

The 50-mpg sporty car—a generation ahead of its time

# 1940 American Bantam Speedster

by Arch Brown

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID GOOLEY  
Owned by Les Ludwig



**T**he trouble with the American Bantam was that it was introduced 35 years prematurely. It was a sporty, stylish little car, simply but sturdily constructed and capable of delivering 50 mpg. Now that's a car for *our* times!

The Bantam story has its beginnings in post-World War I England when, in 1922, Sir Herbert Austin first introduced his diminutive Austin "Seven" to a car-hungry British motoring public. It was an instant best seller and eventually was manufactured under license in Germany (as the "Dixi"), in France (where it was known as the "Rosengart"), in Japan (Nissan-Datsun, if you will—having bootlegged the design without the formality of a licensing agreement) and, ultimately, in the United States.

The American Austin, built in Butler, Pennsylvania, from 1930 to 1934, was mechanically all but identical to the British product, save for its left-hand drive. Styling, however, was another matter. Britain's Austin "Seven," an eminently practical 4-seater, was a homely little mutt. In terms of the American market, that wouldn't do at all; Americans were nothing if not style-conscious. Accordingly, the American Austin Car Company engaged the services of no less a personage

than Alexis de Sakhnoffsky, charging him with the design of the American version. (American Austin, incidentally, was totally independent of the British firm, though Sir Herbert sat on its board of directors, and the company was obliged to pay the British organization a royalty of \$7 per vehicle.)

The American Austin was clean, with crisp lines that still look good half a century later. There were two basic body

styles, a coupe (also available as a delivery car, with blind rear-quarter panels and a single seat for the driver) and a roadster that featured a Deussen-like "sweep" on its side panels. Arguably, the American Austin was the world's handsomest small car. But it didn't sell. Perhaps the timing of its introduction, seven months after the Wall Street debacle of '29, was inauspicious. But then it might be argued that the onset of the Depression should have enhanced the Austin's appeal as an economy car. Somehow it didn't work out that way. Perhaps it was because, at \$445, the little newcomer sold for \$5 more than the Model A Ford. Maybe the price wars that had driven the cost of gasoline as low as a dime a gallon had something to do with it. Or it could have been that potential buyers were put off by the terrifying racket that the little (45.6 cid) Austin engine produced.

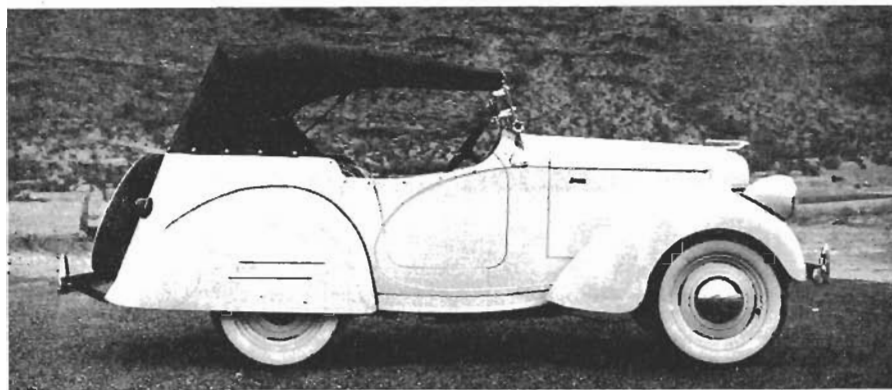
Unfortunately, the Austin had two characteristics that, though sound enough from an engineering standpoint, raised its decibel level to a point totally unacceptable to the American motorist. The first of these had to do with the main bearings, of which there were but two. Up front the crankshaft ran in a double row of ball bearings, while to the rear it was encased

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in a cylindrical roller bearing. That's an expensive way to build an engine, of course; but there's nothing wrong with it—apart from the noise. However, it wasn't easy to convince the buyer of a cheap little car that the clatter he heard was in fact due to very sophisticated engineering practices, somewhat akin to those of the Bugatti.

But the bearings weren't the half of it. The Austin's transverse-mounted generator was driven by the camshaft gear and it, in turn, drove the distributor. The mechanism was simple, sturdy and sound, but at speed it howled like a crying banshee.

A total of 8,558 American Austins were built that first year—less than 5% of the projected total. Still, that figure looked quite good compared with 1931's dismal record of 1,279 units. At first, 1932 brought receivership, and then a savior.



Young Roy Evans had been selling Austins with spectacular success down in Florida. Aware that there were 1,500 unfinished cars remaining at the Butler factory, he arranged to have them completed and shipped to him. Priced at \$295, they sold like tube steaks at the ball park, and the next thing Evans knew, he was in charge at Butler.

Production for 1932 was triple the previous year's total, and 1933 showed another 25% gain. But then the bottom fell out again and, in June 1934, a petition for bankruptcy was filed. The court put the company up for bids, and for \$5,000 cash, Roy Evans—then aged 34—found himself the owner of an automobile company, its factory conservatively appraised at \$10 million.

