

## USA TEST DRIVE IN A MERCEDES BENZ 600 FUNERAL CAR

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In August of 2001 the 600 hearse came back from the painter, to Opa's playpen, as our grandchildren tell their peers, to be reassembled.

When we returned from Germany this year on April 13, visiting Techno Classica, there stood the newly painted body. No engine had been installed, neither rear axle, and much of the dash area was yet to be completed. The computerized fuel management system was still in the box. I knew that there were many challenges ahead.

Ruth and I originally planned to start on our trip to Portland, OR on May 1. We did not make it. But, finally, on May 8 we loaded up the casket with 600 parts for the meet, as well as a few boxes for the kids we wanted to visit during our trip, and headed west on the PA Turnpike. We took I-81 south and shortly before Roanoke, VA filled the gastank. One of the locals approached us and wanted to know if someone was in the coffin. When I told him, "sure"! he responded, 'I'll buy him a beer!'. In Roanoke we exited I-81 and took the Skyline Drive south, passed an old cemetery, stopped and were impressed by one of the tombstones. The infant had died after two days, and the inscription read 'Sown on Earth - Blossomed in Glory'.

This is a road that I highly recommend. There is hardly any traffic, gorgeous panoramic views on the right and left sides, and a host of wild turkeys, deer, and other wildlife along the way. We got off in Fancy Gap and took I-77 to Charlotte, NC for a visit with Ruth's parents and our daughter Margaret, who took us to the best Fondu restaurant we ever visited.

Next morning found us on I-40 towards Andrews with a side trip to Chimney Rock. In Andrews we were greeted by Andrew Tibcken and his wife, and toured Drew's woodworking facility.

Next stop was Atlanta, GA where Lori, Ruth's sister, expected us. While the girls went garage sale shopping, I went to an English car show on I-85.

On Sunday after church we took I-20 to Memphis, TN, where we arrived late afternoon to meet with Rolf Pludra, President of the local MB Section. The 600 Funeral car received Best of Show Award. Monday at 8:00 Rolf came to the motel and we went to Wileys Yard. He had to show off the funeral car, and I was able to get some MB parts. Feeling good after lunch we took off towards Little Rock, AR and Dallas, TX.

Tuesday morning we drove to Ed Mullenix shop where he had three 600 Limousines. Two of them needed parts and I made a list to forward to Ed upon our return.

Going south after noon we were greeted by our daughter Christine and hubby Paul in New Braufels, TX. Son Jordan, better known as Texas Roadblock for his size, is a devoted baseball fan at age 4. During our visit he decided to try to dismantle a kitten's tail. The critter did not like the idea at all, and let him know with her claws. It was a lesson learned.

We were surprised at the beauty of the Guadalupe river and the rafting that takes place there. A pretty sunset at Lake Cannon gave the second day of our visit a fitting ending.

Left Braufels next noon on our way to Fredericksburg, also an old German settlement from about 150 years back when the Count of Solms-Braufelz, near Wetzlar, Germany arranged for many boatloads of immigrants to settle in this area of Texas. Der Deutsche Verein has a museum to visit, and street signs have German subtitles. Opa's Wursthaus, Friedhelms Hotel are other vivid reminders of the past. The area is also known for its delicious peaches.

On our way west on Rt. 87 towards Brady we noticed the variety of wildflowers and cactus; stayed over in Spring City and headed next morning for Lubbock and Littlefield - man how big is Texas!

A short rewarding side trip we took to Billy the Kid's grave site. The short lived life was amply illustrated in a large room next to the cemetery. His tombstone had been stolen twice, turned up again but now mounted in solid iron on his grave. When the gunslinger was buried, so told us a local oldtimer, his father Jesus Silva was one of the pallbearers.



Off I-40 we went to Painted Desert National Park, and a further drive to the Petrified Forest Park. Never seen tree trunks looking like wood but being stone.

When we stopped in Gallup at Jiffy Lube for an oil change, we met there with Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, who also had the oil changed in their car. She, being from Hamburg, Germany, is still homesick.

From Flagstaff we took N180 towards Grand Canyon. The following day Charly Baker from Chicago had to talk to us. A MB mechanic, he told me that he attended the last MB 600 school but never had seen a 600 hearse.

