

THE MAGNIFICENT MERCERS

BY WIM VAN DER GRAAF

FROM ITS BRILLIANT beginning in 1909, the Mercer Automobile Company of Trenton, N.J., did things in a big way. The company was founded and financed by the Kuser family and the Roebings, builders of the Brooklyn Bridge, with the participation of William T. White and Finley R. Porter. The magnificent Mercer, originally conceived by Washington A. Roebling, was designed by Finley R. Porter under the watchful engineering eyes of C. G. Roebling. The first Mercer, a Speedster Model 30-C, shattered design and engineering traditions. In fact, it was the first production sports car to feature the much copied torpedo body styling.

It took a daring driver and speeds in excess of the then accepted speed limits to truly appreciate the effortless performance built into the new Mercer. Its rugged 4-cyl., T-head engine, mounted on a sub-frame, was guaranteed to power the 2600 lb. of subtle steel through a mile in 48 sec.—and did! Throughout the 16 years of Mercer's life the company never withdrew that guarantee and actually could have decreased that figure substantially. In 1916, for example, a 16-valve Mercer Raceabout covered a 250-mile Sheepshead Bay Speedway race in a time of 2:37:28, or an average of 95.20 mph.

Fame did not long elude the magnifi-

cent Mercer. The year 1910 saw the introduction of the shorter and faster Mercer Raceabout, which soon established a reputation for speed and reliability that has endured to this date. That fame was no accident. Its solid foundation is the result of its racing performances. As early as 1911, only two years after the first Mercer rolled out of the Roebling shop, the company adopted a factory-sponsored racing program. Starting with Hughie Hughes, the first Mercer competition driver, Mercer added glory to the driving skills of Ralph de Palma, Caleb Bragg, Spencer Wishart (who died at the wheel of a Mercer), Grover Ruckstell, the great Barney Oldfield, Ed and

Al Schillo, Eddie Pullen and Walter Haines, just to mention some of the better known.

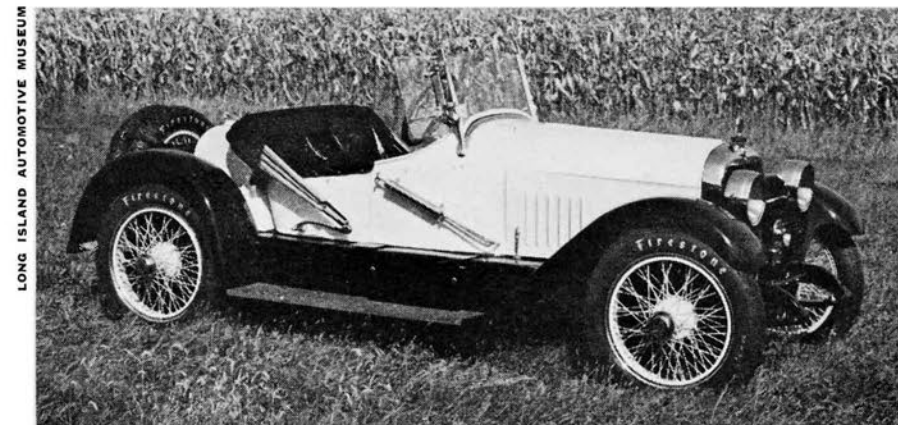
During the first year of competition racing Mercer scored five firsts, two seconds and one third place in a total of six major races. In 1912 Ralph de Palma established eight new world records for Mercer. Spencer Wishart added four more to de Palma's eight to give Mercer an even dozen for 1912.

Through 1916 Mercers scored at least five more firsts, two seconds and three thirds—no mean feat when you consider that these were major events, including Indianapolis. The finest race drivers in the country competed in these races. While Mercer raced on the 250-mile Sheepshead Bay course in 1919, racing activities were on the decline from 1915. Mercer did not race in major events in 1917 or 1918.

The comfortably enclosed 1922 Sport Touring bears little resemblance to the straight-fendered, spare-bodied Raceabout of 1911. The lively Mercer T-head engine was ready to roar to life under the characteristic belt-strapped yellow hood. The unforgettable Raceabout had staggered twin bucket seats—now the latest option from Detroit. Although they left something to be desired for all-weather comfort, the Mercer allowed the fortunate driver a feel of kinship with the road, a sensation of speed even today's fastest cars have trouble matching.

