THE SEEDLESS THOMPSON SPEEDSTER

-four guys build a speedster and learn a few things in the process

By Chuck Jordan
Camarillo, California

The Seedless Thompson Speedster is named for eighty-two-year-old Model T zealot Franklyn Thompson. Franklyn is a man who knows more about Model T Fords than anyone I ve ever met, and I've bumped into a few Model T buffs since I bought my first Model T forty-four years ago. Franklyn was nicknamed "Seedless Thompson after the Thompson Seedless variety of grapes by his boyhood chums; and that sounded like the perfect name for a planned speedster project dedicated to a man with a lifelong love of the Tin Lizzie.

Franklyn 'Seedless Thompson, lollipop in hand, stands next to his Model T truck

This old guy has been obsessed with Model Ts since boyhood, and it has been his only addiction in life. He has never smoked, he doesn t drink, he s never been a womanizer, and the only time I ever heard him curse was once when I dropped a small shop anvil on his foot. I have never heard Seedless Thompson speak ill of anyone, and to top that off, the man looks like Santa Claus, only bigger and a bit more grizzled. He has a sizable pot belly, usually adorned with gravy stains, and he s tough. For example, in July of 1994 he fell thirty-five feet from the top of a tree he had been trimming, but he had the good luck to land on his long-time Mexican helper Chuy, who broke his fall. It s a miracle that neither of them were killed although Franklyn spent seven days in the hospital and Chuy still complains of aches and pains. Franklyn, who is legally blind, had no business up in a tree at the age of eighty, but he was trying to demonstrate tree surgery to three non-English speaking Mexican helpers, and he figured that a demonstration was worth a thousand words.

But this isn t only Franklyn s story. This is about four old guys who joined together as "partners to put their talents and resources together to build a unique Model T speedster. We named it in honor of Franklyn because he lives and breathes Model Ts (he can t wait for me to read him the latest *Vintage Ford* issue and he starts pestering me three weeks before it is mailed, wanting to know if it has arrived yet). Franklyn is by far more colorful than all the rest of us put together.

The Seedless Thompson Speedster is designed for looks, fun, and low cost; but mostly for fun. We started with a 1916 chassis that I owned and had placed in storage some twelve years ago. We all agreed to use parts and technology of the 1920s speedster era. In short, there would be no Toyota hydraulic brakes or Pep Boys shocks considered for the "Seedless. As the primary designer, it was my constant concern to keep restoration expenditures at a minimum. This was because I wanted team members to donate time, skills and materials on-hand rather than out-of-pocket cash.

Most speedsters start out with whatever parts are available, and our speedster was no exception. There were so many false starts and redesign upgrades that I almost had mutiny on my hands a couple times. For example, the original concept was to use bucket seats taken from a Stutz Bearcat pattern. But that changed when I had the incredible good luck of finding an original 1907 fire engine seat in excellent condition. By "excellent I mean that the sheet metal and wood frame were intact, even though the stuffed horse-hair leather upholstery was dried out and "shot. We also started

restoration by rebuilding a 1927 engine that was in pristine condition, although we later reverted to a 1916 engine which qualifies as a Horseless Carriage in California.

The original estimate for completing our project was right in line with most jobs associated with a Model T Ford. In other words, I estimated a six month project, and we "finished eighteen months later, in time to ride in the 1995 Camarillo Christmas parade. I emphasize "finished because I found out the hard way that a speedster never reaches that utopian goal.

The initial design changed, and it quickly changed again when a large oval gas tank was found behind some old horse stalls on Franklyn s property. The tank was donated to the cause by Franklyn, who vowed he would probably have sold it for scrap years ago had he known it was there. I should have seen these early changes as an omen of things to come. The '26 Ford cowl I had originally modified was discarded (and later cannibalized) when seventy-six-year-old Dick Pack, a retired Navy Chief metalsmith, joined the team. By a wonderful stroke of luck, Dick turned out to be an expert fabricator, metal fitter, plumber, welder and brazing expert. He quickly pointed out that the first attempt to narrow the cowl by four inches was unacceptable due to warping of the welded sheet metal, and in his humble opinion, the cowl "looked like hell. Dick convinced me that he was just the guy who could rivet a four-inch narrower speedster cowl that would look like it had been factory-built by Henry Ford. Thus began a new friendship and the opportunity for Dick to "dust off his rusty abilities and put a combination of unique skills to the test, some of which he had not used in several years. He also offered free access to his vast store of brass fittings and assorted hardware.

Dick Pack works some of his miracles on another part for the Seedless Thompson Speedster

Dick kept his word by disassembling all cowl parts including the steel frame, wood, and skin. We went to work on what was left of a '27 cowl we found on Franklyn s property, which is generously

An early iteration

stocked with rusty old car parts. Between the two junked cowls, Dick produced what does indeed look like a factory-built Model T speedster cowl. He also narrowed the stock thin wall tubing windshield frames to fit the four-inch narrower cowl, and he did so with an enviable display of fabrication techniques. My contribution during this phase was sandblasting, fetching things, and doing the dirtier grunt labor tasks. Although Dick is a closet softy, he likes to project a gruff exterior; therefore, I became a willing recipient of feigned verbal abuse usually aimed at my low intellectual capacity for being unable to grasp the simplest of welding or fabrication techniques. These were things that Dick had learned back in the forties that any fool should know. This might sound demeaning but it wasn t. I learned a whole bunch by taking notes and listening to the old grump.

And we kept putting Dick s skills to the test as new challenges confronted us; for example, an old bronze water pump was purchased from a surplus equipment store. After we installed it, we found that the impellers turned in reverse rotation. Dick saved it by grinding off the old vanes and silver brazing handcrafted vanes in the correct direction. He also silver brazed a Frontenac intake manifold using a brass plumbing trap taken from a 1930s kitchen sink! The man is amazing.

By this time we had a restoration team of four which included myself (designer, woodworker, grunt laborer, and team recipient of verbal abuse), Franklyn (Model T expert and rusty parts provider), Dick (chief fabricator, welder & resident grump), and mild mannered Jerry D. Fugit. Jerry owns the JDF machine shop and he is generous to a fault.

