

The Porsche Rambler... er, Eagle by Joe Holzer

In the March Redline, John (the editor) decided to regale us with his pontification on the obvious; Porsches are Porsches. But that does not really address the issues which lead many to suggest that one or another model is more “pure” than any other. As usual, I have an opinion. But before I express that, I’d like to indicate a complete sympathy for John’s interpretation of the historical facts he used to justify his positions vis a vis the developments at Porsche, and I certainly agree with his feelings about the general masses who might have time to swap barbs on a chat room; they almost certainly have no real evidence to support their respective positions; they merely HAVE them. I look on them as the ignorant masses, and do not attempt to enlighten them. You, dear readers, are at least a somewhat different stock. You at least have put something more than your saliva where your mouths are.

The thing is, I believe there are a wide variety of interpretations which can be drawn depending on what evidence we choose to deny, more than to acknowledge. For example, the supposed good Doktor Professor John mentioned was undoubtedly an excellent engineer. There is as well plenty of evidence he was a bigot. But HE had only a single automobile which HE directly affected which ever bore HIS name, and it was an ELECTRIC hybrid; the Lohner - Porsche, which had far more in common with a diesel locomotive than with any current model which bears his name, and which we revere. His design firm developed the Volkswagon in a competition not at all unlike that we would expect between Lockheed Martin and McDonald Douglas. Remember that the LOSERS never get to write the history. But to suggest that he intended his legacy to be the VW denies a huge load of alternative interpretations, each as legitimate as that one. I think he intended nothing more than “I was a good engineer who solved a number of problems I got very wealthy from, and would have been even happier if the French hadn’t arrested me for the simple fact I made better weapons than they”. Pretty much the legacy for most engineers, myself included, in the same circumstances. But the fact remains; the VW never came to fruition under HIS tuteledge. It was his son. And THAT is a telling point.

It was never the Sr. who made the Porsche we adore; it was his son, with the support of his sister. And Ferry, the son, was so magnanimous as to give far too much credit to his father for something the old man never did. He never had more than an advisory role to other industrialists - a consultant - while his son Ferry actually made a plant from ruins and kept together a bunch of capable people, and developed a PRODUCT for which someone would provide hard currency. And he followed a vision his father had actually shared; to take the mundane and make it extraordinary. It was both pragmatic awareness that they had no resources to start with a clean sheet, and an ability to look and see potential in the lowly VW, which led to the birth of the 356. If you look closely at the lines for each, you can see the lineage continuation as the A, B & C evolved, and further to the new 901, which later was named the 911. In an act of inspired nepotism, Ferry allowed his son Ferdinand III (nicknamed Butsi, but I’ll call him F3, which seems more formal) to handle design work on the 901/911. But F3 was no mere relative; he had paid his dues in design work and understood his father’s objectives for the 911; to achieve a more powerful, more neutral performance car, with greater range and better braking, which could hold four people in a 2+2 configuration, and a set of golf clubs. The 901 met all those criterion. It was no more nor less than an engineering solution to a set of engineering problems. No different than the 356. And, frankly, no different from any other vehicle ever, which was much of John’s point.

But to understand the “legend”, which is why there is this religious love for the anachronistic designs, one must understand that Ferry loved to race, and look at their contemporaries as they were introduced. Flathead Fords and boxy post war domestic cars were simply no match on the track with anything the Europeans could provide. But the Europeans had this tendency to require a guy named Guido or Nigel Carruthers to ride right seat with a spanner handy to keep the stupid thing running. Meanwhile, an off-the-shelf Porsche would drone on to win index of performance; a measure of its relative placement factoring its power. It was no secret that Ferry never bothered to drag race the cars; they were underpowered relative their competition. But they were bulletproof reliable. And THAT was no different than the reliability we take for granted today. But back then, it was far from commonplace, and it led to a reverence for the machinery, in spite of its weirdness. That was followed by the 70’s during which time the outright WINNERS of Daytona, LeMans and Sebring even LOOKED almost exactly like the car you could buy on Monday, and it takes little to appreciate why it was that the Nissan 300ZX was NEVER the success that even its forebears were. It was simply expected to be what it ever was.

Now consider the 928. A technical masterpiece, but a reliability nightmare. It had so much complication which had no seeming reason to be there except to say it was complicated. John’s point that the 911 was kept alive on support was not untrue, but not because of the hoary nature; the vast percentage of people who own them will NEVER get near the point of spinning their 911. They were kept alive because all the other products at Porsche were always the result of some glitch in the planning process. The 944 was simply the next generation of the 924, which was supposed to be a WV made by Audi, and it was viewed in perpetuity with a contempt which should have been reserved for only its original 77-79 brethren. The 914 was supposed to have a Porsche Crest only with a six, and otherwise a VW, but VW decided to exploit the “status” in the market, and wound up alienating a lot of people who never took the time to even meet the car. The 928 was a failure as much because it was stated by an engineer, Ernst Fuhrmann, that the 928 would replace the 911, long before the 928 was capable of filling its shoes. And its mass made it a poor substitute in the marketplace. So the 911 HAD to be kept on life support, or Porsche would die, and the 74-77 911 is proof of the “second thought” reality.

Absent such a minute analysis, it looks like the marketplace somehow “loves” the 911 and hates its brothers. But look at the volumes and you see a different story. The 944 volume provided all the cash to develop the 993 and the Boxster, while unit sales of the 911 remained pretty much flat throughout. So what does that tell us? That the STATUS of the Porsche Crest was sold, rather than the fabulous performance, at a bargain basement price. And we know how fickle price shoppers are. Ergo... Those of us who “love” the 911 generally have some model which is not a basic coupe, but is more unique; the Targa, the 930, the “Speedster (gag)”. Excepting the late, and grossly overpriced, 968 Cabrio, there is very little even in appearance to separate one from another. And again I emphasize status as a basis for these cars..

No, I believe Porsche has merely been fortunate at some specific points to have a few crazy people in some specific positions who had a vision no finance manager would ever support. I doubt seriously that Dr. Wiedeking would be so successful were he to assume the reins in 1987, for example, and I predict he will be short lived as the Boxster sales drop off following the initial flurry of idiocy, unless he can find another visionary and let that person be a little crazy. John is right about German tenacity, but more so about Porsche luck. Some have benefitted, and some have been sacrificed on its altar. And a few have been the recipients of both. For me; I’m not very confident. I see too many Doktors and too few Ferris. It has never been strictly the SIMPLEST solution. It has always been the BEST solution which wins. The 911 never competed in Firehawk; the 944 won regularly. And the fans said “so what?”. What made the 911 was the Walter Mitty and Giant Killer image, and those legends die VERY slowly, because we WANT to

believe in their immortality. I think the 911 has survived for that more than any other reason. And I see NONE of that in the Boxster. Sorry.