

Big Man, Little Car



—Times Staff Photo by George Hall.

JO CONN GUILD JR.

By CHARLES PENNINGTON

New interests add zest and pleasure to life at any age.

Josephus (he uses the diminutive Jo) Conn Guild Jr. can vouch for that.

At 70 he is one of Chattanooga's most enthusiastic sports car devotees.

His interest in automobiles goes back about 50 years, but his fascination with the small cars started about six years ago when he bought a Jaguar. Now he owns a Ferrari, a Fraser-Nash, a Lancia (which his wife drives) and a small British-made Metropolitan.

He has great admiration for the fast, rugged Ferrari, which he calls a "brutal" car to drive, but his eyes light up with pure devotion when he talks about his Fraser-Nash.

No relation to the American car of the same last name, the low-swung British car is designed and built by Archibald Fraser Nash.

"He only builds them on order and he turns out only 10 or 12 a year. But they're custom made for the buyer. I was measured for that car like I would be for a suit of clothes."

Leg-room on the driver's side has been extended to accommodate Guild's 6-foot, 2-inch frame; a shorter man can barely reach the pedals.

But for all their surging power and catlike maneuverability, the real thrill of driving sports cars is in their mastery and control, Guild says.

An expert driver himself, Guild likes to attend sports car races but he says he is too old to drive in competition. To appreciate sports car racing you have to know what to look for.

"People who don't know about sports cars just see a lot of cars going by. But those drivers have to know what they're doing—you know what I mean?"

"They have to have a feeling for the car, like flying a plane by the seat of your pants back in the old days. They have to know exactly how to decelerate when going into a curve or turn. They don't use brakes; they slow it by shifting down into a lower gear. They slide into the turn almost sideways and if they have misjudged by a fraction they're in the ditch. And if they skip a gear shifting down they tear out the gear box. It's tricky driving. Takes a lot of nerve and skill."

Just driving a sports car around town requires special knowledge.

"If your engine operates most efficiently at 3,500 revolutions per minute, that's where you ought to keep it, no matter what gear you're in. I drive all over town a lot of times without ever getting above second gear."

Jo Conn Guild is president of Southern Coach Lines, which operates the city bus system, and chairman of the board of United Transit Co., which is composed of 10 subsidiaries including Southern Coach. He was president of the Tennessee Electric Power Co. before it was sold to the Tennessee Valley Authority. The old TEPCO, operated the street transportation system here and when TVA took over its power facilities Guild stayed in the transport business and organized Southern Coach. Shortly afterward he switched from electric-powered streetcars to gasoline-driven buses.

Somehow he gives the impression of being bigger than his physical measurements and 320 pounds—like a huge but friendly bear. The thought of him inserting his bulk into a little sports car

is almost ludicrous until you see how easily he does it.

He has iron-gray hair and light blue eyes that look directly at you from under heavy black brows. The tip of his left brow quirks sharply upward and the right one downward. An arthritic hip gives him a slight limp and almost constant pain. He wrenched his leg when he stepped through a rotten board in the bottom of a duck blind about 10 years ago.

"The doctors advise against cortisone in my case and bravely let me suffer."

Guild takes pride in his pioneer Tennessee ancestry. Both sides of his family settled in the state in the early 1800s. His maternal great-great-grandfather, Dr. Samuel Mayes, bought a 320-acre farm near Columbia in 1807 and it has been in the family ever since. Guild still operates it for sentimental reasons. He raises hogs and cattle there and just before Christmas every year is hog-killing time. He has a smokehouse at his home on Lookout Mountain in which he cures delicious hams and sausage, using old recipes long in his family.

His mother's father, Robert Orr, came to Tennessee from North (Protestant) Ireland in 1860. When he tried to enlist in the Confederate Army along with his brothers who had preceded him here, an alert recruiting officer, finding Orr had a British passport, put him to work as an espionage agent. Moving about freely in the North, he passed along Yankee military information for two years. He became suspect and fled just ahead of the hangman to the relative safety of a Confederate uniform back home.

Jo Conn Guild Sr. and Mary Orr Guild moved to Chattanooga in the 1880s. Jo Conn junior was born here in a house on Gilmer Street, now East 8th Street, on what is now the parking lot of Interstate Life & Accident Insurance Co., on Dec. 15, 1887. He was an only child.

His father, a civil engineer, traveled a lot during the boy's early life and he took his wife and son with him. Jo was tutored by his parents and never set foot in a school until he entered Baylor at the age of 10. Baylor then was on the present site of Centenary Methodist Church. Guild is now chairman of the board of trustees of Baylor.

Jo attended the University of Virginia and Vanderbilt, where he majored in civil engineering. He was later elected to full membership (as compared to a junior or associate membership) in the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Jo Conn Guild Sr. designed Hales Bar Dam, which Jo junior says was the first dual capacity (hydroelectric and navigation) dam in the United States. A permit for its construction was supplied in a special act of Congress. The elder Guild and C. E. James persuaded Anthony N. Brady, New York City financier, to put up the money. When the dam was finished the Army Engineers operated the lock for navigation, and the old Chattanooga & Tennessee River Power Co. generated electric power for Chattanooga. The company later merged with several others supplying some 70 Tennessee counties and became the Tennessee Electric Power Co.

Guild has one daughter, Virginia (Mrs. Rupert M. Colmore) by his first wife, the former Sarah Nichols of Savannah, Ga. He married May Bondurant Young of Mississippi in May, 1942.

