



Superman's Car: The Nash Healey

By Patrick Quinn

"Homework? Of course mum, I did my homework as soon as I got home!"

And so it went on when I was going to school back in the 1950s and '60s. Being the first home every day by at least an hour or an hour and a half would give me plenty of time to get those books out and revised what was taught to us during the day.

However I'm not talking about pigs flying, but more about



Clark Kent arrives at Police Headquarters in his Nash Healey.

Superman that I found myself glued to the new PYE black and white television. Every afternoon I was transfixed by that mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper who as Superman could change the course of mighty rivers and bend steel in his bare hands. I was certainly on his side in the never ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way.

But what about Superman's car? Sure when Clark found a phone booth and shed his conservative suit and tie, he really didn't need a car, but when in his mild-mannered persona he had to have something to get around. Back then I can't say that I took all that much notice of what sort of car the good guy drove compared with the driving choice of the bad guys. However very early in my television watching career I did notice that good guys wore white hats, while black hats were de rigueur for the baddies.

I will assume that everyone knows about the story of Superman and how he was shot to earth by his parents Jor-El and Lara only to land near the town of Smallville, Kansas. Thankfully he didn't land on Dorothy or Toto, but was found by Jonathan and Martha Kent and raised as their own. What you may not know that the Superman character was created

as Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1932 and first appeared in Action Comics #1 in June of 1938. The Man of Steel came to television in 1951 in "The Adventures of Superman" with George Reeves in the title role. The program ran until 1958 and featured a continuing cast of characters including Lois Lane as a reporter for The Daily Planet, cub reporter Jimmy Olsen, Editor Perry White and Inspector Henderson of the Metropolis Police Department.

So what car would Clark Kent drive on his many trips between The Daily Planet and police headquarters? It was a convertible Nash Healey!

Two Seater

The new Nash Healey, a two-seat, open sports car debuted in December of 1950. It had a Nash drive train mounted in a modified Silverstone chassis, covered by an all-aluminum body built by Panelcraft of Birmingham, England. All told, 104 Nash Healeys were built in that form between 1950 and 1951.

For 1952, the body was redesigned by Sergio Pinin Farina in Italy and the output of the Nash engine was bumped up to 140 HP. The body retained its open top design and was greeted with much acclaim. A handsome coupe version expanded the Nash Healey offerings in 1953.

The year 1954 proved to be the last for the Nash Healey. The logistics of shipping the engines and transmissions from the US to England, shipping the bodies from Italy to England, and then shipping the completed cars from England to the USA drove the cost of the Nash Healey to over \$5,000. At a time when the average price for a new car in the US was \$1,700, the Healey was a tough sell. The merger of Nash Kelvinator with Hudson in 1954 to form American Motors brought the production of Nash Healey to an end after a total of 506 were built.



Nash Healey-1951.



Rolt and Hamilton at LeMans, 1950.



Right: Nash Healey-1952.



Left: Clark Kent arrives at a news scene in his Nash Healey. Right: Nash Healeys at Le Mans, 1953.



George Mason

Most of you would be well aware of the mid-Atlantic chance meeting between Donald Healey and George Mason of Nash Kelvinator. However what is not well appreciated was that George Mason and the marketing team at Nash were experts at what is known today as 'product placement'. If you get a chance to see an episode of "The Adventures of Superman" you will see that not only does Clark drive his Nash Healey, but Lois could often be seen in her spiffy Nash Rambler convertible and Inspector Henderson would arrive at the crime scene in his Nash Ambassador police car. By the way have you noticed that William Holden drives a Nash Healey in the 1954 film Sabrina and yes, Audrey Hepburn (Sigh!) looked wonderful in the passenger seat?



The Nash Healey has been called the most improbable car ever built, but history is now giving it the credit it richly deserves. In competition the Nash Healey was certainly a success, especially at Le Mans. In 1950 #4 Nash Healey driven by Tony Rolt and Duncan Hamilton finished 4th overall and 3rd in class. Then the following year the same drivers brought a Nash Healey into 6th place overall.

The Nash Healey's finest hour at Le Mans was in 1952 when car #10 driven by Leslie Johnson and Tommy Wisdom finished 1st in class and 3rd overall behind two Mercedes Benz 300SLs. In its last year at the Circuit de la Sarthe in 1953, Leslie Johnson and Bert Hadley drove car #11 to 7th place in Class and 11th overall.

Today, pick up any number of publications on American sporting cars and especially the Chevrolet Corvette and you will see that the Nash Healey is now recognised as being the first post-WW2 American sports car and the Corvette's forerunner. It was also the vehicle that brought to the Donald Healey Motor Company the much needed funds required to build the prototype Healey 100. In all probability if it wasn't for the Nash Healey we may not have the Austin-Healey.

In Australia

As far as it's known there are just three Nash Healeys in Australia, all imported of course as the model was for export to the US only. All three are in Victoria and I am pleased to say that one of these is under restoration by Larry Varley.

