

Wires & Tyres

Mid December 2020



www.memphisbritishcars.org

British Sports Car Club, LTD Memphis, Tennessee

BSCC Officers 2020-2021

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MG Marque Leader	Paul Burdette
Triumph Marque Leader	Jon Brody
Lotus Marque Leader	Chris Irving
Secretary	Jim Duke

Membership Meetings

Coletta's Italian Restaurant, 2850 Appling Rd.

3rd Monday of each month
6:00 p.m. if you wish dinner
7:00 p.m. for our program

Mark your calendar

For now, write TBD on all calendar pages!!!



What a year - 2020. A year ago if someone said 'Corona' we thought they were asking for a lightweight Mexican beer. Not now! Thinking back, we can remember 2020 for 30 hurricanes (the most ever). Both Australia and California nearly burned entirely up. Harry and Meghan quit the royal family. Congress impeached and acquitted the President. The Dow crashed 2000 points, the biggest one-day dive ever. Beirut exploded. nationwide BLM protests occurred. We elected a woman of color to be vice president, Notorious RBG died, Kobe Bryant, Eddie Van Halen, and Chuck Yeager died, too. And there was a sharply contested presidential election.

Oh, yes—we forgot murder hornets, and the BSCC took a hiatus from activities.

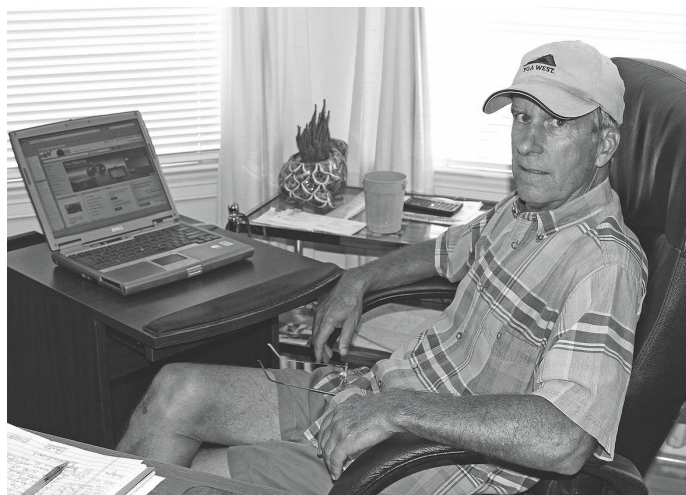
Holy Toledo! What a stinking mess.

Yet, there were compensating bright spots. New grandchildren arrived. Dr. Fauci has been there for us. Italians sang to their neighbors from their balconies. Nurses and doctors continued to be amazing. A woman became the general manager of a major league baseball team. A private company sent two persons to the space station. Vanderbilt's Sarah Fuller became the first woman ever to score points in a major college football game. Africa banished polio, and people in science developed a COVID vaccine in an incredibly short time.

You woke up this morning, and murder hornets have killed no one—yet, and **the BSCC will rise again.**

Much like our 2020 experience, the following tale is very sad. But, there is light at the end of the tunnel. This is a story that has been told in many publications since it first appeared nearly a decade ago.

Austin Healey Magic Act



In 1969, Bob Russell bought a 1967 BJ8 from his best friend, who got it new. "I bought the car on a lark," he says, "and I grew to like it." Then a graduate student at Temple University in Philadelphia, Bob drove the Healey every day. He and his girlfriend—now his wife—Cindy, enjoyed their first date in that car. For them, it was indeed a fun ride.

Bob usually parked his prize in a lot, but one September night in 1970, he left it on the street. The next morning, it was gone. "I got that sick feeling," he remembers. He immediately filed a theft report, but the police offered little hope for recovery—and they were right. The car never turned up.

The timing couldn't have been worse. Bob had just returned from a trip to Europe to find he had lost his graduate assistantship. So cutting expenses, he dropped the Healey's theft insurance. With no coverage, he was out about \$3000. "That was stupid," he admits.

Losing the car was a huge financial hit. The Healey's theft also affected Bob's life in another way: "I was considering dropping out of

graduate school," he says. "That Healey was my escape car. Without it, I decided to stay and finish."

