



Willem Oosthoek has written several books on the history of Maserati, including "The Magnificent Front-engined Birdcages" and "Birdcage to Supercage: Maserati Tipo 63•64•65."

"I always loved the 3500 GT, from the first book that I got as a 12-year-old, and I promised myself that one day I would own one."



Oosthoek's first car was this '50s Fiat 1100, which was so rusty, he covered the holes with decals!

Willem Oosthoek

Author, Maserati Club Historian

VR: How did you first get started with cars?

WO: I guess it was around 1959, when I was at the age of 12, I became aware that there was such a thing as motor racing and almost immediately, Stirling Moss became my hero. He was the underdog with that little Walker Cooper in which he won at Monza in '59, thrashing the Ferrari team. I was born and raised in Holland, and there was very little information on motorsport at the time. Whatever I could pick up was from Dutch car magazines. I used to buy second-hand car magazines at local flea markets with my hard earned pocket money. But also, in 1959, for my birthday, I asked for a book that really opened me up to the world of motor racing and cars in general, *The World's Racing Cars and Sports Cars*. It was a relatively small one by today's standards, but it was really a nifty book because it covered all the 1957 Formula One and Formula Two cars, the sports racers and the grand touring cars. The cars that got my real attention were the Maseratis, the 250F, the 450S and the new 3500 GT. The book came with technical details and things like that; in spite of the fact that I just started to learn English, it was always a treasure and I still have it.

VR: So, really, you started with Maserati almost from day one then?

WO: Yes, although other marques were my favorites too, like the Vanwalls and cars like that, because Moss drove them in '58. And obviously, Moss being a favorite, I started to read more and more about him. He was a Maserati driver in the mid '50s and later on in the early '60s. The fact that he got stiffed by Enzo Ferrari once, early in his career, really turned me off on Ferraris!

VR: What was the first car you ever owned?

WO: My first car was a Fiat, mid-'50s with suicide doors. I bought it from my granddad.

VR: The 600?

WO: I think it was more like an 1100, and it was so rusting by the time I bought it that I put all kinds of racing decals on it to cover up the holes! I actually took it to Le Mans in 1972. I couldn't exceed the speed potential, which was about 60kph, otherwise the contents of the radiator would blow out. I had to stop a number of times along ditches to refill the radiator, so that taught me how to moderate my pace, however slow it was. But, I got there and I got back in one piece.

VR: When did you first get hands-on with Maserati either in terms of ownership or being involved or working on the cars?

WO: I came to America in early '83 and I worked in the banking industry. I had to do a fair amount of business travel across the country, and I realized that there were a lot of interesting people who used to race Maseratis or owned Maseratis throughout the U.S. So, I made a real effort on every business trip that I made to see whether there was anybody, in the locations that I visited, who was associated with Maserati in the past. I did a lot of interviews during those trips. I interviewed Dick Thompson, Jim Jeffords, Bill Kimberly, Bill Krause and Chuck Daigh. Among the car owners I interviewed were Frank Harrison and Joe Lubin. A lot of these interviews got published in the East Coast Maserati club magazine.

VR: You were a member of the club at that point?



Oosthoek's pride and joy is his 1963 Maserati 3500GT.

WO: Yes, the club magazine was called *Il Tridente*, and it was basically a federation of local Maserati clubs around the country. It was not associated with Mandarano at the time, but they had a very good magazine that came out once every quarter and the interviews covered the racing contents. During those interviews, I picked up a lot of additional information that nobody was really aware of. All these guys had been real road racers, and what you picked up in the SCCA publication and magazines like that was only a fraction of what actually happened during those races in the background. That's really how it started. As a child, I hated writing but it almost started as a hobby, doing these interviews. From there it snowballed into publishing books. I started to realize more and more that there were omissions in the few Maserati books out there, and this was really the first time that I contemplated doing a book on the subject. I decided to do

