

# drive shed

CLASSIC AND ANTIQUE VEHICLES

## Bricklin

By Bill Vance

Malcolm Bricklin was an opportunist and a promoter. Although he knew little about cars, he set out to build and market a "safety sports car" which he would call the SV-1 (safety vehicle one), with gull wing doors and a wedge-shaped profile. It was meant to appeal to automotive neophytes like himself. He was charming and charismatic, but his automobile manufacturing credentials were, to say the least, skimpy.

Bricklin had come to his car-building enterprise via a circuitous route. After dropping out of the University of Florida in 1958 at age 19 where he majored in "time and space," he parlayed his father's Orlando, Florida, building supply business into a franchised chain of Handyman hardware stores.

When lawsuits began to fly from franchisees, Bricklin quickly exited, claiming to have made a million dollars. Handyman America, Inc., soon went bankrupt, but Bricklin was bitten by the franchise bug.

He launched his next venture in 1965, selling franchises for motor scooters, including some made by Fuji Heavy Industries of Japan. Fuji also made a tiny car called the Subaru 360, and when Bricklin discovered that the 360's under-1,000 lb (454 kg) weight let it slip under the U.S. government's safety legislation, he and partner Harvey Lamm formed Subaru of America, Inc., to sell Subaru franchises.

Sales went reasonably well until the consumer magazine Consumer Reports called the Subaru 360 the most dangerous car in America. Sales plunged and Bricklin was soon forced out of the business; his settlement included 1,000 360s.

Bricklin then tried to franchise small racetracks where the 360s could be raced for a fee. He was soon sued by his financial backer for misappropriation of funds.

Malcolm Bricklin then decided to found an automobile building enterprise. He had a California custom car builder create a prototype that, at the insistence of Bricklin, had gull wing doors.

The final result was a low, two-passenger coupe that somewhat resembled a Datsun 240Z.

The prototype was good enough to enable Bricklin to shoot a movie of it, and produce some glossy publicity shots. Armed with film, photos and his charisma, Bricklin hit the road in the fall of 1972 looking for investors.

Several banks, including the First Pennsylvania Bank, took the bait, loaning Bricklin a total of almost a million dollars. He rented a building in Livonia, Michigan, and hired a staff to make the prototype production-ready. A deal was made with American Motors Corp. for the purchase of V-8 engines (Ford V-8s were also used).

While the Livonia staff struggled with the design, particularly the gull wing doors, Bricklin set out to sell dealerships, secure more financial support, and find a place to build his car.

Bricklin approached the Quebec gov-

ernment and tried to get them to finance his operation, and make available the closed Renault assembly plant in St. Bruno. Quebec was interested, but quietly sent Renault's Jean de Villers to Philadelphia to investigate Bricklin's background. When Quebec discovered that Bricklin lived lavishly, was a dubious promoter, and that his business credentials were unimpressive, the province backed away from the deal.

Bricklin then visited Premier Richard Hatfield of New Brunswick. Hatfield saw the film and was captivated by Bricklin and the idea of a New Brunswick-built car. The province agreed to provide a \$2.88 million loan guarantee, and purchase 51 percent of Bricklin Canada's shares for \$500,000. A plant was obtained in Saint John, and another

in Minto where the acrylic covered bodies were to be made.

