

Chapter 11 – Back to School

Having two cars wasn't the only thing that changed when I went back to school. For one thing, Don wasn't there. He was taking a year off to work and earn enough money to continue his schooling. This meant I had a new roommate – actually a series of them as it turned out – who was just as nice, just as normal, and just as forgettable as my freshman roommate. Marianne Kressler transferred to Purdue that year, but she immediately acquired a steady boyfriend so there were no new developments in my love life. Of more impact was the fact that Luis offered me a Saturday job, cleaning up and doing odd jobs around the shop. And, of course, my engineering courses were getting more and more demanding as I progressed toward my degree. Some people look back on their college life as an endless series of parties and social events, with an occasional class to break the monotony. That was not my experience. I look back on college as an endless series of classes, labs, homework, and tests. If I wasn't doing homework, I was worrying about the homework I was supposed to be doing. I told myself at the time that I was giving up four years of my life in exchange for a good job and a higher standard of living after college. That's not to say I never had fun while I was in school. I had fun, and I have fond memories of the friends I made in college. It's just that the fun was tightly rationed, and was an explosive release from the pressures of studying. At times I felt like a World War I pilot having a rollicking night in Paris, knowing full well that the next day he'd go back to the front and face death in the air. Perhaps that's why so many of my college memories involve cars. These were unplanned, forced breaks from the pressures of academic life. They weren't always fun, but they were better than studying.

A Saturday morning in the fall of 1971. Cool, crisp, clear air. I'm driving to work at Riccotto's and there's a light dusting of snow on the ground. This is the first time it's actually been cold enough to put up the top and turn on the heater. The cockpit's a little drafty and the side curtains are rattling, but my feet are warm and I'm enjoying the drive. The sun is shining and there's a pleasant smell of burning firewood in the air. Someone's enjoying a cozy morning in front of the fireplace! A few miles further, and I notice the

smell of burning firewood seems to be getting stronger. Or maybe it's burning leaves. Odd, because I haven't seen anyone burning leaves this morning. I stop the car and check under the hood. Everything looks fine, and nothing seems to be burning. I get back into the car and drive on. The smell of burning leaves is definitely getting stronger. I stop again, but everything still looks fine under the hood.

As I get to the town of Clymers Indiana, smoke fills the cockpit. I immediately pull over and throw open the hood. Everything's fine there, but when I look back I see smoke streaming out of the side curtains and the half-open driver's door. I throw open the door and see a column of smoke rising out of the driver's seat. I lift the seat cushion and flames leap up into the cockpit. Holy Cow! It's like some demented cartoon! I've been driving around sniffing at the smoke while my butt was on fire! I hadn't drunk any coffee that morning so I didn't have an organic fire extinguisher, but I see a little snow in the ditch. I scoop up a handful of snow and douse the flames.

The flames are out, but there's a big, smoldering hole in my floorboards. The MGA, like the Model A Ford, has floorboards that literally are made of boards. Wood actually has a lot to offer as floorboard material. It doesn't rust, it deadens noise, and it's easy to work with. Its one minor disadvantage is that it catches fire when it gets hot. In this case I apparently ran over something a while back that bent my exhaust system until it was touching the floorboards. Could it have been that unmarked speed bump at the Barf & Gag, the infamous all night student eatery? Whatever it was, it's now burned a big oval hole in the floorboards, and the edges of the hole are glowing red with burning embers. I need some water.

I look around. There's not much in Clymers. No gas stations, no stoplights, no stop signs, not even many houses. Just a bend in the road, a reduced speed limit, and a farm supply store just a little ways up the road. It only takes me a minute or so to walk to the store, but nobody's there. The door is unlocked and they've apparently just opened for the day, but there's nobody behind the counter. I see an open door behind the counter leading to what appears to be a shop area for repairing farm machinery. On the wall of the shop there's a hose spigot, and a bucket sits on the floor beneath it.

I call out, but no one answers so I walk into the shop and start filling the bucket. Just as I'm finishing, someone walks into the shop from the parking lot out back. He seems surprised to see me there. "Can I help you?" he asks.

"Yes, please" I reply. "My car's on fire and I need something to put it out. Is it OK if I borrow a bucket of water?"

That got his attention. "Of course!" he answers. "Are you sure that will do it?"

"Oh, I think this will take care of it" I reply, as nonchalantly as possible. Then I casually stroll out of the shop, walk to my car, and dump the water on my floorboards. That takes care of the immediate problem, but I still have another 15 or 20 minutes of driving until I get to the shop. I gather up as much snow as I can find and build a pillar of snow underneath my seat. I'm guessing there's enough snow there to last until I get to Riccotto's. I return the bucket. "Thanks for letting me use your bucket" I say with a wave. When I get to Riccotto's a few minutes work with a pry bar moves the exhaust system back where it belongs. Then I nail a plywood patch over the hole. The patch has held for over 40 years now. One of these days I really ought to replace that floorboard.

One positive result of this incident is that I have always since carried fire extinguishers in every old car I've owned. Fortunately I've never had to use one. I like to think the mere presence of the fire extinguisher has been enough to intimidate incipient conflagrations. That didn't prove to be the case with my younger brother, though. When he was in college he drove a 1958 MGA which I had rebuilt and loaned to him, and one day he drove for several miles wondering who was burning firewood before he discovered that his floorboards were on fire. He pulled off the road, grabbed the fire extinguisher I'd mounted in the car, and then hesitated as he thought "I wonder how much it will cost to buy Steve a new fire extinguisher?" Fortunately he didn't ponder this question long before he broke the seal and doused the fire.

