

Escape Road

Underwater treasure: A 1936 DKW sedan

By Roger Barlow

Some interesting cars are to be found in junkyards, some are discovered in barns and haystacks (even in Manhattan, such as in the case of the Bugatti Royale I wrote about not long ago), and I actually found one in the Los Angeles River under 10ft of water.

The River Of The Angels is usually bone dry—but not always. Fifty years ago Southern California was hit by exceptionally heavy rains that, in a few days, produced devastating mud slides. Backed-up storm drains filled the normally serene Los Angeles River to overflowing and put most of the San Fernando Valley from North Hollywood to Sepulveda Blvd under several feet of water. About three blocks north of Ventura Blvd, not far from Laurel Canyon, there was a 1936 DKW sedan sitting in a driveway totally submerged. I knew it was there because I had seen it before the rains came and met the owner, Arthur Zwebell, who had recently bought it new in Mexico City. It was a fascinating car—front-wheel drive, powered by a truly odd-ball valveless 2cyl, 2stroke engine having only five moving parts but, of course, with the same power flow as a conventional engine having dozens more moving pieces.

It cost about \$800 in Mexico, which was the 1937 price of a Ford V8. After being given a drive in Zwebell's car, I lusted after a DKW with a hopeless passion. Hopeless because in those Depression years even \$800 was a not-so-small fortune for a mostly unemployed film maker.

As the San Fernando Valley began to emerge from the deep, I could see part of the Zwebell residence from a higher street and there was the poor little "Deek" with waterlogged debris piled up around it.

Days later, when I was able to find Zwebell at his no longer immaculate home, the car was gone. I said I'd hoped to buy it from him and try to fix it up—my only hope of getting a DKW. He told me the insurance company had taken it to have it refurbished.

Two months later he phoned to say the car had been returned to him and would I come to look it over. His house and yard still showed signs of the flood but there stood what appeared to be a brand new DKW. The headlining had been replaced and the rest of the interior reupholstered with the best looking synthetic leather this side of a 1960s' Mercedes. The car certainly appeared perfect—but it had a rather unpleasant musty smell. Looking distinctly unhappy and grumpy, Zwebell said, "They seem to have done a pretty good job—but I don't think I want to keep it. You can have



Once dried out, the DKW proved to be a delightful car that in many ways was years ahead of its time

it for \$400. If you haven't got the money you can pay me \$25 a month."

So what was life with a recently submerged DKW like? Odd to begin with, as the first time I used the brakes I heard the sound of rushing water! Sheer imagination, I thought. But it happened again at the next stop light. Later I had to brake heavily and there was not only the sound of rushing water but a geyser-like spurt of it shooting up out of the opening where the centrally mounted handbrake was pivoted on the backbone chassis. A quarter-inch hole drilled through the bottom of it let the last of the muddy flood waters ooze out. The musty odor, too, was soon gone.

Filling station attendants thought I was mad when asked to pour a quart of SAE 50 oil into the tank with the incoming six gallons of gasoline. The DKW, like virtually all 2stroke engines, had no oil pumps. Because the incoming gasoline-oil mixture from the carburetor was first drawn into the sealed-off chamber below each cylinder, the "petroil" mixture on its way to the combustion chamber was able to lubricate the roller main and connecting rod bearings with fresh, clean oil.

Though the oil in the fuel led to a more rapid carbon build-up in the combustion chamber and exhaust ports, its removal every 15,000miles took just half an hour. Lifting the cylinder head required only unscrewing six very accessible head bolts and loosening a hose clamp. The engine utilized "loop scavenging" and so had no deflector on the piston crown, which was domed, and the combustion chamber was hemispherical—just like a twin-cam engine of today, but without any valves to grind or adjust.

Oh, the oil in the fuel that produces the

carbon deposits in a 2stroke does copiously lubricate the upper cylinder walls to keep bore life well above that of 4stroke engines, which suffer rapid wear on cold starts til oil can get to this hard to reach area.

If the DKW had a fault it was that even German 2strokes tend to some 4cycling on the overrun and at idle, which results in unburned mixture igniting in the exhaust system with intermittent but audible pops. (Under load it was smooth and quiet.)

As unique as its engine was the body of the DKW sedan. Except for the grille, hood and fenders, it was made of wood! Mostly plywood glued and screwed together to make a strong, rigid structure rather like that of the Mosquito fighter-bomber of World War II. The exterior panels were covered with leather-like vinyl that gave it the air of a much more expensive car. Neither this material nor the body structure seemed to have been any the worse for its week under water. It remained without squeaks, rattles or drumming all the years I drove it. Just as the engine was trouble free.

The DKW's quick steering, its superior front-drive cornering and straight-line stability, was vastly superior to the big Detroit cars of that year and the next 20. My DKW, Das Kleine Wunder, was a brilliantly simple concept. A practical and truly economical car, even with a top speed of only 60mph.

It was not only good, it was lucky for me. A few months later I got a call to come East to work with Willard Van Dyke as a cameraman-director on *The City*, a big documentary that has, with Aaron Copeland's first film score, become a classic. I drove the Deek to New York and was able to pay off Zwebell in short order. I was earning the stupendous sum of \$60 a week. **AW**