

1963 300SL Roadster

by Frank Spellman, Greater Washington Section,
and Frank Barrett, Editor/Publisher

If clothes make the man, do options make the car?



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Frank Spellman's fascination with 300SLs began in 1957, when he picked up a few pieces of factory sales literature at Bowman Motors in Washington, D.C. Since he was a mere six years old at the time, the salesmen can't have taken him for much of a sales prospect, but they were rather short-sighted. Frank's desire to own one of the legendary sports cars inspired him to get a good education, and he became a doctor. Since then he has acquired not only an unusually original 300SL Roadster but an excellent cross-section of Mercedes-Benz factory options and accessories to go with it. All the baggage, so to speak.

Luggage Cults

South Pacific cargo cults probably bear no relation to the luggage cult among 1950s Mercedes-Benz owners, but we're not absolutely sure of that. To many such enthusiasts, the factory-optional fitted luggage—made by Karl Baisch or Hepco—is something akin to the Holy Grail. And it's gotta be original, none of that repro stuff!

So if you have the original filled luggage-complete with the original stickers from the ocean liner that carried its original owners back from original Europe-where do you go from there? How about an original factory luggage rack with original factory ski clamps? Only one is known to exist, and it graces the back of Frank's Roadster. (Spouses may scoff at such automotive fanaticism, but may we gently remind them of their own current cravings for retro-styled kitchen appliances? Say, is that an original Sunbeam Mixmaster there on your counter, or is it a reproduction?)

Ephemera

Once you've begun collecting sales brochures, as Frank did, you'll eventually find the one in which DBAG's copywriter extolls, "with its impressive performance, the 300SL is the ruggedest and swiftest German production car, which in its new roadster version, not only had success in sporting competitions but is also one of the smartest and obedient business cars..., with the soul of celebrated racing sports cars."

That reference to a 300SL being an obedient business car was perhaps a subtle reminder to potential buyers that a 300SL could be bought and maintained by their businesses, though perhaps to impress clients rather than deliver donuts or gravel.

Studebaker-Packard's copywriter had his heart in the right place but forgot one detail when he wrote. "The modern outline of this beauty of a car is still further enhanced by that new style feature, the 'light unit' in which the main headlight, fog lights, the low beams, the parking light, and the turn signal are all combined." Alas, these sleek European units were unavailable on U.S.-delivered vehicles.

Apart from the obligatory factory press releases, sales literature, shop manuals, and other essentials of ephemera, owning an old Mercedes-Benz gives you a license to acquire more than your minimum yearly requirement of old magazines, books, and newspapers-any publication containing even the most remote mention of your car.

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For instance, every 300SL Roadster owner should understand deep down that they really do need a copy of the October 1956 issue of *Collier's* magazine. Why? It includes a photo essay by David Douglas Duncan on the 300SL, of course. Late 1950s back issues of SCCA's *Sports Car* display not only black and white action photos but race results from the Paul O'Shea factory racing effort. There's an ancient *Playboy* issue with 300SL photos, too. Of course, the 300SL guys all say they want it only for that article.

Another example, a 1959 review by *Houston Post* automotive editor Mel Martin, was quoted in the early 1960s by Trammell Motor Co. in Fort Lauderdale, Florida to help sell Roadsters: "If you've got the price of admission, the latest and most potent version of the Mercedes-Benz 300SL is a worthy possession. It should give thousands of miles of driving pleasure [and] win some gold for your trophy case (if you like racing and rallying)."

The pipe-smoking Mel's weakest rating of the 300SL fell in the area of resale value, which seems odd today. After all, more than a few owners have sold their cars for several hundred thousand dollars beyond their original price. So much for Mel's credibility.

Late Originals

Of course, it all comes back to the car itself, and Frank is one who appreciates the old adage, "A car is only original once." After searching 10 years for an unrestored late Roadster with disc brakes, he found one of the last to be made and sold, which happened to be one of the best original cars left.

The last 26 300SL Roadsters were built in January and February 1963, the final copy, chassis number, 3258, being completed on February 8th. That spring, MBCA member Bill Stanley was the award-winning sales manager of Piedmont Motors in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Given the opportunity to order the last six new Roadsters in the U.S. at \$6,250 each, he jumped at it.

Bill's subsequent classified ads in *The Star* advertised what had become just old, expensive inventory to Studebaker-Packard, which was then-apart from trying to stay alive, concentrating on selling the all-new 230SL. Bill had to hold onto two of the Roadsters for quite a while-his last ad appeared in our January/February 1965 issue-but his efforts eventually paid off. The half-dozen new Roadsters sold to actor Robert Horton, three doctors, a Dodge dealer, and a construction company president. The latter paid \$15,000 for his car in early 1965, almost assuredly making it both the last new 300SL to leave a U.S. dealership and the most expensive. Yes, that is a lot of money, but the guy was smart. What would a new Roadster sell for today?

