



KISSEL KAR STORY



Forgotten Treasure

To see more photographs of Lynn Kissel's 1924 Kissel Speedster, select [Kissel Gallery](#).

What are the odds that any of us might unwittingly discover a rare, century-old, obscure classic car that shares our surname? Meet the Kissels.

Lynn and Jeanne Kissel appear dwarfed among the giant car haulers on the polo grounds the day before the 2010 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. They carefully detail their 1924 Kissel Speedster for the next day's appearance on the splendor on the grass of the 18th fairway.

Lynn and Jeanne affectionately nickname all of their cars. "Bugsby" is their personal adaptation of "Gold Bug" given the chrome yellow and black Kissel Model 6-55 Speedster in 1919 by journalist William W. "Brownie" Rowland of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Lynn explains, "For us, the name Bugsby conjures images of an old-money playboy with the feel of the F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*." In the presence of Bugsby, Lynn's unpretentious, somewhat self-deprecating manner is no false façade, but some part of him occasionally adopts the gentlemanly persona of Jay Gatsby.

Lynn expresses this alter ego through his accompanying '20s-era ensemble including knickers, argyle socks and sweater vest, wool touring cap, and two vintage golf club bags (with wooden-handled clubs) mounted on Bugsby's pair of rear-fender-golf-caddies. Not surprisingly, while Bugsby won Third Place in Class G (classics) at the 53rd Hillsborough Concours d'Elegance in 2009, Lynn won The Chairman's Award for attire most appropriate for the era of the car.

More importantly to Lynn, in May 2009, Bugsby won the Forgotten Treasure award at the Marin-Sonoma Concours d'Elegance. Lynn was deeply appreciative of the award. He wanted to know more of its significance. He asked acclaimed car historian and Chief Judge, Martin Swig, for his explanation.

"Over the years there have been numerous significant cars. There are waves of fashion that sweep over various cars, [we] see them featured in magazine articles, and recognized by various commentators. But very few car buffs are serious historians. As a result, many truly significant cars get overlooked. We had several examples at this last weekend's show, and it was not easy to select the recipient of the Forgotten Treasure award. But your Kissel meets the criteria to a "T", and I was very happy to make the award to you."

Lynn Kissel, a retired Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory research physicist, repaired his first transmission at the age of 15. In high school in Western New York, he raced his 1966 Chevrolet at a local drag strip. In college, he supplemented his school expenses as a mechanic, and in graduate school he helped several of his fellow students keep their cars running on student budgets. After many years devoted to his career and his family, he pursued track racing in his MINI Cooper. Although he enjoyed keeping his MINI mechanically fit for racing, Lynn considered himself little more than a casual car enthusiast, certainly neither a serious car collector nor historian. It was his 55th birthday that accelerated his latent interest into a sincere passion.

As a birthday gift, Lynn's son gave him a framed original page from a 1920 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* featuring an advertisement for the Kissel Motor Car Company. Lynn had heard of the Kissel car but with vague details. Seeing the advertisement, he wondered if the Kissel family may have made a significant but largely ignored contribution to the development of the great American classic automobile. His curiosity started as a casual investigation into the history of the Kissel car. As his research revealed more interesting details about the Kissel Motor Car Company, the small spark of inquiry quickly grew into a personal mission to illuminate and preserve the story of a "forgotten treasure".

The Kissel Motor Car Company, was founded in 1906 in Hartford, Wisconsin by Louis Kissel and his four sons: Adolph, Otto, William, and George. In 1908, an angry employee murdered an ailing Louis Kissel, but his sons had already assumed primary management of the company. From 1906 to 1930, the

company hand built over 26,000 vehicles, including cars, trucks, hearses, ambulances, and taxi cabs. The first twelve years of Kissel design and production focused on dependable engineering and fine craftsmanship. Styling and elegance – characteristic of what we now recognize in the well-known classics such as Duesenberg, Packard, and Pierce Arrow – were introduced in 1918.

In 1914, Conover T. Silver, a New York City dealer, redesigned a Willys Knight that later became known as the Silver Knight. Silver recognized and applauded the engineering of the Kissel car. His success led him to persuade William Kissel to implement similar restyling of the line of Kissel cars. In 1918, William and the company designer, J. Frederick Werner, introduced three new designs as the Silver Special Series – the Speedster, the Tourster, and a larger seven-passenger touring car. These cars, especially the Speedster, received considerable recognition at the 1918 New York Auto Show.

