

Denise McCluggage

1927 - 2015



Denise McCluggage was born in El Dorado, KS on January 20, 1927. She lived with her parents, Robert and Velma McCluggage, and two sisters at 214 South Taylor.

Attending Mills College in the San Francisco Bay area of California, she graduated in 1947 with a BA in philosophy, economics, and politics. She began what was to become an amazingly successful career in journalism with the San Francisco Chronicle.

While working in San Francisco, Denise spent a lot of time with people who would later be termed “car people.” Her friend, Barney Clark, introduced her to their special hang-out, an imported car dealership owned by Kjell Qvale. It was there that she saw something that in her words, she “quite simply had to possess”: a black MG-TC. This was the car that is most often credited with the introduction of the sports car to postwar America. As Denise put it, it was “a loose roller skate of a car.” Her parents back in Kansas advanced her \$1795 to purchase the car, a sizable sum for the early 1950’s.

McCluggage’s first MG led to another. With the rise of amateur sports car racing, it was just a matter of time before she ended up racing. She had already been attending indoor sprint car events. Moving to New York City about 1954 to take a position with the New York Herald-Tribune, she was racing a Jaguar XKK 140 MC just one year later

A gifted descriptive writer, McCluggage eventually moved to the sports department; at this time women sportswriters were rare. With her adventurous spirit, she became known for actually doing whatever she wrote about, whether it be racing, skiing, or parachuting.

In her own words, “It could be said that what successes I have enjoyed were not because of any opportunities but because of the absence of them. Women were rare on the city desks of newspapers then, and in sports departments, too. So I chose the fringe sports, like skiing and auto racing. And I was further unique in that I did what I wrote about. That was not common then. I created my own niche.”

Also a talented photographer, Denise's photographs have hung in museums and galleries across America, including the Peterson Automotive Museum in Los Angeles, CA.

After living in many parts of the United States and traveling around the world, McCluggage now makes her home in Santa Fe, NM. She was once married to an actor but is now single.

Among those she has had close friendships with, many before they were well known, are actor Steve McQueen, and musicians Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck and Cal Tjader. "It's been a smorgasbord sort of life," she once chuckled. "Maybe I'll come back sometime and have a full-course dinner."

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Denise Tyler McCluggage was born in El Dorado, KS, the youngest of three daughters born to Robert Tyler and Velma McCosh McCluggage.

Mr. McCluggage was a prominent lawyer and also served as the First Assistant United States District Attorney for the state of Kansas. Denise's grandfather, James McCluggage, was one of the early Butler County pioneers, moving to the area in 1872.

While only twelve years of age, Denise started up a neighborhood newspaper. She went on to become a leading lady of automotive journalism.

LEAVING THE AREA

The McCluggage family moved from El Dorado to Topeka, KS about 1936.

After graduating from Topeka High School in 1947, Denise left Kansas to attend Mills College in Oakland, CA. She chose this independent liberal arts college for women after being impressed by a representative speaking at her high school. Their central aim is to teach students to think critically and communicate responsibly and effectively, and to accept the challenges of their creative visions. In this aim Denise excelled, as proven by her life.

ACHIEVEMENTS

At a time when females were not allowed into the press box, race track pit, or garage areas, let alone being given the chance to drive in races, Denise McCluggage often resorted to interviewing racers through chain link fences or away from the race track to get her stories. She was told that people would not accept news from a woman. But she persevered and found a way to get the story. She possessed a talent and depth of character to overcome the obstacles of the era, both as a journalist and a racing competitor.

Already a ranked driver in 1958, she was refused entry at Le Mans. The head of the organizing committee said, "This is an invitational race, and we do not choose to invite women."

As one of the first women road racers, McCluggage proved to the world that women could indeed compete in both American sports car and international racing. During the late 1950s through the early 1960s, she raced in competitions, holding her own against the best drivers of the day. Among them were Stirling Moss, Carroll Shelby, Juan Manuel Fangio, and America's 1st World Driving Champion, Phil Hill.

McCluggage raced at some of the great sports car venues of the day: Sebring, Nassau, Daytona, the Nürburgring Germany, and the Monte Carlo Rallye. She drove a variety of cars, including the Porsche, the Italian OSCAs, De Tomos, Maseratis, Volvos, Mini-Coopers, Fiats, and Renaults. Some were personally owned, such as an Alfa Romeo Guilietta Sprint Veloce. She also owned and raced what seems to be her favorite, a Ferrari 250 GT, that she drove to the track, raced, and drove home. She remembers racing one entire season on the same set of tires, unlike today's race cars that may get only 2 or 3 competitive laps out of one set of tires.

McCluggage opened numerous doors for women. Taking seriously her being a role model and hero for many aspiring women race car drivers, she always made a point to stop and chat with future racers.

As her professional racing came to an end in the late 1960s, McCluggage's journalism career took off. She was involved in the beginning of Competition Press, which later became AutoWeek magazine, the largest weekly automobile magazine in the world. Today she still holds the position of Senior Contributing Editor. Leon Mandel, publisher of AutoWeek and long-time friend of McCluggage, says "Denise has always been the spiritual center of AutoWeek. She defined its aspirations." Today AutoWeek still aims at the knowledgeable enthusiast reader, not the casual car shopper. Mandel liberally credits McCluggage for instilling that philosophy from the beginning. He praises her accomplishment as being very womanly – not a dare or a challenge, but an example.

McCluggage continued to write a monthly column for AutoWeek by the name of "Now & Then." Her syndicated column, "Drive, She Said," appeared in some 90 newspapers across the United States and Canada. As International Editor for Road & Travel magazine, she reviewed European cars and contributes to their travel advice section.

She is the author of a number of books, including *The Centered Skier*, published in 1977, and *By Brooks Too Broad for Leaping*, a collection of some of her pieces from AutoWeek published in 1994. She also wrote the text to accompany Tom Burnside's photographs for *American Racing: Road Racing in the 50s and 60s*, published in 1996.

Denise McCluggage edited an Internet car magazine, www.roadrunning.com, and contributed to the on-line "The Car Connection." She is also a frequent speaker across the nation on driver and traffic safety.

In her own words, McCluggage has “dabbled” in interior decorating, competition skiing, parachuting, and bungee jumping during her exciting life. Along with journalistically covering automobiles and motor sports, she has also covered skiing extensively.

She once said: “Change is the only constant. Hanging on is the only sin.”

Denise McCluggage passed away in 2015.

AWARDS, RECOGNITION

In auto racing and rallying, Denise McCluggage has won trophies on three continents. Chief among her victories are 1st GT, Sebring, driving a Ferrari 250 GT SWB Berlinetta; Copa de Damas, the Grand Prix of Venezuela, driving a Porsche 550 RS; and 1st in class at the Rallye de Monte Carlo driving a Ford Falcon.

As a journalist, Denise is the only woman to have won the Ken W. Purdy Award for Excellence in Automotive Journalism. She has also received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Media Association, and is the first journalist to be admitted to the Automotive Hall of Fame in Dearborn, Michigan.

She has been awarded the Dean Bachelor Life Time Achievement Award. In 2003, she was honored as Road & Travel’s 1st Lifetime Achievement Award. In February of 2006, she was inducted into the Sports Car Club of America’s Hall of Fame.

Denise McCluggage is also in the Topeka High School Hall of Fame (Topeka, KS) and the Hunter Mountain Ski Area Hall of Fame (Hunter, NY).

Denise was posthumously inducted into the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in 2022.

BIBLIOGRAPHY / FURTHER READING

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