

Founded 1957

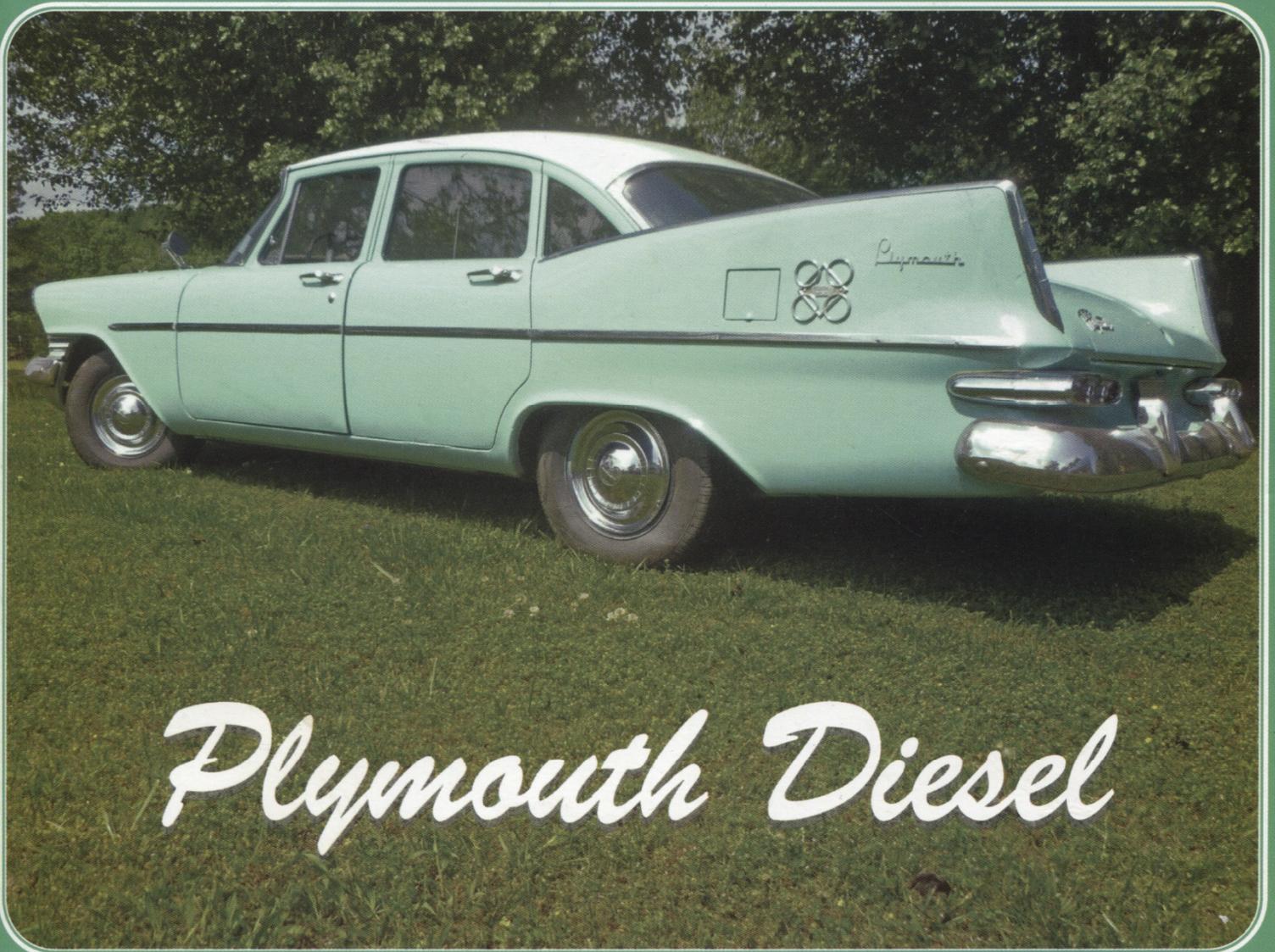
The Plymouth Bulletin

29-time Old Cars Weekly Golden Quill Award winner

March-April 2020

361

Volume 61 Number 3



Plymouth Diesel

Ed Prichard's 1959 Perkins-powered Plymouth taxi (ret.)

PHOTO BY ED PRICHARD

AN ENTERPRISING INDIVIDUAL, David N. Viger in Detroit, Michigan, saw a role for diesels to play in American taxis, as well. Forming American Diesel Corporation in 1958, he struck a deal with Perkins for the importation of P4 diesel engines and arranged to have them installed in Plymouths off the assembly line in the Motor City.

