

Dodge Sprinter Product Heritage

March 16, 2007, Auburn Hills, Mich. - With the most best-in-class advantages in its segment and a wide variety of features and available options, the new Dodge Sprinter is ideal for contemporary truck applications requiring a high-ceiling, high-volume vehicle. But Sprinter customers may be surprised to learn that Dodge's leadership in this segment extends back to the time of World War I.

Just three years after entering the passenger car market in 1914, brothers John and Horace Dodge began building "commercial cars," trucks designed to meet specific needs of business customers. Early examples included screen-sided delivery trucks for wholesale grocers and ambulances for hospital and military applications. Chassis-cab construction permitted the addition of specialized car bodies for uses ranging from fire trucks to curtain-sided "canopy cabs" used by truck farmers.

By the 1930s, the Dodge "humpback" panel truck had become a favorite delivery vehicle for bakeries and other retail enterprises. But the automobile-based development of suburbia and its many small businesses prompted the development of a taller delivery truck, one more suited to bulky or delicate cargo and continual stop-and-start service demands. The result was the urban delivery van, or, as some described it, the "step van," because its low floor and single step to the driver's seat made the workday less taxing for the driver.

Dodge entered this segment in 1938 with urban delivery vans blending a standard Dodge truck chassis with a specialized tall body constructed by an external supplier. Examples include the Montpelier Urban Delivery Vans of 1938-39 and postwar vans with bodies designed by noted Milwaukee industrial designer Brooks Stevens and built by the De Kalb Wagon Works of De Kalb, Illinois.

In 1948, Dodge enhanced its position in the urban delivery market with an all-new vehicle called the Dodge Route Van, reflecting its intended use by operators traveling regular routes to deliver finished goods. In contrast to the earlier "hybrid" chassis-body combinations, the Route Van was an all-Dodge vehicle from roof to powertrain.

Two models were produced: the DU light-duty model was available in 102-inch and 117-inch wheelbase versions, while the EU heavy-duty version could be ordered with either a 117-inch or 142-inch wheelbase.

The first DUL light-duty models of 1948 featured many industry firsts, including the first use of Chrysler's Fluid Drive in a volume-production truck. Fluid Drive foreshadowed the torque converter by transferring power from the crankshaft to the driveshaft through a fluid rather than a mechanical coupling. The resulting "semi-automatic" transmission was a blessing for delivery truck drivers, who typically spent their workdays maneuvering through city traffic and making frequent pickup-and-delivery stops. Fluid Drive also reduced maintenance costs and increased vehicle life for operators of delivery-truck fleets.

These first Route Vans were equipped with two rear axles, one to move the vehicle and another to support its load. The differential assembly of the driving axle was rubber-mounted on the chassis frame and moved vertically with the frame rather than the wheels. Open-type axle shafts and universal joints connected it to the wheels; axle shaft length and angularity changed with the deflection of the springs. The two shafts telescoped for load compensation. Two U-joints on each shaft adjusted for angular fluctuations.

Another appealing feature of the Route Van was its electro-hydraulic service brake holder, which allowed the vehicle to be left running, in gear, with the brakes applied while the driver stepped out to make a delivery. To operate this feature, the driver simply operated a switch on the steering column which applied the brakes, eliminating the need to reach for and release the hand brake at each door-to-door delivery stop.

Easy of entry was another selling point of the Route Van. Thanks to the Dodge-designed rear driving axle, its floor was about 10 inches closer to the pavement than that of any other truck. The low entry-step height, the easy-sliding wide door, ample headroom and a wide cabin all combined to reduce operator fatigue. The engine was offset to the

driver's right, providing more cabin room, and the windshield's 1,870 square inches of unobstructed vision made driving both easier and safer.

Dodge rated the light-duty DU series Route Vans as ¾-ton trucks and the heavy-duty EU models as 1-ton units. All were powered by standard Dodge inline, L-head six-cylinder engines. Options included a rear bumper with a step plate, jackknife-style side and rear doors, interior lining and insulation equipment and heavy-duty battery and generator for high charging at low engine speeds. Standard colors included Ecuador Blue, Judson Green, Charlotte Ivory and Black -- but most units were painted and lettered in the distinctive color schemes of their operating companies.

Ideally suited for delivery service by department stores, dry cleaners, food processors, package delivery firms and many other businesses, these well-built, highly-maneuverable vehicles were familiar sights on city streets for years. Today's Dodge Sprinter utilizes 21st Century technology to make the tasks performed by its Route Van ancestors easier still.

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