

NEWS *Diary*

Dame Nellie's car won't go for a song



By BOB MILLINGTON

DAME Nellie Melba? Wonderful woman, guv. She had a voice that could knock a chicken off its perch at 10 metres. And her taste in cars? Nothing but the best.

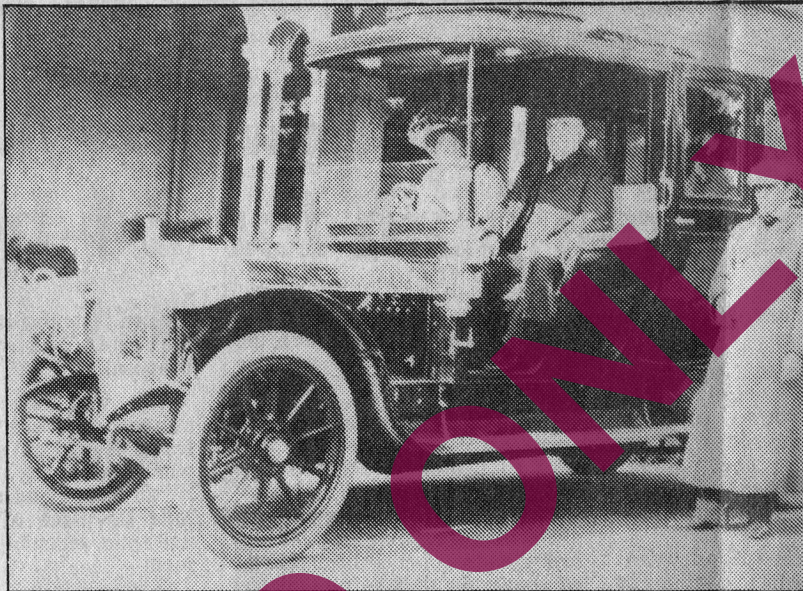
In 1911, when the diva was touring the United States and persuading culture-starved Yanks to buy a ticket and invest in Melba Enterprises NL, she did some investing of her own. The dame purchased a Pierce-Arrow limousine, a beautiful vehicle that, in today's terms, would make a Mercedes-Benz look as shabby as a Goggomobile.

It had style, it had pizzazz, it had four wheels, brakes and a horn. Dame Nellie would sit up in the back of this charabanc looking for all the world like, well, Dame Nellie Melba, as a chauffeur tootled her around the US, Britain and Europe, breaking hearts, box-office records and assorted glassware whenever she hit a high note.

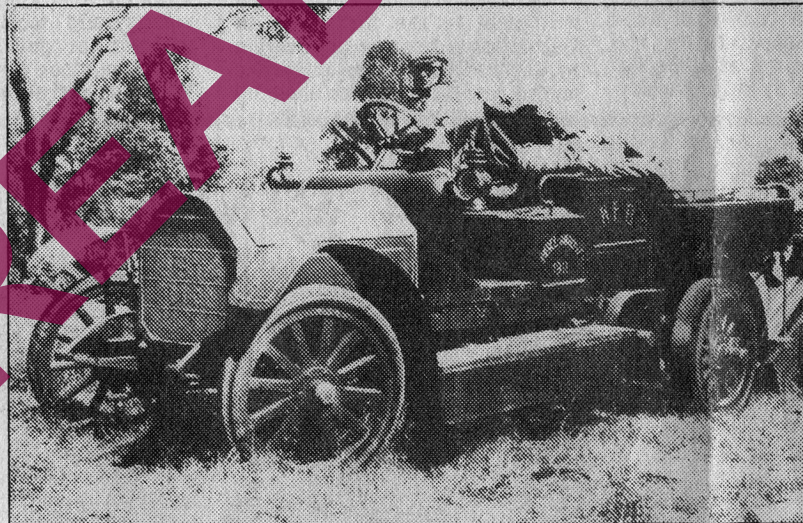
But at the outbreak of World War I, the French Government gently turfed Nellie out of the back seat, filled it up with soldiers and rushed them to the front. From then on, it was downhill for the Pierce-Arrow. Nellie got it back to Oz in 1918, cleaned out the empty bottles of vin ordinaire and drove it herself.

She quickly flick-passed it, however, to the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, which cut down the back and installed hoses and machinery. Staffers at the North Melbourne Fire Brigade in Curzon Street always referred to it as the Melba pump. In 1933, the brigade farewelled its historic but spluttering pumper and auctioned it off.

In 1978, when a Lakes Entrance car museum put it up for sale, the Melbourne Fire Brigade Historical Society pounced. With help from 'The Sun' and the State Government, the society bought the old Pierce-Arrow. But full restoration will need about \$30,000, and the society is seeking the help of some well-heeled, opera-loving car buffs.



Dame Nellie Melba (above) at the wheel of the Pierce-Arrow. In the passenger seat is her father, David Mitchell. And below, modifications turn the stately car into a jaunty tourer before doing service as a fire engine.



ity and support to anti-pornography lobbyists such as the Festival of Light and the Australian Federation for Decency. Its mailings are always liberally sprinkled with attacks on the "anti-family" dangers of pornography.

In the August issue of the fund newsletter, the group hailed the recent vote by the attorneys-general to ban all x-rated videos throughout Australia as "a resounding victory for conservative and pro-family groups, including the Christian churches, who have lobbied

price — propaganda for the "adult" video lobby which opposes any such bans on pornographic material. In a curious turn for the books, the fund now says that it is "totally opposed to the imposition of any censorship on literature or viewing material".

This seems to be a case of the fund's right hand not knowing what its extreme-right hand is doing.

ALL RIGHT, Mary Darcey of

year short of the quarter century.

Mr Lumb says Ms Gage's conduct has been above and beyond the call of "I'm sorry, he's out to lunch". It's an awfully difficult job: "This was particularly the case at the time when the firm for which she works merged with another, and for over a year the redoubtable Nannette answered every call with the new firm's name, 'Ford Aspinwall & DeGruchy Cohen Thompson Bolger and Co'.

"Indeed, so impressed were callers with her rendition that on several occasions she was informed that the caller had rung just to hear the name. In the interests of the preservation of our receptionist's voice ... the name has now been shortened to Ford & Co."

LOOKING for the perfect birthday present? Why not consider buying 'Happy Birthday To You' itself. The song is for sale. Anyone with a spare \$14 million can snap it up.

The Sengstack family of Princeton, New Jersey, which for half a century has owned Birchtree Ltd, the company that holds the copyright, has decided it is time to get out of Tin Pan Alley. But whoever buys Birchtree will have rights to 'Happy Birthday' — and the \$1 million a year it brings in — only until 2010, when the song's 75-year copyright expires and it becomes part of the public domain. Then, and only then, will families feel really secure as they gather around the cake and warble.

The birthday song was written by Patty Smith Hill and her sister Mildred, two kindergarten and Sunday-school teachers in Louisville, Kentucky. It is now one the three most popular songs in the English language.