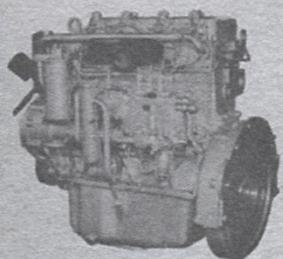
Did Viger take delivery of '59 Plymouths without engines to reduce costs, including the de-installation of the flathead six? Did the Ken Brown dealership in Detroit perform most of the installations as indicated by the *Detroit Free Press*? Was Viger able to return the taxis to the factory to take advantage of Plymouth's distribution network? These are questions I put to Viger's son when I recently spoke with him. He was only 14 at the time and does not recall much of what was happening. He did spend many a road trip with his father, though, promoting the American Diesel Corp. in Chicago, Atlanta and as far as Miami.

IS ED PRICHARD'S CAR AN AMERICAN DIESEL?

Or is it an European diesel that found its way to America? You will have to decide for yourself. Here's what we know: Ed purchased the car in the fall of 2017 from someone in Georgia who had bought the car in hopes of restoring it. However, this person's business moved to a location in which he could no longer store the car and he gave it up for sale. This previous owner had written:

I bought the car from a fellow who had inherited it from his father's estate. His father had bought it from someone in the mid-nineties.

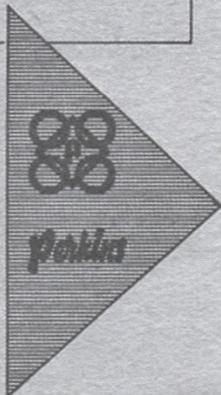
PLYMOUTH DIESEL TAXICAB



PERKINS P4C DIESEL

Brief Specifications

- No. of cylinders 4
- Bore and stroke 3 1/2" x 5"
- Compression ratio 16.5:1
- Torque, 140 lb/ft at 1600 RPM
- Max. speed (RPM) 3,000
- Max. BHP 57
- Starts and runs on regular No. 2 DIESEL fuel.
- Cold-weather starting aid is regular equipment.
- Weight - 543 lbs. with electric starting gear but less flywheel and starting ring gear.



CUT YOUR FUEL AND MAINTENANCE COSTS APPROXIMATELY \$1200 A YEAR

Brand new Plymouth Diesel Taxis, powered by Perkins, the world's leading builder of Diesel engines! The great Plymouth Taxicab incorporates over 30 "extras" added to fit them for rugged taxi service - one reason why there are more Plymouth taxicabs in service today than any other make. This Diesel-powered version should cut your fuel and maintenance costs approximately in half: no carburetor, spark plugs, coils, points, distributor, ignition wiring AND the Diesel's long life, economy and trouble-free service are well known.

SUPERB TAXI PERFORMANCE! There is absolutely no objectionable noise, smoke or vibration... excellent pickup and top speed of 70 MPH.

PRICE: F.O.B. Detroit

AMERICAN DIESEL CORP.

1306 LAFAYETTE BUILDING
DETROIT 26, MICHIGAN WOODWARD 3-0681

FUTURE MOTORS, INC.

37-01 QUEENS BLVD.
LONG ISLAND CITY 1, N. Y.
Tel. Stillwell 4-6351

Plymouth diesel flyer by American Diesel Corporation and a Long Island, New York, distributor



Ed notes from the paperwork that the car had been owned by a Delta Airlines mechanic, who bought the car as a cab and used it to commute to work.

It is odd that it has no model identification. The car only has PLYMOUTH emblems—no model emblems at all. It had original paint, so no holes were filled. That's odd too—just the big Perkins emblems on the fins.

Note: the Plymouth in the American Diesel advertisement above has Savoy emblems on the fenders.



Lander Motors in Atlanta, Georgia



It appears to have had an emblem on the trunk from a car dealer, which is now missing. I can make out that the dealership was in Atlanta by looking at the paint fade around it. I don't know if it was a new or used car dealership.

A little Photoshop enhancement reveals that the dealership was Lander Motors in Atlanta (as shown in the lower right inset). Dave Viger, Jr., recalls a business stop in Atlanta with his father!