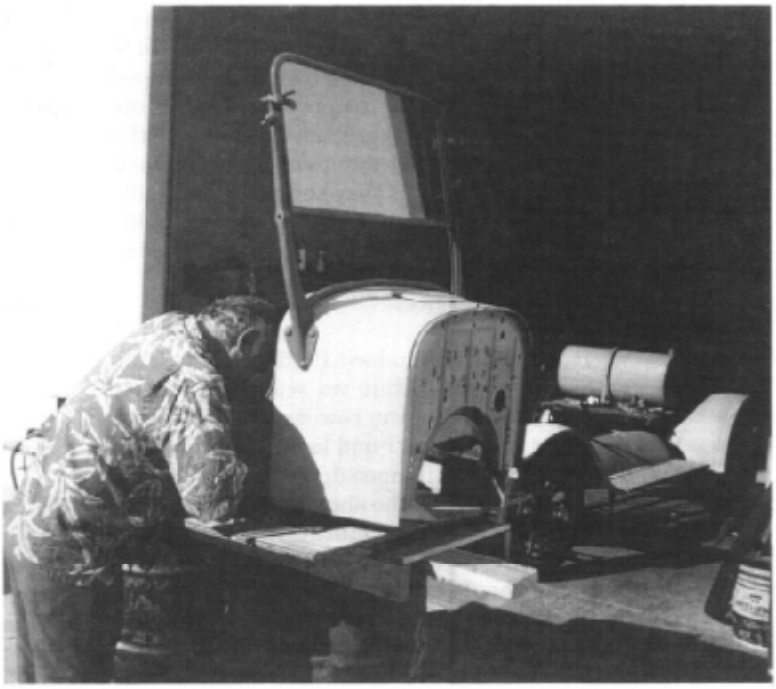
What a team !

Jerry got hooked when I convinced him to machine a "V crankshaft pulley that would accommodate our odd-ball bronze water pump. Once he gave in on that, I became a pain in the neck to him on a regular basis until he agreed to be a team member and "partner. From then on Jerry donated mechanical know-how, machine shop raw stock of all sorts, and the full use of his equipment. Eventually he provided workspace in his shop for final assembly and painting of the Seedless Thompson Speedster.

When we started this project our speedster parts inventory included a Winfield carburetor, a Frontenac overhead valve assembly, Bosch distributor, a spare 1927 engine in pristine condition, parts enough to assemble a Ruckstell rear end, an NOS speedster steering wheel, aluminum pistons, a Ford Faithful oiler (in addition to a fancier, brass large diameter outside oiler that looked factory made), many brassy doo-dads, and outside brake parts galore. We also had an abundance of seasoned oak wood suitable for framing the speedster body. The wood was gleaned from the Heritage Mills wood shop dumpster (across the alley from Jerry s machine shop). They specialize in producing oak banisters, and their scrap was our bounty.

Please note that I dreamed up several "design enhancements which we spent a lot of time on, but they were either superseded or didn t work properly. These were the things that almost got me lynched a few times. Some of these fiascoes included:

- Dozens of hours were spent on an engine we later decided not to use
- We ended up with three oak and two steel firewalls; two different round gas tanks (one leaked and the other didn t look good enough); three different seats, and numerous other "extra parts were collected before we were done.
- We attempted to repair two leaky and irreparable aluminum sub-level oil sumps
- Welding: Several brackets for the emergency brake handle were made before we had a design that was satisfactory. Several false starts in modifying the dashboard for width and gauges were required.



Jerry Fugit tries fitting another variation of a special emergency brake bracket

- Machining: Numerous rocker arm improvements were made and rejected and two different temperature gauges required different "connections."
- Too many outside brake modifications were attempted in an effort to duplicate missing forged parts
- Three hood configurations were tried before deciding to use a 1916 stock T hood
- Three different (steel and wood) firewall spacer designs for a modified steering wheel column assembly (we ended up using a stock '27 assembly with no spacer)
- Changing radiator styles three times and restoring the final selection with specialized welding
- And many, many more smaller jobs using cardboard templates and mockups were performed in the interest of safety, cost, or looks.

But this is getting ahead of the story. It would probably be easier reading (or listening) if the Seedless Thompson Speedster story was described from fore to aft. Therefore, we will concentrate on running gear first and leave the sheet metal stuff until last.

HEADLIGHTS

Large brass carbide headlights of unknown origin (but in perfect condition) were adopted in lieu of stock Ford lights because they were brassy, classy, and easy to convert without damaging the original components. Stock Ford headlight mounting posts were cut from a badly rusted pair of T headlights. The posts were then heated and shaped so that the large carbide drums would clear the radiator shell. We took care not to damage the carbide drums by bolting them rather than welding, and they fit exactly as they should in the Model T fender bracket hole with the "V" slots, The lights were electrified using household lamp fixture components and Model T six-volt bulb sockets.

RADIATOR

We began with a standard 1916 Model T radiator with a steel shell, but we wanted a brassy looking speedster. So we reworked a '26 stock nickel-plated brass shell I had laying around. Dick cut the '26 mounting flanges down two inches and reconfigured them to fit the shorter radiator. I then soaked the shell in a 50-50 muratic acid and water bath to strip the nickel plating. This acid bath can be tricky and should be closely watched. If you ever try this, don t leave the piece in too long. However, plating can sometimes be stubborn, so monitor it often and rinse it well. With this operation completed, the shell was buffed and ready for installation.

After a mishap damaged our original radiator, a second one was purchased at the Long Beach Model T swap meet, and it is a dandy. This is an aftermarket "speedster flat, wavy, tubular radiator patented in 1915 by the Steidle Manufacturing Company. *The Atlas Radiator* as it is named, leaked badly at the bottom cast-iron water hose outlet, but that accounted for its bargain price of $80. Dick Pack got to work on it and effected repairs by using nickel based welding rod on the cast iron outlet. It turned out to be a "real bear to fix without melting the radiator solder, but the job finally got done.

