

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

by Jay Klehfoth

Imagine this-

It is early 1910. Ford Motor Company has been successfully building cars for seven years and Henry Ford's latest creation, the Model T, is being heralded as a "possible up and comer by the fledgling US automotive press.

Ford has had some success in exporting cars to other nations, but Ford car sales, particularly in Europe, are languishing. Although Ford believes that the "mechanicals of his products are exceptional by any standards, he has been lead to believe that the "American style of utility is hampering sales abroad.

Henry decides he would like to tackle the automobile market in France. "After all, he states, "the French have always chosen form over substance. If we can give them the style they want, plus a dependable chassis and running gear-we ll knock 'em dead. They ll hang a portrait of me in the Louvre when we are

finished. Viva La France! And with that, a little known chapter in Ford's history began.

Ford decided that he would hire a French stylist to design a body for his beloved Model T-a design that would be uniquely French. A secret search began in earnest for a designer.

Jacques Lepieue, who had once worked for Louis Renault and his brothers was summoned to Detroit for an interview with Henry Ford.

Henry Ford, it is reported, liked Lepieue immediately because he spoke English, didn't smoke, and hated French wine. He was hired immediately and a "skunk works was set up on the third floor of the Piquette Avenue plant to design the "Oh La La car, as the secret project was known.

In eight short months, the new car was completed and Lepieue summoned Mr Ford for the unveiling.



Mr. Ford, upon seeing the new creation is said to have gasped and said, "My gosh man! That looks like a Renault.

Not buying this...?

The Truth

In actuality, the car featured here and on the cover is the creation of Don Johnson of Los Molinos, California.

Don has been "pounding aluminum for sixty years and has built airplanes, race cars, off-road cars, street rods, boats, and other items out of aluminum.

"I finished rebuilding a wrecked 1941 Aeronca airplane in 1993, about the time the FAA said I couldn't fly anymore. So, I flew it once and then sold it. I took the money and started on a "T - sixty-three years after selling my last "T -which I wish I still had today.

Don started buying Model T parts without knowing what he was going to build. A trip to Las Vegas and a visit to the Imperial Palace Museum was the impetus for this car. Don was

fascinated by a 1911 Renault-particularly its "meat locker nose. He also liked the boat-tailed shape of other "classics of the period. He was inspired!

With inspiration and his talent, Don set about building a special T that took styling cues popular in the early years of the automobile and created this unique car.

The body is made of .051 and .064 3003 aluminum alloy, chosen because it is the most malleable of the various aluminum alloys available. Don reports that when "welded (heli-arc'd)-the welds can be dressed and are invisible.

The curves were initially hammered out on a sand bag and then finished using a spoon (a hand-held device that looks like a spatula), to remove the marks made by the hammer. The body is made of six pieces welded together. There is a 1 square steel tube framework inside the body that ties all of the major points together.

The chassis is lowered about four inches. The front was lowered by removing the origi-



nal front cross member of the frame and replacing it with a straight cross member. He also removed two leaves from the front spring to compensate for the lighter weight. The rear was lowered by cutting the frame and using "Z bars to lower the frame rails. One of the larger spring leaves was removed from the original rear spring.

Don positioned the engine ten inches to the rear of the normal placement of a Model T engine in order to accept the body lines he desired with the Renault-styled hood. Of course, ten inches had to be removed from the drive shaft.

When he moved the engine to the rear (and the body), it now precluded him from using the standard Model T steering. To overcome this problem, Don adapted a rack and pinion system from Japanese compact car.

He had a new radiator core made that would fit under the new hood. The radiator is shorter and narrower, but is six tubes deep and has the same cooling capacity as a standard Model T radiator. Don, of course, formed the radiator tanks.

The gas tank is aluminum and was also especially fabricated by Don to fit in the boat-



Top: Boat-tail section mock-up in cardboard

Middle: Mock-up transformed into aluminum

Bottom: Custom gas tank made to fit inside boat-tail section is located ahead of rear cross member

Note "Z" bracket used to lower frame



tail section. It holds about ten gallons.

While Don considered using stock Model T fenders, they just would not give him the look he wanted. So, if you have Don's talent, you make new fenders that suit your taste - and that is what he did. He also decided to mount the spare tire in the left front fender and made a special well to hold it. To achieve the "antique look," Don rolled beads into the fenders using roller dies he made to achieve the desired size and height. To make the fenders appear authentic and add rigidity, Don made aluminum angles to fit

