

Leader in a New Era

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This former CEO of Saab Cars USA and all-around motoring guy was the driving force behind the automaker's prestigious growth and its most enduring model

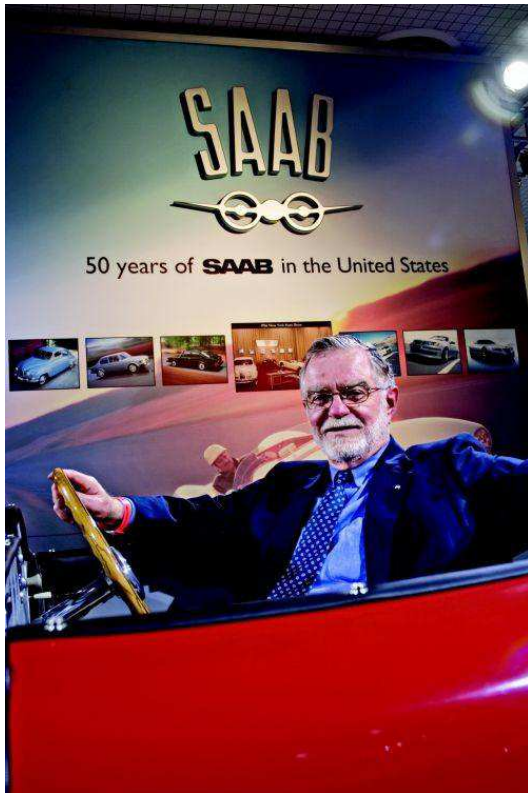
If you were asked to describe a Swedish car, you would first think of a Saab or a Volvo. But what connotations come to mind? Both brands are known for upscale appointments, safety, practicality, and in turbo form, power. But it wasn't always that way--in fact, in the 1950s and 1960s, when they were still relative unknowns in middle America, they were recognized more for economy than for any demographic they appeal to today. One man's vision and nearly boundless energy changed all that.



Robert J. Sinclair--Bob, as he insists everyone address him--enjoys a thoroughly active retirement, filled with cross-country and international travel, camping and motorcycle touring with Anne, his wife of 54 years. It is no surprise that this 74-year-old, who describes himself as having a "Type A" personality, is always on the go, making the most of every situation...this has been his modus operandi all his life.

After a few years as an imported car salesman, Bob was hired by the fledgling Saab Motors, Inc. company as a field representative, and began to canvass the eastern half of the United States, save for New England, in a two-stroke Saab 93, signing up new dealers. "After a year or so, we hired five more field representatives," he recalls. "I was called into the head office in New York and asked to be their supervisor. I eventually took over advertising and PR, and became sales manager, doing all that at one time. In 1958, I was just 27...it was a hell of a learning experience."

Bob enthusiastically tackled his many duties at Saab, but was shaken in 1961 when the U.S. founder and CEO, Ralph Millet, decided to move the company headquarters to New Haven, Connecticut. "I told him that the company may be moving to New Haven, but I wasn't moving to New Haven," he chuckles. Bob had a fortuitous encounter with the president of Volvo's advertising agency, and learned that the position of advertising manager at Volvo had just opened.



"I started working for Volvo in January 1962. In 1967, I was promoted to president of their western distributing company, which was headquartered in LA," he recalls. Bob accomplished a great deal in California, professionally, but the good times didn't last; "Volvo downsized their U.S. presence in 1974. In the process, I picked up everything west of the Mississippi River, but lost my finance and legal departments, and I became, in my eyes, sort of a paper tiger. I stayed in that mode for a couple of years because we had six kids to raise."

He'd had enough by 1978, when he expressed this to Volvo's president. "This job is not fun anymore. I've only got one life to live, and I don't feel like doing what I'm doing," Bob explained. "He said, 'Why don't you come to the head office? You can be vice president of marketing, in charge of sales, advertising, public relations, distribution, product specifications--the whole bag.'" Although he didn't relish the idea of working in headquarters, Bob again took a chance and moved his family back east.

Although his marketing efforts to help change the Volvo image from stodgy, conservative cars to upscale Swedish family haulers were successful, he became mired in the company's bureaucracy. Bob dealt with this for a year until his former boss, Ralph Millet, contacted him with an incredible proposition. "He asked if I would consider coming back to Saab," Bob recalls; "I told him I'd consider it under certain circumstances...if I were president and CEO, answerable only to the board of directors, and had a free hand to run the U.S. operations. He replied, 'That's exactly what we have in mind.'"

Bob stepped into the presidency of Saab Cars U.S.A. in May 1979, a time when the tiny automaker was floundering; "Saab was trying to compete on price--they were de-contenting the cars. It was absurd...they were building 80,000 cars a year for the world market, selling about 15,000 here, and trying to compete against the big guys.

"It was probably my second meeting when I told the board that we had a conflict in strategic direction. 'You guys appear set on building something akin to a stripped-down Scandinavian Volkswagen. What I'm interested in selling is a high-performance Swedish four-passenger Porsche.' You should have seen the smiles on their faces," he laughs. "The turbochargers were coming on strong--we were the only company who had turbos in a standard production car, and the cars had such immense possibilities, but they didn't have tinted glass, they didn't have central locking, they didn't have air conditioning, they didn't have sound systems, they didn't have bloody anything! Step by step, we started adding content, we started adding price, and not incidentally, adding profit."