A final innovation was to rivet a four-inch wide wrap-around sheet steel fixed extension to the brass shell. This allowed the use of a stock Model T hood rather than trying to extend a hood four inches.

A radiator assembly "tinkering tip Franklyn suggested, which I really appreciated, was to use two 5-1/2 -long threaded studs (3/8 dia.) to attach the radiator to the frame instead of those shorter, knuckle-busting stock studs which are spring loaded inside the frame channel. Our studs go through the radiator mount, a fender clearance hole, the frame, and the fender rod bracket. Radiator springs are then mounted below the frame and backed with a washer and cotter keyed through the stud.

THE ENGINE

The engine was my first challenge, and I had started working on it prior to asking Franklyn s help; and that was a mistake I corrected as soon as possible.

Before involving Franklyn on a daily basis, the engine was tom down to install aluminum pistons. Inspection of the innards disclosed no filings or chips, and everything was tight. The magneto looked unblemished (only to find out later that a stock Ford magneto can t be used with a Bosch distributor). By the time I got Franklyn over to review my progress, I had reassembled a stock-headed engine with all new gaskets, and had cleaned, buttoned up, and painted. Since this was the first time I had ever attempted something like this, I was proud and smug.

The first thing Franklyn asked was What kind of oilers did you put in it? "Oilers? I answered. And that was the day I decided to fetch and deliver Franklyn eight miles each way to guide me in my ignorant ways. Please note that in the past I had always hired a mechanic for serious Model T engine and transmission work.

It s a fact that Franklyn is legally blind, but he can see a little bit and he knows every Model T part (year, model, and interchangeability) by touch and

feel alone. It became our habit for Franklyn to sit there in the garage, feel the parts, and instruct me on backyard mechanic short-cuts he had picked up through the decades. For example: I didn t own a hoist, so Franklyn showed me how to pull a T engine by unbolting it and "walking (manhandling it) it forward inch by inch onto a makeshift table made from large wooden blocks. But Franklyn didn t just sit there, he also did a lot of bolt tightening and straw bossing to the sound of his favorite country music.

We tore the engine down again and installed oilers in the rod caps. This consisted of drilling the caps with an "R size bit and tapping them with a 1/8 pipe tap. We then went to a hardware store to obtain four one-inch lengths of 1/8 steel pipe nipples, one end of which was ground off to a scoop shape. While the pan was off, we also installed a large-diameter, odd-looking conical-shaped outside brass oiler and the damndest looking cork float oil level indicator we had ever seen. Both of these old innovations were salvaged from a rusted out three-dip oil pan I stumbled across on Franklyn property. Installation of all this oiler stuff involved brazing by Dick, machining by Jerry, knuckle busting by me and straw bossing by Franklyn (who began to grumble that we should chuck the stock T head and get busy installing the Fronty).

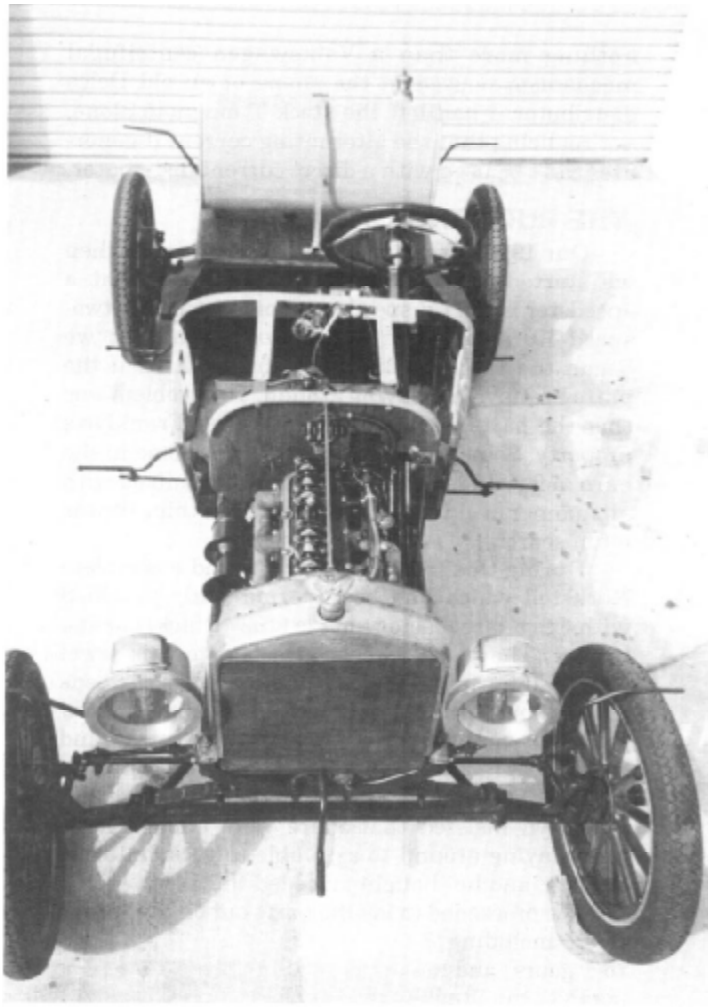
Therefore, we quickly disassembled the stock valves and valve springs in preparation of installing the Frontenac overhead valve assembly. It is worth noting that Franklyn recommended buying a new Fronty head gasket from Ron Kippling in the Youngstown, Ohio area. Ron has hundreds of new factory-made speedster gaskets for the total price of $25, which includes postage.

The original Frontenac overhead assembly was in pretty good shape, and it required a minimum of machine work and adjusting to put it in top shape.

Since our engine isn t pressurized, we reverted to some 1920s "technology to oil the rocker arms. A 1/2 thick piece of felt was cut to the inside shape of the aluminum valve cover, and a small brass machine oiler was fitted to the cover top. Oh, yeah, this caused interference with the rocker arms, so Jerry machined and I band saw cut a 1/2 thick aluminum spacer from plate stock to fit between the head and its aluminum cover.

