



The Houston Star

MBCA Houston Section Newsletter



**September
2005**

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The zero mile 300SL

Every so often something truly amazing comes along in the automotive world. In 1954 it was the Mercedes-Benz 300SL, a sports car so strikingly advanced that it became the symbol of Mercedes' postwar renaissance.

Among countless Americans moved by the 300SL's design was Bob Doehler, a senior stylist at Studebaker-Packard, the South Bend, Indiana, automaker that would soon become the American distributor for Mercedes-Benz. Doehler's position ultimately allowed him to do something that no one had ever done before—purchase a 300SL part by part!

Doehler appreciated fine automotive design, but the one he considered perfect and the most beautiful was the 300SL

"Gullwing." Remembered by friends and associates as a perfectionist, almost obsessively so, Doehler felt that a 300SL off the showroom floor wasn't good enough. He wanted a perfect car, and the only way he felt that he would get it was to make it himself.

"The idea developed in his mind that if he could buy all the component parts, then he would be able to translate this idea of perfection into reality, combining what he considered to be his skills as a craftsman, his eye for lines and symmetry, and fit and finish, along with the design of Mercedes-Benz," says restorer Scott Grundfor.

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President's Message

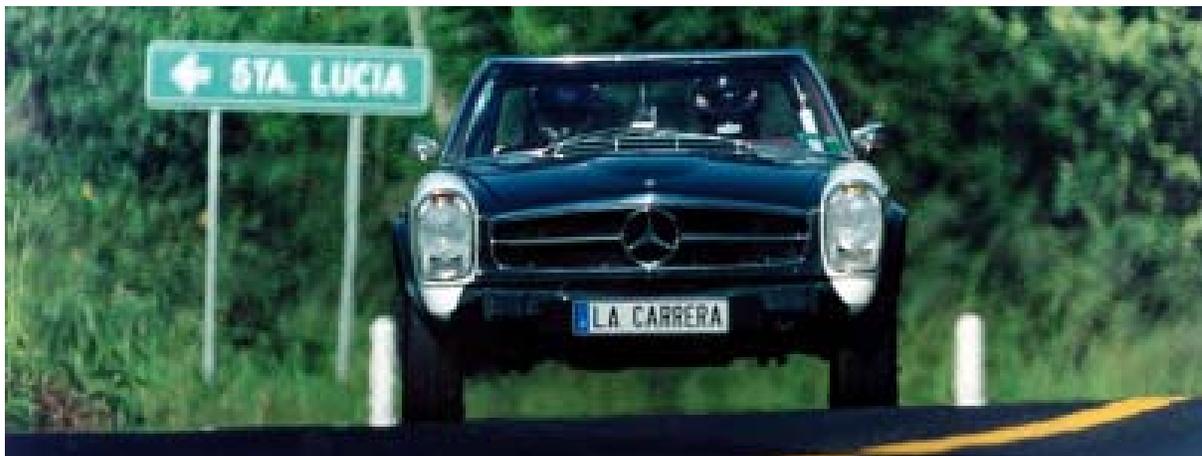
Final President's Message (for me!)

I wrap up my term as President with some fond memories of members and events, but I'm not going far... I'll remain on the board of directors to help out with the transition and planning of future events. I've gotta admit, despite having been on the board for years, becoming president was a challenge... but one I've enjoyed. It's amazing how many members and advertisers you run into everyday.

With our election dinner coming up in a few weeks (details later in this issue), we'll see not only a change in officers, but the addition of some new board members. It's not too late to throw your own hat in the ring either!. Following the election dinner we've got our annual Oktoberfest planned at Texas German Autohaus, Hans & his crew put on a heck of a tech session and the German food and beer add a wonderful theme to whole event. November will see the return of the Autocross at Kingwood College, an event where you get to safely push your car to it's limits and risk little more than a dent to your pride. We'll round out the year with our largest social event, the annual Holiday Brunch, hosted by Marjorie Russell.

So, dust off the MB and prepare to learn more about it, learn it's limits, and meet other club members. (and thanks!)

*Sincerely,
Mike Haney - President
MBCA - Houston Section*



(continued from page 1)

In the Beginning

Since Studebaker-Packard then distributed Mercedes-Benz cars and parts in the U.S., Doehler had access to the parent company in Germany, and in 1958 he visited Stuttgart and met Rudolf Uhlenhaut and Karl Wilfert, the men most responsible for the creation of the 300SL. With Uhlenhaut, Doehler discussed various points of design, as both were engineers and designers. He also ran his idea by Uhlenhaut about buying a car in pieces through the parts department. Perhaps intrigued by the idea, Uhlenhaut authorized Bob Doehler's project.