Bill painfully recalls, "Mercedes-Benz sort of turned its back on the 300SL when the 230SL came out. The 300SL was distressed merchandise to them. Can you believe that? The 300SL was so much more car in every way. [It] had more romance than any other car I ever sold."

The White Dove

Frank's Roadster, number 3254, was one of five built during that final week of production, but thanks to a special lady, it didn't come to the U.S. with those other cars. First, it lingered at the factory until summer, when Mercedes Pollack and her husband were visiting Andorra. Having heard that the 300SL was going out of production, Mrs. Pollack called the factory and arranged to buy this Roadster. She flew to Stuttgart and bought the car for a clearance price, \$6,500 (U.S. list price was about \$11,000). On August 13th, 1963, a factory driver piloted the European spec car and Mrs. Pollack to Geneva, where she and her husband, Mark, had a home.

Like many 300SL buyers, Mrs. Pollack was Someone Special. The Pollacks had been in the tobacco business in Cuba, but when the Batista regime fell to Castro's rebels in 1960---and Frank Spellman was still dreaming of owning a 300SL---they fled to the U.S. leaving behind not only their lucrative business but a 45-acre estate and a car collection including two other 300SLs, a Bugatti, and three Ferraris, among others. Castro liked their house so much that he took it over and lives there to this day.

In October 1963, the Pollacks returned their Roadster, which they called *La Paloma Blanca* (The White Dove) to the factory to have a few options fitted. After staying at the Hotel Rosengarten while this was accomplished, they toured Europe in the car then returned with it to New York via ocean liner the following February. They drove the car home to their estate in Tryon, North Carolina and used

it regularly. By the late 1960s, though, Mr. Pollack's eyesight had deteriorated, so the Roadster went into storage until 1977, when it was sold to Ann Hallowell of Connecticut. As antique gun dealers, she and her husband had a sense for fine machinery and history and for 20 years they preserved the car well, adding only about 2,000 miles.

Dream Come True

In 1997, after learning that this still-original Roadster was available, and knowing how difficult it was to find such an original example, Frank went to see it. "The paint, chrome, and interior were virtually flawless, and it drove like a dream. Although the original hoses and clamps looked a little scary, none of them leaked." He bought it within an hour. The next weekend, with the car in his suburban Maryland garage, he sorted out all of its pedigree, papers. Among these were its original bill of sale, original service booklet, original factory build card, and original warranty plus letters from the original owners and service records.

According to Frank, "I wanted to mate the car with a collection of original factory options I had accumulated. I prefer the European-spec 300SL, with European headlights, amber taillights, the steering column horn switch and headlight flasher, and European instruments. The 3.64:1 rear axle ratio would allow somewhat lower rpm at highway speeds than the normal U.S. ratio of 3.89:1. I didn't like the U.S.-mandated rear fender reflectors, either.

The European-spec car originally had the glass-covered European headlights, but because it was bound for the U.S., it was fitted with U.S. sealed-beam units later, probably on its factory visit in October 1963. The factory also moved the rear view mirrors from the fenders to the doors to accommodate Mr. Pollack's eyesight and make it easier to see around the luggage rack. Today the original European headlights---stored for years---are back in place, and the mirrors are in their original location.