Top: Mocking-up fender lines

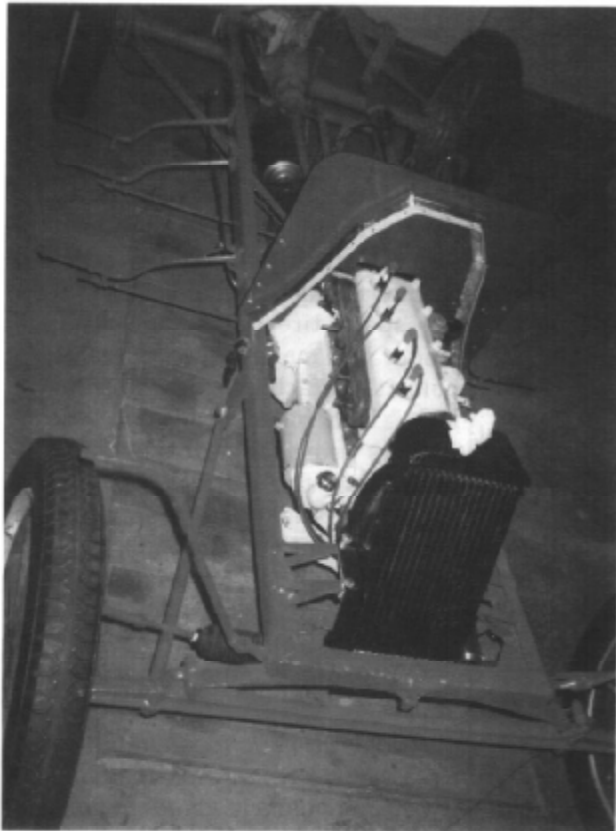


Middle: Don Johnson (right) and neighbor, Bernard Rossumsen (left) rolling beads in fender material

Bottom Left: Front fender with inner liner attached is nearing completion

Bottom Right: The left front fender includes a well to accept the mounting of the spare tire





the contour of the fenders angles and provide the “lower lip” of the fenders. These were clamped to the upper skins and butt welded completely around the perimeter and finished smooth.

The new fenders necessitated doubling the length of the stock running boards and making custom splash aprons.

The windshield is of the stock 1921-23 variety, but he had to fabricate custom mounting brackets to attach it to the body.

When first completed, the engine was stock. However, Don was more than a little dismayed when he attended a tour in Colorado only to be passed by heavy touring cars with four people on board as if he were stuck in low pedal. Upon returning home, Don began making a few modifications to allow him to keep up with some of the faster Ts.

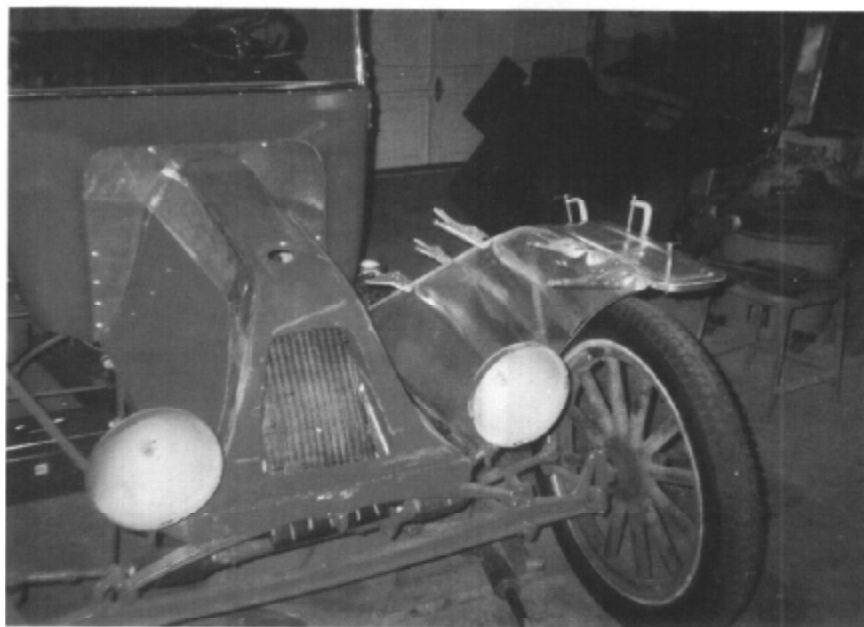
He has installed larger valves and a higher lift cam. He also adapted a carburetor from an old 60HP Evinrude outboard boat motor. He has converted the electrical system to 12 volts, but has installed a resistor to step-down the voltage to about 8 volts.

Don has added a Ruckstell rear axle, to which he has adapted VW Rabbit hydraulic drum brakes. The drums are the same size as the pre-26 Model Ts. To increase the stopping capability of his car, Don installed disc brakes on the front wheels, adapting a brake system used on Honda motorcycles.

While there may be a few purists who cringe at any Model T that is not “the way Henry made it, Don’s interpretation of what a French-influenced Model T may have looked like is certainly an interesting exercise and does

capture the prominent French styling of the era.

No one, however, can be critical of Don’s beautiful craftsmanship. While the car may look good in these pictures-it is even better looking in person. It is truly a piece of art. □



Top: Lowered chassis prior to final assembly

Bottom: Chassis with Renault-style hood and body in place while final fitting of front fender is being completed