

My 1960 VW Bug

By Niels Nielsen



This is the story of my first car, a ceramic-green, 1960 Volkswagen Bug. It had been our family car since new, so when I brought it to college with me in 1971 I was already intimately familiar with most (but, as we shall see, not all) of its quirks and weirdnesses. Automotive technology has come a long way since the 1960 Bug, and after thinking about it I realized that many things we take for granted in a car made today were absent from the Bug, which made the experience of driving one something that most drivers alive today would have no understanding of.

POWER

First of all, it had an engine rated at only 36 horsepower, of which probably only 30 were available at the rear wheels. Many motorcycles on the road today have engines that put out twice as much as this, which meant that a 36HP Bug was the slowest thing on the road. Merging into freeway traffic always required mashing the gas pedal all the way to the floor, and it took quite a while to reach 65MPH. Top speed on level ground was about 70 (80 going down a hill) unless there was a headwind.

I hit a headwind once on I-5 in northern California that held my top speed down to 43MPH in third gear. I would rev the engine up to its 45MPH redline in third, drop it into 4th, floor the gas pedal all the way and watch my speed bleed off down to 43. I downshifted to 3rd, took it up to 45MPH and held it there for almost an hour until the wind subsided. Even fully-loaded diesel trucks on the Interstate were passing me the whole time.

Once while driving back to campus with a set of wooden shelves tied to the clamp-on roof rack, I discovered that I could not get the car up to 60 MPH. To keep from being late, I pulled off the freeway and hurriedly pulled the shelves off the rack and jammed them into the back seat along with all my other cargo. Thus streamlined, the Bug could make 65MPH and I arrived on time. The engine was in the rear of the car, drove the rear wheels, and was cooled not with water in a radiator but by air that was sucked in by a big fan and blown down across the cylinders. The fan made a loud whining, whirring noise that sounded very much like a really big blow-dryer coming down the road. There was no other car on the road that sounded like a Bug.

INSTRUMENTS

As bizarre as it might sound, the 1960 VW Bug had NO GAS GAUGE. Instead, they gave you a thin stick of painted aluminum marked off with liters on one side and gallons on the other. To tell how much gas you had, you stopped the car, got out, opened the hood, unscrewed the gas cap, and dipped the stick down into the tank until it hit bottom. Then you pulled it out, saw how much of it was wet with gas, and read off the number of gallons you had. When full to

the brim, the tank held a little over 10 gallons, which gave you a useable cruising range of over 300 miles. Of course, there was no way to check the gas level while you were driving, which meant that you could be straining down the freeway at 65 MPH one minute and windmilling down to zero the next when you ran the tank dry. So the VW designers gave the driver a little valve next to the foot pedals that you could work with your toe, which turned on a reserve fuel supply good for about 30 miles, which they figured was enough to get you to a gas station. So when the engine quit, the drill was to leave the engine in gear, cut into the slow lane, flip the valve with your foot and pump frantically on the gas pedal to restore the flow of gas. If everything worked, the engine started up again after about 5 seconds of terror; if unsuccessful, you cut onto the shoulder and coasted to a stop.

HEATER

The heater for the Bug was an air scoop that took some of the hot air that the cooling fan blew off the engine, and diverted it into the cabin. This meant that the hot air coming in always smelled just like “hot engine” (duh) and if you had a little oil leakage happening back there, the black oil mist would get blown in with the hot air to condense on the inside of the windshield, near the defroster vents. If you wanted to help this feeble arrangement take the moisture off the windshield by wiping the glass with your hand, it would come away with a smudge of black soot on it.

WINDSHIELD WIPERS

The windshield on the Big was a completely flat slab of glass positioned about 12 inches from the tip of your nose. It was serviced by a pair of teeny wiper blades with about 8 inches of rubber on each that swept back and forth in an arc about 45 degrees wide. Even when properly functional, they were not quite enough to keep up with the rain, and a downpour would leave you blinded. Each blade was attached to its crank shaft with a little screw which inevitably worked its way loose. The looser the screw got, the less arc the wiper would swing through and the smaller your field of view out the windshield would become, until the screw got loose enough so that the wiper blade either flew off the car altogether or stayed stuck in one position on the glass and did not move at all.

Exactly this happened to me once while driving through a severe storm in Sacramento, California. Rain started and got heavier and heavier, then turned into hail that drummed down on the bodywork of the Bug like gravel on a big tin can, which it essentially was, and suddenly there was a inch of rainwater and hail on the freeway surface that the tires picked up and blew all over the place. I was in whiteout, and the windshield wiper blade picked exactly that moment to freeze in the straight-up position, leaving me at 60 MPH on the freeway with no forward vision at all.

Now because the windshield is so close to you in a Bug, it is possible to pop the vent window open and stick your arm out and grope around until you can get the wiper moving again, and I did this. But at that instant I discovered that with my long legs, bending forward to get my arm out the vent window in the Bug had two very significant and immediate consequences:

First, my right knee hit the ignition switch and shut off the engine.

Second, my left knee wedged the door handle up, unlatching the door which then popped open and started flopping around.

There I was... blinded by rain and hail, scooting down the freeway at 60 with the driver's side door open, the engine off and my left arm stuck out the vent window up to my elbow, trying to grab the windshield wiper arm. And of course, the 1960 VW bug had no seat belts of any kind in it.

I gave up and coasted to a halt on the shoulder, jerked the door shut, extracted my arm from the vent window and sat there for a few minutes waiting for my pulse to come down before I restarted the engine and proceeded, very gingerly, to re-enter the traffic flow and head for home.

Try THAT in a car made today!