Thanksgiving break. Much to my surprise, Marianne Kressler asked if I could give her a ride back to Yodersburg. I'm looking forward to the trip, as it will give us three

hours to chat. We'll have to chat, as there's no radio or other source of entertainment in the MG.

The day of the trip is cold and blustery. No surprise, as it is late November in Indiana, but still it means we'll have to make the trip with the top up and the side curtains rattling. I notice when I get in the car that there's a thin dusting of snow on the passenger floor. Must have blown in through the cracks around the door and the side curtains. I wonder if maybe this car had weather-stripping when it was new.

I drive to Marianne's dorm and pick her up. There's not much trunk space in the MG, but by tying my suitcase to the luggage rack there's room for her stuff in the trunk. I help her into the car and seal the side curtain as well as I can. Then I get in and we take off. For some reason she starts putting on nail polish. Who puts on nail polish in a car? She seems to have a little trouble as we bounce over railroad tracks and potholes, and once or twice I think I hear a muffled curse. Maybe she's not used to the taught suspension and quick handling of the MG. After it dries she puts on her mittens to warm her hands. Later, when she takes off her mittens her fingernails are covered with mitten fuzz. I guess maybe the nail polish froze before it dried.

Three hours later I drop her off at her house. Her mother is glad to learn that the wheels stayed on for the entire trip. (I guess I'll never live that down.) The conversation lagged now and then, and we had to shout to hear each other over the rattling side curtains, but all in all I thought the trip went well. I help her carry her things inside and say good-bye. As I'm getting back into the car I notice the passenger's floorboards still have that dusting of snow. Damn. And I had the heater on full blast the whole way. I spend several hours over Thanksgiving sealing up the cracks and putting weather-stripping around the doors, top, and side curtains. This improves the effectiveness of the heater significantly. I call Marianne the day before we're scheduled to head back to find out what time she wants me to pick her up. She says her parents were going to drive to Purdue anyway, so she'll just ride with them. I guess what they say about never getting a second chance to make a first impression is true for cars, too.

I wonder if her parents really were planning on driving to Purdue or if somehow she just didn't enjoy riding in the MG?

It's a cool night in early spring, and I'm driving across campus to the library. A light mist is falling and I have the wipers on. Suddenly, the wipers stop dead. Naturally they stop in the middle of the windshield, where they obstruct as much vision as possible. I pull off into a parking lot, get out my flashlight (I learned a few things about preparedness from the Model A) and pop open the hood. I know there's a fuse box in there somewhere. Turns out it's in the middle of the firewall, and there are only two fuses in the entire car. I pull each one out and examine it, but the fuses seem to be fine. I put the fuses back and crawl under the dash. It's pretty easy to see the problem. There are two connectors on the back of the wiper switch, but only one is connected to a wire. There's a loose wire hanging next to the other one.

The connectors are wonderfully British. A block of solid brass that has been carefully machined with a hole for a wire which intersects a threaded hole with a small brass set screw in it. In theory, you tighten the set screw against the wire to hold it in place. Expensive to manufacture, they will last for hundreds of years. Of course, they won't hold the wires that long, because as you drive the vibration jiggles the set screws loose and the wires fall out. No problem, as long as your periodic maintenance schedule includes crawling under the dash and tightening all the set screws every now and then. Viktor calls them "Lucas Casual Connectors." (I will soon learn that there is an entire genre of jokes about Lucas electrics. Why do the British drink warm beer? Because they have Lucas refrigerators. What's the Lucas company motto? "Home before dark.") It's a bit of a pain to reach past all the other wires to get to the wiper switch and I have to hold the flashlight in my mouth while I'm doing it, but in a few minutes I have the wire back in place and my wipers are working again. Success. I drive to the library without further incident.

When I'm finished with my research at the library and get back into my car I notice the ignition light is on. This is unusual, as the key is still in my pocket. I pull on the

starter knob (you don't turn the key to start an MGA, you pull a knob) and the car starts immediately. Not very good theft protection. Just to be safe, I take the key out of my pocket, put it in the ignition switch, and turn it on. When I get back to the dorm the car doesn't turn off the first time I turn the key off, but I jiggle the key on & off several times and eventually the engine stops. "Oh great" I think. "My switch is going bad."

For the next several days my ignition switch is intermittent. Sometimes it works fine, sometimes the car turns itself on without the key, and sometimes I have to fiddle with the key to turn the car off. Finally the inevitable happens. I drive back to the dorm and the car won't turn off. No matter how much I jiggle that key, the car keeps running. Very carefully, so as not to short anything out, I crawl under the dash and start disconnecting wires from the switch. One by one, making a sketch of where they go so I can put them back again. Finally, I remove the last wire from the switch. The car is still running. I take the switch out of the dash, just to make certain I haven't overlooked any wires. The car is still running. I'm holding the ignition switch in my hand, the nexus of all things electrical, and still the car keeps running. It's like a bad horror movie – The Car That Would Not Die! I used to get frustrated at my Model A when it wouldn't start, but that was nothing compared to a car that won't stop. In desperation I flip the seats forward, remove the access panel above the batteries, and disconnect the batteries. The car is still running. I have a moment's panic while I consider that maybe the car has been possessed by some evil spirit before I realize the generator is still supplying electricity to the ignition system. I push in on the clutch, put the car in gear, stand on the brake, and let up on the clutch. The car stalls and dies. Silence. Blessed silence.

