

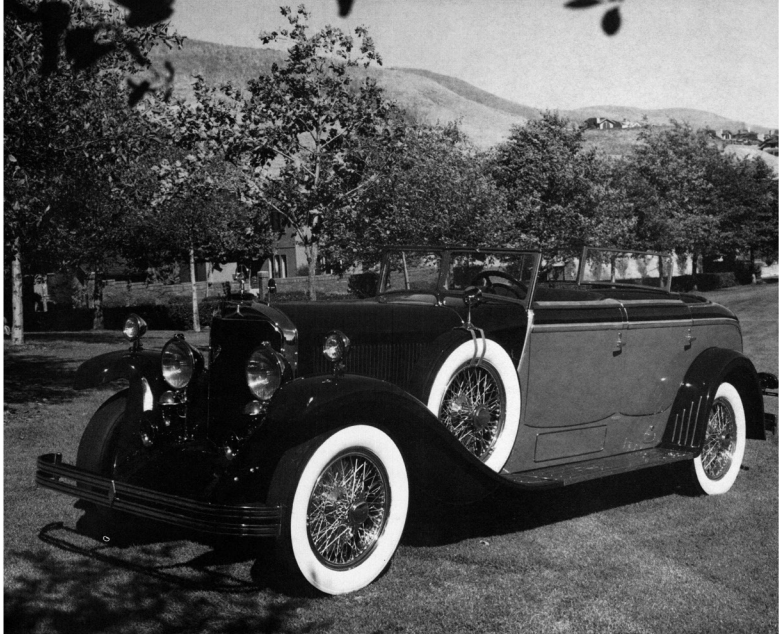
M E R C E D E S B E N Z



Three-pointed star from Gary Gallup's '27 Type K Sport Cabriolet—photo by Dennis Adler

In Germany, in workshops just sixty miles apart, two inventors worked feverishly on the same idea at the same time. In early 1886 Carl Benz patented the three-wheeler he had completed a few months before. Later that year, Gottlieb Daimler tested the four-wheeler of his design.

These were the first successful gasoline automobiles the world had ever seen. The two men were profoundly different. Daimler was a visionary; gripped with the universality of his engine, he was forever experimenting. Carl Benz's vision was solidly focused on his vehicle, and at the turn of the century, he was the world's largest automobile manufacturer. By then Daimler was dead at the age of sixty-six. A few years later, at the age of sixty, Benz became little more than an adviser in his company, and his advice wasn't asked much. Rather like Henry Ford a generation later, he had thought his simple little car could be built forever. His retirement was effectively forced when his board of directors began producing more progressive versions. The rival companies, famous the world over, prospered awhile. The Daimler-Motoren-Gesellschaft model engineered by Gottlieb Daimler's long-time associate Wilhelm Maybach and named for the daughter of dealer Emil Jelinek who ordered it, had taken the world by storm. In concept, the Mercedes was the first modern automobile. It won races everywhere. DMG soon adopted the name and, in 1909, added the three-pointed star hood ornament (to memorialize Gottlieb Daimler's pioneering of motorization on land, on sea and in the air). In 1911 the gargantuan 1312-cubic-inch Blitzen Benz stormed the sands at Daytona at 141+ mph, a world speed record not to be broken until after the First World War. But by then Daimler and Benz were only famous. Prosperity was gone. In the chaos of postwar Germany, the two rival companies, with some initial reluctance, concluded that merger was the only way to stay alive. . . .



1926 Mercedes-Benz Type K Convertible Sedan, Saoutchik
Owner: Blackhawk Classic Auto Collection, Danville, California

On June 28th, 1926 Daimler-Motoren-Gesellschaft and Benz & Cie. became Daimler-Benz AG. The managing director of the new firm was Wilhelm Kissel, the Benz man whose quiet diplomacy made the difficult transition easier. Making the new cars of the new company memorable was a DMG man, former Austro-Daimler engineer Ferdinand Porsche who had joined the Stuttgart factory in 1923. Porsche brought with him colleague Alfred Neubauer, a man of epic proportion who would find that he was better at managing a race team than being a race driver. Motor sport, long a tradition for both firms, was now pursued with increasing fervor. Rudi Caracciola was the Mercedes-Benz racing star. In 1926 he was winning races with the new Type K.