Before elaborating on Mercer's brilliant competition record of 1911-1916, the engineering responsible for its flawless performance should be examined. With the exception of the Continental L-head engine, used for about a year in 1910, all Mercer engines were built in Trenton until 1922. For financial reasons a 6-cyl. Rochester engine was used from then until 1925. Mercer-built engines with a 300-cu. in. displacement powered many a Raceabout to victory over the famed Stutz and other formidable competition. It is interesting to note that Mercer accomplished all this against racing engines with 25% to 75% more displacement.

The engineering-minded Roebings can be credited with the quality and long-lived performance of every Mercer component. As a start, the Mercer T-head engine had a dual magneto and battery ignition. Output was 34 bhp. Notable engineering innovations on the 1909 Speedster included outboard rear leaf springs and an advanced 3-speed transmission with direct drive in high. Expanding rear hub brakes, hand-operated, were supplemented with an over-size contracting pedal brake working directly on the driveshaft. Roebling's preoccupation with top capacity performance is convincingly demonstrated by the 40-gal. rear gas tank—it held enough fuel for a non-stop 500-mile



MERCER SPEEDSTER of 1922 is a companion model to the centerspread Sport Touring. It also is powered by the 4-cyl., L-head engine designed by Erik Delling.

trip. By 1911, Mercer Raceabouts featured single-spark Bosch magnetos, Fletcher carburetors and a multiple-disc clutch immersed in oil to improve the already unsurpassed Mercer shift.

From \$1950 in 1909, the Mercer price tag rose to \$2600 in 1913, with little more than a new 4-speed transmission improvement in the design. Still, Mercer's production backlog increased. This is understandable when we consider that even during its highest production years the Mercer factory turned out less than one car per year per employe.

In 1914 three standard T-head engines were increased to 445 cu. in. The racing results proved so disappointing that the engine displacement was not materially changed until production was discontinued in 1922. The Series Five features one of the last Mercer engines produced, with a displacement of 298.2 cu. in.

The year 1915 brought many changes in engine design. When Finley Porter was replaced by Erik Delling in the engineering department a new L-head 4-cyl. engine became the standard powerplant. The smoother performance of the new engine was not enough to make up for its comparative lack of power. A 12-volt electrical system, only recently reintroduced to the American motorist, and the first hydraulic shock absorbers used in the United States were other advances of that year. A Hotchkiss driveshaft system with radius rods and torsion bar replaced the Mercer drive, and the engine and transmission subframe were dropped. In 1919 a new engine with a 16-valve head was introduced, but time was running out for Mercer.

The Titanic disaster claimed the life of W. A. Roebling II in 1912. F. R. Porter was replaced as head of the engineering department in 1915. F. W. Roebling died in 1917 and C. G. Roebling in 1918. Gradually, the spirit that had produced the magnificent Mercer vanished. A year later the highly successful Mercer Automobile Company became the property of a Wall Street in-

vestment group and Emlen S. Hare, an ex-Packard executive, was hired to breathe new life into the company.

For a while it looked as if Mercer might be headed for another surge. Hare first purchased Locomobile and later Simplex—both fine names. Financing necessary for this step forward actually proved to be the undoing of the new corporation known as Hare's Motors. Mercer engine production was canceled in 1922 in a move to conserve the company's working capital. The 4-cyl. Mercer engine was offered as a "Special" along with the new 6-cyl. Rochester engine then introduced. The last Mercer-built engine was a 1922 4-cyl. 70-bhp unit. It had a 3.75-in. bore and 6.75-in. stroke and a piston displacement of 298.2 cu. in. True to Mercer tradition, however, it featured a 5-gal. oil tank for high speed lubrication. For those who put stock in these things, and stock it was on the 1922 Mercer (\$3950 FOB Trenton, N.J.), the 4-speed transmission (overall) ratios were: first, 11.91; second, 6.88; third, 4.72; fourth, 3.22. The pictured 1922 Mercer Sport Touring, owned by C. W. Bjelland, is one of slightly more than 5000 Mercers produced. Shown prior to its current restoration, it is a sound car which proudly bears the Mercer name. New top with all-brass bows, upholstery, paint, some engine work, and a complete restoration of the solid wood dash was effort well spent. Few—certainly not enough—Mercers have withstood the ravages of time, accidents and neglect to perpetuate the name.

CENTERSPREAD

The Mercer Sport Touring Special on the center-spread is a 1922 Series Five 4-cyl., similar but not identical to the Series Six, 6-cyl. featured on the following pages. Full-color reprints of this centerspread, suitable for framing, are available for \$1 postpaid from Car Life, 834 Production Pl., Newport Beach, Calif.

THIS BEAUTIFULLY restored 1911 Mercer Raceabout from the Henry A. Clark Jr. collection, is a Model 35R T-head of the type created by Finley R. Porter.

