

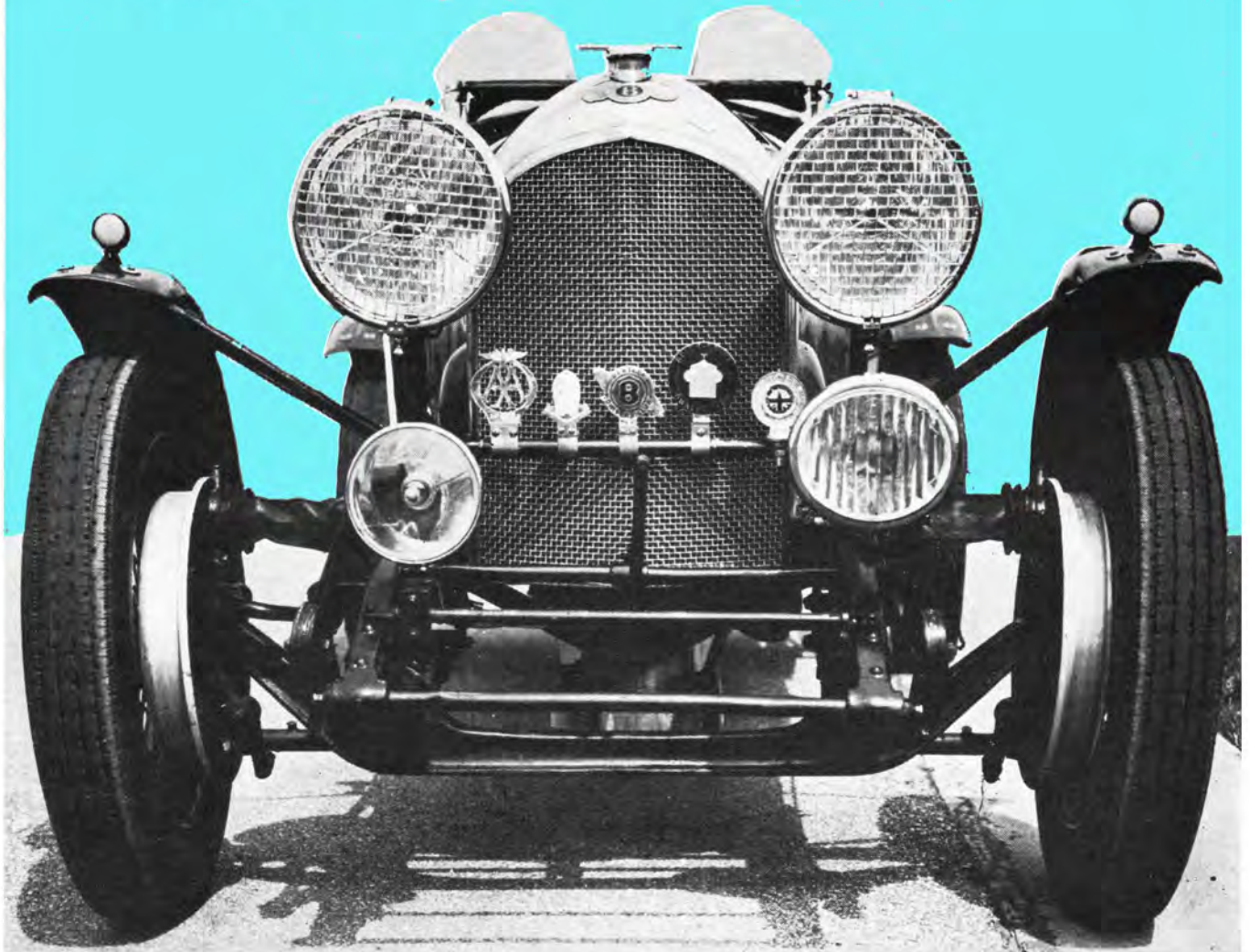
BIG, BOLD BENTLEY

AFTER SOME TWO YEARS of letter writing, searching and researching, there it crouched on a damp, misty Chicago dock. It had huge headlamps, one slightly askew as if it were a corner loafer obscenely leering at the passing cool chicks, a barrel-chested radiator with its red, winged insignia thrust arrogantly to the fore, battered stubby body flecked with spots of aluminum showing through, its huge silencer haphazardly hanging from one clamp, and all with the odor of the sea, mildewed leather, and canvas enveloping it like a cloak. Its ancestry and

breeding blared at you from every stark, useful piece of substantial iron. It was a true Le Mans-type red label, the 100-mph Super Sports 3-liter Bentley, one of the rarest, most desired cars in the world. It was shabby and year-worn, but it was mine!

