



NEWSLETTER

Vol 38 #6 October 2020



The late great Sherm Decker
The fastest MG racer ever?

From The Editor :

Our cover headline last month was sure a fizzle. The Lime Rock MGVR Focus race was cancelled. It was not the MGVR race but the fact the weekend was shared with the TransAm series. The State of CT ruling for quarantine would not have allowed dozens of crew and drivers from other States to participate – so the event went down. No MGVR focus race for 2020 – maybe 2 for 2021?

In This Issue

Sherm Decker was the superstar of MGA racers. Back when the SCCA classified cars by displacement, the poor 1500cc MGA raced against the 1500cc 4 cam Porsche Carrera's. But Decker humbled them more than once. A tribute story about Sherm written by the journalist Edward Vendyk and courtesy of Safety Fast Magazine.

Alix Lafontant was The Photographer at Watkins Glen in the 50's & 60's. He took that expertise to tracks around the world. A great story about this unusual career in photo journalism.

A fair amount of items For Sale. Those “things” you have in your garage or barn or storage could be just what somebody out there needs badly. Feel free to use this forum for cars, parts, publications, posters or whatever.

No letters to the editor, shame on you.

No tales of MG's past and the great times you had, shame on you.



SHERMAN DECKER

By Edward Vandyk

When I became aware that one of Sherman Decker's Twin Cams had recently been restored in the UK I thought this was something that would be of interest to the MG community and, with the help of the owner, I set about writing an article both about Sherman Decker and his MGAs.

Whilst Sherman Decker's name will forever be associated in MG circles with his historic nighttime session in a 'works' MGA Twin Cam (Race Number 30) in the deluge that beset the Sebring

12 Hour Race in 1959, I very soon became aware how little information about both Sherman, and the MGAs he competed in, was actually easily accessible.

Accordingly, with the help of various

North American contacts including Dave Nicholas, Ted Rounds, MGA! Editor Mike Tooke, Michael Eaton along with details from 'Call it MGA', courtesy of Roger Martin and the MG Car Club MGA Register, I hope what follows gives an overview of Sherman Decker and his achievements in his MGAs. However, from here onwards it will be 'Sherm', as he was known, not 'Sherman, in the same way as a UK 'boot' is a US 'trunk'.

Sherm Decker was born December 13 1929 in Oneonta, New York and died in a tragic car accident in October 1987 at the



Car 1 - Watkins Glen 15 September 1956, red 1500 - #67 - 1st Collier Cup

age of 57 in Delaware County, New York. Married on August 5, 1951 to Joan, who is still very much with us, they had one son, Greg, who has also sadly passed away. As his close friend Dave Nicholas said, it was ironic that such a talented driver should have passed away in a car accident.

Sherm was naturally strong and athletic but relatively short (5'9") which would have made the MGA, with its relatively tight driving position and lack of any power assistance an ideal competition vehicle for him. He was a star (American) football player at High School, probably



Car 2 - Watkins Glen 21 September 1957, black 1500 - #112 - 4th Collier Cup

a 'running back', despite weighing in at only 127lbs but he chose not to go on to College, preferring instead to be drafted into the Army, just two weeks after his wedding, where, after basic training which he loathed, he taught motor pool officers how to fix jeeps and trucks at Fort Benning GA. The young Sherm also was a downhill skier and rodeo competitor.

After the Army Sherm went to Broome Technical School with Ted Rounds and they remained friends and racers for life. Ted gave an indication as to what Broome offered as follows "The President of Broome Tech was Cecil Tyrell, an ME who majored in automotive technology.



Car 2 - Watkins Glen 27 June 1958, black 1500 - #38 - 1st Glen Classic



Car 3 - Sebring 21 March 1959 Ash Green Twin Cam - #30 – 12 hour race 46th overall, 4th in class Collier Cup with Joan and Gordon Morris



Car 4 – Watkins Glen 23 August 1959 Red Twin Cam - #62 – 1st Collier Cup with Joan and Gordon Morris

He could foresee what was coming in the auto industry. He designed a two-year program named automotive technology. He was aware that we would need to understand the rules of physics and chemistry. The two-year program worked us hard, fifty weeks a year, eight hours a day, four or five lab reports a week, on mechanics, thermodynamics, electricity, petroleum chemistry, hydraulics, accounting etc. Not much time for nuts and bolts, although we put rings and a valve grind on a donor car from a friend or relative. However, we did find time to generously support the nation's Brewers." Ted Rounds recalls the graduation picnic from Broome which began Tuesday night at Chenango Valley state park and ended Sunday morning in Buffalo!

Leaving Broome, Sherm found work with Gordon Morris in his dealership just north of Oneonta, New York, which takes us conveniently first to 1955 where Sherm

competed in an MG TF 1500 in a couple of races, (finishing 9th and 20th) and then on to 1956 and the start of 27-year-old Sherm's eight season history racing MGAs which continued until the 1963 season.