The engine boasts a finned aluminum exhaust-port cover and a finned aluminum sub-base oil reservoir. These speedster accessories are mainly for looks, although the oil reservoir holds an extra gallon of oil which acts as an oil coolant.

Long after I thought the engine part of the restoration was complete, I found a 1930s temperature gage with a braided copper lead attached to a



An overhead view--the chassis is nearing completion

thermostat. All it needed was a machined fitting for the water jacket. Jerry machined one from a brass slug to fit a (now threaded) freeze plug port. As a result, our speedster boasted a 1930s temperature gauge that we all agreed would prove invaluable on long trips. Two months later at the Long Beach Model T Swap Meet, I chanced upon the oldest and most quaint dashboard temperature gauge I have ever seen! This incredible antique is a brass oval-framed *thermometer* with the brand name of SAF-T-STAT. It has two leads, one of which goes to battery and the other to a weird looking sensor which clamps to a brass fitting Jerry rigged up to the previously modified freeze plug. So far, I have not met any car buff who has ever seen one before. What s more, it works! And I only gave $2 for it.

The Seedless Thompson Speedster was becoming more unique!

A true speedster requires a Bosch or Eiseman magneto or at least a distributor. I opted to buy a reproduction Model T Bosch distributor which is

nothing more than a Volkswagen centrifugal mechanism housed in the shape of an old Delco distributor. I had left the stock T magneto alone, not realizing that the alternating current it generates can t be used with a direct current distributor.

THE RUCKSTELL REAR END

Our 1916 chassis had a stock T rear end when we started, but Franklyn was adamant that a speedster wasn t a speedster unless it had a two-speed Ruckstell with three-to-one gears. So we began the task of building a Ruckstell from the parts Frankyn had laying around. The problem was that the parts were scattered all over Franklyn s property. Some were in various sheds, some in the barn, a few under a trailer, and several mixed with all manner of old car parts in numerous bins (it was a fun search!).

During this treasure hunt, I found a complete Ruckstell which had been permanently modified with extra-large factory-made (1927 Buick) outside brakes. The wood wheels attached to this jewel were half buried in the dirt under a mass of weeds and bushes. Although it had been in a shallow grave for many years, it spun as smoothly and silently as a ghost when it was eventually unearthed. I also found a near complete Ruckstell, but Franklyn insisted that there were enough loose parts laying around to assemble a Ruckstell from scratch, and he thought I needed the experience!

We proceeded to lay the parts out on my garage floor (including 3-to-l gears) and assemble the Ruckstell. I was shocked to learn that Franklyn wanted Jerry to machine a part that would make it super easy to shift the Ruckstell into neutral. This spring-loaded solid part would replace the internal V-shaped spring-loaded shifter sub-assembly with a roller on its end.

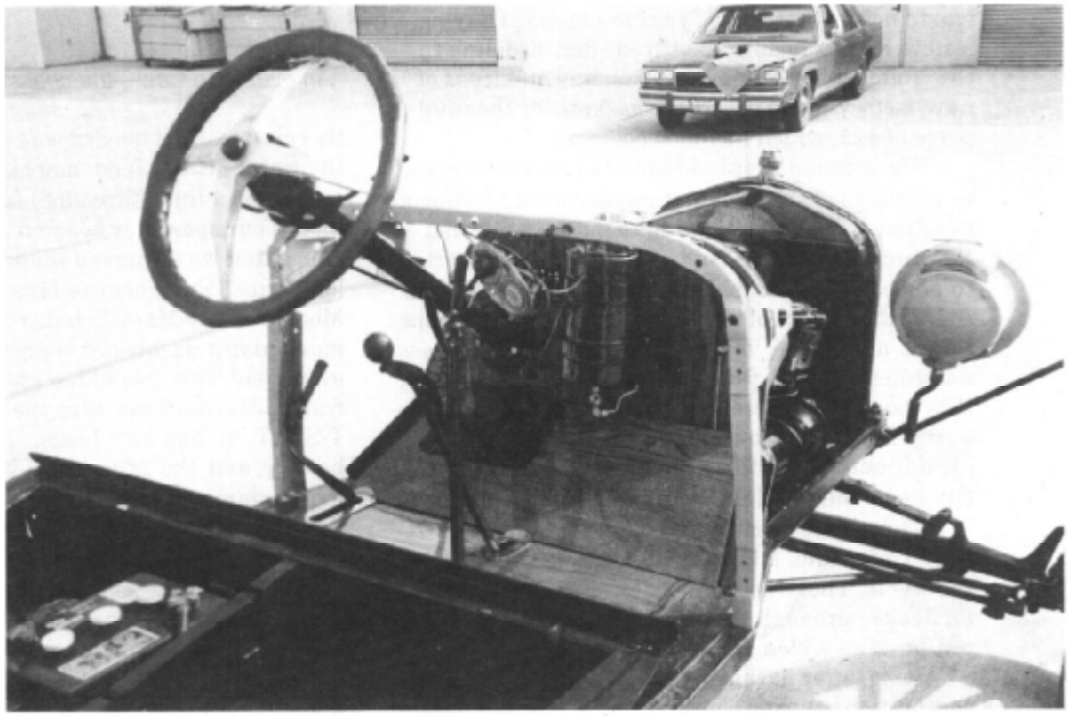
Franklyn scoffed when I mentioned the danger. I had been warned about Ruckstells popping out of gear. He contended that when a Model T was equipped with good outside brakes, the advantages of starting in neutral (or pushing a car) far outweighed any disadvantages. So I went along with him and we had Jerry machine the part.

It was fun assembling that Ruckstell rear end from scratch! I learned a lot from the old codger, and he was more than a big help, even though he was blind. He would straw boss and guide me in the use of fixtures, which made assembly easier. Once he had me balance the near-complete Ruckstell assembly vertically while it rested in a three-pound coffee can! He steadied the drive shaft while I did whatever it was that I was doing at the time.

