

**ESCAPE ROAD**

# Hudson "Iron Lung" Special

*Putting the land speed record-look on the road*

By Roger Barlow

**T**his decidedly odd machine was the brainchild of a Connecticut enthusiast who wanted something different (read: personalized) during and just after WWII.

I saw it in a parking lot at Indy when I went east to cover the 500 for *The Autocar* in 1947; and bought it for my company which was hard up for interesting cars as few European products were yet available for export. Then I drove it back to Beverly Hills where my partner, Louis Van Dyke, took one look at the amazing body and dubbed it "The Iron Lung."

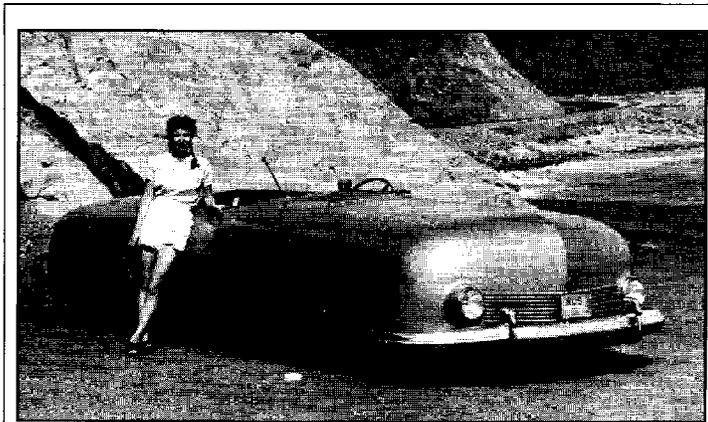
Why a Hudson as the basis for this strange effort? It's hard to say now and I doubt that I ever knew. Perhaps a family sedan had been crash damaged leaving a usable engine and chassis. But Hudsons once had a solid reputation as gutsy cars with better-than-average performance. Not only here but abroad. They were assembled and sold in England in substantial numbers and there they also formed the basis for a range of specialized high performance luxury cars bearing the name of Railton.

Reid Railton was the brilliant and highly regarded engineer/designer who was responsible for John Cobb's successful land speed record cars, the first to reach 350 mph. That he put his name on cars derived from six and eight cylinder Hudsons surely says something about their basic worth...even though in the late '30s Hudsons were still powered by side valve, flat head engines and had not yet gone to independent front suspension (nor, of course, had Jaguar or Bentley in 1938.) However, this special aero Hudson was built upon a 1941 chassis with coil spring independent suspension adopted by Hudson in 1940.

Nevertheless, that side valve, straight eight engine sent a lightweight two-seater Railton up the famous Brooklands Test Hill in record time—I remember seeing a photo of it topping the crest with two feet of daylight between its wheels and the pavement, so effectively airborne that the caption read, "We are now passing over Surrey."

Hudson's 4.2 liter straight eight was a

long stroke engine (76×114 mm) which offered some advantages in England, being rated only 28 hp for tax purposes compared to 30 hp for the smaller, short stroke, 3.5 liter V8 Ford. But despite its long stroke, this was one of the highest revving production



Powered by a Hudson 124 hp eight-cylinder engine displacing 4.2 liters, this aluminum-bodied special could do 95 mph; it had no top or doors

engines of its time...its 124 bhp being developed at 4200 rpm. Which was well up on all counts compared with the 80 bhp at 3800 of the Ford V8 or the 110 bhp produced at 3600 by the 4.2 liter Oldsmobile eight. Even the 5.3 liter Chrysler Imperial straight eight developed only 130 bhp at 3400 rpm.

Of course, such exotic power units as the new 4.5 liter Lagonda overhead cam V12 and the supercharged twin cam 2.9 liter Alfa Romeo eight developed their 180 horses at 5500 and 5000 rpm respectively—and they alone cost more than a complete Railton drophead or Hudson.

So the choice of a lively, relatively high-revving Hudson as the basis for a unique personal "special" was less illogical in its day than if viewed from the 1980s when flat head engines are for lawn mowers and even the cheapest small cars now have overhead camshafts—sometimes two of them.

As I remember it, the crankshaft main bearings of those Hudson engines were lubricated by pressure from the oil pump but the connecting rod bearings were served by a "splash" system. Pipes from the pump delivered oil to a trough below each crank throw in which the con rods dipped their little scoops each revolution. And I believe

that Hudson still used clutch discs which had cork inserts and ran in oil. What advantages for the owner these two odd engineering aspects possessed, I'm not sure.

On my way back to California with the unique "Iron Lung" there was ample opportunity to really get to know it. It did perform well for its period. According to reliable road test reports, the top speed of a Hudson sedan or a Railton drophead was only 86-88 mph but the Iron Lung indicated just under 100 on a couple of occasions—probably a genuine 92-95. Despite a three-speed gearbox, acceleration was impressive—largely by virtue of the high-revving engine and light weight. The body, bulky as it was, was not as heavy as it looked; being constructed from small steel tubing of square section. I'm almost certain it was skinned in aluminum for I remember it being subject to rather easy denting. The structure was commendably rigid inasmuch as it had no door openings. Which made entry and exiting something of an athletic display, and among ladies only those with superb legs tried.

The bulky, bulbous "Iron Lung" was no automotive beauty but, once you were inside, this machine shed its ugly-duckling character and gave both driver and passenger a wonderful sense of security because you sat so deeply within it. Yet there was also a feeling of openness due to the huge curved plexiglass windshield which had no A-pillars to obstruct a view.

As long as the car was on the move wind and even rain were deflected well over the occupants' heads, but a soaking was inevitable if a stop was necessary during a shower, for no top of any sort was provided and we never attempted to develop one. Truly a California vehicle in spirit and reality and not a car for all (Connecticut) seasons!

Handling was only a little better than most American cars of that period. That is to say it wallowed and pitched more than it should and the steering was low geared.

In Hollywood-Beverly Hills the "Iron Lung" turned more heads than had any elegant European car that we had displayed. Not even excepting the World's Fair V12 Delahaye. But it took quite a few weeks to find a buyer—a used car dealer who wanted something on his lot to attract attention. A home for the "Lung" which pleased us, for we were sure we could hear the con-rod bearings beginning to rattle. ■