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PILLARLESS SWEETHEART

One of only a handful ever built, this Autenrieth-bodied 327 coupe has survived the decades to become a restoration specialist's prize.

By William Edgar | Photography by William Edgar, as credited



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It's a bright sunny day in Sonoma County's Valley of the Moon, where I'm driving Jim Smith's 72-year old BMW and loving every minute of it. The 77-year old Smith is in the passenger seat of his 327 Pillarless Coupe, coaching me on shifting. It's a long throw from second up to third, and the gears grind if engine speeds are too high when I try to shift. I go to fourth instead, hoping that the next time I need third it'll work. The transmission did the same thing earlier, when Jim was driving, refusing a clean shift.

"It has to do with the synchro," Smith says over the coupe's evocative pre-war melody of engine, gear train and exhaust. "I thought if I drove it a little it might loosen up."

Like most early BMWs of its type, this 327 was fitted with a replacement Volvo transmission on restoration. It was installed by a local shop, far afield of Smith's own meticulous standards.

"I have to pull it out and fix it," says Smith, who has restored some 14 other BMWs, most from frame up. This one—a quite unusual, strikingly handsome Pillarless Coupe bodied fresh from the factory by Autenrieth Karosserie in Darmstadt, Germany—is perceptibly Smith's favorite in his broad collection.

Lined with trees and bordered by vineyards, the narrow road we're on reminds me of Europe. The coupe's tight, cozy cabin, big steering wheel, low windshield and long hood transport me back to the late 1930s, when I'd stand on car seats and watch the world stream past through child's eyes.

Coming upon an open stretch of road, I press the throttle and the 1,971cc six-cylinder overhead valve motor comes to life with unexpected brawn.

"Originally, these were 80 horse," Smith tells me as I increase our speed. "It's probably around 120 horsepower now, because I like to tweak them a little. For racing, BMW ran this engine up to 175 horse."

Listening to Jim but concentrating on the road ahead, I notice that the coupe's nose won't stay aimed on a straight line.

"You can adjust the camber on these cars," says my co-driver, who knows the machine intimately, down to its last nut and bolt. "It may have to do with toe-in, or just that it's a 1939 car."

We who are even older know what that means.

Smith has come to trust me enough to leave me behind the wheel for the drive on home. I make a perfect second-to-third gear change with a flash of pride, forgetting that the car's drums are shod with linings a tad too hard for effortless results. Even so, I'm aware of traffic ahead stopped for a red light



The meticulously restored 2.0-liter M328 engine in Jim Smith's 327/8 Pillarless Coupe puts out a bit more than its original 80 horsepower—about 120 hp, by Smith's estimation. Smith acquired the car in late 2004 from Gaylord Lineaweaver, who bought it in Germany in 1958 and imported it to the U.S.



and am on the brake pedal with the slight pump Jim suggested earlier, ready to add more pressure.

That's precisely when Smith's left foot presses the floor.

"Stop coming up here!" he warns. "With these old cars you want to think a little farther ahead."

Feeling his eyes on me, I haul her down to a halt in time, with a few feet to spare.

A serviceman's story

Back at the house, greeted by Jim's wife Gloria and his inquisitive dogs Abby and Satchmo, Jim and I repair to his chock-full office to shuffle through the coupe's old files and records. He has a fat research book on each of the BMWs parked in the adjacent garage and workshop. I've already written about one of them, Smith's Soviet-built 340 sedan [see "Iron Curtain Bimmer," issue #85], and I'm all eyes and ears as to whence came this exquisitely coachbuilt 327 Pillarless Coupe, Fabrik Nr. 74599.

Smith first heard about the car some 20 years ago, when it was owned by a Californian named Gaylord Lineaweaver. Lineaweaver had acquired it in 1958, while he was serving with the U.S. Army in Germany. Research shows that "only a few"

of BMW's pre-war coupes were bodied by the Autenrieth coachworks with their "B" pillars omitted, which gave them that open feeling of what would become known as a "hardtop convertible," the best example of which is the 1956 Bel-Air from Chevrolet.