About the time we had completed the Ruckstell and were experiencing grief trying to duplicate missing Rocky Mountain brake parts, Franklyn decided to offer the use of his Ruckstell with the Buick outside brakes. He proudly proclaimed that this Ruckstell had just been rebuilt when it was set aside for another project. I jumped at the chance to switch since I was still a bit "goosey about running a Ruckstell that easily pops into neutral. Those extra large Buick brakes sounded extra safe.

THE FUEL SYSTEM

A twenty-gallon oval gas tank feeds to a Stewart vacuum tank, then gravity flows to a Winfield carburetor mounted on a brass intake manifold, which is bolted to the Frontenac overhead valve assembly.



Dash/cowl area exposed. Note Stewart vacuum tank mounted on firewall.

The vacuum tank is mounted on the firewall inside the cowl on the passenger side. The oval tank is bolted to an oak platform behind the bucket seats.

Our twenty-gallon gas tank probably originated from a 1920s era truck. It was a little rusty but in pretty good shape except for some rust pits on one end. Dick Pack repaired these four or five spots with brass brazing build-up, whereupon I soaked the tank in a ten-to-one muratic acid and water solution for rust removal. After the rust disappeared, the tank was rinsed and saturated (inside and out) with Jasco metal preparation. The tank was now ready for final brazing operations and leak sealing.

This oval tank was originally configured to be mounted horizontally, in the flatter resting position of the oval. It had a three-inch diameter gasoline filler neck on one end of the top side. Since we wanted the oval rotated 90 degrees into an upright position, expert quality welding and brazing was required on the thin, pitted metal. Dick modified the filler neck to accommodate the new tank position and then extended the filler neck by silver soldering a three-inch length of conical-shaped brass taken from a large brass fire hose nozzle. Once the brass neck was attached, an antique brass gas filler cap with both its mating threads intact (found in Franklyn s barn) was silver soldered to the fire hose nozzle extension.

A wonderful coincidence allowed installation of an antique gas gauge a friend had given me years before. It fit perfectly into the factory-installed brass fuel line casting which had been riveted and soldered to the middle of the fuel tank. The bolt hole patterns even matched!

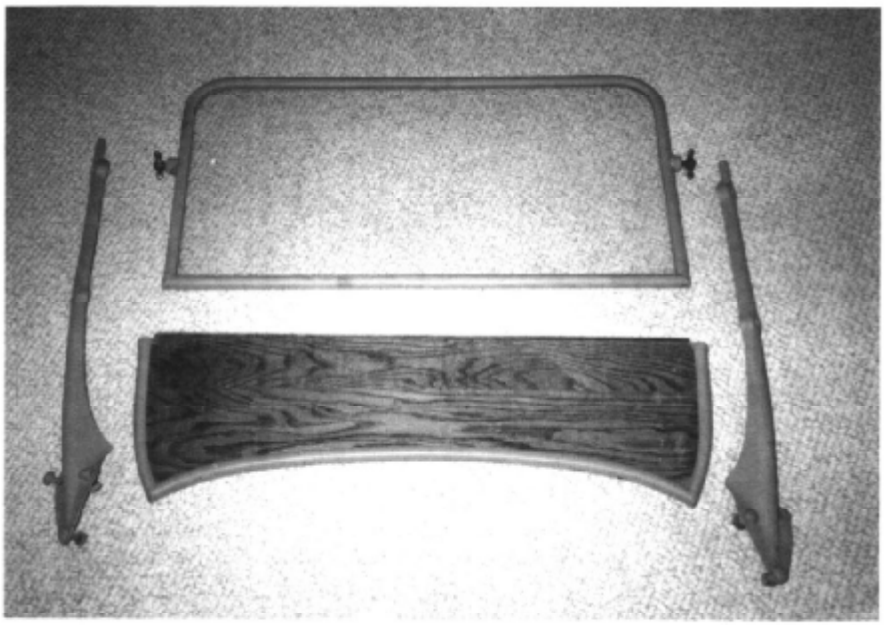
Further leak prevention measures were taken after welding, brazing and soldering operations were complete. All exterior creases and mating areas were sealed with SUPERmend epoxy designed for fuel leaks. The tank interior was then treated with Kreem Tank Sealer. An executive of Kreem products recommended a second treatment as additional insurance, and I took his advice.

As a finishing touch, a brass Ford script was epoxied to the tank ends and Dick put the tank to a 10 psi air pressure test. The tank passed with no leaks the first time.

THE UNDERCARRIAGE

A major change I wanted to make was to move the firewall back four inches. This would provide more room for working on the engine and give the speedster a longer, racier look. Of course it caused a lot of extra work because it affected the hood, cowl, floor boards, steering column, and battery placement (now under the driver s seat). The oak frame and rear deck were also affected, but it was no big deal.

What did turn out to be a big deal was our outside brake control. Our hook-ups are quite different from a stock Model T even though we used T parts. I wanted the brake lever to be on the driver s right, next to and slightly behind the Ruckstell shifting arm. This would facilitate comfort to the driver and quick, right-handed access to the brake in the event of an emergency; however, I didn t want to forfeit the Model T capability of driving the car in low or reverse gears while held in neutral by the stock parking brake lever. This mobility (unique to the Model T Ford) has proven to be great when parking or when showing off during parades. The solution was dual controls. We kept the stock brake lever in place but shortened it because of knuckle-busting interference with our modified cowl. The stock brake rods were then attached to the outside brake lever swivel. In order to have parking brakes at our disposal, I rigged up a gadget that looks like an overgrown screen door hook. It is a rod that attaches from the brake lever to a large eyelet bolted to the seat box.



