

A SPEEDSTER.. .THE SECOND TIME AROUND

by Harold Sauter
Seldon, New York



Frank Stepanek of Smithtown, New York, driving his "Flying Desk speedster in a parade circa the late 1970s

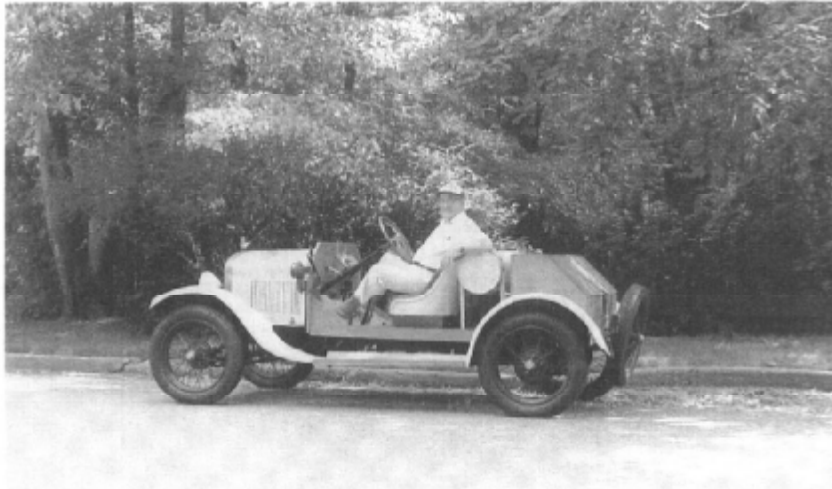
Building a Model T Ford speedster is nothing new. It was done in the heyday of the car, and it continues to be a large part of the antique automobile hobby today. However, the story of this particular speedster is perhaps a bit different. There are two different stories to tell, and although still a speedster, I think you will agree the appearance of the car is very different in each.

The first version of the speedster was built by a man well known and respected on Long Island (New York). Frank Stepanek, of Smithtown, New York was known as "Mr. Model T," and if anyone knew the T, it was Frank. He bought his first Model T in 1956 from an Indian woman, in Smithtown. She lived to be over one-hundred years old. She had bought the car new, a 1926 tudor sedan. This car was used at countless antique auto events, and it journeyed off the island to Dearborn, Michigan for the Ford anniversary in 1963. Frank, his wife and

three daughters attended the party. The car logged about 2000 miles on this jaunt alone. To say the least, this Model T was a most familiar sight on the road and at antique auto events.

In 1973, Frank started the construction of a Model T Ford speedster. It was based upon a 1927 engine and chassis. The platform was made of oak-veneered plywood. The firewall, seat riser, floor boards and running boards were made of oak. Mechanically, the car was all stock 1927 running gear except for 3-to-1 ratio gears in the rear end.

The seats were made by forming plywood over forms which resembled lobster traps. They were professionally upholstered in maroon Naugahyde. The gas tank was from an old 1920s auto of unknown make, and the tank support was made from angle iron. The tool box was quite large, to hold luggage for tours, and it was not in proportion to the rest of the speedster lines. The car quickly



Another view of the "Flying Desk" with Frank at the wheel

became known as the "Flying Desk." The car was finished in a bright yellow paint, with green wheels, which were wire spoked. All in all, it was pleasing to the eye, and would prove to be an outstanding runner.

Frank ventured to Cape Cod, Massachusetts for a tour, approximately an 800 mile trip. It made many other trips, and the mileage piled up quickly. It was a fun car to drive.. .very fitting for the fun-loving guy Frank was.

Sadly, Frank passed away in 1997, at the age of 78. The 1926 tudor went to South Carolina with one of Frank's daughters, Diane. A Model T fire engine that Frank was building at the time also went to South Carolina. The 1927 "Flying Desk," and a myriad of parts were put up for sale.

Another good friend of mine, Tim Hollowell had been looking for a speedster to add to his collection, which include a 1926 Fordor sedan, and a 1940 Fordor sedan. In short order, the Flying Desk took up new residence at Medford, Long Island (New York). This is the beginning of the second story.. .the "rebirth" of this speedster.

The Second Time

At the time of its purchase from Frank Stepanek's family, the speedster was not in running condition. It had an ominous knock in the engine, and sometimes would jam when it was being cranked. A popular guess was that a magnet had probably come loose, and was caught in the crankcase.

It was decided that the car would be given a total new restoration, and gone through completely, rather than just repair the engine.

The first project was to remove the hogshead and find what was causing the problem. Everything seemed to be in good order, but close inspection revealed that the bolts that hold the pressure ring assembly for the clutch had come loose and partially backed out. They struck the cross shaft that operates the throwout bearing and jammed. These were supposed to be safety wired, but no evidence was found of any wire. An easy fix! The rest of the transmission was in excellent condition. Then, the bottom plate was taken off the crankcase, and the bearings were found to be in

very nice condition, so adjustment was all that was needed there. Considering how many miles we know this car has on it, it was in excellent mechanical condition. Our belief is that it was overhauled by Frank, perhaps more than once.

In relatively short order, the entire running gear was cleaned and lubricated and put into top shape. The next project would be the body.

The body was taken apart, down to the oak platform. All of the wood was stripped and refinished with spar varnish. The dash was lowered and reshaped, and trimmed with brass capping. The seats and riser were refinished and relocated further back, to give better leg room. The gas tank was replaced with a new oval tank, mounted on new heavy oak supports. The famous "desk" was replaced with a smaller tool box, made of oak. The running boards were stripped and refinished. All of the metal parts were stripped, repaired as was needed, and refinished in a dark green. This is so easy to write about, but as everyone knows, a lot of hours went into this part of the project.

The wire spoked wheels were repainted maroon to match the pleated upholstery, and with the green, made a very pleasing combination. Although this is not a brass era car, there were a number of items on it that were made of brass, such as the trim on the dash, the horn, the cap and script on the gas tank, and the new monole windshield. These were all polished, and once installed, made a striking appearance. It was thus decided to have the radiator shell plated in brass, maintaining the "matching" of finish, which was a liberty taken and found to be acceptable on a speedster. This is a fun

***Second Time Around-
Tim Hollowell and his re-restored
speedster. We think Frank
Stepanek would be pleased with
the results.***

car, and intended for use and enjoyment, so true authenticity plays a smaller role.

A unique mechanical feature was the relocation of the brake/clutch lever. An extension was welded to the cross shaft and the lever was moved to a position outside the body. This gave more room, and a much more comfortable method of operation.

Slowly, the car was assembled, and the real satisfaction of the many hours of work done on it began to come through. The new look is most pleasing, and we were very much rewarded for the effort put into this car.

So, the 1927 speedster is on the road again. It has a new look, but still retains the reliability that the original version had. It is a very smooth running car, and is quite lively, due to the light weight and the 3-to-1 rear end ratio.

We are sure that if Frank Stepanek could see this car today, he would approve. The car stands as a tribute to his original efforts that went into saving this car, and for the many years of pleasure it provided. Our big hope is that it will supply as many miles of pleasure for Tim Hollowell and his family in the coming years. Wherever the car goes, it brings a smile, or "thumbs up" gesture...each a reward in itself. One of the most rewarding parts of this great hobby is to do a project like this and get the results that we did.

For my part, as the author of this article-Thanks, Tim for allowing me to take part in the "re-birth" of the "Flying Desk." My wishes go to you for many miles of fun with this pretty, special car! □

