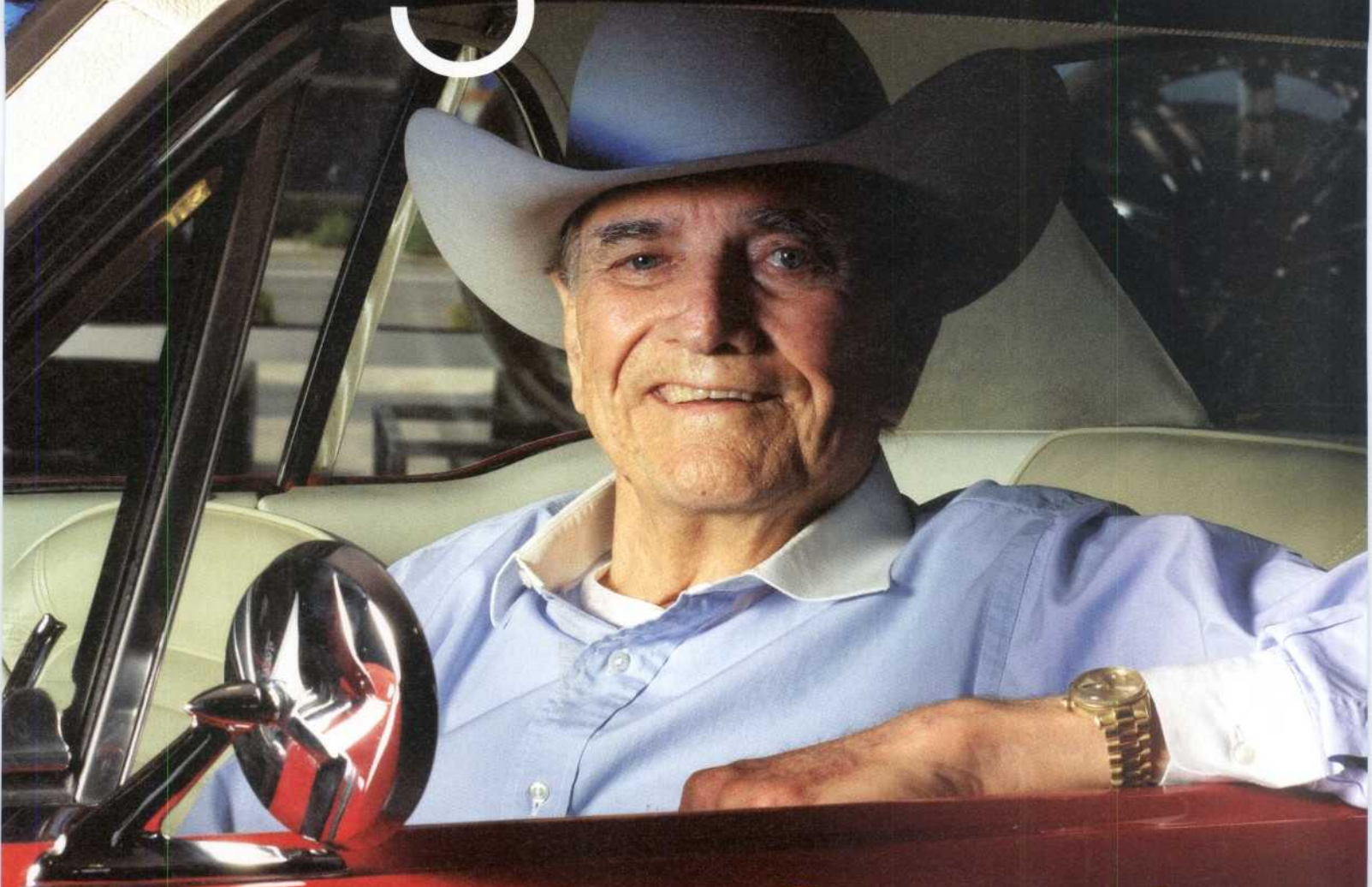


Long Beach

COASTAL LIVING CITY STYLE

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GO SEE CAL!
INNOVATIVE MINDS
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Photo courtesy of Cal Worthington

Super Salesman

WRITTEN BY ELIZABETH AGUILERA PHOTOGRAPHED BY WES KRONINGER

Generations of Southern Californians have Cal Worthington's jingles and madcap stunts with exotic animals forever etched in their consciousness.

The auto dealer-turned showman became famous for nuzzling a Bengal tiger, wrestling a grizzly bear pup and waving his white Stetson while riding atop an elephant in television commercials coupled with a catchy jingle and chorus of "Go see Cal, go see Cal, go see Cal" — all to get TV viewers to come buy a car.

The campaign, called "Dog Spot", features Worthington with an animal each time — but never with an actual dog.

"I started to use 'Dog Spot' as a joke. I didn't intend to keep it but people loved it," Worthington said. "When I meet people today, they don't tell me hello — they say 'where's your dog Spot?'"

