

THE LAST GREAT AMERICAN ADVENTURE  
or  
Flogging a old open top MG across the Nevada Desert

It was June 10, 1987 and I was standing in the Oakland, California Airport handing the baggage handler my tool box. Earlier I had carefully went through all my tools selecting those few that would fit in my small box yet trying not to forget anything that I would be needing on this adventure.

I apologize if I appear to sound a bit melodramatic, but I still remember back in 1959, a little sortie involving a MG

TD and a similar try at making it from Ogden, Utah to L.A. but as they say that is another story.



A few hours after handing over my tools, my wife Clar and I are in Salt Lake City. The object of all this is to rescue Clar's MG Midget that we abandoned two years earlier. I will say Clar does have class. It is after all her car and she is really as you will see, flying in her mechanic and driver to fetch her car. True to the story line, after we do all the proper things with the family, Clar dropped me off at the garage and goes off to party on the lawns of the University Of Utah and to see her oldest son graduate. Personally I was probably more suited for the project at hand than rubbing with the ex-husband and what.

I opened the door and looked in at all the treasures we left behind. One each, 1960 Mini,

1958 Alfa, bits and pieces of a Frog Eye project, 3 dirt bikes, and the 1966 Midget. The Midget was in good condition when we parked it. But as you remember British cars go off just sitting. The temperature was in the 90's but the garage at least was shady.

From past experience I attended to the hydraulics and got those working properly. Put in points, condenser, cap, and all the other bits. I had planned next to check the timing but the battery was dead. Clar came by from her party and I got a jump to start the MG. I loosened the distributor and made the adjustment.

The next day I found the battery had not charged. A check verified a bad dynamo. No problem the Mini was full of spares. Restart the car. No, now the starter will not turn. The Prince of Darkness is alive and well in Salt Lake City . Back into the Mini for a replacement. A restart and a try for a charge to the battery with no luck. A new battery solves this last part, and the MG finally emerges into the sun. The ride to Clar's youngest son's home where we have been staying reveals no new concerns.

It's into the afternoon on June 13 when we get the MG washed and loaded. I was anxious to get going but Clar convinced me that she really needed to fill-up at the TAKE FIVE DRIVE IN for what she says is the best milk shake in the west. That done we turn west. 1:45 pm. Our first priority is slipping out of town with out the local and state police taking note that our plates are two years out of date. They say that you never see a cop when you need one, this day they were all over.

The route planned called for going from Salt Lake City, Utah to Pleasant Hill, California (about 30 miles east of San Francisco) with out driving on any freeways, just like when the car and freeways were new. After a short turn on 1-15 to Lehi we turned west to circumvent Lake Utah on the west side via a little used state highway, (pix) however a wrong turn put us in Saratoga. Back track.

Eureka, Utah (pix) is a left over mining town on Route 6 not unlike most towns we were to pass through. I had driven through here many times before on my way in to the desert to ride my dirt bike. On one hand I was sad that I would not be able to go riding here any more and on the other I was looking forward to getting one more of our cars to our new home in California.

We were not yet out of Utah and my wits were being taxed. The MG was over heating. Run at 4,000 to 4,500 RPM the temp, would go from 190°f to 212°f. My first guess and hope was the radiator cap. If I was right at least it would be easy to put straight. In the great city of Delta, Utah we find dinner at the Steak House, and a radiator cap at the Napa store. It's 6:15 pm Mountain time, back into the MG. Set our watches to Pacific time and head off chasing the setting sun.

The map shows 100 miles to the next town out in the Nevada desert. The MG carries 7 gallons of petrol give or take depending on the number and size of dents in the tank. At anything over 15 mpg there would be no problem. For insurance I had taken the precaution of a small petrol can in the boot.

Surprise; after 70 miles just inside the Nevada border, an enterprising person had built

a nice new structure. Everything that one would need was right here. A fill-up done we sampled the pie and coffee in the one room cafe/gift shop/dance/ gambling hall/gas station.

Ely, Nevada came and went at 9:00 pm. 10:30 pm; 310 miles out of Salt Lake we raced a Datsun Z into a motel parking lot. The motel was one of the standard strip-of-rooms that runs parallel to old highways with cars parked in front of each door. This one had all the main requirements, "VACANCY" in the window, light in office, only motel in town, and we were in before the Datsun.