Bob presided over Saab's industry record-setting growth during the first half of the 1980s, when the company had 60 consecutive months of sales growth, bringing sales up to the 50,000 unit per year level. He'd successfully established Saab as a niche manufacturer of technically advanced, premium front-wheel-drive performance vehicles--anti-BMWs, if you will--and was instrumental in creating what would become the company's flagship, the 900 Convertible.

"In early 1983, I got a telephone call from Sten Wennlo, the president of the company, asking me to come to Trollhättan a few days later, and bring my sales and marketing guys with me. He wouldn't tell me what was up," he recalls. Like the company's other international executives, the Americans had been summoned to Sweden to view a new two-door notchback 900 sedan designed to meet the demands of lower-income markets like Finland, Denmark and Norway.

"It was the stripper of all strippers," Bob laughs, "With stamped steel wheels, no chrome window trim, crank-up windows, cloth upholstery--it was really something. It had a carbureted engine, which couldn't be sold in the United States anyway. So after they made a presentation, with slides and such, they went around the room asking for our reactions. The sales and marketing people of logical markets said how many they thought they could sell. When they got to the United States, I said, 'This doesn't fit in at all with our plans of continuing to move up-market, so we'll pass, we don't want any.' To say this was an unpopular decision would really be putting it mildly."

Bob discussed his marketing strategy with Mr. Wennlo that night, and conceded to take the cars if that were his official order. Within a week of returning home, he was informed by Saab's deputy sales manager that he'd have to take 1,000 two-doors each of the next three years, but was allowed to order them to any specification he desired. So he got creative.

"I pulled out an 8 x 10 black-and-white side profile of the two-door sedan. I got a pair of scissors and cut the top off. I said, 'How about this?' Bob and his U.S. marketing director called the deputy sales manager and gave them a list of their demands; "I went through the whole litany. Cast wheels, window trim, tinted glass, power windows, air conditioning, sound systems, power steering, turbocharged engine, five-speed gearbox, leather upholstery, metallic paint--he's saying yes, yes, yes--and I got down to the end of the list, and said, 'Oh yes, there's one more item.' 'What's that?' 'A convertible top.' There's silence. He said, 'A what?' 'I said, a hydroelectric cloth top... you know, convertible, cabriolet!' He said, 'Let me call you back.'



"It wasn't five minutes later that the phone rang, and it was Sten Wennlo. He said, 'Meester Seenclair, vat in hell are you dooing now?'" Bob laughs. "We were and remain good friends, but when he said 'Meester Seenclair!' I knew he had his purple face on." Bob explained that the U.S. market was ripe for convertibles, and offered to construct a prototype in America with his own budget. "I knew if I told him how much it would cost, it would stop, so I told him it would be about \$15,000 dollars. He said, 'Femty toosand?'--femty is fifty, so I said 'Femtan, fifteen!' He said, 'Ees it so?' I told him that I know people."

Despite a shoestring budget that certainly blew past that absurdly low figure, Bob talked his friend Heinz Prechter, president of the American Sunroof Corporation, into building Saab a properly engineered, pre-production prototype out of one of the two-door sedans. "If it was Bondoed and dum-dum glued together, the Swedish engineers would tear it apart, and that would be the end of it, so it would really have to be done right," he says. "We showed that car that fall at the 1983 Frankfurt auto show, just eight months after we got the green light, and the rest is history. I was really proud of that insight."



In addition to his smash hit with the 1980s' first premium European four-seat convertible, Bob got Saab Cars U.S.A. involved with motorsports by supplying Skip Barber's open-wheel Spec Car series with their turbocharged and intercooled 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine, modified only for dry sump lubrication and racing fuel. He also provided the seed money that allowed the Saab Club to host the first Saab Owners Convention in 1983, after recognizing this opportunity to bond with Saab owners and enthusiasts. Although the company's sales streak plateaued and slumped after the American economy stalled in late 1986, he kept his focus on marketing Saab in America as a builder of premium niche automobiles.

General Motors bought 50 percent of Saab Cars in December of 1989, and Bob quickly sensed a change in the company's focus. "I'd been slaying the same dragons for 34 years...my batteries were flat. The timing was great; my contract allowed me to retire on my 60th birthday, although I was obliged to give them a year's notice. In 1991, I was approaching my 59th birthday, and I had an upcoming board meeting during the Geneva auto show," he explains. After explaining the situation to Anne and hearing that she would also retire ("from cooking dinners--that's my job now," he laughs) when he did, he advised the board that he wanted out, and subsequently negotiated a September retirement.

Bob and Anne moved back to California, settling in Santa Barbara. He is sanguine about the current state of his former charge, noting that its being wholly owned by GM is "the way of the world today, like Volvo and Jaguar being subsidiaries of Ford." But he is proud that, during his watch in the 1980s, "Saabs had a lot of appeal to a limited number of avidly enthusiastic buyers--they were the cars for people who didn't want to buy the car that everybody else was buying. There wasn't anything like them in the marketplace."

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