

ESCAPE ROAD

The Big Deal on Sunset Strip

Trading 20 cylinders for four, and walking away happy

By Roger Barlow

Naturally in the 1950s there were some BTC and TD MG sales wherein a Ford or Chevrolet was traded: in effect, six or eight cylinders (plus some cash) for just four British cylinders. But on a cylinder for cylinder basis, this transaction was a deal worthy of not only an Escape Road, but possibly a place in automotive folklore.

Twenty cylinders for just four. Not two and a half Ford V8s. Not two Plymouths and a Buick Roadmaster. No, the Big Deal on the Sunset Strip was one my partner and I could hardly have imagined, much less refused. Even 38 years on, I find it hard to believe.

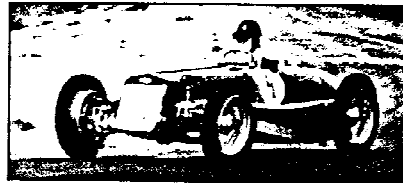
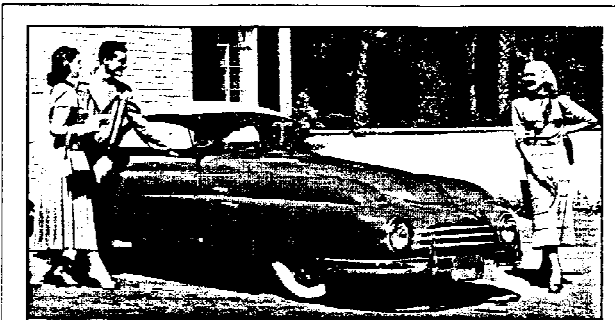
For the 20 cylinders offered to Louis Van Dyke and me as an even trade for four rather plebian Italian ones were not just *any* cylinders. Though the badge on the hood did not bear his name, twelve of them (in V configuration) were the product of the second most famous man in British motoring, W.O. Bentley. The other eight were, like those

maids of Mother Goose fame, all in a row. Beneath twin overhead camshafts and fed by a Roots blower. Surrounded by more roller bearings than ever seen in an automobile engine, before or since. Bearing one of the great names in the French automotive industry.

The first car was a 1939-40 4.5 liter, V12 Lagonda Rapide, once owned by Gary Cooper, I think. The second, believe it or not, was one of the unbelievable 1500 cc Delage Grand Prix racing cars of 1926-27. Perhaps as many as eight were built, but probably only two were in existence by 1950 and this was the only one in the U.S. These "Roller Bearing" Delage engines each had some 60 antifriction bearings and seemed almost too complicated to be practical. Their forged crankshafts ran in nine roller bearings: the connecting rods, twin overhead camshafts and everything else that rotated was also carried on some sort of ball, roller or needle bearings. Yet they were totally reliable and unbeatable in 1927, the last of that two-year 1500 cc formula. Furthermore, the appearance of these exceptionally low and businesslike racing cars

was every bit as imposing as the design and performance of their remarkable free-revving engines. Not only were they much faster than the Bugattis of this formula, the Delages were even better-looking!

One of them had a second life in the mid-1930s when the young English driver,



Fiat 1100-based Castagna (top) had A-pillarless windshield. 'Roller Bearing' 1926-27 GP Delage (left) was famed for complicated yet reliable engine

Richard Seaman, made his reputation with it in Formula Two racing and earned a place with the Mercedes team in 1937.

As I said, 20 truly exceptional, world-famous cylinders offered to us for only four, not even prestigious Italian ones ... those of a Fiat 1100!

But the Big Deal on the Sunset Strip wasn't predicated upon cylinders. We weren't trading oranges for oranges. The deal was, as you will see, Cylinders for Beauty. Twenty of them for a lovely Fiat show car by Castagna, the oldest and, at the time, most famous Italian body builders. A family enterprise dating back to the last century.

We had come by this very special car as a result of a 1948 visit to Italy, when I was smitten by it at the Castagna workshops. Two years later Sr. Castagna finally sold it to me, and it arrived in our showroom ready to seduce others.

Built on a normal Fiat 1100 chassis, this delectable coupe was remarkably graceful. Had it, with its enclosed front wheels, been based upon a chassis as wide and long as,

say, a Chrysler or even a Ford, it might have been almost as ungainly and ill-proportioned as a fat, ugly postwar Nash.

But attractive as it was, what made this Castagna coupe exceptional was its windshield of half-inch toughened glass with no A-pillars. The airy lightness it bestowed, already noted from outside the car, was even more evident and impressive when seated inside. Then one could fully appreciate the effect of eliminating all obstruction to one's view of the road and world ahead. The French custom coachbuilders who had pioneered this use of self-supporting armored glass also coined the term "Vue-totale" which so aptly describes it. This

thick glass also provided real structural strength, for it was carried well down into the scuttle and secured there by a number of bolts. Then the roof header was firmly attached at the top, resulting in greater rigidity than many conventional bodies.

Now who offered the "20 for four" deal? It was that hard-driving, eccentric L.A. car fancier, Tommy Lee. The man who then owned every Talbot-Darracq in California save my Figoni convertible. Obviously the 1100 cc Castagna coupe had nothing like the performance he normally demanded of a car, but he and his engineer-pilot, Mal Ord, had ascertained that there was just room enough to permit replacing the Fiat engine

with a hotted-up Ford '60" V8 to endow this beauty with acceleration.

Why did Tommy Lee part with those twenty famous cylinders? Perhaps he was temporarily short of cash. Perhaps he was running out of space in his shop. Perhaps he and Mal Ord didn't want to contemplate the hours of work needed to put that complex engine back into running condition.

We sold the V12 Lagonda for \$2,500. Bill Pringle was still working on the Delage in 1953 when we liquidated our company. Even had it been fully operational, I doubt the Delage would then have brought more than \$2,500 or \$3,000. Now, as part of the Cunningham Museum, I suppose it might well be valued in excess of \$100,000. But in the early 1950s pre-WWII cars, and especially race cars, had not yet found a market. Indeed, during and after WWII, the going price for Duesenbergs or V12 and V16 Cadillacs was \$800-\$1,500!

The Big Deal on the Sunset Strip involved some unusual cars and a lot of cylinders, but in terms of money, it only came to about \$5,000. Plus a pretty good story. ■