

**ESCAPE ROAD**

# 1936 Cord 810

*An automobile more than slightly ahead of its time*

By Roger Barlow

If not beautiful to all eyes, it was certainly spectacular. As was the basic concept of the 810 Cord, unquestionably the most technically advanced American car of the 1930s. Right from its introduction in '35, this Cord had beguiled with its appearance, intrigued with its specifications, and impressed by its performance. In Los Angeles, when the Auburn-Cord-Duesenberg showroom on Wilshire Blvd. opened, only poverty kept me from being their first customer! Actually it was 1940 (and a film for the New York World's Fair of 1939) before a modicum of prosperity allowed me to buy a low-mileage, cream colored '36 convertible and turn my front-drive fantasies into reality.

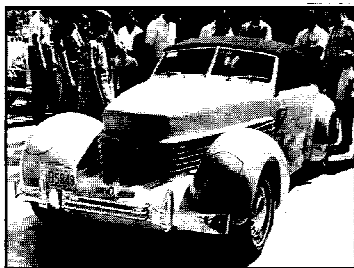
As the 810 had the reputation of being plagued with problems, could it really have been "good?" Indeed it was ... assuredly so in the sense of being good to drive. The ride, too, was good. Its roadholding was exceptional for the time. Even its basic reliability was quite good.

With all those "good" qualities how then could it also have been "bad?" Perhaps "flawed" would be a better word.

Its most aggravating defect was the misbegotten Bendix electro-vacuum shift mechanism. An inept design except for the lovely little open gate (on the steering column) with its miniature shift lever convenient to one's fingers while one's hands were on the wheel. Unfortunately, the system tried to function as a preselector unit without being able to do so properly. While moving off in low you could snick the lever into second; no shifting took place until or unless the clutch was depressed and the throttle eased up. At which point switches and solenoids activated a vacuum-powered mechanism to shove the appropriate gears into engagement. This the mechanism, being devoid of finesse or sensitivity, often did with a disturbing "thunk." One did better treating the system like an all-mechanical one, pressing the clutch before moving the little shift lever to another gear.

On the great day I drove out of that barn of a building on West End Ave. where I'd bought the Cord, I eased it through the

disrespectful Manhattan traffic to 57th St., then let the 4.7 liter V8 hum a higher note along the West Side Highway and across the George Washington Bridge until, with an open road ahead, I pointed that impressive coffin-nose toward the horizon and floored



**Cord 810 line included a sedan (above), convertible and phaeton. Striking Gordon Buehrig design had such an impact that in the '60s a Cord replicar (left) was built using a Corvair drivetrain. It was called the 8/10 because it was only 80 percent the size of the original**

the throttle. Only second and third (high) had been used thus far. Now, with the revs approaching 4100, it was time to sample overdrive-fourth! Would my new automotive love take me to long dreamed-of heights ... would the speedometer touch the magic 100 mph? It did not. But it read 97 before I lifted my foot and came back to earth. Later, with stopwatch in hand, I sorted out the speedometer error to learn that the indicated 97 was in reality 92 mph (at 3200 rpm!) Only the supercharged 812 model of 1937 would break the 100 mark by a couple of miles per hour, though Ab Jenkins took some records at 107. While failing to reach 100, on not the best road in the realm, my car had shown me the main virtues of these front drive Cords—their ability to cruise effortlessly at 80-90 mph with no mechanical fuss and hold a steady course as though on rails. A combination of speed, roadholding and comfort not found in any other American and few European cars of the time. Not a sports car, of course, but

what a Grand Tourer!

Fast bends, too, were negotiated with aplomb despite a slow steering ratio (3¼ turns of the wheel for a 41-foot turning circle) but powering through corners in second gear left me slightly uneasy. Not because of the way the car handled but because I felt it was being abused. I had driven a Citroen and owned, with great satisfaction, a 1936 DKW (AW, Dec. 23), both of which were much lighter fwd cars that took to being hurled around bends of any radius at the limit with no signs of distress. The 3950 pound Cord had much more weight on its front wheels and put far more power through them and one felt this. After a month I found good reason for my unease as an almost inaudible "click" grew louder and ultimately was felt in the steering.

No, it wasn't a failure of the ball-in-the-groove Bendix CV joints; it was a wheel bearing. The Cord had only one on each front stub axle instead of the usual pair spaced four to six inches apart. In the quest for room here, Cord engineers decided on a single double-row affair that, in theory and tests, no doubt seemed able to do the job despite high loading of the races under hard cornering; the two rows of balls were only about two inches apart. I now realize that the inside of the hubs were probably not machined accurately, even though the bearings were a light press fit; so when cornering fast, with the balls forced heavily against their

outer race, that race would crack because its outer surface was not in perfect contact with the supporting hub. In any event, after taking a corner really quickly I could be certain of soon having to replace that double-row bearing in the outside wheel. Perhaps other hubs were machined more precisely and maybe few owners cornered as hard as I often did, so this problem may not have been widespread.

The most serious fault of my 810 Cord derived from it being a convertible rather than a sedan. In open form the "chassis" lacked rigidity so scuttle shake on a choppy road was pronounced.

E.L. Cord never pontificated about the cars that bore his name being years ahead of their time, but they were far nearer today's cars than those of Dr. Porsche or Preston Tucker. Unfortunately, the 810 had to go into production about a year too soon in a futile effort to bolster a failing company. A little more time and money might have perfected an admirable car and saved a company surely deserving of a better fate. ■