

The Continental Conundrum

How do you explain a Mark II convertible? Ask the Secret Service...

By Daniel Strohl

Photography by Kevin Pearce, Steve Petrovich
courtesy Latcha+Associates



When an ex-Secret Service agent starts to tell you about your car, you should probably listen.

While not a common or an expected circumstance, that's exactly the situation Barry Wolk, of Farmington Hills, Michigan, found himself in while preparing his Continental Mark II convertible for a showing of Lincolns and Continentals in 2003 in the lobby of Ford's Dearborn, Michigan, World Headquarters. "At the time, I didn't care much about the history of the car," Barry said. "As a long-term art collector, it was just another work of art. I bought it strictly for my enjoyment."

Thus, he never questioned the Derham badge on the car. The only authenticated custom-bodied Mark II convertible known at that time, a different car now located in Iowa, had come from the Derham Body Company in Philadelphia,

and most folks—including the restorer who placed the badge on the car in 1994, eight years before Wolk bought it—simply assumed that this car had been converted in Philadelphia as well.

But Rick Bondy knew otherwise. "That's not a Derham-bodied car," Rick said. He introduced himself as not only a former Secret Service agent who worked with Hess and Eisenhardt's presidential limousines, but also as the man then in charge of Ford's Ballistic Protection Series (bullet-proof car) division. Rick told Barry he was sure Cincinnati-based Hess and Eisenhardt had built Barry's car.

All Barry knew for sure at that point was that Ford Motor Company never built a Continental Mark II convertible. Why they didn't remains one of those frustrating mysteries of life. A Mark II convertible would have had gorgeous lines with the top down, all perfectly accentuating the Continental's length and prestige without making it look like a

tuna boat. Besides, convertibles naturally complement a ritzy car, especially one that sold for just shy of \$10,000 new.

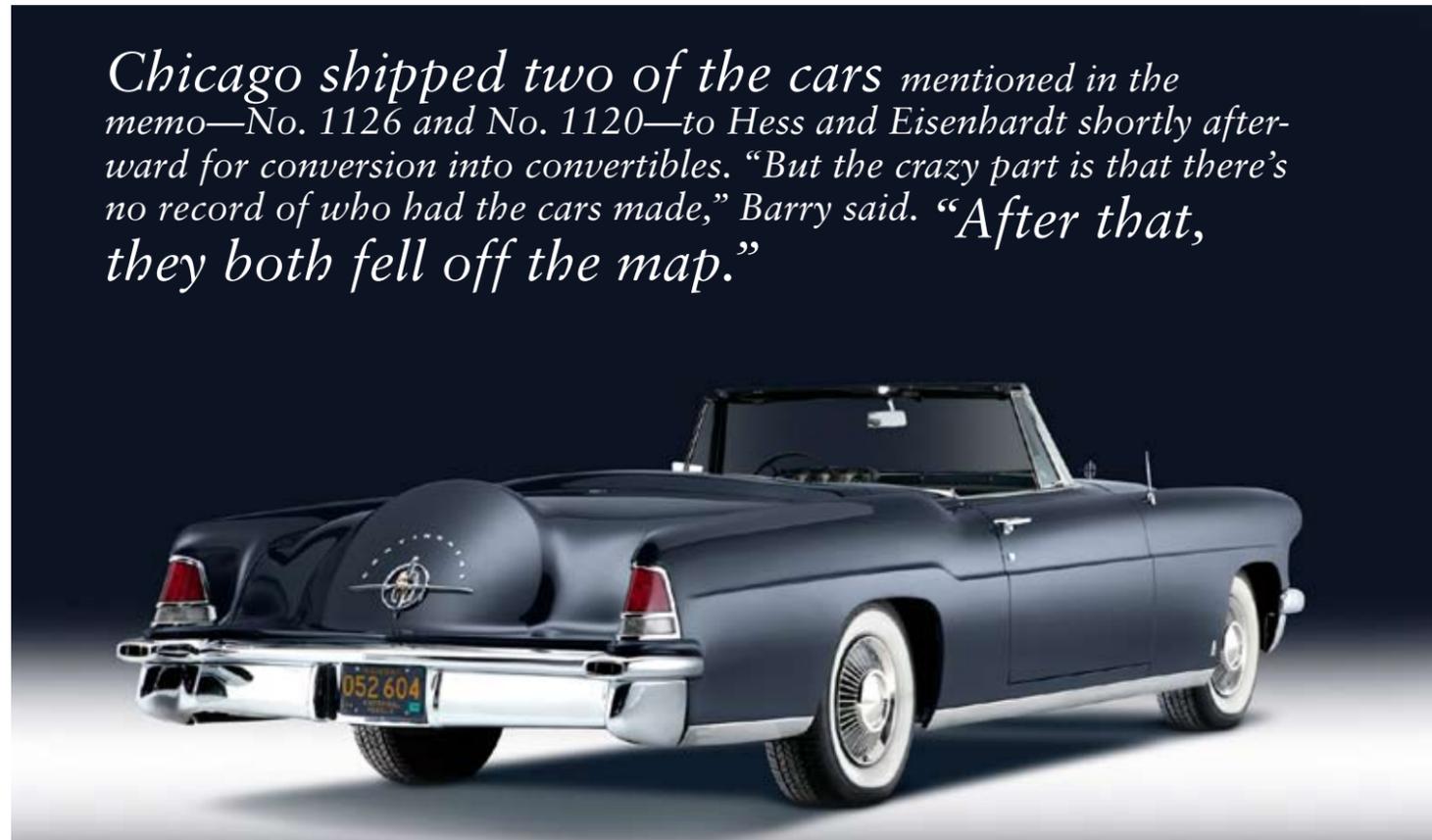
And it's not as though Ford didn't consider a Mark II convertible. Preliminary plans for the Mark II in the early 1950s called for up to four different body styles: a coupe, a soft-top convertible, a hardtop convertible and a four-door sedan. Design sketches by Ford designer Charlie Pfaneuf show that the soft-top convertible would have shared most of the coupe's bodylines, with a delicate folding canvas top gracefully taking the place of the steel roof.

