

# *Paul Lewis's Airomobile*

## Colorado's "Almost" Volkswagen Beetle

FERDINAND PORSCHE of Germany and Paul M. Lewis of Colorado have similar goals in the mid-1930s: To build a small, affordable family automobile, well engineered, easy to maintain, and fun to drive. Porsche puts four wheels under his, calls it "Volkswagen" (literally "People's Car" but nicknamed "Beetle" because it looks like one), and it becomes the second-biggest success in automotive history, after the Model T Ford.

Paul M. Lewis's car is similar to the Beetle in philosophy, size, basic "teardrop" design, and performance. Lewis names his the "Airomobile" because it is aerodynamic in a 1930s Art Deco way. Unlike the Beetle, however, the Airomobile has three wheels and a tail like a bird. The Airomobile emerges as an oddity at best and a laughingstock at worst. It is acceptable for a car to look like a beetle, but not to look like a three-legged bird.

Lewis in 1927 moves to Idaho Springs, Colorado, where he builds a hamburger drive-in/ dance pavilion called "The ?". But he is evolving into a mechanical dreamer, planner, and promoter. Relocating to Denver in 1933, he starts up an airplane company and begins building a flying machine. His Lewis-American Airways sells stock to finance a vertical-takeoff, vertical landing, forward-moving aircraft. In February 1933, Lewis-American is fined twenty-five dollars for selling stock without filing a prospectus with the Colorado secretary of state. It will be a forebear of stock-sale difficulties that pester him throughout his life of inventing. The next year, 1934, Lewis builds a working prototype of the three-wheel Airomobile. As a high school graduate who proudly states that he never attended college, Lewis plans to market an inexpensive, simple, streamlined three-wheeler to sell for \$300.

Response to Lewis's stock offerings is so positive that he proceeds with his idea to build Airomobiles as well as airplanes. Lewis does not know how to build cars, so he approaches Carl Doman and Ed Marks, ex-engineers for the Franklin Automobile Company who now operate their own struggling automotive factory. Lewis is represented to Doman as having a considerable amount of money. Doman in 1953 will recall his initial meeting with Lewis:

He had a model of a small teardrop car. It was a little beauty. He outlined very briefly his plans to develop a full-size car with lines similar to his model. He also outlined his plans for production, financing, etc... He gave me \$1,000 to close the deal, with an agreement to pay me \$500 a month for engineering services.

Although the Airomobile prototype is made in Colorado, production is planned for Syracuse, New York, home of the Doman-Marks Engine Company. Lewis follows development of his dream car very closely. Its Franklin-made engine is mounted in the front, generates fifty-eight horsepower, and is air-cooled. He later will accuse Volkswagen of stealing the Airomobile's engine design. The Airomobile has two front drive wheels, front-wheel steering, with a single little rear wheel scooting along behind. From the start, Doman and Marks believe the three-wheel design to be a mistake, and indeed draw up designs showing the Airomobile with four wheels and a rear engine, but Lewis is obsessed with the three-wheel concept, insisting that the stream-lined looks of the Airomobile would be compromised by the use of four wheels. Doman writes in June 1954:

I never did like the lines, the single rear wheel, and other features of the Airmobile [sic]. But Ed Marks and I had to eat and we certainly didn't (in fact, couldn't) bite the hand that was feeding us. So we made the Airmobile the way the sponsor designated.... The Airmobile never carried the Franklin name. Ed Marks and I worshipped that name too much to place it on a car of questionable character.

Manufacture of the Airomobile body becomes a problem. The original concept—a true teardrop, without hood or fenders—is changed to give the Airomobile a more conventional front end, featuring bullet-style head-lights atop the fenders, and a hood to better accommodate the engine. Even later, the headlights are built in to the fenders, in the style of a late-1930s Ford. Lewis now envisions at least four body styles: the initial two-door, a convertible, a panel delivery truck, and a pickup. Doman-Marks hopes to subcontract out the body manufacture, but the Airomobile is so unconventional that nobody wants to attempt the project, and the body must be made in-house. Problems develop with the front suspension, the engine cylinders and camshaft, the steering, and the gear-shift linkage.

But finally, Paul Lewis's Airomobile is ready for its maiden run—fifteen miles carrying four men. "It's a success! It's wonderful!" exclaims co-manufacturer Ed Marks. The cost: \$25,000. Lewis dreams of building at least 100,000 a year and selling each for \$500. Research concludes that that goal is reachable, provided that the money for tooling, equipment, and materials can be raised.

