

REFLECTIONS IN A RIVIERA



Reflections in a Riviera



A very nice addition to our list of “toys” has joined us recently. The story of its acquisition is, I feel, a good one.

We had a 1979 Mercedes 450SLC with a 5.0 liter engine. I had bought it almost on a whim as they are most interesting cars, with only 1470 of these M117 all-aluminum engined cars having been built. It was a low-mileage car, only two owners. A very decent driver but it didn't inspire me.

So I got to thinking, “Why not try to swap it for something more interesting?” I had always liked the look of the 1963 Buick Riviera back from when it came out, when I was nineteen. I can remember reading the road tests in “*Motor*” and “*Autocar*”, the then current English comics and “*Road and Track*” and “*Car and Driver*”, which you could buy in England even in those days.



So I grabbed a *“Hemming’s Motor News”* and started calling owners who were advertising their cars. Took me three calls until a very pleasant sounding man said, “I’ve never had a Mercedes, if you bring yours to me, I’ll swap with you.”

“Very good”, I replied, “Where do you live?”

“In Iowa” he informed me. I looked on the map. Good grief! Fifteen hundred plus miles but you know me, act on impulse and regret it later.

“Okay” I said. “I’ll set off Sunday morning, be with you around Monday lunchtime.”

And I was. The Mercedes proved to be a very good long distance touring car and I covered a thousand miles on the Sunday and then stopped, slept until 4.30 a.m., rose, grabbed a Waffle House breakfast (something I like!) and drove the last five hundred miles on Sunday morning. It was snowing as I drove across Iowa and I was on a mission to get to Mason City, sign the paperwork and be on my way.

As I drove into Ken and Darlene's two-car garage, the Riviera was waiting. One look was enough. Beautiful. By 2.30 p.m., paperwork had been exchanged and I was back on the road in the snow, which by now had turned to rain. Did three hundred miles and called it a day. Bed at nine, up at four thirty, gone by five. Twelve hundred and fifty miles further and I was home at 12.30 a.m. Monday. Wonderful drive—averaged 65 mph and 14.7 mpg.

The Riviera was a joy to drive; those wonderful “clap hands” wipers and that great V8 engine of 6.5 liters. She cruised easily at between an indicated 75-85 mph but I'm sure the speedometer is optimistic. Oh sure, the steering is incredibly light and insensitive but you know what? You get used to that very quickly. I had been warned that the drum brakes were not up to today's driving but they are. I certainly wouldn't want to try and stop the Riviera hard more than once in quick succession from 80 mph but it's well capable of doing it.

The car had stayed with its first owner for thirty years and there is a plaque on the dashboard with her name (Verna Beard) on it. In 1993, she sold it for \$1500 after it had covered just 80,000 miles. The next guy carried on maintaining it very well and replaced anything that needed doing, including having the engine rebuilt. There is a file for each year that the second owner had it, up until he sold it to the third owner in Iowa in 2005. Each year has all the receipts and correspondence, together with a hand written total of expenditure. The man spent over \$32,000 on it. The owner in Iowa only did 3,000 miles in it.

So I'm very privileged. I told Jim Pace, our racing instructor about it, little expecting his reaction, which was: “Ah, the ‘Rivy’! First real car my Dad had was a 1965 with the clamshell headlights. I remember going to the Buick dealer and bringing it home. I was 4 years old and remember every moment like yesterday. Mom, Dad and five kids went all over everywhere in those four bucket seats. Later Dad bought a used 1964 for my sister to take to college. He and I flew to DC, picked it up and drove it home. I was about 14 and drove it most of the 1000 miles home. Love those big Buicks! “

The reaction from folks who see it is nothing short of amazing. This morning, we went to “Foxy's”, our local diner that we frequent at least once a week, and have done for the past seven years. There is one customer who goes there in a 1979 Corvette. He has always studiously ignored us, no matter how many times I've smiled and said “Hello”. This morning, as Su and I were getting into the Riviera, he quite unexpectedly asked: “What year is that?” I nearly fell over in shock. “1963” I managed to answer. “Beautiful car.” he observed and turned back to his breakfast.

I stopped for fuel later on. The twenty-something girl from the next car in line announced: "That is the most beautiful car I've ever seen." "Yes," I responded, "I just got it. I had to drive to Iowa to get it."

"No problem" she replied. "I'd have driven to Iowa to get that!"

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