We were driving Highway 50, and were about in the center of Nevada. Highway 50 is a two lane road that the freeways have eliminated from the list of desired routes of travel. Crusemobiles, cruse-controls, and the general desire of most people to avoid turning the steering wheel have kept the old two lane highway system like it was in the 50's; just right.

Clar and I enjoy the old highway towns with all their charm and fantastic architecture. Their freeway counterpart, the super slick "Truckco" fillup and feed in a sea of tarmac really does not compare with this kind of reality.

The top-down drive through of these islands of Americana in the MG kept reminding me of my drive from Ogden, Utah to LA in 1958. I was in my 1954 MG TD then. Today I was on a different highway in a different part of the west, 29 years later, but the road look the same; the towns looked the same; but God Bless the Queen, MG had made some progress from the TD to the '66 Midget.

Clar is an early riser. So we were up to see the town come to life. Well we did find someone at the bar/cafe in the center of town. By the way where were we? "Movies-Eureka Theatre" was painted in white letters on the front a large red brick building. Eureka! Common name for old mining towns it seems. For breakfast I went for my usual; eggs, toast and hash brown potatoes. Clar, as always adventures went for the house special. After ordering I walked around to look at this great old building. In the bar was a line of slot machines. I am not a gambler but if I have any pocket change I can not resist trying my luck. I put in my two quarters with my usual lack of luck. There were two guys and a girl at the bar talking and drinking (at this hour, coffee I hope) the girl turned to me and said as if an apology, that those machines had not paid off in

years. I went back to wait for my food in the next room and heard the slot machine spin a few times. Then she hollered . The girl in the bar had hit the Jackpot.

Breakfast done it was back out onto the street for a little walk, then back to the MG. A fillup of gas and good-by to Eureka.

Out side of Fallon, Nevada we passed a Quest group in their wagon train. More shades of the old west.

As we neared Sparks, Nevada we started encountering many 1950's cars on the road. Say, just what year is this anyway?

A short stop in Carson City to satisfy Clar's yogurt craving, then on to South Lake Tahoe for lunch. A bit of gambling, \$30 won, a tour of lake turn-outs and we were away at 4:30 pm still on highway 50 heading for the 49er gold town of Jackson. Once again MG meets a town out of the past but like it's self still alive and thriving. Home is getting close and the sun is starting it's slide so we hasten toward Lodi and the flat fields of California's agricultural lands.

Lodi slips by and we reach the turn-off to Rio Vista, Humphrey the whale's high point in his wayward journey in 1980 when he got lost in life threatening fresh water. The river delta is at our home's doorstep and we have just one more bridge to cross. A long sweeping turn to the left and I could see the Antioch bridge in front of us. The sun was just inches above the Carquinez Straits and the wind was coming in from the sea at more than a brisk pace, making it's self well noticed in the top-down MG.

We were about 15 miles away from home, our waterbed and a hot bath, but now there was nothing but dead silence. The wind was still blowing, the MG was still moving, but the comforting throaty roar that our willing 1,100 cc A series engine that had kept singing to us for over 700 miles, had stopped.

There was a wide shoulder and I pulled over, lifted the bonnet, and started to shiver. I dug into the boot for some tools to help assess the situation. No spark at the plug leads

seemed to be suspicious, so I started to focus on this. A tug on the distributor cap seemed to set the whole assembly out of line. Not quite cricket I would say.

I am cold, Clar's freezing (both of us have shorts on) the wind is unrelenting and it's getting dark. The only solution in this predicament was, abandon ship, put out the thumb. It worked.

A older gentleman returning from a day in the foothills said he agreed to giving us a lift and in fact delivered Clar and I to our door step. Thanks given, warm clothes on, tow chain located, we were off to fetch the MG to safer ground. We managed to chain the car across the bridge and into an all-night petrol station. There we left the gallant little MG that had so effortlessly got us to California.

The next day determined to finish the drive, I gathered some spares to repair the distributor. First guess was that the shaft had sheared, hence the free turning. Raising the bonnet without the wind, dark and freezing wife, assessment would be much easier. First pull removed the complete shaft assembly with no signs of damage. Closer inspection reviled the problem.. Remember the timing adjustment I made back in Salt Lake City? Seems as if I pulled up as well as turned the distributor, allowing just enough purchase of the clamp on the shoulder to keep it in place from Salt Lake to the Delta where it let loose. A simple resetting of the clamp, a guess at the timing and we were back on the way again, but for this leg, with the embarrassment of a chase car following close behind.

An adventure can not be an adventure with out one. So we had ours.

Frank Cunningham

1987