But first a personal anecdote from Dave Nicholas. At the 1965 Watkins Glen USRRC weekend, Dave had entered his MGA in the preliminary races. He had also just bought a very cool Simpson Indianapolis racing suit, white with yellow stripes on the arms and legs. The weekend was also a NASCAR stock car weekend. A well-known NASCAR driver was Tiny Lund who won the Daytona 500 in 1963. He was named Tiny because he was huge. Tiny was also known for fighting. When he saw Dave in the scrutineering line he immediately started picking on him for my "fairy lookin' suit". Dave knew who he was and what he was famous for

and was pretty sure he wanted a fight. Out of nowhere, Sherm

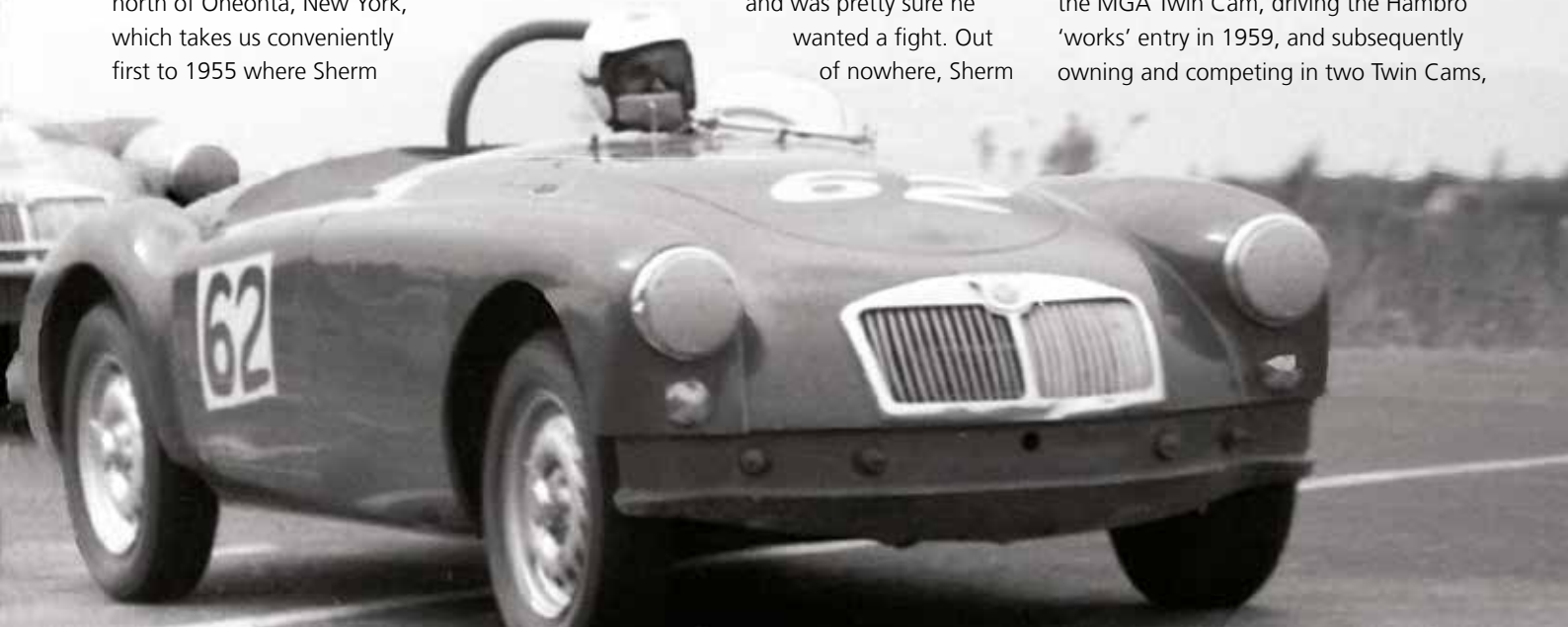
Decker showed up, put his hand on Dave's shoulder, stared Tiny in the face, complete with cigarette hanging out of Sherm's lips, and said: "Let's go Nicholas". Lund just turned around and walked away. As Dave says: "Nobody would challenge Sherm".

Dave Nicholas recalls that Sherm would help anyone, a friend or competitor, and also that Sherm often had a cigarette and a beer close by.

Sherm's MGAs

Sherm raced at least seven different MGAs in that eight-season period, starting with the only variant available in 1956, the 'Original MGA', colloquially known as an MGA 1500, which, for purists, I am referring to as simply an 'MGA' in the table setting out Sherm's MGA races. This is believed to be complete.

From pushrod cars Sherm moved on to the MGA Twin Cam, driving the Hambro 'works' entry in 1959, and subsequently owning and competing in two Twin Cams,



Car 4 – Watkins Glen 23 August 1959 Red Twin Cam - #62 – 1st Collier Cup



Car 5 – Watkins Glen 25 June 1960 Black Twin Cam - #167 – 1st Watkins Glen Classic

firstly a red car followed by the second, a black car, acquired in the summer of 1960 and sold a year later, which has been the subject of the recent restoration. After the Twin Cams Sherm competed in an MGA 1500 again and finally in an MGA 1600 MkII De Luxe. Whilst the table has the race details, photographs of the seven MGAs are illustrated below plus even an eighth car at the [XXXXX] Hill Climb in the late 1950s.

