

An excerpt from **The Way It Is / A vintage day at Lime Rock** by Gordon Kirby (9/14/09)

A feature of this year's Lime Rock Vintage Festival was the appearance of the Collier Collection's rare Mercedes Benz 1939 W154 Grand Prix car. The car was rolled out for a demonstration run on Tuesday before the vintage weekend and was demonstrated again on Labor Day Monday. Mercedes engineer and test driver Gert Staub first drove the W154 which was then driven by event chairman Smith. It was the first time the car had run on a racetrack in seventy years.

This particular W154 is the fifteenth and last of these spectacular cars to have been built. The car made its only Grand Prix start in Belgrade's Yugoslav GP on September 3rd, 1939 driven Manfred von Brauchitsch who qualified on the pole ahead of teammate Hermann Lang. Von Brauchitsch led the race before spinning and recovering to finish second, beaten by seven and a half seconds by Tazio Nuvolari aboard a D-type Auto Union.

The Yugoslav GP was the last major motor race run in Europe for six or seven years as World War II was getting underway at the very moment the cars were fired up for the start. So ended a golden era in Grand Prix racing.



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Von Brauchitsch's chassis #15 was one of two W154s shipped to Austria for safe keeping during the war. Near the end of WWII the Soviet army tried to freight the pair of W154s by railway to Romania where some starving Soviet soldiers traded the car for a supply of food rations. After the war the Romanian national museum displayed the car but its existence remained a secret on the western side of the 'Iron Curtain'. The W154 was hillclimbed twice and crashed once in Romania before it was sold to a Japanese collector who eventually sold the car to the Collier Collection in Naples, Florida.

The 1939 version of the W154 was the apotheosis of the 'Silver Arrows'. It enjoyed a twin supercharged V-12 engine called the M163 with a roller bearing crankshaft that produced 485 bhp at 8,000 rpm. The engine in chassis #15 is a K-type engine, the two-stage supercharger version. The single-stage H engine from 1938 ran in most of the W154s raced in 1939.

The W154 carried 100 gallons of fuel in two tanks, one behind the driver and the second over the driver's legs. In a masterpiece of fabrication the steering column passes through the scuttle-mounted fuel tank. The screaming V-12 managed to drink its fuel brew at around 1.5 mpg so the car was losing about seven pounds for every mile it travelled. Seventy years ago the much-advanced W154 benefited from driver controlled rear shocks which had hard and soft settings to help cope with the lightening fuel load.

Incredibly, the Collier Collection's W154 is clothed in its original hand-hammered body panels. The Paul Russell Company in Massachusetts restored the bodywork to concours condition and Crosthwaite & Gardiner in the UK attended to the engine. Equally remarkable, the only major work required on the engine was replacing the rusted magnesium casting on which the twin turbochargers are mounted at the front of the V-12's block. The housing between the engine and superchargers contains a water jacket and Crosthwaite & Gardiner made a new stainless steel housing so it won't rust again.

The rest of the engine was in pretty good condition. The crankshaft and connecting rods had to be reground and new roller bearings were installed. The intake and exhaust valves were also in good shape and remain as original. There were signs of corrosion on the outside of some of the engine's castings but all was fine inside. And the fuel pump had to be replaced.

A bunch of us privileged spectators were standing behind the pitlane fence as the Collier Collection's crew prepared to fire-up the M154 for Murray Smith's Labor Day laps. A graying fellow perhaps ten years my senior stood beside me. He told me that as a child the walls of his room were covered with posters of the Silver Arrows.

"This car was what I dreamed about as a kid," he remarked. "The Mercedes Benz and Auto-Union Grand Prix cars and their drivers--von Brauchitsch, Carraciola, Lang, Nuvolari, Rosemeyer--those were my heroes."



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He related a story from some years after WWII when the federal government commissioned a study into how technological advanced Nazi Germany's military-industrial complex was going into the war. It turned out, my companion said, that the state of metallurgy employed by the Mercedes and Auto-Union Grand Prix teams was woefully inadequate in structural strength compared to modern times.

"Knowing that in hindsight," my momentary companion commented. "It's incredible to think about the bravery and skill those guys had driving those cars, bouncing them across cobblestones and off curbs. Those guys were tremendously skilled, but very brave too."

When it crackles to life, the W154's engine emits a raucous, staccato-charged shriek unlike anything we hear today. We got a taste of the engine's piercing howl at Lime Rock but the fuel mixture didn't permit Murray to get seriously into the power band so we were denied the full earful provided back in the late thirties by von Brauchitsch, Carraciola, Lang and their teammates. Still, it was a rare treat.

Test driver Gert Staub, who first drove the car at Lime Rock, is a fourth generation Daimler-Benz engineer. Staub's father was Wolfgang von Trips's co-driver and navigator on the 1955 Mille Miglia aboard a Mercedes Benz 300SLR. So the only men to have driven this car are von Brauchitsch, the Romanian who owned the cars for so many years, Gert Staub and Murray Smith.

"It was quite something when I realized I was only the fourth person to drive that car since it was built," Smith grinned. "It's really fantastic. What an amazing car. The noise and the smell from inside the cockpit is unbelievable and as Dick Crosthwaite said, 'Imagine five of these on the grid with four Auto-Unions and you're sitting in an ERA ready to try to do battle with them!' This was an experience I'll never forget."

Nor will any of us who watched and heard this remarkable car and engine run at Lime Rock on Labor Day weekend. Many thanks to everyone at the Collier Collection for making our day.

Auto Racing ~ Gordon Kirby

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For the complete story of the event, see

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