

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2012

The Star

Mercedes-Benz Club of America

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Kent Emigh

FOREIGN AGENT

One of the first Mercedes-Benz sales agents in America opens his scrapbook of the early days

The automobile market was a different world for Mercedes-Benz 60 years ago when Kent Emigh established one of the first sales agencies for the marque in the United States. Emigh is still an active member of the San Francisco Bay Area Section, so we asked him to provide his first-hand views of those early days. To help tell his story, Kent leafed through his scrapbooks of old pictures.

Like many other members who were born in the 1930s, Emigh's love affair with things mechanical started on his family's farm in Indiana with his hard-working parents and an older brother. As the family went from using Belgian horses to tractors and powered farm machinery, 15-year-old Emigh's responsibilities were to maintain and repair them. These experiences set the groundwork for his future in the automobile business. As a point of interest, his brother Wayne devoted his lifetime to the family farms and community, earning a "Rural Preservation Award" at the 2007 Indiana State Fair for his farming methods.

Indianapolis was always an automobile town. In fact, 198 automobile manufacturers got their starts in Indiana, so it was an auspicious place for Emigh to start his own career. In 1952, at the

ambitious age of 24, Emigh and a business partner opened Auto Imports, Ltd, starting with English cars. After several meetings with Max E. Hoffman in New York, Auto Imports became the first authorized dealer, "foreign agent" in contract terms, for several of Hoffman's brands – including Mercedes-Benz – in fall 1953.

In those early days, it was up to the agent to pick up his cars from the supplier rather than being shipped to his door. To procure his Mercedes autos, Emigh and one of his men would take an early morning flight from Indianapolis to LaGuardia Airport and taxi to Hoffman's midtown vehicle preparation facility. There they inspected the latest cars, discussed service problems, and picked up the Mercedes-Benz he was collecting for a customer.

Afterward, he would park it in a midtown garage and meet friends at the Henry Hudson Hotel, then headquarters for the newly formed Sports Car Club of America, an essential network for anyone selling new, foreign sports cars. After a theater performance, he would retrieve his customer's car around 11 p.m. and begin the 725-mile, all-night drive back to Indianapolis.

Many such trips were necessary to gain knowledge of service, maintenance, and spare-parts procedures for more than eight of the finest European automobiles because service manuals were limited and no formal training programs existed. And because the foreign-car market didn't have the volume to justify truckload lots, these road trips from New York to Indianapolis were ideal. As a benefit, Emigh treated his travel-companion employee to a Broadway show or Christmas at Radio City Music Hall, although winter driving on the Pennsylvania Turnpike wasn't quite as pleasant.

While building his business, Emigh helped form the 500 Section of MBCA in Indianapolis and involved himself in the SCCA's organization. He supported many auto shows and rallies, was active on the Indianapolis Speedway Citizen Committee, and involved in sports-car racing events in the area. Emigh remembered

Left: Emigh acquired his love for mechanical objects on his family's farm in Indiana. Above: With a partner, Emigh opened his first dealership, Auto Imports, in Indianapolis when he was 24 and soon was selling Mercedes-Benz cars.



