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It has become tradition for the California Mille to pause atop Mount Tamalpais overlooking San Francisco for a group photo of all the rallyers. Here, a small fraction pose by their cars.

For its one thousand miles, the California Mille offers unbeatable vistas and an impressive lineup of classic sports cars

BY JAN TEGLER



Ernie and Jeanne Gabiati carve a corner on beautiful Highway 49/120 north of Marinopolis in their 1956 Jaguar XK-140s.



CHOPARD



The seductive rear end of Bruce Massman's rare 1957 Talbot Lago Dupont.

The pairing of the California Mille and Chopard must have been inevitable. Yes, it took almost twenty years for the two to come together, but there it was in front of me, personified by the co-founder and organizer of the rally, Martin Swig, at the wheel, and the president and CEO of Chopard USA, Marc Hruschka, leaning into the corners with him.

It was a matter of the right timing both men say—a point where opportunity, friendship and a familiar passion came together at the right

moment—precision timing that allowed Chopard to be a part of the California Mille.

The venue

International Watch was fortunate to return to the California Mille this past April. The 19th edition of the event marked our second year of participation (see *International Watch*, September 2008) in a five-day classic that ranks right at the top of American vintage car rallies. Begun in 1991 by Martin Swig and co-founder Ken Shaff, the rally is run over 1,000 miles

of the best roads northern California can offer.

Each year Swig and his very talented staff plan a route combining challenging pavement with breathtaking scenery. Varied from year to year, the course is always entertaining with new sights, sounds and experiences on each successive stage. For 2009, the California Mille took a detour, leaving behind the spider web of blacktop north of San Francisco it traditionally explores to discover fresh roads to the south, snaking from the sea to the mountains and back.



Dennis Varni slashes through the same bend on Highway 49/120 in his magnificent 1957 Maserati 200 SI.



Stanley Bauer and Craig Gilbert scorch along Highway 160 south of Sacramento in their classic 1953 Jaguar XK-120SE.



The well-known emblem of the California Mille, a blend of the famous "Freccia Rosa" (red arrow) of the Mille Miglia and the international car code oval sticker for the USA.

Many of the loyal participants who return annually for this springtime tradition were back, eagerly looking forward to what has become an early highlight on the calendar of great automotive events. But there were new crews as well, bringing with them new automotive treasures to spice up the rally. Some came from overseas but that's no surprise.

So well regarded is the California Mille that its reputation has spread far and wide. As we detailed last year, the rally's close connection to the famous Mille Miglia Storica has earned it the distinction of being one of four Mille Miglia-associated events worldwide including the Mil Millas de la República Argentina, La Festa Mille Miglia in Japan and the Melbourne Mille in Victoria, Australia.

The distinction was earned, you might say. Martin Swig learned that a revival of the legendary Mille Miglia (see *International Watch*, September 2006) was to be held in 1982 and immediately decided it was an event he wanted to be part of. Together with longtime *Road & Track* magazine editor John Lamm, he set off for Brescia, Italy, where the pair drove Swig's

1955 Alfa Romeo 1900 Zagato coupe in the rally. They had a ball, and Swig returned for many years to drive in the Mille Miglia Storica—an event that has become the leading vintage rally in the world.

Friendship & opportunity

Today, it is almost impossible to think of the Mille Miglia Storica (MMS) without thinking of Chopard. The event and its best-known sponsor first came together in 1988. The next year, Chopard's co-president Karl-Friedrich Scheufele partnered with Formula One and sports car star driver Jacky Ickx to run the rally. The pair has been at it ever since, as much a part of the fabric of the modern revival of the great race as the hugely successful Mille Miglia collection of timepieces that have issued from Chopard in successive versions for the last two decades.

A friendship formed between the man behind the California Mille and the co-leader of Chopard in 1998 when both participated in the Argentine Mil Millas. Swig is well aware of the Scheufele family's close and genuine ties to the historic motoring

community. Karl-Friedrich learned to drive on a Jaguar 3.8 liter Mark II and began driving in the MMS with his father's 1955 Mercedes 300SL. Subsequently, he has piloted a long list of magnificent classic sports cars in the MMS and other rallies.

