

# When the cars are the stars, movie makers give him a call

BY GARY HENRICHS

While photographing some of the antique cars on the set of *The Cinderella Man* on Toronto's Queen Street this summer, I spoke with a couple of the drivers of the more than 100 antique vehicles on the set that day. Surprisingly, I found that almost all the vehicles on location were there as a result of the lifelong passion of one man.

That's Ron Fawcett of Fawcett Movie Cars in Whitby, Ont. Fawcett supplied up to 106 cars at one time to the filming of *The Cinderella Man*, starring Russell Crowe and Renee Zellweger and directed by Ron Howard. That's a lot of old cars, but not a huge feat for an outfit with more than 1,000 cars in its fleet.

Fawcett got started in the entertainment world in the mid-1960s — well before the movie industry discovered Toronto — when he rented his 1903 Columbus Electric for a commercial.

Over the years, he has supplied period cars for productions as varied as *Chicago The Musical*, *Friday the 13th — The Series*, *The Super Dave Osborne Show*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *New York Minute*, *Relic Hunter*, and *War of the Worlds*.

*The Cinderella Man* takes place in 1934 and Fawcett supplied 106 vehicles, including a 1928 Model A Ford, a '25 Dodge, a '34 Hupmobile, a '32 Desoto and a '26 AA Ford Truck.

Now in his 70s, Fawcett displays a passion for life, for cars and especially for Pierce-Arrows. He's currently working on six Pierce-Arrow restorations, while keeping up with the maintenance of his favourite — a 1918 48 Series 7 passenger that he has had for 36 years.

(I asked why Pierce-Arrow went

out of business and he said the company simply did not know how to make an inexpensive car — the carburetor alone of the 1918 Pierce-Arrow cost more than a complete, road-ready Model-T.)

Fawcett founded Fawcett Motor Carriage Co. in Whitby in 1963 (in its current location since 1966) as an automobile restoration business.

He can tell a tale about almost every car he has purchased on his numerous trips to the southern and western parts of the United States to buy rust-free cars, four trips just last summer.

He can tell you where and when he was hauling during both legs of the trip, including the modifications to the hauling vehicle he was driving at the time and how his old tractor-trailer truck (a 1967 W Ford 4000 Series retrofitted with a 400 Cummins instead of the stock 250, and a doctored transmission) could out-pull all the new rigs on hills.

And he lights up when he tells about what's required for the movie productions he's been a part of — the cars, the special effects and the special mechanical modifications made to the cars so they can be rolled, crashed, burned or flipped in a particular way.

Although the vehicles are antiques, they're generally not pristine collectors' cars, and most of those required for stunts have been modified. The trick, as with most aspects of the movie industry, is in the illusion: The cars have to look right, sound right, and "feel" right — but they also have to work, and work safely.

Movie stars at times have had to be taught how to drive the cars (some had no driving experience), while others required automatic



transmissions. Most were a joy to work with, according to Fawcett.

It is not uncommon for Fawcett to provide three or four identical cars for a movie shoot, since some may be crashed or burned and tight production schedules do not allow for rebuilding.

Where can you find four identical 1972 Chevys?

Even if Fawcett and his crew don't have the identical cars, given some notice they can pull what's needed from his vast inventory of what I would call junk cars, and restore them into mechanically sound working cars that look the part.

Safety is always a priority, Fawcett says. He and his crew ensure that if a car is going to be crashed by a stunt driver, the mechanicals and frame are in perfect order to make the stunt as safe as possible.

Some cars that are to be crashed or burned are sold to the movie studio with the provision that the remains are returned to Fawcett.

He and his crew can rebuild what looks to the untrained eye like a twisted pile of junk — a pile of automotive rubble — to get it back into a safe working vehicle to be used again on another movie. Fawcett is quick to point out he does not do it

all by himself, and that he has some dedicated individuals who help him make it all happen.

Dave Wilson now handles most of the movie-related business, while Fawcett is available for consultation, and often acts as historian regarding what vehicles were in use during a particular period.

A brief tour of his collection revealed a 1948 Kaiser; Hupmobiles from 1924, 1930 and 1934; 1949 and '50 Fords; a slew of Studebakers; and the likes of a Gremlin and Pacer, a Brinks truck.

Dan Mathews, production manager for Sullivan Entertainment, says: "Ron is extremely reliable, able to fulfill any request... he delivers. The maintenance on the set is quite meticulous."

"Ron is the first person to call when a movie requires any period cars," he added. "He is the go-to guy when it comes to cars."

Many of Fawcett's automobiles are featured on the website: [www.fawcett-movie-cars.com](http://www.fawcett-movie-cars.com)

Gary Henrichs is a consultant with Back to Basics Associates, and a sucker for old cars. He lives in Georgetown, Ont.



GARY HENRICHS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Ron Fawcett, top, loves period cars, particularly Pierce-Arrows, like this 1918 48 Series 7 passenger model. Above, cars supplied by Mr. Fawcett, line the street on the set of *Cinderella Man*, starring Russell Crowe and Renee Zellweger.



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