

ON THE COVER

Henry Kaiser, Troy Ruttman, and
Madman Muntz

Three Originals

ROBERT C. POST

Two of the men mentioned above appear in the photograph on the cover of this issue. Henry J. Kaiser does not, just his namesake automobile manufactured at his plant near Ypsilanti, Michigan. Of the three, however, only Kaiser's has remained a name to be reckoned with in American history: the entrepreneur behind Hoover, Bonneville, and Grand Coulee dams; builder of a third of the entire World War II U.S. merchant fleet, as well as the world's largest cement plant at Permanente, California, and a steel mill in Fontana that employed as many as 11,000 workers; founder of the Kaiser Medical Care Program in Oakland, which became the template for the HMOs so much in current news; developer of Hawaii Kai, another template, in this case for the luxury resort hotel complex; chief of an industrial firm that made hundreds of different products, from airplanes to dishwashers. In 2004, the Oakland Museum of California staged an exhibition about Kaiser's "impact on the modern economic and cultural landscape" called *Henry J. Kaiser: Think Big*. Not everything Kaiser created survives today—only a couple of those merchant ships, and the steel mill replaced by California Speedway, a land reuse entailing minimal toxic-waste clean-up. But he certainly left monuments.

By comparison, Earl Muntz's fame was fleeting—and yet his name did become a punch line for Jack Benny and Bob Hope, he is enshrined in the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) Hall of Fame, and a sports car called the Muntz Jet is a rare treasure among collectors. And, while California's premier historian Kevin Starr is probably correct in calling Henry

Bob Post is the author of *The SAE Story: One Hundred Years of Mobility* (San Diego, Calif., 2005). Madman Muntz's lunatic radio spots still linger in his memory, and he also recalls his mother and dad test-driving a Kaiser before settling on a Plymouth (a name dreamed up by Joseph Frazer in 1928 when he worked for Walter P. Chrysler). Lastly, he remembers fine-tuning a table-model Muntz TV with a screwdriver.

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Kaiser the most “surprising character” in the state’s history because of his “eccentric Wizard of Oz personality,” for sheer eccentricity Kaiser was no match at all for Earl Muntz, who was as colorful a character as ever marched to the tune of American enterprise.

Muntz and Kaiser may never have actually met, but their lives intersected in 1947 when Muntz became the California distributor for the Kaiser automobile and its companion make named for Kaiser’s partner Joseph W. Frazer. With the two of them as president and chairman of the board, respectively, the Kaiser-Frazer Corporation turned out enough cars at Ford’s old Willow Run bomber plant to capture 5 percent of the U.S. market before Frazer left the firm in 1949, and Kaiser produced nearly 750,000 autos all told before folding his hand in 1955. These included Kaisers, Frazers, a fiberglass sports car called the Darrin, and one of the first autos later to be dubbed “compact,” the Henry J, which, if nothing else, “reinforced the industry’s conviction that Americans were not interested in small fuel-efficient cars”—Rudi Volti’s words in his new book, *Cars and Culture* (Westport, Conn., 2004).

But the name Henry J brings us back to the photo, taken a couple of years after the end of the war, when Henry Kaiser (1882–1967) and Earl Muntz (1910–1987) had both hit their stride, Kaiser assembling 2,770 Liberty ships, Muntz selling many times that many used cars when Detroit assembly lines were converted to military production. The car shown here is a Kaiser, but it could just as well be a Frazer—later on, with the debut of the “Anatomic” Kaiser, the styling of the two makes differed, but in 1947 they were virtually identical save for chrome trim and interior appointments. Most likely, the track is a half-mile oval called Carrell Speedway in the town of Gardena, which staged weekend events for prewar hot rods called “the roarin’ roadsters,” and for “late model stocks”—the kind of competition from which NASCAR would flower. These were usually well-established makes like Fords, Mercs, and Oldsmobiles, but on at least this one occasion a car from fledgling Kaiser-Frazer went to the races also.