Could Ed's taxi have been produced by American Diesel and sold new by Lander? Perhaps, but... here's the data plate from Ed's car:



The "183" is an order code for a taxi; the "M186" prefix to the serial number denotes a six-cylinder taxi produced in Detroit. But the *Detroit Free Press* article from May, 1959, suggests that just a handful of diesel taxis had by then been produced by American Diesel. Isn't it likely that more than 418 '59 Plymouth taxis were produced in Detroit more than halfway through the model year? If bodies built for assembly in Europe left American factories with data plates, might this body not have gone to American Diesel, but rather to

Chrysler's plant in Antwerp? FCA Historical can find no record of M186100418 in its archive. Is it possible that partially assembled vehicles shipped abroad were never micro-filmed with American build cards?

BACK TO THE MYSTERY OF THE MODEL EMBLEM—which Ed's car lacks—on the tail fins. Here are 1954 and 1959 Plymouth emblems, side by side:



And here is a closeup shot of Ed's fender and trunk deck, with both emblems!



There is no evidence of any other holes being drilled through the tail fin. Why would American Diesel—who displayed the Savoy model emblem in their brochure—put a five-year-old Plymouth emblem on the tail fin? And, is it likely that a European factory might have used a '54 emblem from excess inventory?

And, what to make of the Lander emblem that once lived on the trunk deck? Did the diesel return to America from Europe—perhaps, with a GI formerly stationed in, say, Heidelberg—only to end up on the Lander used car lot, where they slapped an emblem on it? Don't you love a good mystery?

ED WOULD LIKE TO KNOW, but is content to live with the mystery. Mostly, he has been preoccupied in restoring the diesel to good working order because it was not running when he took possession.

Ed struck up an acquaintance with a person in England who used to work for Perkins and through whom he was able to get the starter rebuilt.



The Perkins diesel roared to life once the injectors were rebuilt.

Once he had the engine cranking, he found it would not fire. He cleaned out the filters and fuel lines but it came down to the injectors needing a rebuild. Ed rummaged around in tractor shops for whatever parts he could find, but in the end his English friend again came through for him. Within a week of an expensive shipment abroad, the injectors came back to him restored, and the beast roared back into life.

This engine really smoked when it ran for the first time in forty-plus years. It died down a little on its own, I guess as the rings reseated and some of the junk blew out. But the smoke was still visible and burned our eyes. Then I started tweaking the fuel injection pump timing and, by advancing it a little, I got the smoke down to being almost invisible. It still smells, but not nearly as much.

Finding that the car was drifting all over the road, Ed located a replacement steering column and installed it. He rebuilt the brakes to original specs, had a local shop recover the seats and a neighbor repaint the car. Ed is still on the lookout for an alu-



The Perkins diesel engine data plate

minum water pump. Fortunately, the car doesn't produce a lot of heat at 2,500 RPM, so he manages to make it to shows without overheating.

Ed also has a more conventional 1959 Plymouth, this one with a Savoy emblem on the tail fin! You guessed it: *Sassy* is her name.

AN AMERICAN DIESEL, OR A DIESEL IN AMERICA? If you should figure out the puzzle, be sure to let Ed know. In the



A typical Spartan taxicab interior



Cabbie clipboard holder remains on the door panel



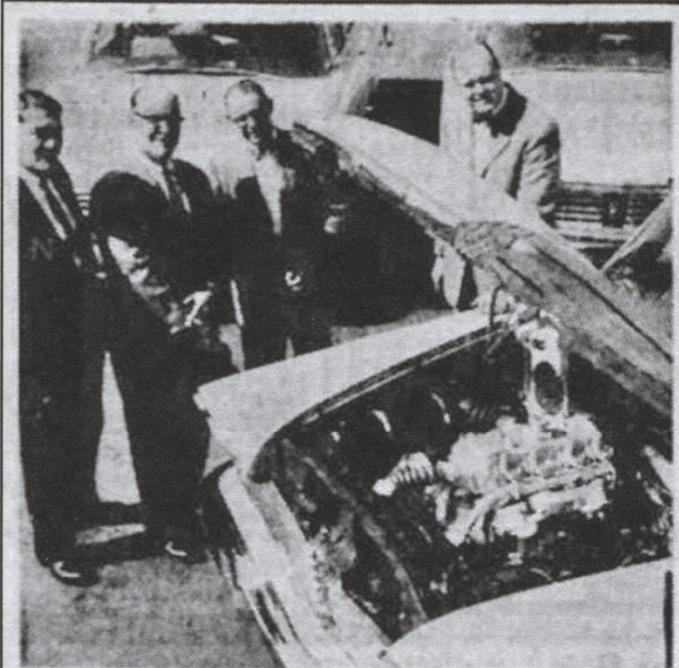
A more conventional '59 was purchased to be a parts car but with only 35,000 original miles, the Savoy was "too nice to part out."

meantime, you'll find him cruising' the environs of Madisonville, Tennessee, enjoying the mystery.