On our cruise along the south rim of the canyon we met Horst Wirths and his wife from Hennef, Germany. Horst was born in Siegen which also was my birthplace. A few stops on I had to take a photo. Sitting only a few feet from the canyon cliff were two couples with a folding table and chairs having breakfast a la Grand Canyon, and they spoke German. Dieter Schaumann from Stuttgart, Germany and another couple were touring the parks. Our car was now pointed towards Bryce Canyon, past Lake Powell, the Coral Pisandunes. Photographing two of the natural stone tunnels, again two Germans had to inspect the funeral car.

We were amazed to be again at 7617 elevation at Summit Point of Bryce Canyon rim. We stayed overnight at Ruby's Inn, and took off early next morning for another drive along the canyon stops. What a vista, what colors, a natural stone bridge, one view more spectacular than the next!

Zion National Park was impressive by those huge mountains, tunnel drives. There we saw a movie presentation of the park, and afterwards enjoyed a cool fruit drink when two Germans came over and asked if it was allowed to take a photo of the funeral car. It so happened that one of them had worked on the 600, the other worked for the funeral division of Munich. He told me no one will believe me when I tell them that in Zion National Park, USA I saw a 600 hearse! To document his story, I had to take a photo with his camera, and him standing next to the 600.

That night we stayed in a motel in Hurrigan, UT, visited Brigham Youngs summer home in St. George, also some of the Mormon churches. In one of the cathedrals, a pilgrim group of Germans had arrived from Saxony.

We then continued on I-15 towards Reno, NV, past Beaver Dam Wilderness Area, and decided to drive through downtown sin city USA.

California we entered via the Mojave Desert, gassed up in Baker and saw the world's tallest thermometer, pegging 104F.

Pushed the car hard to get to Escondido for a special dinner invitation by Franz Stapley, only to find out the steak waited for us in a restaurant 60 miles away in Santiago.

Next morning photographed to lowest milage 600 Limousine, 2400 miles, standing next to an even more impressive 540K Special Roadster. Only 11,000 manhours had been spent in the restoration of the 540K!

In La Jolla we visited Ilse and Heinz Gietz, Heinz has a Mercedes Benz shop there. When we left next morning and drove past Los Angeles, we got a taste of smog, and smelly cattle pens near Ontario. We took old Rt. 66 to La Verne, then 210 towards I-5 and San Fernando, crossed Tejon Pass 4100 ft., and finally got out of the smog area.

In Visalia on Rt.198 we stayed overnight, went next day to Sequoia National Forest. On route at Lake Kaweah, Ruth had to put her feet in the water. A sign beckoned for wine tasting, and we followed to Bullene Vineyards. The wine tasting was refreshing and we bought a case of "Rattlesnake" Red, a good table wine to compliment a steak. After you enter the State Park you wonder where the trees are. You climb the road, winding until you reach 8000 ft. and a vista opens before you that you did not expect. General Sherman is the oldest and biggest of the sequoias, over 2000 years old. In 1937 one of the tall trees fell down, 275 ft. high, 21 ft. trunk diameter. Someone got the idea to use the tree as a tunnel and as a drive-to attraction. We went under and drove on top of the trunk. Our overnight stay was in Oakhurst, and we met a young couple from the Harz area in Germany taking the elevator at the inn.

The drive towards Yosemite Park is, again, very beautiful. Our stops included the Yosemite Logger Rail Road, Mariposa Grove, and Glacier Point. What a view from 8700 ft.! Waterfalls and snow covered mountaintops extend down below the Merced River. On the descend we passed Bridlevail Falls along Tioga Road, still 8000 ft. The park rangers were watching a few mountain climbers when we drove past, one of them told us we were a little early for a pickup. Amstead Point, and dome shaped Rock, Lake Tenaya with snow covered mountaintops, meadows Tuohume, fishing at 9000 ft. Leaving the park after a short roundtrip of 138 miles and not having seen all the beautiful views. We entered Mono Basin via Conway Summit 8138 ft, I-395 North to 89 West. Bridgeport still at 7000 ft., Sweetwater Mountain along a rapid flowing river, Toyota National Park to Markleville, Luther Pass 7121 and Rt.50 towards Placerville.

