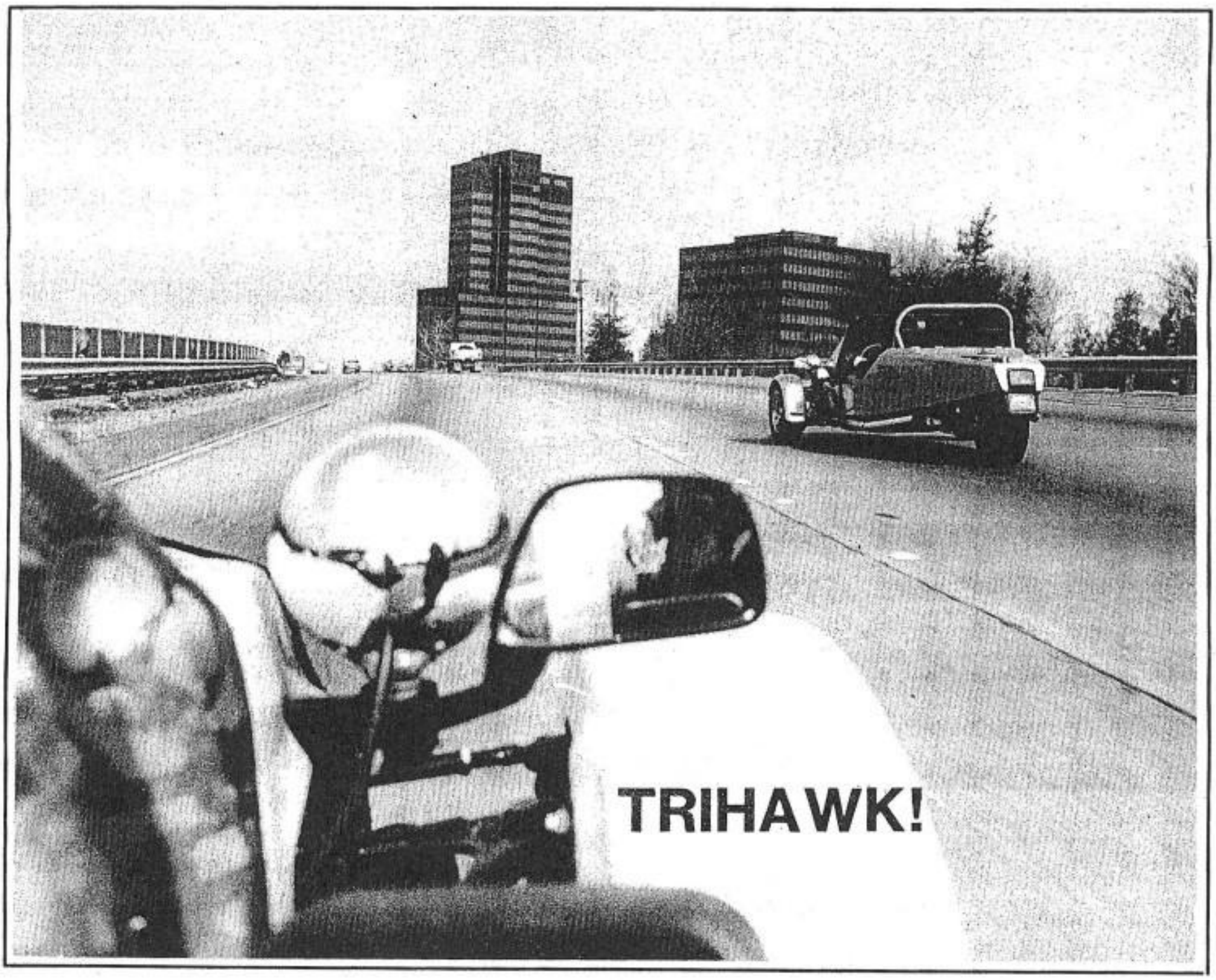
CITY BIKE



TRIHAWK!