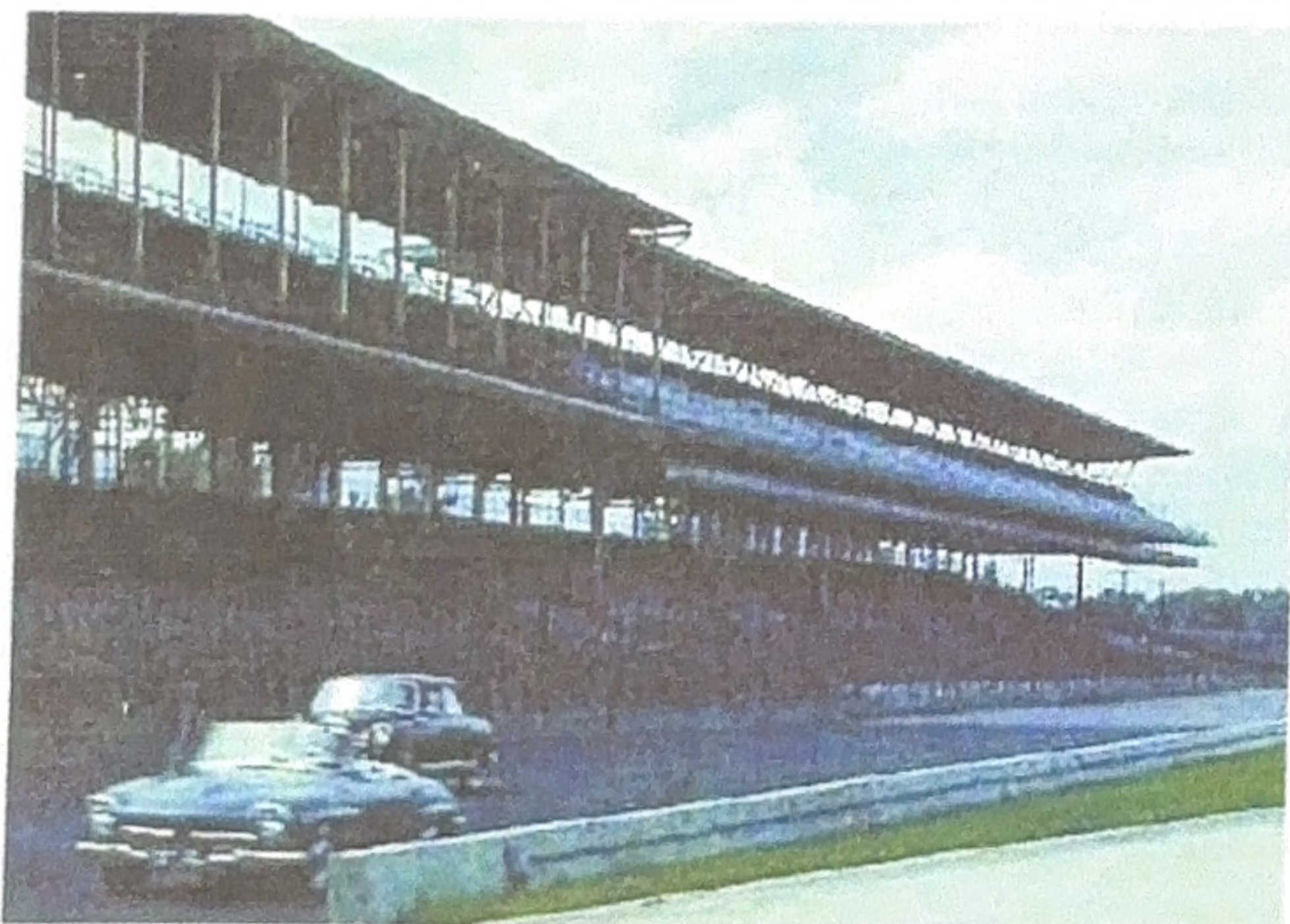
one visit to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway with the 500 Section in 1961 – the club was blacklisted for racing in the rain. But they were having so much fun!

After a few years, the European companies realized they needed to have their own U.S. offices. By 1957, Hoffman's agreement was cancelled and so Emigh began to travel to Europe on his own to conduct business, relying on his mail and motor-sports associations' contacts. On these European trips – always in the fall to enjoy the international auto shows, Oktoberfest, and Rhine Wine festivals – he would purchase new and pre-owned European classics, many of which were special-ordered for his clients. He further developed a market for the highest-quality German elec-

