

# OUR SOUTH AFRICAN MOTORING SCENE PIONEERS OF THE OIL INDUSTRY IN SOUTH AFRICA

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*



*This 1927 GMC package truck delivered 4-gallon tins of oil and buckets of grease, as well as household products in the Cape Peninsula during the 1920s*



*This 1926 3,5 ton International bulk truck was used to carry fuels to Cape Town and Suburban garages from the Quarry Terminal in Cape Town Docks*

In 1897, Vacuum Oil was the first oil company to establish itself in Cape Town, some six months before the first motor vehicles appeared in the city. Initially, cases of petrol in tins were imported, for fire purposes as deck cargo, on wind-jammers from the USA. Vacuum Oil of SA marketed its own brand of petrol, initially as Pratt's, then Sphinx and in 1911 as Pegasus, with its famous red logo, the flying horse. The Pegasus brand became so popular that, within a few years, the name that had first been used in South Africa was adopted throughout the world. The name Vacuum Oil was changed to Mobilgas in 1954 and, eight years later, to Mobil.

Some 35 years ago Mobil published a calendar featuring historic photos of its local delivery vehicles





*Above left: A 1926 Graham Brothers package truck awaiting supplies at a Johannesburg depot*

*Above: A 1927 GMC 200-gallon delivery truck completed 92 000 miles before being replaced in 1935*

*Left: An AVRO AVIAN acquired in 1930, was the first aeroplane in South Africa to be used exclusively for business purposes*

of the 1920s and '30s. Fortunately CHC member Mike Johnson kept a copy of the calendar. His photos are an impressive reminder that, without a comprehensive lubrication and petrol distribution industry, our treasured vintage and classic cars would have been useless as modes of transport.

Oil company transport in South Africa evolved rapidly during the 1920s and early 1930s. Rival company Texaco installed the first petrol bowser in the country, a manual pump, at the Regent Garage in Sea Point in 1922. It's fascinating to see through these photos how the focus of oil company transport changed from the delivery of tins of fuel in the 1920s to tanks of fuel in the 1930s as petrol pumps were installed

throughout the country.

To assist with the control of this long-distance distribution system, in 1930 Vacuum Oil invested in the first corporate aircraft in South Africa, an AVRO Avian. Brand advertising took to the skies as the fuselage of this neat biplane displayed eye-catching Mobiloil advertisements.

In 1933 the Wayne Oil Tank and Pump Co licensed the technology in the USA for an electric petrol bowser. It included a mechanical calculator which used a revolving wheel to show how much fuel was being pumped while a second wheel displayed the accumulating charge for the fuel. These new machines reduced the time needed to fill up, and allowed customers to limit their fuel orders to a cash

amount as well as by a number of gallons. The competition between the oil companies in South Africa increased dramatically after another competitor, Shell Oil, installed the first of these locally in 1935.

In the early days the competition between the most important oil company brands in South Africa, Vacuum Oil, Shell, Texaco and Atlantic Oil, was intense. The larger petrol stations often housed pumps displaying three or four different brands, so each company advertised intensively on their distribution vehicles to capture the public's attention. As an additional image enhancement the drivers of these trucks were kitted out smartly in white coats and caps.

In the 1950s service stations

started negotiating for single petrol brands to be sold on their forecourts. This in turn led to a number of changes to name brands. While Texaco had become Caltex in 1934, Vacuum Oil became Mobilgas in 1954 and in the same year British Petroleum (BP) was launched in South Africa when it bought out Atlantic Oil.

During the following decade the competition extended to the construction of oil refineries. A Mobil (later rebranded as Engen) refinery was built at Wentworth, Durban, in 1962. A year later Shell, in conjunction with BP, built one at Reunion in Durban, while Caltex built South Africa's third refinery at Milnerton in the Cape in 1965. The intense competition helped to keep the local cost of petrol to some

30c per gallon (7c/litre). This low price led to a major increase in the number of vehicles in the country and by the early 1960s this had escalated dramatically to 1 400 000.

This all occurred well before the 1973 world oil crisis when fuel prices almost quadrupled. Cheap oil had generated an extraordinary period of growth in the country.

*Thanks Mike - great photos!*

*This 1 000-gallon Buick based  
Flxible (trade name) tanker,  
first commissioned in 1932,  
was considered "the ultimate" -  
with its "fine lines and  
impressive capacity".* 🚗



## Citroen DS - A car from the future

*Presented at the Seniors' and Evening Meetings on 09 October 2024*

By Charl Olivier and David Green

Photos Viv James, Charel Olivier

The Citroen 2CV had provided a masterclass in producing a fully featured, reliable car on a budget, and Citroen's engineers would take the knowledge gained and apply it to a new, larger car, something that would leapfrog the competition.

A soft ride was almost obligatory when driving fast on potholed post-war French roads but cornering at speed was also important. The engineers started with similar suspension setup to the 2CV, but it didn't work on the longer car. However, during the war Citroen's engineers hadn't been able to do much development, but they'd a lot of time to think. Citroen employee Paul Mages had dreamt up a suspension system that, instead of using springs and dampers, used oil and air. It was quite revolutionary and, after producing remarkable results on a donor car, Citroen made a bold choice to adopt it for their new car. It provided an astonishingly smooth ride without wallowing through the bends.

The road holding would be improved using radial tyres, when many others were still using inferior cross-ply tyres. These new tyres would be supplied, of course, by Citroen's owners Michelin. The hydraulic suspension could tap into the system used by the brakes. But there was more that it could do. Citroen realised that it could also be used to give power-assisted steering at a low cost, because the hydraulic system was already there. Many cars at the time didn't have power-assisted steering; when you turned the steering wheel you directly turned both front wheels. Using a hydraulic system made steering a breeze and you can only use one finger. This will put you ahead of the competition. The steering would be rack and pinion.

