

Deserter

The fun buggy from Marblehead

Bruce Meyers may have been the founding father of the off-road Buggy movement in 1960s' America with his Meyers Manx, but the West Coast influence would be tempered by a more serious use of the Buggy on the American East Coast for track racing

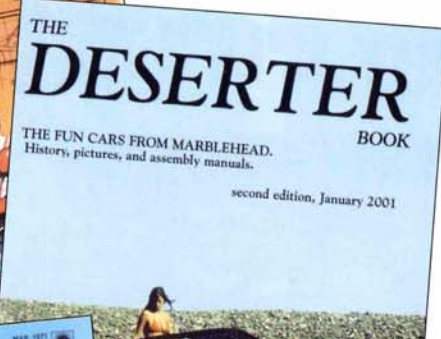
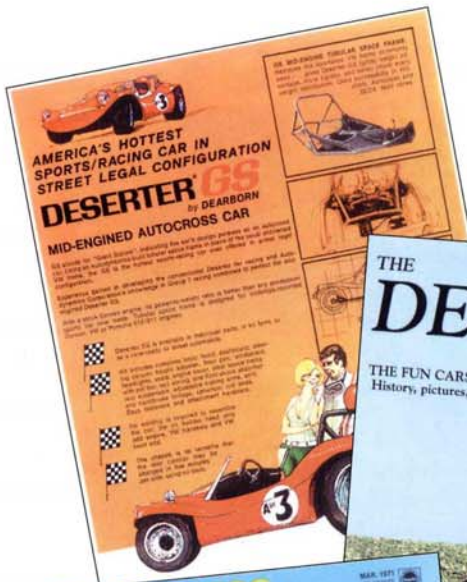
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Photos: Alex Dearborn & archive

Alex Dearborn, the vintage Mercedes restorer and skilled engineer who ran the Dearborn Automobile Co, based in Marblehead, Massachusetts, had watched the Buggy craze develop, but with some reservations. He had seen his friends, Ray Caldwell and Fred Jackson, from nearby Autodynamics Corporation fabricate and deliver dozens of Formula Vee race cars, and build an EMPI Sportster. He particularly admired the Bruce Meyers' Manx creation ('Without his design genius, we would still assume you needed doors to have a car'), but felt that, for a Buggy to be usable in the Eastern states, a certain amount of engine and tyre coverage was needed to meet road legislation. The Manx design didn't allow this and, anyway, Dearborn had been refused a Manx dealership on the grounds that a VW dealer had already been given the licence in Massachusetts.

So, in 1967, Dearborn began developing his own design along similar lines to the Manx, but with a longer (84-inch) wheelbase – to give it better road manners – and more bodywork overhang at the rear to enclose the engine. The longer wheelbase of the Deserter Series 1 allowed weight distribution to be evened out, and to help the front tyres to get greater grip. Directional stability was also improved, even if there was a slight handicap in the dunes. Most East Coasters wanted a car for on-road use, so less traction in the sand was no great loss.





◀ The Deserter GT even featured on the front cover of Dune Buggies & Hot VWs magazine, back in March 1975

▼ Not all Deserter Buggies became race cars or fast road cars - some were even built to be used on the beach!



By this time the Dearborn Automobile Co had set up shop next door to Autodynamics, soon to be the largest race car manufacturer in the US. This allowed Dearborn access to full manufacturing facilities for the Deserter Buggy, with Autodynamics producing the glass-fibre bodies.

The proximity of the two businesses allowed the Deserter to be developed as a true sports car that could easily outpace the look-alike Buggies from California - and would have the reputation for performance ability and the hardware to make them go. The genius of the Meyers door-less Buggy design was retained but, as with Formula Vee racing, it was to be the tuning of the chassis that would produce exceptional handling and faster racing times, rather than just sheer horsepower. In the '60s, it took a lot of time (and money) to make a VW engine produce even 80hp, so clever chassis tuning was the key to success.