A mechanic has pulled off the brake drum to check the lining or wheel bearing, and a gentleman in dark glasses and bow tie glances at something else, perhaps another car taking qualifying laps. This is “The Automotive Madman,” Earl Muntz, of whom more below. Other people in the photo, at right or casting shadows, may forever remain anonymous. But the lanky youngster—and clearly he is a youngster—with his back turned would later enjoy considerable fame as a race-car driver who competed in the Indianapolis 500 a dozen times between 1949 and 1964, becoming its youngest winner ever in 1952. He survived serious injuries in a crash at Cedar Rapids, Iowa, then operated a motorcycle business in Dearborn, Michigan, before passing away in 1997 at age sixty-seven—an advanced age for a racer of his generation, whose life expectancy was “decidedly telescoped,” as Terry Reed remarks in *Indy: The Race and Ritual of the Indianapolis 500* (Dulles, Va., 2005).



Earl "Madman" Muntz, Troy Ruttman, an unidentified "wrench" (mechanic), and sundry helpers are seen here in 1947 with a new Kaiser that is being checked over between time-trials at an oval track in southern California. Ruttman, in the T-shirt with his back turned, was the driver; Muntz, in the bow tie and shades, the "wallet." (Author's collection.)

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His name was Troy Ruttman, and with his parents he had moved from Mooreland, Oklahoma, to Lynwood, California, just after the war. More than anything else, he loved driving cars as fast as they would go, and the story is told that he was skipping school at age fifteen to go racing in San Bernardino in his father's sedan. Troy was exceptionally big for a race-car driver, which is obvious even in this photo taken when he was only seventeen. By the time he got his first ride in the Indy 500 at age nineteen (having hoodwinked officials with a forged birth certificate) he was six feet, four inches tall and weighed well over two hundred pounds. Much could be said about the ironies of Ruttman's career: how his annual winnings rarely enabled him to support a wife and three children in the absence of a day job (when he won Indy in 1952 the purse was \$61,743, but a fourth-place finish in 1954 was worth only \$12,710—and of course a driver received only a percentage of the purse); how he was reprimanded for “conduct detrimental to racing” (gambling) in 1958 and then went abroad to drive a Maserati in the French Grand Prix; or how he announced his retirement at the Brickyard in 1964, a few hours after he had seen two drivers die in a fiery pileup at the start of the 500: “I just feel that it's time to make way for the younger fellows,” he said, being then thirty-four years old.

But interesting though he may be, Troy Ruttman takes a back seat to the man in the bow tie, Earl Muntz, whose automotive ventures were just the first chapter in a lifetime spent around the intersection of technology and culture. Like Ruttman and Kaiser (who was born in Sprout Brook, New York), Muntz was from a different part of the country; he opened his first used-car lot near Chicago during the late 1930s. But when it came to “automobility” the real action was in California, and by 1946 he had moved to the Los Angeles suburb of Glendale and built up a hugely popular business. And his nickname—“The Automotive Madman”—had become a household word. His line went like this:

I buy 'em retail and sell 'em wholesale! Here's today's special! If I don't sell it today I'm going to take this sledgehammer and smash it to bits! My wife says I'm crazy, but it's more fun this way!

Muntz pitched his used cars on local radio stations and, with a sledgehammer in hand and a Napoleonic hat, also on the pioneer Los Angeles television outlets, most of whose transmitters were readily visible from all across the LA basin—visible on a clear day, that is—on Mount Wilson, where the California Institute of Technology also had its hundred-inch telescope. And with television, so began the second chapter of Muntz's saga. After he severed his tie with Kaiser-Frazer at the beginning of 1948, Muntz did not altogether lose interest in the new-car business. Two years later he bought the tooling for a sports car designed by a man named Frank Kurtis, who had been unable to market it successfully even though his race-car business was thriving: Troy Ruttman was driving a Kurtis when he won the

Indy 500, and in 1954 seven of the top ten finishers were in Kurtis Kraft roadsters. Muntz began making a jaunty convertible he called the Muntz Jet, first with a Cadillac engine, then later (after his antics proved embarrassing to Cadillac executives) with a Lincoln, all with GM's Hydra-Matic transmissions. Muntz soon outgrew his Glendale plant and moved production to Evanston, Illinois. But the business failed in 1954 after only 250 Jets had been manufactured, when an auditor found that he really was selling them for less than they cost him to make. By then, however, Muntz was devoting most of his attention to a different venture: television sets.