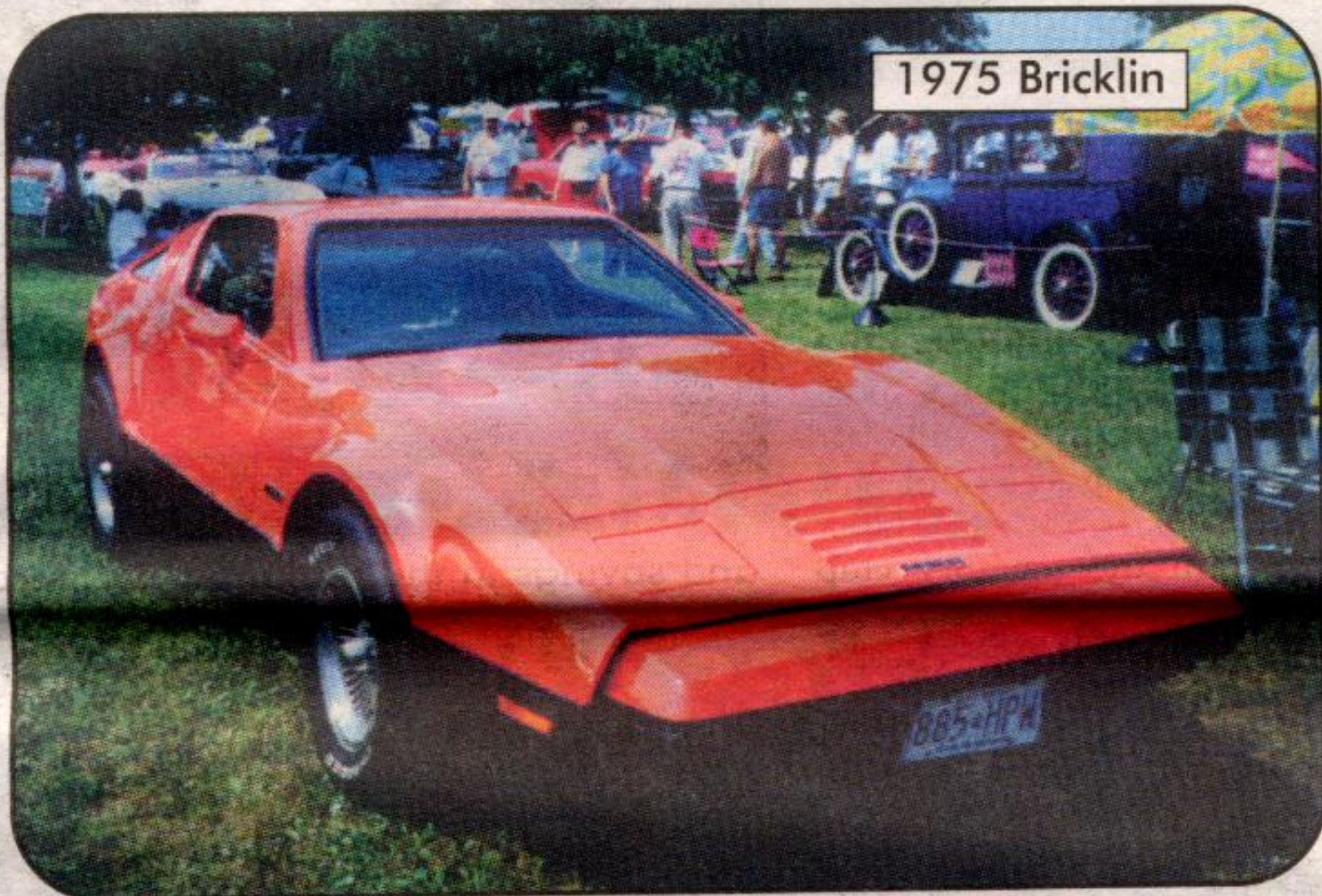
Production was supposed to start in the fall of 1973, but the engineers in Livonia and staff in Minto and Saint John were still struggling with design and plant problems. Malcolm Bricklin was busy selling more dealerships, now up to 200, and attempting to keep his creditors at bay.

In the fall of 1974 the Bricklin finally got into production, but it was a poorly engineered and shoddily assembled job. Road & Track magazine (4/75) tested one borrowed from a private owner (Bricklin couldn't or wouldn't make one available), and their list of deficiencies was long.

They found visibility poor due to the narrow windows and high hood and fenders. The acrylic body panels fit poorly, the windshield wipers interfered with the hood, air and water leaked into the car, the 36 kg (80 lb) gull wing doors were agonizingly slow in operation, the manual transmission was stiff...the list went on and on.

The Bricklin was gradually improved and the plant managed to produce just under 800 cars in 1974. This rose to 2,100 in 1975, selling mainly on novelty value in the U.S. only, because Bricklin Canada was not a member of the Auto Pact.

When New Brunswick finally called a halt at a staggering \$23 million the company fell into receivership in September 1975. Taxpayers were left holding an empty bag, and Malcolm Bricklin went on to other ventures such as importing Fiat X1/9s (badged as Bertones), then Yugoslavian Yugos, followed by marketing electric bicycles. It was recently reported that he was trying to return to the car business by importing models built by Zastava in Serbia. His latest venture, just announced, is to import cars from China.



1975 Bricklin



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