After crossing Echo Summit (7700 ft.) we came to Lake Tahoe through a rich smelling Eldorado National Forest. There were no motels, until we finally found a one in Grass Valley. Some enthusiast are still mining for gold in the Yuba River. The California gold rush started there with a farmer falling over a large gold clump while chasing his cow. Today there are cows grazing over the hilly countryside. Per chance there are a few gold clumps left for you to find. The rice fields, almond trees, oliander bushes give room to Clear Lake. At Nice we wanted to have breakfast, finally found a place partially occupied with a Harley motorcycle group. When we got out of our Benz, I could not help to face the group and told them I had come for a pickup. The leader asked for whom? Ruth answered promptly "for all of you". The bunch replied with a loud "BUH".

Back on Rt 20 is a reminder of a part of Germany with curves and curves and more curves. We drove through some smaller Redwood groves, and stopped at Chamberlain Creek Recreational Area where an old steam engine caught my eye. A native explained that this machine had been used years ago to pull tree trunks out of the forest. Now we were going up again towards Willits and Fort Bragg, passing whole areas of pink and white foxgloves, laural pink and ginster. Often in fog or clouds but at noon we had the first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean, so different from the Atlantic. We passed rock formations, redwood sections, at times the road was covered on both sides with trees that met at the top forming a tunnel like a passage, wild flowers galore. Yellow and blue lupines, red columbines, paintbrushes.

In Legget we had to drive the funeral car through the legendary Redwood Tree. Stopped in Garberville for gas, next to us was a pickup truck

with 4 dachshound dogs. Barking up a storm until the owner called 'Cookie', the leader of the barking bunch, and gave him a dousing of water from the hose. The racket stopped at once!

We stayed overnight in Eureka, and were back on Rt.101 early next morning. In a meadow along the road were 20 elk grazing. More redwoods, Avenue of Giants, and I tried to photograph the scenery, but could not do justice to the site. When we left the redwoods on the Oregon side we found ourselves in a different climate, blackberry bushes - too bad they were not ripe yet, gooseberry bushes likewise. We stopped in New Port and went to see the lighthouse to stretch our legs. From there it was a 4 hour ride to Portland. We had the oil changed in the Benz and valves adjusted next day at MBI Motors. The evening welcome party at Gerry's house brought in a few late arrivals, Erich Waxenberger, Felix Thiede and Mathias Henne from Germany. Food and drinks at the van Zandt's could not have been better.

We all retired early to be in good form for the Thursday racing events at the Portland International Speedway. After breakfast and a welcome by Gerry van Zandt and Stu Hammel, we drove to the track for the first part - the quarter mile speed trials.

While the race officials briefed us on rules and regulations, the use of proper flags, and the mandatory ambulance, someone in the crowd could not help to comment - " yes, and we also brought our own funeral car"!

The quarter mile results: fastest 300SEL 6.3, 15.2 sec.; fastest 450SEL 6.9; fastest 600 funeral car 16.6 sec. Karl Middelhaue, who raced with an AMG ML 55 that clocked at 15.4 sec.

The road course racing saw Erich Waxenberger getting the trouble flag but he was fast, Neil Dubey pushed his 300SEL 6.3 to the limit. It all ended with everyone having had the fun they were looking for; best of all, no accidents or broken cars.

The evening meal was served at the Rhinelander Restaurant, good food and drinks, and afterwards Erich Waxenberger gave Telemetric race car presentation during their 1980 race history in Africa. On Friday we started after breakfast briefing on a road tour through the Columbia river gorge, with a stop at the tallest waterfall along the river, Multnomah Fall, to the Timber Lodge at Mount Hood. There a buffet lunch had been prepared, and on our way back met at Neil de Atley's garage where supper was brought-in and tables set among the Benzes to enjoy a nice evening.

Karl Middelhaue gave a short presentation on the computerized fuel management system that had been installed in the 600 Funeral Car, he and Ruth had been driving to Portland, OR a distance of 6226 miles with an average fuel consumption of 17.4 GPM.

