

Doug Partington's Wikner Ford Special 19



As a teenager growing up in Queensland during the 1950's I suffered from a disease (the need for speed) and all I wanted was my own racing car. Mother said I inherited the disease from my father who had raced motorcycle sidecar outfits in his youth. He had been apprenticed at a small Victorian country Ford dealership during the Model T era and was passionate in his enthusiasm for the car that put the world on wheels. Dad and I attended many local motorsport events and by the time I was fourteen I had seen and heard a 250F Maserati, a D type Jaguar and several Cooper Climax racing cars, but the car of cars to me was the Australian built Corvette powered Tornado Special. Australian built racing cars and their dogged determination to defeat the enemy; the imported factory built cars made them the stuff of legends. I had absolutely no idea then that I would become the caretaker of an Australian motor racing icon.

The disease became acute, I was fourteen years old, I had to have my own racing car but even a Model A Ford powered speedway midget would cost at least 100 pounds (\$200) an M.G. T. C. 200 pounds plus and the Ferrari Super Squalo that was for sale was 1200 pounds (\$2400). The Ferrari had been brought to Australia for the 1956 Olympic year Australian Grand Prix and had had several owners including Gilltraps Auto Museum on the Gold Coast before it was restored for historic racing in 1976. Much later I had a great race against it at the Lakeside circuit with my factory built Lynx Formula Junior designed by the great Formula One Brabham and RALT engineer Ron Tauranac, but that is another story. While still attending high school weekend work in the local wrecking yard was bringing in one to three pounds (\$5 or 6 dollars) per week (less bicycle repairs) and Dad had a lovely 1912 Model T Ford Touring and a 1904 Rambler that I eventually drove on the 1986 London to Brighton rally to enjoy. I still have the 1912 Model T Touring today.

It was in 1958 on one Saturday morning when I noticed in the Brisbane Queensland Courier Mail newspaper an advertisement reading something like this – Old Ford racing car complete but dismantled, twenty pounds

(\$40). The inspection was fatal I just had to have it. Dad helped me hassle Mum out of ten pounds (\$20) and I had four pounds of my own. There couldn't have been many buyers as they quickly took the fourteen pounds and with the help of a mate who had both a drivers licence and an Austin A70 Ute (pick up) we brought home my very own racing car. Every time I walk inside my garage today I get that very same excited feeling just as I did fifty three years ago, the Wikner Ford Special is one exciting motor car.

It took about four years to assemble the car, we called the RAJO (after its cylinder head manufacturer) and in 1962 I drove it at the Lakeside circuit in an historic parade at the Tasman International Formula One meeting. The Tasman series was created to provide the European F1 drivers with off season racing and a chance to avoid the northern hemisphere winter months. Many of the greats attended including Jack Brabham, Jim Clark, Bruce McLaren, Graham Hill, Jackie Stewart, Lorenzo Bandini and the American Phil Hill. It was also an opportunity for the factories to sell off their previous year's team cars. I was disappointed, boy was my Model T racing car slow, but instead of trying to hot it up or change the engine I took my wise old fathers advice. Dad convinced me that I had a special old car worthy of preservation. At Lakeside the legendary Tom Sulman who had raced in England in the thirties said he knew of the car. Thirty years later his name was to come up again when the full story of my car came to light.

I put the old car away. Funds improved, now working full time I bought a M.G. TD then a M.G. TC Special and finally a local factory built Lynx Formula Junior racing car. Ron Tauranac had had a hand in the Lynx's design; it was a great Ford 105E powered little car .It is still a regular historic competitor now based in the UK. I went back to veteran motoring with Dads 1912 Model T when I became a family man. I also maintained our 1904 Model G Rambler and was lucky enough in 1986 to take it on the London to Brighton rally for pre 1905 veteran cars. The Rambler now resides in the collection of the Royal Automobile Club of Queensland and on special occasions I have had the opportunity to take it for a run.