Thousands and thousands of individual pieces make up a 300SL. Mercedes-Benz provided a completely welded body shell and chassis plus an assembled and tested motor that at the time served as a display engine in Chicago. It was understood that upon the car's completion, Mercedes-Benz would issue a proper chassis number for it.

Back in South Bend, using the factory spare parts book, Doehler compiled a list of every individual part and component necessary to build a 300SL. In 1960 he started to order his car piece by piece through the Studebaker-Packard parts department. By then the 300SL coupe was out of production, so he devised a system for keeping track of all the parts. Using color coding to identify whether a part was in stock or backordered, the condition of the part when it arrived, and whether it was acceptable or not. In keeping with his commitment to build the best possible car, Doehler sometimes returned parts because their condition was not up to his standards. When Scott Grundfor inventoried all of the parts before buying the car, he discovered as many as four of the same part, still in their original blue and white factory packaging.



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Within 18-months Doehler was able to acquire 90 to 95 percent of the components, and had Studebaker-Packard not failed, assembly might have proceeded as planned. When the doors closed in South Bend, Doehler moved to Milwaukee and bought an old coachbuilding company, which he referred to at the time as “having assets that included two winos and a bending brake.” He subsequently turned this into one of the premier, if not the premier, restoration shops in the Milwaukee area, which, notes Scott Grundfor, trained some of the better restorers to come out of that area.

Later...

“Bob was characterized by good friends as being a perfectionist and a procrastinator, so he never quite got around to finishing the 300SL,” says Grundfor. “He seemed happy to discuss the nuances of the body design or the engineering peculiarities of the car but never seemed motivated enough to complete it.”

Grundfor met Bob Doehler in 1988 when he came to Scott Restorations in California to find a few parts that he had been unable to obtain over the intervening 25 years. “I had heard a rumor about an eccentric man who owned a body shop in the Midwest who had a brand new Gullwing hidden away in pieces. Of course, I considered this a folk tale, not believing that anybody could possibly purchase a 300SL in parts. It turned out to be true. After introducing himself, he showed me photos of the project, and we discussed a lot of different topics.”

At the time Scott was involved in two fascinating Mercedes-Benz projects, a W194 300SL prototype and a Pininfarina-bodied 1954 300b Coupe. “We needed technical information and drawings regarding the body and chassis on both cars, and Bob offered to check through his literature when he got back to Milwaukee. Several weeks later I received a factory blueprint for the W194 car that had



been given to him by Rudolf Uhlenhaut back in 1958. The blueprint detailed the body shape and chassis design of the W194. Even Mercedes-Benz had said they did not have this drawing when I visited them earlier to research the car. He also sent a folder which he had put together delineating four different versions of the 300b as shown on Pininfarina’s stand at four international auto shows in 1954 and 1955. He also included his own drawing synthesizing what he thought was the most appropriate elements of all four designs. We subsequently used this in our restoration of that car.”

Making the Deal

At the time of his visit, Doehler had mentioned selling the 300SL for a price in the high six figures—if he were to sell it. That was the last Scott ever heard from him. “I just lost track of him until I heard of his death in 1994. I was subsequently contacted by a representative of his estate saying that the car would be sold along with a half dozen other cars and literature. I went to Milwaukee in 1994 to inspect it and’ was astounded at the completeness and the number of parts that Bob had assembled. All of the pieces were in their original factory boxes or packages and in new condition. The body had been set down on the chassis, and the engine and transmission had been put into the car but not plumbed up or

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Changes at Daimler Chrysler:

As expected, Eckhardt Cordes, ex-chief of the Mercedes Car Group, announced his resignation effective at the end of August. Cordes was responsible for the turn around in the truck business and was a pal of departing DCAG CEO Juergen Schrempp.

Dieter Zetsche, who is to be DaimlerChrysler's new CEO, is poised to take the lead at Mercedes. Mercedes is a critical part of the DaimlerChrysler empire. Zetsche, who is know for his turnaround of Chrysler, wants to tackle the quality control situation at Mercedes head on instead of bringing in an outsider or struggle with promoting from within. On Jan 1st he will also take over Juergen Schrempp's post as head of DCAG.

This is all good news. Within a week after Schrempp's departure was announced, DCAG stock rose 17 percent.



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installed completely. I was also able to inspect all of the pieces, which Bob had placed in a very organized fashion on storage racks. It seems that Bob enjoyed having this oddity, this car in pieces, and sharing it with friends and surprising newcomers, more than actually owning a completed 300SL."

The car was offered to Scott, but he never received a response to his bid. "Six or eight months later I was contacted by an agent in Florida who had bought the car and was offering it for resale. This began four months of difficult negotiations—on again, off again situations where a saner person might have just thrown up their hands and given up, but I was determined to, if at all possible, buy this car and assemble it. This was a very significant and unusual project."

