

ESCAPE ROAD

1905 American Mercedes

Once upon a time the star of Stuttgart was made in Queens

By Roger Barlow

Short of having a personal time machine, it isn't easy to step from the immediate future into the fairly distant past. I was going to say that my jaunt from *now* back to *then* was via the three pointed Star of Stuttgart ... except that in 1905 this truly shining emblem of automotive excellence hadn't yet been created or adopted by the Daimler-Motoren-Gesellschaft. It did, however, grace my transport at the start of this journey back to the early days of motor cars.

Which is to say that I was driving the newly introduced Mercedes 300SE (a slightly shorter version of the big SEL sedans) and admiring the view of the road seen beyond that incomparable hood ornament while sampling the performance of its 177 hp at 6200 rpm only minutes before I stepped into (*up onto* is more like it) the only existing example of the 1905 6.7-liter American Mercedes ... 45 hp at 1100 rpm!

Although bearing the name American Mercedes, it was a faithful copy of the same model concurrently manufactured in Germany. Actually the Daimler Mfg. Co., located in the Steinway Building in Astoria, Queens, Long Island, had been established in 1888 to manufacture and sell various non-automotive Daimler engines. It was jointly owned by piano maker William Steinway and the parent factory—with some other shareholders including, it is said, General Electric. By 1904 America was an important market, already taking 25 percent of the 800 or so cars produced that year by the German company. It was thought an American-made version, by avoiding the 45 percent import duty, was likely to expand the market for Daimler cars, officially known as Mercedes cars since 1902.

To maintain Daimler factory standards, as promised the prospective buyers of the American Mercedes, some workmen and even the materials from which various components were manufactured on this side of the Atlantic were imported from Europe because it was said that no American-made steel of that time could equal the ten-

sile strength and other characteristics of the chrome-nickel steel smelted from the superior iron ores of Europe. Even the castings of the Daimler blocks were claimed to resist bore wear better than American cast iron.

Nevertheless, it is not clear just what



Meticulously restored in 1985 by Phil Hill, 1905 6.7-liter American Mercedes is much harder to drive than it is to look at

Roger Barlow Photo

parts of the American Mercedes were actually fabricated here. Certainly all drop forgings and cylinder castings were imported. It is also likely that the main transmission components were German-made and merely assembled here.

The crankshaft for the 1906 engine, with three roller bearings, was not a built-up unit but forged like that of the 1905 engine. The two end bearings simply slid into place while the center bearing was large enough to be "threaded" over the crank throws and onto its journal.

The four big cylinders (120x150 mm) were cast in two blocks, as was Mercedes practice then and for many years to come. This was a "T" head engine, with inlet valves on the left and exhausts on the right. The two camshafts were driven by exposed gears at the rear of the engine. You may be surprised to learn that the valve lifters were of the roller type, which I had always assumed to be a much later development. Head and block was cast integrally ... no blown head gaskets with these engines.

Lubrication of this big four was surprisingly complex, though there was no oil pump. Connecting rod big ends got oil via

conventional scoops which dipped into the oil in the crankcase which was divided to better ensure that on steep inclines the level did not vary too much at the front or rear. But additional oil was supplied to these bearings via the exhaust-pressurized lubrication system with its impressive row of drip-feeds on the dash. This separate source of oil was also fed to each cylinder (about midway up the piston stroke) through a hole in the cylinder wall to supplement oil thrown off by the whirling crank pins.

Chain drive being utilized, the four-speed gearbox and differential was in one chassis-mounted unit, wherein there was also a liberal use of ball bearings.

There were two brake pedals, each working a separate water-cooled drum on the transmission and disengaging the clutch when applied! The hand brake actuated the shoes of the rear drums.

The clutch, a metal-to-metal affair running in oil, was said to be smoother and to impose less shock than the popular cone clutch.

But it was the action of this unit while M-B's technical specialist in charge of this car, Ernst Thiel, was maneuvering it before I was to take the wheel, that persuaded me not to attempt the exercise. There was enough judder as engagement took place to jar

the entire driveline, so I decided not to risk breaking something on this magnificent car, meticulously restored in 1985 by Phil Hill's classic car shop, Hill & Vaughn in Santa Monica, Calif. I opted instead for passenger-observer status.

Steering was quick but appeared to require immense effort. Had the lovely Mercedes herself sampled one of these cars, we might have had power steering long ago!

Sitting high off the ground exposed to the full force of the wind was enough to make even 25 mph exciting. The quoted top speed of 45-50 would have been frightening. Indeed, I thought that perhaps the car had been restored minus its proper windshield ... but in an illustration from the maker's brochure the car appears as I experienced it and you see in the photograph. The automotive past may have offered entertaining motoring, but it was with minimum comfort and maximum effort.

The 1905-6 American Mercedes cost \$7,500, the rough equivalent of \$49,000 for the impressive new 300SE (mit windshield).

In 1907 the factory, along with 40 cars under construction, was destroyed by fire, ending this international effort. ■