Sebring 12 Hour event 1959

This event remains probably the context in which Sherm Decker's name is most recognised by MG aficionados worldwide. The MG entry was for three MGA Twin Cams, a high-performance model which had been announced in July of the previous year, and four cars were sent to Sebring, one being for practice. All the MG top brass were there, including John Thornley, Geoffrey Healey and Marcus Chambers. Duggie Watts was the mechanic. The drivers were all drawn from North America in order to attract the best publicity possible for these cars. A credible showing was essential.

The Twin Cams, YD2/931 to 934, had been constructed as roadsters but were converted to coupé form by the Competitions Department. The cars ran with numbers 28 (Gus Ehrman and Ray Saidel), 29 (Jim Parkinson and John Dalton) and 30 (Jack Flaherty, Ray Pickering with Sherm Decker as reserve). All these drivers were American and came from areas picked to give a spread of dealers within the regions. Sherm Decker was not happy to be the reserve as his times were consistently faster than the others. He did, however, drive in the race.

The race started at 10.00am in clear weather and the cars were running well within their capability in order to see how the race panned out. The weather deteriorated badly and the rain came down in torrents when they were expecting to cut the lap times, instead reducing their average speed by 5mph. Car 29 had an hour out while its starter motor was fixed and Car 28 rammed a straw bale but was able to continue without much damage. Sherm Decker was sent out in the dark and the heavy rain, spun the car but continued until the tenth

hour when the engine let go just after the start of a lap. He pushed it for a mile and a half in the rain until he ran out of energy. When he tried to start the car (with some unacknowledged outside assistance) it was plain that a piston had gone but he managed to drive round to the finish line, driving in short bursts until it seized. As the engine cooled after each seizure he drove another few yards. The car was pushed over the line to qualify as a finisher in 45th place. The other two cars came 2nd (No. 28) and 3rd (No. 29) in class and 27th and 34th overall. In passing, it should be added that photographs show that the registration numbers on the cars were in use elsewhere at the time and are rather obviously not "Made in England"!

The Collier Cup Rivalry

In 1958 Dave Nicholas, a close friend of Sherm's who indeed was his mentor, together with three other teenagers, Joe Tierno, Steve Vail and Dave Zych, founded the Binghampton Automobile Racing Club (BARC), initially to photograph the East Coast SCCA races and later, in Dave's case, to go racing. Fortunately, many of their photographs have survived and can



Car 7 – Reading 21 October 1962 MGA 1600 MkII De Luxe - # - result unknown



Car 5 – Marlboro 16 April 1961 Black Twin Cam - #671 – 6th



Car 6 – Watkins Glen 23 September 1961 White 1500 - #305 – 1st

now be viewed on their website - www.barcboys.com.

Two drivers who would eventually have a huge impact on Dave Nicholas's racing career dominated the middle Collier Cup races by winning four years in a row from 1956 to 1959. The Collier Cup Race was established in 1954 to commemorate a local racer of the time, Sam Collier. Sherm Decker was simply overwhelming with his amazing car control, starting in his wire-wheeled 1500 and finishing in a 1600 Mk II with a couple of Twin Cams in between. Bob Bucher was equally fast but a polar opposite in style; smooth, calm and efficient to Decker's mercurial manner. In 1956, Sherm Decker won the Collier race in his MGA. By 1957, most of the entries were MGAs, 15 of them. Bob Bucher won the race that year. Perhaps the most famous MGA race of all time was the 1958 Collier Cup where both Decker and Bucher had to come from deep in the pack. In those days grid position were determined by a drawing, not qualifying speed. Bucher got to the front with about three laps to go but Decker was coming through strongly. On the next to last lap Decker passed into second just yards behind Bucher. On the last turn of the last lap with no more than 300 metres to the finish line Decker braked late to

come inside Bucher. In those days the last turn (now the first turn) was a very tight, slow right hand hairpin that was preceded by a slight left. Decker got a bit sideways and had to correct his slide to avoid contact. He looked over his shoulder at Bucher who was calmly planting his foot on the floor, knowing his good friend Decker would never take him out and it was a drag race to the finish. Bucher won by a hair. In period the SCCA determined car classes by displacement. This meant MGAs raced against four cam Porsche Carreras. At Lime Rock and Marlboro Decker could beat them. On longer courses where HP counted, he could beat some. His greatest victories against the Porsches actually came in his red 1959 Twin Cam. The black car was always, and by a mile, the fastest MG but the Porsches were getting better by 1961.

Today The North American MGA Register (NAMGAR) honours the memory of these two racers, competitors and friends, by awarding the Bucher/Decker Memorial Trophy annually to the highest-placed MGA in the annual Collier Cup race. Nowadays the Collier Cup is not necessarily awarded to the race winner but to the driver voted for by his fellows as best demonstrating the "Spirit of MG Vintage Racing". This includes racing skill but also car preparation, all in the MG spirit.