Derived from the 24/100/140 (triple-barreled designations were a company practice which will not be followed here in the interest of readability), the K was powered by a single-overhead-cam six-cylinder engine of 6240 cc (381 cubic inches). The alphabetical letter represented *kurz* (or short, for the 134-inch wheelbase, over a foot less lengthy than its predecessor) but it could also have appropriately translated to *kompressor*. Unsupercharged, the K developed 110 hp; with Roots-Geblase blower engaged, the hp figure shot up to 160. The flexible exhaust pipes boldly jutting from the right side of the hood were a Mercedes feature subsequently adopted by a number of other factories building supercharged cars, Duesenberg among them.

The K chassis was heavy in both weight and price—3,417 pounds and \$11,000. But with a factory-guaranteed 90 mph, the car could be honestly advertised as the fastest standard touring model in the world. It could go. Stopping was another matter. In one road test, 145 feet were required before the K came to a halt from 40 mph.

Still, the sporting thrill of the K appealed to well over 200 buyers during the five years of its production. In addition to factory-bodied versions, the K was dressed by the *cieme* of European coach-builders. Jacques Saoutchik, the Russian-born cabinetmaker who had established his carrosserie in Paris in 1906, created the Type K Convertible Sedan in the Blackhawk Classic Auto Collection.



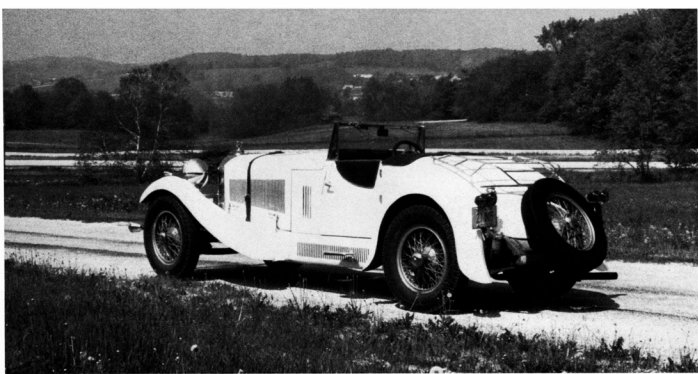
1927 Mercedes-Benz Type K Sport Cabriolet, Hibbard & Darrin
Owner: Gary C. Gallup of Santa Barbara, California Photos: Dave Gooley

And those Americans in Paris—Tom Hibbard and Howard Darrin—were responsible for Gary Gallup's Type K Sport Cabriolet: "We were able to talk with both Mr. Hibbard and Mr. Darrin about

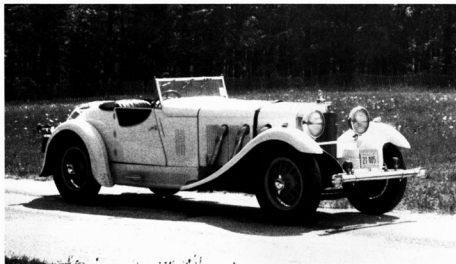
this car before their deaths. Dutch Darrin thought they made only three of these bodies for Mercedes-Benz. One was sold to the King of Sweden. This one was originally sold in New York to an opera star (name so far

unknown). I've owned the Type K for thirteen years. It's a very fast car. Admittedly, it is also something of a handful to drive. The brakes are inadequate which makes for a real fun challenge."