For the next several days I don't bother with the ignition key. Why should I? The ignition switch is sitting on a desk in my room. When I want to drive the car I connect the battery, pull the starter knob, and drive off. When I'm finished I disconnect the battery, then stand on the brake and stall the motor. In my spare time I pour over the workshop manual, trying to figure out what's gone wrong.

I was lucky to find an original MGA factory workshop manual at an antique car swap meet. It makes wonderful reading. In addition to the British terminology and spelling

(bonnet, boot, tyre, colour, moulding, etc.) the Brits have a wonderful sense of style. “Always use a good grade of anti-freeze solution when frosty weather is anticipated.” “Carefully prise the two halves apart, examine the sealing ring, and renew if perished.” I also learn that my car is equipped with an “anti-dazzle device.” This wondrous invention “dips the headlamps to prevent dazzle of oncoming drivers.” Fascinating, but it doesn’t help solve my problem. Finally I resort to studying the wiring diagram. The wiring on the MGA is simple enough that the wiring diagram is laid out the way the wires are run in the car, so you can actually see which wires run close together. I’m guessing that somewhere in the car I have a wire that’s always hot shorted to a wire that’s only supposed to be hot when the ignition switch is on. The result is that the electricity is bypassing the switch and turning on the ignition regardless of whether the switch is on or off.

After several fun-filled hours of tracing wires, my suspicion centers on the fuse box. Of the two fuses in this box, one is always hot and the other is only hot when the key is on. The fuse that’s always hot goes to the horn. I don’t know what’s so damned important about the horn that it deserves its own special fuse, or why this fuse is always hot. Do the British like to sit in their driveways and honk their Clear Hooters with the ignition turned off? The other fuse supplies electricity to everything else in the car that’s fused. Not everything is fused, of course. The headlights have no fuse, for example, so they’re just sitting there waiting to fry the wiring harness at the first sign of trouble. But the ignition, the wipers, the turn signals, and almost everything else in the car runs through that second fuse – but only when the key is turned on. Then I remember that rainy night when I pulled out my fuses and replaced them in the dark. I walk out to the car and look at the fuse box in the light of day. The horn fuse is sitting in its fuse holder, just the way it’s supposed to. The other fuse is wedged in between the two fuse holders, shorting the horn circuit to the ignition circuit. It’s not a very good short, however. There is enough dirt and corrosion in that fuse box so the two circuits were only intermittently shorted together. Sometimes the ignition switch worked, and sometimes it didn’t. I pull out the fuse and put it back where it’s supposed to go. The car is fixed. That certainly was a hell of a lot of trouble for such a simple problem.

A few weeks later, while I'm at work, Luis calls me over to my car. For no apparent reason whatsoever, he has chosen this moment to share some tidbit of knowledge with me. "Pop the hood open, Steve" he says. "I want to show you something." I open the hood. "Don't ever worry about losing your key" he says. He points to the fuse box. "If you lose your key, just pull one of those fuses out and stick it in between the two fuse holders. That will bypass the ignition switch and you'll be able to drive your car."

Thanks, Luis.

A Friday night in April. I'm sitting in my dorm room, trying to get a head start on the weekend's homework so I won't have to worry about it while I'm working at the shop tomorrow. It's a warm night, and I have the window open. Suddenly I hear a familiar sound: Ahhoooooga! Ahhoooooga!. The chances of there being two cars outside my window that sound like that seem pretty slim. I look outside, and there appears to be a pretty lively party going on inside my Model A. I rush outside, and there must be at least seven or eight drunks crammed into the car. They're leaning out the windows, shouting clever phrases like "Twenty-three Skidoo!" to passersby as they rock the car back and forth. The driver is honking the horn and wearing my straw hat. I let them know that this is my car, as politely as possible under the circumstances. Gradually it dawns on them that maybe I don't want them in my car. They pile out, each one shaking my hand in turn while telling me that it's a great car and they didn't do anything to hurt it. The driver starts to walk off with the others, and then realizes he is still wearing my straw hat. "Here" he says, returning it with the exaggerated courtesy of a drunk. "This is for you." He rushes off to join the others while I roll up the windows and close the doors. I wonder how they'd react if they found a pile of drunks sitting in their car.

Final exams. I'm up late studying Advanced Thermodynamics. I've already emptied my jar of instant coffee trying to force my groggy brain to grasp the importance of the Gibbs Free Energy equation. I'm not having much success, but I know it's going to be

on the exam tomorrow. There's a warm breeze blowing in the window. It rained earlier in the evening, but now the clouds are clearing off and the air smells fresh and clean. Finally I say "screw this," grab my car keys and go outside. The MG is parked at the curb. The top is down, of course. It's spring. I unfasten the driver's half of the tonneau cover, tuck it behind the seat, and hop in. In no time at all I'm heading out of town on South River Road.

