

## **Whippet, it's not just a dog - The history and style of a forgotten automobile**

Ask most people these days, if they have seen a **Whippet** and they'll say; "Sure, they're really cute little critters." Explain that you were referring to the car and they will give you a blank stare. I, on the other hand, grew up hearing my Dad tell stories about his favorite car, a 1928 **Whippet** Cabriolet. I have to admit I had never seen a picture of one until today. The only thing I knew about the car was that it was surprisingly fast for it's time. I know this from the kick my father got out retelling stories about scaring the life out of people while driving it at top speed, and then taking corners so fast the wooden spokes in the wheels would creak. In fact, my Aunt told me that he scared her so bad once that she walked 3 miles home rather than get back in the car. I also know that during dry periods, he would need to water the wheels to prevent them from shrinking up and making hideous noises while driving up the street. After my Dad passed away, I wanted to learn the history of this forgotten car, and why my Dad loved it so much.

I started my quest like most people in this day and age, searching the web for pictures and information about **Whippets**. I was pleasantly surprised to find a picture of a **Whippet** similar to the one my Dad had described. It was a small, boxy little thing with a rumble seat, soft-top and the aforementioned wood spoke wheels. The grill had the typical look of cars from this period. I have read on several occasions that the majority were painted yellow, but I believe other colors where available as well. What a great looking car! Now I was intrigued, and found pictures of the other **Whippets** produced. All but the roadster had the same boxy look, with the main difference being their size and the amount of seats they contained. The coupe had a two-door rumble seat version and a four-door version that resembled the Ford's of this time. My thirst grew stronger. I wanted to know more about where they came from, and why they vanished. It seemed to me this was no Etzel.

I discovered a story that was both amazing and tragic. Spun off from the lack luster Overland, the **Whippet** was an attempt to reach consumers looking for lower priced cars. The racing dog name referred to the speed of this little spitfire. I have to admit; I wasn't too shocked to learn that this 6-cylinder car broke velocity records held during the time for an automobile of its size. It was during an endurance run at the Indianapolis Speedway that it averaged 56.52 miles over a 24-hour period. However, I know for a fact that my Dad reached speeds way beyond those of the trial. The **Whippet** was manufactured by the Willys-Overland company, and was such a success in its short lifetime that the auto ranked third highest in sales. Another famous trait of the **Whippet** was a button located in the middle of the steering wheel that acted as a starter, headlight control, and horn. That explains why, when my Dad went to a company Christmas party and threw his keys to the valet, the poor kid just sat in the car and said, "I can't drive this." My Dad had to provide a quick lesson, before escorting his date inside.

Amazingly, Willys-Overland sold over half a million of these little gems in 37 countries between 1926 and 1931. This is a remarkable feat for any carmaker, but even more so for this era. Unfortunately, Willys-Overland suffered greatly during the depression, and the **Whippet** was dealt a fatal blow. The company would survive the financial woes, and be reborn with productions of a stateside version of the popular Jeep used during World War II.

My father rightfully appreciated this little bullet, the **Whippet**, and I must say I yearn for my own Cabriolet or Roadster for myself. It has been an insightful journey, and I have learned to appreciate my Dad's first love.