

THE BEAST

By Tom Wallters

Irene and I had been in our new condominium less than two years. The landscaping was done. The garage workbench was in place. I was bored. I picked up a copy of Kit Car Magazine on a whim and spotted the ad for the Heritage 1935 Mercedes Benz 500K Roadster. It got me thinking about my uncle's 1950 MG Roadster, which as a teen-ager, I dreamed of one day owning. That dream never materialized due to a tour in the Marines and getting on with the normal necessities of life. That 500K sure looked fun - convertible, big V8 engine, long, low and sleek - a real beauty. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted one.

I'm a software engineer by trade, and have always been pretty handy around the house. But car mechanics? About all I'd done in the past was change oil and spark plugs. But hey, I'd put together many an airplane kit as a kid. What could be so difficult about putting together a kit car? Isn't it sort of like a big model airplane kit?

A few months after seeing the Heritage ad, I bit the bullet and ordered the 500K. It arrived in the driveway a few weeks later in the biggest crate I had ever seen. It sure got the neighbors' attention in our complex of dainty pink stucco homes with manicured lawns.



As they say, the rubber met the road (or the #@\$\$ hit the fan). Irene named it "The Beast." Our living room was filled with boxes, fenders, doors, body panels, radiator, grill, bumpers, etc. The garage was taken over by two huge chassis members; the lower chassis and the passenger cage. The neighbors were probably scratching their heads trying to figure out what CC&R was being violated. But somehow we received no nasty letter from "the association".

Over the next year I spent close to 1,000 hours putting that car together - every Saturday and Sunday, in the garage 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. The directions say the kit can be put together in 300 hours; yeah right. I got an education in auto-mechanics the hard way. The doors were the toughest - complicated by power windows, power door locks, control wires, speakers, door and window adjustments in 3 dimensions. Each door took a good part of two weekends. Like all kit cars, there were many problems to solve where the "directions" didn't quite make it. While the kit did include most of the bolts, nuts, washers and rivets, there was still a long list of items I had to buy or scrounge from the junk yard. But finally, it was completed, licensed and on the road.

I can understand why some folks take literally years to put one of these things together. For myself, I've always been highly motivated to finish things. This is a good, dare we say "indispensable", requirement when attacking a kit car project.

"The Beast" seats two comfortably, and can handle three in a pinch. It's built from a 1975 Chevrolet Camaro donor and weighs in at 3,750 lbs. Power comes from a 250hp Chevrolet 350 V8 mated to a 350 Turbo-Hydramatic Transmission. It can do 0-60 in under 8 seconds and gets 12-18 mpg in city to high-way driving. Amenities include power steering, power brakes, power windows, door locks, cruise control and of course, air conditioning.



Although it's been on the road for 15 years now, it is still going strong. Irene and I enjoy going to three or four car shows and car club outings per year. We've made some good friends in the club and continue to meet interesting folks from other clubs. All of this is a bonus that "The Beast" has afforded us.