There's no one else on the road at this time of night. A full moon is shining brightly, occasionally shaded by the few wisps of clouds that are rushing off to the east. The road runs along the banks of the Wabash River and the river glitters in the moonlight. It's a nice twisty road and I'm enjoying the drive immensely. I'm not really pushing it, but the pace is brisk enough to keep things interesting. Spring is in full bloom and the night air is glorious. After about 15 or 20 minutes my conscience begins nagging me. Reluctantly I turn around in the parking lot of a closed tavern and head back toward campus. The return trip is almost as enjoyable as the outbound trip, spoiled only by the knowledge of what awaits me at the journey's end. Finally I get back to the dorm. I button up the MG and go back inside. Thermodynamics isn't any more interesting than it was when I left, but at least now I'm refreshed and ready to hit it anew.

Classes are finally over, and it's time to head back home for the summer. Don has driven his MGB to campus to help me pack up. Today we're going to drive our MGs to Yodersburg, and tomorrow Don will drive me back to campus to pick up the Model A. Don's a good friend.

We're about half an hour south of Berrytown, stuck behind a slow pickup truck. There aren't many places to pass on this stretch of State Road 25, and every time we come to a passing zone there's oncoming traffic. Finally we get a break. I pull out and scoot around the pickup truck. I look in my rear view mirror expecting to see Don passing the truck, but all I see is the truck. Then I see a cloud of dust off to the side of the road with a spinning blue MGB at the center. I pull off, let the truck pass, and go back to Don. His car is hunkered down in the dirt, with the right front wheel jutting out

at right angles to the fender. We examine the wheel and see that the lower wishbone, the piece that holds the bottom half of the suspension to the car, is broken in two. I remember that a couple of weeks earlier Don had come down for a weekend visit and had hopped a curb with that wheel. At the time I had peered under the car and noticed that the lower wishbone was bent, but I couldn't see how bad the damage was. I had advised Don to take it to someone who could put it up on a lift and take a good look at it, but Don has a degree from the "No Tomorrow" school of automotive maintenance and is sometimes prone to defer maintenance longer than a more nervous person would think prudent.

"Did you ever have anyone look at that suspension arm?" I asked.

"Not yet." Don replied laconically. Then he changed to a more introspective tone. "You know, you really can't steer very well with only one wheel. The car just sort of goes wherever it wants to."

There's not much we can do in terms of a roadside repair so we call a tow truck. Fortunately it's only a short tow to Riccotto's in Berrytown. When we get there all the stalls are filled with customer's cars, but Luis says we can work on in the driveway. We manage to get the car up on jack stands, but run into a new problem. Normally you loosen the lug nuts before you jack up a car, so the weight of the car will keep the wheel from turning. There's no way we could put any weight on this wheel, so now we're faced with trying to hold the wheel from turning while we break the lug nuts free. Don and I trade off, one of us wrapping our arms around the wheel and trying to keep it from turning while the other one tugs at the lug wrench. It's no use. The nuts are on too tight, and we can't keep the wheel from turning. Both of us are filthy from hugging the wheel. Nick is working on a car in the shop, and finally we give up and ask Nick for help. Nick looks at us like we're dumber than a box of rocks. "Did you try stepping on the brake?" he asks. The dummy look illuminates both our faces. It never occurred to us that even though the suspension was broken, the brake would still work. I step on the brake and Don removes the lug nuts with no problem.

It's getting dark, and Luis is ready to close the shop. Don and I have gotten the broken suspension arm off the car and obtained a replacement from one of the junkers out back, but there's no way we can finish the job that night. Nick warns us to take everything out of the car and lock it up in the shop. For some reason, thieves scour the area around the shop every night. It seems that people who would never dream of stealing from their neighbors have no such scruples against stealing from a business, even if it is a small family-run shop. We lock up the tools, jacks, nuts, bolts – everything anyone could walk off with. Then we drive back to campus in my MGA. We are absolutely filthy.

The next morning we drive back to the shop and discover thieves have picked the car up and stolen the jack stands out from underneath it. Luis is furious that we lost a good set of jack stands. We're furious that they dropped the car down on the ground after they stole the stands. Once again I have to dig a tunnel under an MG so I can get a jack under it and lift it off the ground. The rest of the job proceeds smoothly. We thank Luis for letting us use his tools, apologize for losing his jack stands, and drive back to Yodersburg, having learned a few things about suspension repairs and thieves.



The MG Mechanics

There's a postscript to this story. Replacing the lower wishbone on Don's MG pretty much trashed his alignment. At the time, I didn't know how to set the alignment so I advised Don to take it to an alignment shop. The going rate for an alignment back then was \$17. This struck Don as an outrageous waste of money when the car drove fine, with the minor exception that he wore through a set of front tires in less than 1,000 miles. This wasn't a big problem for Don because there was always a pile of old tires in back of Riccotto's and Luis let Don pick through the pile any time he needed another tire. Not all of Luis's customers were starving college students, and some of them replaced all four tires at the same time even though only two or three were actually worn out. Whenever Don's front tires wore out he could always find a couple of tires in the pile that had enough tread to last another six or seven hundred miles. It wasn't long before Don got enough practice using the tire machine that he could rip his old tires off the rims and mount a new set of tires in less than 10 minutes, although he did have a tendency to pinch the tubes now and then. (His rims had long since deteriorated past the point where they would seat tubeless tires.)

