

From the Archives

By Bruce Harbison

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Welcome to Classic Corner, a regular column which will cover the care, feeding and driving of the Saab 99, 90 and Classic 900. These Saabs have seen very little coverage in NINES recently (2001), yet they are among the most numerous Saabs still on the road. This column will try to rectify that.

Some may be asking why the 99 is grouped with the Classic 900, and what is a Saab 90? Well, the answer is pretty simple. The 900 started life as a stretched 99 chassis. In fact, many of the parts and upgrades for the 900 will fit the 99. Front suspension, rear suspension, seats, etc. are all interchangeable to some degree between the 99 & 900. Over the years, each was upgraded and updated as needed. The Saab 90 was an entry level car with the front of a 99 and the rear of a 900 2-door sedan. Following is a brief history of the Classic Saabs, the 99, Classic 900 and 90. This is not meant to be an exhaustive history, but rather a quick guide to the changes over the years.

Saab 99: A New Era

The 99 was Saab's first "large car." A "compact" by EPA standards, it was a departure for Saab, who had, until this point, only produced small, lightweight cars. Everything would be different about this car, unlike the 95 and 96, which were obvious descendants of the 93 platform. Introduced in 1969 as a 2-door, the Saab 99 contained many features which were new to Saab:

- Disc brakes on all 4 wheels, with a handbrake acting on the front wheels.
- A completely new engine: the Triumph-built OHC inline 4-cylinder.
- A Saab-exclusively designed transmission, and an optional automatic transmission.

Initially in 1.7 liters, later expanded to 1.85 liters, this Triumph-built motor was in place of the Ford V4 that was powering the 95 & 96s of the time, but Saab had problems with the engine right away. It was low on power, and had reliability problems, so Saab decided to take the bull by the horns and redesign and manufacture the engine to their specifications. Saab significantly beefed up the head, strengthened the block, and straightened the head bolts in their new design. Thus was born the 1985 cc "B" motor in 1972, which would soldier on, little changed mechanically, until 1980.

The transmission case bolted to the bottom of the engine block formed the oil sump for the motor, but

the motor and transmission never shared lubricants. The basic design, with many internal modifications, was kept throughout the production of the 99, 90, and Classic 900. Curiously, Saab kept the freewheel feature that had been in Saab gearboxes since the two-stroke days, which is not needed by 4-stroke motors, until the Swedish 'B' engine was introduced.

For the first two years, the 99 had an instrument cluster very reminiscent of the 96. In 1971, Saab changed that to the modern, distinctly Scandinavian instrument cluster we know today, which carried through to 1987. The 99 was produced in the widest selection of body styles save the Classic 900. There were 2 and 4 door sedans, and 3 and 5 door hatchbacks. The hatchback 99 model was introduced in 1974, and continued through 1978. Carburetors gave way to fuel injection, and many of Saab's safety features were born on the 99.

The most important innovation for the future of Saab as an automaker was the introduction of the Saab 99 turbo in 1976. Offered for public sale as a 1978 model, it was the most powerful Saab to date, with 135 horsepower. Turbocharging would become a vital part of Saab's philosophy as an automaker, and established Saab as the maker of high performance, luxury-class vehicles.

99 to 900

By the mid-70s, Saab recognized that the 99 was starting to look a little long in the tooth, and the engine and accessory demands of some markets (the USA in particular) were now making maintenance on the engine increasingly difficult. The car couldn't live on one alternator belt. At the time, Saab was not ready to invest in a completely new car, and they also believed that the chassis they had designed still had a lot of life left in it. Saab decided on a redesign of the 99 chassis to accommodate the new demands of their markets. Thus the 900 was born. Legend has it that Saab was initially going with the next number in sequence, which would have been 100. However, Audi already had a 100 model, and one thing that kept the lineage in the naming of the cars was the number nine. So, 100 changed to 900, and all was well in Trollhättan.