—Dan Morton
1959 Tech Advisor
<dan@59plymouth.net>

*"For '59... If It's New,
Plymouth's Got It!"*

26 Tuesday, May 5, 1959 DETROIT FREE PRESS



DIESEL ENGINE installed in Plymouth cab by Ken Brown, Dodge-Plymouth dealer at 3131 E. Jefferson, is inspected by David N. Viger, extreme right, president of American Diesel Corp. Shown with Viger are, from left, Jerry Grammans, Ray Penney and Edward Dove, officials of the installing agency.

Says Cabs Provide Big Diesel Market

by Fred Olmsted
Free Press Automotive Editor

DETROIT FREE PRESS
TUESDAY, MAY 5, 1959

A FORMER Detroit department store executive who switched from dry goods to diesels is

now convincing taxicab companies that he can give them bargain basement economy.

For 12 years **David N. Viger** was a director, secretary and assistant to the president at Kern's Department Store.

Now he's only a few blocks away, at 1306 Lafayette Building, as president of the

THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

SUNDAY, JULY 19, 1959



SOMETHING NEW UNDER THE HOOD— Delivery of the first four diesel-powered taxicabs in the Midwest was accepted this week by Capitol Motors, Dodge-Plymouth dealer, and Red Cab Inc. The cabs, production-line Plymouth sedans modified by the American Diesel Company of Detroit, Mich., use only four cylinders, obtain 18 to 20 miles a gallon of fuel (compared with the

usual taxi 9 to 11 miles a gallon) and operate on No. 2 diesel fuel. Shown examining the motor of one of the new vehicles are (left to right) Richard Hunt, Red Cab general manager; Thomas Kackley, president of the company; David N. Viger, president of American Diesel, and George B. Girdler, general manager of Capitol Motors. (Star Photo)

American Diesel Corp.

Viger formed the diesel firm a year ago to represent **F. Perkins, Ltd.**, of Peterborough, England, one of the world's leading producers of diesel engines.

Incidentally, Perkins recently was purchased by **Massey-Ferguson**, the Canadian tractor and implement builder, which has some of its manufacturing facilities in Detroit.

(continued, next page...)



ON THE OPEN ROAD during PM's test the Perkins diesel-powered Plymouth cab rolled easily at 55-60 m.p.h.



Spotlight on the PLYMOUTH DIESEL

By Jim Whipple

IT LOOKED LIKE an ordinary Plymouth taxi but it sounded like a flock of woodpeckers trying to make a meal out of a tin roof.

You guessed it. That "pocketa-pocketa" noise betrayed the presence of a diesel engine. The bright yellow sedan was one of more than 300 diesel-powered Plymouth cabs hacking around in six U.S. cities.

A look under the hood disclosed a husky four of 204-cubic-inch displacement, rated at 72 horsepower. This power plant, a four-cycle job operating on No. 2 fuel oil, was made by Perkins of Peterborough, England, shipped to Detroit and placed in the standard 1961 Plymouth chassis. It uses a stock manual transmission.

What's it like to drive America's only diesel-powered production automobile? Well, PM got behind the wheel and found

out, to the tune of \$18.75, which was what the taxi meter read when we concluded our test, conducted in and near Detroit.

Driving a Plymouth Diesel is not especially difficult; however, it is different from driving a standard, gasoline-powered car.

The diesel is started just by turning a key—if the engine is already warm. When starting a cold engine, you must press a switch to energize glow plugs in the combustion chambers, wait a few seconds, and then turn the key.

One characteristic of diesel operation, and particularly of four-cylinder engines, is the vibration. Engine mountings take a good deal of it out of the car, so that at cruising speeds from 35 to 55 m.p.h. range vibration is noticeable but not objectionable. At low speeds, however, the car throbs somewhat like a cold, wet puppy dog.

