



Marvels in Automotive Design

1954 Kaiser Darrin 161

America's First Sports Car

This beautifully proportioned 2-seater is called the Kaiser Darrin. It was built by industrialist Henry J. Kaiser's fairly large Kaiser Motors Company and was designed by legendary custom coach builder, Howard A. "Dutch" Darrin. Although the car was not produced until the 1954 production year, a prototype of the Darrin made its debut in Los Angeles on November 10, 1952, two months before the introduction of the Corvette.

Darrin was a visionary who correctly predicted there would be a lucrative market for U.S. sports cars. However, Kaiser Motors, struggling against the "Big 3", was focused on building family cars. But Darrin felt such a car would help Henry J. Kaiser's faltering auto operation. So, he developed a sports car on his own time, with his own money, and in secret. Darrin designed the new car with his patented sliding pocket doors and a fiberglass body to help save production costs and shave weight.

After finishing his secret car, Darrin invited Kaiser and his wife to look at the auto in late 1952. Kaiser snapped after seeing the car. But Kaiser's new wife told him: *"This is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I don't see why you aren't in the business of building sports cars. I don't think there will be many automobile companies that won't go into the sports car business after seeing this car."* Minds changed and months later Kaiser named the car the Kaiser Darrin 161.

Despite the 1952 debut, production was late. Among the factors that caused delay was the lack of an adequate powerplant. Kaiser engineers had modified a Henry J engine but it had issues. An F-head Willys six was chosen as the powerplant (Kaiser had bought Willys in 1953). To complicate matters, a labor strike shut down the Willow Run plant where the engine was made. Full production finally began in December of 1954. Total production was just 435 cars. American Motors acquired the struggling Kaiser Motors in 1955.

This model features a 161cid L head 6-cylinder Willys engine with a Henry J 3-speed manual transmission with overdrive. Top speed is 95 mph and it takes 15 seconds to get to 60 mph, much slower than its rivals. The car also has a 3-position landau convertible top, stainless steel wire wheel covers, wide white wall tires, complete full body undercoating and heater. It is finished in the original Yellow Satin with matching interior and top. Original cost was \$3,688, about the same as a Cadillac 62 and \$150 more than the Corvette.

Kaiser Motors, 1954: The Sports Car the world has been waiting for.