Larry bought his car in early 2012 after seeing it for sale in

the US on the Bring a Trailer website. I will admit that I saw it on the same website and for three nano-seconds contemplated buying an engineless Nash Healey.

"The car was with a Michigan restorer and I saw it on Bring a Trailer where it had been for about six months." Larry answered. "It's a 1954 Nash Healey Le Mans Coupe and I noticed that no one had shown much interest in it, as perhaps the project was going to be too hard as a considerable amount of the car was missing. The ad described the car as missing its engine and gearbox along with the grille and some of the glass. What eventuated was that not only the original Nash engine and gearbox was missing but it had also been in quite a major fire at the previous owner's premises. Originally it was fitted with a four-litre straight six and a 3-speed manual gearbox with an American Borg-Warner overdrive."

"So I bought the car and shipped it to Melbourne which included transport from Michigan to the US West Coast. It had been owned by one person for most of its life, but once he died the family sold it on to an intermediary who removed the Corvette engine and gearbox from the car as well as the wheels, after which it was sold on to a Michigan restoration shop. They probably decided that it was going to be too hard to make any money from and decided to pass it on."

Worse State

"When it arrived it was in a much worse state than I expected." Larry added. "I hadn't been told that it had been in a fire during which it had been so hot that the lead had melted from the joins in the panels. Plus most of the glass was shattered in the frames. So I decided that the only way to go with the car was to totally rebuild it. I must admit that I didn't expect to go that far and also due to the heat the panels had buckled and things like that. It was a car that I expected to do the body repairs myself, but when I saw how far gone it was I knew that I was going to need help."

"So I called on Jerry Milnaric here in Melbourne did the work. Jerry used to work for Theo van Heel years back and made a front guard for a 100S in a day. That was when you couldn't

buy panels. He is a very clever man indeed."

"I have decided not to use a Nash engine but have settled on a 327 Corvette engine of the early 1960s which I have found in Melbourne. For the gearbox, as I intend to use the car quite a bit. I have decided on a T700 automatic as fitted to many cars such as the Holden Commodore. I'll also install a Vintage Air system as well. The rear end will remain torque tube as original,

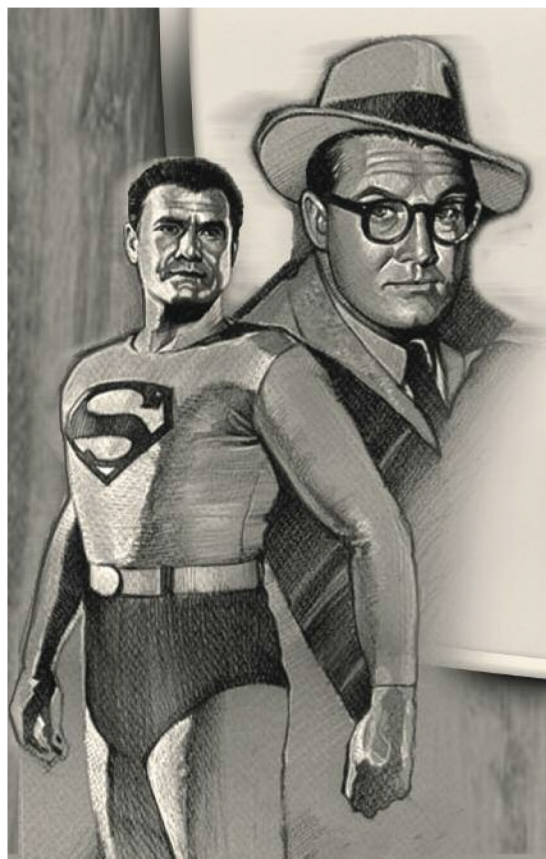


but it will be modified as the tube originally joined to the back of the Nash gearbox, so I have had to make a new pivot point."

"I hope to paint the underbody and inside later in 2014 and then get on to the rest of the mechanical work. I've started on the engine, but realistically I still think it's three years away to being on the road. It's been converted to right hand drive by using Jaguar XK120 steering components which turned out to be the same that were fitted new to the Nash Healey. The new worm came from England and the housing is reversible."

"The Nash Healey front suspension is the same as other Healeys." Larry said. "A large electron alloy trailing link and single lever arm shock absorber at the front and coils at the rear with a Panhard rod and an A-frame. The brakes are Nash drums all round, but it will eventually have discs. Robbie Rowland, the owner of one of the other Nash Healeys in Australia very kindly lent me the grille out of his car so that I could fashion a new one."

"It was bought by Roy Stetina back in 1958 and he was going to use it for some form of competition. He was a foreign car dealer in Michigan and also raced a Sunbeam Alpine, but once the Nash Healey was burnt the plans never turned into anything concrete. Stetina was also a competitive swimmer and in correspondence I have had with his widow, she sent me a photo of him next to Johnny Weissmuller when they were both competitively swimming. It's always



interesting tracking down as many facts as you can about the cars you have."

So there you have a short snapshot of the Nash Healey and especially of one right here in Australia.

Thank you Superman and the citizens of Metropolis.