The question concerning this BMW and its possible mates has long been, "How few is only a few?" As far as Smith has determined, only two "pillarless" bodies were produced, not discounting the possibility that more, through the war years and thereafter, were lost or destroyed.

The definitive book on Autenreith, Henning Zaiss' 1991 *Erste Darmstädter Karosseriewerke Autenrieth*, shows two such pillarless iterations in the volume's 371 pages. Smith has identified one of those two cars as very likely his #74599.

The history of the car's early life in Germany is cloudy. Based on tools of the trade he found in the coupe's trunk, Lineaweaver thinks the car's prior owner was the proprietor of an upholstery shop. Also, he'd been led to believe the car was once a German officer's.

Whatever its history, the car changed Lineaweaver's life when he came across it during the summer of 1958. He was stationed near Stuttgart, serving as an IBM

transceiver specialist in the U.S. Army's 97th Signal Battalion.

"I had never seen a BMW coupe before," Lineaweaver tells me from his home in Modesto, California, "but I had seen several of the cabriolets around. I really didn't know anything about BMWs, and I saw one out of the window of a bus I was riding in Böblingen near Stuttgart. I was all eyes and thought it was beautiful.

"Then, when I was transferred to Munich, I used to stroll around town, and that's when I saw this used car lot. I was first attracted to a BMW convertible there," he says. "It had a nice shiny paint job, but the bodywork was a mess. Then I saw the coupe, virtually untouched."

There was, however, a crunched rear fender, and he didn't like the car's oxidized dark blue paint.

"The headliner was hanging down like old theatrical curtains," he says of #74599. "It looked pretty grim, but I cut a deal with the guy and that was it."

According to the bill of sale that Lineaweaver later gave to Smith, the intrepid soldier's purchase was made on August 3, 1958 for the sum of 1,200 *Deutschmarks*, or roughly \$285. He drove it around Germany until his overseas tour was up, then, with the





U.S. Government's pledge to ship one car per service man or woman back home to the States, sea-freighted the Pillarless Coupe to New York in 1959.

"I should have shipped it to San Francisco!" Lineaweaver says.

Instead, he got behind the wheel and headed for California. "The engine caught fire on a bridge in Kansas City, and there were a lot of other little adventures that I didn't need."

Strange characters and snapshots

He eventually made it to Oakland and parked the car in a Shell station, where a BMW enthusiast named Bob Sonsten put a note on the windshield urging the coupe's owner to get in touch with him "immediately."

"Bob was a real character," says Lineaweaver, "always booting me along with the car to get it done," meaning myriad repairs and new paint.

"He was a strange guy, an eccentric. He had several BMWs, an oddball collection, but I never saw any of them running," Lineaweaver goes on. "He would turn up, uninvited, at the most inopportune times, to work on my car. I would open the door, and there he would be! Bob kept on me all the time about 'finishing my car,' as he called it."

For his part, Lineaweaver was torn

between letting the project take its time or pouring himself into the coupe all at once.

"I appreciated the good lines of the car," he says, "but I was totally useless under the hood. That was a lot of the problem I had. I couldn't tell if someone had done a good job or not."

Along the way, he took a series of snapshots of the car he'd brought home from Germany, writing notes on the reverse.

"The exhaust," he wrote on one, "is somewhat of a mess underneath, lots of leaks and rattles."

Another photo: "Yikes! What happened to the upholstery? Time and wear, that's what. The pattern looks like Mickey Mouse."

And another: "Chipped paint, poor fit of the door due to the deteriorating wood at the hinge."

The captions went on: "One inside window frame lost...wire hanging inside the roof belongs to the interior lights...note the running board, another item that doesn't look so bad at a distance..."

The ex-G.I. was creating an operetta of sorts, enjoying the car but wondering what to do with it, and when.

