

Walter Chrysler defended the Airflow in 1935

By Gerald Perschbacher

Airflow Chryslers are not common at vintage car shows, so if you are visiting a major meet this year, feel privileged if you spot an Airflow.

Known by some historians as an albatross around the neck of the Chrysler Corporation in the 1930s, the Airflow was meant to stir up enthusiasm for a new breed of car, conceived in the minds of creative Chrysler engineers and raised over a longer-than-normal incubation period. It was Walter P. Chrysler's vision for the future.

Sadly, Airflows were not snatched up as quickly as corporate coffer-watchers had predicted. The car did not embody the design and ideals of the general new-car buyer. A slowed cash flow put a big dent into the shining image of Mr. Chrysler's armor. He was not the all-knowing knight of automotive success, an image that had followed him since his early days with Buick in the formative years of the 20th Century.

So Mr. Chrysler, a little on the defensive, launched out with a new offense at a meeting with Chrysler-DeSoto officials in December of 1934. Amid rumors of its demise, Walter Chrysler firmly stated, "The Airflow will be continued."

His opening comments set the record straight: "Nearly 100,000,000 miles of travel, the comments of over 24,000 owners and tens of thousands of other people who have seen and ridden in the Airflow Chryslers and DeSotos in the last eight months offer an emphatic answer to the question: Will the Airflow design be continued in these two lines of cars in 1935? They certainly will."

"The Airflow design in less than a year has created an entirely new public conception of what the car of the future will be," he continued. "There is no longer any question as to the popularity of this design. People thought it radical at first. And so it was. But as more and more of these extraordinary automobiles have passed into owners' hands and have been demonstrated to the public, it is not the appearance that impresses them but the new kind of ride made possible by this new design. And now, like many things that are different from what people are used to, people have also become enthusiastic about the design itself."

Skepticism had reared an ugly threat by 1934. It was Depression time in America, and the car business was stinking when it came to sales. Car companies and dealerships were collapsing at an alarming rate. Buyers who wanted expensive cars shifted downward to the medium-priced market to avoid over-extension or an image of being flamboyant at a time

when the new poor were tempted to throw rocks and bottles at a passing limousine or town car. A major upheaval had hit the market, and car companies that were absorbing the brunt were financially solvent, were proud of their good management team, and offered fine products through strong dealer outlets.

In Chrysler's case, the corporation had seemed to do no wrong with the meteoric rise of Plymouth through the early 1930s, the absorbing of Dodge, and the launch of DeSoto.

It was not a time to experiment. Chrysler officials discovered it the hard way. A cloud of potential doom hung over heads at the main office and seemed to weep at meetings, dampening future goals and drenching hopes. But the corporation was determined not to be bogged down in the muck of self pity. It was not a gloom-and-doom atmosphere, but a challenge to be faced and overcome.

"We spent five years in experimentation with the Airflow before it was introduced," Mr. Chrysler explained. "That is the way our engineers work. All the laboratory and road tests showed that Airflow gives a measure of roominess, riding ease, safety, economy, roadability, and beauty not obtainable in any other construction. But owners do things to cars in daily use that even the most rigid tests do not always discover. Our fleet of Airflow test cars were handled by experts. What, we asked ourselves, would these cars do when driven by the public."

"Consequently, a short time ago, we got in touch with every Airflow owner. We asked just two questions — 'How do you like your Airflow? Have you any complaints?'"

Said Chrysler, "The response to these questions was one of the most amazing things I have encountered in all my years of manufacturing motor cars. We received thousands of letters, some of them two or three pages long, brimming with enthusiasm. The things that owners found out about these cars surpassed our own claims. Not the least amazing feature of the situation was that such a large percentage of owners replied to our inquiry. Few men are too busy to sit down and write about something they do not like or with which they find fault. It takes unusual enthusiasm to inspire a letter



This 1934 Chrysler Airflow coupe reminds the American public that under AAA contest supervision, DeSoto and Chrysler Airflows set 104 new speed records for closed cars at Daytona Beach, Florida. A Chrysler Airflow also broke all high-gear records from one mile to 24 hours of continuous running and set a new economy record of 18.1 miles per gallon.

of praise."

Engineering had not been neglected by Chrysler officials. Mr. Chrysler prided himself on the fact that he had been a mechanic and still was, in many ways. He knew the benefits of sound construction. He attracted workers of similar bent, but they seldom received the limelight. So it was in late 1934 when Mr. Chrysler promoted the ideals of Airflow design.

He noted that even its controversial appearance was not a concern. "On appearance we gathered suggestions not only from owners, but from the tens of thousands who crowded into Chrysler and DeSoto salesrooms to look at the Airflow. Here again, our engineers were not satisfied they had spoken the last word. So they have spent the months searching for refinements and, if possible, improvements in line which would still preserve the qualities that make Airflow great."

As for performance, the Chrysler and DeSoto Airflows had racked up some achievements. Under AAA contest supervision, the two models set 104 new speed records for closed cars. Reportedly, Chrysler Airflows broke all high-gear records from one mile to 24 hours of continuous running. It set a new economy record of 18.1 miles per gallon.

"The result was that six months ago I put my OK on Fred Zeder's engineering plans for 1935," Chrysler added. "I studied those plans for a good many weeks. And I want to tell you that Chrysler and DeSoto cars for 1935 will be the finest motor cars in the history of the corporation."

Hedging their bets, officials and the

field force had pushed for more conventional cars. The company treasury demanded relief through such a venture. No doubt some officials believed adding a more conventional car would pay for the continued production of Airflows, and perhaps the innovative design would catch on if time allowed.

What resulted was an impressive line of the continued Airflow idea, including the DeSoto and three Chrysler models: the Airflow Eight, the Airflow Imperial, and the Airflow Custom Imperial. The Custom was offered on 137-inch and 146-inch wheelbases.

Besides the Airflow, there was also the Airstream line. Conventional in appearance, it was meant to attract the lower-end buyers of the medium-price range while the Airflows aimed at the higher portion of the range, according to Mr. Chrysler's assessment.

The Airstream came with a six- or an eight-cylinder engine, "which I believe is the lowest-priced quality eight on the market," said Walter P.

DeSoto also had its echo Airstream versions with a six-cylinder engine. Said Mr. Chrysler, "With this car DeSoto again enters the lower-priced field where it enjoyed such popularity for many years. I think... the prices of our 1935 line and the values they represent will be most interesting to the public."

He was correct. Sales gained healthy ground, and the Airflow, innovative in numerous ways, became known as a car far ahead of its time. The corporation would survive its bold move and gain respect for having been creative.