

SPACE AGE

Mercedes-Benz did not officially build estate cars until 1977, but **Richard Truesdell** found this Ponton wagon in California, built in Germany in the early 1960s – and saved by its present owner from the scrapyard two decades later.

IMAGES Richard Truesdell





**"PROBABLY THE BEST
KNOWN BUILDER OF
MERCEDES ESTATES BACK
THEN WAS BINZ GMBH, A
SPECIALIST COACHBUILDER
IN LORCH, GERMANY"**

In the United States, estate cars remained popular up until the introduction of the Chrysler Minivans in late 1983. From that point on, traditional station wagons declined in popularity here, with SUVs and car based 'crossovers' being the final nails in their coffin. The traditional American built, rear-wheel drive station wagons are now all but extinct on this side of the pond, the last being the 2005 to 2008 Dodge Magnum, a car conceived when Chrysler was part of the ill-fated, supposed merger of equals of 1999, the DaimlerChrysler conglomerate.

Ironically it is European prestige manufacturers like Mercedes-Benz and BMW that still offer rear-wheel drive station wagons in the US, albeit priced way beyond the reach of mainstream buyers. And since its introduction of the S123 range in the late 1970s, wagons have been an important and popular part of the US Mercedes line up, accounting for up to 20 per cent of sales. But before the W123 series, did Mercedes-Benz ever offer estates?

The answer is both yes and no. If you mean factory built station wagons, no. But if the question is did Mercedes offer any estate, then yes, when you consider coachbuilt models from firms like Miesen and Binz in Germany, along with IMA in Belgium, which built the Universal models with full factory approval from 1965 to 1968. Probably the best known builder of Mercedes estates back then was Binz GmbH, a specialist coachbuilder in Lorch, east of Stuttgart in Germany. Binz has a long history of producing custom vehicles, many on platforms provided by Mercedes-Benz.

One quite rare model that was manufactured many years before Mercedes-Benz offered its own factory built estates is the wine red Binz built 1961 190b featured here, owned by long time Mercedes enthusiast Bob Gunthorp, who has an association with the brand dating back to the late 1960s, when he was hired as a technician at Mercedes-Benz of San Diego. Next came a five-year stint at German Motors, an independent shop in nearby Pacific Beach. While there,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
Ponton has the classic 1950s instruments and steering column shifter.

A bench front seat was a very common feature in cars from the 1950s.

The 1980s factory vinyl was a perfect match for the original cabin trim.

Maker's plate identifies who carried out the conversion, and where.

Instrument cluster is small, but it displays all the info you'll need.

he was involved in the purchase of two older Mercedes-Benzes which set Bob on his present course, a 1961 220SEb and a 1967 250SE.

By 1979 Gunthorp had quit full time wage slavery to concentrate on the used parts business he had set up, the Onager Corporation in nearby Chula Vista, not far from the US/Mexican border. This has spawned a service department, which has also acquired a number of Mercedes classics, including this 190b Binz Estate.

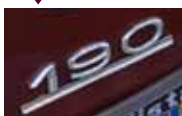
The ownership history of this car is not fully documented, but diligent detective work, including direct correspondence with Mercedes-Benz, has pieced together much of its history. It was built on a 1959 petrol engine 190b chassis, one of 349 chassis only 190b units produced for completion as station wagons, ambulances, and hearses from 1959 to 1961. However the total rises to well over 2,200 when other variants, such as 180b/c, and the diesel powered 180Db/Dc and 190Db are taken into account.

"This chassis was delivered to Binz in Germany on September 3, 1959, the commission number being 1,540," says Gunthorp. "In 1964, after completing the transformation into an estate, Binz returned the completed vehicle to Daimler-Benz AG for US shipment."

Further research confirmed that it was shipped to Mercedes-Benz of North America on October 30 1964. For reasons not fully explained, the vehicle was titled as a 1963 model – neither the date the chassis was constructed, nor the time frame in which it was imported into the United States. When Gunthorp contacted Mercedes-Benz USA about its origin he was told, "You have an incorrect chassis number. There was no such chassis number ever used."

When he later received proof from Mercedes in Germany that the chassis number was correct, he again contacted wrote to the importer. "This time they stated that the records from that time period no longer existed," =>

Specifications



Mercedes-Benz 190b Binz Estate (W121)

Engine M121 1,897cc 4-cyl Power 70bhp@4,800rpm

Torque 103lb ft@2,800rpm Transmission 4-speed manual

Years produced 1959-1961 Number built 349

All figures from Mercedes-Benz



BELOW
Grille badges show
that the owner is a
Mercedes club man.

BELOW LEFT
A radio is fitted in the
dash, one of the basic
Becker Europa models.

