

....And There Were Kaisers

by Jerry Duval

Yes, there were Kaisers and Frazers that were introduced to the automobile market in 1946. The Kaiser-Frazer Corporation was organized by Henry J. Kaiser, a West Coast industrialist in metals and construction and Joseph Frazer who had gained over many years a thorough knowledge of the auto industry, most recently as chairman of the Graham-Paige Corporation. Both the Kaiser and Frazer vehicles were similar 4-door sedans except in furnishings and price. The Kaiser Special was priced at the entry level and the more opulent Frazer Manhattan was the top of the line. The cars were designed by custom auto designer "Dutch" Darrin. They were the first of the modern designed cars to be offered following World War II. The cabins were roomy and were cradled forward of the rear axle allowing for comfortable seating of four adults in the back and three in the front seat. The design had full flowing fender lines from front to rear, and the interiors were color coordinated with the exterior colors. Both vehicles were powered by a Continental 226 cid 100 HP flathead 6. The transmission was standard with optional overdrive. The cars were well received by the general public. Sales for 1947 vaulted K-F to the top of America's highest volume independent auto maker.

The association of Edgar Kaiser and Joseph Frazer was cooling with Frazer abruptly leaving the company in 1950. The Frazer auto line was discontinued with the '51 model in favor of the newly designed '51 Kaiser. The Kaisers continued on until 1955 with annual refinements to the '51 styling and with the introductions of specialized models. During this time period the low priced Henry J was added to the product line as well as the fiberglass Kaiser Darrin roadster. In early 1955 production ended with the unsold vehicles and tooling being exported to a Kaiser subsidiary in Argentina where it remained in production through 1962 as the Carabella. During the nine model years K-F produced more than 1 million cars.

I was familiar with the K-F marque as my parents owned a '48 Frazer Manhattan and later a '51 Kaiser Deluxe 4 door. I routinely drove both cars as I had a drivers license by 1947. My family took three cross country road trips in the Frazer. One trip included the town of Rouyn in the northern area of the Province of Quebec, Canada, where there were many miles of rough, dusty, "washboard" roads. My dad found the Frazer to be fuel efficient and very dependable.

From 1946-1950 I was a student at Anaheim Union High School. It was a very exciting time car wise as all of the auto manufacturers were introducing their new models following the war. Most of the cars were a continuation of the '41-'42 models when civilian production ceased, and the companies turned to war production. Many of the auto agencies would have war surplus searchlights

sweeping the night skies on those evenings when the new models were now on the show room floors. My friends were mostly into Fords and Chevys, and they did not share my enthusiasm for K-F. Frankly, I thought that the earliest models of the Big Three were somewhat dull and uninspiring when compared to the Frazer.

In February of 1950 my dad had a stunning announcement that we were all invited to the unveiling of the newly designed '51 Kaiser. It was to be held at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles. The show night could not come soon enough; and of course, all of my friends were informed. We arrived on the evening of the showing at the prescribed time. Upon entering the ballroom, we observed a large turn table in the middle of the room supporting a vehicle shrouded to conceal its identity. In true Hollywood style, at the appointed hour the lights dimmed, and the master of ceremonies

introduced the all new '51 Kaiser with "Anatomic Styling." With that announcement, the shroud lifted and there it was--an iridescent green 4 door model whose paint and stainless steel trim glistened under the spot lights. As the turn table slowly revolved, the announcer related the features of the car; and at the same time, a beautiful, tall fashion model dressed in a long



evening gown with long elbow length white gloves pointed out the many features that the new car had. Some of those features included how sleek and stylish the vehicle was and that the center of gravity existed below the top of the wheel line to give greater stability. The car had more glass area than its competitors, and the wind shields would pop out on impact in case of a crash. The safety features included slim corner posts to provide better vision and a recessed instrument panel and a padded dash--it would take Ford another 5 years to pad their dash. All in all it was an exciting evening for a 17 year old and would provide lasting memories for at least the next 62 years. About two months later dad and mom came driving home in a new '51 Kaiser.

Following the armistice ending the Korean War and my release from the army in 1954, I was eager to get my own set of wheels. Within days of my discharge my older brother and I were at the Kaiser show room in downtown Los Angeles. Upon looking around it was evident that Kaiser Auto Corp. was on its way out. There was very little activity and few cars were on the show room floor; besides, my meager bank account could not handle the price of a new car. After

looking at used cars, my brother and I spotted an abused and forlorn looking '51 Kaiser Club Coupe set aside in the back lot. It had 35 K miles on the odometer, and the standard 226 cid Continental flat head 6 coupled to a Hydramatic transmission. The engine started right up and the Hydramatic seemed to shift properly on a test run. I could have it for \$350--all within my price range. I happily drove it back to Long Beach with the same feeling that most of you have had driving your first car home.

Since restoration was mostly cosmetic it did not take long for it to be presentable. I was working swing shift at Douglas aircraft and taking day classes at Long Beach City College. Being single, living at home, and working nights, I had lots of extra cash to "feed" the Kaiser. By the end of August of '55 my Kaiser wheels took me to Cal Poly University in San Luis Obispo, California. At that time I was unaware that my destiny was pushing me forward to a very special meeting that would occur in February of '56. That meeting some 55 years ago would be with the girl who would become my bride--but that's another story.



1951 Kaiser Club coupe -- Restored in 1955 by Patrick J. Duval -- Lake Matthews and the San Gabriel Mountains of California in the back ground.