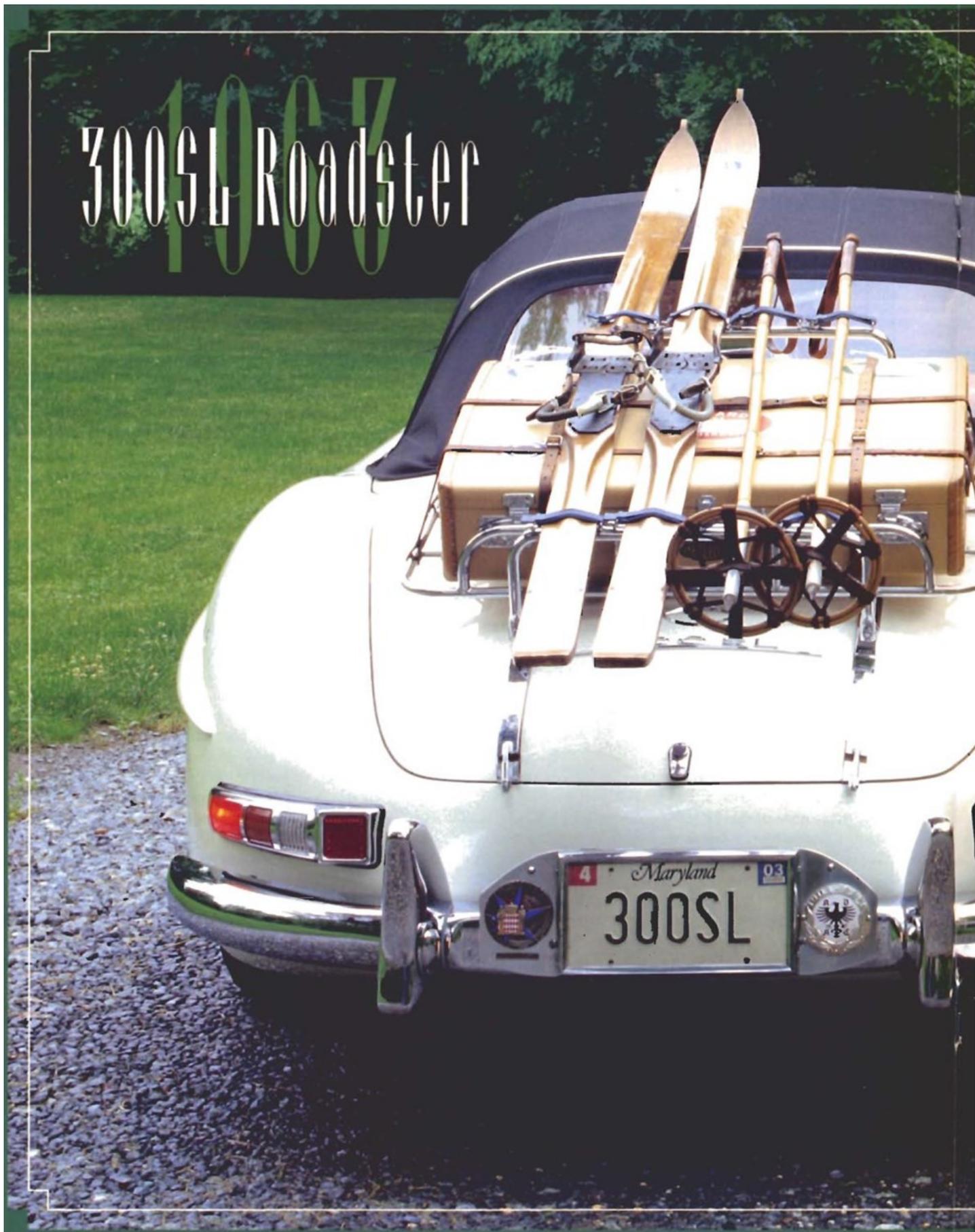
Because it was originally intended as a European model, the car also has the unusual Alfred Baiche seat belts, not fitted to U.S. models. The Becker Grand Prix radio is a more compact and expensive version of the Becker Mexico radio and became available in 1962: a Reims shortwave adaptor is also fitted. The badges represent the clubs and rallies that the Pollacks enjoyed. Inevitably, one original aspect of the car fell victim to age and wear. After 27,000 km (about 17,000 mi) the original Continental Super Record whitewall tires needed replacement, and since they were no longer available at the time, blackwall Michelin X radials took their place.

Another deviation from original condition was definitely unplanned. In 1999 the car was rear-ended. The necessary repairs---which involved fresh paint and eventually a new top---were entrusted to Paul Russell and Company, who Frank says, "walked the fine line between restoration and preservation of low-mileage originality."

Last fall, Frank drove the Roadster to Asheville, North Carolina for the national convention of The Gull Wing Group. On the trip, he stopped in Tryon, North (not South) Carolina to visit its original owner, Mercedes Pollack, who still lives there. She later told Frank that the car "has always been maintained like a trophy, so please keep her that way. Take good care of one of my babies."