The first 900s were only available as hatchbacks. In fact, the new 900 was essentially the same car as the 99 from the "A" pillars back. When the 900 started selling as a 1979 model, the 99 became available only as a sedan with 2 or 4 doors. Compared to the 99, the 900 had a longer wheelbase, more integrated front lights, and plenty of room in the engine compartment. Saab completely redesigned the instrument panel as well, with a more modern and vastly cheaper to

From the Archives Cont'd

manufacture version. The wiring system was upgraded to be able to handle the large number of accessories that were anticipated. Air conditioning was designed in from the start. Even when purchased as a dealer option, the installation was completely integrated into the car's ventilation and heating system.

1981 saw the addition of a sedan body style to the 900 range. Also, Saab redesigned their 2.0 liter motor into a lighter, more reliable one. Gone was the usually reliable, but expensive to repair in-the-block water pump, and the shaft that drove it as well. The distributor was moved to the end of the camshaft, and the oil pump was now driven by the crankshaft. This motor also would end up powering the 99 & 90. The most significant developments made to the 900 over the years were APC turbo boost control (1982), the 16 valve DOHC turbocharged motor (1984), and the Convertible (1986).

APC stands for Automatic Performance Control. This system reduces boost levels when the system detects a knocking in the cylinders. As a result, higher compression ratios can be used, improving fuel economy and allowing quicker engine response.

The 16-valve motor started in 1984 (1985 in the US). The added breathing increased the turbo's performance to 160 HP, and ultimately 175 hp in SPG models. A non-turbo version was also introduced.

Former Saab USA president Robert Sinclair provided the impetus for Saab to build the Convertible. One of the best-selling Saabs, there were people who ordered one in 1986, but did not get one until 1989!

The Saab 900 helped take Saab to new heights in production numbers. However, by the late 80s, the bubble had burst, and it was time for a new car. While the design and construction were still excellent, Saab could no longer compete in the marketplace. The 900 was designed in an age where speed of assembly wasn't so important. If you needed more capacity, you built a new plant (Malmö 1990) and hired more people. By the late '80s, it was apparent that continuing to build the Classic 900 would push Saab further and further into debt. A solution was needed, and the New Generation 900 was created.

Saab 90

When the 900 came along, it wasn't long before the 99 was relegated to the position of the "entry level car." There were no trim options, only the manual transmission, and carburetors to boot. In fact, as soon as the 900 was introduced, all but the base 2-door 99 models disappeared from the USA, even though 99

turbos were made as late as 1981 in Europe.

When Saab introduced their next large car, the 9000, in 1985, it was obvious which model was the "old maid" here. The tail end, especially, of the 99 was definitely '60s. Saab still needed an entry-level car, so the decision was made to modify the 99 using parts from the 900 2-door sedan. If (Seth—The "If" looks as if it's in a different font. Perhaps you can unscrew this. MB) the 900 is a 99 from the "A" pillar back, the 90 is a 99 from the "C" pillar forward. The trunk of the 90 is the same as a 900 sedan trunk, with the spare under the floor. The Saab 90 was sold only in Europe and the UK, and only as a two-door sedan.

Model Years in production:

99: 1969-1984

900: 1979-1993 (1994 for the Convertible)

90: 1985-1987

So many years later there are still quite a few Classic 900s on the road and some 99s as well. Several of our local Rocky Mountain Saab Club members still drive these cars regularly and I know others still do across the country and in the UK and Europe. A fair proportion are treasured and have been restored or kept in excellent condition which is a testament to Saab's original and innovative design, making them desirable to a great many Saab enthusiasts.



Let's start with my favorite Saab, the 99. I was a young boy during the 1970s, and every year I'd go to London for the Motor Show and to see what was new. And I'd go to the Saab stand to have a sit in a EMS or a GL.

The sad fact as we all know Saab is no longer. But if you see a 99 drive past remember the good old days. You never know Saab might rise again up out of the ashes of time.

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