

“Kaiser Flyer #4”

What about the Kaiser - Darrin ?



Sports Car

The Design -

When Henry J. Kaiser decided to build his “pet project” small car for the American market place he rejected the original designs offered by his own internal design team and another submitted by Howard “Dutch” Darrin. The internal Kaiser design team’s mock-up was a very pleasant design but nothing special. Howard Darrin’s was another matter. His design was a thing of real beauty. Darrin had used the basic lines from his 1951 full-size Kaiser design and it surprisingly looked even better in the smaller scale. When his design was rejected, Darrin was not just disappointed but was furious at Kaiser for choosing, of all things, the AMP design - it was really an ugly thing. (Note: For more information on Kaiser’s “small car” project and the Henry-J, read Kaiser Flyers #3 and #6. Contact Kaiser Bill for a copy.) The original AMP design was so ugly in fact that several of Kaiser’s best men resigned over it. They told Kaiser they just couldn’t sell something that looked like that. Kaiser finally did have Darrin work over the AMP design resulting a very pleasant-looking and “cute” little car - - the Henry-J. In fact, today the Henry-J is probably one of the most easily recognized of all Kaiser models. But it was not the great-looking car Darrin had originally designed.

However, Darrin was not satisfied and wanted to show Kaiser what could have been done with the excellent frame and suspension the Kaiser engineers had provided for the Henry-J. None of the original AMP’s mechanical engineering was actually used for the Henry-J as it was very radical and totally impractical for production.

So Darrin confiscated a few Henry-J frames, suspension and running gear and took them to his little shop on Santa Monica Blvd. in Los Angeles. Darrin working only with the help from his son, Bob, and a fiberglass workman, shortly had built a running prototype of a small two-seat sports car out of a seldom-used product at that time, fiberglass. The little roadster was a beauty, long, low and sleek with a European flair. When Darrin finally approached Henry Kaiser about the car in 1950, Kaiser scolded Darrin for working on his car without Kaiser’s knowledge or approval and promptly refused to even go look at it. He told Darrin that Kaiser-Frazer Motors “was not in the sports car business, they built only family cars.” (Note: This story was told somewhat in the movie “Johnny Dark” starring Tony Curtis.)

But Darrin would not be dissuaded so easy. His persistence paid off and he was finally able to get Henry Kaiser, his son Edgar, Mrs. Kaiser #2 and a few other Kaiser officials to come look at the hand-made prototype Darrin car in his Los Angeles shop. When Mrs. Kaiser saw it she remarked, "Henry, this is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I don't think there'll be many companies, after seeing this car, that won't go into the sports car business." The rest is history. The little car was rushed into production.

Once Kaiser made up his mind to actually build the little sports car, things moved fast. Several prototypes were built at the Kaiser plant. The exact number is not known and is still a matter of controversy today. One of the prototype cars was first publicly displayed at the 1952 National Auto Show in Los Angeles (there was no "Motorama" in 1952). It was an instant hit. Other manufactures took careful note of the public's overwhelming acceptance of the idea of a small American sports car. The 1984 "Sports Car" calendar issued by TRW displayed an artist's painting of the "1952" Kaiser Darrin and gave a very complimentary, although somewhat inaccurate, description of the new fiberglass-bodied Kaiser Sports Car.

Howard Darrin continued to work periodically with the Kaiser design team until the overall design was almost complete. During his absence the Kaiser engineers discovered that the height of the headlights were so low they didn't meet the height requirements of some states. To solve this problem they raised the height of the front fenders for the final approved design. This design change was immediately apparent and the overall appearance was not quite as good. When Howard Darrin saw the change he was enraged at the Kaiser engineers, especially for not consulting him before making such a change. When questioned what he would have done to fix the problem, his remark was, "did you ever think about putting larger tires on the wheels?"

The Engine problem -

Darrin had initially used the original Henry-J running gear in his prototype, including the Kaiser Henry-J 6-cylinder engine but he new the car really needed a power plant more in line with the little Darrin's "Sport Cars" image. He tried several different engine combinations, including multiple carburetors, a McCulloch supercharged Henry-J 6-cylinder engine and a Cadillac V8, his favorite. Howard Darrin was aware that the Kaiser engineers had been working on a Kaiser V-8 engine since 1949 and he thought it might become available at some point. So, his Henry-J frame modifications included providing channels for a V-8 engine dual exhaust system. Darrin went to General Motors Cadillac Division and secured several Cadillac Eldorado V-8 engines along with temporary approval for Cadillac to provide additional engines for the car. The little sports car was a real bomb with the 331 cubic inch Cadillac V-8. Darrin is reported to have sold as many as 85 cars from his Hollywood , California, showroom with various engine configurations. About fifty of these were sold after Kaiser-Willys discontinued distribution.

When General Motors executives actually got their first look at the Kaiser-Darrin at the Los Angeles Show in November 1952, Darrin was suddenly unable to obtain any more Cadillac engines. It has been reported that GM's reaction to the Darrin was, "this thing with the Cadillac V-8 Engine will blow our 6-cylinder Chevrolet Corvette (as then yet unannounced) out of the market, we can't let that happen." (Note: Howard Darrin was later able to obtain a few more Cadillac engines, but only after Kaiser had announced it would cease production of automobiles in the United States.)