"THE OWNERSHIP HISTORY IS NOT FULLY DOCUMENTED, BUT DILIGENT DETECTIVE WORK, INCLUDING CORRESPONDENCE WITH MERCEDES-BENZ, HAS PIECED TOGETHER MUCH OF ITS HISTORY"





⇒ he recalls. “I have never been able to find out who owned it from 1964 until I bought it in 1984. I believe this station wagon to be one of only 50 that were built specifically to be sold in the United States.”

Gunthorp entered the picture on September 15 1984, when he received a call from a woman, about three hours north in Fontana, California, whose boyfriend had recently passed away. “She asked me make an offer on a lot of five Mercedes-Benzes that were sitting in her yard – when I found out that one of them was a 190b estate I purchased all five sight unseen over the telephone,” he says. “Of the five cars, only the 190b estate wagon was operable. Before he died, the previous owner was planning to remove the engine and junk the station wagon. I saved it, and junked the other four.”

It had all the problems associated with a car that had been sitting outside for many years, the exterior and interior in a sad shape. As is typical in such cases, rodents had decided to

take up residence in both the engine compartment and interior, this complicating the restoration. “My wife and friends looked over the vehicle and stated, ‘Only a complete idiot would try to restore this pile of junk.’ I decided to take on this restoration project anyway,” says Gunthorp.

He nonetheless found the vehicle to be in very good mechanical condition. The only major component that had to be replaced was the differential, as it was noisy at between 45 and 60mph. In spite of having not been started for many years the engine ran perfectly and just needed tuning.

The interior, because of the rodent

ABOVE
Direction indicators are mounted on the top of the Ponton’s front wings.

ABOVE RIGHT
Bob Gunthorp bought the 190d 29 years ago, and got to work restoring it.

ABOVETOP RIGHT
Binz has earned itself a badge from Mercedes-Benz to mark 500,000km.

ABOVE LEFT
This is a 1.9-litre, petrol engine, but Binz converted some diesel Pontons too.

A contemporary photo of the Binz project, from the Mercedes-Benz archive.



infestation, was another matter, but not an insurmountable one. As Binz used non Mercedes materials to trim the interior, it was redone in 1980s factory vinyl. This turned out to be a perfect match for the colour and texture of the original material. Other trim components were sourced from Mercedes-Benz models of the period. Gunthorp pointed out that the interior lights are from the 300 series cars, which is why the light switch on the dash is chrome instead of black plastic.

As luck would have it, the exterior sheet metal was intact and essentially rust free, but had suffered from years of neglect. Over the years the dented 190b had been repainted an incorrect, non factory cream, but with a little digging Gunthorp found the original colour, the burgundy like Medium Red (Code 516), which fortunately he liked. The restoration started in 1984 and was completed in 1987.

A common characteristic of most of the cars in the Gunthorp collection is that they are definitely not trailer ⇒



⇒ queens. Rather, his cars are restored to a point that they present exceptionally well, but not to the degree that their owner is afraid to drive them. There is a sense of balance that Gunthorp maintains with his collection that is admirable. He does not seek concours trophies, rather he has amassed a collection of unusual Mercedes-Benz automobiles that never fail to catch the eyes of enthusiasts. Nowhere was this more apparent than when he drove the 190b from San Diego to Phoenix, Arizona, to Star Fest, where the 2012 annual meet for The Mercedes-Benz Club of America was held.

“On Saturday, along with fellow San Diego Section member, Mike Cooper, who made the trip with me to Phoenix, we drove in the rally. The rally turned

ABOVE
The austere load bay is tough and durable looking, and has a split tailgate.

ABOVE LEFT
Hardly a graceful looking estate car, but nonetheless a very appealing wagon.

out to be not quite as much fun as we expected, it was too long at about 90 miles, most of that in was city traffic, taking over four hours to complete. It would have been a lot more enjoyable if we had had air conditioning and automatic transmission.

“While I don’t consider the 190b to be of show quality, I did enter it in the Star Fest Concours d’Elegance even though the restoration was 25 years old, with just the repaint in 2002,” says Gunthorp. “It was quite a hit with everyone at the show. Most of the people there had never seen one of these wagons.”

“Having no illusions that my car would win a trophy, I just watched as the trophies were given out,” he recalls. “The last three trophies were for the People’s Choice, the Judges’

Choice and the Best of Show. By now I was just talking to my friends and half listening to the announcements, when I realised that my name was announced. My 190b had won the Judges Choice award. Naturally I was thrilled because the judges appreciated the station wagon for its rarity and not because it is not perfect restoration.”

Preservation, not absolute perfection, is Bob Gunthorp’s enduring philosophy. And it is due to his efforts, and those of many true enthusiasts like him, that many rare, and in some cases significant Mercedes-Benz cars, have been saved from oblivion. To him, the rest of us who appreciate these rare cars, surely owe a debt of gratitude.

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