

# Hotchkiss-Amilcar's sad heritage

*The potential of Gregoire's innovations was not appreciated*

By Roger Barlow

**T**he Hotchkiss-Amilcar Compound described in "Escape Road" on August 3 did not survive WWII. But when the war ended, J.A. Gregoire was ready with more advanced variations on the themes of cast alloy frames and front-wheel-drive.

Incredibly, the post-liberation government seemed determined to destroy much of the automobile industry of France, an industry which had barely survived the Depression. Now, by edict, Renault was taken over by the state. Manufacturers were told what class of cars they could or could not make, and as a final blow to the nation's builders of prestige *voitures*, a heavy tax was levied upon large cars. As if that wasn't enough, Owners of expensive motor car were subject to almost certain investigation by the tax men. (Could Cadillac have stayed in business if our IRS audited every owner!) Before long, the great names of the French car industry—Delahaye, Delage, Voison, Talbot-Darracq, Hotchkiss, Salomon, Panhard, Hispano-Suiza and Bugatti—were all gone. Renault continued because it was owned by the bureaucracy and could not be allowed to fail, no matter the cost. Citroen survived because powerful and rich Michelin owned it, and possibly because the citizenry would have again stormed the Bastille had the government been so foolhardy as to mess with the beloved Traction Avant. How family-owned Peugeot managed to survive this period, and to prosper ultimately, is surely a tribute to the many virtues of this great old company.

If those were bad days for large, expensive cars, they were boom times for those with plans for small economy vehicles. Prototypes of ingenious mini-cars were announced almost monthly, though few made it into production.

A clever new Gregoire design for a front drive mini-car with cast ALPAX (an aluminum alloy) frame and a flat twin, air-cooled engine was taken on by Panhard, now prohibited from building the big cars for which they were long famous. As the Dyna-Panhard, it sold very well for quite some years and even had competition successes.

But Gregoire had something bigger and better up his automotive sleeve. An impressive (running) prototype of a new 5-seater "Compound" was seen by 1947-8. Front-wheel-drive, of course, with a 70 bhp 2.0 liter, water-cooled, flat-four engine (largely of light alloys) mounted out ahead of the front wheel—the mode that many



**The Gregoire 'R' type, one of J.A. Gregoire's postwar designs, boosted alloy frame, front-drive and, for the time, advanced aerodynamic styling**

others would copy, even Citroen. This car featured Gregoire's pioneering light alloy cast frame, as found in his Hotchkiss-Amilcar of 1937. Cast alloy suspension arms were now featured, along with a patented system of variable-rate springs and shock absorbers. Eventually Hotchkiss did put this roomy, fast car into production—but not long before having to give up car making.

Which brings us to the American industrialist Henry J. Kaiser. He planned to get into the car business after WWII and end his shipbuilding activity. Initially, he was full of good ideas and intentions. His new cars would be of advanced design, with innovative engineering. He favored front-drive and bought up all the pre-war Citroens he could find in California. There were rumors and statements about a contract to build the Gregoire-Compound car under license. This made manufacturing as well as engineering sense, inasmuch as Kaiser owned and operated huge aluminum processing and fabricating plants. But Henry J's mind was changed, no doubt influenced by the prevailing Detroit mentality when he took over the huge Willow Run bomber plant in Mich-

igan. In the end, he ignominiously chickened out and produced an insipid, totally conventional (and soon unsalable) front-engined, rear-drive car with a flat-head six. This hackneyed car might have been made by Nash, Hudson or any of the status quo-oriented American car makers.

In a 1950 statement to the press and public, Mr. Kaiser tried to justify his disappointing switch from the advanced and exciting car originally promised to the deplorable exercise in organized mediocrity: "Our new low-priced car (the 'Henry J') culminates seven years of experimental work with more than 50 prototypes. We experimented with front-wheel-drive and rear engines. We worked with...aluminum, plastics and wood. We came to the early conclusion that the American public doesn't want anything radical or revolutionary, and certainly doesn't want a 'small' car."

We must presume that Kaiser's oh-so-wrong view of the American car-buying public came from the same geniuses who led Detroit to its ultimate head-in-the-sand stance as it was being overwhelmed by "small" and radical cars that Henry Kaiser mistakenly came to believe we would never buy! These marketing "experts" could not understand why Americans would ever buy a little MG or a Volkswagen when they could, instead, have had a V8!

Could Henry J. Kaiser have succeeded if he followed his instincts and given us the Gregoire "Compound" that was aerodynamic, handsome and roomy inside? I think so. Americans after WWII *did* want cars that were genuinely interesting, and we had a national yearning for affordable front-drive ever since the Millers began winning races.

The 810 Cord failed because it cost twice what a Cadillac did during the Depression, not because it was front-drive. Now, with substantial war-time savings in almost every family's bank account, price was less critical; dealers sold every car they could obtain. An advanced front-drive would have sold well with a price tag of \$500 to \$800, or even \$1000, above average American cars. Postwar Fords and Chevies could only be described as near-obsolete; they had changed only sheet metal since the 1930s.

An American-made front-drive Gregoire with its "cast iron" aluminum frame might actually have been a runaway seller. Henry Kaiser had the know-how and facilities to build it economically and in quantity. It could never have been the disaster the Henry J was. Why did he compromise on this uninspired design? Or did he surrender? ■