It turned out that the "agent" in Florida really *was* an agent, ex-CIA. After months of negotiations, they finally arrived at a price, then just as the deal was about to close, Scott was told that a competing group, which the agent referred to only as "the Germans," had swooped in and purchased the car. Money for the deal had been transferred from Germany to a representative in Florida, but, along with \$200,000 of it, he disappeared. "Until recently I tended to doubt that there ever were any Germans involved," says Scott. "This broker was just using them as a foil to try to pique my interest, bump up the price, and conclude the deal. Several months ago I met "the Germans" at a car auction. I was talking to a broker, and he mentioned that he thought I had bought his car. He said, 'Yes, I'm the gentleman that sent the \$200,000 to Florida, but it was stolen by my representative there.' So the story was true!"

Final Completion

Assembling this vehicle, or what you might call conservation and assembly, was different than any other project that Scott had ever attempted. He and Michael Warner, Triangle Section, the client who eventually bought the car, discussed the best approach. Says Scott, "Restored vehicles today tend toward perfection, sometimes ignoring the original quality, going far beyond what the manufacturer did—making the surfaces better, the paint shinier, sometimes chroming parts that were never chromed. We felt a responsibility to assemble the car to original specifications, preserving as closely as possible anything that was original in finish. So the chrome plating, which was excellent but perhaps not as perfect as it would be if it were prepared for show, was left as is. We merely cleaned up those pieces, all of the gauges and trim pieces, and so on. We didn't try to restore them or make them better. They were mint original, and we left them that way."

The engine compartment was also left intact, with nothing repainted or replaced. This was no traditional restoration. "The engine had been sitting assembled in the chassis for 30 years, so a certain amount of oxidation, dust, and grime had accumulated on the bare metal and painted pieces of the engine. The challenge was to try and return these castings and painted pieces to their original look without disturbing the finish or having to refinish it."

In a total restoration, Scott notes that you are faced with similar concerns, but you approach it more aggressively, for example, using a sandblaster to clean up the aluminum intake manifold. "We didn't want a restored look. We



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Vice President's Message

August flew by in a trail of what seemed like hot jet engine exhaust - a most warm summer to say the least. As September approaches we have an interesting month ahead and it is time to think about a couple of coats of wax for that fine German machine(s), checking the hoses and belts in preparation for the upcoming winter months, maybe even walk around the ol' beast and check the tire wear. Maybe I'll treat our machines with some new oil for the next 5,000 miles.

Just as our prized automobiles require attention so does the MBCA Houston Chapter. For all those who would be interested in spending about an hour or so a month, we are in need of volunteers to help out with our planning for what our organization can do for our membership this next year and participating in some of the events. Should one be interested contact any of those folks with phone numbers at the back of our Houston Star Newsletter.

Our fall Autocross is featuring a Mini Concours and anyone with experience in judging car event such as this is would be very helpful in coaching our judges, taking pictures of the chars and owners, finding out about the automobile's history, and getting to know some of us who like to share information about Mercedes Benz cars. It is amazing how much our owners know about their cars and we love to share technical information. Did you know that the paint used on the 2006 Mercedes Benzes have a new scratch less clear coat paint? This can start a whole conversation on how best to detail our cars. Someone mentioned that the black bumper trim can be made to look like new with a coat of Peanut Butter. Has anyone tried that to see if it works?

Our next event is open to all the membership which is going to be an evening of German food at Rudi Lechter's. Here is a chance to meet some really great folks, and help us elect our new chapter officers and Board of Directors. Plus there will be door prizes, and a something special that hopefully peaks everyone's curiosity to attend the MBCA Houston Election Dinner. Read on to get more details regarding time, date, and address.

A woman answered the knock at her door and found a destitute man. He wanted to earn money by doing odd jobs, so she asked, "Can you paint?"

"Yes," he said, "I'm a pretty good painter."

"Well, there's a gallon of green paint and a brush out back, and a porch that needs repainting. Be very careful. When you're done, I'll look it over and pay you what it's worth."

It wasn't more than an hour before he knocked again. "All finished!", he reported with a smile.

"Did you do a good job?" she asked.

"Yes, but lady, there's one thing I'd like to point out to you," he said, "That's not a Porsche back there — it's a Mercedes!"

Well that is about all the curbside chatter from me this month and I look forward to meeting some new acquaintances at September's Election Dinner.

