

1969 Ruger

20th century Victorian gentleman builds his own vintage car

By Roger Barlow

Anachronisms and oxymorons galore? Not necessarily. Not if you accept my assumption that being "Victorian" is as much a matter of mind, attitude and personality as mere nationality and dates.

Teddy Roosevelt, surely as American as apple pie and the Panama Canal, had the values, faults and virtues we associate with men of the Victorian period.

So, too, the gentleman whose car is the subject of this page. Indeed, William B. Ruger even *looks* as indomitable as TR. Defining a vintage car is even easier ... think of a 1929 4.5 liter Bentley and you have it.

Bill Ruger owned such a Bentley in the 1960s (and still does), but he became increasingly concerned about putting miles on such a rare example of automotive history and subjecting it to the hazards of everyday traffic. And, much as he liked the car, he speculated as to how much more enjoyable it would be for day-to-day use if only it had better brakes, a more rigid chassis, a synchromesh gearbox, less unsprung weight.

Yet he was not attracted to any of the replicars which usually had a 1920s-style body on a modern independently sprung chassis, complete with 15-inch wheels.

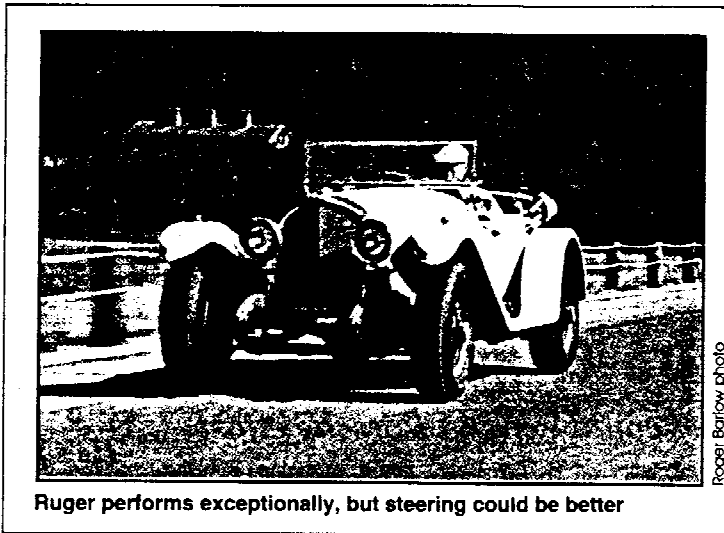
What Bill Ruger had in mind was a vehicle styled appropriately to the vintage period, not necessarily a replica of his Bentley, but certainly faithful to the basic mechanical layout of that day.

Since there was nothing quite like this available, he set out to build just such a car ... not only to suit himself but also to explore the possibility of a limited market for what he was considering.

Bill Ruger was uniquely qualified to undertake this task. A successful industrialist, he had the required facilities and financial resources. An enthusiastic and knowledgeable owner of sports and vintage cars, he could make informed decisions and guide the project on both aesthetic and engineering matters.

You should know that Ruger's ambition since boyhood was to design firearms. After college, in the late 1930s, finding no job in

his field, he worked as a machinist for \$20 a week until WWII brought employment in his chosen profession. After the war he designed and manufactured a simple .22 pistol that was an immediate success and launched Sturm, Ruger & Co. into the highly competitive firearms field. Superb revolvers and sporting rifles followed. In the late 1960s



Ruger performs exceptionally, but steering could be better

Roger Barlow photo

came Ruger's bold, successful decision to build a high grade, *single shot*, big game rifle—rather like the famed Farquharson of the late Victorian era. Modern materials and manufacturing techniques, along with Ruger's appreciation of the character and qualities of this type of rifle, made the Ruger Single Shot an instant success that confounded the industry.

For the more complex vintage car project, Ruger drew upon individual specialists and automotive suppliers: Irwin Weiss (who had designed chassis for Packard), Bendix for the powerful three-shoe brakes (in Alfin drums), Borrani for the special 104 spoke, 18x5 inch wire wheels.

Only the engine was non-vintage in concept as it had, for practical and financial reasons, to be a modern production unit. In this case a big-block 7.0-liter Ford V8 (with a pair of Holley four-barrel carburetors) developing 425 hp at 6000 rpm and 490 lb ft of torque at 3700.

To relieve the front and rear semi-elliptic springs of having to deal with brake and driveline torque, both axles had radius rods, thus allowing the use of more flexible

springs in order to give a reasonable ride. There was an anti-roll bar at the front, telescopic shock absorbers at each corner.

Two prototypes were built using glass-fiber for the body and fenders, with the body panels covered by fabric. Only the hood was steel. The running boards were truly "boards" ... of real wood, rubber covered. There was no door on the driver's side as a traditional outside hand brake was located there.

In 1970 one of the cars was taken to England in an effort to find a company to build the Ruger there as a joint venture. While there a complete road test was carried out by *Autocar*, which said, "... a quite extraordinary machine that somehow captures all the enjoyment of vintage motoring with none of the heartache and misery." They praised the

close-ratio gearbox with its Hurst shifter and were impressed by the 61 mph low gear and 0-60 time of 7.7 seconds for a car having a 131-inch wheelbase and weighing 3984 pounds as tested. Despite having the aerodynamics of a boxcar, the Ruger achieved a top speed of 110 mph. *Autocar's* only real criticism was of the steering—finding it too heavy and with excessive free-play in the dead-ahead position. Bill Ruger would have dealt with this by changing to a power-assisted, variable-ratio system in place of the original worm-and-roller steering gear if the cars had gone into production.

Which did not happen. The estimated selling price was \$13,000, the price then of a Ferrari; too high to permit sufficient sales for the project to succeed.

Autocar concluded their report by saying, "The Ruger is beautifully engineered throughout and looks as if it would last forever. It is an honest attempt to build a modern car with character using classic principles and as such succeeds all the way."

Precisely what Ruger set out to do.

So Bill Ruger, is, you might say, "stuck," with two unique new vintage cars.

While making a videotape film called *Conversations with Bill Ruger*, which contains a sequence dealing with the Ruger-mobiles, I had the opportunity to drive them. I was staggered by the acceleration in the gears (40-60 in 2.3 sec). The three-shoe brakes gave powerful, instantaneous bite. *Autocar* was right: the heavy steering plus a too-big turning circle made the vehicle a bit ponderous. And choppy corners pointed out the flaws in beam axle suspension. But the car and driver were basically at one with the road and the world around them—exactly what Bill Ruger intended. ■