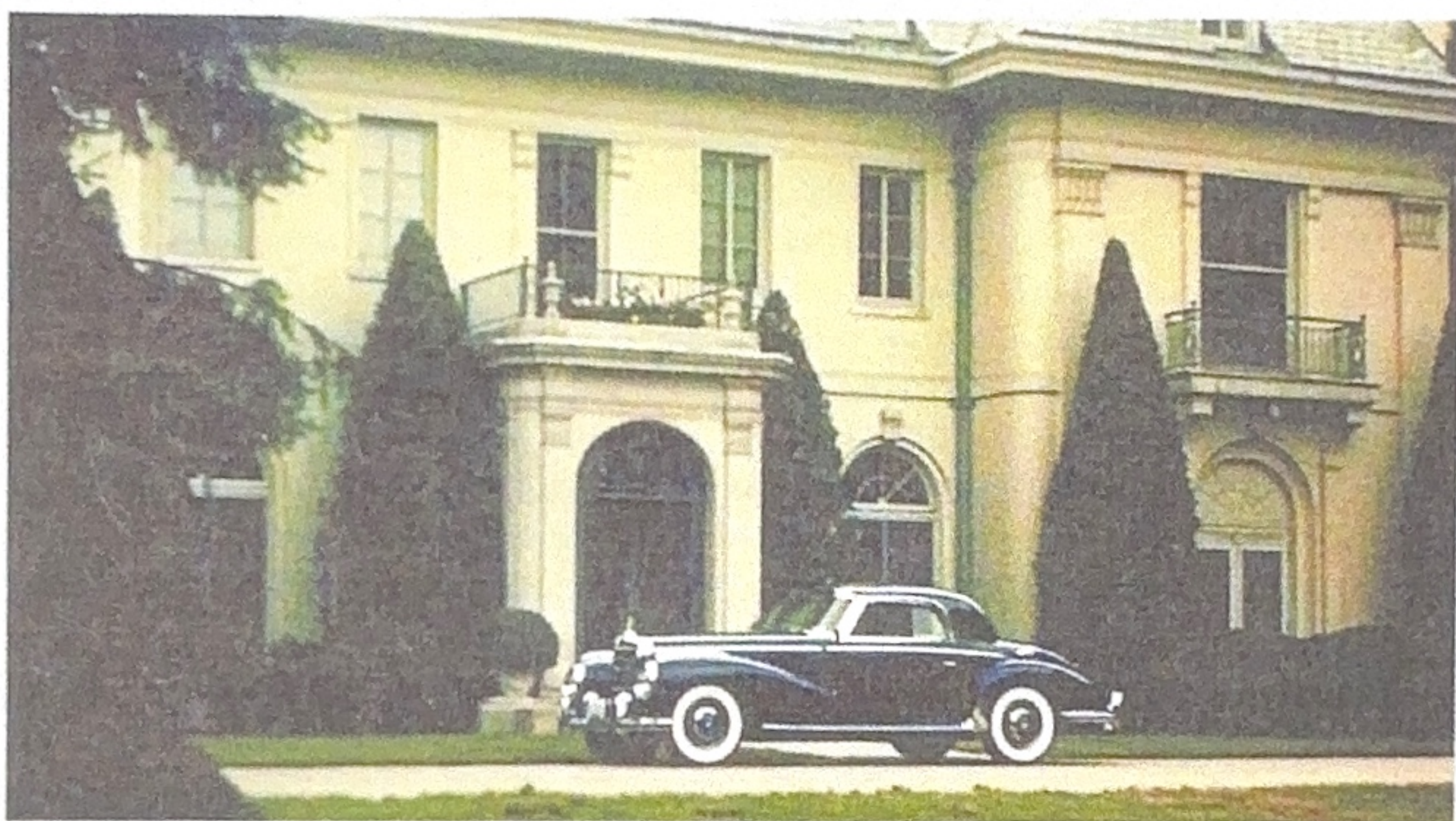
tronics – including Telefunken, SABA, and Grundig for the home and Becker AM-FM-SW radios for all automobile clients – and it became a profitable business on its own.

In 1961, Emigh asked Susan Freeland to be an important part of his life and they married that October. Their honeymoon to Europe included a stop at Porsche in Stuttgart, where they collected a 1962 356 Cabriolet at the factory – a great start for their marriage and, at least, Susan knew what she was getting into with a genuine car enthusiast for a husband. In the following years, they traveled throughout Europe, visiting the French Riviera, Paris, Italy, and of course, the Nürburgring and the rest of Germany. Emigh nurtured his business contacts on these trips and Susan learned about his business.

Clockwise from top left: Emigh was a founder of the MBCA 500 Section, and Indianapolis Motor Speedway was a favorite place to drive their cars. In 1961, he honeymooned with his new wife Susan on a buying trip to Europe. In addition to cars, Emigh imported and sold high-quality German electronic gear.



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Above: Delivering a 300S coupe to J.K. Lilly of Lilly Pharmaceuticals, one of Emigh's important clients.

Although he sold other marques, Emigh always was involved with Mercedes-Benz. After the new 300SL Coupe arrived at the New York Auto Show in 1954, he was able to get one of those first cars in March 1955 and drove it back to Indianapolis.

Emigh said it was "the reliability and finish" that made it possible for him to sell five of the coupes within their production lifetime. Given that the car was so unique, this was quite an accomplishment; some dealers were practically begging customers to purchase them. Little did anyone know the car would become an icon, a masterpiece of automotive engineering and design.

Emigh recognized the potential of the Mercedes-Benz brand early on, establishing a service center and Mercedes-Benz showroom in his Indianapolis agency to cater to Mercedes-Benz clients. One of the first 300SLs Emigh sold was to a Dr. Williams, who decided to tour Central

America the following year by driving his Gullwing from Indiana to Guatemala. All was going well until he arrived at a bridge washed out by a tropical storm. Committed to completing his trip, Williams transported the Gullwing by rail car to the other side of the canyon, where he continued his journey through Central America, giving Emigh a picture when he returned.

