

Origins of the VW "Beetle/Bug" on Stamps

by Stan Cronwall

The origins of the VW "Beetle/Bug" started with some small car concepts developed by Dr. Ferdinand Porsche while working for Daimler in their design department. Daimler and other luxury car manufacturers tinkered around with the idea of a small car, but these were largely stripped down versions of their expensive models.

Porsche shopped his ideas to motorcycle manufacturers such as Zundapp who declined to become involved because of sharp increase in their basic motorcycle business, and NSU who were concerned about the high tooling costs.

Daimler-Benz came together as a single company in 1926 with their joint products beginning to be called Mercedes-Benz. Porsche's small car ideas were not well received by the Board of Directors. He left to join Steyr Automotive but was laid off due to The Depression.

He then formed his own design and consulting services for engines and vehicles. Porsche continued to work his small car design.

In 1932, struggling auto manufacturers Audi, DKW, Horch and Wanderer were combined to form Auto Union GmbH.

Enter the impact of new Chancellor Adolf Hitler. At the 1933 Berlin Auto Show Hitler announced his intention to motorize the nation with every German owning either a car or tractor in the future. He unveiled two new programs: the "people's car" and a state-sponsored motor racing program to develop a "high speed German automotive industry".

At the time only about 1 German in 50 owned a car.

To initiate these programs, Mercedes-Benz was to be given an annual grant of 500,000 Reichsmarks. Later in the interest of increasing the competition to build race cars it was decided to split the grant between Auto Union and Mercedes-Benz.



Dr. Porsche (on the left in suit) showing Adolph Hitler a model of the KdF-Wagen, ca. early 1939.

In June 1934, Porsche received a contract from Hitler to design a "people's car" (or Volkswagen) following on his earlier small car design work originally for Zundapp. Hitler demanded that the production vehicle be capable of transporting two adults and three children at 100 km/h (62 mph). This was when the speed limit on the autobahn original sections was 66 mph.

The car would be available to citizens of the Third Reich through a savings plan for 990 RM (\$396 US in 1930's dollars) — about the same price as a

small motorcycle. The average German income was about 32 RM a week at the time.

The first two prototypes were completed in 1935. They had air-cooled rear flat-four engines, torsion bar suspension, and a "beetle" shape with the front hood rounded for better aerodynamics

Several other pre-production batches followed during 1936-1939. Prototypes were built in Stuttgart. These were called the KdF-Wagen.

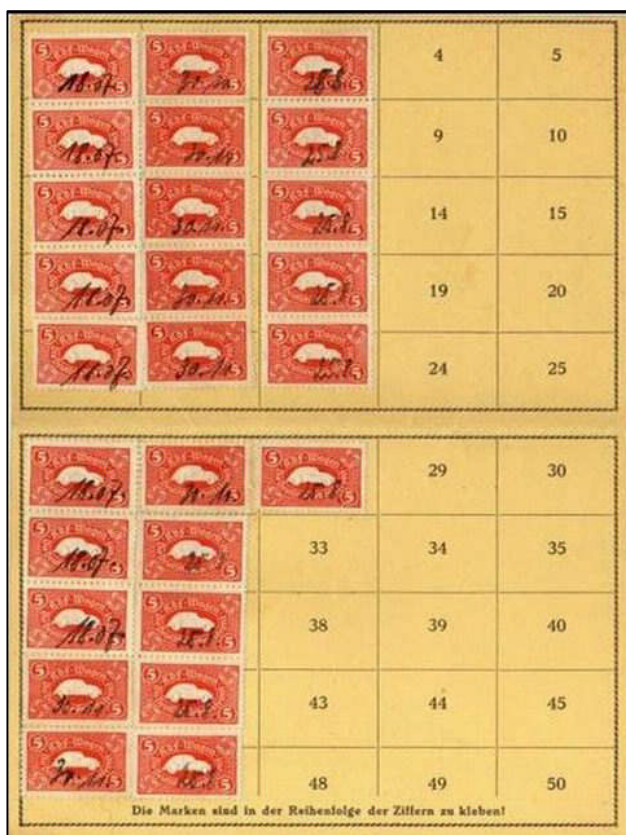
It soon became apparent that private industry could not turn out a vehicle for only 990 RM. It was then that

Hitler decided that to sponsor an all-new, state-owned factory. The construction began May 26, 1938 near Fallersleben, while nearby Stadt des KdF-Wagens, now called Wolfsburg, was purposefully built for the factory workers. This factory built only a handful of cars by the time the war started in 1939.



Germany issued a three stamp set (B134-136) early in 1939 to promote the Berlin Automobile and Motorcycle Exhibition with the surtax for Hitler's National Culture Fund. The set, pictured above, shows the early types of automobiles with the highest value featuring the VW as the "modern automobile":

The set was re-issued (B 141-143) on May 18 overprinted in black promoting the Nurburgring Auto Races. This was one of the venues for the international motor races prior to the introduction of what is now known as Formula 1.



Beginning in 1933, KdF (Kraft durch Freude = Strength through Joy) was an umbrella organization that provided affordable leisure activities such as concerts, plays, libraries, day trips and holidays. KdF rewarded workers and their families with going to the movies, to parks, keep-fit clubs, hiking, sporting activities, film shows and concerts. For example, by 1939 KdF had sold more than 45 million package tours and excursions. It had over 7,000 paid employees and 135,000 volunteers. Every factory and workshop with over 20 employees had a KdF representative.

In 1938, KdF began a program by which the German citizen could register to buy a new KdF-Wagen. They began by purchasing a KdF-Wagen Sparkarte from their local Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Labor Front) KdF representative for 1 RM (40 US cents).

Once the buyer had a KdF-Wagen Sparkarte he or she was obligated to spend at least 5 RM (\$2.00 US) each week buying stamps to paste on the savings booklet. The stamps were canceled when sold.

The first KdF savings booklets were yellow and the stamps red (illustrated above). In late 1941, the savings cards became blue and the stamps green.

Here are mint examples of the green version with the same embossed image of the vehicle:



Completion of roughly three and a half cards meant that the subscriber had pre-paid enough to receive a vehicle.

The KdF cars could not be ordered and paid for in cash by civilians. Only companies could pay in cash using "one easy payment plan" if they chose to.

336,000 people paid into the savings plan. One report says that none ever took delivery of a car. Others say that the few who did receive vehicles had to return them for the war effort and instead got a voucher saying they could deem them after the war.

After the war, some of the subscribers received a voucher from the new Volkswagen company which could be used to partially offset the price of the postwar model.

The factory did produce a limited number of the original design. A Type 1 cabriolet was presented to Hitler on April 20, 1938 — his 49th birthday. What few others produced went to the diplomatic corps and the military.

The factory was primarily converted to the production of the Kubelwagen which was the German equivalent of the American Jeep and an amphibious variant Schwimmwagen. During WW II, the Germans produced 50,435 Kubelwagens (1940-1945) and 14,265 of the Schwimmwagen variant.

These are photos of both the Kubelwagen and Schwimmwagen (notice the outboard motor on the rear):



Post war, a variant on the Kubelwagen was introduced in the U.S. as "The VW Thing" which was sold 1972-1974. New U.S. DOT requirements forced VW to discontinue the model in 1975. To the right is the 1974 model.

Stan Cronwall collecting interests include Germany: Third Reich 1933-45 and the areas it occupied (stamps covers & cards). He also collects U.S. World War II Patriotic Covers and Cards, Civil War Patriotic Covers (both U.S. and CSA), U.S. Naval Covers, DDR stamps, Post WW II Soviet Zone Hitler Head Obliteration stamps, covers & cards.

