

The legendary Beetle's

John Lemon - Car Historian

In 1951, when the Korean War was still very much a reality, Sugar Ray Robinson, World Middleweight Boxing Champion was beaten by Randolph Turpin and the world's first production jet passenger airliner, the De Havilland Comet, had recently been granted its certificate of airworthiness.

That year also saw Springbok Radio, South Africa's first commercial radio station, just one year old, beaming its programmes across South Africa advertising products like Persil washing powder, Ipana toothpaste, Post Toasties and many more names that are no longer there, Springbok Radio included.

One product introduced in South Africa in 1951 and for which few people saw any future, made its debut on August 31 and is still very much in evidence more than 33 years after production ceased.

A best seller for 11 years of its 28-year reign, the product was of course, the Volkswagen Beetle.

To put the Volkswagen story in South Africa into perspective one really has to go back to 1946.

In that year a franchise agreement was signed between the Studebaker Export Corporation of South Bend Indiana USA and South African company Industrial and Commercial Holdings for the assembly and distribution of Studebaker cars and commercial vehicles. South African Motor Assemblers and Distributors (Samad) was formed the same year. A site for the factory was chosen on the outskirts of Uitenhage, the foundations being laid in April 1947.

The agreement and subsequent completion of the factory early in 1949, set up the infrastructure required for the assembly of vehicles from various manufacturers in order to make the factory economically viable. In that year an agreement was signed with Austin Motors of England for the assembly of Austins in Uitenhage and towards the end of 1950 negotiations were started between Samad and Volkswagenwerk with a view to assembling the Volkswagen sedan in Uitenhage (the name "Beetle" was not yet official).

Although no concrete agreement had yet been entered into between the two parties, a fully built-up Volkswagen was dispatched to Samad on March 28, 1951.

On July 27 a second fully assembled Volkswagen was sent to Uitenhage. Amazingly this historic vehicle, still fitted with its original engine, has survived till today and belongs to Dr Johan Van Rensburg of Kimberley.

After the signing of the agreement in July, things moved pretty quickly and on August 31, 1951 the first Volkswagen came off the production line in Uitenhage.

Volkswagenwerk insisted on setting up a dealer network for spares and sales, almost in that order and the last four months of 1951 saw 290 cars sold. Those were brave owners, not to mention the brave dealers

who took on the franchise, as Volkswagen was virtually unknown in South Africa and the car itself was unusual and unconventional in having

an air-cooled engine situated in the rear end.

There were no

luxuries in those early models, not even a fuel gauge or a synchromesh gearbox, although the car did have hydraulic brakes (first fitted to the deluxe model in April 1950) and a very efficient heater.

Very soon, however, the little German car started building a reputation for reliability although sales hovered around 500 units per year until 1954, mainly because of import restrictions. But from 1956 sales started to climb quite dramatically.

No doubt the Volkswagen's performance at local rallies in the hands of people like Leicester and Marion Symons helped to raise its reputation for reliability. They entered the 1954 Pretoria/Lourenco Marques (Maputo) Rally (forerunner of the Total International Rally) in a used 1952 1131cc Beetle and walked off as overall winners.

Winning rallies like the tortuous East African Safari and the 16 000 km Round Australia Rally also helped to bolster its reputation for toughness and reliability.

On June 1, 1956, a 1955 model Volkswagen became the first two-wheel drive vehicle to conquer the notorious Sani Pass in the Drakensberg between Natal and Lesotho. The car was crewed by Leicester Symons, Ewold van Bergen, Dave Preiss and Martin Harper.

Despite the hammering the car took in climbing the pass, which was virtually nothing more than a track for pack mules and covered in rocks and snow, the only repair it needed before coming second overall in the Pretoria/Lourenco Marques Rally a few months later, was a new clutch.

By this time the Beetle's future was secured and sales were running at record levels, sales for 1957 were almost double those of 1956 at 5 212 units.

With the introduction of the larger rear window and windscreen for the 1958 model year, one of the major criticisms of the Beetle was overcome and it became the best-selling model in South Africa for the first time.