One summer weekend we drove Don's B to Riccotto's for some long forgotten errand and while we were there Don picked out a nice pair of tires for his front wheels (one Dunlop, one Pirelli) and a Sears Allstate "*Ted Williams Approved*" tire for his spare. (Between the bad alignment and the pinched tubes his spare saw a lot of service.) He finished mounting them just as Luis was closing shop, and after a brief stop for dinner at Mr. Happy Burger we headed north on US 25 for a nice summer night's drive back to Yodersburg. Unfortunately, we didn't make it out of Berrytown before the right front tire went flat. We tossed that into the trunk along with a few mild curses, put the spare on, and set off once again. It didn't take us long to discover that the spare had a slow leak. Fortunately there are a lot of gas stations along US 25. This was long before the advent of those #%\$& air machines that demand a handful of quarters before they'll put air in your tires. Gas stations were actually service stations, with a mechanic on duty and a couple of stalls to work on cars, and they kept an air compressor in the shop, with a courtesy hose outside for customers to use if they needed air in their tires. These stations had long since closed for the night when Don and I were making our trip, but most of

them left the courtesy hose outside when they locked up and they had more than enough air left in the compressor to fill an MG tire. For the rest of the trip, we kept our eyes peeled for service stations and stopped at every one we saw to top up the tire. Even if it had only been a couple of miles since the last fill up, we didn't know how far it would be to the next air hose so we topped off the tire just in case. As the night wore on we realized the leak was getting worse, but we persevered. We almost made it. We got as far as New Paris, which was only a couple of miles from the farm house where Don was spending the summer and where my MG was parked. There was a gas station in New Paris, but by this time the air was leaking out of his tire as fast as we could pump it in. Reluctantly, we left the car at the station and began walking to the farm house.

By this time it was well past midnight on a dark, moonless night. Even the stars were hidden behind a low, horizon to horizon cloud cover. If you've never walked down an Indiana country road on a moonless night you wouldn't believe how dark it can get. Don and I couldn't see each other and we couldn't see the road. Only the sound and feel of the pavement beneath our feet told us we were still on the road. When we heard crunching gravel we knew we had strayed onto the shoulder and we'd have to scout around a bit to find the road. Things can get a little spooky when it's that dark, especially when the guy walking beside you suddenly lets out a blood-curdling scream. A large, shaggy dog had come out of nowhere, padded noiselessly up behind us, and suddenly nuzzled Don's hand. Later it was my turn to jump when an unseen horse leaned over an unseen fence and went "PBPBPBPBPBPBPB" in my ear. (How do you spell the sound a horse makes when it exhales through closed lips?) Fortunately there was a light on in the bathroom of Don's farm house or we would have walked right past it and continued walking until dawn.

On Monday Don got a lift back to the gas station and paid them to patch his tube. The mechanic started to feel inside the tire for a nail or other leak-causing protrusion but Don told him not to bother because he was certain he had pinched the tube in a tire machine. The patched tube lasted just long enough for Don to make it to the next gas station before he once again had a flat tire. This time he kept quiet while the mechanic checked the inside of the tire. A look of shock flashed across the mechanic's face.

“What the . . .?” he exclaimed as he hauled a handful of broken glass out of the tire. Don explained that he had gotten the tire off a junk pile and it was just possible that he hadn’t looked inside before mounting it. Actually, I was pretty impressed with that used Sears tire. We drove over 75 miles with a handful of broken glass between the tire and the tube. I don’t think you can expect much more than that from any tire, regardless of price.

Senior year! Don has managed to work his way back to school, so we’re sharing a dorm room again. I’ve got the MGA and the Model A waiting for me in the parking lot, so it looks like it’s going to be another good year. I seem to be the only senior who showed up with a beard, however. When I was a freshman, all male seniors showed up with a full beard which they shaved off after Purdue won its first home football game. It’s amazing how fast some traditions die out. Unfortunately, I can’t keep mine until we win a football game because the Air Force is helping to pay my way through school and the ROTC instructors don’t seem to fully grasp the importance of this tradition. So, I head out to my first ROTC class a little early and stop by the village barber shop on my way. For the first and only time in my life I ask for a “shave and a haircut.” Only this barber shop no longer shaves customers. They say no one’s asked for one in years and they don’t even have a razor in the shop. I have a minor panic attack until they offer to mow my beard off with electric clippers. Not the best shave I’ve ever had, but it will do.



Senior Beard

Later that fall I get a surprise phone call from Cory. Cory's decided to take a few years off to go through a hippie phase. He's living in an informal commune on a farm outside of Yodersburg with Jill and an assortment of other ragged looking individuals. They don't actually farm, they take turns working at factory jobs to buy groceries and pay the rent. Cory is obviously excited about something. "Hey, man" he says. "I scored a duck."

For some reason I briefly thought he was talking about a DUKW, the World War II amphibious landing craft you see in old war movies, but I immediately dismissed that idea as being preposterous. However, I couldn't seem to come up with any other plausible ideas that would explain why he was calling me to talk about a duck. "You scored a duck?" is all I could think of to say.

"Yeah, man. I scored it today."