1927 Mercedes-Benz Type SS Convertible Coupe, Corsica
Owner: Paul Dauer of Chicago, Illinois

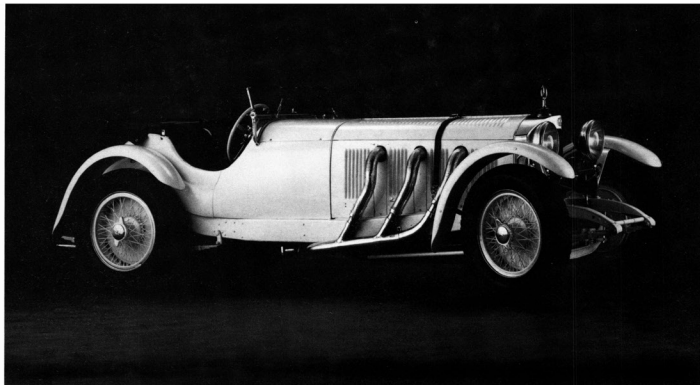


1927 Mercedes-Benz Type S Roadster
Owner: Edward H. Wachs of Long Grove, Illinois



Introduced in 1927, the 6.8-liter (415-cubic-inch) Type S was lower (by several inches), lighter (by over 500 pounds) and more powerful (180 hp) than the K. "The acme of motor car perfection," the U.S. distributor's catalogue read, "the car of cars for the great sport." In 1927 the S won twenty-seven races and captured ten speed records. A few less than 150 sportsmen would buy one, among them the first (and unknown) owner of Edward Wachs' car: "With its factory roadster body, my S is similar to the one driven so successfully by Rudi Caracciola. In the thirty years I've owned it, I've raced the car too in vintage events and hill climbs. And without stopping problems. The inadequacy of the K's brakes was a matter Ferdinand Porsche remedied in the S.

In 1928 the SS, or Super Sport—with 7.1 liters and 200 (later 225) supercharged horsepower—followed, and found about 111 buyers. Among other modifications was a slightly higher radiator which was much appreciated by coach-builders who had found it difficult to design graceful and commodious bodies on the S with its hood line barely clearing the engine. Corsica of London created the coachwork for the SS which Paul Dauer has owned since 1971: "The chassis was shipped to England in 1930. Reportedly, Corsica bodied only seven S series Mercedes. In a sense, this series represented the last of the big-bore, long-stroke, slow-revving Mercedes engines. In the SS, handling was improved via an undersprung rear axle."



1929 Mercedes-Benz Type SSK Roadster

Owner: Miles C. Collier of Naples, Florida

“K” designated *kurz* again in a chassis shortened a foot-and-a-half to 116.1 inches. The radiator was from the S, the engine from the SS. The aptly-named “elephant blower” was the SSK’s own. In competition form, the engine developed over 300 hp. In competition, the car was indomitable. It had been developed by Ferdinand Porsche at the behest of his friend Alfred Neubauer. The S and SS won races routinely whenever the road was straight, a limitation that had distressed Mercedes’ race manager. A less wieldy car for hill climbs was his

desire—and he got it. The sound of the SSK—a Valkyrie’s cry to some ears, a banshee’s scream to others—became a metaphor for victory. With the SSK, all hills belonged to Rudi Caracciola.

Just thirty-one SSK’s were produced in three years. Miles Collier’s car was built for English sportswoman Dorothy Paget, sponsor of the Blower Bentley team.

Among the last SSK’s produced, Bob Bahre’s car was raced by Baron Michl Tüssling on behalf of the factory during those years of

galloping inflation in Germany when Daimler-Benz could no longer afford an official race team.

Reluctantly, Wilhelm Kissel had discontinued competition after 1931 and the triumphal year of the SSK’s successor—the *leicht*, or light, SSKL. Of the handful built, strictly for competition, none survives. Gone by now, too, was the brilliant and tempestuous Ferdinand Porsche, his departure as cacophonous as the towering cars he had created for Mercedes. The automotive world would hear of him again, of course.

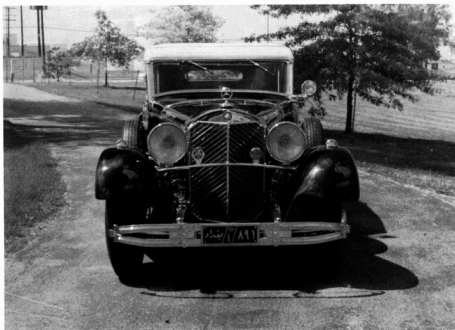
1931 Mercedes-Benz Type SSK Roadster

Owner: Bob Bahre of Oxford, Maine





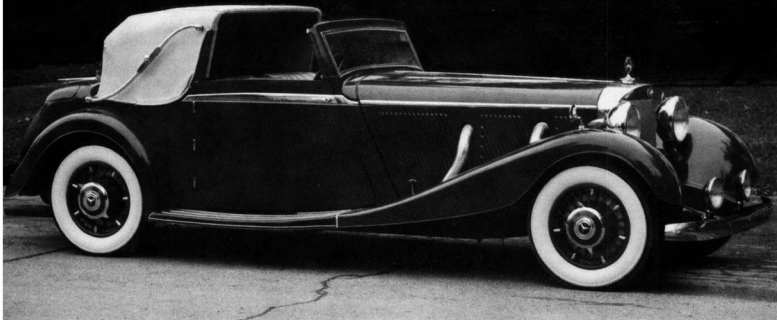
1930 Mercedes-Benz Type 770 "Grosser" Cabriolet Limousine, Voll & Ruhrbeck
 Owner: Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame Museum