Of course the Beetle has been credited with many almost unbelievable feats of endurance, but one outstanding and little known one was the epic journey undertaken in a standard 1960 Beetle by Mike Streeker and Colin Wynne of Port Elizabeth.

The journey started in Port Elizabeth in December 1961 and ended nine months and 45 000 km later in London. It took them through Africa, the Middle East (where they were joined by Lilith Bond of Johannesburg), Europe and eventually to Norway where they reached Nord Kapp (North Cape) Island the northernmost point of Europe before heading for England.

On the motorsport scene in 1961, Beetles made a virtual clean sweep of the 4th Total International Rally.

Leicester Symons and Ray Hauptfleisch in a Karmann Ghia took overall honours and first in class with Beetles in 4th, 5th, 8th and 10th overall and 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 6th in class.

It is perhaps surprising to many people that the Beetle enjoyed quite considerable success as a rally car during the '50s and '60s, both in South Africa and internationally. This was probably due more to reliability and consistency rather than outright speed. Of course the skill of the drivers and navigators could not be discounted.

For the 1961 model, major changes were made to the engine. While still 1192 cc (1200), horsepower was increased from 27kW to 29kW and for the first time a fully synchronised gearbox together with other "luxury" items such as a windscreen washer, self-cancelling indicator and padded sunvisor for driver and passenger were introduced. Still no fuel gauge though, that would only come about for the 1962 model.

Unit sales dropped to 9 993 in 1961 from an all-time high of 12 246 for 1960. By 1963 sales had climbed back to 13 049 units for the year and despite the setback in 1961, the Beetle was the best-selling car for the 6th consecutive year.

While the Beetle was well known for its low overall running costs, it was never really as economical as its rivals with regard to fuel consumption. Beetle owners seemed to drive their cars harder than most, to which many letters by irate owners of other makes of car



John Lemon



never-say-die attitude



in the local press and motoring magazines, would testify.

This probably accounted for the fact that the Beetle had proportionally higher fuel consumption, but if driven conservatively, the Beetle was up there with the best of them.

The 1966 model boasted the first cubic capacity increase since December 1953, namely from 1192cc (1200) to 1285cc (1300) and from 31kW to 37kW. The Beetle had inadvertently joined the famed American "horsepower race"!

In July 1967, an addition to the Beetle line-up was announced which caused quite a stir. This was the semi-imported 1500cc disc-braked Beetle which, just a few months before, had been launched in Germany to great acclaim. While only a limited number was assembled, it proved popular particularly regarding the extra power generated by the 1500cc motor which put out almost 67% power. Its wider rear track enhanced road holding considerably.

South Africa's own 1500cc Beetle arrived with the 1968 model which boasted many changes forced on it by American safety legislation including larger taillights, vertical headlamps and its distinctive large one-piece front and rear bumpers. Unfortunately it retained (as did all South African assembled Beetles from this point on) the domed hubcaps, drum brakes, five-bolt wheel rims and linkpin-kingpin front suspension set-up of previous models, while the European models were fitted with front disc brakes, slotted four-bolt wheels rims with flat hubcaps and a ball-joint front suspension.

However, this didn't deter South African buyers, as sales reached record levels in 1968 and by 1970, with the introduction of the 1600 cc engine, sales of 21 009 units were recorded, an all-time record for a single model in South Africa up to that time.

On February 17, 1972, Volkswagen plants world-wide celebrated the production of the 15 007 034th Beetle, so breaking the Model T Ford's 45 year old record as the most produced single model in automobile history. It is doubtful if the Beetle's record will ever be broken.

The Model T and the Beetle remained true to their original concepts throughout their production lives.

In 1973, sales again reached record levels of 21 034 units. This would be the highest figure achieved as from this point on, sales started to decline. With this in mind, Volkswagen South Africa started introducing limited-edition models to boost sales.

The first of these was the "Fun Bug" introduced in 1974. A bright, fun car as its name suggested, full of unique features. Another was the Lux Bug - it too featured numerous luxury items.

Sales continued to fall despite efforts to stop the decline. Innovative and uniquely South African addition to the range was introduced in May 1975 to boost the sales. It featured design changes made solely for the South African market. The car, known unofficially as the TDL Beetle (after Tucker D Lochhead, Volkswagen South Africa's technical director who proposed its production) was officially named the 1600S Super Beetle.