A stock Model T windshield was narrowed, shortened and genera//y modified to fit the four-inch narrowed body

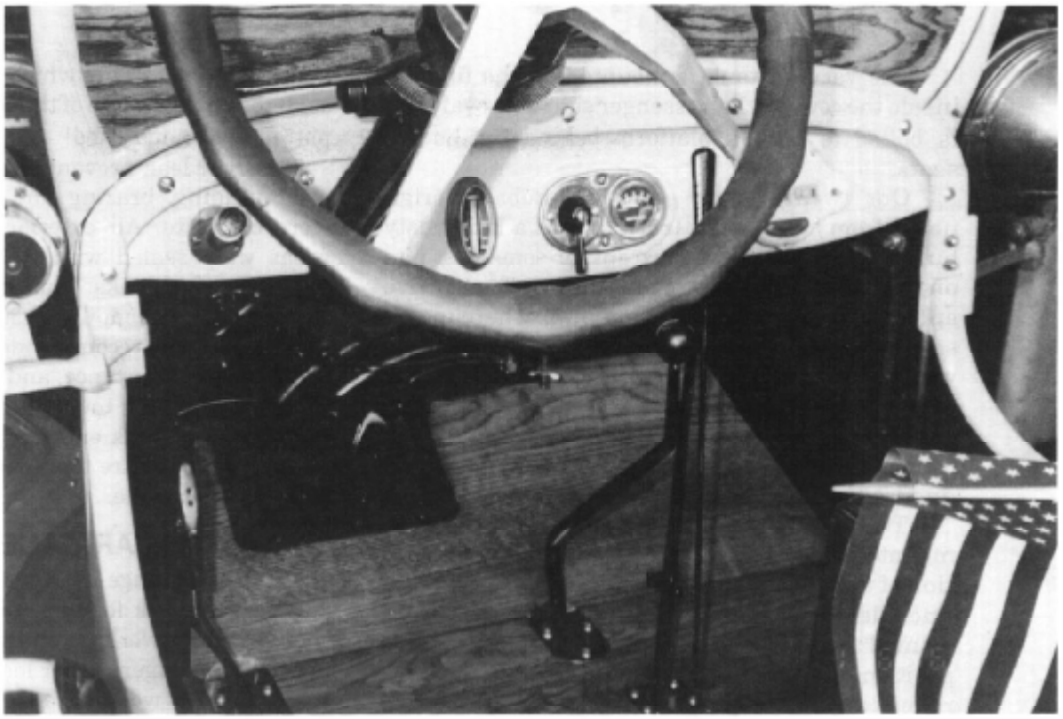
This followed the teachings of Albert Einstein who said, "Make it as simple as possible, but not simpler! "

TRIAL RUNS BREAKDOWNS

Several trial runs were conducted and usually ended with more unplanned work. Oil leaks prevailed every time out, but only two outright disasters occurred. One resulted in a major design change and the other almost convinced me that an extra change of clean shorts in the tool box might come in handy if it happened again.

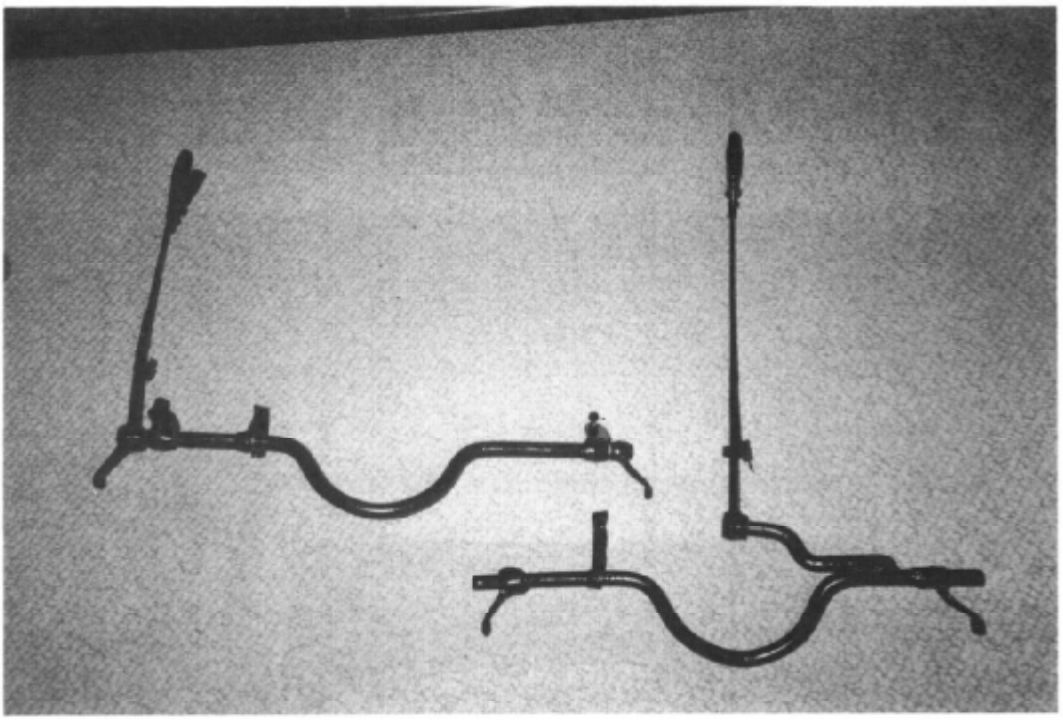
MAJOR DESIGN CHANGE

The original cowl design had a two-inch step from the cowl top down to the hood top. Don t ask me why, but I thought this looked great for a speedster. Something along the lines of 1906 - 1908 vintage cars. But I was wrong, and the error was made obvious one day while I was adjusting the distributor at a fast idle. During one powerful rev, the water pump pulley flew off and gouged a couple holes in the radiator. It looked pretty bad and it was entirely my fault. It appears that I had not tightened the pulley set screws enough when the pump was installed some months before. As luck would have it, Franklyn was right there when it happened and he said, "Don t worry about it. You can borrow the pressurized radiator off my 1923 Model T truck! So we zipped over to his house and got what turned out to be a two inch higher radiator which Franklyn had made up several years before. It instantly improved the speedster s looks. From a



Above: *Photo shows two emergency brake levers-one in its normal position and one aft of the Ruckstell shifter. In actuality, the lever in the normal position merely actuates "neutral." The lever in the center actuates the emergency brake.*

Below: *Two "brake levers*



side view, its profile was flush with the new cowl that Dick had just finished. This design change resulted in several domino-effect changes to the cowl, including changing the placement of the steering post and fuel lines, and eventually resulted with a steel fire wall instead of oak. Franklyn s pressurized radiator was returned when we purchased the Atlas radiator at the Long Beach swap meet.