The new design for the Speedster included a "Fiat-type" radiator with a horse collar shell, low positioned electric headlights, close fitting bicycle-style fenders, and a straight hood line from the top of the radiator to the base of the windshield. These features and the additional appeal of the rounded turtle-back rear deck and the racer-cut side doors moved the Speedster into a rivalry with the Stutz Bearcat and the Mercer Runabout. The Speedster's advanced engineering and its new racy styling attracted buyers such as Amelia Earhart, Greta Garbo, Al Jolson, and Fatty Arbuckle.

During the production years from 1906 to 1930, numerous Kissel cars were bought and shipped out of the U.S. Twelve cars went to Australia and New Zealand. For the 100-year anniversary of the Kissel Car Motor Company, John Lewis of Brisbane, Australia wrote a 60-page comprehensive history entitled *Kissel Cars Down Under*.

Not long after his 55th birthday, Lynn Kissel set out in search for his own Speedster. In April, 2005, he found three on the internet – one in St. Louis, an enclosed Speedster in Norway and an open Speedster with potential as a "collectable" in Sydney, Australia. The Model 6-55 Speedster Lynn found in Sydney was the oldest of the twelve Kissels exported to Australia and New Zealand. This car was originally purchased by Fred Shuffener, the owner of a sawmill and joinery in Rockhampton. In the 1940s, the turtle-back rear deck was replaced with an ill-fitting but functional truck bed, and the Speedster-turned-pickup served for many years as a "ute" (utility vehicle) on a farm. In 1965, Ron Griffiths of Ipswich restored the ute back to a Speedster. In 1976, Bill Trollope of Sydney bought the car. In 2005, Lynn Kissel bought the car from Trollope and prepared to have the car shipped to Oakland, California. Importation proved to be more difficult than anticipated.

As a response to the events of 9/11/2001, the U.S. and many other countries put in place strict security measures to detect terrorist devices hidden in imported collectable cars. Exporting rare, collectable cars from Australia was particularly difficult and expensive. If a car was whole, x-ray was the expedient method of inspection. Since many parts of Kissel cars were fabricated from wood, the potential for infestation required fumigation. Consequently, shipping, import duties, X-rays, fumigation, and other expenses to import Bugsby to Oakland totaled over \$10,000.

Although Lynn had seen numerous pictures of Bugsby, technically he acquired the Speedster sight unseen. He anticipated that the car was in much better condition than a barn find, but he also knew that the car was as a forty year old restoration. Realistically (and perhaps with eager expectation) Lynn anticipated the Speedster was going to need some rejuvenation. In January 2006, six months after he took possession of his Speedster, Lynn commenced with what he calls a serious refreshing. Considering the extent of the work he did to the car, his characterization seems a bit modest. A complete reconstruction of the car's turtle-shell rear deck became the defining challenge.

As Lynn was about to begin work on the Speedster, he noted that the shape of the rear deck was somewhat squared, not half-round as correct for that model. He contacted the Australian historian, John Lewis, who confirmed that during the restoration in 1965, Ron Griffiths was unable to find the correct Kissel metal for the rear deck to replace the bastardized truck bed. Instead, he found and installed a rear deck from a 1930s Chevrolet roadster. The deck looked correct for the period, but it was not correct for the Kissel Model 6-55 Speedster. Indeed, Lynn Kissel inherited the same problem. No correct rear decks were to be found, and he was faced with hand reconstruction.

Before Lynn discovered the problem, he had commissioned Kevin Schell of California Reflections in Livermore to begin the bodywork and paint. It took Lynn's best persuasive efforts to convince Kevin to take on the hand construction required to build the correct wooden understructure and metal shell. Lynn chuckles when he says, "We had several running jokes about the work. One was that he [Kevin] only had to move the hole in the deck – the hatch was in the wrong place. How hard could that be?" Fortunately, two other owners of Kissel Speedsters, Phil Renuart and Al Nippert, graciously shared detailed photographs and measurements of their cars. Joe Leaf, a Kissel owner in Washington State loaned Lynn precise Kissel-company dimensioned mechanical drawings of the car. Kevin Schell's exquisitely hand crafted fabrication of the correct rear end, together with refinishing all the body parts, took eighteen months.