The ironic piece is that Bucher's car

(No. 029) was prepared by Decker. Decker won again in 1959. By 1959, SCCA had begun diluting the Collier race by including other makes. In 1960, the Collier name was simply applied to the regular E/ Production race, where the only MGs were the rare Twin Cams. Today the race at Watkins Glen every September as part of the SVRA US Vintage Grand Prix is again solely for MGs. thanks largely to Joe Tierno who bought the Bucher #29 car that beat Sherm in 1958 and then campaigned it for many seasons. This race was won in 2018 by Dave Nicholas in his MGA.

Sherm Decker wins at Lime Rock in 1960

The fast setup before racing tyres was a set of Michelin X radials. Still quite new in the US, radials had very different handling characteristics. They would stick much better than the Dunlops but when they let go you had best grab a handful of opposite lock or find yourself well off the pavement. Decker was the master of staying in control when the Michelins broke – Bucher was the master of taking the radials to their very limit but rarely going over the line.

In those early days of SCCA racing, modifications to the engine, suspension and brakes were forbidden. What Decker found was that a slight milling of the MGA cast iron head increased compression and power. How did he get away with it? Simple. The competitor blew a head gasket and he was forced to do it because the head was warped. Somehow the blank pull switch on the dash mysteriously had a wire connected to the generator that cut it from charging and added just about 1 hp when you needed it. Heavy oil in the lever dampers, front and rear bumpers off, the tonneau cover taped for aerodynamics and even



Car 8 – Keene Hill climb MGA 1500

taking the passenger seat cushion out were all parts of the equation.

When roll over bars became mandatory, Sherm had a friend in upstate New York who made a pattern to create a custom bar to fit the MGA. A simple hoop behind the driver that had one rear-facing brace and the whole thing bolted to the frame with U bolts. The speed secret was that Ray Henley made them from 1.5" electrical conduit not 1.5" .080 wall thickness steel tubing. They used dull drill bits to make the inspection hole that scrutineering looked at to prove wall thickness. The dull drill created a nice burr inside the tubing that looked and measured over .080 while the actual wall thickness was considerably less. Why would they use something that clearly would not stand up in a violent roll over? Weight. Their bar weighed about seven pounds while the others were about twenty. Plus they all knew none of them would ever be so incompetent as to lose control and roll over.

As years passed, they could use optional cams, lifters and pushrods; high compression pistons, lightened flywheels, balanced and lightened crank and rods. The old cast iron B-Series motor was getting up to 100 hp by the mid to late 60s. The twin cam brought four wheel disc brakes, the Sebring cars brought the close ratio gearboxes and oil coolers and the Mquette gave us the 4.55:1 differential. Every bit of that was necessary if you wanted to win. The Carreras were gone, but the 2.2 litre Triumph TR3s with overdrive could not be caught on long tracks, but the MGA always handled so well that given a tighter course like Lime Rock, Marlboro or Reading it could win. Way back in 1958 Decker did the unthinkable feat of beating all but two of six four cam Carreras at Lime Rock with a brilliant third overall in his 1500, drum brake wire-wheeled MGA.

Sherm Decker's Black Twin Cam YD3/2319

Alan Kyson, an MG Club member and MGA racer for over 20 years, has actually owned YD3/2319 twice! Initially in 2009, when he was unaware that it

Finish	Date	Location	Race	Car	Race No.
9th	20/5/56	Cumberland		MGA	106
?	19/8/56	Allentown		MGA	46
1st	15/9/56	Watkins Glen	Collier Brothers Memorial	MGA	67
5th	9/6/57	Lime Rock	SCCA National	MGA	92
4th	6/7/57	Watkins Glen	Watkins Glen Classic	MGA	127
4th	7/7/57	Lime Rock		MGA	127
5th	28/7/57	Lime Rock		MGA	56
14th	18/8/57	Montgomery		MGA	76
4th	21/9/57	Watkins Glen	Collier Brothers Memorial	MGA	112
5th	27/4/58	Lime Rock		MGA	20
?	18/5/58	Lime Rock		MGA	?
3rd	15/6/58	Lime Rock	SCCA National	MGA	6
1st	27/6/58	Watkins Glen	Watkins Glen Classic	MGA	38
3rd	5/7/58	Lime Rock		MGA	38
8th	31/8/58	Thompson		MGA	138
11th	1/9/58	Thompson		MGA	138
2nd	20/9/58	Watkins Glen	Collier Brothers Memorial	MGA	16
4th	21/3/59	Sebring	12 Hour	MGA Twin Cam	30
DNF	9/5/59	Lime Rock	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	162
2nd	24/5/59	Thompson	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	262
3rd	13/6/59	Lime Rock	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	262
2nd	27/6/59	Watkins Glen	Watkins Glen Classic	MGA Twin Cam	162
DNF	4/7/59	Lime Rock	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	162
1st	23/8/59	Watkins Glen	Collier Brothers Memorial	MGA Twin Cam	62
7th	12/9/59	Lime Rock		MGA Twin Cam	62
1st	26/9/59	Watkins Glen	MG Car Club	MGA Twin Cam	162
DNF	26/9/59	Watkins Glen		MGA Twin Cam	162
1st	17/10/59	Lime Rock	Regional	MGA Twin Cam	62
1st	16/4/60	Marlboro	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	67
1st	25/6/60	Watkins Glen	Watkins Glen Classic	MGA Twin Cam	167
1st	25/6/60	Watkins Glen	MG Car Club	MGA Twin Cam	?
DNF	2/7/60	Lime Rock		MGA Twin Cam	67
DNF	7/8/60	Montgomery	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	267
6th	5/9/60	Thompson	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	
9th	24/9/60	Watkins Glen	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	67
6th	16/4/61	Marlboro	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	671
2nd	30/4/61	Virginia	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	671
3rd	14/5/61	Cumberland	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	267
2nd	24/6/61	Watkins Glen	Watkins Glen Classic	MGA Twin Cam	178
5th	1/7/61	Lime Rock	SCCA National	MGA Twin Cam	27
1st	23/9/61	Watkins Glen		MGA	305
?	21/10/62	Reading		MGA 1600 MKII	55
DNF	7/4/63	Marlboro		MGA 1600 MkII	
4th	27/4/63	Virginia		MGA 1600 MKII	67
DNF	15/6/63	Lime Rock		MGA 1600 MKII	?