A number of things had to happen before production could get under way with any hope of profitability. The car's performance—which, in truth, had been anemic—would have to be improved. The rickety, gear-driven generator had been replaced in 1933 by a conventional, belt-driven design, but the noisy and costly ball-and-roller bearings had to go. Conventional Babbit units took their place.

To give the little engine more punch, the stroke was lengthened by  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch, larger valves were used and the compression ratio was boosted an incredible 48%, from 5.0 to 7.4! The result was a 69% boost in horsepower, from 13 to 22.

Then there was the matter of styling. The handsome Austin lines had become dated, in that era of increasingly streamlined design. Alexis de Sakhnoffsky agreed to return to Butler, and for a very modest fee he wrought something of a miracle. Fenders and headlamps were reshaped; smaller wheels were mounted; a simple, rounded grille was fitted; and for the incredibly modest plant investment of \$7,000, a totally new appearance was achieved.

Finally, there was the royalty that had been paid to Austin of England. The fee of \$7 a car doesn't sound like much, but it amounted to nearly 2% of the list price. On such margins are profits determined. Since the car was no longer built from the British blueprints, all that remained was to change the name.

At this point, Roy Evans came up with what must be considered a stroke of ge-

Evans' cost-cutting efforts had led to the use of a number of off-the-shelf components purchased from various suppliers in lieu of parts manufactured in-house. Since every other American car at that time was considerably larger, heavier and more powerful than the Bantam, the result was that many of the Bantam's vital parts were over-engineered for the job they were intended to perform.

There were other improvements over the original Austin design. The frame was strengthened; safety glass was fitted all around; cam-and-lever steering replaced the earlier car's worm-and-wheel mechanism; and although the rather primitive thermo-siphon cooling system was retained, its capacity was increased.

As time rolled along, refinements followed. A 3-bearing crankshaft was introduced in 1939, eliminating the "whip" that had plagued the earlier cars; and the 1940 model featured a vastly improved (though still mechanically-actuated) braking system.

Delighted owners reported that the Bantam would cruise without complaint at 45 or even 50 mph, delivering as much as 50 mpg in the process. Treated in this fashion, the engines were good for 40,000 or more miles without major attention.

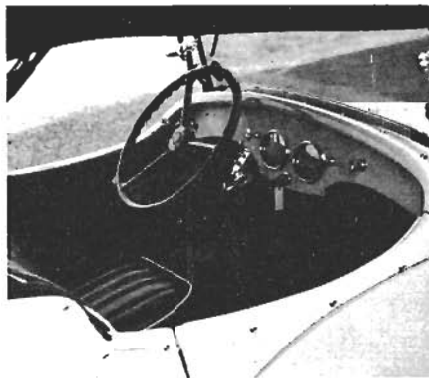
Less ecstatic were those owners who insisted upon driving their Bantams flat out. With the driver's foot pressed against the firewall, the car would do an honest 60 mph, but to hold it at that speed for an extended period of time was to court disaster.

In an effort to broaden the Bantam's market appeal, several new body styles were offered. A hardwood-bodied station wagon was built on an extended frame. A smart, 4-passenger convertible called the "Riviera" was designed by Alex Tremulis. Both a panel delivery and a pickup were pitched to the commercial trade, along with a sophisticated "Boulevard Delivery," based upon the handsome roadster body and featuring an open driver's compartment.

Finally, there was the model featured here, the Speedster (or "Foursome"), a striking-looking phaeton, also based upon the roadster. It was a tight fit, perhaps, but unlike the original Austin and Bantam body styles it was a 4-passenger car. Still, customers failed to materialize. From 2,000 sales in 1938, production sank to a little over 1,200 in 1939, then dropped to 800 in 1940. The 150 or so cars that were registered as 1941 models were in all probability leftover 1940 units. It was all over for the American Bantam.

The company soldiered on, though, first to pioneer the versatile little vehicle that eventually became the ubiquitous Army Jeep; and then to build military trailers during WWII.

But it wasn't until OPEC took a hand in the game, more than three decades later, that America was ready for the car that Bantam had sought to provide: a sturdy, serviceable, attractive 50-mpg automobile.



nius. The American Austin's radiator badge had featured the likeness of a bantam rooster, and the car had generally—though inaccurately—been known as the "Bantam Austin." So why not, Evans reasoned, adopt the name officially? Thus was born the Bantam; the American Austin was no more.

Getting the revised, renamed car into production took more time than one might expect, and the reorganized American Bantam Car Company was unable to take advantage of the comparatively prosperous automobile market of 1936-37. Bantams began to roll off the Butler assembly line just in time to greet the recession of 1938. The timing was most unfortunate.

The car, however, was not. One of Roy