

## A Car for the Volks

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

The People's Car is said to have been the brainchild of Adolph Hitler who sketched a rough design of the Volkswagen Beetle in 1934 and ordered Ferdinand Porsche, the great German automotive engineer, to lead the project. Hitler directed that it was to carry two adults and three children on the autobahn all day at a speed of 60 miles per hour, getting 33 miles to the gallon. It was to sell for 990 marks, the rough equivalent then of 330 U.S. dollars.

The plan was that ordinary Germans should set aside five marks a week to purchase stamps and eventually collect enough to redeem for a shiny new car yet to be produced. It was a lay-away plan of sorts, with over 330,000 citizens participating, advancing the money Porsche and his team used to design the car and assembly line and build a factory in a new city which would later become Wolfsburg, Germany.

Production began in 1939, but only a few Volkswagens were made before the factory was converted to the exclusive production of war vehicles. None of the automobiles were ever delivered to their rightful owners, although after the war the new German government gave some of the holders of the stamps a credit of 200 Deutsche Marks.

When the war ended, occupying forces established rules governing which industries Germany was allowed to retain, including severely restricted automobile production. But by 1946 the Wolfsburg factory was making a thousand cars a month in a building that was still so bombed out production would halt when it rained. The People's Car eventually came to America, with but two selling in 1949, yet sales reaching a million by 1955.

Many of my generation of the fifties and sixties adopted the dependable Volkswagen Beetle as our preferred method of transportation. They were great on campuses and inexpensive for young adults like me getting started in the world. Some Americans put racing stripes on their Bugs, others painted flowers. The Beetle had a brother by then, the Volkswagen Bus, an even larger canvas for daisies and peace signs and road trips to San Francisco.

In 1966, I was living in Lakehurst, New Jersey. My sister Maureen, her husband Mac and their kids were returning stateside from his second Army tour in Germany. I met them at nearby McGuire Air Force Base to drive them to their motel. For the half-hour ride, we stuffed into my 1961 Bug, severely testing Hitler's design, three adults, four kids and luggage.

Passing through Cooktown we heard a buzz in the back. Possibly it was the car's battery under the back seat, so at Maureen's command, I pulled over and we got the kids to safety, then methodically removed baggage to isolate the peril. It turned out the menace that spontaneously came to life while packed tightly away, grounding my Volkswagen and six of my dearest Volks, was an electric shoe polisher. A German one at that.