the history of the rear-engined Birdcage Maseratis, the Tipo 63, 64, 65. At the same time, when I moved to the U.S., I began a photo collection. It started out with Maseratis. I contacted a lot of the well-known photographers like Bob Tronolone, Pete Biro and Jack Brady. Flip Schulke was one of the tip-top photographers at the time. I got some photos on the rear-engined Birdcage from a friend in Austria, Egon Hofer. He owned one at the time and he had quite a collection. And, that all came in very handy when I did that first book. It took me two years to find a publisher but luckily, Glyn Morris, who had just taken over the Dalton Watson name, stepped up to the plate and the book got published through him. Once you do one book, the next one and the next one, and all the others, become a lot easier because of name recognition.

VR: When did you first become the

official historian for the Maserati Club?

WO: That was pretty much early on, in the late '80s when the club was founded. Mostly it was because there wasn't anybody else, and I was the only one to submit historical articles. So, in the land of the blind, the man with one eye is king.

VR: You're also a Maserati owner, as well.

WO: I bought a 3500 GT. I always loved the model from the first book that I got as a 12 year old, and I promised myself that one day I would own one. I didn't have the money when I was still living in Holland, but when I moved to the U.S., I started to make some decent money in banking and I bought a wrecked car in Los Angeles. That was in the late '80s, but the car had to be completely restored. That took about five years because it's all cash flow related, but

it is a great looking car. The restoration is a older one, but it is holding up well. We had an Italian classic car event here in Charlotte a couple of weeks ago and I won two prizes—best in show and the ladies choice.

VR: The 3500 is an interesting Maserati in that even as recently as maybe as 10 or 15 years ago, you could still find examples of that car for under \$20,000.

WO: Oh yes, it was amazing. The same was true for Aston Martins, the DB3, DB4s, DB5s etc. Ferraris became very expensive from the early 1980s on. Now Aston Martins are gaining ground very rapidly and, luckily, so are Maseratis in the last few years...

VR: Luckily, if you own one, not luckily if you don't!

WO: Yes, but they're still relatively cheap. The car that I have, if I would put it on the auction block, would probably fetch about \$250,000. But Aston Martins, made in the same year, go for double that amount and obviously the GT Ferraris, we're not talking about the 250 GTs but more the passenger cars, go for triple that amount. It doesn't make any sense because Maseratis were, I think, better built than Ferraris at the time. And when they were sold new, they all went for around \$12,000 in the early '60s.

VR: Is there anything about the 3500 that you find particularly special or appealing? Is there a particular strength to it in your eyes?

WO: They are quality-built cars, and I like some models better than others. I have a late model 3500GT, which did away with some of the chrome and looks better than the early 3500GTs, I think. It has a six-cylinder engine that comes straight out of the Formula One car, the 250F—a little boring, a little stroking, but essentially the same engine. It's almost like a parts car because some of the drive train components came from England. The gearbox is a ZF

from Germany, but the Italian aluminum body is timeless. I get stopped all the time, with people wanting to know what it is. Some people, who have never seen one, think it's a Thunderbird. Oh, dear! I can see that point, you know, the '56, '57 Thunderbirds have a slight resemblance; they look a bit like having some of the 3500 body features.

VR: I guess they all share sort of a mid-century design ethic.

WO: I always liked the engine being up front, so I've never been interested in Porsches and that type of car. In addition the 3500 is a practical car. It has two little seats in the back; it has plenty of luggage space. It is totally reliable with the Weber carburetors, and it's a delight to drive.

VR: Are there any other cars in your collection?

WO: My other car, my daily driver, is a 1967 Vanden Plas Princess, which is really a tarted-up Austin or Morris! It came in six different versions based on BMC's ADO16 design and uses a liquid suspension. It's a completely different car.

VR: That's a unique daily driver in this country.

WO: It is. It was never imported here. I used it going through college in Holland and had it completely restored in England about 20 years ago, but it needs it again. But it's a very comfortable car, due to that liquid suspension and its front-wheel drive. I call it the baby Bentley because of its grill, the leather upholstery, wooden dashboard and all those features.