As he describes it, his passion for vintage automobiles was handed down to him by his father, Karl Scheufele III.

"That 'virus' was transmitted from my father and in fact, the vintage cars played a role in the watchmaking," he recalls. "The way vintage car engines are built, the attention to detail, the finish, all these things fascinated me and I was constantly thinking how to take some useful inspiration from them."

The MMS provided an outlet for that inspiration, and in the ensuing years Chopard has been an active and very involved sponsor of other premier automotive events, including the world-renowned annual Grand Prix de Monaco Historique. So when it became clear following the 2008 California Mille that an opening existed for a new sponsor of the American rally, opportunity met friendship.

Martin Swig contacted his friend and in relatively short order, Chopard became the official timekeeper of the California Mille for 2009.

"Martin and Karl-Friederich had been in discussion for quite some time about the potential involvement of Chopard in the California Mille," Hruschka explains. "It was good timing this time around, so they decided that this would be a good partnership, one that makes sense and one with some deep roots. We put it together in a quick but effective manner, and we're delighted to be here." While Karl-Friederich could not attend the 2009 edition, Hruschka and yours truly were treated to some unforgettable ups and downs.

Ups

After the lavish car show that takes place the day before the thousand-mile rally, crews launch in numbered order and stream onto the streets of the City by the Bay just after 8 a.m. to begin a descent down the steep pavement of Nob Hill.

Thereafter, the group of snorting sports cars turned south this year, flowing out of the city with the

bright blue Pacific on their right as they hurtled along Highway 1. Then a turn was made inland toward San Jose. If the course had been interesting to that point, it was about to get even better. One after another the Mille runners—cars from the classic era between 1927 and 1957 (the period of the original Mille Miglia)—turned onto Highway 130.

It was all uphill after that, to the top of Mt. Hamilton and the University of California's Lick Observatory at the mountain's 4,209-foot summit. Eighteen miles of climbing blacktop bending back upon itself over and over again greeted drivers and copilots. So numerous were the switchbacks that it would be hard to count the second-gear or even the first-gear hairpins just from memory.

Connected by short straights and third-gear bends where engines could be wound out to redline, the track narrowed to one-and-a-half lanes wide. Views were spectacular if one drove slow enough to split attention between the road and the scenery. Some did, and that's the part of the charm of a rally like the California Mille. You set your own pace. If it's driving excite-

ment you're after, the rally provides it in spades. Or, if a satisfying cruise through picturesque settings is the goal, that's easily achieved as well.

Most choose a mixture of both, but on Mt. Hamilton the majority enjoyed testing themselves and their machines against the inclines. The sound of nearly seventy classics roaring up the mountain was worth the trip alone. Jaguars, Alfa Romeos and Porsches scampered up the road in twos and threes.

Other exotics including the beautiful 1948 Nardi-Danese Corsa Spider driven by Dick and Matilda DeLuna and the fantastic 1953 Ferrari 250MM of Thomas Mittler and Aubrey Findburgh tore up the mountain with crackling Italian exhaust notes. These were contrasted by two impressively sized examples of American iron—a 1954 Lincoln and a 1952 Hudson Hornet representing cars that ran in the famous La Carrera Panamericana road race of the 1950s.

Many surprises

It's not just the roads that challenge participants. Not infrequently, vintage cars confront crews with surprises. Rounding a bend at speed near the top of the mountain behind Dennis Varni's gorgeous 1957 Maserati 200 SI, I'm obliged to brake hard as he raises his left arm indicating a problem. The Maserati has slowed substantially. Later, atop the mountain I learn that the Italian racing car's gear lever came apart in his hand as we entered a tight right-hander.