TRIAL RUN TERROR

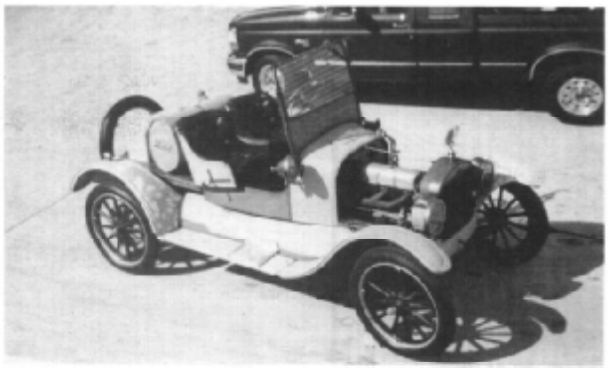
While on the first fifteen-mile trial run through some Oxnard farm country, the steering suddenly got sloppy and I suddenly got queasy. The two-lane road was heavily traveled (both ways) at the time and there was no parking shoulder. Without further warning, steering control became non-existent and the car sharply veered to the right, off the road and into a four-foot deep ditch. I was traveling about 35 MPH at the time and it was pure luck that I didn t swerve into oncoming traffic. It was also incredibly luck that the front tires first went onto a relatively flat surface before the ditch slope yanked the front wheels to the left and forced the car to straddle the narrow ditch. The car came to a shuddering halt as I simultaneously stomped the brake pedal and yanked on the outside brake lever. Talk about your heart pounding! The third bit of luck was that I didn t need the aforementioned change-of-shorts (but only barely).

Dick Pack happened to be following me in case something like this happened, and he went back to the shop for a replacement nut and woodruff key. The cause of this mishap is understandable, but not forgivable. During modifications that required multiple removals and reassembling of the steering column, I made it a point to tighten and cotter key the pitman arm nut after each reassembly. But it looks like I forgot to do it just this one time. The moral here is to "flight check all nuts and bolts in the undercarriage before attempting a trial run. It could be a life saver.

BODY WORK AND PAINT

Our body parts are all authentic Ford parts or vintage after-market Model T accessories, with the exception of the 1907 bucket seat, the large oval gas tank, and the 1927 Buick outside brakes. Unfortunately, none of these wonderful originals had been out of the weather much. That means all fenders, splash pans, running boards, hood, cowl, dash board, and gas tank were pitted, ripped, shot at and hit, or slightly cancered through. Every body part needed the attention of our fabrication specialist, Dick Pack.

Dick wore himself out brazing holes, welding tears, patching bullet holes and pounding metal



Nearly complete, the Seedless Thompson Speedster is rolled out for a shake-down run

into shape on an anvil. At times I had to restrain him from trying to make a silk purse out of a sow s ear. Dick is a perfectionist craftsman, and the parts with which we were dealing were in pathetic condition.

Several fenders and splash pans were repaired to a point when it was decided that they just weren t good enough. Something like seven fenders and five splash pans were restored when the final choice was made to get on with the paint job. Keep in mind that the Seedless Thompson Speedster is not, and never will be, a show car. It is designed mainly for fun and parades with low cost being a major consideration.

Side panels which mate to the cowl and bucket seat box assembly were made of 20-gauge sheet steel. The panel radius was capped with a steel channel that Dick formed cold in a vise and straightened on an anvil. This channel stock was scavenged from an old wheelbarrow frame I found; but I didn t just happen to find it. I had been searching for months for the perfect size and shaped panel cap. The side panel had long since been developed, cut to size, and braced with a

Chuck Jordan and Franklyn Thompson about to embark on a test run

welded steel frame. The part looked great, right out of the 1920s.

As this phase of our project matured, I determined that a completion goal was needed and I chose the Camarillo Christmas parade which was scheduled for December 16th, 1995-three months down the line.

That was when I began putting in twelve- and fourteen hours days on things that wasted more time until I conceded that it would be better to have the upholstery professionally done. From the beginning of the seat restoration project, I had tried building the seat springs from scratch and even attempted to fashion padding taken from old armchairs. It was a foolish effort with ugly results. So I shopped for the best possible upholsterer I could find (for quality and cost) and ended up in east Los Angeles where I paid half the going price it would have cost in my county. During this phase I installed seat belts and made inside padded "door panels.

By this time, the bucket seat had been primed and prepped for paint. Another last minute design addition was the installation of top bow brackets prior to the upholstery. This occurred when Franklyn casually mentioned one day that our speedster would look a little classier if it sported a top, and he said he had a couple somewhere up in his barn loft. By now I was getting sick of working on the car, along with everybody else, so the brackets were installed as the first step in a future (long-range) project. Once the upholstery was finished, we were ready for paint, and I had learned my lesson about taking the "do it yourself " attitude too far.

I contacted a retired Northrop buddy of mine, Bob Neri, who had been an aircraft painter. Bob agreed to do the paint and bondo touch-up for little more than cost. We were fortunate enough to use the empty unit next to Jerry Fugit s shop as a paint booth, and the car was painted piece by piece and hung on an indoors clothes line.

The two-tone colors chosen get a lot of negative comments. Green was selected because the color of Seedless Thompson grapes is green and we figured it was a logical selection. We were wrong, but stuck with it for the time being. The fenders, running boards and splash pans are John Deere Tractor green, which generally gets compliments, but the upper body is kind of a mint-colored gangrene. The speedster was carefully reassembled and made ready for the parade with only two days to spare. Bob-Neri s work was superb. But all did not go well the next day.

THE PARADE

The day before the parade, the starter began to act up. Not too bad at first, but by late afternoon it turned into a major problem. On a test run, two hours before sundown, the engine began to sputter and cough and finally died a half-mile from Jerry s shop. I got out, messed with the distributor a bit and tried to start the engine but smoke billowed from the starter. It was a goner. Then I began to crank, and I did so to the point of exhaustion. In my haste to beat the setting sun, I forgot that I had messed with the distributor, and this oversight came back to haunt me the next day. So I called the AAA automobile club.

