

What lurks beneath the hood of an early Honda?

BOB ENGLISH

Way back when Canadians were just being introduced to the first humble Honda Civics, our compatriots down under were racketing around in hot, little, front-drive 1300 Coupes powered by overhead cam, four-carb, dry sump and, wait for it, air-cooled engines that revved to 7,500 rpm.

And currently running the roads of Armstrong, B.C., is one of perhaps only 30 survivors of this quick and quirky little car, one of the last to be created with extensive input from company founder Soichiro Honda -- he apparently drove everybody involved nuts.

This car -- the sedan version was introduced first in 1968 and the coupe for 1970 -- is virtually unknown today, but actually played a pivotal role in Honda's success as a car maker. In fact, it fomented something of a palace revolution that ended an era in which the "Old Man" -- as Soichiro was affectionately, if often frustratingly, known -- single-handedly ruled the product-development process.

"Originality" may have been the Old Man's watchword, but his incessant tinkering, even while the factory was attempting to mass-produce the car, the fact its air-cooled engine wouldn't allow it to meet emission standards and that it simply wasn't selling, was threatening the company's future.

As the 1960s ended, the Old Man grudgingly gave ground and Honda began putting in place a proper development team that led to the creation of cars such as the original Civic -- and the rest, as they say, is history.

Lindsay Thachuk, now a computer consultant, has owned a 1972 1300 Coupe 7 (with a single carb; the Coupe 9 had the four) since it was new, purchasing it in Australia where he was working on a two-year teaching contract after graduating from university in Edmonton. The contract stretched to a 22-year stay and among the souvenirs he returned to Canada with in 1993 was the 1300 Coupe.

"There was room in the container with our household goods, so we just put it in, too," he says.

Thachuk had become sold on front-wheel drive with his Morris Mini and, when this needed replacing, he took a chance on the Honda brand from Japan.

Although famous for its motorcycles, Honda had only been making cars (mainly home-market micro-machines) for a few years and the 1300 sedan was its first attempt at a mainstream vehicle.

By 1970, it was selling the new coupes in penny-packet numbers (just over 1,000 were apparently exported) through independent dealers in Australia and a handful of other markets.

Thachuk had been rather taken with a pretty little coupe he'd seen displayed at the 1972 Adelaide Motor Show and it is that same car he's ended up driving for the past 34 years.

The car -- the sedan and coupe share mechanical specs -- is a fascinating example of Old Man Honda's unique approach to the vehicles he produced.

It's small, only 4,140 mm long (about the size of a contemporary VW Beetle) and narrow, and its styling isn't dissimilar to other Japanese coupes of the period.

The interior is typically attractive and well equipped by the high Japanese standards of the time. It is also built on a monocoque platform, as were its contemporaries. But under the sheet metal, things are far from ordinary.

The engine is an all-aluminum, 1,298-cc, inline four-cylinder, single overhead cam, two-valve unit with a unique finned block, exterior shroud and high-capacity fan, a system that Honda called Duo Dyna Air Cooling.

The Old Man was convinced air cooling was the way to go and was also busy designing an air-cooled Formula One engine (it was a flop).

After overcoming many development problems, the 1300 engine was eventually deemed production-ready and, in single-carb form, produced 100 hp at 7,000 rpm and 79 lb-ft of torque.

Pretty amazing numbers for an engine of this size in those days, but the four-carb version trumped even this, upping output to 116 hp at 7,300 rpm and producing 87 lb-ft of torque.

The engine was mounted in east-west fashion and drove the front wheels through a four-speed manual gearbox.

The front suspension was by what were then still fairly novel MacPherson struts, but the independent rear was an unusual contrivance somewhat similar to the front suspensions used for years on Ford pickups.

Each rear wheel is attached to a long strut with its pivot point on the opposite side of the car (looked at from the rear, they formed an elongated X) with semi-elliptic leafs providing the springing.

Brakes are front discs/rear drums with power assist, and the is steering rack-and-pinion.

It all worked remarkably well, according to enthusiastic period road tests of the coupe in Australia, one describing it as "superb and incredible."

A reviewer at the sedan version's launch in 1968 mentions Old Man Honda himself blazing down the straight at Suzuka violently sawing at the wheel to demonstrate its stability.

Honda's records from this period are sketchy at best, but it seems the coupe was available from 1970 to the end of production in 1972 and that 46,461 were built.

Some were driven on a promotional tour across the United States, but it was never sold in North America. The sedans were apparently never exported.

Thachuk's 1300 was used as the main family vehicle for many years and has proven both a reliable and fun ride. In the mid-1980s, with just under 100,000 km on the odometer, he treated it to a bumper-to-bumper going-over and an engine rebuild, but the bodywork is still fine and 75 per cent of the paint original.

Despite its rarity, Thachuk says his classic Honda's value isn't high. "There's just not a lot of interest. One sold in Australia on eBay for \$800 (Australian)," he says. But, oddly enough, a single-page sales pamphlet for the car recently changed hands for \$172.

Thachuk enjoys driving his car in the summer and plans to keep on doing so. He also keeps fellow enthusiasts of the car informed by operating a web site: <http://www.honda-1300-coupe.com>. globeauto@globeandmail.com