

CHUCK LATTY - BECK 550 SPYDER

by Steve Cameron

Sometime in 1984 Chuck Latty began his search for an original car. Answering an ad for a 1955 Porsche 550, he found the car had been sold for a price in the six figures arena. At that point he realized that the only way to obtain the car of his dreams would be to build a replica.

After a little research he headed from his home in Michigan to Uplands, California to check out the Beck Development Vintage 550 Spyder. Although he wanted a test drive, Beck had sold his demonstrator and didn't offer test-drives of his personal car. However, he offered to take Chuck for a ride.

"He tore around the streets local to his shop like a madman. I was in the passenger seat with no seatbelt nor anything to hold onto while the vehicle executed some extreme maneuvers. To say I was favorably impressed by the performance of the car would have been an understatement."

In January 1985, Chuck bought his Beck 550 Spyder kit along with all of the options offered for it at that time. Beck's creation differs from the original in several ways: the body is

made of hand-laid fiberglass instead of aluminum; the wheelbase is approximately 2.3 inches longer; the frame rails are placed about 1.5 inches further apart; the wall thickness of the main frame tubes is .125 inch as opposed to the original's approximate .080 inch; and the car uses more modern VW suspension components. The engine of choice for the replica is a VW air-cooled flat four that offers relative affordability, reliability, and acceptable performance when properly built. The transaxle used is a VW 4-speed manual swing axle unit with the final drive ring gear flipped to the other side of the pinion gear to provide 4 forward speeds with the engine in the mid-ship location.

When asked about the expected build time, Beck said it should take, "forty hours if you know VW's". It actually took about 200 hours to assemble the vehicle.

Getting the vehicle registered and licensed in Michigan was a challenge. The Secretary of State's office in Lansing (known as DMV in CA) sent a green legal size sheet of paper with about 25 items listed on each side. Details requested, included bumper height and condition of glass along with 23 other things that each had to be checked and signed off by a State policeman before the car could be registered.



The Spyder was completed in September of 1986 and it has been on the road ever since. It currently has about 41K miles on it. Some years it has been driven as little as 200 miles and other years it has been a daily driver and covered as many as 6K miles.

At about 23K miles Chuck installed a new more powerful engine so that the car would be as quick as it looked. The biggest difference between the Gene Berg 1776cc "Built" engine and the original stock 1585cc one is that the "Killer Motor" cost about five times as much and makes about 50% more HP.

Chuck and Ronnie have had a lot of fun with their Spyder. The car has gone on many 900 plus mile roundtrips. It has run in track day events at Waterford Hills near Detroit and Gingerman Raceway near Kalamazoo. It has been driven on "Parade Laps" around Road America in Elkhart Lake, Waterford Hills, and in May 2006 at Laguna Seca.