was one of Sherman Decker's race cars, Alan bought the car from Bob West and rebuilt it as a race car for his own use. This involved fitting a roll bar and all the other modifications to comply with race regulations. The full build also included fitting a Twin Cam belt-driven engine, a close ratio four-speed gearbox and limited slip differential. Intentions change so in 2011, having finished but not raced the car, he sold it back to Bob West, the well-

known MGA expert and restorer who rebuilt the body and chassis to his own high standards.

When Alan retired in 2016 after 50 years in the motor trade, he became aware that Bob still had the car which was still unfinished. Alan rang Bob, who not only made him aware of the car's connection with Sherman Decker but ended up selling the car back to Alan. Bob said he had promised Sherman's



widow, Joan, that he would get it back on the road, an obligation Alan was happy to accept. The repurchase consisted of the repainted body and chassis and also included all the parts required to finish the car, including a genuine works cylinder head and parts to build up a Twin Cam engine.

The car has been rebuilt to its original build specification – race screen, c/ratio gearbox and competition seats along with a genuine works steering wheel. The engine was, however, more of a challenge, as to have the potential to compete in the car it had to be stronger than simply a road-going engine and it soon became apparent that the block was not up to that. To cut a long story short, Alan ended up having a 1622cc block completely re-manufactured to replicate the standard 1600cc twin cam block, bored to 1800cc with a works twin cam head. The full engine specification is as follows: New old

stock works cylinder head fitted with new valves and re-ported, forged pistons, steel billet crank, steel con-rods, special main bearing end cap, rear oil seal conversion, new cams, new jack shaft, new gear/chains, new water pump, new lighter steel fly wheel, works-type alloy inlet manifold, competition clutch, four branch exhaust manifold, twin 45 Weber's.

The engine was built in-house with Mass Racing doing the final set ups and dyno tests showing 169 bhp and 138 ft/lb of torque at 6,400 revs. The car now, having been restored to an exceptionally high standard at considerable expense, can be used as either an amazing road-going car or, with some modifications, as a competition car.

Alan admits the pleasure in restoring this car probably outweighs that of his subsequently using it, so I hope it does not languish in Alan's collection having neither achieved its on road or competition

Sherm Decker in his own words

To conclude, some words from Decker himself. When asked in the 1970s why he now refuses to go to motor races since he quit racing himself he responded: "It's in my blood and I'm afraid I'd want to go back into racing." Recalling his days "travelling the circuit," he went on:

"Racing is like a high. I don't know of any thrill like it. I've thought of doing other things, like skydiving, but I doubt they could offer the thrills of racing."

Decker crashed five or six cars - "You never keep count" - and he had several near misses. Probably his narrowest miss was in a race at Bridgehampton, Long Island. Decker was driving a Lola (Ford) T-70 at speeds of 90+ miles per hour. His gas line sprang a leak near the start of the race and half soaked him with gasoline. When making a turn, his rear suspension broke, causing his car to almost flip over on its nose. Though the Lola was in a vertical position, it miraculously fell back down on its wheels. Had it flipped, Decker recalls, he and his car would most certainly have been ablaze.

Decker dismissed this incident and others like it, saying it was "part of the job."

"Death is often on a race car driver's mind but you develop the attitude of 'It can't happen to me'."

Sherm Decker signed off with "It took me two years to get racing out of my blood, and I still think of it. The thrills, the ego-boost when hearing the crowd and the experience of living high each day because you never knew what tomorrow would bring, all kind of remain in your system."

To conclude, Sherm Decker was one of the greatest in period MGA racers who has not always got the recognition he deserved. Compiling his MGA competition history makes me pose the question: did any driver, even a works driver, compete in more different MGAs in period than Sherm? I suspect not!