*Charles T. Wyatt - Vice President
MBCA - Houston Section*

Be part of the election of the Officers and Board of Directors for the Houston Section, MBCA



Join us for our annual election dinner to be held in the Hunt Room at Rudi Lechner's. Enjoy fine German food while we're nominating and electing Officers and the Board of Directors for the coming year. The process is open to any nominations, so you're invited to toss your own hat in the ring to help make this club a success for everyone.

Rudi Lechner's Restaurant, Hunt room
2503 S. Gessner, Phone 713-782 1180
Saturday, September 24, 6:00 pm Cash bar , 6:30pm dinner
\$20 per person

Menu:
Jagerschnitzel or Veal with Hunter Sauce
Salad or soup
Cheese cake, Carrot cake, or Apple Strudel

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wanted an original look, so we used soft brushes, very mild soaps and cleaners, and occasionally a mild acidic solution to remove oxidation from the bare metal casting.”

The assembled and finished engine compartment doesn't look the same as a 100-point restoration, but since these are the original finishes, it probably has the most authentic look of any 300SL in the world.

Doehler had purchased a complete replacement body and already fitted the hood, trunk, and doors; all it really needed was priming and painting. The interior was complete except for the cloth and vinyl covering. Scott decided that the most appropriate color combination would be a silver exterior with a blue plaid interior. What DaimlerBenz sometimes referred to as the standard gullwing colors, these were also the firm's traditional racing colors.

“The only concern we had was that this car had never been put together,” recalls Scott. “When you restore a vehicle, you're generally talking about a car that was assembled and running for a number of years and is more or less worn. Here we had all the pieces—the doors, the latches, the engine—all as new and never before assembled, so we were a little nervous as to how these parts would all go together. As it turned out, they fit very nicely.”

The First Time

Total assembly and finishing took nearly 1,500 hours over about a year at Scott's shop in Kalamazoo, Michigan. “It was exciting when we finally got around to starting the engine. This was a completely assembled factory motor, probably intended as a replacement engine, tested on the dyno and run-in 30 years earlier. We thought about disassembling and inspecting it, but it appeared that at the factory the engine had been put up for storage. We just drained the fluids, checked the adjustments, and replaced all the oil and fluids, carefully turning the motor over to make sure that it was free and had oil pressure. We hooked up the ignition, and after a couple of cranks it fired right off. It's amazing how smooth and quiet this motor is, perhaps the smoothest 300SL engine I've ever heard, a testament to the fact that it has zero miles on it. It's probably in the best condition of any 300SL engine in the world.”

To ensure the mechanical integrity of the car, Scott made a very short test run. “It was quite a thrill to have the experience of driving a brand new 300SL—what it must have been like when a person purchased one of these cars brand new—the thrill of actually driving it for the first time and feeling the quality and precision. I don't think that sensation can ever be quite captured when a car is restored. No matter how extensive the restoration is, the parts are still stressed, old, and rebuilt,” says Grundfor.

“Recently a friend told me about a Johnny Cash song called ‘One Piece at a Time,’ and it reminded me of the 300SL. It told the story of a General Motors worker in the Cadillac Division who built himself a car ‘one piece at a time’ by taking parts home in his lunch pail.”

Perhaps Bob Doehler heard this song |



Mercedes Marketplace

For Sale: 1988 Mercedes 560 SL, \$16,500 Teal color, Low (92,000) miles. Soft top in great shape. Hard top comes with overhead garage storage rack and wench. Recent engine maintenance has this car running smoothly and powerful. Environmentally safe air conditioning coolant. 5 Premium Goodyear tires have less than 10,000 easy miles on them.



Only selling this car to help pay for daughter's college or else your only chance to enjoy it would be watching me drive by. Call 936-271-1230, or e-mail kmharris@houston.rr.com Kathy or Roger.

For Sale: 1980 Mercedes-Benz 450 SEL: 4-door Sedan. Recently passed state inspection. Engine has been overhauled. All repair receipts are available for the past 12 years. The air conditioning and heating components have all been replaced. The car is in good condition, has new tires, but needs a transmission. Asking \$2500. Ron Johnson 713-892-6770 or 281-438-8955

For Sale: 1974 Mercedes-Benz 450 SL Hardtop: The top is Mint Green and in very good condition Asking \$400. Ron Johnson 713-892-6770 or 281-438-8955

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Moving?

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<https://www.mbca.org/mbca/addchange.htm>

2005 Calendar of Events

September - 24th 6 pm

Election Dinner - Rudi Lechter's on Gessner at Westheimer
Alberto Gomez-Rivas / 713-780-4377

October

11th annual Oktoberfest @ Texas German Autohaus

November 13th

Fall Autocross @ Kingwood College
Mike Haney / 713-298-4580

December 4th

Holiday Brunch
Marjorie Russell / 936-321-2475

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