

The good old days?

# RUXTON

A big front-wheel-drive phaeton that was more fun to look at than drive

by Robert J. Gottlieb

**A**CCORDING TO AN OLD SAYING, whatever goes up must come down. Most Ruxton owners could get down, but they couldn't get up. There was a reason — the car featured a front-wheel drive, and on steep hills or icy roads the front wheels spun helplessly. This is not current with modern front-wheel-drive vehicles, but the Ruxton's rather skinny 6.50 x 19-inch tires and a very heavy rear end certainly spelled doom for this drive system on this particular car.

Historians are not in agreement on whether the Ruxton preceded the Cord or whether the Cord came first. They do agree that production started some time in 1929, ended in 1931 and that 375 cars were built. Moon Motors of St. Louis, builders of the Moon automobile, was the parent company, but a subsidiary corporation, New Era Motors of New York, was formed to actually build the Ruxton.

Most of the cars were sedans. Only two phaetons were built and but one is known to exist today (see photograph).

The Ruxton was a large, dependable and expensive machine, but it was an assembled car. The engines were standard powerplants built by Continental, while the bodies were assembled by Budd from British dies (Wolseley). Even the headlights were purchased (Woodlite), though some sedans appeared with the contemporary drum lights of another manufacturer.

There is no question but that the Ruxton was one of the most advanced cars of its day. It even featured four-tone paint jobs, which put to shame the three-tone combinations so popular in the early '50s.

The front-wheel drive was first utilized in early horseless carriage days. The best known early American makes were the Christie and the FWD. During the late '20s, imagination was fired by the success of certain front-wheel-drive racing cars, such as the Miller, and the directors of the rapidly sinking Moon Company jumped on this "new" innovation in an effort to save the corporation from bankruptcy. Strangely enough, the successful whispering campaign by the competitors of the Cord, in great measure, spelled doom for Ruxton.

You have to learn how to drive any car with front-wheel drive. You need power to pull you out of a turn; if you brake the car on any sharp curve at speed, you'll spin it every time. FWD is blamed for taking at least one life in the famous Novis at Indianapolis.

Not very many women drove cars in those days, due largely to the physical strength needed to steer and stop. In fact, most of the male drivers who graduated from the foot-operated band transmissions of the Model T were learning to mesh the straight-cut gears of the huge gearboxes on conventional cars, and they offered some resistance to learning to drive the then unconventional front-wheel drive.

There isn't much to say about the eight-cylinder Continental engine (3 x 4¾ inches) which was used by many manufacturers, including Locomobile, Peerless, Windsor and Jordan. By today's standards, the 85-hp peak rating at 3000 rpm of the engine

seems very low, but in the '20s, when horsepowers were in the 45-to-50 range, this was considered a very impressive powerplant. However, the Ruxton was neither fast nor a lively performer because of its 4000-pound curb weight. There was also a lot of lost motion in the three-speed non-synchromesh transmission, mounted ahead of the engine and the double U-jointed driving shafts. The closest thing to a constant-velocity U-joint was what was called a double trunnion, and Ruxton used one on each end of the I-beam front axle in addition to one on each side of the transmission.

The body design, which was more than a foot lower than other contemporary cars, was so low that running boards were unnecessary. Most cars of this period had little front and rear overhang, mainly because the rear luggage compartment was not part of the body. The Ruxton had a 130-inch wheelbase and a tubular rear axle suspended on semi-elliptical springs, similar to a box trailer.

The transmission drove the wheels through heavy, silent worm gears, and the U-joints were sealed, with the entire mechanism beautifully covered by well designed sheet metal. The illusion of hood length was enhanced by side-mounted tires and wheels, which appeared on every car built.

From a collector's standpoint, it is one of the most desirable cars to acquire. From a practical standpoint, we are just as well off without the Ruxton. It took a he-man to manhandle the steering wheel and an expert to maintain and service the front end. Both the design and the lavish paint schemes were designed to attract monied buyers, but while the car was an immediate hit at auto shows, purchasers still preferred the Duesenberg, Lincoln, Packard and Cadillac. The car was a hit in Great Britain, but the manufacturers found to their horror that the British too had a full-fledged depression. /MT

