

AutoCoast Project

In 1968 Ernie Kanzler was building racing boats in Newport Beach, California, and had been enjoying boats, cars, racing and other entertaining hobbies. He made the hobbies look like businesses, and perhaps some of them had a positive income, but I was too far away from them to know the difference.

Richard J. Smith and I were building steam car components and systems for clients and these were at the development and demonstration level. The designs were largely Richard's, I tended the print matter and supply chain, and we both built and finished steam projects interdependently for our clients.

Kanzler decided he wanted to power an old Indy chassis with steam. The chassis had been driven by his racing employee, Skip Hedrich, and it was beefy enough for the grueling 500 mile race and the hard knocks expected there. There was no expectation that under steam it would be competitive against any other racers.

The plan was put together to enlarge the 1000 lb/hr steam generator which had remained after an accident in April 1968 on a cross country trip to demonstrate it in Greensboro, North Carolina. A large feed heater section was coiled up by summer employee Christopher A. Petersen, later to become a noted pediatric psychiatrist, and a new stainless shell made to fit. I built up a fresh 66 cid Kiekhaefer Mercury outboard block conversion. Richard built a rotary valve to his design for the engine. The chassis was heavy but, by removing much of the weight, using narrower harder tires and running the engine direct into the differential, the output would give adequate performance. The engine was not the limiting factor, but the steam supply. At 15 lb/hp-hr and 1500 lb/hr of steam, you had a peak power of 100 HP.

The hardware was completed and Richard put the parts in the chassis while I continued with other projects. I went over during the fitting exercises and discovered that Kanzler and his group decided to put in a quick-change box and add full condensing. That explained in part Richards recent muttering to himself. This effectively turned the already underpowered chassis into a parade vehicle which would spend most of its energy in running blowers to cool the condensate from the exhaust. I was so soundly disappointed in the change of direction that I wrote an agreement and Kanzler incredulously signed it to release me from the project and remove my name from any credits and publicity that would be given.

I took these Ektachrome slides with a half-frame Universal Camera Corp. "Mercury-II" with manual focus f:2.8 lens and focal plane shutter using ambient light, hand held. You can see that Smith was wisely using a tripod to record the technical details on monochrome Polaroid film for further development.

The car was beautifully rebodied with a giant scoop behind the driver for the radiators and fitted with the widest possible sticky tires which would have needed a 400 HP engine to properly warm up. It was then demonstrated at a press conference at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles at which it moved under its own power. I did not attend. The most useful photo from the event is of Skip Hedrich in street clothes in the cockpit wearing sunglasses and displaying his most engaging broad grin.

The steam system was sold to Don Beck who, with his brother John, installed it in a Camaro SS, modifying many things including adding a 4 cylinder Merc conversion auxiliary engine.

Despite the general clatter of the mechanical systems, it became a very serious demonstrator for steam, appearing on the NBC national TV feed. The steam generator remains in the collection of Don Beck in Tennessee.