The Kaiser engineers knew that Henry J. Kaiser had the work on the Kaiser V-8 suspended in favor of bringing out the Kaiser small car, the "Henry-J," so they never considered using it. The Kaiser V-8 engine program (see "Kaiser Flyer #1") had been personally shelved by Henry Kaiser himself, and so, the Darrin team knew they had to select from those engines currently manufactured by Kaiser or Willys. Earlier several variations of the Henry-J "Flat-Head" 6-cylinder and the Willys "F-Head" 6-cylinder had been tried, multiple carburetors and even the McCulloch Supercharger had been installed in several cars. Although all of these were viable and reliable power-plants, only a V-8 would give the little car the public impact the team wanted, and they knew it. But, for corporate reasons, the Kaiser-Willys executives finally settled on the Willys "F-Head" engine as the base power plant for their new Sports Car.

The Darrin's frame had been specifically designed with channels and frame access holes to allow for easy installation of a V8 dual exhaust system. The dual exhaust channels were left in the final production cars as the frame specifications had already been put into production. Look under most any Darrin today and you will see those exhaust channels just outside the frame under the frontal door area. The right-side channel was omitted in late production models.

It was also very unfortunate that Henry Kaiser himself had stopped the tooling for the Kaiser V-8 engine in favor of spending Kaiser's resources on his personal pet project, a small car, later to be named the "Henry-J." Had Kaiser actually put the Kaiser "288" V-8 into production in 1951 as originally scheduled, what a difference it would have made, not only for the Darrin, but for the entire Kaiser line of cars, and history might be telling an entirely different story. A quick glance at the 1952 thru 1955 Kaiser full-size cars reveal the "V" emblem intended to indicate the cars had a V8 engine. They were left on the cars as Kaiser did not have the resources left to redesign and replace the "V's" with a more appropriate symbol. The only modification afforded was to delete the "8" from the center of the emblem and insert a "K" for Kaiser. I have observed Kaiser cars of these years being downgraded by judges at open shows because of the "V" emblem as being equipped with the wrong engine, a "straight 6" instead of an "V-8". (Well, what else could the "V" mean? That is the usual reply of many uninformed judges.) Sadly, the judges are actually correct in a way, those Kaisers were supposed to have a V-8 engine, as was the Darrin.

Of course the Kaiser V-8 was later placed into production by American Motors as a 327 CU V-8 in late 1956 and was first used in the 1957 Nash and Hudson cars. The American Motors "Rebel" model equipped with this engine was a hot muscle car. The engine served American Motors very well for many years and was only dropped when Chrysler bought out American Motors. Chrysler had developed many good V-8's of their own and they were cheaper for Chrysler to produce so the American Motors "Kaiser V-8" was discontinued.

The Kaiser V8 was a good reliable engine and had many innovations for its time. My father was one of the few Factory Authorized Kaiser Dealers who actually witnessed the Kaiser engine running on a test stand at the Kaiser plant. The initial blocks were cast of aluminum as Henry Kaiser had dictated but the final blocks were cast in iron. The 1949 designed Kaiser V8 was of overhead valve design and used a green-sand casting method. General Motors adopted this method of casting for the now-famous "Chevy Small-Block V8" introduced in 1955. Several of the engineers who worked on the "Kaiser V8" went on to work for General Motors, Studebaker and Ford and contributed much to the development of their engines. (See "Kaiser Flyer #1")

Only 435 of the beautiful little Kaiser Darrin Sport Cars were built. There is currently 387 of them still registered which represents the highest survival rate of any production car ever built. I personally know of two others not yet included in that count. I have one of them, car # 390, and I've been trying to buy the other one since 1991 with no luck as yet. But I know where it is!

Others -

General Motors - *Little needs to be said here about the Chevrolet Corvette. It was introduced in 1953 with the old "stove-bolt" Chevrolet 6-cylinder engine and was almost discontinued before it really got started. However, once the small-block Chevrolet V-8 was made available for the Corvette it became a hit and has endured ever since as America's Sports Car, and rightly so.*

Studebaker - *Raymond Loewy and Robert E. (Bob) Bourke of Studebaker also had a design for a two-seat Roadster, similar to the Kaiser Darrin and the Corvette. Bourke was the major contributor to this design but the little cute car never got out of the clay mock-up. It had good clean lines but was rather plain compared to the Darrin or Corvette.*

Ford - *Although Ford also worked on a sports car, it's final efforts were put into a 4-seat "family" car - the Mustang. The original Mustang was a two-seat sports car just like the Darrin and Corvette but Lee Iacocca steered Ford into a different direction which resulted in Ford's very successful "pony car" era.*

Chrysler - *It wasn't until the new "Viper" and Plymouth "Prowler" of the 90's that Chrysler ever seriously considered building a sports car.*

Nash - *Although a two-seat "sports car" (the Nash-Healy) was offered by Nash in late 1951, it was really a "import" from Warwick, England and not of US manufacture. It's Pinin Farina design resulted in a good-looking car. Only 254 were imported and it was sold only in 1952 as either a 1951 or a 1952 model. The only major difference between the two models was the engine. Ironically, some models were made of aluminum as were several earlier Kaiser prototypes.*

Restoration Notes -

The Kaiser Darrin Sports Car is considered today as the most collectible of all the Kaiser or Frazer cars. Howard Darrin was very proud of the fact that the car he had to shove down Kaiser's throat, so to speak, became the most sought after model Kaiser would build.

The fiberglass body is easy to repair, it doesn't rust, and most all of the mechanicals are shared by some other Kaiser, Frazer or Willys model. It's frame is a highly modified Henry-J factory frame which are easy to locate. Some of the unique fiberglass body panels, doors, hood, deck, trunk, etc., are almost impossible to find but some reproductions can be located. It is the trim that presents a real problem. The special emblems, wire hubcaps, door handles, parking lights, etc., have become almost impossible to locate. The sliding door mechanism is complex and not obtainable. The only alternative is to borrow these parts and have them reproduced - not an inexpensive task. But, once it's finished, what a beauty!

