1963 300SL Roadster

by Frank Spellman, Greater Washington Section, and Frank Barrett, Editor/Publisher

If clothes make the man, do options make the car?
Frank Spellman's fascination with the 500SL began in 1957, when he picked up a few pieces of factory sales literature at Bowman Motors in Washington, D.C. Since he was a mere six years old at the time, the salesmen can't have taken him for much of a sales prospect, but they were rather short-sighted. Frank's desire to own one of the legendary sports cars inspired him to get a good education, and he became a doctor. Since then he has acquired not only an unusually original 500SL Roadster but an excellent cross-section of Mercedes-Benz factory options and accessories to go with it. All the baggage, so to speak.

**Luggage Cuts**

South Pacific cargo cults probably hear no relation to the luggage cult among 1950s Mercedes-Benz owners, but we're not absolutely sure of that. To many such enthusiasts, the factory-option fitted luggage—made by Karl Biesch or Hepp—is something akin to the Holy Grail. And it's gotta be original, none of that repro stuff!

So if you have the original fitted luggage—complete with the original stickers from the ocean liner that carried it and original owners books from original Europe—where do you go from there? How about an original factory luggage rack with original factory ski clamps? Only one is known to exist, and it graces the back of Frank's Roadster. (Spouses may scoff at such automotive fanaticism, but may we gently remind them of their own current cravings for zesty-styled kitchen appliances? Na, is that an original Sunbeam Mixmaster where you are, or is it a reproduction?)

**Ephemera**

Once you've begun collecting sales brochures, as Frank did, you'll eventually find the one in which DBMG's copywriter extols, "with its impressive performance, the 500SL is the nattiest and swiftest German production car, which in its new roadster version, not only had success in sporting competitions but is also one of the smartest and obedient business cars...with the soul of celebrated racing sports cars." That reference to a 500SL being an obedient business car was perhaps a subtle reminder to potential buyers that a 500SL could be bought and maintained by their businesses, though perhaps to impress clients rather than deliver donuts or grail.

Studebaker-Packard's copywriter had his heart in the right place but forgot one detail when he wrote, "The modern outlook of this beauty of a car is still further enhanced by that new style feature, the 'light unit' in which the main headlight, fog lights, the low beams, the parking light, and the turn signal are all combined." Mas, these sleek Euro-continental units were unavailable on U.S.-delivered vehicles.

Apart from the obligatory factory press releases, sales literature, shop manuals, and other essentials of ephemera, owning an original Mercedes-Benz gives you a license to acquire more than your minimum yearly requirement of old magazines, books, and newspapers—any publication containing even the most remote mention of your car.

**"Mel's weakest rating of the 500SL fell in the area of resale value."**

For instance, every 500SL Roadster owner should understand deep down that they really do need a copy of the October 1956 issue of Galler's magazine. Why? It includes a photo essay by David Douglas Duncan on the 500SL of course. Late 1950s back issues of GQ's Sports Car display not only black and white action photos but race results from the Paul O'Shea racing factory effort. There's an ancient Playboy issue with 500SL photos, too. Of course, the 500SL guys all say they want it only for that article.

Another example, a 1953 review by Road and Past automotive editor Mel Stir- man, was quoted in the early 1960s by Team-mell Motor Corp. in Fort Lauderdale, Florida to help sell Roadsters: "If you've got the price of admission, the latest and most potent version of the Mercedes-Benz 500SL is a worthy possession. It should give thousands of miles of driving pleasure [and] win some gold for your trophy case if you like racing and polishing." The pipe-smoking Mel's weakest rating of the 500SL fell in the area of resale value, which seems odd today. After all, more than a few owners have sold their cars for several hundred thousand dollars beyond their original price. So much for Mel's credibility.

**Late Originals**

Of course, it all comes back to the car itself, and for some one who appreciates the old adage, "a car is only original once." After searching 10 years for an unrestored late Roadster with disc brakes, he found one of the last to be made and sold, which is no happened to be one of the best original cars left.

The last 26 500SL Roadsters were built in January and February 1963, the final coup, chassis number 2339, being completed on February 8th. That spring, SMCA member Bill Stanley was the award-winning sales manager of Piedmont Motors in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Given the opportunity to order the last six new Roadsters in the U.S. at $5,250 each, he jumped at it.

Bill's subsequent classified ads in The Star advertised what had become just old, expensive inventory to Studebaker-Packard, which was then—apart from trying to stay aloof—concentrating on selling the all-new 350SL. Bill had to hold onto both of the Roadsters for quite a while—his last ad appeared in our January/February 1965 issue—but his efforts eventually paid off. The half-dozen new Roadsters sold to actor Robert Horton, three doctors, a Dodge dealer, and a construction company president. The last paid $15,000 for his car in early 1965, almost assuring it made both the last new 500SL to leave a U.S. dealership and the most expensive. Yes, that is a lot of money, but the guy was smart. What would a new Roadster sell for today?