W. O. Bentley built 3048 Bentleys from 1922 to 1931 in all sizes and shapes. Some 1634 of them had the 3-liter engine, and the elite were the red label or Speed models, 507 of them on the 9-foot, 9½-inch chassis. But at the pinnacle were the 100-mph cars on the 9-foot chassis. Only 15 of them were

BY PAUL HATMON



built in 1925 and 1926, and every motor and chassis number is registered with the Bentley Drivers Club. The greatly reworked engines fitted to the Super Sports had their serial numbers prefixed SS, and these little letters inspired such awe (and commanded such a price) that many 10-footers were cut in two, shortened to 9 feet, and a counterfeit SS placed in front of their numbers in mostly futile attempts to boost their value.

The 100-mph Super Sports was the most magnificent of a series of efforts to bolster the chronically failing finances of Bentley Motors Ltd., a situation that stayed until Rolls-Royce moved in during 1931 to create the "silent sports car." But be this as it may, the idea for the 100-mph Bentley was derived from the car that Clement and Duff drove to Britain's first win at Le Mans in 1924. This chassis had been cut down to 9 feet, and the improvement in handling, though perhaps unexpected, was dramatic. Seven of the 15 genuine 100-mph models have been traced by the writer, and the only other one known to be in the United States at this time reposes in Harrah's Automobile Collection at Reno, Nev.

It was and is customary to refer to various Bentleys as blue label, green label, etc., but Bentley itself has always frowned upon this admittedly handy categorization. The reason is that while ordinarily blue stands for the Standard 3-liter and red for the Speed Model, the genuine 100-mph models were not always green. The 4½-liter badge was black, the 6½-liter Standard was blue, the 4- and 8-liter blue, and the 6½-liter Speed Six was normally green. However, all bets were off if a customer for any model wanted a badge to match his paint job, and many did.

The engine of the 100-mph is slightly different from the other 3-liter models. It is a 4-cylinder with a bore of 3.15 inches and a stroke of 5.86 inches, a displacement of 2996cc (183 cubic inches) and a compression ratio of 5.6-to-1 versus 4.31-to-1 on the Standard model. At 3500 rpm it developed a bhp of 85 as against the 70 of the Standard. The head is non-detachable due to designer W. O. Bentley's distaste of gasket trouble, and each cylinder has four tulip-shaped valves. The two inlet and two exhaust valves are driven by a single overhead camshaft running in five white-metal bearings and turned through a gear tower on the front end. This same gear tower drives two magnetos mounted on platforms cast into the block on either side of the tower, both driving off a cross-shaft.

The two magnetos spark eight plugs, reserving the battery for starting and for supplying the huge P 100 "Kings of the Road" headlamps which no doubt replaced the original Smiths many years ago when some terror of the English highways decided he needed light that would reach where he was going to be very shortly.

The crankshaft runs in five white-metal bearings with a double-thrust ball race in the front to prevent end-play and to take the clutch withdrawal thrust. The gear-type oil pump is mounted in the bottom of the sump and is driven through a vertical shaft from the front of the crankshaft by skew gears.

There are two of almost everything on a racing Bentley including two gigantic SU "Sloper" carburetors which, after proper adjustment of the position of the shoulder of the needle to the face of the piston, will function indefinitely without alteration.

Like everything else on the Bentley, the gearbox is massive in size and built for brute strength to take the pounding of hours on end of inadequate roads or tracks. The record books have proven this was the correct approach. There are four speeds forward and one reverse with a rather too large gap between 1st and 2nd. There is no slushing into gear with a vintage Bentley! It's either in or out, and the horrible clashing, grinding noises that result when a gear is missed will chill the soul of a true car lover, though the Bentley seems to shrug such abuse off in stride.

Suspension is firm to say the least, with heavy-duty leaf springs fore and aft in conjunction with friction-type shock absorbers. The latter use quite a bit of friction but absorb very little shock. At speed, any washboard-type road is sure to set the Bentley airborne, and arriving back on earth is truly a shock both to the spinal column and the nervous system. The only approach is to hang on to the wrapped steering wheel and forge ahead, leaving the hapless passenger to wind up with a grip of death on some portion of the driver's anatomy, which in turn leads to some exciting moves.

