

Kissel's Kissels

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With a last name of *Kissel*, how could I *not* want to own one? About 150 complete Kissels are currently known to exist, making it more difficult to find parts and information on this relatively rare make of automobile last produced in 1930. I'm not a direct descendant of the people who built the car, but both of our families came from Alsace in the 1850s; maybe I'm a distant relative. I guess that my life would have been a whole lot simpler had I been born a *Ford*.

For those of you that participated in the 2009 Heart-of-the-Redwoods NETR Tour in Fortuna, California, you have already met **Annie**. She is the latest car to be added to our small family. *Annie* is a 1914 KisselKar model 40 four-cylinder (334 cu.in.) 5-passenger touring car. She is one of three surviving 4-40s of the fewer than three hundred that were originally hand built by Kissel that year. Kissel's 1914 model year started in July 1913. Based on her car and engine numbers, Annie was finished later in the model year, perhaps about April 1914.

We acquired this car in 2008 from the estate of the late Ann Klein, founder of Universal Vintage Tire and a well loved member of the antique



Photo 1. Lynn with **Annie** (1914 KisselKar 4-40 Touring) at the Great Gatsby Festival on Sep. 8, 2009 (Tallac Historic Site, South Lake Tahoe, California).

Bentley community. Her unrestored 1931 4½-liter supercharged boattail Bentley was a cherished favorite and sold at auction in 2007 for \$4,510,000.

James Henry Fisher acquired this KisselKar in 1949 from John Julien for his daughter, Ann (born Elizabeth Ann Fisher on May 20, 1931 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania). Ann was attending Penn State University as an undergraduate and had wanted to study engineering but was not allowed to do so as university policy at the time prohibited the admission of women to engineering.

Ann rebuilt the engine on the KisselKar herself and got a husband in the bargain. Phil Brooks tells me this story about how Ann and Bill Klein met; he says he's heard Ann tell it several times. Apparently Bill had heard about the KisselKar that Ann was rebuilding and wanted to meet her and see the car.

Ann was working underneath [the KisselKar] when Bill came up, saw the feet sticking out from underneath, so he calls out "Say, do you know what you're doing under there?" Ann slithers out from under the car, looks up and says, "I certainly do!" It was essentially love at first sight between Bill and Ann

The KisselKar was stored at Klein Kars until after her death in 2007. Note the KisselKar-like spelling of the company name, an auto repair business that Ann started in Lancaster in 1968. We've named the car *Annie* in Ann Klein's honor.

If you are interested, you can read more about *Annie* on our website at <http://starship.org>; start with looking under Annie | About.

I expect that I am late to the old car hobby, at least compared to many of you that are reading this note. I've been involved with cars from an early age (I rebuilt my first manual transmission at age 15, raced my 1967 Chevy at the local drag strip while in high school, worked as a auto mechanic during undergraduate physics studies, raced my MINI Cooper on road tracks later in life), but my interest in older cars started rather casually in the late 1990s. That's when we acquired **Moleka**, a silver 1979 Mercedes 450SL. The car is named after *Silver Moleka*, a Polish Arabian horse we once fondly owned.

While I had vaguely heard that there was a Kissel car, this was the extent of my knowledge for most of my life. In April 2005, my son Andrew gave me a framed 1920 Saturday Evening Post magazine page with a large Kissel ad. Hung on my office wall at work, I was repeatedly



Photo 2. Lynn with Bugsby (1924 Kissel 6-55 Speedster) at the Marin-Sonoma Tour d'Elegance on May 16, 2009 (Sausalito, California)

reminded of the Kissel cars. I started doing some research as I became more curious. That's when I discovered the Kissel "Gold Bug" Speedster.

The Kissel Motor Car Company was founded by Louis Kissel with his sons George and William in 1906 in Hartford Wisconsin. Over a twenty-five year period, this company would hand build about 26,000 cars, trucks, hearses, ambulances, taxi cabs and other vehicles. Kissels were well build vehicles that employed advanced engineering. Until 1918, the styling of Kissels could be best described as solid and staid, but not inspired.

Conover T. Silver was a New York City auto dealer with a flair for style. In 1914 he rebodied a Willys Knight which later became a production model called the Silver Knight. In 1917 he took a new design to Kissel that was introduced in 1918 as the Silver Special series. Kissel produced three models bearing Silver's name and styling, a Speedster, a Tourster and a seven-passenger Touring car. Styling elements of the Silver Specials were a new "Fiat type" radiator, low-placed headlights, a hood line that ran straight to the base of the windshield and close-fit bicycle-style fenders. The Speedster featured a turtle-back rear deck and low racer-cut sides, making a big splash at the New York auto show. The designs were a great success and Silver's touches would influence the design of Kissel vehicles through most of the 1920s.

A number of famous people owned Kissel Speedsters, including Fatty Arbuckle (comedian), Bebe Daniels (actress), Ralph DePalma (racecar champion), Eddie Duchin

(band leader), Amelia Earhart (aviator), Douglas Fairbanks (actor), Greta Garbo (actress), Gladys George (actress), Ruby Keeler (actress), William S. Hart (actor), Al Jolson (singer), Mabel Normand (actress), Mary Pickford (actress) and Rudy Vallee (singer).

I really became excited about the possibility of owning a Kissel Speedster, but was quickly discouraged when I found an example for sale in St. Louis that sported a six-figure asking price. I was so interested in acquiring one that I sought out some co-workers that had family in Wisconsin and asked if any had an old Kissel stored in a barn.

The big break came early one morning in April 2005 when I discovered not one, but two more moderately priced Kissels for sale on the internet. A small detail was that one resided in Oslo, Norway, and the other in Sydney, Australia. I had not known earlier, but I do now, that Kissels were exported to customers around the world.

Making a long story short, after contacting both owners and some protracted negotiations, we acquired the 1924 Australian Kissel that we've named **Bugsby**. My wife, Jeanne, suggested *Bugsy* as a name, referring to Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, the famous gangster. This felt close and was a nice tie-in with the Roaring 20s and the *Gold Bug* name. But I wanted something lighter, denoting more of the idle rich, or an old-money playboy with a feel of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. Adding a "b" to Jeanne's proposed name did it for me. If you're interested in the whole saga, you can read it on our website at <http://starship.org>; look under Bugsby | Adventures | 2005 | Acquisition.

John Lewis, who lives in Brisbane, wrote a 60-page history entitled *Kissel Cars Down Under* for the 100-year anniversary of the Kissel Motor Car Company. I learned from this that *Bugsby* is the oldest of twelve Kissels that were shipped Down Under, that he was originally sold to Fred Shuffener (owner of a saw mill and joinery in Rockhampton) and that the car was restored in 1965 by Ron Griffiths in Brisbane. We bought the car in 2005 from Bill Trollope in Sydney, who had owned it since 1976.

This is the end of my little introduction to *Annie* and *Bugsby*, but I expect not the end of this Kissel's Kissel stories. I look forward to seeing many of you on the 2010 Nickel Era Tour planned for Coos Bay, Oregon.