

CLASSIC DRIVER

[Is this Mercedes-Benz 300SL the greatest single barn-find of all time?](#)

Lead

For reasons that will likely forever remain a mystery, this Mercedes-Benz 300SL 'Gullwing' - just the 43rd example to roll off the line in Stuttgart - was entombed in a Jacksonville garage for 53 years. The time-warp coupé has now returned to its birthplace. We were granted an exclusive audience...

A Belgian castle filled with [a fleet of dilapidated 1960s Alfa Romeos](#). The treasure trove of [60 classics languishing on a French farm](#), including the 'lost' Ferrari 250 GT 'California' Spider formerly owned by Alain Delon. A certain [Elvis Presley's old BMW 507](#) unearthed in a dusty San Francisco pumpkin warehouse. We've all been caught up in the hysteria that surrounds the discovery of a spectacular automotive barn-find.



Forget the Ark of the Covenant or Tutankhamun's tomb - today's treasure hunters are looking for forgotten classic cars. And the folks at the Mercedes-Benz Classic hit the proverbial jackpot in late 2018 when they received a tip-off about a forgotten 300SL 'Gullwing' sitting in a garage in Jacksonville, Florida. It came from none other than Bill Warner, the ever-enthusiastic founder and chairman of the Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance.



Sure enough, entombed in the dark, dusty, and rat-infested garage was a spellbinding 300SL, sitting silently, caked in dust and desperately lifeless, its once-glimmering chrome trim demounted and stored inside the musty cabin. Just the 43rd 'Gullwing' to leave the Mercedes-Benz factory in Stuttgart and thus boasting a raft of features unique to the earliest cars, the 1954 model was parked and left to decay in peace at some point during 1965. We know that because Warner, reportedly a close friend of the owner, recalls actually seeing the car in its current unpainted state at a local dealership when he was just 16. That, and a newspaper dating to 1965 was found behind one of the cushions.



At this point, we should outline the early history of the car prior to its 53-year slumber. Completed in October of 1954 and originally finished in Medium Blue with a Light Grey leather interior, the US-specification 'Gullwing' was shipped to Los Angeles, from where it was sent directly to Waco Motors in Miami. Its first owner, a lawyer from Jacksonville by the name of Otto Bowden, was a well-known collector with a penchant for European sports cars.



Bowden also founded the local sports car club, which later became part of the Sports Car Club of America, and most likely raced his exotic new Mercedes on a number of occasions. Fittingly, Bowden sold the car to his chief mechanic Gene Clendening, who continued to race the car competitively in local club events. In 1957, it was sold to its third and final owner, a naval pilot stationed in Jacksonville who sought to use the Mercedes virtually every day, including on numerous 'overland' trips to Washington D.C. and West Virginia.



It was supposedly a puncture endured on one such journey and, we can only imagine, the circa-35,000 miles on the clock and inevitable signs of heavy use that prompted the owner to have his 'Gullwing' repainted and refreshed. But this is where the story diverts at an abrupt tangent - it appears all the preparation work was carried out in anticipation of its respray, the project stalled and the car was unexplainedly parked and left.





The loss of over 50 years of use was the gain of the Mercedes-Benz Classic guys who were granted the opportunity to open the tomb and inspect the stricken silver-starred sports car. In spite of its decay, the earliness of the car and its extraordinary originality was quickly ascertained. Everything from the body and the fading grey leather to the window panes, wheels, and even the Englebert Competition tyres. The engine and gearbox are the matching-numbers units, too, though as you can imagine, the car's currently a non-runner.



As previously mentioned, a number of charming almost-prototype features are special to this car, being such an early example - the 43rd of the 1,400 eventually built by Mercedes. These include the hand-beaten silver star in the front grille, the bolted-on 'eyebrows' above the wheels, the flat-topped rear bumper 'horns', and the distinctive gooseneck gear lever. And all caked in 53 years' worth of beguiling patina - you really don't find them like this very often.



Rather pleasingly, this extraordinary 300SL has been repatriated to Germany, where it's due to enter the collection of Mechatronik, the renowned Mercedes-Benz specialists located a stone's throw from Stuttgart. And it's our good friend Pascal Stephan in Pleidelsheim who kindly invited us to join him as they collected the car from its brief tenure at the Mercedes-Benz Museum, just feet from where it was originally born 64 years ago.



Such an occasion required [a particularly special cavalcade](#) - we commandeered two exceptional 300SLs, a silver 'Gullwing' and a black Roadster, as well as Mechatronik's brilliant exhibition transporter, with its entirely clear rear bed. Here's what Stephan had to say on collection day: "This is undoubtedly a very special day for Mechatronik - this exceptional vehicle really is a reference for the 300SL and we therefore believe that restoring it is out of the question."



We also couldn't resist finding a traditional Swabian barn in which to carefully position the car for Mathieu Bonnevie to take some photographs - it would have been rude not to, don't you think? It's also our first chance to properly pore over chassis #00043's every mesmerising inch. Its brutal weathering commands your attention, lending the car an altogether elevated aura. You yearn to hear its story, wishing it could tell you in its own words why it fell so mysteriously into such disrepair. But then you marvel at its intactness - at the fact every individual piece you're ogling was fitted by one of Mercedes' engineers in 1954, just up the road in Stuttgart.



If you're wondering about the car's future, we're thrilled to report that it will remain - aesthetically, at least - very much in the condition it is today. It would be sinful to wipe clean its history and erase what is probably among the most beguiling yet respectful patinas we've ever encountered. We're sure the car's last owner had his reasons for locking the car away for so long. But in doing so, he also wrote its future. Now to get the old girl singing again...

Photos: Mathieu Bonnevie for Classic Driver © 2019

Gallery

