



"I'm just grateful it wasn't our little Kadett that got hit!"

## Safety Lessons from Forest Avenue

I want to thank the MBCA Board for inviting me to its meeting in Naples, Florida, this past November. I was very impressed with the club's professionalism. I also appreciated the positive feedback I received for this column while I was there.

I heard some suggestions for future column topics. One that stood out was to discuss how the brand's safety heritage fits into our work at the Classic Center. Some ideas come immediately to mind. First though, that suggestion triggered a "light bulb moment" for me. I recalled a memory of Mercedes-Benz safety that was planted in my mind when I was about eight years old.

I grew up in Northern New Jersey (Bergen County), not far from the MBUSA headquarters in Montvale. A few miles south of there is Forest Avenue. It is a major thoroughfare that connects several towns with two lanes running in each direction. The speed limit is 40 mph and if people think drivers treat it as a highway today, I have news for them. It has always been like that.

I remember being out on an errand trip with my dad in our Opel Kadett, that 1.1-liter powerhouse. It certainly wasn't the best piece of German engineering ever imported into the States! It was probably about 1968 and we were at a stoplight waiting to cross Forest Avenue. When our light turned green, I saw a car run the red light and broadside another car in the intersection. Sorry to say, the offender that day was a Mercedes-Benz, a Fintail sedan actually. I have a vivid memory of seeing that Fintail's front end folding up and then the driver opening his door and stepping out to survey the wreckage.

I thought, wow, that car is ruined, but the driver just climbed out of it. He's so lucky! My father, though, was something of a Euro-

pean-car aficionado and he told me that the Mercedes had done what it was designed to do. It had protected its occupants. That Fintail sedan, of course, was from the first generation of Mercedes-Benz cars built with the crumple zone design, the brainchild of eminent engineer Béla Berényi. I wonder if others who witnessed the collision that day understood what they saw. I'm just grateful it wasn't our little Kadett that got hit!

I often think of that incident when we are counseling customers at the Classic Center. With all work that we do, whether servicing or restoration, we first gauge a car's road-worthiness and overall safety. For example, we were recently asked to make an older model "drivable and functional" as a car to use at a customer's beachfront vacation home. Making it run well would not have been a big challenge. But the frame rails were rusted so badly you could have put a fist through some of the holes!

Unfortunately, not all of our customers put safety as the first priority for their cars so we do what we can to guide them. In this case, we advised the owner that there were two smart choices: restore the car or take it off the road. We pointed out the pitfalls of driving a car in such condition and our service manager asked, as he always does, "would you let your mother drive this car?" (Hold the mother-in-law jokes, please!)

Not surprisingly, the Classic Center is often approached to install safety belts in Mercedes-Benz models that never had them. We are reluctant to do that, however, unless the factory originally included a provision for belts. Seat belts must be installed correctly in order to perform as designed. We do make exceptions to originality when installing three-point belts for cars that had

them in Europe but perhaps had only lap belts in the U.S. If the mounts are there, we can install Mercedes-Benz OEM belts. In fact, reaching back into the 1960s, the factory made retrofit kits for this purpose and we still offer them today.

One of the best things you can do for your classic Mercedes-Benz is to upgrade its lighting. Some of those older pre-WWII cars had only one brake light, which was inadequate and sometimes barely visible in sunlight. We have upgraded customers' cars with modern lighting that looks correct but can be removed for a concours.

Recently, the Classic Center upgraded a 1930s model to 12-volt electrics, including halogen headlights that look stock. In this case and others we've seen, part of the work was to undo older, sometimes poorly done attempts at the same job. On this particular car, the semaphores were missing and incorrect fender signal repeaters had been installed in the 1960s. We located and rebuilt correct semaphores and eliminated the repeaters.

We have not upgraded brakes on older Mercedes cars because we have found that even old drum brakes, when set up correctly, work well. Usually it's an issue of repairing something that had not been properly maintained, or replacing a faulty drum. We're often reminded that Mercedes-Benz engineers went to, and continue to go to, great efforts in designing comprehensive safety systems including the brakes which, when properly set up as designed, perform well even in modern traffic.

Finally, the absolute best safety feature you can install in your Mercedes-Benz, regardless of its vintage, is *you*. Pay attention. And if you're ever on Forest Avenue, please take it easy. •