For 57 years, Cal Worthington, now 90, has been selling cars in Southern California. At the height of his career he owned 29 dealerships and various other businesses, had sold more than 1 million cars and grossed billions of dollars. The TV Bureau of Advertising once named him "the best-known car dealer pitchman in television history". Worthington inspired a national Dodge ad called "The Good Guys in the White Hats". During that same time he appeared as himself in a movie, *Save the Tiger*. Box Cox wrote his biography *My Dog Spot, The Cal Worthington Story* in the 70s.

Worthington opened his Long Beach dealership — now his flagship location — in 1974 after operating in nearby cities since the 1950s, first in Huntington Park and later in South Gate. In 2007 Worthington told Long Beach city officials his dealership had generated more than \$20 million in sales tax since it opened. Then manager of the city's Economic Development Bureau, Robert Swayze, told the Press-Telegram that Worthington had "certainly been the most recognized retailer in Long Beach."

There has been recent buzz around town that Worthington has been offered a deal by Ford Motor Co. to relocate, and city officials are talking about negotiating with Worthington to keep the business in the city.

However his grandson Nick Worthington, who manages the Long Beach store, said that although he could not offer insight into any ongoing conversation, he assures his grandfather is committed to this city.

"I don't see any change in the foreseeable future. I could be wrong, but I don't think so," he said. "Cal should be in Long Beach for the next 15 or 20 years. Cal loves Long Beach — Long Beach has been great to him for years and he has been supporting the city for years, and he'll keep doing that if he can."

The ongoing marketing of the Worthington Ford business empire also does not give indication there are plans to leave the city. These days the car culture icon is in a radio ad with Snoop Dogg, and recently taped some new "Dog Spot" ads with reindeer and sled dogs.

Branding expert Liz Goodgold remembers similar ads from her childhood, and now, as a well-known voice in marketing and branding, she recognizes them as brilliant business. She is the author of *Red Fire Branding*.

"I remember the ads as being comforting," Goodgold said. "Oh my goodness — here's Cal again — and let's see what crazy animal he has today. It made TV an adventure."

Worthington chuckles when asked about his strategy. "It's simple really," he said. "The lesson is to get people's attention. A good way to do it is with a baby, and the next best thing is with animals and then a pretty girl."



Photo courtesy of Cal Worthington.

This is true, but Worthington also has a Depression-era, Dustbowl memory-inspired work ethic that has served him well in his half century in the car business. He has endured economic downturns, oil crisis', and countless other shake-ups in the auto industry. In the late 70s he faced lawsuits — later settled — filed by the state for alleged deceptive advertising. He settled without admission of guilt and paid thousands in fines.

Worthington points to competitors and the occasional hard-to-please customer for those challenges. "If you get run over, you dust yourself off and get up again," he said. "That's how you succeed in business."

Or you make a joke, as Worthington did with his "Dog Spot" ads. He was making fun of Ralph Williams, another auto dealer

and competitor who had ads with his actual dog, Storm, a German shepherd.

But Worthington was doing something else, too, as he enticed animals to play with him during his commercials. "He was branding himself," said Goodgold. "Great characters become celebrities. If we can't remember you we don't do business with you."

Goodgold likens Worthington to Richard Branson, CEO of Virgin Airlines. "His flamboyant character is part and parcel of his brand and attributes," she said. "Flying on Virgin Air is as if purchasing a piece of Richard."

