

ESCAPE ROAD

# Marmon Sixteen

*Marmon's 1931 V16 was one of the sweetest sixteens*

By Roger Barlow

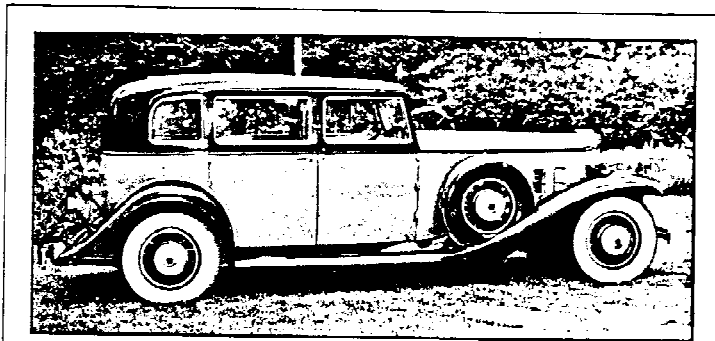
For once a rare car actually found me. That's right ... no searching in dusty barns, musty haystacks, dusky Manhattan warehouses or the murky waters of a rampaging Los Angeles river. It happened one afternoon in 1948. At our own premises on Alden Drive at the edge of Beverly Hills. Louis Van Dyke and I were in my office discussing the always pressing problem of finance. The specific worry was how to pay for the next six Jaguars arriving in a week (banks in those days wouldn't advance a dime on a "foreign" car!) when I rushed someone from the shop (it might well have been a very young Phil Hill, our tuneup specialist) to say that there was a man outside who had something he wanted to show us. "It's really worth looking at," he concluded. Inasmuch as we couldn't solve the dilemma with which we were wrestling, any diversion was welcome. So we headed for our parking area.

And there it was ... a truly magnificent diversion ... a magnificently diverting motor car ... surrounded by our entire staff. Not a famous European marque wearing flamboyant French or Italian coachwork, but a conservatively styled, 16-year-old American sedan; dignified and elegant. It was a diverting motor car, not by virtue of its still pleasing appearance, but because of its remarkable V16 engine. On my doorstep, so to speak, was one of the less than 400 Marmon Sixteens ever built and one of probably less than 70 still in existence in 1948. Phil had good reason to be excited.

Of course this wasn't the only V16 made in the 1930s; there was the Cadillac, introduced in 1930, a year before the Marmon. It cost more but its engine was not as advanced as that of the Marmon which had more than just a lot of cylinders going for it. This was an aluminum unit weighing almost 400 pounds less than if made of cast iron—as were virtually all other car engines. It utilized wet cylinder liners of specially hardened steel; sealed at the bottom with rubber O-rings and by the cylinder head gasket at the top. The ohv heads were also of aluminum with inserted valve seats.

It was a big 8.0 liter engine, bore and

stroke of 3.1 x 4.0 inches. In spite of only one dual downdraft carburetor to feed all those cylinders, it breathed well enough to produce its 200 hp at 3400 rpm (fairly high for 1931), revving to 4100 rpm at top speed. A stump-pulling 390 lb ft of torque was on



Marmon Sixteen bodies were styled by W. D. Teague, built by LeBaron

call at a mere 1800 rpm. With all that low-end torque and eight, *eight* power impulses every revolution, this Marmon would pull top gear from five miles per hour, and although it was capable of reaching 70 in second gear of its three-speed box, many owners never bothered to shift once it was on the move and in high gear. They got eight to 10 mpg.

Although its compression ratio of 6:1 was then the highest in the industry, this engine idled so smoothly that owners were able to confound their friends by standing a coin on edge atop the intake manifold. This almost total lack of vibration in part derived from the V16 cylinder blocks being at a 45 degree angle and therefore even-firing. The two banks of cylinders were not offset, as is usual with V engines, which may also have contributed to smoothness, though it required the con rod big ends to be of the blade and fork type.

Advanced as this engine was, the chassis was completely conventional, though well designed, as was the suspension with semi-elliptic springs. The turning circle was 42 feet (small for a 145 inch wheelbase) and required four turns of the steering wheel. Brakes were Bendix, cable-operated and power-assisted.

The Indianapolis-based Marmon factory used the Speedway for its test track and to run in each Sixteen for 200 miles; the last two laps at 105 mph. Not bad for a big

5300 pound sedan.

*Road & Track* did a simulated road test, arriving at their performance figures by calculation and deduction; they gave the Sixteen a 0-60 time of just 14 seconds. A 1937 supercharged 810 Cord only beat this by half a second. The MGs we were selling, the cars that converted America to sports cars, had a 0-60 time of just over 20 seconds! The big Marmon combined luxury with performance in 1931 ... and 1948.

Performance had been an ingredient of Marmon engineering since the company became car makers about 1902. And Marmon engineering was innovative right from the start ... with air-cooled, V2 and V4 engines, a V8 in 1907 (before going to water cooling), the use of aluminum for crankcases and gearboxes along with unique thin-wall aluminum castings for certain sections of the body.

As a boy, I heard knowledgeable adults speak of the current Marmon cars with great respect for their performance on the road—and the marque's many racing success in the early days: including first and fifth in the first Indy 500 in 1911.

Howard C. Marmon was a highly regarded engineer who was directly involved in the development of all the cars bearing his name during the life of the firm, which fell victim to the depression in 1933, just three years after the introduction of the Sixteen. His company closed with a class act.

The Marmon on our doorstep had been brought there by its owner because he needed \$600 more than he needed the car. But much as Van Dyke and I admired the Sixteen, we too needed money more than we needed the Marmon. Bargain though it was, we could not have kept it as every dollar was wanted for those Jaguars coming in; imported cars, not classics, were our business. Besides, I had my beloved Talbot-Darracq. Taylor Lucas, then our shop foreman, drove a 1939 3.5 liter Hotchkiss sedan that was his pride and joy and more fun on a twisty road than the big and long Sixteen would have been. Mechanic Ben Raimondi was a specialist in Lancia Lambdas of the 1920s, coming to work in his own 1927 model, and would never have considered owning anything else. Phil Hill passed it up, I presume because he was enamored with his new MG TC. Our salesmen, sports car enthusiasts all, owned the kind of cars they were engaged in selling. So, for one reason or another, no car lover at International Motors became the owner of a Marmon Sixteen.

And to a man, I'm sure, came to regret this lost opportunity. As have I. ■