"Did you hit a duck with your car?" I asked. The last time I visited the farm Cory was working on an old Triumph Spitfire out in the barn. It wasn't running at the time, but if he'd gotten it running and hit a duck with it, I thought it was just possible the duck

had done some damage that he wanted to ask about. A Spitfire isn't all that big, and his was pretty rusty, so it might have come out second best in an altercation with a duck.

“No man. I scored it. You know, bought it. A 1943 duck. D-U-K-W. One of those World War II things.”

Hard to believe, but Cory really had bought a DUKW. Somehow he'd met a hippie who was living way out on the lunatic fringe, and this guy had bought it at a truck and farm equipment salvage yard. At the time he had some vague notion of using it to squash cop cars, but then he sobered up enough to realize that not only was this not a very peaceful thing to do, it might actually get him into some serious trouble. He was going to restore it, but so far his restoration had only gotten as far as painting a small peace symbol on the prow of this noble vessel. When Cory offered to buy it from him he didn't mind letting it go.

A DUKW is a rather large vehicle, being over 30 feet long and weighing in at about 7-1/2 tons. This particular one wasn't in the best of condition. It had a few rust holes in the hull and the propeller shaft bearings were shot so it wasn't seaworthy, but its six-wheel drive system was intact so it could still be driven on land. You could fit up to 40 people on the deck, and Cory figured that if we could get it seaworthy it would be the perfect vehicle for parties at the lake.



A World War II DUKW

A few weeks later Don and I were poking about in an Army/Navy surplus store near campus when we found the perfect accessory for the DUKW. It was a very large cube-shaped cooler with extra thick insulation on the sides. An ice storage bin formed the core of this chest, and a couple of heavy duty wire racks held bottles in place around this bin. The racks would hold 24 bottles, so it would be the perfect thing to keep a case of beer cold. The best part was the stenciled lettering on the top and all four sides. In bold, red military stenciling against the olive drab surface were the words “Human Blood. Handle with care.”

There was no way we could ever fit this into the MG, so after we bought it we came back with the Model A. We carefully lashed it to the top of the car and proudly drove back to campus with our new treasure. That weekend we drove to Yodersburg and delivered it to Cory, filled with bottles of dark red beer of course. (You can do wonders with food coloring.)

Sadly, we never used the DUKW for parties at the lake. I helped Cory work on the engine a few times (it was a conventional 6-cylinder Chevy truck engine) and we drove it around the farm, but we never did get it seaworthy. A year or two later Cory moved to

California, and believe it or not the DUKW made the trip with no problems. It also saved Cory from having to rent a moving van. Finding a 30 foot parking spot in California proved to be difficult, though, and eventually Cory sold it to a collector who had the time and the money to restore it.

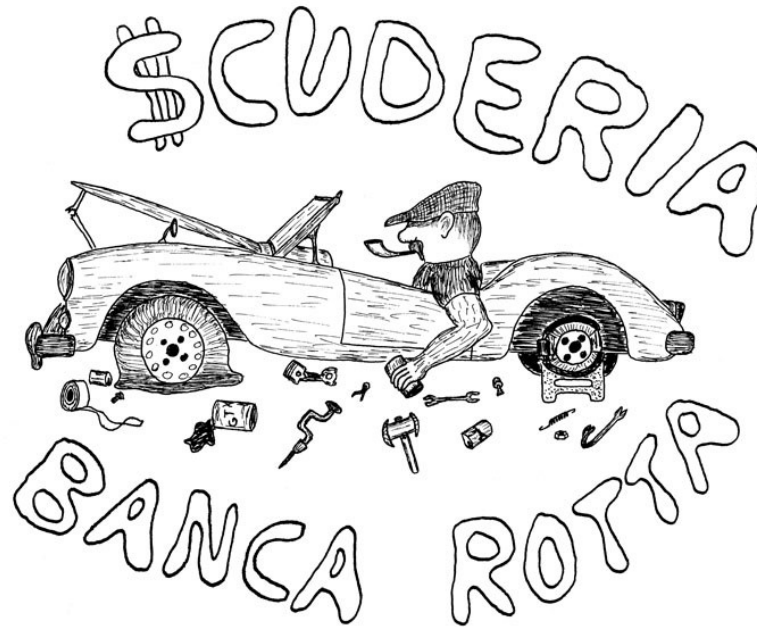


Delivering a Blood Chest

Mid January. One of the coldest nights of the year. Five below zero, which is pretty cold for this part of Indiana. Don and I and a couple of girls are driving back to campus from a movie theater. We're driving the Model A, of course, as we couldn't fit four people in either Don's MGB or my MGA. It's pretty cold in the car, and neither the manifold heater nor the lap robe can keep the chills at bay. There aren't many other cars on the road tonight. I'm stopped at a traffic light and we're all talking about how cold we are. Suddenly all conversation stops, as we stare at a car that drives past us on the cross street. It's another Model A Ford. I recognize the car, as I saw it once in Yodersburg. I don't know what it's doing in Lafayette, but I'm sure it's the same car. For one thing, there aren't many white Model A's with red running boards and red pin-striping. For another thing, there aren't many Model A sedans that have had the top hacked off with a

metal saw. The driver looks awfully cold in this homemade convertible. No top, no side curtains, just a windshield to huddle behind as he scoots down the road. Suddenly my Model A doesn't seem quite so cold anymore.