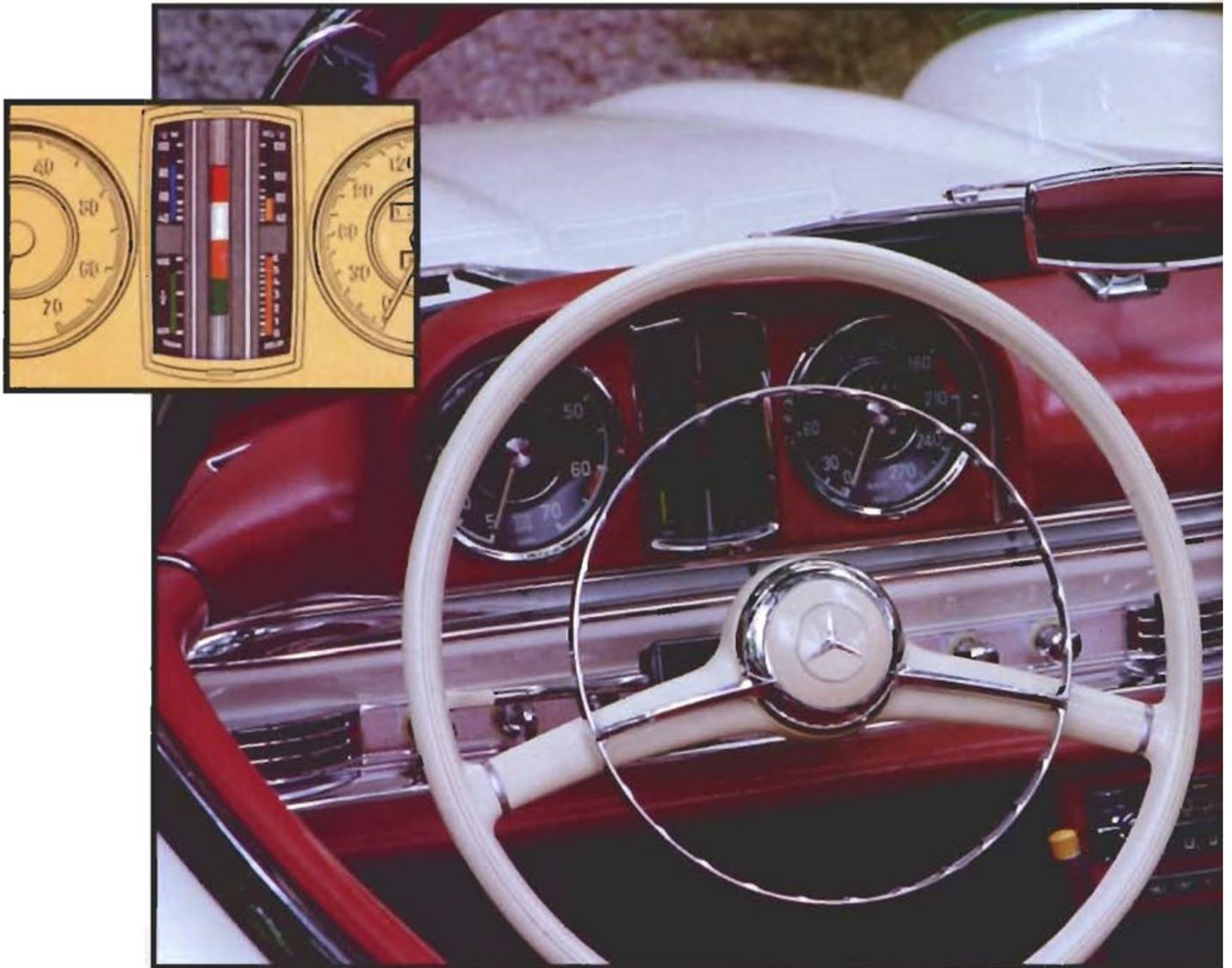
Mercedes is right. When it comes to great old cars, we're all just curators.

1967 300SL Roadster

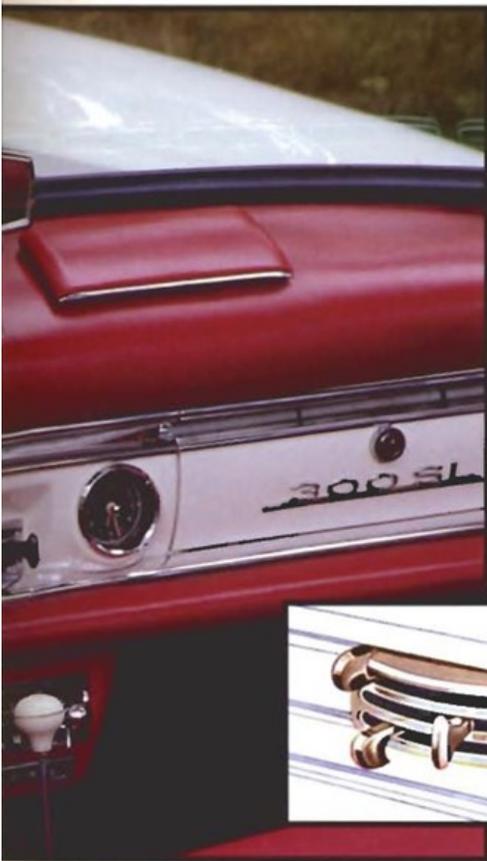




Luggage from Mrs. Pollack's former 300SL was strapped to the exterior rack, thought to be the only existing example. Skis are non-Mercedes-Benz, of course, hand-carved in Norway during the 1950s.



Before the U.S. government required pictograms so that any idiot could drive a car, the 300SL required a look at the owners manual before all those chrome-plated knobs were twisted.



Mercedes enjoyed her namesake in Europe before bringing it to the U.S.



*Above: If you liked, Daimler-Benz would ship your new 300SL to America by air.
Left: Since someday, original drum-brake 300SL Roadsters may be rare and valuable!*

*Current photography
by Dennis Adler,
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