



The Last Peerless

by Jefferson Melland Brown

It would be pretty easy to find out what was the last 1953 Chevrolet Corvette made, the last Oldsmobile, or the last Duesenberg. What was the last Peerless? The last bottle of Carling Black Label beer to come out of the Cleveland factory in 1979? The last bottle of Carling Red Cap Ale to

bear the words “Wholly Owned by the Peerless Corporation” in 1934? The V-16 Prototype in the Crawford Auto Aviation Museum?

Most books and magazine articles say the beautiful black car in Cleveland. Though it *is* one of the last of 107,000 Peerlesses¹ made, in my opinion it is another. Many times in these publications, and in auction catalog blurbs, a writer is asked to describe the Peerless Company and everything they did in the last 151 years. Usually they get it more than half right. The date of company founding(1865) is always wrong in the auction pieces. I guess the auction guys haven't read Richard Lichtfeld's book The History of the Peerless Automobile Company.²

A typical piece was in the May 7th Auctions America Auburn Spring catalogue, in which a really nice 1920 Peerless Model 56 Sedan or Limousine was sold³. In addition to 2 pictures, people were told that Peerless:

- built wringers, bicycles, and auto parts before cars(right)
- catered to the luxury market(right)
- produced an 80 h.p. V-8 used in this car(right)
- was founded in 1889(wrong)
- following the Great Depression built less expensive models(wrong)
- built its last car on June 30th, 1931(wrong)

¹ When I write about Peerless cars plural, I use “Peerlesses” (“Only six survive, but 1,164 Model 8-125 Peerlesses were built.”) and in the case of possessive, “Peerless’” (“Peerless’ use of aluminum in bodies started in 1900.”).

² Lichtfeld, Richard, The History of the Peerless Automobile Company, 2009, pg 1.

³ Sold May 7th, 2016. This is the car on exhibit for decades at the Smoky Mountain Antique Car Museum in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. It sold for \$9,625.

The surviving V-16 car was completed in the summer of 1931, after road testing⁴ and fitting of a new aluminum body at Murphy. Reportedly, some extra cars were completed from leftover parts as late as October, 1931, with the car plant shutting down November 7th, 1931. According to an article Don Bettes sent me, the last car was a custom order for Cleveland Chief of Police George J. Motowitz. Chief Motowitz served from 1932-1952, some of that time under Department of Public Safety Officer Elliot Ness.

The photo above is from a newspaper article⁵, and captioned "This car owned by Cleveland's chief of police, a 1931 Peerless, was the last passenger car model to be built in the city." The picture's black & white, but it looks like a big black sedan: a Custom Eight with a police siren mounted behind the front bumper, and dual spotlights. My sources tell me the last serial number for a Custom Eight Series, Model C Peerless was 70,555 in a run of just 555 (1930, 1931, 1932). Chief Motowitz's Custom Eight would have set him back \$2,945 + options at 1931 prices, or \$1,095 for a "new 1932".⁶ Too bad the car isn't still around. However, about 2009, I found a Peerless car serial number plate for sale on eBay. I was curious, because I only see a couple of these come up for sale each year. Looking up the number, which I believe was "C 555", I realized it was probably the last of that model. Alerting PMCC member Matt Lynch about it, he snagged it off of eBay for a small sum. It's not impressive-looking by itself, and doesn't say "Official Last Automobile Produced by America's Oldest Maker of Fine Cars", but it should. In my opinion, this represents the last of 32 years of car production.

Calling the V-16 Prototype a 1932 is what everyone does....but I like to think of it as a 1931. Sometimes it's referred to as an "XP-31" or "XD-31" model, suggesting a 1931 project more than a 1930 or 1932. Development for the V-12 and V-16 engines began in 1926, predating even James Bohannon's move from Marmon to Peerless in 1929. The company used "XD #3" to denote the surviving V-16, according to Schneider's article in Car Classics. So, we're discussing the merits of two 1931 Peerlesses as the last one. The V-16 was definitely the last word in Peerless technology and would have given the Cadillacs and Marmons a run for their money if it was a production car in 1933. The police chief's car was built in 1931, too, but so late it would have titled a 1932 by the company. I just think Chief Motowitz's 1932 came out of the factory later than the 1932 V-16 did, and that may have even been later than completion of the V-16 car at Murphy's shop in Pasadena, CA . I don't know the exact dates the V-16 was driven from the factory in Ohio to California, or even when & where George picked up his Custom

⁴ Schneider, Roy, "Peerless V-16", Car Classics, January, 1979, pp 41-45. This was a 2,350-mile drive of one V-12 and three V-16 Peerlesses from Cleveland to Pasadena, Temporary bodies from the 1931 Peerless straight-8 line were attached to these V-12 and V-16 chassis', to be replaced by Roadster, Coupe, Convertible Coupe, and Sedan bodies, according to some sources.

⁵ Prizinsky, David, "Peerless In It's Field", Crain's Cleveland Business, Business & The Bicentennial, Cleveland 1897-1946, pp B-49-50, 12/4/1995. Photo: Bruce Young Collection.

⁶ Lichtfeld, Richard, The History of the Peerless Automobile Company, 2009, pg 28.

Eight. The V-16 had to have left the shop in Pasadena in '31, because Murphy folded that year.

Maybe someday the stolen Peerless archives will reappear from whatever library, archive, or storage unit they're in and we can find all of this out. Note to the guy "holding" it for us...if it still exists...look around the 770 volumes { the Smithsonian states that was the count for the Peerless Library when it was donated to the Cleveland Public Library by company president James Bohannon in 1946 }, and see if you have a notebook on the V-12/V-16 project. Coachbuilding records would be nice.....I've only been able to scrape together 42 coachbuilders for Peerless so far. Oh yeah, the 107,000 owners enrolled in the registration records would be cool to look at, too.