Spring break. I'm headed back to Yodersburg, but I promised Nick I'd stop by the shop on the way and help him get his car ready for a race. Over the past few years I had occasionally helped Nick and Viktor work on their race cars. Both raced at an amateur sports car track in Wisconsin. Viktor drove a 1959 Austin-Healey 100-6 that was just a little too heavy to keep up with the MGB's, despite its six-cylinder engine. Nick drove a 1960 Fiat Abarth 600D Allemano Spyder, a marvelous little gem of a car which had the misfortune to leave the factory with an engine that was only about $\frac{3}{4}$ the size of the next smallest sports car. This meant that even though Nick raced in the smallest displacement class possible he was still blown away by the "big" Bugeye Sprites with their 850cc engines. This plus the fact that he was trying to race on a college student's budget inspired him to name his racing team "Scuderia Banca Rotta" - Bankrupt Racing Team. He claimed this was the final achievement of all the great Italian racing teams and that if we started there maybe we could build upon their success. I designed a logo for the team and we had some T-shirts made. The T-shirts turn out to be much more successful than the team, and they last longer, too.



Scuderia Banca Rotta

When I get to the shop I expect to see Nick doing the final “fine tuning” on the Abarth, since the race is the following day. Instead I discover he has the engine on a bench and he’s just now putting the pistons in. He’s running a little behind schedule. He doesn’t want me to help him with the engine, though, he wants me to drive to Chicago to borrow Viktor’s new racing helmet. The track where Nick races has new safety rules this year and his old helmet won’t pass tech inspection. Viktor’s expecting me. It’s a nice, sunny day so a six hour drive to Chicago and back sounds a lot better than sweating over a greasy car engine.

The drive to Chicago is uneventful, although the sun quickly disappears behind a heavy cloud cover that’s moving in from the North. I pick up the helmet and have dinner with Viktor. By the time I’m ready to head back it’s dark and the temperature has dropped significantly, so I put up the top. The first flakes of snow appear as I reach the outskirts of Chicago. By the time I reach the Indiana state line it’s a full-fledged blizzard. Thick, wet snow is blanketing my windshield despite the feeble efforts of my wipers. (MGA’s have an incredibly lethargic, single-speed windshield wiper motor. When the

MGB was announced enthusiasts rejoiced over the news that it would have a two-speed wiper motor. Unfortunately, it turned out MG had added a new “glacial” speed that was apparently designed for people who thought the MGA wipers were too fast.) The wipers pack snow against the top of the windshield, where it freezes into a miniature glacier that slowly creeps downward. Eventually it stops my wipers dead in their tracks and I have to pull over and clear the snow to free them. Then I can drive until the next time they get stuck. Once they stick just as a tractor-trailer roars past in the other lane, splashing bucketfuls of thick brown slush on my windshield. I’m in a total brownout and can’t see a thing. I throw open the side curtain and reach out to free the wipers just as another truck roars past. This time the bucketfuls of brown slush fly in through the open side curtain, drenching me in an icy slime.

The blizzard slows traffic to a crawl, and I don’t make it back to Berrytown until after 2:00 AM. I drive to Riccotto’s house, but I’m too intimidated by Luis to ring the doorbell and wake everyone up at this hour. I decide to sleep in the MG and give Nick the helmet in the morning. It’s amazing how fast an MG cools off on a cold spring night. I try wrapping the tonneau cover around my body and wearing the racing helmet, but it’s no use. My teeth are chattering madly and sleep is out of the question. Then I notice Nick’s car is not in the driveway. I drive to the shop and he’s just starting to put the engine back into the car. This is a 45 minute job if everything goes right, but of course tonight everything doesn’t go right. Dawn breaks as we tighten the last bolt. Nick jumps into the driver’s seat to start the engine, but it won’t turn over. We put jumper batteries and battery chargers on it but it still won’t budge. Luis shows up and helps us try to push start it, but every time Nick lets out the clutch the rear wheels lock up. Nick finally has to admit that maybe he built the engine just a little too tight. Normally he checks the tolerances on everything as he assembles an engine, but last night he was in a hurry and he just slapped it together. There won’t be any racing for us today. We poke dejectedly at the breakfast Nick’s mother makes for us, and I tank up on extra coffee. I haven’t slept in over 24 hours and I still have to drive to Yodersburg. After breakfast I climb into my MG and – my starter dies. All in all it’s not a good day for Scuderia Banca Rotta.

Later that spring. It's a Friday night, and Don and I are going to take a couple of girls to a movie. We've still got an hour before we have to leave, so Don decides to walk to a local drug store to get a pack of cigarettes. It's just one block away. I stay in the room, as I've got some homework I want to get out of the way before we go to the movie. Time passes. 15 minutes. 30 minutes. 45 minutes. I call the girls to let them know we'll be a little late. Finally, after about an hour, Don staggers into the room. His pants are torn and he's covered with mud from the knees down.

When Don walked out of the dorm on his way to the drug store, he saw his MG parked at the curb. He hadn't driven it much recently, as he had parked it at Riccotto's with a "for sale" sign in the window trying to raise a little extra cash for school. No one was interested, so we had just brought it back to Purdue the previous weekend. It was a beautiful spring night, and Don decided to drive the MG to the drug store.