Four years and eight months since he began, Lynn considers his showing at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance in August, 2010 the consummate point of Bugsby's revival. But Lynn admits to the seasoned perspective that a real restoration is technically never complete. At the writing of this article, he has removed the generator and the armature is being rewound. He has acquired but not yet installed an original coil. And he is repairing the original chain speedometer cable. In Lynn's care, Bugsby continues to thrive.

If you talk with Lynn about his Bugsby and Kissel cars for more than a few moments, you realize that he has pursued his interest with the professional discipline and thoroughness we might expect of the research physicist that he is. His personal library and collection of memorabilia are extensive. And he speaks eloquently about the Kissel heritage. But there is something more than the joy of research and restoration that drives him. When asked of his possible ancestral link to Louis Kissel, he wryly quips, "I like to think we are distant relatives." And with an acknowledged tongue-in-cheek and faint hint of childlike glee he proceeds to construct a conceivable heritage.

Although Kissel is a Germanic surname, the Kissel family can be traced back to France before the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. As a result of his own genealogical research, Lynn discovered that his great-great-grandfather, Joseph Henry Kissel, emigrated from Alsace, France settling in Western New York in 1850. In his book, *The Classic Kissel Automobile* (1990), Val V. Quandt, traced Louis Kissel back to Conrad Kissel who also emigrated from Alsace, France in 1854.

Currently, the modern Alsace telephone book lists only eight Kissels. Given that the surname Kissel is common neither in the U.S. nor in France; and given that the lineages of Louis Kissel and of Lynn Kissel can be traced specifically to Alsace; and given that Louis Kissel and Lynn Kissel's great-great-grandfather immigrated to the U.S. from Alsace within four years of each other, it seems fascinatingly conceivable to Lynn Kissel that he and the Kissels of the Kissel Motor Car Company are, at the very least, "distant relatives". He wittingly adds, "but if we go back far enough, you and I are related, too."

The highlight of Lynn's mission to bring attention to the history of Kissel cars, Lynn rightfully says, "It was a thrill just to be invited to the 2010 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance". Bugsby also completed the 70-mile Pebble Beach Tour d'Elegance. Lynn's efforts have also brought recognition with a Third Place in Class G (classics) at the 53rd Hillsborough Concours d'Elegance, the Forgotten Treasures Award at the 2009 (inaugural) Marin-Sonoma Concours d'Elegance, Second Place in Class A (classics) at the 2010 Presidio of San Francisco Concours d'Elegance, Most Exciting Open Car at the 2010 Ironstone

Concours d'Elegance, and Best of Class (US Classics Open and Closed) at the 2010 Niello Concours at Serrano.

On September 11 and 12, Bugsby participated as one of ten of a gathering of Gold Bugs given a place of honor at the 2010 (annual) Old Cars Festival held on the grounds of the Henry Ford Museum in Greenfield Village, Michigan. Three Kissel Speedsters won First, Second, and Third Place in the 1919-1924 Class. Bugsby was awarded Second Place.

In October, 2008, Lynn and Jeanne acquired a second lost Kissel treasure. Annie is a beautiful, mostly original 1914 Kissel Model 40 (40 hp) Touring car, acquired from the estate of Ann Klein and named in her honor. Lynn says that Annie offers a more comfortable ride than that of Bugsby, so she has a clear and continued destiny as a touring car. But in order to tour and show, Annie needed new upholstery by Jerry Stehling, new Universal tires (a company founded by Ann Klein), minor engine work, a rebuilt carburetor, a rebuilt generator, a rebuilt magneto, new ring and pinion gears by Industrial Sprockets and Gears, and a rebuilt cone clutch by Bob Knaak. Annie currently resides in Lynn's and Jeanne's home garage awaiting reinstallation of her new clutch, but she's soon to join the mission to spread the story about the Kissel Motor Car Company.

For a well detailed documentation of Bugsby's restoration process, visit Lynn's website at <http://www.starship.org/Bugsby/Adventures/2006/SeriousFreshening/index.php>.

More information about Kissel cars and the history of the Kissel Motorcar Company can be found through the Kissel Kar Klub with the support of the Wisconsin Automotive Museum in Hartford at wisconsinautomuseum.com or email the museum's executive director, Dale Anderson, at info@wisconsinautomuseum.com.

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