Bill painfully recalls, "Mercedes-Benz sort of turned its back on the 500SL when the 500SL came out. The 500SL was distressed merchandise to them. Can you believe that? The 500SL was so much more car in every way. [It] had more romance than any other car I ever sold!"

**The White Dove**

Frank's Roadster, number 2574, was one of five built during that final wave of production, but thanks in a special lady, it didn't come to the U.S. with those other cars. First, it lingered at the factory until summer, when Mercedes Pollack and her husband were visiting Andorra. Having
Luggage from the European "Grand Touring" era, loaded on the exterior rack, thought to be the only complete example of this 300SL restoration in Norway during the 1950s.
heard that the 305SL was going out of production. Mrs. Pollack called the factory and arranged to buy this Roadster. She flew to Stuttgart and bought the car for a clearance price, $8,500 (U.S. list price was about $11,000). On August 15th, 1981, her driver piloted the European-specified car and Mrs. Pollack to Geneva, where she and her husband, Max, had a house.

Like many 308SL buyers, Mrs. Pollack was a Someone Special. The Pollacks had been in the tobacco business in Cuba, but when the Batista regime fell to Castro's rebels in 1959—and Frank Spellman was still dreaming of owning a 308SL—they fled to the U.S., buying, behind not only their lucrative business but a 45-acre estate and a car collection including two other 308SAs, a Bugatti, and three Ferraris, among others. Caught unawares by the force of the news that he took off and lives there to this day.

In October 1981 the Pollacks returned their Roadster, which they called La Pahuna Illiana (The White Door) to the factory, to have a few options fitted. After staying at the Hotel Roessgen while this was accomplished, they toured Europe in the car they returned with it to New York via ocean liner the following February. They drove the car home to their estate in Tivoli, North Carolina and used it regularly. By the late 1960s, though, Mr. Pollack's enthusiasm had deteriorated, so the Roadster went into storage until 1977, when it was sold to Joe Hallsworth of Connecticut. Mr. Hallsworth, she and her husband had a battle for the machine and history; and for 20 years they preserved the car well, adding only about 2,000 miles.

**Dream Come True**

In 1997, after learning that this old-original Roadster was available, and knowing how difficult it was to find such an original example, Frank went to see it. "The paint, chrome, and interior were virtually flawless, and it drove like a dream. Although the original hoses and clamps looked a little scary, none of them leaked." He bought it within an hour. The next weekend, with the car in his suburban Maryland garage, he scored out all of its pedigree papers. Among these was its original bill of sale, original senior Roadster, original factory build card, and original warranty plus letters from the original owner and service records.

According to Frank, "I wanted to make the car with a collection of original factory options I had accumulated. I prefer the European-spec 305SL, with European headlamps, amber taillights, the steering column horn switch and headlight flasher, and European instruments. The 5.64:1 rear axle ratio would allow somewhat lower rpm at highway speeds than the normal U.S. ratio of 3.89:1. I didn't like the U.S.-standard rear bumper reflectors, either."

The European-specified car originally had the glass-covered European headlamps, but because it was bound for the U.S., it was fitted with U.S. sealed-beam units later, probably on its factory visit in October 1981. The factory also moved the rear view mirrors from the fenders to the doors to accommodate Mr. Pollack’s eyesight and make it easier to see around the luggage rack. Today the original European headlamps—stored for years—are back in place, and the mirrors are in their original location.

Because it was originally intended as a European model, the car also has the unusual Alfred Rütche seat belts, not fitted to U.S. models. The Becker Grand Prix radio is a more compact and expensive version of the Becker Mexico radio and became available in 1962; a Beins Shortwave adapter is also fitted. The badges represent the clubs and rallies that the Pollacks enjoyed. Frank, the original owner of the car, fell victim to age and wear. After 27,000 km (about 17,000 miles) the original Continental Super Record whitewall tires needed replacement, and since they were no longer available at the time, blackwall Michelin X radials took their place.

Another deviation from original condition was definitely unplanned. In 1999 the car was rear-ended. The necessary repairs—which involved fresh paint and essentially a new top—were entrusted to Paul Russell and Company, who fixed says, "touched the fine line between restoration and presentation of this-still-original car."

Last fall, Frank drove the Roadster to Asheville, North Carolina for the national
convention of The Gull Wing Group. On the trip, he stopped in Tyron, South Carolina to visit its original owner, Mercedes Pollack, who still lives there. She later told Frank that the car "has always been maintained like a trophy, so please keep her that way. Take good care of one of my babies."

Mercedes is right. When it comes to great old cars, we’re all just custodians.

Above: If you liked, Dehler-Benz would ship your new 300SL to America by air.
Left: Since someday, original drum-brake 300SL Roadsters may be rare and valuable!

Current photography by Dennis Adler, Senior Contributing Editor