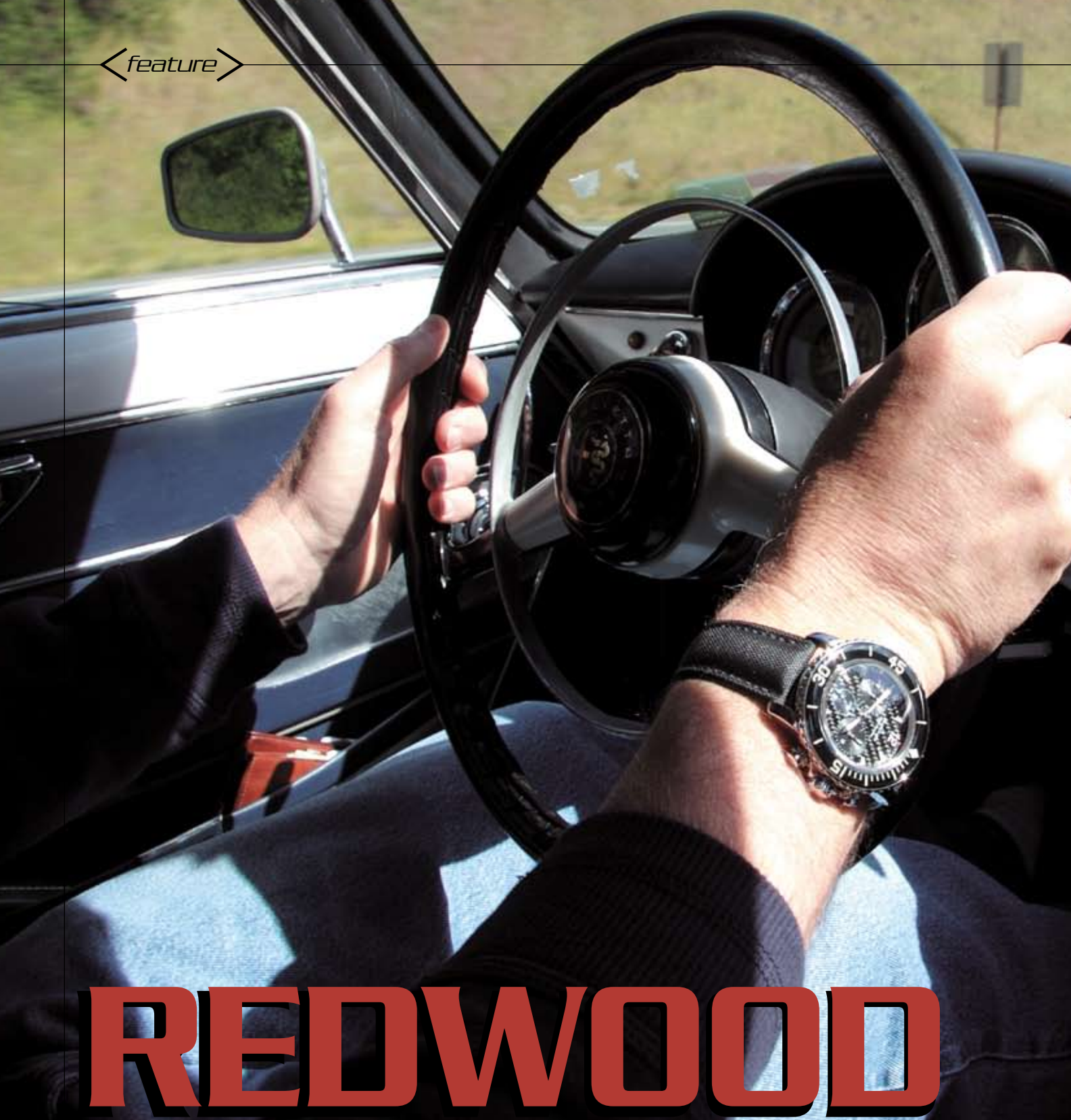


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# REDWOOD

# *Rally*

BY JAN TEGLER



Caption

The panorama is West Coast awesome. Behind the wheel at the California Mille, a vintage auto rally co-sponsored by Blancpain, hills and ocean swerve in and out of view.

**Y**ou hear roads like this described as goat trails. It's not hard to believe as we plunge steeply downhill yet again, making the transition from sunlight to shade under the canopy of a glorious mixed evergreen forest. Off come the sunglasses. Climbing through 5,000 RPM in third gear, Alfa Romeo's legendary Giulietta Sprint Veloce snarls.

At the moment, the California Mille is an exercise in connecting short undulating straightaways with tight bends – sharply uphill or downhill – with radii that vary but generally tighten quickly.

It's my first time driving in this terrific event and there's a left-hander coming up fast – no telling what happens when we get there. Onto the brakes—hard. Pop in the clutch, blip the throttle and down to second gear.