Life Goes On

Stolen Healey or not, Bob's life went on. He and Cindy got married and had a daughter. He embarked on a career in sales, and Cindy became an English teacher. Through the years, they packed up and moved around the country four times, finally ending up near Fort Worth, Texas. Bob continued to play with other fun cars, including a 1965 Corvette coupe and later a 2002 Porsche 911. He enjoyed a couple of motorcycles, too.

But through the years and household moves, Bob hung on to his Healey's original title and a set of keys. Somehow this car stuck with him (he could always recite the VIN from memory), even though he figured it had been wrecked or chopped up long ago. "I had no hopes of ever finding it," he says.

But lack of hope didn't stop him from checking out Healeys. While driving, Bob would always take notice of white BJ8s, and sometimes he would follow one for a closer look. "One time in Washington, D.C.," he recalls, "I must have stared at a car for 45 minutes, trying to find some telltale mark that would show me it was mine." Sadly, he couldn't find one.

He always kept his eyes open, occasionally scanning classified ads in newspapers and car magazines. Later, he prowled the Internet, where he checked the BJ8s listed for sale. When eBay gained popularity, he frequently looked at Healey auctions and prices—with no luck. Still, he persisted. Time passed.

The Game's Afoot

Consider the odds of a sleepless night, an eBay auction and a guy with a VIN embedded in his brain for 42 years all coming together at the same instant.

"Couldn't happen," you say. Normally you'd be right, but it did.

Bob was jet-lagged from a trip and couldn't sleep. So he got up, went into his office, turned on his computer and checked out eBay Motors. "I just happened to click on the auction of a white Healey, and the car's VIN was listed," he says. "I thought, 'Holy shit! That's my car.' I jumped up, pulled out my title and there it was."

The car was listed by a Los Angeles car dealership. Early the next morning, Bob was on the phone. "I basically told them they were selling my car," he said. "They thought I was joking."

And then the fun began. Bob is normally an affable guy, but as he puts it, "This got personal." A man of considerable energy, he vowed to do whatever it took to get his Healey back. He also loves a challenge, and he saw this as a wrong that had to be righted.

Of course, he couldn't know that his decision would lead to a five-week, stress-filled battle fueled by hundreds of emails, letters and phone calls, a saga that would produce despairing lows and euphoric highs.

After some phone sparring and the exchange of documents, the car dealership's attorney admitted Bob may have an ownership claim. But he insisted, so did the dealership. After all, he said, they had bought the car from a guy in New York who claimed he had owned the car for more than 40 years and who provided a New York title. To Bob, that meant one thing: "Either that guy stole it or bought it from the guy who did."

Bob contacted the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and explained the situation. They sympathized, but pointed out that they couldn't help unless the Healey was currently listed as a stolen car.

Help

Bob needed legal advice. In the first of a series

of breaks that came his way (this guy should buy Powerball tickets every week), his wife's cousin, Deborah Fishman, happened to be an attorney on the West Coast with the firm of Dickstein Shapiro. When she heard Bob's strange and compelling tale, she agreed to act as his legal advisor, pro bono. Soon she was explaining California law to him and the requirements needed to proceed with a civil



case.

California civil law features a well-established code called bona fide purchaser for value. Translated, this means that if a buyer can prove he bought an item in good faith—not knowing it was stolen—he may be able to keep it if an ownership dispute arises. Under this code, Bob feared that proving his ownership would require drawn-out, expensive litigation, with the considerable burden of proof on him.

As a compromise, the dealership offered to sell Bob his car at a discount. Naturally, he was not too keen on that idea.

Working several fronts at once, Bob had contacted Steve Byers of the BJ8 Registry. "Steve interpreted all sorts of data and answered all kinds of questions for me," he says. Byers also explained how Bob's numbered ignition key matched the British Motor Heritage Trust Report for his VIN. "From the start," Bob says, "Steve's encouragement gave me the motivation to continue."

More Breaks

Bob's negotiations with the dealership reached a stalemate. Since his copy of the 42-year-old theft report was missing, he assumed he would be unable to prove his car stolen. Seeking advice, he called a friend—a retired New York state policeman.

Thinking like a cop, his friend suggested that Bob attempt to get the Philadelphia Police Department to issue a new stolen car report. That way, the claim could proceed as a criminal case. But after 42 years and many record purges, this seemed highly unlikely.

