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# AutoWeek



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## 1948 Davis Divan Three-wheelin' into oblivion

By **NICK KURCZEWSKI**

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When millionaire and part-time Indianapolis 500 racer Joel Thorne commissioned a custom roadster in 1941, few could have imagined that the outrageous three-wheeled result would serve as the blueprint for a production car. Then again, few were as quick-thinking and fast-talking as Glenn Gordon “Gary” Davis, a former car salesman who befriended Thorne. Davis saw potential in the one-of-a-kind creation—nicknamed the Californian—which had been designed by Frank Kurtis, Thorne’s shop foreman at the time and the future founder of the Kurtis-Kraft racing outfit that dominated the Indy 500 in the 1950s.

Davis managed to pry the Californian away from Thorne in 1945. Exactly how remains unclear; everything from a simple cash transaction to a staged accident has been suggested. Whatever the case, Davis’s timing could not have been better. Post-World War II America was ravenous for new cars, and the Davis publicity machine thrived in this consumer feeding frenzy.

By 1946, Davis was touring the United States, using the Californian roadster to promote his fledgling Davis Motorcar Company. When the Californian became tatty from constant use, Davis had prototypes built at the company’s new factory in an aircraft hangar in Van Nuys, California.

Now called the Davis Divan, the two-door sedan had one 15-inch wheel up front and two 15-inch driven wheels out back and was powered by a 47-hp, 132.7-cid Hercules L-head four-cylinder engine (soon changed to a 63-hp, 162-cid Continental four) mated to a Borg-Warner three-speed manual. A removable hard top, covered headlights and a body shaped like a bar of soap completed the \$995 package.

Davis Divans were soon in the news, on the covers of magazines and in newspaper ads. Franchise agreements were signed, and the quirky car looked poised for success. Yet despite the hype and the hyperbole, Davis had oversold and underfinanced his futuristic aluminum-bodied car. Impatient franchisees came looking for cars that were not there. Davis's own employees—who initially agreed to work without salary on the promise of double pay once serial production began—began to revolt. By May 1948, the Davis Divan had gone from car of tomorrow to yesterday's news. The Van Nuys factory was shuttered, assets were liquidated and Davis eventually served two years in prison for 20 counts of fraud.

Roughly 13 Davis Divan sedans are believed to have been built—not including three Jeep-like military variants. Incredibly, all but one survives. The example featured here is the sixth built and was saved from a scrap yard in 1967 by Tom Wilson, founder and director emeritus of the Davis Registry. Wilson recently sold the car to Jeff and Susan Lane of Nashville, Tennessee, where it now takes pride of place among hundreds of eclectic vehicles at their Lane Motor Museum. "I love the unique engineering of the Davis and have always liked streamlined cars," said Jeff Lane.

Behind the glitzy plastic and chrome wheel of the Divan, there is plenty of room. The wide bench seat is comfy. The painted dash is plain but handsome, with chrome-rimmed gauges directly in front of the driver. The engine—a nonoriginal four-cylinder from a Henry J—emits a charming burble as it starts.

The dainty wand for the column-mounted shifter feels light and clicks into its gears with ease. On the busy streets of Nashville, the ride is comfortable, the Y-yoke front suspension and solid rear axle effectively soak up bumps and the car keeps up with traffic—no doubt slowed somewhat by drivers craning their necks to check out the Divan. Most important, worries that the Divan could feel tippy prove to be unfounded. On city streets, the lone front wheel endows the 2400-pound car with London cab-like maneuverability.

As peculiar as the Divan might appear, its composed road manners hint that with a bit less boasting and a lot more funding, there may have been room on American roads for this idiosyncratic three-wheeler.