Driving a block wasn't very satisfying, so Don decided to take the long way back to the dorm. Basically he was just driving around the perimeter of the campus, but on the north east corner his route took him a little way out into the country. I knew the road well. Evidently Don didn't. As he crested a small hill he was surprised to see a speed limit sign dropping the speed from 45 to 30. He was doing about 60 at the time, so he was even more surprised to discover the reason for the speed limit change was that the road changed from asphalt to gravel. Worse still, the gravel road curved to the left. Don didn't.

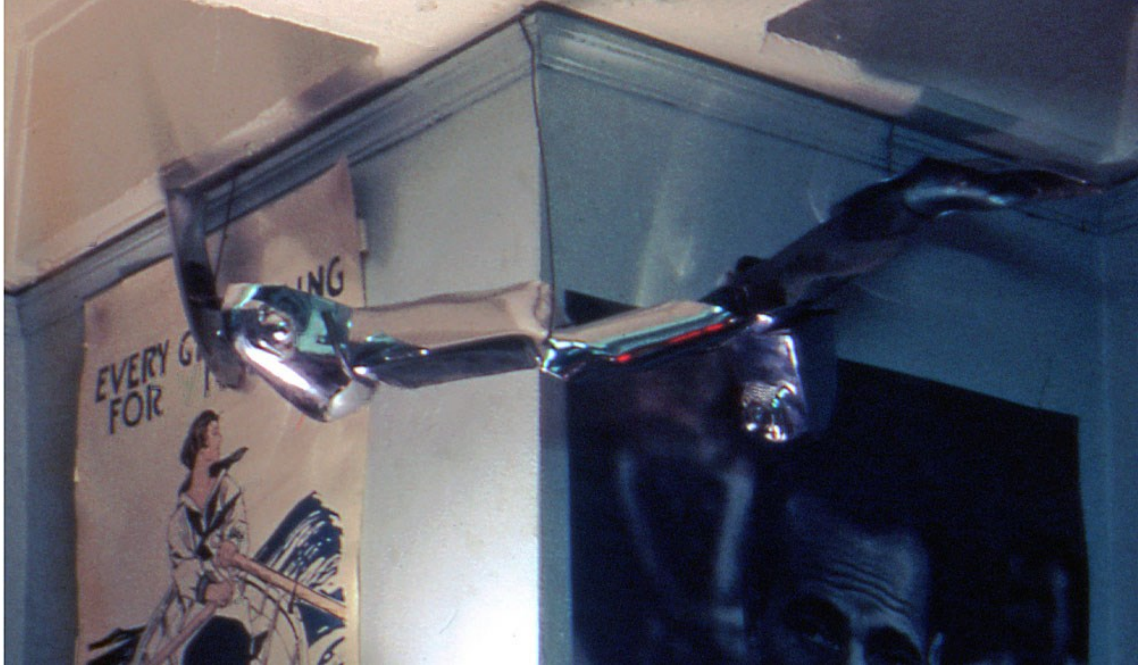
Don had gotten into trouble a few times previously by slamming on the brakes and locking up his wheels when things got dicey. That was how he had hopped the curb the previous spring. I had tried to talk him out of that, explaining that when you lock up the wheels you can no longer steer. The car just becomes a projectile following a fixed trajectory. Brakes are very useful when you need to slow down, but don't lock the wheels if you have to steer. That night he followed my advice and almost made it through the curve. Almost wasn't quite good enough, however. Once he left the gravel he was on wet grass and spring mud, and there wasn't much he could do. He flew through a fence and came to rest in a farmer's corn field. When he opened the door there

was the sickening sound of bending metal. Apparently his left front fender had been jammed back against the driver's door. As he waded through the mud to get back to the road he barked his shin against a piece of twisted metal lying in the field. It was his rear bumper.

By the time Don finished walking back to the dorm he was thoroughly disgusted with himself, his car, and life in general. I suggested we drive back to the car to survey the damage but he didn't want to spoil what was left of the evening. The car was in the middle of nowhere, and it would still be there tomorrow. So we climbed in the Model A, picked up the girls, and drove to the movie. The movie was sold out by the time we got there, so we decided to go back and look at Don's car. It's a good thing we did. There were at least a half-dozen police cars there and a group of men with flashlights were searching the cornfield, looking for the body of the driver. They called off the search when the driver asked them what they were doing.

The police had already called a tow truck, and the farmer who owned the field was there too. Don settled up with the farmer for the damage done to his fence while the tow truck dragged his car back out to the road. As the farmer counted his money he told Don "You're lucky you went out into the field. Most people slam on their brakes and slide right into that telephone pole."

Fortunately, a few minutes bodywork with a big hammer made Don's car drivable again, although it didn't look quite as nice as it did before the accident. The bumper was beyond salvaging as an automobile part, but it made a lovely conversation piece when it was suspended it from the ceiling in our room. We hung it in a corner, as its twisted shape matched the angle of the two walls perfectly.



Don's Bumper

“Flaming Floorboards” is available in paperback from [CreateSpace](#) and [Amazon](#). It is also available in electronic (Kindle) format from [Amazon](#) and in epub (Nook) format through [Barnes & Noble](#) and [Google](#).