There have been more books written on the Bentley, mainly by the English, than almost any other car and it is doubtful if I can add anything that has not at some time or other been said by some ecstatic lover of the racing green — and Bentleys in particular. I mean, for example, the experience of walking up to a vintage Bentley and striding over to the driver's door — oops, this type of racing Bentley has no driver's door! — then sheepishly going around the other side and sliding in over the minute passenger's seat. Or, settling down behind the huge wheel, noting that the oval brass pedal between the brake and clutch is the throttle, and that the hand brake is mounted on a bracket of its own, outboard. It's all car!

Then you count the myriad of instruments on the gleaming mahogany dash — 13 of them, to be exact. It is very hard to be blasé in the face of such a jet-age array of instruments, gears and levers. Switch on, push buttons of both magnetos in, two pumps of the "A" gas control which puts raw gas into the manifold, a touch of the huge brass Smiths starter button, and there is an immediate burbling pulsation of sound from the rotund copper tail-pipe. One of the joys of a correctly tuned Bentley is its ability to start immediately, almost on the 1st turn after even months of inactivity. PE 7539 has never failed to pounce to life with a minimum of effort and preparation.

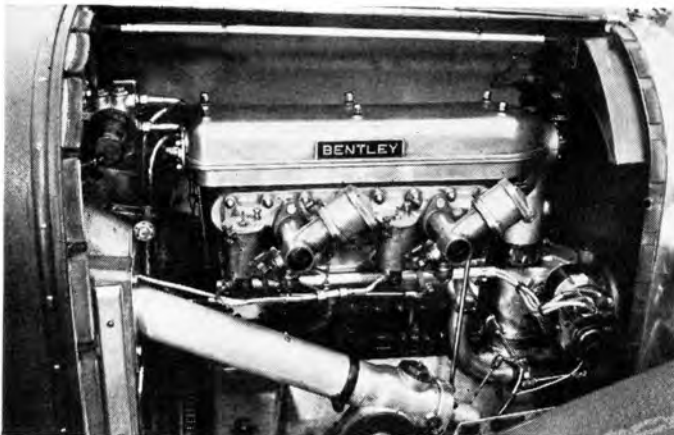
The custom-type racing bodies fitted to the 100-mph Bentley are mostly different from each other with the exception that they are almost all two seaters of minimum width. Sitting in between the side rails of the frame in the approved racing position is just about the only way one can sit at all in these. After a short bit the oil and water begin to warm, so you grasp the gigantic lever with the great aluminum ball on top, depress the firmly resistant clutch, slide into 1st gear with some resulting noises, release the clutch and away you go, savoring a sound similar to the throbbing of a huge air compressor. Next 2nd, then 3rd with the resulting clashes — the box on a racing Bentley will not be hurried — back with a small thud into 4th gear, and at about 45 miles an hour it's time to look around at the world flowing beneath. Then on to the freeway to fit in easily with traffic moving at 60 and 70 mph. You open the cut-out and the burbling pulsation becomes a flame-throwing roar emitting directly from under the passenger's feet.

About this time comes the thought that it might be necessary to stop or at least slow down. A firm application of pressure only seems to cause the behemoth to move faster, so you panic with your full 200 pounds on the pedal — so it seems — which succeeds in locking up all four wheels with accompanying noises to cause all other cars in the immediate vicinity to shy away. But a touch on the brass accelerator brings an immediate response (the high-gear torque is tremendous) and away you go.

When you alight from this high-wheeled carriage without running board or step plate, it is some time before the world settles back to the norm — something like a turista's first gulp of tequila. If ever the opportunity arises to ride in, or better still, to drive a vintage Bentley, grab it, for it's an experience like no other. It's a visit back in time to raw-boned days of hardy men and tougher machines that were built for racing without frills and doodads. /MT



OWNER HATMON IS OBVIOUSLY ENJOYING HIMSELF IN THE "RED LABEL." CONTRARY TO LEGEND, LABEL COLOR COULD BE DICTATED BY BUYER.



Type G5, 45-degree "slopers" were used for a while, then discontinued in favor of vertical SUs when 4-½ liter bowed.



The Bentley invariably starts instantly, but Hatmon reports that "pre-flight" check list requires 5 minutes to complete.

BIG BOLD BENTLEY

continued



MOST COMMON VIEW OF SUPER SPORT. A TOP WAS SUPPLIED BUT AUTHOR SAYS IT WORKS ABOUT AS WELL AS A CUB SCOUT'S FIRST PUP TENT.