That's when luck again stepped in, or as Bob calls it, "ridiculously good fortune." He managed to get in touch with a civilian in the Philadelphia Police Department who was willing to search the National Crime Information Center for an archived report. This was no easy task, as fruitless searches finally revealed that the theft record was listed not under the car's VIN, not under Bob's name, but under "AUHE," an obscure abbreviation for Austin-Healey. Bingo.

Armed with a copy of this archived report, Bob again called the Philadelphia police. Again he lucked out, working with a couple of veteran officers, Detective Walt Bielski and Lieutenant Fred McQuiggan.

According to Bob, these cops went above and beyond the call of duty to dig further, this time into the FBI's computerized files, where Fred found the stolen Healey's VIN had been entered in 1970 with a number transposed. When this was corrected, they were finally able to re-list the car as stolen. They immediately contacted the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office with the now-active stolen car report.

Bob puts it this way: "After weeks of ups and downs, the case turned in 10 minutes."

The Fat Lady Tunes Up

Bob's good fortune with police had continued on the West Coast. From early in the game, he had

been in contact with yet another responsive and helpful police officer, Detective Carlos Ortega of the auto theft division of the L.A. County Sheriff's Department.



Armed with the active theft report, Carlos quickly set the wheels of justice in motion—and this time the wheels were driving a rollback. The sheriff's department impounded the Healey. Carlos called Bob: "We've got the car," he said. "When can you be here?"

Soon Bob and Cindy were headed to L.A. They walked into the impound lot with mixed emotions—the car was looking pretty sad. Bob approached his Healey for the first time in four decades, clutching the keys he had kept all those years. "I got in, stuck my key in the ignition, turned it and it started right up." Without a doubt, this was his car. Cue the blinding light and heavenly music.

What did Bob feel? "Overwhelming relief," he recalls. Cindy agrees. "It was an emotional roller coaster," she says. "There were times when I thought, 'He's not going to survive this.' Some days we felt we were just going around and around. But he would just not give up."

The car was basically intact—one tire was flat—but the Healey had been badly neglected. No doubt it had spent years in storage, as the odometer showed it had been driven only 10,000 miles since it was

stolen. A closer inspection revealed that the car's VIN plate was missing, the corresponding number stamped on the frame had been ground off, the trunk lock had been changed and the glove box's lock was gone.



Bob gladly paid \$600 in impoundment fees, plus \$800 to ship his car to Texas. He figures he spent about \$2500 to get the Healey back, close to what he paid for it in 1969. Of course, this is a fraction of the "discounted" price the dealership wanted him to pay for his car.

During this battle, he figures he spent a couple hundred hours researching law, chasing leads, playing detective, talking on the phone, sending emails and documenting his efforts. "And that doesn't count the time I lay in bed, unable to sleep, trying to think of ways to solve problems," he adds.

He acknowledges that he had a lot of help, and he has nothing but praise for everyone who assisted, including the police. "I know these guys are busy, but they went out of their way to help," he says. "I was amazed."

He also reflects on key turning points in his saga: "If I hadn't canceled the theft insurance in 1970, the insurance company would have paid me off. None of this would ever have happened."

And his chance eBay find? "Unbelievable," he says. Plus, at each step of his battle, what were the odds of finding the right person with the right information who was willing to help?

Yet this happened many times. Bob believes that his unlikely, off-the-wall story drew them in. "Who could make something like that up?" he asks.

What about the dealership that listed the car? When the police seized the Healey, they lost their claim to ownership—and possibly their investment. However, the law provides recourse if they tracked the ownership trail to the thief and seek compensation. Since Bob got his car back, he has mellowed a bit. "They were victimized, too," he says.

He also has some pointed advice for the guy who stole his Healey, wherever he is. It's instructive, but we can't print it here.

Riding Into The Sunset

Last seen, Bob was a happy man, covered with grease, waist-deep in his long-lost toy.



With the help of Pat Yoas from the North Texas Austin-Healey Club, Bob contacted Healey expert Bret Blades, and Bob and Bret are now refreshing the car in Bob's garage. They're working from a long list, which includes new brake and fuel lines, a gas tank, hydraulic seals, and electrical and interior work. They plan to turn over the car to a shop for bodywork and paint.

"It will never be a show car," Bob explains, "but it will be a nice driver, and I intend to drive it." Once the Healey is back on the road, Bob says he'll pick up where he left off in 1970—owner and car both trying to make up for all those lost years together. Of course,

Cindy is invited, too.