On Saturday morning we had a technical seminar on polishing the cars by Griot's Garage, and at MBI air suspensions by Neil Dubey, M-100 ignition by Randy Durance. To round off technical seminars, Gregory Merrick gave a presentation on wood care and restoration, interior restoration especially leather were presented at Guy's Interior. Michael Trei our specialist on soundsystems explained the Becker range of car radios. MBI mechanics had their hands full to service the benzes, and to suggest repairs, often assisted by other M-100 Group members.

The judging of the cars at the meet was only a peoples choice and awarded to

Best 300SEL 6.3 - Mark Passarelli

Best 450SEL 6.9 - Dan Lundblad

Best 600 - Karl Middelhaue

The Benz driven the longest distance to the meet - Len Giordano

The Best of Show - Karl Middelhaue's 600 funeral car

Stu Hammel, President of the M-100 Group gave the closing address at MBI Motors, thanking Erich Waxenberger and his wife Ute for attending, Neil Dubey of Star Motors for sponsoring the race track event, Karl Middelhaue for the car badges, and the many that had worked hard to make the Meet in Oregon a success.

After a fitting round of applause many M-100 machines could be heard being started for the trip home. Those of us who stayed until Sunday morning had a farewell supper at Ruth's steakhouse with Erich and Ute Waxenberger.

A friendly group of pallbearers had helped load the coffin packed with precious M-100 parts for the ride home to Woxall, PA. Drew and Linda Tibcken said goodbye to us when we left on Sunday morning driving first north on I-5, then to Rt 12 in direction of Spokane, WA. We passed White Pass, a favorite ski area with lifts 4500 ft, got here and there a view of Mount Ranier with his snow covered top, Tieton Dam, Rimrock Lake and the beautiful Wenachten National Park, great fishing, and towards the foothills apple and cherry orchards.

At Wanapu Dam, actually the Columbia River we stopped for lunch, arrived late afternoon in Spokane where we visited the MB dealer, creating for a few minutes a stir of excitement until the photos were taken. Continued up Rt.2 north towards Glacier National Park through Kooyenai National Forest with its picturesque waterfalls. When we came to Lake Loon, the water was just like a mirror to reflect the beautiful sky, which I had to capture in a photo. At the west gate of Glacier Park we learned that we could only drive 18 miles inside the park, since heavy snow had blocked the mountain pass. But, we were rewarded along Lake Donald with scenes of the wild Flathead River, and a black bear crossing the road in front of us.

On our detour around the south side of the Park we could see the snow capped peaks of the Rockies and Marias Pass 5220 ft., Rt.2 east we followed through the Blackfoot Indian Reservation, the northern plains of Montana with its endless straight roadway parallel the train tracks, grain elevators with crossroad intersections, a bar and parked pickup trucks.

In North Dakota the large Fort Peck Indian Reservation, and near Williston the Lewis & Clark State Park along the Missouri River. In Rugby we stopped to take a photo of the Geographical Center Monument of North America, then took a side trip to Fort Totten, the best preserved Fort in the US, filled with all the reminders of the past. On the benz rolled into Minnesota through the Leech Lake Indian Reservation, over the bridge at Duluth, along Lake Superior into Wisconsin. Rt.51 south brought us to Island City at Lake Minoqua. But when I noticed Crown Classics and a collection of restored American classics, I had to stop. They even had a 300SEL 6.3 there for service, a true original owner benz in lovingly cared for condition.

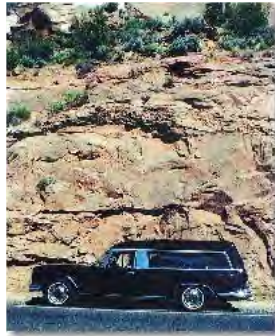
In the afternoon we were greeted by our daughter Audrey and husband Dave in Wausau, WI a much needed rest for both of us. Refreshed we left Monday noon to drive to Appleton, there to visit Martin Viebahn one of the M-100 members and the proud owner of a 600. Toward evening got on the way to Fon du Lac. A severe thunderstorm with 70 MPH wind closed the road in front of us because of an overturned vehicle for 3-1/2 hours. Tired and worn we checked in the motel at 2:30 in the morning to get some shut eye, and be ready to meet Arden Hjelle with his 600 at his machine shop in Fon du Lac. In the afternoon we reached Chicago, IL for a last car related visit with Manfred Pfeiffer who has an independent MB repair facility on Westchester Road.