The association with Mercedes-Benz enabled Emigh to meet many important and influential people in the Midwest. Leafing through his old scrapbooks, Kent pointed out a picture taken when he delivered a new Mercedes-Benz coupe to J.K. Lilly of Lilly Pharmaceuticals. Through his business, Emigh recalled, he also knew William Ball of Ball Glass and also involved in space technology and with Ball State University, who became an officer in Emigh's business; Indy 500 winner Bill Vukovich; Don Ricardo, band leader and 300SL owner; singer Mel

Tormé, nicknamed the Velvet Fog and an avid sports-car enthusiast; Luigi Chinetti, American Ferrari agent and active motor-sports competitor; aviation pioneer Roscoe Turner; Indy 500 winner Pete DePaolo; and Art Kortheuer, second editor of *The Star*.

On one notable trip to Europe in October 1958 – after shipping several Mercedes-Benz cars home and visiting the Brussels World's Fair – Emigh met actors Danny Kaye and Frank Sinatra on Pan Am's inaugural Jet Clipper flight from Paris to New York.

In 1963, during the establishment of Mercedes-Benz North America, Emigh accepted a position to help organize a Mercedes-Benz agency in San Jose, California as part of the formal dealer network. Selling the business in Indianapolis, Emigh moved his wife and four-month-old daughter – as well as four vehicles and a jet boat – along Route 66 from Indianapolis, no small feat on the newly opened turnpike. He remembers the exciting times as the orchard-laden area once known as "The Valley of Heart's Delight" made the transition to become "Silicon Valley."

After a short time, Emigh realized that he really preferred to be independent, so he established Auto Sport Limited, a showroom and maintenance facility on El Camino Real in Palo Alto. With his established connections in Europe, Emigh continued well into the 1980s to import and maintain collectible automobiles including Mercedes-Benz, Porsche, Jaguar, and Roll-Royce.

During that time, one of Emigh's more exciting adventures involved a car-boat vehicle, restoring a 1943 VW Schwimmwagen with 4-wheel drive. This vehicle had been designed by Erwin Komenda under Ferry Porsche, for use by the German military. With five friends aboard the Schwimmwagen on a reservoir in the Santa Cruz Mountains, he was swamped by a larger boat and the vehicle sank in 30 feet of water. After divers recovered the Schwimmwagen, Emigh drained and replaced the fluids, and the Schwimmwagen started up right away. Unfortunately, nobody would accompany Emigh in the boat again; he sold it later.

Shortly after establishing his business, Emigh displayed his three 300Scs at Villa Montalvo in Monte Sereno, California.

During the 100th Anniversary of Mercedes-Benz in 1986, he was invited to show his 300SL Gullwing Coupe and 300Sc Cabriolet at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance.

Below: Another of Emigh's clients drove his 300SL Gullwing from Indiana to Guatemala.



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Top to bottom, left to right: Emigh moved to California in 1963 to help establish the new San Jose Mercedes-Benz agency. Soon he resigned to establish, Auto Sport Ltd, his own sales and service shop in Palo Alto. A show at Villa Montalvo was an opportunity to show his own three 300Scs. One of Emigh's most unusual cars was a 1943 VW Schwimmwagen, which sunk. After driving his Gullwing for many years, Emigh finally sold it last year.

Through the years, Emigh has owned several car models from different manufacturers. Having sold many 300-series cars, he had a special passion for the 300Sc Cabriolet and made many trips to Europe searching for the right car. As evidenced in his archives, he enjoyed many years of trouble-free driving in his Gullwing and 300Sc, frequently using the Gullwing in rallies.

But Emigh recently bade farewell to his cherished 300SL earlier this year. [Pic B11]

"With my health issues, the legend must continue with proud new owners," he said.

Emigh was proud and honored to have devoted 58 years to Mercedes-Benz, nearly half the years that the marque has been in existence. He was instrumental in the success of

Mercedes-Benz as a foreign agent in the earliest postwar years that so few now remember. His automotive lifetime was devoted to this great product and all those whose quality of life was improved along the way.

In our conversations, I was impressed by one aspect of Emigh's life: how many of his clients became lifelong friends. Stop and think for a moment about how many car salespeople you have known that you remained in touch with through a lifetime. Emigh was never merely a car salesman, but rather a friend who helped his clients choose a car that met their needs and then provided them with service and support for the long term. To those clients, and to all those enthusiasts

he has known in the Gull Wing Group International and the Mercedes-Benz Club of America, Emigh has been a dear and loyal friend.

It has been our honor to select a few of the hundreds of pictures and write this oh-so-short summary of one of the earliest agents for Mercedes-Benz automobiles when Americans were first discovering European cars in the late 1940s and early '50s. As a club, we appreciate his dedication to the marque and his efforts in supporting the formation of the 500 Section in Indianapolis. Finally, we thank Emigh for sharing the highlights of his rich history and special experiences about our favorite marque – Mercedes-Benz. 