

CAR OF THE MONTH

An appeal for Car of the Month stories: You may have noticed that many of our Car of the Month stories are about my own experiences and, thus, may appear a bit egocentric. By way of explanation, I want you to know I do this only (well, usually) when no one else has stepped up to the plate. Diversity is a hot topic these days and we, too, need diversity. So, please seize the moment and placate your own ego by contributing a story. Email me at swhite79@cox.net or phone me at 703-533-0386. Steve

Remembering My Mercedes-Benz 300SL Roadster

By Steve White

The call came on an August Sunday in 2015 from my good friend, Frank, a devout Mercedes 300SL owner and aficionado. Frank knew that decades ago I had owned a 300SL Roadster and was calling to give me an update on my old car. Frank's a nice guy, but I suspected he was trying to make me squirm a little, all in good fun, of course.

Frank had been watching the Gooding and Co. auction from Pebble Beach, an annual event during Monterey's Car Week in August. With a trace of mischief in his voice, Frank told me that my old car had just crossed the auction block. Now, stay tuned for the rest of the story.

The Beginning

It was 1972 and I was between marriages. My temporary freedom no doubt colored my judgment as I was contemplating the purchase of a sports car. But isn't that what all divorced guys do?

Back then, one could find really cool cars in the weekend car ads of the Washington Post, which I happened to be perusing one Sunday morning. Could this be true – a 1960 Mercedes-Benz 300SL Roadster located near Annapolis for \$3800? I called and learned the car was still available. Using my new-found freedom, I jumped in my Plymouth Barracuda and took off without a second thought.

What I knew about 300SLs is what I had read in books and learned from watching them race in California where I grew up. But my wild enthusiasm for these cars stemmed mainly from their overwhelming success in the 1952 Carrera Panamericana (Mexican Road Race), a race I had promised myself someday to enter. I was very ambitious for a 15-year-old.

The Roadster I was now looking over was red with black leather. It was originally sold in Belgium and had European headlamps. It was basically sound, but not a show car by any means. It looked more like

someone's basic transportation, minus the dents. After examining and driving the car, I was hyped up and paid the asking price to its owner.

It was when I got it home that I first realized my new pride and joy would have to live outside in the elements. But that would change shortly when Judy and I married and bought a house with a one-car garage. From then on, we'd both enjoy the car for several more years.

The Middle

In 1974, my job sponsored me to a fellowship at the University of Washington in Seattle. We'd be gone for quite a while and I had to make arrangements for the car's safe keeping. I wanted to get it painted and arranged for Guenter and Guenter, a German-car specialty shop in Clinton, MD, to keep the car and repaint it in its original red while we were away. In an act of outright heresy, I also had them replace the Euro headlamps with a pair of U.S.-conforming ones I had found. When we returned home the car wasn't quite finished, but a final payment worked miracles. And I couldn't have been happier with the result.



My 300SL Roadster following its paint job in 1976

Like I do with all my cars, I enjoyed driving the 300SL as much as possible. On one occasion I was touring the Beltway when the engine suddenly stopped. I needed a tow and had the car taken to a Mercedes dealer in Bethesda. A couple of days later, the shop called to tell me the problem was very simple. All the car needed was a new distributor cap and rotor. I breathed a sigh of relief, but when I went to pick it up, I was stunned to learn that the cap was \$312 and the rotor \$58. And the labor rate was similarly inflated. Remember, that was in the 70s.

The End

I kept the car until 1976. My reason for selling was a gut reaction to something I learned from the Gullwing Group. In a bulletin, they proudly announced they had found a source for rebuilding fuel injection pumps. The search for this service had been motivated by owners' complaints about pumps failing at a high rate due to age. Anyway, the bulletin said the price for a rebuild was a mere \$3600, an amount almost equal to what I paid for my car. Remembering the distributor cap incident, nervousness set in as I began worrying about the long-term cost of upkeep. So, later that year I sold the car to an insurance man from Indiana. I got \$10,000 for it.

Now, back to my call from my friend, Frank, and the rest of the story. He told me the car had undergone a stunning stem-to-stern restoration and been repainted gray. The seller was Hollywood film director, Frank Darabont of Shawshank Redemption fame, but the auctioneer had thoughtfully mentioned my name as an earlier owner. Now here's what hurt and what I believe Frank enjoyed telling me the most. The selling price was \$1,210,000. Yes, I squirmed. Moreover, I lost my appetite and Judy's nice dinner went to waste.

More About The 300SL

The production Gullwing Coupe was offered from 1954 to 1957. There was one year of overlap when the Roadster came out in 1957. Its run lasted through 1963. 1400 Coupes were built compared with 1858 Roadsters. The two models were quite similar, but the differences went well beyond the doors and top. Some of those differences can be attributed to what the factory learned during the four years of Gullwing production. Most notably, the Roadster had a vastly different rear suspension, which improved the car's handling and reduced its scary tendency to oversteer. By 1960, the Roadsters were selling for about \$10,000.

The coupe and roadster shared the same engine and 4-speed manual transmission. The engine was a three-liter six-cylinder overhead cam unit and was the first production automobile engine to use fuel injection. Horsepower figures vary between publications, but I'll take the high number of 250 @ 6100 rpm. In a car weighing about 2500 pounds, one could expect very spirited performance. In fact the 300SL was the top performing production car in the world during its reign.

Besides the tricky handling of the Gullwing Coupe, the main complaint about all 300SLs was the need to change engine oil at least every 1000 miles. This was the result of a mechanical fuel injection unit that continued pumping raw petrol into the cylinders after the ignition was turned off and for the short time it took the engine to stop turning. This contaminated the engine oil and added to cylinder wear. The problem was exacerbated by the high-capacity oil tank (10 quarts), which seldom allowed enough heat buildup to burn off the fuel in the oil.

Perhaps the greatest reason the Roadster replaced the Coupe was driver and passenger comfort. The Coupe's door window was fixed in place and ventilation was terrible causing stifling heat in warm weather. By contrast, the Roadster had wonderful ventilation and was a delight in any weather.

All in all, the Mercedes-Benz 300SLs of the 50s and early 60s were among the best sports cars ever made and now are among the most sought-after collector cars. And as I learned and continue learning, great cars can turn into gold.



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My old Roadster as it appeared at Pebble Beach in 2015 following a stunning restoration