RIDING THE WILD MOUSE!

by
Chris Vaughan

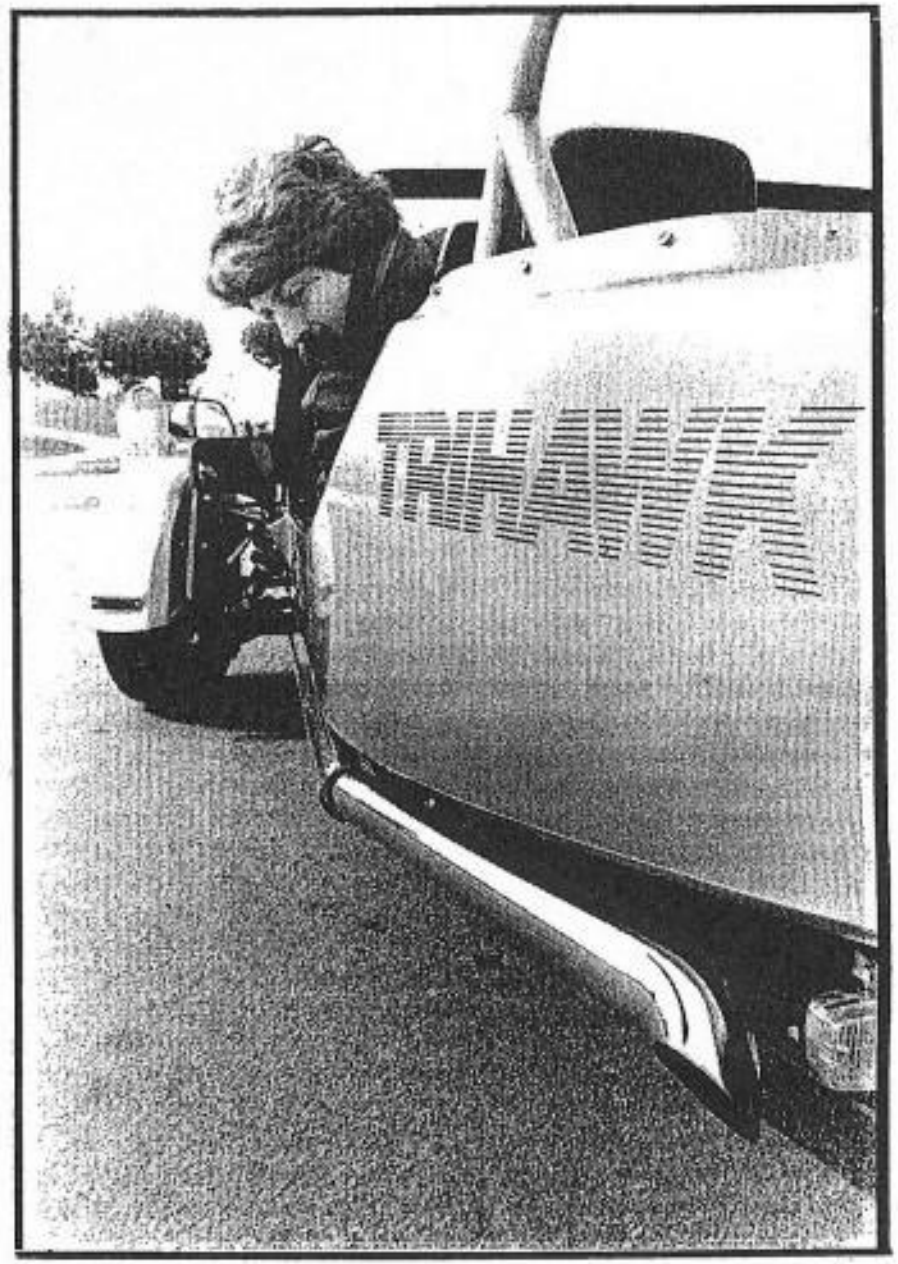
The Trihawk roadster is not a vehicle for everyone. It's a three-wheeled roadster with room enough for two and some carry-on luggage. The Trihawk's principle design function, on the other hand, is to handle. This the Trihawk does exceedingly well.

On a Monday in mid February I had the opportunity to test-drive the Trihawk. I had been introduced over the phone to Scott Curtis, the Northern California agent for Trihawk and drove down to Curtis' shop, Curtis Circus, next to Frey Racing in Santa Clara.