Viewers can't forget the time Worthington stuck his head in the open



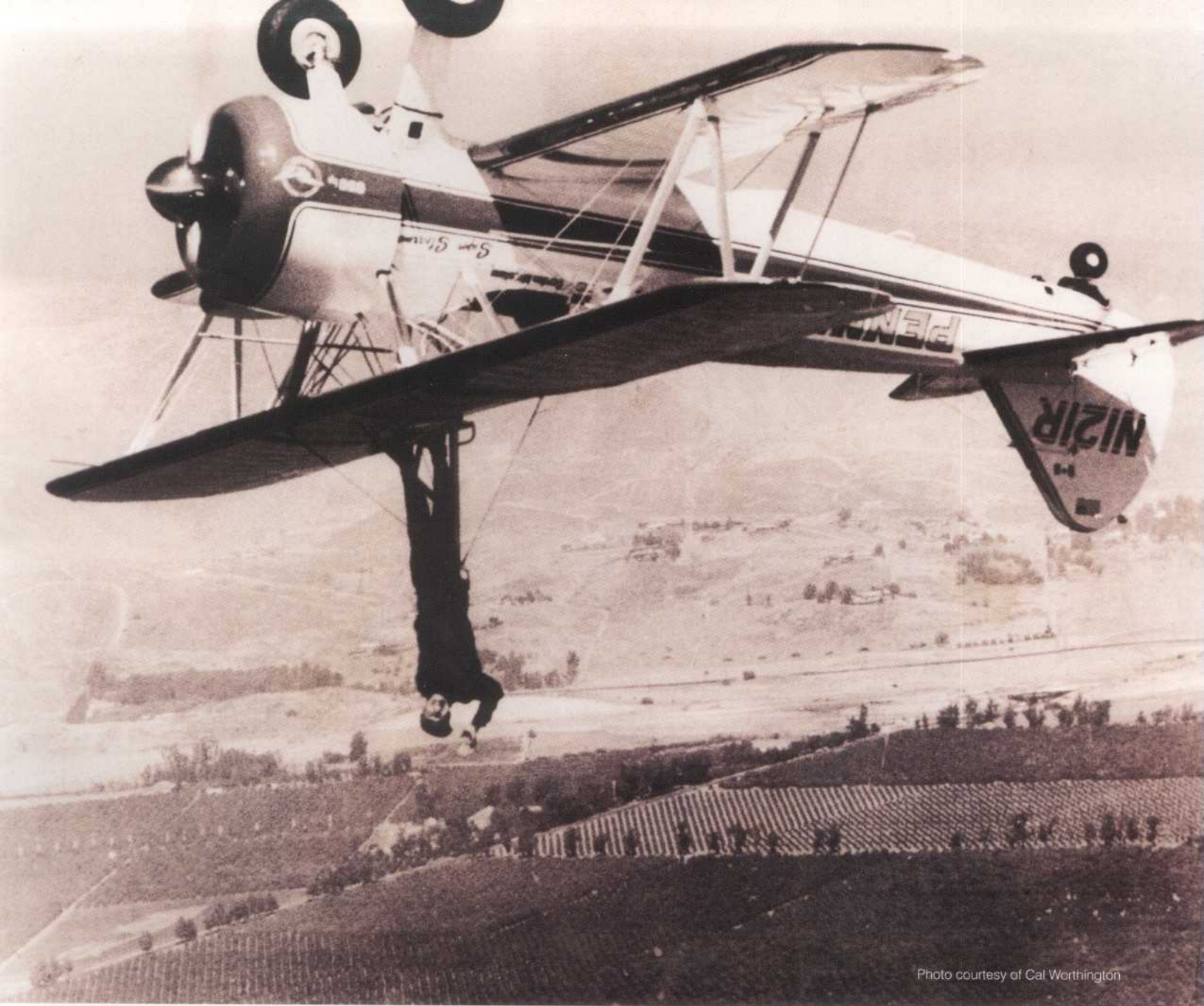


Photo courtesy of Cal Worthington

mouth of Shamu, the killer whale, or the time he drove a go-cart with a tiger sitting next to him. Or the time he rode a hippo through the car lot or encouraged a chimp on roller skates to follow him around the lot.

Worthington "became a larger than life character," Goodgold said. "He brought in the outrageous and kept us tuned in."

The joke turned into a monumental success. His television production days started with entire shows. Before the commercials he hosted a three-hour variety show from Cal's Corral at the dealership. He featured rising country stars and cars.

Born Calvin Coolidge Worthington in November 1920 in Oklahoma,

Worthington was the seventh of nine children. Growing up poor during the depression shaped Worthington as a hard worker and a risk taker. He dropped out of school when in the ninth grade to work on a road crew to help his family. At the time his late father, a man Worthington admired very much, sought work for \$1 a day.

Young Worthington signed up for the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC paid \$30 a month, of which \$25 was sent home to his family. After leaving the CCC, he hauled gravel for \$2 a day, and later, when WWII began, he signed on with the Air Force to become a combat pilot. Worthington flew 29 combat flights over Germany and was recognized for his service, but returning to civilian life in 1945 was boring for the young man.



"I was used to so much excitement after going on bombing missions," he said. "So I knew I would get a job as an airline pilot, but guess what? They would not take anyone without four years of college. I was a great pilot and I still fly now."

The requirement dashed his dreams of flying commercial airliners. The rejection led to Worthington purchasing a Texas gas station. Business was slow and he sold it quickly, but not before he used the station to sell a few cars.

"I thought I would buy cars and sell cars," he said in his familiar deep voice. "I bought a car and sold it and made \$60, and then another and made \$118, and woo-hoo! — I thought that was a lot of money."

At the time he received a call to check out a failing Hudson dealership in California. He did, and he bought the Huntington Park dealership. He had \$13,000 and the bank loaned him another \$13,000 to get started. Later he opened a Dodge store in South Gate. In the 60's he was the country's top Dodge dealer.

Worthington, who now lives outside of Sacramento, has been married three times and has six children. His sons Calvin and Rod work with Worthington in other areas of the business.

These days Worthington's ads remain legendary.

It's understandable, as who can forget Worthington's perhaps most famous stunt that traded exotic animals for a biplane. As the plane flew and rolled upside down, he stood on top, attached only by straps around his feet. Cal waved and smiled as he stood upside down, the hard earth visible several miles below his head.

Worthington loved the stunts, always having a good time with the animals or the biplane. But his antics were not reserved only for his TV audience. He saved some of his gags for his employees too.

"The idea in advertising is to get their attention," Worthington chuckled. "I did this with my salesmen too. One time we were having a sales meeting and I pulled out a revolver and fired it in the air. I woke them up." ■



Photo courtesy of Cal Worthington