

1933-34 Dymaxion 4D Transport

A dynamic car, and a dynamic car builder

BY MICHAEL LAMM

Sometime after midnight in 1968, the telephone rings. It's Jim Hamilton, editor of *Car Life*. "Hey," says Jim, "I just got a call from a guy who's found one of the Dymaxions. It's in a wrecking yard in Phoenix, and it's for sale for \$3,000. Wanna go halves?"

My wife, JoAnne, says, "Who is it?" I tell her it's Jim Hamilton. "What's he want?" He wants us—me—to go halves on a Dymaxion in a Phoenix wrecking yard. "Not likely," says JoAnne. She punches her pillow and falls back asleep. Well, Jim doesn't buy the Dymaxion, and neither do I. Instead, it goes to a group of Arizona college kids. I still suffer from non-buyer's remorse.

The Dymaxion was the brainchild of R. Buckminster Fuller, who, according to *Time* magazine, was considered a crackpot until late in life. He was born in 1896, dropped out of Harvard and, until age 31, bounced from job to job. Then, in a flash of determination, he decided to do something with his life. That something became the creation of, among many things, a Dymaxion world. Fuller went on to invent the geodesic dome; in 1969 he was nominated for a Nobel Prize.

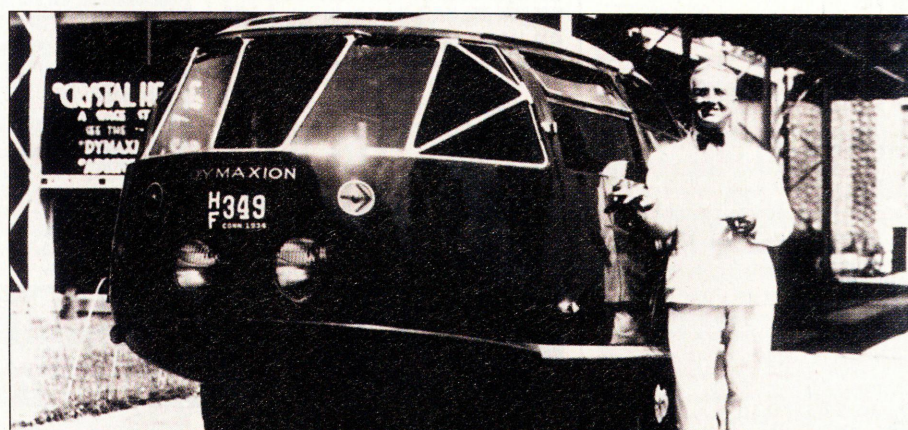
In 1927 Fuller designed his first Dymaxion house, a low-cost, roomy dwelling that hung from a central mast. An adman coined the word Dymaxion by combining "dynamic" with "maximum" and "ion." The idea behind all of Fuller's Dymaxion creations was to combine economy, simplicity, strength and ease of use. He designed a Dymaxion bathroom, a Dymaxion boat, Dymaxion household items and an entire floating city. In some instances he specified building materials and electronic gadgetry that were yet to be invented.

In 1932 a benefactor gave Fuller several thousand dollars, with no strings attached. "Bucky" decided to use this windfall to build his ideal car. He called it the Dymaxion

4D Transport, 4D for four dimensions (3D plus time). He hired aeronautical engineer Starling Burgess and 27 craftsmen to build it. Construction took place at the former Locomobile factory in Bridgeport, Conn.

Three Dymaxions were built, all of them three-wheelers. Dymaxion No. 1 used an articulated, scissor-like double frame

Based on glowing press reports, a group of wealthy Britishers commissioned the construction of Dymaxion No. 2. Their representative came to Chicago to test drive Dymaxion No. 1. A stoplight drag race took place against a chauffeur-driven car. The cars bumped, both flipped, and the driver of No. 1 was killed. The next day's headline



R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER poses beside Dymaxion No. 2, whose body was aluminum over wood.

and a new, 1933 Ford V8 powertrain turned 180 degrees. The engine and radiator stood at the rear, driving the two front wheels. The single rear wheel steered. There was room inside the car for four people. The steerable wheel could turn through 180 degrees. One of Fuller's goals was to make the car easy to park. He could nose it into a parking space and make the rear follow by turning the rear wheel sideways and pulling the car straight forward. The Dymaxion also could make 360-degree donuts around the front axle.

Fuller was initially invited to display the car at the 1934 New York auto show, but officials changed their minds at the last minute, probably because Chrysler wanted the limelight for the Airflow. Fuller parked his car at the show's front entrance and caused a minor sensation.

read, "Zep-rider killed as freak car crashes."

The British group backed out, but Fuller built Dymaxion No. 2 and No. 3 anyway.

Both could each seat 11 people and had triple articulated frames (subframes that pivoted near the middle of the car), but they were otherwise similar to Dymaxion No. 1. No. 1 was rebuilt and sold to the U.S. Bureau of Standards in Washington, where it eventually burned up in a garage fire. Orchestra conductor Leopold Stokowski bought Dymaxion No. 3, and it was used to promote bonds during World War II, racking up some 300,000 miles. A friend of Fuller's bought No. 3 in 1946, refurbished it and gave it to Fuller. It's been shown several times and is owned by the Buckminster Fuller Foundation.

Dymaxion No. 2, the car that Jim Hamilton and I could have bought in 1968, was purchased from the Arizona college students by Harrah's Automobile Collection in Reno. That's where you and I can still visit it—I more wistfully than you.

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