Curtis Circus has long been a repair shop for Citroen, the French automaker that withdrew from the smothering net of emissions and safety regulations that began to choke the U.S. auto market in the mid-seventies. A kind of Musee Mechanique of the 20th century French automotive history, the Curtis Circus service area is temporary home for nearly three dozen Citroens: several prewar models with suicide doors, a couple of 2CVs, a bunch of DS-19s and 21s and a few SM Citroen Maseratis, all in various states of repair or reconstruction. Most of the Citroens sported a bumper sticker that said "I THINK YOUR CAR LOOKS FUNNY TOO!".

Mr. Curtis roared up in his white Trihawk. We introduced ourselves and he began wiping a film of road dirt off the car with a chamois. "Excuse me if we talk while I work. I've got a lot to do today." He began to tell me about the Trihawk....

The Trihawk was originally conceived by Lou Richards, an industrial designer, whose company, Formax, has made a lot of money designing and building hamburger patty forming equipment for America's fast-food industry.



Richards saw a market for a no-nonsense sports car. His idea was to get back to an earlier concept of a sports car, reminiscent of roadsters like the MGTD, the Triumph TR3, and the Lotus 7. He figured there was a market for a vehicle that was more like sports cars of the past than today's luxury 2 plus 2s and sports sedans that are heavy on creature comforts.

The result is the Trihawk, a three-wheeled performance roadster. Curtis says the market for the Trihawk is among drivers who have in the past driven open roadsters and also to motorcyclists who have enjoyed touring on big touring bikes.

Lou Richards contacted Bob McKee, the race-car engineer, who had worked on a few front-wheel-drive race cars. McKee liked the concept of a front-wheel-drive three wheeler and signed on to the project.

The two looked around for an available engine and drive train and settled on the air cooled flat-four 1300 cc motor from the currently produced Citroen GSA, now in production in France. The rest of the Trihawk is designed and built around the GSA engine and drive train. The Trihawk design concept caught the interest of Citroen and along with engine and drive train the Trihawk benefits from several million dollars of Citroen engineering and design work. The results are impressive. The Trihawk radiates the aura of a well-designed, well-built vehicle.

Richards and McKee left the engine pretty much alone, making only minor modifications to accommodate new air intake and air filter and to "rebreathe" the engine because it can rev up much more easily in the Trihawk than in the heavier Citroen.

The GSA engine puts out 67 horsepower (SAF). Not a lot for a sports car, but then, the Trihawk doesn't weigh much either. With a full tank of gas (11 gallons) the Trihawk weighs only 1,370 lbs. With the center of gravity just 12 inches off the ground the performance emphasis of the Trihawk is in the handling, not rocket-sled acceleration.

The frame is 4-1/2 x 1-3/4" box tube steel frame that is covered with powder-coated baked enamel paint. The fiberglass body is hung on the frame in two sections, upper and lower. For major servicing and long term upkeep the top part of the body is removable in half an hour.

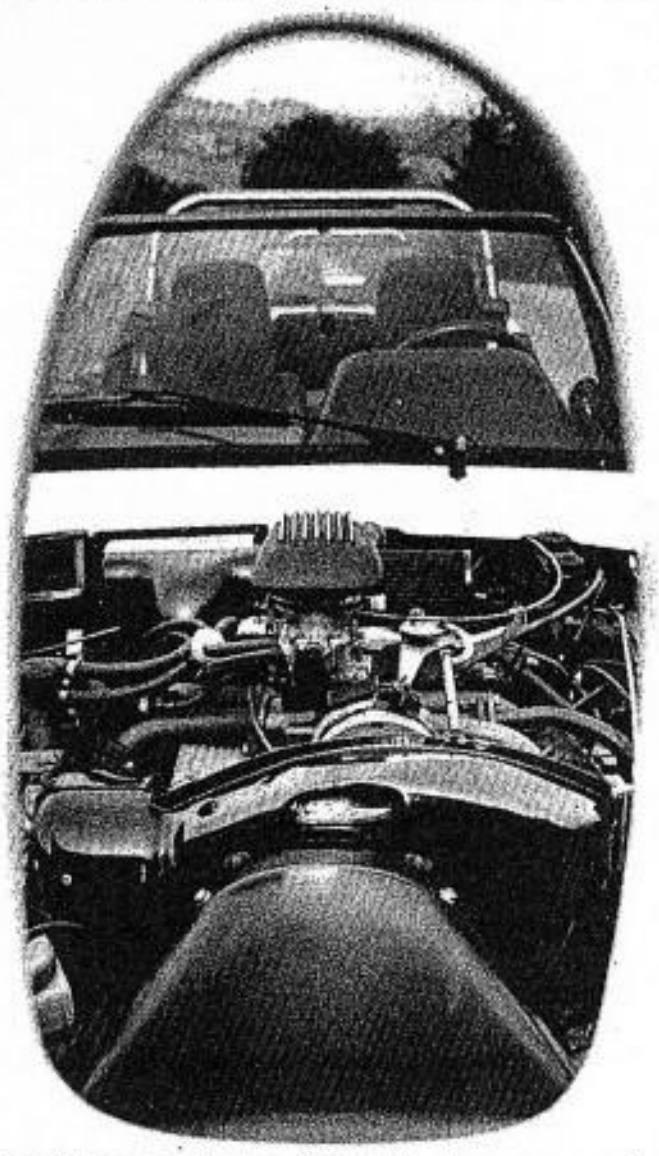
The suspension on the Trihawk, in the tradition of earlier sports roadsters, is Bob McKee's own integration of available and specifically manufactured parts. The lower control arm, hubs and disc brakes are from the Renault Le Car. The upper control arm is designed by McKee. Carrera coil-over adjustable gas shock absorbers are used on the two front as well as the rear suspension, a trailing arm, modified from the Le Car.