According to the sales literature, the model was designed for those "who always view a maximum achievement as just sufficient for their needs." A massive 7.7-liter supercharged pushrod straight-eight engine developing 150 hp was required to keep this tremendous three-ton-plus car moving on the road. The "Grosser" was well named. Performance wasn't the aim. Like the low-production S series which carried Mercedes colors in the sporting arena, the Type 770 was carefully targeted for the ultra prestige market. Just 117 examples of the first series (1930-1937) Grosser were built, many of them destined for heads of state.

Faisal I, King of Iraq, was the first owner of the Indy Museum Cabriolet Limousine. The multi-position top permitted use of the car in a variety of configurations: full touring, cabriolet, town car, limousine or sedan. Following Faisal's death, the car passed to his successor, King Ghazi I. The Crown Prince, Faisal II, was a child when King Ghazi died in 1938, this car of state subsequently being stored until Faisal II took power in 1954. Completely overhauled at the Daimler-Benz factory in 1957, it was used only twice before Faisal II's death in 1958. Ten years later Tony Hulman imported the car for the Hall of Fame Museum.

The head of state most often identified with the 770 Mercedes today, of course, is Adolph Hitler—though the number of his Grossers has been as exaggerated as the number of places George Washington slept.



1935 Mercedes-Benz Type 500K Sedanca Drophead, Corsica

Owner: Larry Nicklin of Leo, Indiana Photo: Nicky Wright

The coming to power of Adolph Hitler produced dramatic changes at Daimler-Benz. Neither the sporting nor prestige cars had ever filled the treasury significantly; the bread-and-butter models accomplished that. The low-production Mercedes did enhance the renown of the three-pointed star but in the threadbare years of the early thirties such cars were a luxury for the company as well. With the economic turnaround which followed the establishment of the Third Reich, the Stuttgart factory flourished once more. A racing program was launched the likes of which the world had never seen. Soon the only competition a Mercedes had was Auto Union, another German company which enjoyed state blessing. Little did these factories know how double-edged was the supportive sword which *Der Führer* had offered them.

For the moment, Alfred Neubauer revelled in a competition team that was a virtual armada. And Porsche successor Hans Nibel and crew enjoyed engineering development unencumbered by stringent budgeting which produced the world's first diesel production car and the world's first production use of independent front suspension in the Type 380.

Introduced at the Berlin Automobile Show in 1934, the 500K was the 380's successor and the spiritual descendant of the fabled S series. Lighter by half a ton than the 3.8-liter 120 hp Type 380, and with forty more horses, the 500K was priced in the \$5,000 range, which bought two cars: a fast, docile tourer with supercharger disengaged and a stupendous

performer when the blower was cut in. Zero to sixty in 16.5 seconds was amazing acceleration for such a big car in the mid-thirties.

The 500K Cabriolet C which Paul Dauer has owned since 1965 represents one of several standardized bodies built by Daimler-Benz's in-house coachbuilding operation at Sindelfingen: "The four-wheel independent suspension utilizing coil springs was remarkable, but the pushrod straight-eight engine was not progressive, given the overhead camshaft of the earlier S series. And, although lighter than the 380, the 500K was undeniably weighty at 5,000 pounds."

But it was also undeniably beautiful, most especially in some coachbuilt examples. Witness Larry

Nicklin's Corsica-bodied Sedanca which he has owned for fifteen years: "Certain styling features on the 500K-540K series are universally accepted yet this one-off, to me, is like a special song. The car got to me emotionally, humbling any experience I myself may have had in the business of car styling. It still does. This was Corsica's only effort on a Mercedes chassis of the thirties; one-of-a-kind cars on a variety of chassis was this London coachmaker's stock in trade. Sir Max Aitken commissioned Corsica to build the car in February 1935. Subsequently, it was used, fittingly, by the German embassy in London, but during World War II the car was shipped to Chicago. I am its seventh owner."

