



1924 Kissel Model 6-55 Speedster: All the Buzz

By JAN TEGLER on 11/29/2010

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"Bugsby" stood out like a bright yellow insect on the greens at the 2010 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance--fitting, given the handle acquired by the most popular model the Wisconsin-based Kissel Motor Car Co. ever made.

Most commonly produced in "Kissel Chrome Yellow," the Speedster's flamboyant shade inspired readers of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel to nickname it the "Gold Bug."

JAN TEGLER
The 1924 Kissel Model 6-55 Speedster was most commonly produced in "Kissel Chrome Yellow."

Founded by German immigrant Louis P. Kissel in Hartford, Wis., in 1906, the brand was known for the advanced design and quality of its upmarket

"Kissel Kars." Four-, six- and "double-six-" (V12) cylinder models issued by the company through the 1920s had innovations such as electric starters and backlit instrumentation.

The 6-55 Speedster was the second iteration of the model. Introduced at the 1918 New York auto show, the sporty convertible was created at the urging of New York-based Kissel distributor Conover T. Silver, who pushed the company for a "glamorous" car to rival the Stutz Bearcat and the Mercer Raceabout.

Designed by William L. Kissel and company stylist J. Frederick Werner, the car debuted as the "Silver Special Speedster" (a nod to Silver) but was redesignated the Model 6-45 in 1920. The original 265-cubic-inch straight-six powering the 6-45 produced about 60 hp. A nonsynchronized Warner three-speed transmission along with a semi-elliptical front/three-quarter elliptic rear suspension and contracting-band rear-wheel brakes completed the package.

Unique to the 6-45 Gold Bug were two extra seats which extended from the Speedster's body just above the integral running boards. These frightening perches were deleted when the Model 6-55 appeared, replaced by fittings for golf bags. The 6-55 was updated with a shortened stroke for the straight-six, yielding 61 hp.

Bugsby was built in Hartford as a right-hand-drive Speedster for export to Australia, one of only 12 RHD models. The car spent its life there, used as an industrialist's runabout and, later, as a farm vehicle.

Lynn Kissel of Livermore, Calif., who is a distant relative of the manufacturer, purchased the car in 2005 and brought it back to the United States for an extensive refreshing.

Now fully correct and wearing its dazzling original paint scheme, Bugsby is one of only a handful of Kissels ever to be invited to Pebble Beach.

"It was a thrill just to be invited," says Lynn Kissel.

The stylish roadster rides smoothly on its leaf springs, accelerating leisurely to a comfortable 50-mph cruise. Braking requires advanced preparation.

The tight cockpit encourages togetherness, but those inside feel like celebrities in the attention-getting Speedster. Perhaps that's why stars of the era including Al Jolson, Amelia Earhart and Greta Garbo owned

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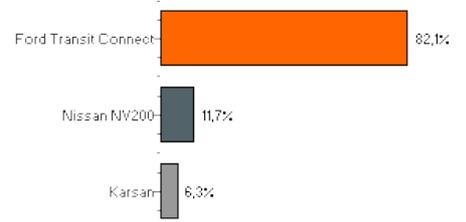
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Produced only through 1927, just 38 Gold Bugs remain today.

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