Photographs of Sherman Decker courtesy of the BARCboys Collection



The Racing Photographer: Alix Lafontant

BY [CARL GOODWIN](#) [OCTOBER 1, 2012](#). [ALL ACCESS PAYWALL](#), [NORTH AMERICA](#), [OCTOBER '12](#), [REGION](#), [VINTAGE RACECAR ARCHIVES](#), [VINTAGE RACECAR ARTICLES](#), [VINTAGE RACECAR FEATURE](#), [VINTAGE RACECAR FEATURES](#)



The Paddock at Watkins Glen in 1954 is filled with a representative sampling of the caars being raced, including Jaguar XK120 coupes and roadsters, a couple of Porsche 356 roadsters and a coupe, an Austin-Healey 100 and lots of T-series MGs, all getting their numbers on and preparing to go racing. Photo: Alix Lafontant

An essential part of the early sports car scene was the race photographer. He was the guy with three cameras strapped around his neck – probably Leicas, Hasselblads or Nikons. He knelt by the side of the track as the cars whizzed by at 140 miles an hour only a couple of feet away. He chronicled the races at venues from Watkins Glen to Bridgehampton to Elkhart Lake, Put-in-Bay and Brynfan Tyddyn. His work went into magazines like Speed Age, Road & Track and Sports Car....not to mention the various SCCA regional newsletters.

Of course, anyone can buy a camera, but not everyone can use one. Professional photographers in motorsports were confronted with things their counterparts in regular news photography could never imagine: extreme high speeds, access to vantage points (re: safety), spectators, officials and distances (e.g., getting yourself and your gear around a three-mile road course).



Three figures who made a name for themselves in the sport, (left to right) three-time World Champion Jack Brabham, famed Watkins Glen starter Tex Hopkins and photographer Alix Lanfonant. Alix is carrying a 35mm Leica IIIIf with a 90mm lens and variable rangefinder, as well as a 2¼ format viewfinder camera. Photo: Alix Lafontant

The better ones overcame all of this and captured some great images...images that will last for all time...images of the Golden Age of Sports Car Racing. Some of their names: Alix Lafontant, Hemp Oliver, Pierre Perrin, Arthur Richards, Ray Boldt,

Pete and Ozzie Lyons, Jim Sitz, Joe Brown, Dan Rubin, Irv Dolin, Taz Ruffy, Jack Campbell, Bob Canaan, Bob Tronolone, Allen Kuhn, Pete Biro, Fred Vytal, Dave Freidman, Tom Burnside and Warren Ballard, with apologies to those omitted.

Alix Lafontant took pictures of the sports car racing scene from Brynfan Tyddyn to Road America and from 1953 to 1963. He was the Regional Executive of the Finger Lakes Region of the Sports Car Club of America from 1957 to 1960. As ex-racing driver Dave Wild (MG-TD and Elva Courier) recalls, Alix did a lot of photography for Finger Lakes Region and Watkins Glen. Beginning in

1956, there was a Sportsmanship Award, otherwise known as the Alix Lafontant Trophy. It is still awarded today. He was a rally driver and owned a number of interesting cars from a red MG-TD, to a Jaguar XK-120 called "The Tomato" (due to a repaint in an unusual color), an Alfa Giulietta and two Porsche coupes (a red one and a silver one). "When he first got the Jag," says racing driver Dave Elder, "he thought that spark plugs should be in very tight. They had trouble getting one of them out and had to repair it with a Helicoil.



"Brabham in his Brabham BT7-Climax at the 1963 U.S. Grand Prix. Photo: Alix Lafontant

Alix and his wife Nicole had come from Haiti and both were French; they spoke fluent English with

a pleasant French accent. Walt Marshall sponsored their entry into the U.S. His daughter Elizabeth remembers Alix and Nicole. "They were sophisticated, elegant people," she says. "Nicole was charming and sweet. Alix wore an ascot. He came from a wealthy family. When he played tennis, a servant ran to get the ball. He taught me how to dive in the pool at our home. It was a neat time in my life."

Graham Hill leads away from the start of the '63 USGP at Watkins Glen. He and BRM teammate Richie Ginther ultimately finished 1-2. Photo: Alix Lafontant



VintageRacecar.com

Elizabeth's brother Mike recalls: "My father went on rallies with Alix in the early '50s. Alix had an MG-TD, a red one, and he brought it over to the house. I'll never forget the smell of the leather seats. We had seven kids in my family and they all swarmed over the car. I thought, 'boy, this is something.' On these rallies, Alix would be the driver and my father was the navigator. One time they came back from a night rally and my father was practically frozen! Then Alix had a Jag 120. The lines on the car were beautiful. Later he had a silver Porsche 356. Alix and his wife Nikki were great people. She was an elegant woman. They came over to our house quite often. Either his or her parents were involved in government in Haiti; they were pretty high up. He had a good job at Kodak. We all went to Watkins Glen when they raced in the streets. It was a dangerous course and a wonder more people weren't hurt. The racing cars were parked in garages in town. One of them was the Cunningham—it was spectacular. They had two of them: a coupe and convertible."

