

## SHOP NOTES King Midget Maintenance and Restoration

### A-17 Model A Midgets *By Bob V.*

JUSTIN KENNEL sent the following email from the Vanderbrink auction:

Bob, we're looking at a '66, serial number K660552A. Why is there an "A" in it? Never seen that before—do you have any idea what it means?

*My answer: That's a "new" number to my list and one of about 33 1966 M3s built in that model year. We've puzzled about that before, and no one has come up with a satisfactory idea why the "A" was added. A fair number of '67 and newer cars had an "X" suffix, which means the body panels were made of galvanized metal.*

Lee and John White independently suggested perhaps the "A" cars were built after Joe Stehlin took over from the founders in 1966.

But wait—Joe took over March 15, 1966. As near as we can estimate, about 211 Model 3s were built that year; about 65 more than in 1965. Sales had been declining in the Sixties as the Model 3 aged, but perhaps the '66 uptick was caused by the power increase from the new Kohler engine.

Because the "A" are late in the '66 run they can hardly mark Joe's starting point. Bummer.

My serial number database includes 58 from 1966, about 27 percent of the year's production. As more of you send in serial numbers, the database grows and that helps find clues to this sort of mystery.

Digging into the numbers, I noticed all but two of that year's cars with the "A" suffix were built at the end of the run. One "odd" Model 3 belongs to Mike Mars, and has no "A", yet it was near the end of the run. At my request, Mike dug out his title and found it *does* have the "A" suffix, and Lee Seats confirmed that was the case when Bill Raetig owned that car.

Another odd ball, K660356A, belongs to Kevin Piquet. That number, despite its suffix, suggests it was built *early*. I wrote to Kevin and asked if there's any chance that number could be K660556A? Nope. But while preparing for Hurricane Irma he checked his serial number but couldn't make it out. Just before this issue went to press, with Kevin's help, we found a typo. The number was originally submitted as K660586A, and it fits!

Some of us have wrestled with this question for a long time, but with more and better serial numbers confirming year-end production, a new idea. In late 1966, a decision was apparently made at Midget Motors to so identify the rest of the cars built that year. There was no apparent change to the cars themselves. Why?

Well, since the last 33 or so Model 3s had that "A" suffix; that would be about 17 percent or about two month's worth of the year's total output—at year end!

I've been known to disparage Joe as the "Car Guy" who departed from the founder's success formula and ran that great little company into the ground, but I've never suggested he was dumb. I met Joe once in Athens and talked to him on the phone much later. A likeable, intelligent young fellow, he probably realized his plan to take production up to the four cars per day could not be easily accomplished. The sales prospectus itself suggested gearing up production would require \$60,000 plant investment in addition to hiring more help. Joe did hire more people but made no investment in the factory. He needed a big sales increase to support the debt incurred, the rent on the factory and the extra layers of management he'd hired. What to do?

For car companies, the late fall and winter are lousy for car sales. Midget Motors generally offered a discount "Christmas" special on the Model 3 to stimulate sales in addition to promoting the King Midget Junior/Trainer in that season. Yet Joe discontinued the Trainer. Why?

So here's my guess. Instead of slowing the fall production rate after current orders had been filled, maybe Joe told the boys to keep 'er cranked up and for the first time in Midget Motors history, building cars for inventory, anticipating spring sales to his new dealers. And mark those cars with the suffix "A" to designate them as "extra" production for the spring of 1967. He

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needed them. Sales increased about 50 percent in the 1967 Model year, and the bulk of those were surely spring sales. Production roughly doubled that year, but too much of the increase came late in the year—about September. When those King Midget dealers failed to sell their cars, reorders plummeted. Joe's dream hit the wall.

Got a better guess? Let's hear it!

Below are the 1966 serial numbers currently in my database. □

K660204	K660354	K660446	K660550
K660208	K660362	K660450	K660554A
K660214	<del>K660356A</del>	K660460	K660570A
K660218	K660366	K660464	K660572A
K660224	K660372	K660476	K660572A
K660226	K660376	K660482	K660572A
K660228	K660382	K660486	K660576A
K660238	K660390	K660488	K660578A
K660248	K660392	K660494	<b>K660586A</b>
K660258	K660400	K660502	K660588A
K660264	K660402	K660504	K660602A
K660268	K660410	K660516	K660612A
K660302	K660416	K660526	K660616A
K660304	K660420	K660530	K660618A
K660340	K660430	K660540	
K660348	K660440	K660544	

*Just before going to press (Fall, 2017) while entering data on new members, I discovered Paul Sebesta has a 1968 with the A suffix. Digging I found two others, and **eight** among the 1969 serial numbers—and three more among the 1968s! And one 1967, but that one is a parts car and the number is very questionable.*

*The mystery continues. □*

### A. Identification