

C-Cars and the Tropica

By: Peter Crisitello

Over the years, there have been quite a few miss conceptions and outright wrong information printed about Bob Beaumont's CitiCar and its successor the Comuta-Car; along with their variants and the confusion between them. This article is an attempt to give an accurate over view in a time line covering the 1970's through the late 1990's. It will also clear up the confusion on what is a CitiCar/Comuta-Car and how does the Tropica fit in! And finally What is a Xebra?!

Let me start from the beginning:

Bob Beaumont was very interested in EV's and spent time working with and for several people/companies that were looking into or attempting to enter the market with their EV conversions in the early 1970's. In late 1973 he took steps and started his own company called Vanguard to sell a highly modified gulf cart that would meet most roadworthy standards but fall under a National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) exemption for light weight vehicles under 1,000 lbs. At some point early on, the company name was modified to Sebring-Vanguard to reflect the City in FL where the EV factory was located.



Figure 25 Boca Raton, Florida dealer Frank Moretoni (right) takes delivery of Beaumont's first production run of Vanguard Coupes

The Vanguard Coupe was the first model Bob Beaumont came out with, sometime in 1973. However, shortly thereafter the NTSB deleted their under 1,000 lb. exemption that this first attempt had been built under. So Bob was forced to bring out the CitiCar. Initially designed by Bob himself, it was basically an experiment in what it would take to make as minimal a vehicle as you can and yet still meet the then NTSB standards for an Automobile. Thus the SV/36 CitiCar for



1974 was born. The SV/36 was a 36 Volt DC model but almost immediately was upgraded to the SV/48 which was the mainstay 48 Volt DC model most CitiCars are. The way to tell the difference between the two is count the number of six volt batteries under the seat. Through 1975, and first half of 1976 (those built before January of 1976) Bob built the SV/48 as a roadster.

Starting in late December 1975 through May of 1976, Bob started to build/sell a slightly modified version sometimes referred to as the transitional or 1976½ model CitiCar. The 29 changes made at this point



were not done all at once but were made over a number of vehicles with some having one but not necessarily all the change. By May of 1976 all the changes had been incorporated into the final product. These cars can be referred to as Hatch-back Coupes as they now had full side doors with sliding windows instead of the pop out Roadster type in the SV/36 and SV/48's. On these coupes the back window now opened like a hatch for easier access to the behind the seat area, also.

One of the major changes made in this transitional model was the move from the 3.5 HP Terrell Axle motor to the 6.5 HP Dana axle motor. An easy way to tell the difference is to note the location of the

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drive motor. If the motor is located above and to the passenger side of the axle than it is definitely the earlier Terrell (gulf cart style) axle indicating the SV/36 or 48 Roadster. However, if the motor is mounted to the front of the axle and feeds directly into the pumpkin, than it is the later Dana with the bigger 6.5 HP motor. This configuration was used exclusively on everything produced after 1975.



From May to August (or there-about) for 1976, Bob upgraded some earlier unsold SV/48 models to the newer 1976½ version. These are sometimes referred to as the "A" Models since their serial number all have an "A" suffix at the end. All of these "A" Model Coupes have the 29 upgrade changes of the 1976½ model. While the serial numbers in these "A" suffixed vehicles does not conform to the sequential pattern of the earlier (pre May 1975) vehicles, they do fill in gaps from these earlier ones that are missing confirming the rebuild/upgrade scenario.

In late 1977 into early 1978, Bob made the last CitiCar change by offering the longer wheel base version referred to as the CitiVan. This model is easily identified because it is the only CitiCar with a side back window. Vanguard-Sebring was dissolved in 1978, and the assets sold to pay off debts incurred, and to avoid an NTSB fine that was pending.

