

WoodCreek Majesty

You may justifiably consider WoodCreek as “majestic”, but you may not know that it was actually once the home of European royalty; Archduke Stefan of Austria, Prince of Tuscany living at 28403 Beech Hill for several years.

Although he preferred to be known simply as Stefan Habsburg, his full name was Stefan von Habsburg-Lothringen and was “His Imperial and Royal Highness Archduke and Prince Stefan of Austria, Hungary, Bohemia, and Tuscany”, eldest child of Archduke Anton of Austria and his wife [Princess Ileana](#), the youngest daughter of King Ferdinand II of Romania and a great granddaughter of Britain's Queen Victoria. As such, he was a member of the House of Habsburg, which once ruled Europe through its kings, princes, and Holy Roman Emperors.

Stefan was born in Mödling, Lower Austria in 1932, where his father owned a castle and to which they moved when he was an infant. In 1942, during WW II, the castle was requisitioned as a hospital and his family moved to yet another castle, Bran Castle, known to the world as “Dracula’s Castle.” in their home country of Romania, which was then under Nazi rule. In 1944, with Germany weakening, Stefan’s first cousin King Michael I launched a coup announcing that Romania had unilaterally ceased all military actions against the Allies, accepting their armistice offer, and joining the war against the Axis powers. Ironically, this action made it much easier for the Soviets to march in and the family was forced out again in 1947 under threat of imprisonment.



Bran Castle

Stefan’s immediate family fled first to Switzerland, then Argentina and, in 1950, to the USA, but upon the divorce of his parents shortly afterwards, his father returned to Austria and Stefan and his siblings made their home with their mother in Newton, MA. Inspired by his interest in cars, Stefan entered Boston’s MIT to study mechanical engineering. He graduated in 1955 and soon after, he married Jerrine Soper (Jerrie), a student at the Massachusetts School of Art whom he had met at a dance. They ultimately had five children together.



Stefan & Jerrie

Jerrie had many accomplishments in her own right. She graduated in 1952 with a bachelor’s of fine art. She also attended the Art Students League of New York from 1952 to 1954, and studied under painter Robert Wilbert from 1965 to 1975. She had a deep Catholic faith, enjoyed talking about politics and world affairs, and liked attending the symphony.

Later in 1955 they came to Detroit after he was hired by GM’s Harley Earl who was looking to strengthen the technical capabilities of his styling department. For Habsburg, this was a personal mission, as he later wrote: “Although my degree is in engineering, I have been accepted into employment as a designer. I believe in the importance of good aesthetic design and functional validity being combined in the initial thinking to make a really novel and functionally valid product. Having read article after article in both foreign and American journals, that the stylists in America don't know a thing about engineering, and the engineers have limited imagination in making the stylists' excesses into high-quality running vehicles, I hope to participate in changing that by going to work as a designer rather than an engineer.”

However, not everything was happy-ever-after, 1959 proving to be a terrible year for the family. In January, Stefan's pregnant sister Minola, was traveling with her husband Rusch on Lufthansa Flight 502 from Hamburg when it crashed just short of the runway in Rio de Janeiro, killing all passengers and crew. Later the same year, Stefan suffered a near fatal attack of viral encephalitis, from which he suffered short term memory loss and other brain damage, despite which, 13 years later, he gained an MBA at Wayne State at the age of 40.



Stefan Habsburg with a Firebird III concept model.

In the Research Studio headed by the brilliant Firebird I designer Robert McLean, one of Stefan's first projects was the never-built XP-53 intended to be Le Sabre II, a front-drive prototype with a toroidal CVT and a rear wing that also acted as an air brake. A project on which he worked in the summer of 1956, was a warm-up exercise for the important efforts in which Habsburg played a major role: the creation of the turbine-powered Firebird II and Firebird III concept cars. As assistant chief designer of the Research Studio he contributed to many of their design elements including the principles of their automatic lane-following systems, a technology that only now is being incorporated in automobiles.

Stefan was engaged in some of the first serious aerodynamic studies conducted in the styling department including early efforts to develop aerodynamic down-force. His many achievements at

GM included key contributions to vehicle architecture, one of which led to Pontiac's adoption of the 'Wide-Track' look.

Stefan Habsburg died in November 1998 at the age of 66.

For her part, while living in WoodCreek, his wife Jerrie painted portraits and landscapes, teaching classes at Oakland Community College, the Visual Arts Association of Livonia and the Bloomfield Birmingham Art Association. After the death of her husband she moved to Commerce Township where she was well known as a painter. She died in 2015 at the age of 84. She is interred with her husband at Suttons Bay, Michigan on the Leelanau Peninsula.

Sources:

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Many thanks to Ara Ekizian for providing the Karl Ludvigsen source material