

## AUTOS



## The King of Classics

Don Williams, owner of Blackhawk Collection and operator of the Blackhawk Museum, is a dealer in extremely rare four-wheeled commodities.



By Marco R. della Cava | Yahoo! Autos – Thu, Jun 16, 2011 6:46 PM EDT



Photo by Robert Kerian

*Danville, California* — Don Williams does not have to work. He is 65, lives in the posh northern California enclave known as Blackhawk, and after a lifetime in the automotive business can afford to while away his days playing golf.

Fat chance. After all, Williams' job is anything but work, as a visit to his office on a ridge high atop Blackhawk attests. Filling tens of thousands of square feet are some of most coveted classic cars on the planet, jaw-dropping stuff that would bring any four-wheel aficionado to their knees. Acting as a middle man crossed with a curator, Williams' task is to use a global network of contacts and friendships developed over 50 years to move these mobile pieces of art from one well-appointed garage to the next. Williams has five human children; but he has thousands of glass-and-steel kids.

"This car here takes me back," says Williams, pointing at an impossibly sleek 1952 Ferrari 212 Inter Vignale. "I sold it 25 years ago for the first time. It went to Switzerland, then to Sweden, to London, to Hong Kong, to New Jersey, and now back here. And after all that time, it only had about 150 miles added to the odometer."

Williams laughs. He does that easily and often, the giddy hallmark of man who is still very much a kid playing in his favorite sandbox. He is trim with white hair and a firm handshake. He walks fast and talks faster. And he's been known to bite. Back in his early days in the classic car brokering business, Williams pounced on weakness.

"A guy would come into my store in Santa Monica back then and he'd look around and then say, 'I've got to talk to my wife,'" says Williams with a hard stare. "And I'd say, 'Do me a favor, next time send your wife.'"

He smirks at the memory. "These days, I hear that and I realize you know what, the guy probably is going to talk to his wife. I do it all the time." A few feet away, his wife Janet laughs.

She is a key support in running Williams' storied [Blackhawk Collection](#), which encompasses not just sales but also the nearby 90-car [Blackhawk Museum](#), the [Auto](#)



The name is Williams. Don Williams.

vehicles to this day. However, the two in Williams' hands seem, from a distance, a bit dirty and in fact badly painted. Williams cracks up at the observation as he approaches the cars.

"Cosmoline," he says of the hazy wax-like substance covering the Porsches. "It'll rub right off. And underneath, untouched paint from the factory."

You heard right - these two 959s are so original that they were never even prepped for a customer. One car still has plastic covering its seats.

"I'm looking for something other than the everyday classic car," says Williams. "I want the last, the first, the prototype. And I want it pure."

Pure is a word he uses often. By that Williams means that every piece on a car was placed there by the factory upon assembly. That's a high standard to stick by considering that in the case of most classic automobiles, age and racing exploits often caused damage that required a new aluminum hood here and a fender replacement there. But that won't do for Williams. Or his customers, who perhaps predictably prefer a veil of secrecy, some due to personality traits and others to changing political situations overseas.

In Williams' company, it's easy to see how mere transportation can be the object of envy.

Over here is a 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing with only 4,149 original miles. Over there, a 1950 Ferrari 166 Sport Touring Berlinetta that looks exactly as it did when it was rolled into place at the 1950 Geneva Motor Show. The fare only gets more absurd down at the museum, where not one but three rare and futuristic 1950s Alfa Romeo B.A.T.-series cars sit side by side, not far from a 1932 Rolls-Royce Phantom II Continental Figoni et Falaschi built expressly for the then Prince of Nepal.

"For me, it's all about the chase," says Williams. "If there's a car out there that's rare and hasn't crossed my path at some point, then I want it."

As will somebody else. Williams says the state of the classic car hobby is sound, and that unique cars are more valuable than ever as collectors shy away from stock markets. He cites the example of Ferrari's legendary GTO, a 1960s racing machine of which only a few dozen were built. He had his hands on one a few decades back at a cost of a few million. Today, a GTO can trade hands for around \$35 million or more.

"The market is drying up simply because people who own these cars are not inclined to sell them unless the price is right," he says. "People see what a good investment classic cars at this level can be. It's almost better than gold. Cars are a world commodity, a tangible and movable object that can be shipped all over the world, unlike say a building."

That's not to say that Williams will deal with just anyone with deep pockets. He has his standards. To meet them, all you need is manners.

"If you're a gentleman, we're going to get along just fine," he says. "If you're not, there's not a car I have that you can afford."

Collections in Las Vegas and an under-development car museum that will anchor the Auto Expo Park in Shanghai. That's an automotive field born of much dues paying, first in the Los Angeles area and later in Arizona, where Williams was a founding member along with Tom Barrett and Russ Jackson of the Barrett-Jackson Collector Car Auction, which now commands the spotlight on Speed Channel.

In 1981, just when Williams was getting ready to set up shop by himself in Colorado, he helped find a few prized cars for real estate developer Ken Behring. Suddenly, "Ken became my bank, and I was off to Northern California instead of Denver," says Williams.

In 1988, Williams opened the Blackhawk Museum to showcase Behring's growing collection, while at the same time pioneering classic car auctions in far-flung cities from Tokyo to Geneva. While Behring went on to buy the Seattle Seahawks and then develop a passion for distributing wheelchairs to the needy around the world, Williams stayed true to his love of the automobile.

The cars surrounding him today bear silent witness to the level of Williams' perfectionism. Two particular machines are a case in point. They are iconic Porsche 959s, one red, the other black, cars that so defined the state of the high-tech art upon their unveiling in 1986 that they remain coveted half-million-dollar



Porsche 959s literally line the walls.



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