Below in the valley around San Jose temperatures edged up near 70 degrees while cresting the driveway to the Observatory drivers and codrivers (many in open cars) shivered in 40-degree air. But the view of Silicon Valley below was a great reward. With the first stage of the rally complete, lunch was on the agenda. Morning stages are typically followed by stops for lunch at gracious and scenic locations. Just as at dinner in the

The sound of nearly seventy classics roaring up the mountain was worth the trip alone



California Mille runners descend Mt. Tamalpais together. In this view are a 1957 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider, 1954 Triumph TR-2, 1959 Porsche 356 Roadster, 1957 Alfa Romeo 1900 CSS, 1952 Cunningham C-3 and another 1957 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider.

evenings, these welcome breaks allow for great socializing and story-telling. Happily, most had good tales to tell about their trip up Mt. Hamilton. And, after an hour or so, a fix is improvised for the Maserati and Varni is on his way.

Downs

If the drive up was terrific, the drive down the eastern slope of the mountain and through magnificent Del Puerto Canyon was truly awesome. Almost eighteen miles of descent began with a similarly twisty track that opened on the lower slopes, spitting the cars out onto the undulating straights and high speed sweeping corners of smoothly paved Del Puerto Canyon Road.

It was a sensory treat to follow many of the runners as they flew through the striking scenery. The elegant red 1956 Jaguar XK-140SE driven by Larry and Carolyn Hursh literally sang as its period-correct bias-ply tires struggled for a grip heading down the mountain. The car heeled over, carving graceful arcs as its four-wheels drifted through each corner—well driven and delightful to behold.

A mile or two ahead, a 1953 Fiat 1100—a diminutive and modest postwar four-door sedan—performed just as impressively. What it lacked in grace it more than made up for in rear-wheel-lifting charm as David Swig (the organizer's son) coaxed it through the canyon.

This juxtaposition of grand and humble machinery perfectly echoes the variety found in the original Mille Miglia where factory teams with big name racing drivers could be seen occupying the same roads as groups of club racers and common-folk who entered the race.

Mt. Hamilton and Del Puerto Canyon exemplify well one of the reasons many California Mille participants keep returning. Somehow, every year, Swig and his staff find new nuggets like these for rallyers to

Right: Chopard Mille Miglia GT XL Titanium
Below: A 1957 Devin Volkswagen owned by Dick McClure, a one-off Devin special.



Dick DeLuna, behind the wheel of his lovely 1948 Nardi-Danese Corsa Spider (which participated in the 1948 and 1949 Mille Miglia), prepares for the penultimate stage of the 2009 California Mille on the morning of Day Four in Sacramento.



enjoy. And this was but one of many highlights. They make quite a case for coming back.

The caseback

"I've done a rally or two before and I've participated in car shows, but nothing at this level," Marc Hruschka relates. "This is done at a level that Chopard can be proud of. The people, the cars, the rally overall is spectacular."

Chopard itself added to the event's luster this year, bringing with them a few very exclusive timepieces tailored to honor the California Mille. Hruschka gave us the scoop.

"We decided that we would take one of our top-selling models, our 42.5 mm Mille Miglia chronograph with the black dial and open caseback, and reverse-etch the California Mille logo into the caseback crystal."

Only seven examples were completed before the rally. Five ended up on the wrists of lucky participants at the conclusion of the event, awarded for a variety of distinctions deemed notable by the organizers. Interest was

high and orders for more were taken. However, the number of these creations produced is likely to be rather low, making the California Mille editions of Chopard's Mille Miglia Chronograph quite special indeed.

The same adjective could be used to describe so many of the roads and venues through which the 2009 California Mille passed. From the lovely views of the Pacific on Highway 1 weaving south of Carmel to the coiling asphalt heading north from Mariposa—from the sight of sophisticated Aston Martin DB2s, Lancia Aurelias and Talbot Lago specials to a one-off Devin Volkswagen and a rare Toyota Toyopet, the 2009 California Mille packed a year's worth of experiences into five wonderful days.

Great weather, good people and the right spirit helped make the rally a smashing success once more. Precision timing and passionate support from Chopard made it even more enjoyable. Here's hoping Karl-Friedrich Scheufele can join in the fun next year. ☺