

How San Francisco ate the secret Honda sports car, or, the little car that couldn't

It was 1964, and the teletype at American Honda Motor Company headquarters was smoking with traffic from Tokyo. The rumor mill hardly got cranked up before the secrecy curtain came down. Personnel with a need to know were informed only that a Honda car was being flown in from Japan and that publicity was not desired.

Since advertising managers are presumed to have nothing important to do anyway, I was assigned responsibility for project secrecy. First, we gave the unseen car the code name "AS280." For concealment from prying eyes at the airport, I suggested that we rent an enclosed truck and slide the AS280 into it the minute it came off the cargo plane. The Japanese did better than that. The car arrived at LAX in an enclosed box, was forklifted into the truck, and off-loaded into a locked room in the Honda service department before the box came off.

When American Honda boss K. Okamoto revealed that one engineer and two mechanics would be arriving from Japan to take the car on the road for testing, we planned an itinerary that would expose the AS280 to the most trying environments in the Golden West.

All the identifying marks that wouldn't come off the car were covered with masking tape, including the company name on the temporary operating permit. Credit cards were issued in personal, rather than company, names with a post office box address. We got an MG Mitten to cover the car when it was parked overnight and during meal stops.

The convoy that left Gardena in the spring of 1964 included an MG Midget (for performance comparisons), a Chevrolet station wagon (for people, luggage, and tools), the AS280, and six persons. There were Don McGee, Honda's service manager; M. Inada, service director (and translator); two mechanics from Japan; Mr. Enemoto, factory engineer; and me.

Everyone was eager to wring out the AS280, and that's just what we did for three weeks. The tiny Honda roadster had a 531cc water-cooled dual-overhead-cam 4-cylinder wet-sleeved aluminum engine with an 8000 rpm peaking speed. The front suspension was conventional, but the rear was weird. The wheelbase was so short that there was no room at the back for both a trunk and a rear axle. The designers had solved the problem neatly with a unique independent rear suspension. Trailing arms were cast aluminum chain cases, with sprockets at each end.

Everyone got to drive both sports cars, and we were encouraged to push the

AS280 as hard as it would go. Out in the Nevada desert, near Las Vegas, the factory mechanics discovered a fractured chain case and replaced it on the spot. That was the only true component failure during the whole tour.

The trip had been planned to test the little car under the kinds of driving conditions with which it might be confronted in the hands of an American owner. But it was also a wonderful vacation trip for the visitors from Japan. We went to the lowest point in the United States, and then up to view the floor of Death Valley from Zabriskie Point. The visitors were mightily impressed. Las Vegas perplexed them, as did the strange foods. Conversations were limited, since Inada had to do all the translating, but mealtimes were

plained that it was a secret project and that we weren't at liberty to give any information. When they pressed us with cleverly phrased questions, and as the Japanese were approaching, we lowered our voices, pledged them to secrecy, and revealed that the AS280 was the result of a cooperation between the Chrysler Corporation and Mitsubishi. They couldn't get into their car fast enough to get back to the office and spill the beans.

After surmounting the formidable obstacles presented by the scorching Nevada desert, the snows of Mammoth, the lofty Tioga Pass, and endless drag races and full-speed runs, it was the civilized streets of San Francisco that doomed the AS280.

Considerable conversation in Japanese produced a politely translated inquiry as



warm and exciting, with everyone sharing the day's adventures.

We were frequently confronted with hash-house menus that had little meaning for the visitors. But they learned fast. Hamburgers were already familiar; club sandwiches were a big hit; and "Million Islands" salad dressing was always specified, while avocados were unanimously condemned. In one Nevada tank town, the obvious place to eat was a Jewish deli. I was delighted with this opportunity to introduce the guests to the wonders of cold borscht, pastrami, chopped liver, garlic pickles, and cheesecake. But the proprietor had unknowingly sabotaged the whole effort. His daily luncheon special was prominently featured and, in spite of my tantalizing descriptions of all the other culinary delights available, everybody ordered Italian spaghetti.

Our efforts to conceal the identity of the car were remarkably successful. One day, at the end of a luncheon stop, Don McGee and I were uncovering the AS280 when a trio of bright, young aerospace engineers approached, brandishing their oval badges. We knew the Japanese would join us at any moment, so we ex-

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to where one might find the steepest street in the bay city. Well, I said, there was this soul-stirring one-block slope out by the U.C. Medical Center, but there was also a pretty challenging stretch of Polk Street, just around the corner. And there we went. The two mechanics made a normal sort of run at it and bogged down in about 100 feet. So, they coasted backwards, down to the flat intersection, and got serious. The driver side-stepped the clutch at about 7000 rpm, and they managed about 200 feet. The third try involved about 9000 rpm and a great lurch off the line. When they began to bog, about a third of the way up, the driver gave the clutch a quick stab to get the revs back up, and the car just stood there and smoked while the air was filled with the pungent smell of scorched clutch facing. One or two more such attempts reduced clutch friction to zero.

Although a 5-speed box and a 750cc engine would have made the little car suitable for U.S. consumption, and although it was subsequently sold in 800cc form elsewhere in the world, the Honda sports car was never again sent to the United States.

—T. C. Browne