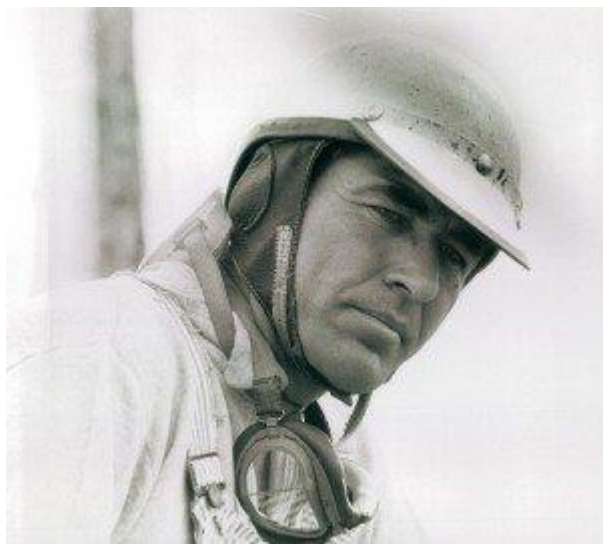


*On the grid prior to the '62 USGP at Watkins Glen. That's Innes Ireland in the #15 UDT Lotus 24 and Count Carel Godin de Beaufort in his Porsche 718.
Photo: Alix Lafontant*

Another one of the Kodak people who was a friend of Alix was David Cunningham, who knew him between 1955 and 1959. "Alix and Nikki were in the Rochester Yacht Club," Cunningham recalls, "and I used to socialize with them there. We both lived in the same apartment house in Rochester, and the people who owned it had a

sailboat of about 23 feet in length that they used to take out on Lake Ontario. They did not race it, just day-sailing."

A man named Ned Junker also worked with Alix. His son Chris recalls, "Dad was a cinematographer for Watkins Glen. His specialty was film transport systems. Alix did the mechanical systems for the photo reconnaissance cameras."



*Carroll Shelby's relentless intensity is readily evident in this classic Lafontant portrait.
Photo: Alix Lafontant*

"After a while, they moved out of the Rochester area into a suburb called Pennfield. Alix was very good with children, though he and Nikki had no children of their own. He taught the children French. It was 'bonjour Alix; bonjour Nicole.' When they were in the garden they spoke French. For cars I remember they had a tomato red Jag, an Alfa Giulietta and a 1600 Super."

Alix and Nicole were such a nice couple that Jim Kimberly autographed a picture: "To my very good friends Nicole and Alix—always the best." And Porsche meister Bob Holbert noted, "Best

wishes to a fine couple.” As Alfa racer Dave Elder recalls, “his wife Nikki was good looking and I remember at the Holland Hill Climb, wherever she went, all the engines were quiet.

Nicole was pretty and popular, and both of them had many friends among the U.S. and European drivers. These friends were figures in the sport both American and European, including Briggs Cunningham, Jim Kimberly, Cameron Argetsinger, Paul O’Shea, Phil Hill, Chuck and Suzy Dietrich, Doc and Peg Wylie, John and Evelyn Mull, Frank Dominianni, Otto Linton and Lester Smalley of Smalley’s Garage as well as Jim Clark, Jack Brabham, Roy Salvadori and Graham Hill.

Among Alix’s friends at Kodak was Fred German. In World War II, Fred was an aide de camp to General MacArthur and stood on the deck of the USS Missouri as the Japanese signed the papers of surrender. “Fred had a very responsible job at Kodak,” notes Louis Willsea, a distributor of sports car accessories. “He was responsible for relations with Hollywood. He had an office in the Eastman Theater, built by George Eastman.” In the sports car world, Fred German first organized race workers into an effective safety team with a group called Race Communications Association. It was the prototype for all the racing organizations to follow, including Bill Benham’s Lake Erie Communications in SCCA’s NEOhio Region.



Fred Walters, father of driver Phil Walters, took this photo of photographer Lafontant sitting in Phil’s Cunningham C-4R, a car so new it hasn’t even had its racing numbers applied yet. “I just pre-focused the Leica and gave it to him,” recalled Alix. “I got in the car and he pushed the button.”

Photo: Alix Lafontant



Friends and co-drivers Briggs Cunningham and John Fitch wait on the starting grid before the 1956 Road America 500 w with Cunningham’s #58 D-Jaguar. with Cunningham’s #58 D-Jaguar. Photo: Alix Lafontant

When they went to the races, Alix would shoot the cars and Nicole would head the Timing and Scoring section. On the way home after the races, Nicole would read off the finishing positions and they would talk about how the race report would be written.

Taking pictures at races began as a hobby but then Alix became a professional by virtue of selling his pictures to *Road & Track* and *Sports Car*, and writing the stories to go with the race results. This was the era before digital cameras. He generally used a Leica IIF 35mm rangefinder camera. Some photographers prefer the larger 2-1/4-inch format, but Alix liked the light weight and portability of the little Leica, and the results speak for themselves. Later on, he added a Hasselblad and a Nikon to his repertoire.