At mid-century, most televisions had dinky 7- and 10-inch screens, but they were nonetheless expensive and complicated, loaded with tubes, transformers, rheostats, complex circuits for processing signals, and adjustments for horizontal hold and audio that had to be laboriously trimmed. For "far-fringe reception"—forty miles or so—a receiver needed three or four intermediate frequency (IF) stages, with a pentode and transformer for each stage, five capacitors, three resistors, and loops to hold frequencies stable when a signal was weak.

But "Hey!" Muntz said to himself, millions of people live in areas blessed with strong signals—the LA basin, or Manhattan, where you could look right up at the transmitting antennas atop the Empire State Building. In places like these, complicated circuitry seemed to be wasted money. So why couldn't TV sets be designed with only two IF stages, no fancy loops, and cheap biases for the tubes? Even though such sets might leave something to be desired as they got older because aging carbon resistors tended to go "on the fritz," they could be designed to work simply—and they were. Muntz, so the tale was often told, would wander through his plant, stop at a workstation, and say to a technician, "This is over-engineered; you don't need that capacitor." And then he would take the nippers he always carried and cut it out. If the video and audio still worked he would snip again, and yet again, until inevitably he would go too far. Then he would say, "Well, it looks like that last part has got to stay." Muntz thereby lent his name to a technique that would be familiar to an entire generation of electronics technicians: using only those components deemed absolutely essential. It was called "Muntzing."

As circuits shrank, prices fell and sales of Muntz TVs boomed, especially the table model that retailed for \$99.99. Unfair competition for Zenith and RCA? Nothing of the sort! Here, appearing on television in his long johns and Napoleonic hat, was Madman Muntz to tell it like it was:

Your living room is our showroom! You can have a TV in your own home tonight! Not a seven-inch TV, but a fourteen-inch TV. I wanna give 'em away, but Mrs. Muntz won't let me. She's not crazy like me!

Eventually the market for cheap TV sets dried up and, because of the debacle with the Muntz Jet, the Madman found himself in bankruptcy

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court. But he was nothing if not resilient and was soon back in business, manufacturing the Muntz Stereo-Pak with a four-track tape system for autos. Stockholders in his firm included Rudy Vallee, Frank Sinatra, Bill Cosby, and Sammy Davis Jr. The system so impressed Bill Lear that he installed Muntz stereos in his own Lear jets and then began improving them by using BASF tape rather than Muntz's preferred Greentree, with its graphite backing that unfortunately allowed the tape to "pull" from inside the loop, hence eventually coming up with the storied Lear eight-track stereo.

Muntz's daughter Tee Vee (usually known as Tina) enjoyed some success as an entertainer, and the Madman himself got involved in projection television, aluminum prefabricated houses, and, at the time of his death in 1987, the very latest electronic novelty, cellular phones. For years afterward one could find Muntz Stereo and Muntz Electronics stores around southern California. And yet Madman Muntz, like Troy Ruttman (but quite unlike Henry Kaiser), was largely forgotten—though not altogether. While his induction into the CEA Hall of Fame in 2001 was not a widely publicized event, his name has turned up a couple of times in just the past few months: in David Lucsko's MIT doctoral dissertation on the automotive aftermarket, "Manufacturing Muscle: The Hot Rod Industry and the American Fascination with Speed"—one of Lucsko's cast of characters is Bob Spar, who as a kid prepped Jets at Muntz's Hollywood showroom—and again in an article in *AutoWeek* (23 May 2005) in which Spence Murray writes about a Muntz Jet that has been restored by the onetime foreman of Muntz's Evanston factory, Peter Condos.

What about Kurtis Kraft roadsters such as Troy Ruttman drove? Even though racing cars tend to come to catastrophic ends, a few of these have survived. And there are more than a few Kaisers and Frazers, even some Henry Js and Kaiser Darrins. Muntz Jets? Forty-eight exist, in addition to the one owned by Mr. Condos. Muntz TV sets? Stereos? Sure, in shops specializing in "collectibles" and even in museums; how many of them would be anybody's guess. Muntzing? The expression seems to be forgotten, though not necessarily the technique.