It was a blend of the local 1600L and the 1303 models built in Germany. Tooling amounted to R1 million which included a new front bonnet especially for this model. The roof section and dashboard were imported from Germany and the car was instantly recognisable by its large curved windscreen and full dashboard with cowed instrument panel.

The "Jeans Bug", probably the most youthful looking Beetle, was introduced in 1976 together with the Silver Anniversary Beetle of which only 216 units were built to celebrate 25 years of the Beetle in South Africa. Sales continued to drop, however, with only 12 252 units sold for the year.

Although the end was in sight, there was still fight left in the Beetle with the introduction of one of the most exciting and powerful Beetles ever, the 1600 SP in 1977. It was fitted with a 49kW twin-carb motor.

Then dawned 1978, the last full



production year for the Beetle in South Africa, its place on the production line being filled by the new front-engined, front-wheel drive, water-cooled wonder from Wolfsburg, the Golf.

The last Beetle left the production line in Uitenhage on January 18 1979, a 1300 model with metallic bronze paintwork and very many luxury features. It was a sad occasion for many thousands of Beetle owners round the country, the Beetle at last succumbing to new technology which it had fought bravely to ward off for many years.

In all 288 353 Beetles were built in Uitenhage during its 28 year reign, 11 of them as South Africa's top-selling car. The last Beetle had a commemorative plaque on its dashboard which read, "The Legend Lives on". It was recently restored after it was nearly written off following an auto-carrier accident returning from an exhibition in Cape Town.

If one looks around the roads of South Africa and sees the large number of the first-generation Beetles still around in everyday use and recognising that the last of these cars left the production line more than 33 years ago, then there is no doubt that the legend lives on.

The idea of giving the Beetle a second life came from the USA. The Volkswagen Design Centre in California created the "Concept 1" design study in 1993 which was first shown at the Detroit and Geneva Motor Shows early in 1994.

This car could not have been more different from its predecessor with its Jetta underpinnings, water-cooled front mounted engine and front-wheel drive. It did, however, have a small flower vase on the dashboard, harking back to the 1950s when this was a popular accessory for early Beetles.

Enormous enthusiasm is probably an understatement for the reception the car received. Volkswagen decided to put it into production. Such was the demand for the car in America when it was launched in 1998 that the European launch had to be postponed until 1999. It was reported in 1998 that five new Beetles destined for Canada were shipped to Germany and sold for DM 90 000 each, almost DM 60

000 above the market price.

When production ended in 2010, nearly 1 000 000 had been sold, almost half of that number in the USA.

South Africa was lucky to receive the New Beetle for display at the Auto Africa motor show in October 1998 and it is fair to say it was the star of the show.

The initial demand was strong but it waned over the years. When production of the New Beetle ended in 2010, more than 2 600 units had been sold in South Africa including some cabriolets, first released for sale in the USA in 2003 and in South Africa the same year. South Africa had the choice of three models at the end, a 2.0 liter 85kW manual and automatic, a 1.8 liter 110kW Turbo and a 2.0 liter 85kW Cabriolet.

Don't miss Autodealer's driving impressions on the newest Beetle in next week's paper.

Footnote - by Jo Onderstall

After having travelled (and raced!) extensively around the world, Leicester and Marion Symons settled in Barberton. I got to know this "shy and retiring" couple when they joined the Lowveld branch of the Botanical Society of South Africa and regularly attended meetings and outings. They both loved the Lowveld Botanical Garden. I soon learned that they, in particular Leicester (known to all and sundry simply as Sy), was anything but retiring. When he spoke about his racing career his face and eyes lit up and there was no stopping him. And his tiny wife Marion, his navigator, usually let him do all the talking. Wherever they went he took note of everything about him. He once told me about the fascinating plants he'd seen in Ceylon! Good thing he had a navigator, because his eyes must frequently have been off the road!

Marion predeceased him and when he died, Leicester Symons made a very generous bequest to the botanical society, which is going to use it to enhance the botanical garden in Nelspruit.