The first Deserter Series 1 was built in 1968 - and the same car appeared with VW of America as a pace car for the Bahamas Grand Prix, a Formula Vee race for celebrity drivers through the streets of Freeport. However, Dearborn wasn't invited back after driving the Buggy up some stairs and into a second-storey restaurant! Despite such antics, the same Buggy went on to become the New England COM ice-racing champion, and later won four out of four quarter-mile oval races in the unlimited VW class - all with a single-carb 1500cc Beetle engine.

The Deserter Buggies were quickly to become awesome race competitors in SCCA (Sports Car Club of America) track events. At the SCCA meeting at Lime Rock, in 1968, a Series 1 Deserter with Porsche 356 power at the rear, Karmann Ghia disc brakes on the front and spun aluminium wheels fitted with Goodyear Blue Streak tyres all round, tore into the competition of Lolas and Corvettes and proved that a Buggy with optimum power, ride height and handling was a winning combination for the track.

Dearborn and Autodynamics found new ways of making Buggies handle, and are quoted at the time as saying: 'If you have a severely limited budget (for autocrossing), spend it on the chassis/suspension. Here, a minimum of dollars will buy a maximum increase in lap times. Handling improvements will also work on the street, whereas a highly modified engine may not.' Wise words, indeed, even today!

In 1970, Autodynamics acquired Dearborn's company and continued with the development and production of the VW-based Deserter and a new offering: the mid-engined Deserter GS (the initials standing for 'Grand Slalom'). The GS used an Autodynamics-built tubular space frame, designed to carry a mid-mounted Corvair or Porsche 911/912 powerplant, with a

wheelbase of 85 inches. With a power to weight ratio better than any production sports car of the time, zero to sixty times were as quick as 4.7 seconds – and this was a street-legal car! Top speed was well over the 120mph mark, and the Buggy could out-accelerate, out-corner and out-brake practically anything on the road, but at a fraction of the cost.

When the Autodynamics organisation became involved in a contract to run the Dodge factory-sponsored Trans-Am vehicles, Dearborn contacted Brian Dries, designer of the Bounty Hunter Buggy, and made arrangements to build the car in a modified format for East Coast distribution.

Launched as the Deserter GT, and mounted on a shortened Beetle chassis, this Buggy had sleek lines and a low, mean look. It could also be fitted with a gull-wing hardtop, with the doors being removable for a 'T-top' appearance. The GS space frame could also be added for those looking for the ultimate performance Buggy that would enable it to go as well as its appearance suggested.

The Buggies were now being shipped worldwide, not least because of excellent publicity in the German magazine *Auto Motor und Sport*, which ran a long feature on the US Buggy scene and pictured the Deserter and Vagabond Buggies. An appearance at London's Earls Court Motor Show also took place in 1968, and provided the springboard for the production of the Deserter in mainland Europe. One such example was the first Apal Buggy design in Belgium, although Dutchman Henk Schollen stole much of the thunder for being the first producer of Buggy kits in The Netherlands in 1969. His Buggy was named 'Woestijnrat' (desert rat), and was a close copy of the Series 1 Deserter. His company was called BAC (Buggy Autodynamisch Centrum) – also very similar to the original DAC name in the US!

As the Buggy influence started to spread into Europe, it seemed that the only loser was Bruce Meyers. Once again, his products had been the inspiration for many, but his company's West Coast location meant that his products were often overlooked in favour of more easily sourced designs from the Eastern seaboard of America.

With the loss of the Dodge racing contract, Autodynamics underwent extensive re-organisation and moved into other, non-race car markets. Although the Deserter disappeared suddenly from the Stateside Buggy scene, it did have a longer life in Europe. Autohaus Kuhn, from Germany, bought the rights to produce the VW-based version, and continued to offer it alongside its other Buggy kit, the Hazard, during the 1980s. And what of Dearborn Automobile Company Inc? It's still very much in existence – with Alex Dearborn still at the helm, working on classic car restoration. ●



▲ Gull-wing doors were a neat addition to the hardtop

▶ Alex Dearborn putting the first Deserter race car through its paces



▼ This shot of the Deserter was taken at the SCCA races

