

OUR 1950s MOTORING SCENE

THE SAR&H CCF-BRILL TOURING COACHES

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

Who can forget the distinctive SA Railways & Harbours (SAR&H) maroon and grey buses that dominated the South African tourist industry during the 1950s? Even today many remember these handsome vehicles with great affection.

After World War II the government authorities realized that significant income could be generated from tourism and the South African Tourist Corporation (Satour) was established in 1947 to advertise the country as an international destination. The responsibility for local travel arrangements, however, were left to the SAR&H, an organization with considerable experience in this field.

An order was placed with the Canadian Car & Foundry (CCF) for 113 model IC-37/41 intercity coaches, costing £7000 each. The J.G. Brill Co. had been building buses, trolleybuses and railroad cars in the USA for eighty years. In 1944 it had merged with the American Car & Foundry Co (ACF) to become ACF-Brill, and the new company licensed CCF in Montreal to build its bus designs for export to the mainly right-



A SAR&H CCF-Brill touring bus returning from Cape Point, on the road above Smitswinkel Bay

hand-drive British Commonwealth countries.

SAR&H representatives had been intimately involved in the design of the 1936 National Road Plan for South Africa, but most of the inter-city routes remained in poor condition as construction had come to a halt during the war. The CCF-Brill coaches, with their large wheels, excellent ground clearance and 6-cylinder Hall-Scott engines had been designed to deal with long-distance conditions like these.

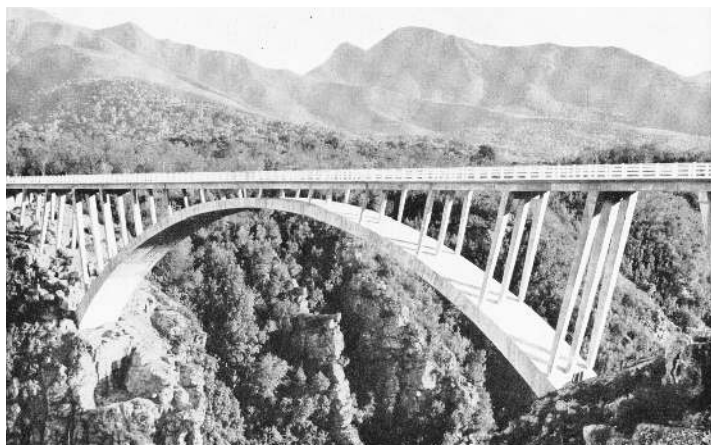
The first of them arrived by ship in mid-August 1947 and their streamlined bodywork, equipped with wrap-round windscreens, oval rear windows and lights fared into the roofline, attracted widespread admiration. The initial vehicles had vertical front radiator protection, the later models sported attractive horizontal chromium grilles. The interiors of the coaches had been designed on aircraft lines and incorporated two alternative layouts, one providing 37 comfortable

reclining seats and the other 41. The latest lighting concepts had been incorporated, and although the buses were not equipped with air-conditioning, the ventilation worked well. The rumble of the powerful 11.5-litre petrol engines was muted as they had been positioned under the floor, and they enabled the coaches to maintain excellent speeds in hilly terrain. The coaches were used to introduce luxury tours between Johannesburg and Durban, a round trip of nine days,

the route proved to be a success and became the forerunner of many other tours throughout the country. Departure times for the bus routes coincided with the arrival times of the inter-city passenger trains, in rail sleeping compartments panoramic photographs featured the SAR&H coaches at popular tourist spots. The CCF-Brills had much to contend with and these large vehicles had to operate in narrow and tortuous conditions like the Storms River, Blaauwkranz and Grootrivier passes in the Tsitsikamma forest along the Garden Route. They were equipped with horns augmented to warn oncoming motorists, the peace of the forest was often shattered by strident blasts at blind corners. Unfortunately two of the coaches had serious accidents on the Blaauwkranz Pass, and passenger's lives were lost; this was a major incentive for the reconstruction of the road through the Tsitsikamma. The narrowest gorge was the Storms River and an innovative single-span bridge was built over the chasm in 1954. Designed by a world-renowned expert in concrete structures,



One of the early Brill buses at Du Toit's Kloof



The graceful arch of the Storms River Bridge soon after it had opened

Professor Ricardo Morandi, its method of construction caused a sensation. The ribs of the supporting arch were cast vertically and, rotating from their footings, were slowly lowered across the gorge. The engineering world held its breath until they met precisely in the centre; to this day the beautiful Storms River Bridge remains a major tourist attraction.