One more night's rest in Youngstown, OH, and the next morning we drove over the truck scales to get the weight of the funeral benz, topping at 7060 lbs. Running on Rt.80 towards the PA Turnpike south to Quakertown, PA, familiar turf close to home where we arrived in the afternoon.

In closing the bare facts of the Test Drive: driven miles 10562, average fuel consumption 16.54 miles per gallon. The computer controlled fuel management system 100% reliable. We came through 26 states of the USA in 5-1/2 weeks driving. Thanked the Lord for the safety on the road

where even the best driver will have some hair raising experiences, like when we almost ran a red light in Portland and came to a screeching stop in the middle of a busy intersection. The only good thing in our favor, no one would like to hit a funeral car, especially not a Mercedes Benz with a beautiful woman passenger.

Now that this experience is behind us, what is next? A 600 engine with a Vortech Supercharger and a computerized fuel management system, I have to catch those fast running 6.3 guys; believe me, I'm trying!



Here is a synopsis of the performance characteristics of the 600 with the fuel management system during the course of our cross-country drive:

1. Idle can be set at 500 RPM. the 500 RPM will be kept regardless if the car is in gear or out of gear. The lower RPM is felt positive when in traffic, stop and go condition.
2. The CO reading at idle can now be set down below 1%. With the old mechanical Bosch fuel injection pump, MB showed 3.5 -5.5 CO in idle but in most cases you had to set CO at 7% to make the car halfway decent.
3. During kick-down you would see a black cloud out of the exhaust, now with the computer controlled air-fuel mixture within a split second adjusted, you do not see this any more.
4. To design an optimal timing curve through the computer, you obtain a cleaner combustion, this is very obvious when you change the oil which is still very clean after 3000 miles driving.
5. Air-fuel ration can now be programmed by the computer as a custom designed curve. On the long distance drive through the USA this ratio had been programmed at 15.3:1 for optimal fuel economy. The ideal air-fuel mixture for gasoline engines is 14.7:1.
6. When we changed oil during our drive, we also added to the oil, Castrol 20/50 GTX, one quart Slick 50, an additive that comes into its own at high temperatures like our drive through the Mojave desert in California.
7. To help combustion with a hotter spark, a MSD Multispark #6 had been installed. The normal spark gap of 0.35 could be opened to 0.50 for a longer spark.
8. For long distance driving it is recommended to increase tire pressure from 32 lbs to 35 lbs, and for the quarter mile racing increase tire pressure of the front tires to 50 lbs.
9. The shift pattern of the automatic transmission is now much smoother by a more constant vacuum, and not anymore influenced by a change of vacuum pressure of RPM.
10. At higher altitudes, 3-12000 ft, the air-fuel mixture will stay constant, you merely experience a slight power loss as a result of a lower oxygene content of the air.
11. When you put your foot on the gas pedal to start driving, you experience a slight hesitation until the mechanical fuel injection pump delivered action. This hesitation is completely gone. The computerized fuel injection system has an immediate response.
12. Also at kick-down there is no hesitation any more. The downshift happens at once.
13. The fuel consumption curve by Mercedes Benz gives 16-14 liter per 100 KM, or 8-16 MPG. To be exact at 25 miles you may get 16 MPG, and

at 80-90 miles 8 MPG. The weight of the 600 given at 6400 lbs.

On our trip we weighed in at 7060 lbs, consequently had 660 lbs more weight to transport.

On our drive to Portland we averaged 17.4 MPG. In driving faster through the space of Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota, at 90-100 miles, our fuel consumption has been lower, but our average fuel consumption driving 10,562 miles in 5 weeks still has been a respective 16.54 MPG.

An optimal set 300SEL 6.3 driven to Portland, OR had a 13 MPG average fuel consumption at half the weight of a 600.

The test drive of the 600 funeral car with a computerized fuel management system showed:

1. 100% reliability
2. A fuel saving of at least half or 320 gallons of high test fuel.
3. Cleaner combustion, and by this a very significant contribution to a cleaner environment.

This 600 Funeral Car sold and is back in Germany, proudly being used by it's new owner.