I explained to the people at AAA about the parade and my need to get the car back to the shop quickly, so that I could change the starter before

the sun went down. They assured me that a tow truck would arrive within twenty minutes and wished me luck for the parade.

A bit more than an hour went by when the wrong kind of tow truck showed up. The driver said he couldn t hook up to a Model T, but they had a platform truck that he would call. Another hour passed, it was now dark, and the truck had still not arrived. I stormed to Jerry s shop, canceled the tow request, and nearly canceled my AAA membership. Enough said.

By this time everybody in the shop had gone home; it looked like the only way I could get the car back was by pushing it. So I tried. After a block and a half of slightly uphill solo steering and pushing, I said to hell with it. I abandoned the car on the darkened street, went home, had dinner, and allowed my fiancee to talk me into going back so we could both push the car. We made it to a parking lot within fifty yards of Jerry s shop before exhaustion took its toll. It looked like Franklyn and I would miss the big parade.

After all we had been through to meet this objective, I decided that one more big effort was worth a try; therefore I went back to the shop after dinner to test the three or four dirt-encrusted starters I had stored there. They all worked so I cleaned one up and painted it for installation in the morning. I did this chore and tried to camouflage the Model T with a car cover out in the parking lot. I was worried about thieves, scavengers, and vandals who rummage that industrial area after dark. But I now had a cleaned and painted starter in working order ready for installation the next morning.

Although I was thoroughly pooped out, I couldn t sleep that night. And I decided that since I couldn t sleep, why not use the time to install the starter by flashlight right there in the parking lot. At least I would be able to keep an eye out for thieves and such. Besides, the parade line-up was scheduled for 10:00 AM and I would need all the time I could get.

I arrived back at the shop a bit after midnight, cut out a new gasket, and went to the parking lot and began removing the old starter. Old-time Model T experts would say that changing a starter is no big deal, but with this Model T it was a time-consuming and frustrating chore. There were clearance problems with a large diameter outside oiler, a radical steering column angle, and the wishbone. The steering column assembly had to be completely removed, and to top it off, this was the first time I had ever changed starters on the fully assembled car, so I was not only literally in the dark, I was in strange territory. It was a long night, but I finally went home and got two hours of sleep.

I was back to work at 6:00 AM and lucky enough to hire three Mexican gardeners who helped me push the car 50 yards uphill to Jerry s shop, where I could get to work on it. Unfortunately, with all the turmoil I had been through, I did not remember messing with the distributor the previous afternoon; therefore, I was convinced there was a carburetor or an electrical shorting problem of some kind. Time flew by as friends showed up to offer their advice on what should be done and how I should do it. My patience was growing shorter and my nerves were wearing thin.

The engine finally kicked over but it was running rough. I took it for a run around the industrial building and left an awful trail of oil in the process. Evidently I had tom the starter gasket the night before! But there was still time to yank the starter and install another gasket. So the complete removal sequence was repeated, the starter with a new gasket re-installed, and another test run performed. During this second trip around the building, the engine leaked just as bad if not worse because in my haste, I had also damaged the newest gasket! There was no time left. I was running late, and Franklyn s daughter Carole had not delivered him to Jerry s shop as planned. The only course of action was to load the tool box with the three quarts of oil available and head for the parade registration area without Franklyn.

I lurched forward at a top speed of 20 MPH, trailing oil, and the engine immediately began to overheat. After I came to a stop at the staging area, a police officer informed me that I was in the wrong place! It seems that all antique cars had been redirected to cue up two miles away. My map had directed me to the horse and floats rendezvous. BATS!

About a mile down the road (now going the right way), I spotted Franklyn and his daughter heading toward me in her car. I hit the Klaxton horn and signaled them to pull over on my side of the road, whereupon they quickly joined me. We were already late.

Franklyn transferred cars with the speed of cold molasses, but we got the old boy up and in the bucket seat. And did he look spiffy! He was wearing an ancient top hat in great shape, a black vest that didn t quite hide his unbuttoned cowboy shirt, and of course, his low slung Levi s and cowboy boots. Franklyn had dressed for the occasion. After cinching up his seat belt we were finally on our way to the parade with the Seedless Thompson Speedster sputtering, lurching, over-heating, and leaving an oil trail reminiscent of the Exxon Valdese. It was grand! It was also scary, daring, and fun.

We were finally, officially, in the 1995 Camar-

illo Christmas parade!

Within five minutes of this stop-and-go procession getting under way, Franklyn had mastered a slow and condescending way of flourishing his top hat to the cheering spectators. He was a sight to see. Because Franklyn s facial expression is normally serious, the only advice I gave him was to quit looking so grim. "Dammit Franklyn, smile a little! You re scaring the kids! And he did.

We went through seven quarts of oil and two gallons of water during the course of the parade. Officials and other parade entrants kept donating oil as we needed it and my fiancee hauled water to us during spasmodic parade stops. The kids thought Franklyn was Santa Clause even though the official Santa was a few cars away from us (several kids came up to him after the parade for a word or two). Franklyn had the time of his long life. After the parade was over and we had returned to Jerry s shop, he sat up there, strapped in the bucket seat, and he wouldn t move until it was time for me to take him home.

All our team effort in creating the Seedless Thompson Speedster had been justified.

And that, my friends, is the end of the Seedless Thompson Speedster story

Epilogue

When I finally finished writing this article, I called Franklyn on the phone and read it to him. He was so pleased with the way the story came out, he urged me to make an audio cassette of it so that other sight-impaired people might enjoy hearing how the Seedless Thompson Speedster came into being. So I did. If you are interested, please write me-Chuck Jordan, P.O. Box 1848, Camarillo, CA 93011. Or you can phone me at (805) 482-7580. ❑

Chuck Jordan and Franklyn Thompson enjoy themselves in the newly completed Seedless Thompson Speedster at the Christmas Parade in Camarillo, California.