The Comuta-Car:

A major portion of the assets from Sebring-Vanguard were sold to a NJ business man named Frank



Flower. Frank owned a number of companies but did not want any problems that might arise with the CitiCar or Sebring-Vanguard names. He then decided to start his own company called Commuter Vehicles, Inc. (CVI) to build his version of this light weight EV called the Comuta-Car. These were based on the 1976½ version with the major difference being that the batteries were now located behind the front and rear bumpers and not under the seat as the original CitiCar's were. This gives the Comuter-Car its distinctive extended bumper look. There were a number of other changes including various frame strengthening and safety additions, as well.

Comuta-Cars were built from 1979 to December of 1981, under a special exemption from the NTSB; with those built from August to December 1981 registered as 1982 models. It is speculated that most if not all of the 1979 production were upgraded SV/48 CitiCar's like those built by Bob in his "A" Model CitiCar's; as these 1979 Comuta-Car's also have the "A" suffix at the end of their serial number. It should be noted that while company records have vanished over the years, the serial numbers of all "A" suffix C-Cars are not duplicated in any of the earlier SV 36 or 48 models. It is also not clear if Frank Flower started CVI as a separate company or a division of General Engine, one of his other companies!?

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For 1979 only, in addition to the Comuta-Car's, Frank also assembled some of Bob's longer wheel base CitiVan's but under the name Comuta-Van. We currently refer to these 1977 and 1979's as the short wheel base Van's or Citi Styled Vans. So far it looks like Bob built number 1 through 10 as the 1977 CitiVan. Serial number 11 through 23 are known to be 1979 Comuta-Van's. These have separate serial numbering than the CitiCar's or Comuta-Car's so are easier to track with their limited number. These 1979 Comuta-Vans are the only CVI built EV's with the batteries still under the seat.



The Postal connection:

In 1980, Frank obtained a government contract with the USPS to build 500 Postal Van EV's. However, these had to be built to strict governments specifications. Thus the Postal Comuta-Van is a much larger and higher voltage EV. Most of these are registered as 1981 and 1982 Van's. At some point the contract was canceled due to problems between CVI and the USPS that eventually wound up in federal court. At this time serial number 367 is the highest numbered Postal Comuta-Van known to exist. Some of these Postal Comuta-Vans were sold to the public with minor alterations as the 1981 and 1982 regular Comuta-Van's as well.

After January of 1982, some left over Comuta-Cars and Postal Vans were sold without serial numbers in whole or as kits to be registered in their individual states as home built EV's, or for off road use. Frank Flower eventually won his court battle with the USPS but died shortly after. Bob Beaumont having been out of the EV business since selling off the assets of Sebring-Vanguard, was busy in Washington DC working towards legislation more friendly to EV builders and owners here in the US.

12 HP Electric Utility Vehicle
ITEM 28-1094 \$1495.00

- Good condition vehicles originally designed for use by mail carriers. Provides economical transportation in warehouses, marinas, industrial sites. Also for shopping, delivery, ice cream vendors, retirees, etc. Vehicle may have small parts missing.
- Corrosion-proof CYCOLAC body has sliding doors on sides plus rear hinged door. Excellent visibility from large windows all around. High back bucket seat (only one on right side of interior for mail delivery - see parts listing for extra seats). Full controls for wipers, lights, etc. Side and top vents provide interior ventilation. Extremely safe with full roll cage framework.
- Powered by 12 HP GENERAL ELECTRIC motor. Clutch-less 3 speed manual transmission. Three motor speeds give a total of 9 possible forward and 3 reverse speeds. Leaf spring suspension and hydraulic drum brakes at all wheels for good ride and control. 145 SR13 radial tires. Differential has 5.17:1 ratio.
- 40 cu. ft. cargo area. Top speed 50 mph. Acceleration 0-40 mph in 21 sec. with 500 lb. load. Uses twelve 6 volt, 220 amp hr. batteries (not included). Curb weight 2400 lbs. 80" wheelbase. 7 1/4" ground clearance. Exterior dimensions: 142" long; 65" high, 62" wide. Drop ship only.

Steering wheel on righthand side.