My two sons grew up to be racers and I spent my time assisting with Go-Karts, Sprint Cars, Formula Fords and when they arrived for a time in Australia we got very involved in NASCAR racing. I was employed at this time by the Shell Oil Company in Australia as part of its Shell Racing Team. For a decade I organised sponsor promotions, team merchandising and marketing etc. I also competed for the Team in Classic rally events in a Ferrari Dino 246 GTS sports car. All the while my old Ford racing car gathered dust but then

in 1994 out of the blue an interesting note came from a Model Ford T enthusiast who was familiar with my old racing car.

He said he was quite sure that there were two photos of my racing car in a book called "The Flight of the Halifax". I tracked down the book and incredibly my friend was right. It was definitely it; you could count the body screws to verify it was the same car. As we had no idea of its history we always referred to the old racing car as the RAJO, now it had a story to tell. The story was to alter how we all regarded the spindly wheeled old racing car and restoration to put it back on the race track became a priority.

The "Flight of the Halifax" tells the story of pioneer Australian aviator Capt Geoff Wikner who in the early twenties built a Model T Ford powered racing car in an attempt to entice backers to fund his aviation aspirations. After a frustrating time and failed attempts to get his company off the ground he went to England in search of a backer. Prior to his departure the Ford special was raced at several venues near Sydney and then on December the fifth 1925 it was entered at the opening meeting of The Olympia Speedway at Maroubra Beach. Maroubra as it was better known, was too often headlined as the "killer track" and was destined to a short history. It was to have been Australia's Indianapolis. That first December meeting attracted over seventy thousand spectators many of whom travelled to the circuit on especially chartered trains from the city. My racing car became the only known complete car that competed that exciting day in 1925.

Circa 1928 Geoff Wikner drove the Ford special about 700 miles over rough roads to Queensland. Based in Brisbane he set altitude records with a self built 80 hp Anzani powered aircraft called the Wico Cabin Sports. The Ford powered racing car and the aircraft were sold to help finance his trip to England. In England he managed to set up the Foster Wikner Aircraft Company building small enclosed monoplanes under the marquee WICKO. An original WICKO aircraft has recently been restored at Southampton in England and won the Spirit of Aviation award at the 2008 Goodwood Revival historic racing car event at the old WW11 RAF base West Hampnett. When the book was printed it was thought that none of cars or aircraft he had built had survived.

One of the WICKO's was a special experimental aircraft powered by a Ford V/8 60 hp engine. Geoff Wikner also spent many war years as a ferry pilot for the RAF. He flew many and varied aircraft including Spitfires, Hurricanes and Lancaster's. He married an English lady and after the war he was keen to return to Australia with his wife and two children. He put a plan together to

purchase an ex RAF Halifax bomber and sell tickets to passengers and fly home to Sydney.

The book tells the fascinating story in detail and points out that among the crew of the Halifax was the well known racing driver Tom Sulman a friend of Geoff Wikners. Sulman was the flight engineer. This fabulous history fired me up. The car I had bought as a boy was turning out to be really quite something. Dad was right again and thank goodness I had taken his advice. Despite running a family business and assisting two sons in their motor racing endeavours restoration of the car I now knew as "The Wikner Ford Special" was commenced in earnest.

In Australia the Confederation of Australian Motorsport (C.A.M.S.) has a historic log book and Certificate of Description system that is internationally recognised by the FIA and they were quite amazed when the "Wikner Ford" came to light. The car had been in storage for almost forty years and as it was totally original when I payed the fourteen pounds for it; it passed eligibility scrutiny with ease.

"The Wikner Ford Special" was built at Leura in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney in 1922 by brothers Geoff and Roy Wikner. The chassis and running gear is based on pre 1919 Ford T parts with two chassis gas welded together to form a primitive space frame. The steel body was fabricated over an angle iron frame and a large transverse bar was hand forged and bolted to the rear cross member. This was to facilitate tying the car down with leather straps for the banked Maroubra speedway. The tail of the body mimics that of a WW1 aircraft rudder.

The book tells us that Wikner brothers imported a RAJO overhead valve cylinder head, a water pump; and Mercury dropped front axle with centre lock beaded edge wire wheels for their Ford Special. A large Stromberg carburettor and a Bosch magneto chain driven from the racing camshaft and aluminium pistons completed the engine modifications. The engine block casting date is 10-8-18 and below the Ford script is "Made in the USA". The engine block has no stamped engine number. The RAJO head is the two valves per cylinder type with no valve lubrication provided.