But Bob vows that two things have changed: Today the Healey is fully insured, and he swears he will never again park it overnight on the street.



The guys at the barber shop asked my granddad to name an actress he would like to be stuck in an elevator with.

He told them the one who knows how to fix elevators because, "I'm old, I'm tired, and I have to pee a lot."

The Traveling Midget

By Tyler G. Hicks-Wright
from MG Driver



Acquiring a Midget

I'm not sure what put the idea into my head. At 31, having not been a "car guy," I started thinking I would like a little convertible to drive around the mountains outside of Denver. I spent hours on Craigslist looking for something fun, sporty, and a little quirky. My search led me to learn about MGs and small British roadsters. They fit the bill, so I narrowed my search. After a few weeks, I came across a listing that caught my eye: "1970 MG Midget: chrome wheels, new engine."

I scheduled a meeting to see the car in Boulder. Despite being April, the weather was nice and the owner had the top down. He took me for a drive to show me the quirks of the car. Then he let me take it out on my own. As soon as I got back, I told him I would take it, and we started negotiating the price. Two days later, I drove it home. I named her "Rosie". Little did I know I was continuing something of a family legacy. After buying the car, I learned that my paternal grandmother, who I never met, had owned an MGB, which she eventually passed on to my uncle.

I kept my early drives short. Rosie and I were still getting to know each other. The days were getting warmer and it was fun to drive the quiet, curving road along Cherry Creek. As I got more familiar with Rosie, I got more

ambitious. I started planning my first drive into the mountains. My goal was to have breakfast in a small mountain town 30 miles west of Denver. I set out early to avoid traffic. The first half of the trip went smoothly. Rosie was running well and climbing into the mountain canyons was a thrill. We turned onto smaller, steeper roads. It was becoming clear to me that the smaller and curvier the road, the more fun it was to drive. A few miles from my destination, I glanced down to see the engine temperature had climbed all the way to the H on the gauge. Joy gave way to worry. I tried to take it easy, but the increasing grade didn't give poor Rosie any respite. Coming around a bend on a particularly steep section, the engine died and steam began pouring from under the bonnet.

Rosie was my first old car and I was still learning how to be a good owner. I had neglected to check the coolant before my journey. I learned it was running low, so it was not able to keep up with the heat of the engine climbing into the mountains. Topping up helped the problem, but the little car still wanted to run hot.

Rallye Glenwood Springs

In June, I asked my best friend Jeff to be my navigator for the 63rd Rallye Glenwood Springs, a precision rally from Denver to Glenwood Springs. A week before the Rallye we installed an electric fan in front of the radiator with the hope that it would help keep the engine cooler.



Part of the Rallye was a climb over the Continental Divide via the 11,000-foot Berthoud Pass. Part way up, coolant began shooting out from between the block and the head. It hit the distributor and saturated wire #3, shorting it out.

We managed to summit on only three cylinders by driving on the shoulder in second gear with the pedal to the floor. At the top of the pass, the cylinder began firing again, leaving us puzzled about the cause of the problem. It was several weeks before we finally diagnosed the leaking head gasket.

Puzzles like this led to projects. Replace the head gasket. Fix the broken hood frame. Reconnect the reversing lights. The list was endless, but every fix and improvement endeared the little car to me even more.

The Rallye Glenwood Springs led me to trust Rosie, and I began to think about longer road trips. Soon, a memory from high school came to mind. When I was 17, my family and I drove down the Pacific Coast Highway, stopping to visit colleges along the way. The little red MG would be the perfect car to take down the PCH; I just had to figure out how to make it happen.

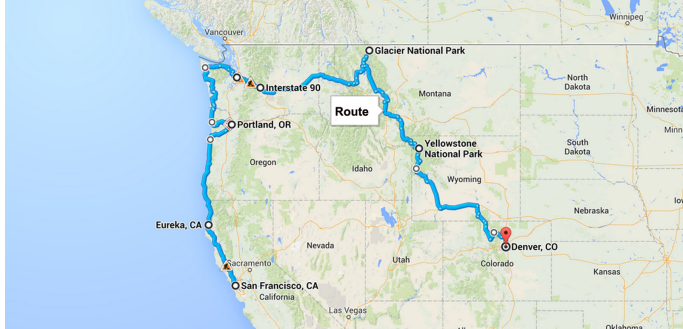
The idea bounced around the back of my mind for the next six months. In theory, the trip was perfect. But logistically it was a bit of



a nightmare. How do you get a 46-year-old car from Colorado to California and back? Drive it? Ship it? Then, on New Year's Eve, the answer presented itself. My father sent my siblings and me an email asking if we were interested in going to Seattle to watch Team USA play in the Copa America soccer tournament. My brother had recently moved to Seattle, and it was a great opportunity for us all to go out and visit him. It also gave me an excuse to put my trip together.