Wheels on the Trihawk are 5-1/2" x 13" cast alloys that fit the Le Car three-bolt pattern. The tires are Goodyear Vector P185 70R13.

Extending up from the frame is a brushed stainless steel roll bar. "You really don't need it," Curtis tells me blithely. "As you'll see there's really no way to turn it over." The comment is meant to impress on me how well the Trihawk handles, but I immediately think of situations where the roll bar would be my best friend. "The roll bar does hold up the top, though", Curtis laughed.

As we are between Pacific storms with no threat of rain, Curtis removed the canvas top, folded it and slipped it into its own canvas bag. A separate bag with two compartments protects the two side curtains. Side curtains! Now there's a feature that went out in the 50's. Remember the MGTD, the Porsche Speedster, the TR-3? With the top and side curtains stowed in the trunk space behind the seats there is room for a couple of soft-sided travel bags and a camera case or two.

HANDLING IS INCREDIBLE.



The Trihawk has no doors. With the top removed, one gets in and out by bracing one hand on the roll bar, stepping over the gunwale onto the floor, then sliding down into the seat. The seats too, are French. Originally from the Renault R5 Turbo, the seats have been recontoured to fit the Trihawk cockpit and covered with tough cloth and vinyl with the strength to stand up to the dirt, rain and ultraviolet that attack upholstery of an open roadster.

Nestled into the passenger seat, the gunwale becomes my arm rest. I fastened the three-point shoulder harness. Curtis turns the three wheeler onto the street and our test drive begins....

Curtis drives straight down a street with no traffic. "Watch this," he shouts and jerks the steering wheel lèft and right five or six times in quick succession taking us from one side of the road to the other. The car doesn't lean at all. What a sensation! I'm on the Wild Mouse Ride! The car straightens out and Curtis looks over to see if I've turned green, am ready to puke, or if my eyes have popped out like Marty Feldman's. I'm cool. No big thing. But I think I'd feel safer wearing a five-point harness for this kind of maneuver.

On Curtis' demo ride around Silicon Valley one sensation happens again and again. Curtis would approach a corner, going what seemed to me a bit fast. Then he'd romp on the gas and we'd go around the turn even faster. No tire squeal, no sliding, just faster around the corner. According to Curtis the lateral force generated by the Trihawk has been measured at .9G on Goodyear NCTs.

Curtis drove to a cloverleaf on route 101 to demonstrate the Trihawk's handling at higher speeds. We went twice around the four inside loops of the cloverleaf then headed back to Curtis Circus.