The hardtop convertible, a more ambitious project, sprang initially from the mind of Gil Spear in Ford's Advanced Styling Studio. Ford thus allocated \$2.19 million to its Special Products Division specifically to study the feasibility of building a hardtop convertible Continental Mark II. The project eventually resulted in a full mechanical prototype



With the top down, the Hess and Eisenhardt convertible has all of the same lines as the Derham convertible, save for the metal boot

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The Continental 300hp 368-cu.in. V-8 and driveline remained unchanged when Hess and Eisenhardt removed the Mark II's damaged roof

Ford's reasoning for not building a Mark II convertible seems rather weak when viewing the Hess and Eisenhardt car with the top down

car, designated MP #5, which debuted at a Ford board of directors meeting in January 1955.

However, William Clay Ford, Sr.—the general manager of the fledgling Continental division—and his staff rejected all body styles save for the coupe when they realized that the economics of the Mark II's planned limited volume dictated just one body style.

Interestingly enough, Ford later wanted a soft-top convertible Mark II to take on the show circuit, and thus commissioned Derham to remove the roof from a production-line coupe. That car debuted at the Texas State Fair in October of 1956 and toured the show circuit for a while, until the company gave it to William Clay Ford's wife.

But throughout the years, the pres-

ence of a second convertible—which would eventually become Barry's car—stumped historians. Some called it a fake; others dismissed it as nothing more than a customized Continental. Barry joined the Lincoln Continental Owners Club, which had little to offer in solid evidence of the car's history, but which still invited him to display the convertible in Dearborn.

Barry thus began to investigate Rick's tip on the Hess and Eisenhardt connection. With some sleuthing, he found Art Sears, Hess and Eisenhardt's chief production manager during the mid-1950s, who said he was 99 percent sure that the company built the convertible. Discussion with fellow former Hess and Eisenhardt employees confirmed Sears's recollections, and William Hess,

the son of one of the company's founders, vouched for Sears.

Unfortunately, while all of Hess and Eisenhardt's records from that time still exist, the person who owns those records has not made them available for research. Barry was able, though, through continued sleuthing, to uncover a bit more of the convertible's history.

First, the convertible's serial number, C-5681126, indicates that Ford originally built the car as a coupe and, more specifically, as one of about 300 cars that Continental designated as special introductory cars, meant to entice prospective customers in dealership showrooms until actual production could meet up with demand. Because Ford couldn't justify forcing each dealer to take a chance on the expensive cars,

Chicago shipped two of the cars mentioned in the memo—No. 1126 and No. 1120—to Hess and Eisenhardt shortly afterward for conversion into convertibles. "But the crazy part is that there's no record of who had the cars made," Barry said. "After that, they both fell off the map."

the introductory cars remained in Ford's possession.

The production order for that serial number shows that Ford shipped the car, then painted black with a two-tone gray interior, on September 23, 1955, to Madison Street Motors in Chicago. But the serial number pops up again in a memo sent three days later from the Continental Division's Midwest Chicago office back to Dearborn, stating that three introductory cars headed to the Chicago area suffered damages during transport. Specifically, a flapping cover damaged No. 1126's paint.

"These cars were shipped in a sort of sock," Barry said. "They were essentially big bags lined in fleece, but early on, they didn't figure out how to tie them down properly. Chicago was

basically asking Detroit what to do with the cars."

As far as Barry knows, Detroit never answered the Chicago office. According to Art Sears's account, Chicago shipped two of the cars mentioned in the memo—No. 1126 and No. 1120—to Hess and Eisenhardt shortly afterward for conversion into convertibles. "But the crazy part is that there's no record of who had the cars made," Barry said. "After that, they both fell off the map."

But No. 1126 resurfaced in 1963, when Bill Hogan, who owned the car at the time, applied for membership in the LCOC. By that time, it had 18,000 miles, but still wore its black paint. Three years later, Bill had the convertible repainted green with a tan interior and a tan top. He also fitted a metal boot

to the car at the same time, replacing the canvas boot, and removed all the power convertible top mechanisms. Bill sold the convertible in 1969, after which it passed through a few hands and resided in a museum for a while. During the 1994 restoration, the convertible became its current blue with blue and white interior.

Barry told us that even though he hasn't been able to obtain the Hess and Eisenhardt records on the convertible, he remains undeterred in investigating the car's history and continues to show it at numerous concourses. "When I take the Willard Hess Award for Design Excellence at the Ault Park Concours, and the award is handed to me by Willard Hess's daughter, wouldn't one think that should be provenance enough?" Barry asked. ☞