The transmission is a standard two speed Model T epicyclic with a shortened torque tube to a normal T rear axle with a special 3:1 ratio. With 30x31/2 beaded edge tyres on 23 inch wheels its no wonder the book quotes the top speed at over 80 mph. Since restoration the Wikner Ford Special has been often timed well over eighty miles per hour. In fact on the

long downhill straight at Sydney's Eastern Creek raceway the magic speed of 100mph is almost achieved.

To provide braking the car relies on the original Model T transmission brake with the standard rear only drums (originally intended as a parking brake only), fitted with linings (they were cast iron shoes normally). They are connected to an outside hand lever that provides sufficient effort to set the linings on fire. Little retardation is actually enjoyed though the reverse pedal can be used in desperate circumstances.

The engine and running gear have been reconditioned and restored with care taken not to lose the original simplicity of the car. We were invited to give the car its maiden post restoration outing at the Geelong Speed Trials in Victoria. The Speed-Trials are held on the beach front in the rural city of Geelong where the Model T Ford was first produced in Australia. Ford Australia is the major sponsor of this event.

The car was first fired up a few weeks before the event and the almost 3 litre four cylinder engine made a great noise. Several unofficial practice runs were then enjoyed on the quite country road outside our then property in rural Victoria. Unfortunately the Speed-Trials were rain affected but we did manage one run against a vintage Delage. The Model T's jack rabbit epicyclic transmission is great off the line and I lead the Delage till the huge gap from first to top gear caused a major delay. The two speeds were not a problem on the banked tracks of the twenties.

The past dozen years or more has seen the Wikner Ford Special compete at numerous Australian historic car race events. The year 2000 was significant as the car and I were awarded the most prestigious prize for the best restoration of an Australian Special racing car and also we returned to Queensland's Lakeside raceway where I had first driven the car as an eighteen year old in 1962. There is now quite a trophy cabinet of awards and prizes that we have collected and my office cum library walls are covered with fabulous photos taken by professional photographers of my ancient racing car twisting and turning its way around many notable race circuits and sprint venues.

Because of its significance it is often invited as a VIP entrant to enhance the historic atmosphere at high profile events and becomes a Mecca to old racing car enthusiasts and the media. The cars all important historic log book that is internationally recognised by the FIA indicates that the car has competed at ten different Australian racing circuits (plus a couple of

demonstration runs on speedway dirt tracks) since its restoration and has never failed to complete an event. Its simplicity is its success; it is exactly as built in 1922 and has no mechanical enhancement such as modern day modifications to the oiling system or the replacement of the bent wire crankshaft. It is incredibly well balanced and enjoyable to drive the only problem is that often one of the beaded edge tyres despite 70 plus pounds of inflation cries enough and starts to slip off the rim. As it is usually a rear I can keep my eye on it and back off if necessary to complete the race. I don't find the primitive braking system too terrifying, it is all a matter of driving the car to suit the circuit and in fact the most enjoyable outings have been in wet conditions when the skinny tyres cut a pathway through the wet roadway and allow the under powered car to make up places against much more favoured rivals. To pass such famous vintage marqueses as Vauxhall 30/98's and Hispano Suizas and the odd MG is a wonderful reward for preserving and maintaining the Wikner Ford Special.

My career with the Shell Racing Team drew to a close a decade before I formally retired and I became involved with motor sports education firstly in Victoria then Queensland. I was asked to assist in the development of a curriculum to train young people in preparation for a professional career in the motor racing industry. Suddenly the old Ford racing car found itself in the care of people whose parents weren't even born when it was built but it fulfilled a roll so well that was to see it gain a whole new group of admirers.

My racing car along with its stable mate our families 1912 Model T Ford Touring are a great pleasure to own and drive and it could be said, short on pedigree, big on character. Geoff Wikner must have had the heart of a lion to consider racing the car on its spindly wheels axles and tyres. It is now recognised as the oldest surviving Australian built racing car and my ambition now is to continue enjoying its ownership and sharing its unique history with others.