Supplies of parts for the CCF-Brill coaches came to an end when ACF closed down its bus-building business in 1954, and this coincided with a period of major improvements in our national routes. Inevitably the SAR&H coach tours lost market share as private operators like Springbok Atlas Tours acquired modern coaches better-suited to the new long-distance travel conditions. At the same time the SAR&H inter-town passenger train services began to chalk up losses, and many of these rail passenger services had to be cancelled. This created a new lease in life for the CCF-Brill touring buses which excelled in operations on secondary roads; as their thirsty Hall-Scott petrol engines reached the end of their operating lives they were replaced in the SAR workshops with Cummins diesel units. In 1962 the Brills replaced the Transvaal passenger train services from Johannesburg to Lichtenburg and Mafeking, and in the Cape similar arrangements were made for the routes between towns like Aliwal North and Barkly East. Passengers were charged rail fares and luggage was carried at railway rates. Local buses were serviced at the SAR Motor Transport Section at Maitland, and loaded passengers at the Adderley Street exit of the old Railway Station opposite Garlick's

department store. After another decade of productive use the Brills were withdrawn from service.

In the Crankhandle Club we like to think that, like old soldiers, classic vehicles never die, and in 1975 Cape Town harbour experienced exactly this. Sea Deliveries (Pty) Ltd, a company operating two ships managed by Unicorn Lines, was a car-ferrying organization operating between Durban, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. 3000 vehicles a month were transported and each departing ship carried between 50 and 80 Leyland vehicles from the Blackheath plant. Each week around 560 vehicles landed at Cape Town and had to be delivered to dealerships within a radius of 250 km of the city. As no office accommodation was available at the quay area, permission was obtained from the harbour authorities for the use of a small area next to the parking zone for ferried cars. However no buildings were allowed and everything had to be mobile - either self-propelled or towable. Michael Cloete, the local manager, obtained two ex-SAR&H CCF-Brill coaches for a nominal price. MT 16317 had entered service on 4 July 1948 and had put in 918 200 km for SAR, whilst running mate MT16986, placed on the road on 13 December 1948, had clocked 1 628 000 km. Their Cummins engines were removed, but the coaches were left on their wheels to comply with the 'towable' stipulation. They were connected to power and water supplies and their interiors were rebuilt; one of them became a rest room for drivers and a workshop, while the other accommodated the accounts section, a control/dispatch room, a kitchen and a training area. The capacious

luggage compartments were used to store office records and cool drinks. Resplendent in the impressive red, white and blue livery of Unicorn Lines, they were tangible proof that enthusiasts will always find a useful role for treasured transport icons.

Have any of these impressive coaches survived?

An excellent example of a CCF-Brill bus is on display at the Transnet Transport Museum in George. During 1990 this vehicle, MT6041, was carefully restored at the Technical Services workshop at Langlaagte, many of the engine parts were unobtainable and had to be rebuilt.

In the August 2009 Crankhandle Chronicle a 1948 CCF-Brill coach was advertised for sale, it was parked at the Ou Skip Resort at Melkbosstrand. Although the front of the vehicle had been altered somewhat, it appeared to be in good condition and we trust it went to a good home.

Another rather forlorn-looking CCF-Brill coach is being stored

under cover at the Sandstone Estate in the Eastern Free State. The Stars of Sandstone motto is 'Preserving the best of our past for the future', hopefully it won't be too long before this symbolic vehicle is back on the road.

In many countries historic buses have been restored and used extensively in film work, but unfortunately the coach in the Transport Museum in George is on blocks and inoperative. Superb films and photographs are captured at Sandstone, it would be a fabulous experience for visitors to be able to admire one of the evocative CCF-Brill coaches back in operating condition, resplendent in its original SAR&H livery!

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The Mafeking bus leaving Johannesburg station, 1962



The Sea Deliveries office at Cape Town Harbour, 1975. Michael Cloete second from the left