

60 Years of 2CV

by Konni Hoferichter

It was Pierre Boulanger's brief to his Chief Engineer to design a small car that could carry two farmers, 50kg. of potatoes or a small barrel of wine at a maximum speed of 60 km/hr. Rural roads in France were very rough, mostly cobblestone, so the suspension was to be soft enough "to carry a basket of eggs on the back seat across a ploughed field with breaking any eggs". Fuel consumption had to be less than 3 litres per 100 km. The car was aimed at getting farmers from horse drawn transport into an affordable and easily maintained car.

The first full-size wooden mock-up was ready by 1936. Pierre Boulanger, a tall man, wanted more headroom and the team was instructed to design a car that could accommodate a man with hat. In early 1937 the first prototype was ready. A aluminium body, with magnesium wheels, mica windows and seats suspended hammock-style from the roof made this a very light vehicle.

By the end of 1937 several prototypes were ready and these were powered by a 375cc. flat twin engine designed by Maurice Sainturat. The aluminium body caused major construction problems but Boulanger was adamant that the car was to be ready to be shown at the 1939 Paris Salon. He ordered production of 250. Only one car was ready by 2nd September 1939. War broke out the following day. When it became clear that the Germans might occupy France Boulanger was worried about the project falling into German hands and ordered all remaining prototypes, in varying degrees of completion, to be destroyed.

This could have been the end of the story but was not. Several people carried on with development in secret and 4 hidden prototypes were uncovered many years after the war. Several changes were made to the design as time progressed including a body from light gauge steel, an electric starter instead of a rope-pull and a heating system.

The car was finally shown at the 1948 Paris Salon, 13 years after conception. And so, the car that is almost certain to have been a monumental disaster had it been launched in 1939, got a second lease of life because of the continuing development during the war and went on to be produced up to 1990.

This little miracle was called 2CV (Deux Cheval Vapeur) because it had an output of the French equivalent of 2 steam horses or deux cheval vapeur.

Initial reactions by the press and public were not necessarily favourable but given the time and circumstances the car made perfect sense and was accepted very quickly by post-war France. When proper production started in 1949 there was an unprecedented demand. The little 2CV became a familiar sight on French roads and whilst it achieved the original goal of becoming the vehicle of choice for the rural population it also became popular as a city runabout.

Demand was so high that production could at first not keep up and cars were "rationed" to those who needed them most, for example doctors, government officials and artisans.

Production of right-hand-drive cars started at the English Citroen factory at Slough in 1952 for the British market and colonies. This was never a great success as British tastes differed greatly to those of their French cousins. Of interest to South Africans is that the Slough-built cars even had a special South African modification, notably in the way in which the rear window was fitted to the car. 9 cars are known to still be in the country. Slough production of the 2CV ceased in 1959.

A more powerful 425cc. engine was introduced in 1955 as well as a centrifugal clutch, for easier driving. As time went by the car was fitted with flashing indicators, window catches, rear and side lights. A metal bootlid replaced the fabric cover, which was an extension of the fabric roof right down to the rear bumper.

Over the years engine capacity grew from the original 375cc to 425 to 435 and finally to a mighty 602cc.

The car was very quickly dubbed the Ugly Duckling by the Dutch and eventually became known the world over as the Duck. Other nicknames were Tin Snail, Umbrella On Wheels, Escargot, and many more.

Variants appeared over the years. The van, the four wheel drive (engines front and back) Sahara, the plastic bodied Mini Moke-like Mehari, many different "colour models" like the famous Charleston, Spot, Dolly, Bamboo, La France or Beachcomber.

Many different variations were also built around the world. There's the Baby Brouse from Iran and the Ivory Coast, the Dalat from Vietnam, the FAF from Senegal and Guinea, the Citronetta from Chile, the Pony from Greece. A special pick-up version was built for the Foreign Legion and the British Royal Navy to be transported by helicopter.

The car became synonymous with record attempts, long-distance round the world expeditions, exotic body modifications and as a donor vehicle for small sports cars and trikes. There is even a 24-hour 2CV Le Mans race.

In 1967 Citroen decided that the 2CV was ready for replacement and introduced the Dyane. This was a much more modern looking car with faired in headlights and straight lines without protruding mudguards. The mechanicals were basically the same as the 2CV. Production of the 2CV continued however and continued, against expectations, to outsell the Dyane. This frugal little car got a badly needed boost of popularity during the fuel crisis of the early 70's. In 1982, the Dyane was phased out and the 2CV continued. It had outlived its intended replacement.

Production of this wonderful charismatic icon of motoring finally ceased in 1990 after more than 60 years after conception and production of 42 years. High production costs, due to mainly manual assembly and an inability to be converted to robotic assembly made these cars uneconomical to build.

And still the 2CV lives on. As they become rarer they take on a new meaning amongst the multitude of worldwide fans and are being increasingly restored and preserved. As long as production was going they were seen as expendable but no more.

Next year sees the 18th World Meeting of 2CV friends in the Czech Republic. This event is held in a different country every 2 years and attracts up to 3,500 cars for a 5 day event. South Africa has been represented at most meetings since 1991.

There are an estimated 140 cars in this country and many of these have been getting together every year since 1996 in a mini-version of the World Meeting. In September the Citroen Car Club of SA celebrates its own 30th anniversary as well as the 2CV's 60th.

If you've never owned one then you have missed the essence of motoring. The pure simplicity, basic functionality, smiles waves and interest from other road users make this a car like no other. And when behind the wheel, a CV owner simply forgets about the rat race and becomes mellow and relaxed, with a permanent grin on his or her face.

Contact the Club by phoning Joyce on 011 949 1415