HERE'S THE PAYOFF. Driver need fill up with diesel fuel about half as often as he does with gasoline cab



A SOLID FOUR, British-bull Perkins Diesel turns up 72 horsepower, weighs 200 lb. more than Plymouth 6



POPULAR MECHANICS

However, there's a plus characteristic of this type of diesel which nearly makes up for the vibration, and that is its high power at low engine speeds. The torque peak of 170 lb. ft. comes in at 1000 r.p.m. which means that you can really lug this car. Start at a traffic light in second, and by the time that you've crossed the intersection you can drop into high at 8 m.p.h. and pull smoothly on up to cruising speed.

It takes over 22 seconds to reach 60 m.p.h.—slower than our mildest compact. But our diesel had no trouble in keeping up with the stream of city traffic.

Maximum speed of the car is an honest 73 miles per hour, but practical cruising speed for turnpikes is 55 to 60 m.p.h. The engine is just not designed for continuous flat-out, top r.p.m. operation.

The Perkins-Plymouth's trump card, however, is economy. Recently a '61 Plymouth Diesel cab was driven from Detroit to St. Petersburg, Florida, at a total fuel cost of \$9.48. The car was cruised at approximately 55 m.p.h. At this speed the engine delivers between 28 and 33 miles per gallon—and this is for an automobile weighing over 3500 lb., about 200 more than the gas-powered Plymouth Six.

Thermally Efficient

Secret of the diesel's economy lies in its higher thermal efficiency resulting from higher compression—16.5 to 1 compared to 8.8 to 1 for a gasoline-powered Plymouth.

Some 38 percent of the fuel's energy is transmitted into power at the engine's crankshaft compared to 32 percent efficiency for a gasoline engine.

This difference of six percent doesn't seem like much until you translate it into miles-per-gallon and dollars and cents.

We talked with Charlie Ross, operator of Detroit Checker, a 70-cab fleet in that city. Charlie's mileage on his Diesels runs from 18 to 22 miles per gallon and this compares with the 10 to 12 m.p.g. with comparable gas-powered Plymouths. Fuel costs about two cents per gallon less than gasoline.

According to Ross, this means that he can save enough to make up for the \$795 extra cost of the Perkins Diesel in nine months on a cab that runs 30,000 or more miles per year. Beyond that point the Diesel's noise is drowned out by the jingle of extra profits.

What about a Plymouth Diesel for you? Plymouth sells Perkins-powered cars only to taxi operators at the present time. They feel, and we must agree, that the savings would justify the higher cost and plodding performance only if your transportation needs involve high mileage and short trips where high cruising speeds were not essential. In short, it makes an ideal taxi!

JULY 1961

54

(continued from previous page...)

RIGHT NOW there are 10 diesel taxicabs operating in Detroit. A few more are in use in larger cities from Boston to Los Angeles.

Viger says 50 will be in service around the country in another month. A year hence, the total should reach 1,000, he adds.

Viger is convinced that cab operators' experience with diesels will swiftly accelerate the demand.

Viger's company installs diesel engines in standard Plymouth cabs at a cost of \$795 over a six-cylinder gasoline-engine cab. The repair costs are reduced by at least half, largely because of the slower engine speed of the diesel (1,600 RPM) and absence of spark

plugs, coils, points and much of the ignition wiring of gasoline engines. Engine life, he says, is about double.

Viger cited one Detroit cab operator's experience in chalking up 16,405 miles on 833.4 gallons of diesel fuel, an average of 19.2 miles per gallon. This, Viger said, was nearly twice the mileage the same operator achieved with a six-cylinder gasoline unit.

Further, the diesel, he said, required no outlay for repairs, while the gasoline cab ran up a \$77 bill on engine, transmission and clutch repairs.

WHY NOT USE diesel engines in ordinary cars?

In the first place, the acceleration is somewhat slower. Starting in cold weather may require up to 40 seconds, although there isn't much difference in warm weather, says

Viger.

And the original cost of the diesel engine might be expensive unless the car racks up big mileages, as in cab operation.

Even so, the cab business (and smaller trucks) will keep him busy, Viger says.

"Eventually," he said "diesel engines will power every taxicab in the country."

Currently, that's about 135,000, including 15,000 in New York City alone.

TRANSCRIBED AND EDITED FOR THE PLYMOUTH BULLETIN

PHOTO TAKEN AT THE 1998 GRAND NATIONAL MEET BY LAURA A. RAPIDS OF CHRYSLER PHOTOGRAPHIC SERVICES

Plymouth Showcase



The 1959 Belvedere convertible of the late Roger Vermeskerch