About 1975, Lineaweaver had the engine rebuilt and new running boards fabricated to replace the rusted originals, with a few other repairs thrown in. But the car was nowhere near finished—parts were missing,

the underbody wood was rotting—and it needed a lot more work that was both time consuming and a strain on Lineaweaver's funds. To make it at least look better, he found a painter in San Leandro who stripped the faded dark blue paint to reveal the car's original color as deep red. Rather than return to that shade, Lineaweaver chose two-tone silver.

"It looked good coming out of the shop," he says, "but what I didn't know was the painter used a lot of body putty."

Lineaweaver, now retired, tells me that he'd been in graphic arts all of his life and wasn't much of a mechanic. Although he liked the car and had visions of it being fully restored some day, the car went downhill during his tenure, mechanically speaking. Finally, it was time to get rid of it.

In the meantime, Jim Smith had been watching and waiting, not unlike the hawks and owls in far northern Idaho, where he grew up learning the laws of nature. Smith had long known about the Pillarless Coupe and its rarity, and he'd kept track of Lineaweaver's plans for it. Eventually, the two men talked prices, but they couldn't settle on a figure that would make it Smith's.

Lineaweaver's next move was to put #74599 on eBay Motors. The auction, with reserve, commenced on October 29, 2004.

Smith followed it through its first 23 bids, then jumped in and bid it up to \$20,000. He let a few more bids come in, then made his final offer of \$28,600. It wasn't enough to meet Lineaweaver's reserve, however, and the auction closed with "Reserve Not Met" on November 7, 2004. The final two bids, not from Smith, had raised the price to a still insufficient \$29,550.

Says Smith, "When it was over, Lineaweaver called me and we agreed on a price, and I bought it from him." The sale date was November 9, 2004.

A full restoration at last

Sitting in the Smiths' house with the afternoon sun streaming through the French doors, Jim and I talk about the Pillarless Coupe. With my thoughts lingering yet on the pleasure of driving this rare machine, I ask what he has done to it, and with it, since it became his those six and a half years ago.

"Like all of my cars," says Smith, "I basically take them apart—every bolt and every piece out of them, and sandblast them and clean them off."

He explains how the wrench size of bolts has to match the originals, not always easy with 8mm bolts today having 13mm wrench size heads when in period they were 14mm. It's this degree of detail and accuracy that Smith strives for, and a hint to the rest of us as to what a full and correct restoration can and must be. Smith tells me he put almost 1,400 hours into restoring the Pillarless Coupe.

"We made brand new floorboards for the car," he goes on. "The wood in these cars is a European ash, but most of the stuff that we put back is oak. The cars have a wooden shell, just like the old Chevrolets, and they wrap the metal around it. It's all basically bent into place and nailed into the wood. That wood sometimes rots away, and you have to replace it. We make copies, then whittle out a piece of wood that will match it. There are places that have routers for this, so if you have the copy, you can just run it and it will follow the copy and rout out the pieces. I don't have a router. I basically whittle mine out by planing and chiseling and whatever."

"And most of my cars I paint, but this one was painted by a local shop."

When I ask Lineaweaver what he thinks about his former coupe being blue again, he tells me he doesn't care for it.

"The blue reminds me too much of the way it looked when I bought the car," he says, straightforward. It appears that he's still disappointed that he couldn't restore the old coupe, no matter how much he wanted to.

"The car was in pretty good shape when I bought it," Smith says. "I put it on a trailer and hauled it home."

Since then, he's totally restored it, a process he loves perhaps as much as the outcome. Smith is a true craftsman, doing things by hand and mind with little added help from the outside. There are, though, certain operations he must look to others to do.

"I don't do machine work," he says. "I don't have equipment to bore the cylinders. I have to sleeve most of these engines because they have been bored, and I don't want to bore them any farther because the walls around the water jacket are really thin. I have a guy in Napa who can bore and sleeve them for me."