And somehow, there's room in my mind to make a mental note to thank Martin Swig. The co-founder and organizer of what has become one of the top vintage car rallies in the U.S. has put together a real driver's delight. From rippling pavement along the Sacramento River to fast two-lanes westward through the Sutter Buttes and the Monte Carlo Rally-like trails along the coast, the 18th edition of the California Mille proved the point.

### **Blancpain and Swig**

If you follow the world of vintage car collecting or racing there's a possibility you have heard of Martin Swig, particularly if you like Italian cars. Or, if you happen to live out West, you may be part of the wider audience that came to





Caption

know the Palo Alto, California, native as a successful as a car dealer in San Francisco. Over the better part of thirty years, Swig accumulated a large number of franchise dealerships selling American, European and Japanese marques. He was also one of the pioneers of the auto mall concept. But his passion for automobiles goes far beyond business.

Growing up in northern California in the 1950s put Swig right in the middle of a thriving car culture. He was particularly drawn to the light, agile European sports and competition cars which were behind the boom in amateur and professional road racing at the time. Everything from British roadsters to German GT machines and American specials piqued his interest, but he fell in love with Italian cars.

All of which goes to show that Martin Swig is crazy about cars. Actually, it would be just as accurate to say he's crazy about motoring in general. Which is why in 1982, after reading that the legendary Mille Miglia (see *International Watch*, September 2006) was going to be revived, he sent a telex to the organizers asking, "Can an American guy come to this?" They informed him he could, so Swig partnered with longtime Road & Track Magazine editor John Lamm and set off for Brescia, Italy. The pair drove Swig's 1955 Alfa Romeo 1900 Zagato coupe.

"We had the best time you could have," Swig remembers. "It was a smaller event then and wild, I mean wild!"

In the following years, the Mille Miglia Storica (revival)

reached new heights, becoming an annual event almost equal in stature to the original classic, which took place from 1927 to 1957. Swig, the first American to participate, would become a fixture, running the rally most every year and inspiring other Americans to do the same.

The event itself also proved inspirational, spawning what has become a recreational sport. In the twenty-five years since its recreation, well over 100 significant vintage rallies have been created all over the world. Today, there are nearly thirty noteworthy events in the U.S. alone. But few match the quality of the California Mille—and none is more respected.

#### From Colorado

As the 1990s began, there was no



Caption

California Mille – mostly because no one had thought of it yet. That year however, Swig and group friends had their own inspiration.

“In 1990 a buddy of mine started the Colorado Grand (see *International Watch*, December 2006) and a bunch of us went.”

He met with Gil Nickel (noted vintner and vintage car collector/racer), Lou Sellyei (ex-surgeon/collector and vintage racer) who had a pontoon Ferrari Testarossa for years and Ivan Zeremba (restoration specialist/collector/racer) and got inspired to create a California version of the rally.

Swig did just that with the help of event co-founder and fellow Alfa Romeo collector, Ken Shaff.

“We scheduled the event for fall 1991. Everybody who participated loved it so we kept doing it. After three years we made it a spring event,” he explains.

So well done was their creation that it quickly attained a reputa-

tion as one of the best vintage rallies anywhere. Swig’s connection to the Mille Miglia Storica gave it added luster and the organization he formed to promote the event, the Amici Americani Della Mille Miglia (American Friends of the Mille Miglia), cultivated a relationship with the Italian revival that has resulted in its being one of four Mille Miglia-associated events worldwide, including the Mil Millas de la Republica Argentina, La Festa Mille Miglia in Japan and the Melbourne Mille in Victoria Australia.

#### Blancpain at speed

The morning of Day Three of the California Mille was shaping up as the best yet. After a very engaging trip north from Mendocino on Highway 1 with magnificent views of the Pacific to our left, verdant mountains to our right and bending blacktop dead ahead, my co-driver Jeff Kingston

and I turned inland.

Following the Mille routebook’s guidance, we left Route 101 at Meyers Flat and entered another world. Within seconds the sunshine faded to dim light as we drove into Redwoods State Park along Avenue of the Giants.

It’s worth pausing in such a setting. Five-hundred-year-old, 300-foot tall redwoods are not something one comes in contact with everyday. Walking among them in the damp cool air underneath is like being in a cathedral. It’s one of the many pleasures, aesthetic and otherwise, a run like the California Mille makes possible. The event is not a time-speed-distance rally like its namesake. There are no prizes for going fast or completing stages in a pre-set time. Incredible driving enjoyment is built into each day’s route to be sure, but there’s also time to stop and smell the roses – or ferns in this case.