The engine would be all-new. Citroen's new car would have a sleek design with a sports car-like low centre of gravity, so a low bonnet dictated a low profile flat-6 engine. The initial design was for it to be water cooled, but for the success of the 2CV's air cooled design meant the idea of using water to cool the engine was dropped.

The hydraulic system would be called upon once more for the gearbox, which would be semi-automatic, with no need for a

clutch pedal. And all that power would be fed through the front wheels, not the rear like most cars, meaning no awkward driveshaft hump inside the car. This is radical stuff, especially for the late 1940s. Citroen weren't building a car with one untried technology, they were filling the car with them. To get this technology to work in all weather conditions would be the real challenge.

They delayed the car's introduction to put it even further ahead of the competition. While American car companies were making cars that imitated the streamlined shapes of jet fighters, Citroen took the principles behind those sleek aircraft and applied them to a car. The designers had known for years that less drag means better fuel economy and a faster vehicle. Citroen's family car had been in development since the 1930s, and the shape was altered many times as fashions changed, but it gravitated towards a wind cheating shape that could still sit five in comfort. Even the bottom of the car was smoothed over to help aerodynamics, something that would take decades for other car makers to do. Citroen was keen for the car to have a good all-round visibility, so the roof would be held up with pillars, with a wrap-around



*David Green expounding  
the many virtues of his  
magnificent Pallas*

windscreen. To help the car's low centre of gravity the bonnet used lightweight aluminium, and the roof was made from the relatively new material fibreglass.

The interior also didn't follow the norm. The steering wheel used just one spoke to make it less dangerous in the days before collapsible steering columns and made seeing the dashboard controls easier. Modern plastics a world away from the Bakelite of the 1930s, were just becoming available and the interior would make extensive use of them, along with washable nylon fabric for the seats. The AM radio was an optional extra.

Jaguar entered their updated C-Type in the 1953 Le Mans 24-hour



endurance race, using disc brakes for the first time. Citroen was persuaded then that disc brakes was the future for the new car. This will be the first time that disc brakes are used on a mass production car.

Getting ready to launch the car needed a name. The name given was DS, which in French sounded like the word for "goddess". But the flat 6 engine wasn't so godlike. It was too heavy and not fuel efficient, also it was down on power. To abandon this engine, they had to use the hand-me-down 1.9L 4-cylinder engine from the 11CV Traction Avant. With the engine being taller it had to sit further back, intruding into the passenger compartment.

Finally, the DS was ready to be presented at the 1955 Paris Motor Show where it became the star of the show. By the end of the first day Citroen had taken 12 000 pre-orders and 80 000 at the end of the show. This was a record that was only broken 60 years later by Tesla. Less than 100 people received one in 1955 and it took three years for

Citroen to deliver all the pre-orders.

When customers did get one, they were beset with problems from all the new technology. Using the hydraulic system to provide so much convenience meant that when it failed, it was disabled with no steering, gearchange, suspension or brakes. All the secrecy that Citroen had put in place just three years earlier meant garages had no clue how to repair the exotic DS. Citroen had to rush maintenance manuals to smooth over these ugly teething problems. The DS was expensive.

With customers purchasing competitor's cars, the following year Citroen announced a cut price version, the ID, again using a French play on words - the ID sounding like the French word for "Idea". Gone were many of the hydraulic bells and whistles which made the car lighter, so the engine was detuned so it would not outperform the more expensive DS, and the interior felt a little cheaper. But it still got the funky hydraulic suspension and those futuristic good looks.

Citroen tried out an even cheaper, stripped back ID in 1957 but it wasn't popular with only 400 sold. They found customers gravitating to the "luxury" ID they'd introduced the same year, essentially giving something closer to the full DS inside without all that new-fangled hydraulic craziness.

In the event of a flat tyre, the suspension, powered by oil and water meant that a jack wasn't required. The spare tyre is tucked away in front of the engine. The car can drive on three wheels. In 1961 there were two assassination attempts on President De Gaulle. He was in a DS and survived the attempts. With four flat tyres the car continued driving to its destination.

An Estate version was released in 1958 and a Cabriolet version in 1960. In 1965 Citroen expanded the engine to a 2.2L. The 1.9L got a bit larger to 2.0L. In secret, Citroen also worked on a redesign of the rear including a hatch back. The headlights also move sideways when the steering is turned in the DS and ID models after 1967. In

1968 the power of both engines was increased and a fuel injected model, producing 102KW, was introduced allowing the car to reach 188km/h. The interior was changed to keep up with luxury cars of the competitors. This kept sales strong and, at the end of the decade, they had produced one million cars. In 1971 a fully automatic gearbox appeared and an increase in power in the following year. Sadly, in 1975, production of the DS came to an end, after selling close to 1.5 million cars, of which 1.3 million were sold in France.

In 1999 the DS was placed in third place on the list for Car Of The Century, after the Mini and the Model T Ford.

And now a word from the Owner David Green ...

My 1975 Citroen DS23 Pallas, one of the last DS's to be produced is Powered by a 2.3litre four-cylinder engine, is a marvel of sophisticated engineering. With its hydro pneumatic suspension, brakes and power steering it was way ahead of it's time when it was introduced at the Paris Motor Show in 1955.



*The clutch, brake, accelerator and hand brake. The brake is a button, when pressed hard the car will come to a complete stop.*



*Crisp, clean, functional, and way ahead of its time; note the level floor sans the conventional consol hump!*



*Captivating, ageless and totally desirable design; even over 60!*



*The spare wheel.*