1935 Mercedes-Benz Type 500K Cabriolet C

Owner: Paul Dauer of Chicago, Illinois





1937 Mercedes-Benz Type 540K Special Roadster
Owner: Noel Thompson of New Vernon, New Jersey

Total Type 500K production was 354 cars; just over 400 Type 540K's would be produced. With a displacement increase contributing to the 180 hp on tap, a maximum speed of well over 100 mph and the ability to cruise an autobahn indefinitely at 85, the 540K was advertised as the world's fastest standard production automobile. There were few arguments. Massive, solid and overengineered in the Mercedes tradition, this new car

was most memorable for its styling. With sensuous curves and bold lines, the Mercedes design team produced a 540K that was sporting as well as elegant, flashy without being gaudy. Not easy to do.

The Special Roadster exemplified Sindelfingen's jaunty flair. Noel Thompson's car, which he has owned since 1987, was originally purchased by Sir John Chabb of England. The purchase price was

28,000 reichsmarks, more than \$12,000.

The King of Afghanistan was the original owner of Bob Bahre's Special Roadster; Mohammed Zahir Shah was just twenty-three when it was delivered to him in Kabul. At the outbreak of World War II, the car was shipped to the Afghanistan embassy in Paris. It was brought to this country by Vernon Jarvis in the early fifties. Special Roadsters are rare; this one is rarer yet with its covered spare tire and low fin, only three such cars being so designed.

"Aside from being fun to drive, it is also a work of art," comments Alfred Hassinger of the 540K Saloon he has owned for over two decades. "When I first became interested in Classics, I wanted an open car but when I saw this rare body style with right-hand drive, thoughts of convertibles soon left me. The car was originally purchased by Heinrich Behrens, a German who was living in Paris at the time. It was hidden for most of the war. When I purchased the car from Mr. Behrens' niece, it had the carburetor he had hand-made for it. The original had been taken off to forestall use of the car during its time in hiding, and had

1937 Mercedes-Benz Type 540K Special Roadster

Owner: Bob Bahre of Oxford, Maine



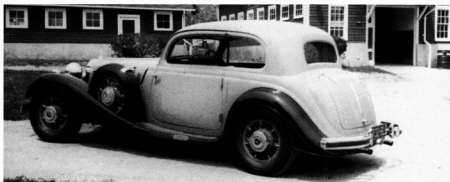


1937 Mercedes-Benz Type 540K Saloon

Owner: Alfred Hassinger of Rumson, New Jersey

been misplaced. The Behrens' carburetor worked fine for me, except when using the supercharger, until I was able to acquire the correct one. Except for paint, tires and chrome plating, the car remains original."

For over three-and-a-half decades the 540K Vanden Plas (as the Belgian coachbuilder spelled its British branch) Convertible Victoria has been in the garage of Andrew D. Darling: "I purchased this car from Randolph Hearst of the newspaper publishing



1938 Mercedes-Benz Type 540K Convertible Victoria, Vanden Plas

Owner: Andrew D. Darling of Edina, Minnesota





1939 Mercedes-Benz Type 540K Cabriolet B

Owner: William Lyon of Trabuco Canyon, California

family. Although the body is English, it's a left-hand drive. The convertible top recesses level into its well and the spare tire is recessed into the body, making very smooth flowing lines. This is a very exciting car to drive and, with the supercharger

engaged, howls like a German Messerschmitt diving from the clouds. I'm also proud of the fact that it starts and runs with the original fuel pump and oil pressure system. No electric pump is necessary on this car."

The panache of Sindelfingen stylists is deftly seen in the Cabriolet owned by William Lyon and the Coupe owned by William R. Patton, the latter car having originally been purchased by Frau Ida Herzberg of Essen, Germany.

1939 Mercedes-Benz Type 540K Coupe

Owner: William R. Patton of Irvine, California





1939 Mercedes-Benz Type 540K Saloon, Freestone & Webb

Owner: Clive Cussler of Golden, Colorado

Freestone and Webb produced the saloon coachwork for the 540K that Clive Cussler has owned for over a decade: "It's the only known example of British razor-edge styling on this Mercedes chassis, and one of only two known to exist with a sedan body. As for the 540K, it speaks for itself."

And so it did. But for little longer. Just sixty-nine 540K's left the Stuttgart factory in 1939. On September 1st, Hitler ordered his army into Poland. The Classic Era was over for Daimler-Benz. *Der Führer* had other plans for the company.