Caption



Blasting off after such a meditative interlude might seem sacrilege to some, but the great thing about the California Mille is that in this and other respects, it never takes itself too seriously. That's why I was smiling as we turned left onto a bit of pavement that has become notorious among Mille participants, many of whom return year after year to be part of the action.

This was Mattole Road. I was driving an Alfa Romeo – Martin Swig's Alfa no less. The man I'd been hearing and reading about for years handed me the keys himself. The likes of me, driving Swig's pride and joy – fast – over a road that barely qualifies as well, a road. Preposterous!

And wonderful.

Mattole Road heads west generally - back toward the ocean, meandering toward what is referred to as the "Lost Coast", a part of California so remote it's hard to believe it lies within the nation's most populous state. But it's beautiful, absolutely gorgeous. Wonderful hills rise and roll over its 65-mile course.

#### Wrist flash

In a few sections the track straightens, opening for long stretches that occasionally allow a glimpse of the sea. It's sensory overload and at speed you get so wrapped in trying not get wrapped up... well you can't see everything. But a flash of light on my right brings

an added dimension. It's coming from Jeff's wrist and the urge to look that way must be fought off – at least until we slow down.

The California Mille is not the first automotive event that Blancpain has been involved with. In 2006, the renowned watchmaker was on hand for the Kitzbuehler Alpen Rallye through Austria. More automotive adventure followed in 2007 when Blancpain took part in the Peking to Paris Motor Challenge. There, Blancpain CEO Marc A. Hayek, a vintage and contemporary car aficionado himself, was instrumental in orchestrating the company's involvement. When the manufacture decided to sponsor the California Mille the same

year, it found an event with an individuality and quality, which match it well.

That's why Blancpain returned for 2008. And they didn't come empty-handed.

The beacon on Kingston's left arm is Blancpain's limited edition "California Mille Fifty Fathoms Chronograph." Just twenty examples of the famous stainless steel diver's watch were crafted to celebrate the manufacture's association with the rally. Executed with Blancpain's unique flair, the Mille versions feature a striking carbon-



fiber dial and special engraving on their casebacks, including the car number of the purchaser and the inscription, "California Mille."

This rarity was made available to Mille participants this year and it received great attention. Blancpain was in the fore at the California Mille's now traditional start venue, the fabulous Fairmont Hotel on Nob Hill in San Francisco.

Swig and his small but superb staff have worked hard to maintain the high quality of the rally since its inception, limiting the number of entrants and choosing an interesting mix of cars pro-

duced between 1927 and 1957 that "could have competed in the original Mille Miglia."

For 2008 the decision was made to allow a few post-1957 cars whose designs were fundamentally the same as those made prior to 1957. This resulted in a slightly higher number of cars than usual, but the variety was terrific. Teams from Switzerland, England, Colombia, Australia and Canada made the trip to join American entrants from fifteen 5 states. Even so, a large number of applicants had to be turned away.

But those who made the cut

took the start one by one on Monday, April 28 at precisely 9 am when two large renditions of Blancpain's Flyback Chronograph struck the hour. Driving under the starting arch, past the starter's flag and out onto the streets of San Francisco, they quickly put the first of 1,000 miles under their wheels.

### The participants

Out on Mattole Road the going was challenging but tremendous fun. The first half coiled round' and round' the hills, a wonderful reprise of Orr Springs Road the previous afternoon but with a





Caption

difference. So remote is the Lost Coast that Mattole Road receives little attention. It is paved, but the roadbed is showing its age. Ruts, ripples and patches conspire to toss cars sideways. Frequent undulations can fully compress or extend aged suspensions or provide the occasional airing out if launch velocity is achieved.

That's very much in keeping with the philosophy behind the California Mille. As Martin Swig acknowledges, the cars are meant to be driven and the people who participate in his event share that view. From humble MGs to multi-million dollar Jaguars, Mille rallyers come to stretch their cars'

legs. It's a pleasure to see and helps keep automotive history vibrant. These are not ossified museum pieces, they're at their best when alive and at speed.

As for feeling alive, the roads of the California Mille are not the only venue from which fun is derived. Fact is, you look forward to the luxurious hotels, wonderful dinners and great socializing that are a part of the event as much as the driving itself.

At dinner, you meet the most interesting people - from David E. Davis, the dean of American automotive journalism to noted collector Miles Collier. Klaus Menzel, an ex-Alfa Romeo dealer and

longtime Mille participant originally from Hanover, Germany, actually drives his 1956 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spyder from his home in Michigan to San Francisco for the rally and back.

Corner after corner, gear after gear, brake application after brake application, the Giulietta SV never missed a beat. Over the last several years I keep coming in contact with and driving Alfa Romeos, including Swig's gem. Mentioning this to him, Martin replied with a sentiment he often expresses.

"The cars pick the people."

Maybe he's right. And maybe Blancpain and the California Mille were also meant for each other. ☺