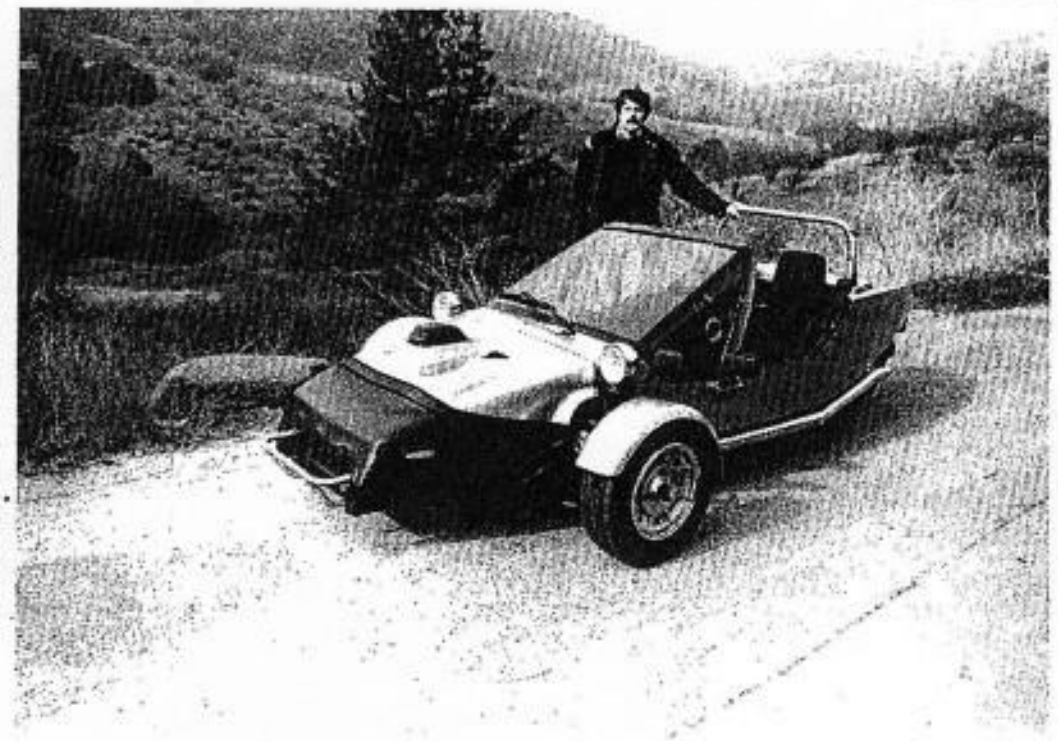
Now it was my turn to drive the 'hawk. I climbed into the driver's seat and adjusted the mirrors. The Trihawk's instrument panel is stuffed with round VDO gauges, visible through the spokes of the black-leather covered steering wheel. The speedo and tach are side by side and equal size. The speedo bears no gratuitous large red numerals at 55 mph to persuade the anesthetized masses, "It's a Law We Can Live With". The red tack needle climbs to straight up when it hits the 6000 rpm red line.

I drove carefully for a few blocks, getting used to the feel of the clutch, the brakes, and the five-speed shift. Not having enough time for a drive to Santa Cruz and back via Pescadero and La Honda I headed out to the cloverleaf. Urged on by Curtis I drove round and round the cloverleaf to see if I could induce Trihawk to misbehave.

In my own test of the vehicle's stability I was trying to get the Trihawk to change from understeer to oversteer and perhaps get the rear end to slide. On each of the cloverleafs I'd drive into the curve with the power on, turn in and lift off the gas sharply at the same time. In most vehicles under these conditions the weight will shift forward to the front wheels, unweight the rear and allow it to slide. This kind of maneuver would provoke a spin in most cars and turn a Corvair on its top.

But despite my efforts to make the Trihawk change from understeer to oversteer the car simply would not. It kept a resolute grip on the road that amazed me. At rest or in a steady state the Trihawk carries 72% of its weight over the front wheels, so deceleration in a turn won't transfer enough weight to provoke oversteer. The Trihawk is stable at the limit.

I went around the cloverleaf long enough to get a good rush on to satisfy myself the car handles phenomenally well. The trip back to Curtis Circus was clouded in an adrenalin haze and I spent the next 20 minutes with Scott Curtis, trying to act normally while dealing with an intense desire to have a Trihawk of my own. I was Toad of Toad Hall. I WANTED this motorcar.



Trihawks sell for about $12,000. Over 116 have been sold so far and Harley Davidson recently bought Hawk Vehicles and plan to produce about a hundred a month at their factory in Milwaukee. So, all I gotta do is get the money together for the down payment.....