Charger is available alone. Shpg. 130 lbs.

ITEM 11-1626 \$299.99

Vehicles are supplied with 12/72 Volt battery charger. Built-in timer. Operates on 220 VAC.

Used. Less than 1000 miles on odometer.

The Tropica:



Sometime in the early 1990's Bob decided to get back into the EV business and formed Renaissance Cars to build a wholly new EV called the Tropica, a Sports Roadster. In 1994 he had amassed enough money to start assembling 25 vehicles in FL. However, only 16 production vehicles were completed totally before they were forced to shut down production. #17 and 18 were partially built at that point, but #19 through 22 were only frames with no body panels. There were two pre-production Crash test vehicles built along with the black prototype which makes the total of 25.

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The Zebra/Xebra:

At some point in the late 1990's the assets of Renaissance Cars were sold off at auction. However, with the backing of some prominent people from CA, most notable was the movie and TV actor Don Johnson, enough of the assets were purchased to form a company called Zebra (later renamed Xebra) Motors. At some point the assembly of Tropica #17 as the last Tropica was completed. However, it looks like they started to build #18 as their first Xebra Roadster but did not have enough parts to complete this project. They did however alter #14, to their specifications and this one became their Xebra #1 Roadster. It was used extensively in the Don Johnson TV series Nash Bridges (1976 – 2001). The #14 & 18 conversions may have happened in reverse order from what I stated but no one seems to remember which came first. Lack of continued funding and GM's entry into the EV market, forced this endeavor to fail also. I believe Xebra Motors was liquidated sometime around 2000.



Today, owners of these unique EV's have formed online internet connections on both YAHOO and FaceBook. To help identify this group of vehicles they are most often referred to generically as C-Cars for an easy classification.

Online Information can be found at the following:

If you are on Facebook, you can find a connection at:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/375351485825419/>

There is a YAHOO talk group as well at:
<http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/C-Car/photos/albums>

You can see a price list/model ID I have made up posted at:
<http://rci.rutgers.edu/~crisitell/EV/C-Car%20Price%20Guide.pdf>

An online Roster of current C-Cars can be found at:
http://rci.rutgers.edu/~crisitell/EV/C-Car_Roster-Beta.xls

You can see an original AD for the 1979 Comuta-Van at:
<http://rci.rutgers.edu/~crisitell/EV/CitiVan.jpg>

You can find additional information on the Wikipedia page (I have personally re written & corrected, myself) at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citicar>



Picture Credits:

Picture #1: from the Beaumont family archives; was also used in the Barbara Taylor Book "*The Last Cord*".

Picture #2: Original Factory publicity Photo.

Picture #3: My personal "*little orange cheese wedge*", a Model "A" with the 29 changes/upgrades.

Picture #4: Factory publicity post card of the 1976 ½ CitiCar.

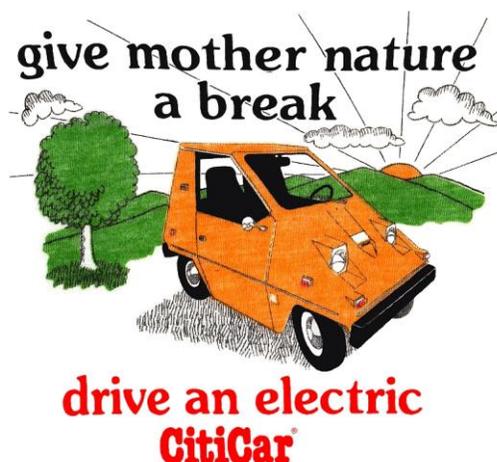
Picture #5: Comuta-Car assembly line.

Picture #6: Screen shot from the 1980 sifi movie "The Lathe of Heaven"

Picture #7: CVI sale page of Postal Comuta-Vans.

Picture #8: from the Tropica sales brochure.

Picture #9: The Blue Zebra/Xebra #1 on the set of "*Nash Bridges*"



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