Planning the Trip

I called my father and told him I was interested. I then asked if he would be interested in road tripping out there with me. He was. I began planning. Planning a road trip has become very easy with modern inventions like Google Maps, but this trip wouldn't be so simple. While Rosie could do interstate speeds, it was not a comfortable experience. The wind was



deafening, the steering wheel shook, and semi-trucks buffeted the tiny car.

This trip would have to be more like a motorcycle trip on small back roads and two-lane highways. Using a variety of online tools, guides, and maps, I began plotting the route. Google Maps lets you choose to avoid highways, which gave a rough route. Next, I used Roadtrippers.com to find roadside attractions and interesting roads. Since I was taking part in the Moss Motoring Challenge photo scavenger hunt, I added a few detours to pick up some hard-to-find points.



After a few weeks, I had a full circle route planned. I split the trip into four legs. The first would take my father and me from Denver to Seattle, where we would catch a few games from Copa America. For the second, I would be on my own, going from Seattle to San Francisco along the Pacific Coast. In San Francisco, my girlfriend Shelby would meet me and we would drive the third leg along the Pacific Coast Highway to San Diego. The fourth leg would be a solo crossing of the deserts of the Southwest back to Denver.

While I was planning, I was also getting Rosie

ready. During the dead of winter, I removed the cylinder head and replaced the leaking head gasket. That solved the chronic overheating problem. Then I worked on the interior. I repaired rust in the footwells, replaced the broken seats, and installed new carpet. This would make the trip much more comfortable.

By late April, I had everything sorted. I planned some longer day trips in May to make sure there weren't any lingering problems. My biggest fear was Rosie breaking down on a deserted back road, far from help or cell service. I brainstormed ways she could break down and began acquiring spare parts and tools to do any roadside repair of which I could think.

Because of my experience overheating the engine, fluids were top on my list: a gallon of coolant and a few quarts of oil. Next I thought about the basic needs of the engine: air, fuel, and a spark. For air, I only needed tools so I could adjust the mixture as I changed altitude. For fuel, I packed a spare pump, filter, and flexible lines. And for spark, I brought a spare of everything: plugs, wires, distributor cap, rotor, points, and a coil. The Lucas wiring was also a concern. If the Prince of Darkness showed up, I had a pocket multimeter, spare wire, bullet connectors, electrical tape, and a wire stripper. For the tires, I got a small air compressor, replaced the original jack with a scissor jack, and stuffed as many spare tubes as I could fit in the rear fenders. The last category were the MacGyver items: duct tape, zip ties, self-fusing tape, and JB Weld. To keep the toolset small, I ordered a tool roll and filled it with a basic mechanic's set of wrenches, sockets, and screw drivers.

With all of that packed into the boot, I could handle a lot of problems that might arise on the trip. But there were a lot of other potential issues that I could not prepare for. If I broke a suspension member or a steering component,

Rosie might be able to limp to the next town, but we'd be stuck until parts arrived and repairs were completed. Same with the transmission and clutch. If we lost brakes, I would still have the handbrake. But what about the engine? It



had been rebuilt eight years prior, but it'd only had a few hundred miles on it since then. Fixing the head gasket had cured the known problems, but what about all the internals?

The 64th Rallye Glenwood Springs acted as a final shakedown. The tour included a climb over the 12,000 foot Loveland Pass, which posed no problem for Rosie. She flew through the Funkhanna and its backward slalom. And the Rallye was a breeze. She was ready for the trip. Or as ready as a 46-year-old car could be for a 5,500 mile trip.

Continued in the next Wyres & Tyres, so stay tuned for further Midget adventures!



A guy from Mississippi goes into a bar and says, "Gimmie a beer."

The bartender asks, "Got any ID?"

The fellows asks, "'bout what?"



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