VR: After all these years, are there any new historical tidbits or aspects about Maserati that surprise you?

WO: I don't think so, other than it startles me when the 450S models, the 1957 sports racer, start to win overall trophies at the various concours events, because it was

never really a pretty car. It just won first overall at the Villa d'Este. I noticed in your magazine that the old Frank Harrison car won in California, and it makes me wonder what criteria the judges use. I love the model, but as an elegant car. It's really a brute; a forceful brute but that's where it stops, I think.

VR: Don't you think that the passing of time tends to soften the view of these things too?

WO: Well, I think people are becoming more interested in Maserati again. Most people seem to think that Maserati in the '50s was just another racing company, like Ferrari. They think that they built racecars and sports cars and so to finance it they had to sell grand touring cars. That was not the case with Maserati. It was a huge industrial concern, manufacturing all kinds of industrial products to sell overseas. That was the business that supported and sponsored the racing activities of Maserati. Not too many people realize that.

VR: But wasn't that originally part of Orsi's original mandate, to offer those road cars as a way of broadening the company's base?

WO: They made a limited number of grand touring cars during the '50s, until the 3500 GT came along, but it was almost like a third leg. They probably got pushed by some of their Maserati customers to come up with a model for their daily drive, but it wasn't until they had to sell their industrial operations to a German company, as part of their bankruptcy procedures, that they started, in earnest, with a production grand touring car, which became the 3500GT.

VR: And what year was that?

WO: The bankruptcy came in early 1958, and it didn't really have anything to do with the racing activities. A number of authors claim, "Well, they wrecked all those 450S cars in their quest for the 1957 World Cham-

pionship, which bankrupted the company," but that was not the reason. It was large industrial orders supplied to Argentina and to Spain on credit that did the company in. They were guaranteed by the Italian government, but the local officials played a very dirty game and the company never saw a dime. The Orsis were forced to sell the industrial part of their company, but they paid off every single creditor. From there on, Maserati became a company concentrating on producing grand touring cars—unless the customer wanted to have a special sports racing car, but in that case the bill had to be footed by the customer. They came up with a very successful range of Birdcage Maseratis, the front-engine ones. Then they jumped into the bandwagon for the rear-engine cars, and those were never really successful. They had Tipo 151 coupes, which were specifically designed for Le Mans. They were fast and were potentially Ferrari beaters, but they were always outnumbered and after leading, they always dropped out, unfortunately.

VR: Was it just a question of them being stretched too thin?


WO: By then Maserati didn't do very much in terms of race development on a continuous basis. They sold a car to a customer, like Briggs Cunningham or John Simone, the American who ran the Maserati France agency and they offered their mechanics, but there really wasn't much development going on until the season ended and then they came up with a model that was slightly more evolved. It was always too little too late.

VR: Now what does the future hold for you in terms of book projects?

WO: After the various Maserati books, I did two books on sports car racing in the South. The first one covered '57-'58, the second one '59-'60 mostly because the SCCA magazine never really reported very much about those races. And there were lots of fascinating Ferraris, Maseratis and Jaguars that generate multi-million dollar amounts on the auction circuit right now.

And nobody really knows what their car's race history was in the southern parts. That's why I decided to do these books, and I have just completed the manuscript for volume three, which will cover 1961 and '62 with an epilog on the '63 season. That's where I'm calling it quits. There weren't really too many exciting cars after that in the South; it turned into the rear-engined trend like Lotus 23s and designs like that, cars that never really interested me.

VR: The question we always like to wrap up with is that if a genie popped out of a bottle and could grant you one wish, is there any one particular car that you'd love to own if money were no object?

WO: I'd probably love to own one of the three Tipo 151s, the Le Mans coupes. It was a fascinating car and I've been indirectly involved with the restoration process of one example, the car raced by Maserati France. So, if I had the money, that would be the car that I would love to have. 



If granted one wish, Oosthoek would love to own one of three Maserati Tipo 151s built to compete at Le Mans in 1962.