But in early 1936—just when Paul Lewis is tending to final refinements in his Airomobile—the Denver office of the federal Securities and Exchange Commission enters the picture with questions about the financing of the Airomobile's parent firm, Lewis-American Airways. On April 3 the SEC suspends Lewis-American's privileges to sell stock through the mails because of misstatements and omissions in its prospectus. The government takes note that not one Airomobile has been manufactured for sale, and that only one airplane has been made. Lewis-American, the government asserts,

has had a hand-to-mouth existence, selling its stock at tremendous variations in price in order to obtain money with which to carry on its experiments. More than one-third of the gross proceeds of the sale of stock has been devoted to the expense of raising capital. Only two attempts to fly the plane have been made. On the first, the housing of one of the rotary wings broke, and on the second, made Sept. 25, 1935, it was brought safely to the ground from a height of eight feet after a "flight" of approximately 150 feet.

(In 1971, at age seventy-four and still trying to de-velop a three-wheeled car in Colorado, Lewis is defen-sive about his ongoing encounters with government regu-lators. In a letter to Special Interest Autos magazine, he writes: "The Securities Exchange Commission [sic] stud-ied my Airomobile project for two years. At the end of those two years, the SEC sent two men from Washington to tell me that they found nothing wrong with my company, Lewis-American Airways. Neither did they find where anyone had ever made a complaint about the company's business activities.")

Whether from naïveté or undaunted devotion to his little automobile, Lewis forges ahead to sell the public on the Airomobile. In the spring and summer of 1937, he tours thirty-six states with the Airomobile, recruiting 300 "dealers" and displaying his oddity to the public from town to town. In Kansas, the crankshaft breaks in two, but the local welder is able to put it together again. The Airomobile averages 43.6 miles to a gallon of gaso-line, which delights Lewis. Moreover, he assembles 4,200 stockholders, some with as little as ten dollars invested.

Upon viewing the Airomobile or a photo of it, some are concerned over the vehicle's roadability and handling. But an hour or two at the steering wheel is said to convince them as to the car's braking and cornering, even at high speed.

But any momentum there may have been for Paul Lewis's beloved three-wheeler or his airplane begins to slow. In 1938 he takes to the road again in an attempt to stir up interest (and cash), but neither is forthcoming. Lewis blames troublemaking government meddlers, especially the SEC, which, he says, is acting at the behest of the major automakers. "I told them," he says, "that if it's a sin against society to build a car that gets 43.6 miles to the gallon, then why not go ahead and arrest me."

No charges are brought, no stockholders complain, and a judge lifts an order prohibiting Airomobiles from being made. But damage to the company has been done. And on November 1, 1939, three former Lewis-American employees petition Denver federal judge J. Foster Symes to receive their back salaries. The company is bankrupt.

Only one Airomobile was completed. In 1970, a staff member from the magazine Special Interest Autos takes the sole Airomobile on a test drive. His evaluation:

We came away from the Airomobile feeling that with four wheels it could have become an excellent People's Car. Even better, considering its state of refinement, than the postwar Volks[wagen]. As a 3-wheeler, though, the Airomobile would have been hazardous for drivers who hadn't mas-tered the special care it takes to drive one. The main thing you have to practice is restraint. You simply can't hustle a 3-wheeler through turns the way you do a conventional car. And, of course, in emergency situations, when you don't get the option of turning gradually or slowing down gently, three wheels become a definite liability. So it's probably just as well that the Airomobile didn't succeed.

### **Epilogue**

Following the Airomobile experience, Lewis creates and sells advertising specialties and small toys in Denver and Los Angeles. He eventually claims twenty-eight patents, from a simple pinwheel toy, to a boilerless steam engine, to a rubber-wheeled railroad train.

Growing restless, Lewis in 1962 forms a company called the Highway Aircraft Corporation in Lakewood, a Denver suburb, and begins designing a futuristic 130-mile-per-hour vehicle called the Fascination. At least three Fascinations are completed and displayed during promotion trips. In Denver, a Fascination is exhibited at Stapleton Airport and is featured on a television program. But it is not to be: Lewis's latest batch of stockholders - many of them farmers - rebel and take over the company, which quickly dies for lack of funds.

Moving to Montana, Lewis develops a hydroplane called the Fantastic, which promptly attracts the atten-tion of state regulators who contend that Lewis's boat advertisements are really an offer to sell unregistered securities. Nine felony counts are filed, but prosecution is deferred. It is the Airomobile catastrophe all over again. Lewis blames his failures on politicians, car com-panies, and the oil interests who are against anything that will save energy.

Paul Lewis dies on November 27, 1990, at age ninety-four. Among his last public statements were, "I'd be a millionaire today many times over if it weren't for all the interference. But I've lived a comfortable life. I've got no regrets." America's only salvation, he said, "is to turn the inventors loose. The inventors are why we were the greatest country in the world. Now we're getting to be third-rate." His daughter, Lorene Burr, says today: "He had no bitterness, and he often said that he did not know what he would do with a lot of money. I thought that if he had succeeded, he would have been dead earlier, from working too hard."

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