"If the crank has to be turned, I have to

send it out. And if I have to have a camshaft redone, I send it to a camshaft outfit to re-grind them. I have to have pistons made sometimes, because I was a race car driver in some parts of my life and I still like to kind of fool around with it, so I always change the engine slightly, do the camshaft, maybe change the valve size. I can hone out the intakes and let the air in. If you can get the air into an engine you can get them running as much horsepower as you want—the trick is to get the air into it and squeeze it tighter. I have pistons made to get the dome like I want, so if I go from 6.5:1 to 9:1, I pick up 25 horsepower."

PHOTOS BY GAYLORD LINEAWEAVER



Though its former owner Lineaweaver made a game effort at restoration, even having the bodywork restored and painted in two shades of silver, the Pillarless Coupe was still a bit rough when it changed hands in 2004. Note the odd upholstery, which most likely isn't original Autenreith fabric.





With its clean lines and flowing sheet metal, the Pillarless Coupe is a fine example of the coach-builder's art, created in Darmstadt by Autenrieth Karosserie. The spare tire holder is also the trunk lid, a clever touch. The clock and instruments are original, but the radio has been replaced.



Time for a road trip

Smith tells me that he and Gloria plan to take the Pillarless Coupe on the BMW Vintage & Classic Car Club of America's British Columbia & Alberta, Canada Expedition this summer. The rally begins on July 9 in Vancouver and takes in Victoria, the Inside Passage to Prince Rupert by ferry, the Icefields Parkway

from Jasper to Lake Louise, finally returning to Vancouver after 15 days and 2,300 miles. For a car he's driven less than 200 miles in all, this will be both a personal adventure and a true test of the machinery.

I have to ask, "Will the coupe make it?"

"The car's got some problems," he admits. "It's not the smoothest. The clutch

shakes a little. There are things that I need to do. I have to correct the transmission."

Add to this better drum brake linings, a proper motor for the windshield wipers so the sweep is more than four inches and a list of other nagging little things. But the Smiths aren't newcomers to the long haul. They've driven a number of rallies including one in Malaysia in a pre-war BMW—when Jim was still flying his planes, no place was too far or too remote. In fact, when I mention aircraft, his eyes light up. He and his pal, Ken Niles, are talking about flying the Spanish Main in Niles' twin-engine Apache.

"We would go down to Florida," Smith says, "hit all of those islands, fly all the way down into South America, and come back up the other side."

The day getting on, Jim and I walk outside to put the coupe away, he at the wheel, I guiding him as he backs into a garage crowded with the BMWs he's bought and restored over the past 25 years.

"I've only sold one of them, a 328 Cabriolet," says Smith, who as a building contractor put up houses, condos and shopping centers all around the area here in Northern California. "I'm getting older. 'Someday, I don't know, I suppose the cars are going to have to go.'"

There's a little vineyard here on Smith's property, five acres of Chardonnay grapes. Coincidentally, the German coachbuilder of his Pillarless Coupe, Autenrieth Karosserie, began doing business over 90 years ago in a Swabian vineyard near Stuttgart, at Heilbronn, known as a city of wine. Georg Autenrieth's first client was NSU, and by 1922 he'd moved his coachworks to Darmstadt, Hesse, where in pre-war times he made auto bodies for Opel, Horch, Audi, Mercedes, Adler, Maybach and BMW, as well as the prototype of the convertible KdF-Wagen that became the Volkswagen Beetle after the war.

The graceful lines and curves worn by #74599 were created and shaped on Darmstadt's Feldbergstrasse for a customer whose name has been lost in the passage of time. As World War II raged, aircraft panel production replaced auto bodies. Georg died in 1950; afterwards, under the management of Georg's two daughters and a son, Autenrieth built a good number of BMW 501 and 502 bodies. The firm's doors closed in 1964, ending the saga of a great German coachworks.

It's my time to go, too, so Jim Smith and I shake hands and part. "Thanks for letting me drive your sweetheart."

"Well, it's got a few rough spots," he replies, smiling.

All love affairs do. ●