In 1962, Lafontant captured reigning World Champion Phil Hill displaying the determined look that often graced his visage. Photo: Alix Lafontant

In addition to shooting races, he occasionally did some commercial work. "Alix took pictures of some German fender mirrors that my company imported. They were Talbot mirrors," says Louis Willsea, longtime member of the Finger Lakes Region, SCCA. "I was also a distributor for Bell Helmets." Louis worked on race communications with his wife and drove an Alfa Duetto. On request by certain racers like Alfa driver Dave Elder, he would even do weddings as Dee Elder notes, "He did all the pictures for our wedding—it was 50 years ago!" In addition, he accepted orders, on occasion, for copies of the photos he took, from the drivers he took them of. SCCA president Jim Kimberly ordered 63 photos of himself, including two enlargements of one taken with Phil Hill. Alix was in demand as a speaker on the subject

of the sports car scene, addressing corporate audiences including General Dynamics and Eastman Kodak top management. He also judged the photo contest at the 1958 New York State Fair, per a request by Watkins Glen race announcer John Duvall.



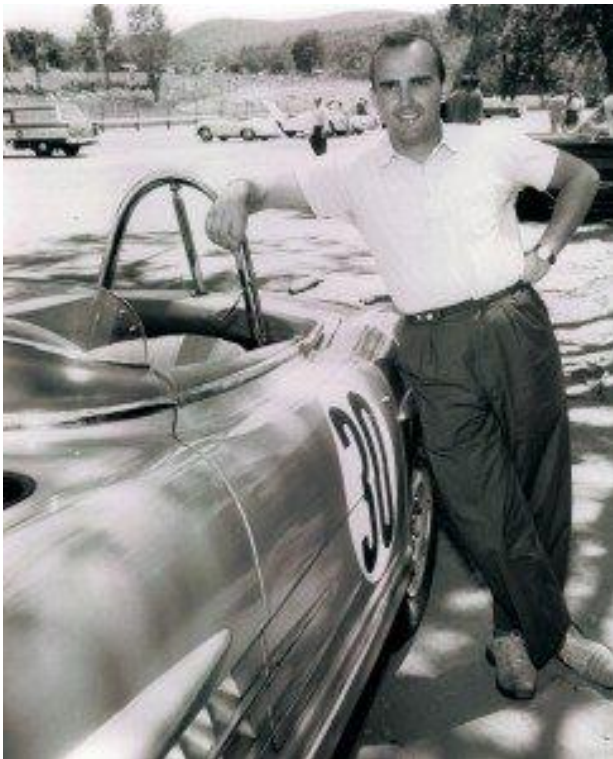
Jim Clark won the 1962 USGP and afterward enjoyed a kiss from Pat Gannon and a little champagne, as a mildly amused Lotus team owner Colin Chapman looks on. Photo: Alix Lafontant

As a graduate of the University of Rochester, Alix Lafontant was employed by Kodak in Rochester, and most people thought he worked as a photographer for them. He was actually a product engineer. One of his projects was a high-resolution, high-altitude aerial spy camera for the U.S. government that took the pictures of the Soviet rockets on Cuba. Walt Marshall also worked on that project, but that's another story for another time.

No, wait a minute, let's hear it now! The U.S. government needed a camera that would take high-resolution photos from high-altitude surveillance planes. Naturally they came to Kodak, the leader in photography. Alix was assigned to design and construct the camera. He was a very methodical man and he located a lens supplier in Germany. When he learned how critical the cooling schedule was and, if too much or too little the lens could crack, he ordered an extra one of the expensive lenses. Midway through the construction process, a meeting with the CIA was scheduled. Alix's boss was nervous about it. "Just remember," he said, "no small talk. Just start the meeting, answer all their questions, finish the meeting and say goodbye."



Isabelle Haskell of Redbank, New Jersey, takes her Siata Spyder under the checkered flag at the 1954 Lockbourne AFB races near Columbus, Ohio. Photo: Alix Lafontant



Paul O'Shea drove his #30 Mercedes 300 SL roadster to the 1957 D Sports National Championship, his third straight SCCA title. This is at Lime Rock. Photo: Alix Lafontant

The conference room was reserved, the door opened, and there they were. "The men from the CIA looked exactly like the Blues Brothers," Alix recalled. "They had dark suits, pork-pie hats, the same briefcases and they were wearing sunglasses. I answered each of their questions, for two hours. Then the meeting was over. Just as they were going out the door, one of them stopped, looked back at me and said, 'Will we see you at Beverly this weekend?'" That, of course, was the national sports car race at the Beverly, Mass., airport. The man's face did not ring a bell. Alix knew all the drivers and officials. The CIA man must have been a crewman for one of the teams. After the spy camera was complete, there came the test. Alix told the pilot to fly over his house. He could recognize everything there. When the films came back, Alix reviewed them. "Yes,

yes," he said, "those are the pebbles on my driveway."



Stirling Moss enjoys the spoils of victory after the FIA Formula Libre race at Watkins Glen in 1960. It was the second consecutive win for Moss. Photo: Alix Lafontant

Over the years, Alix took pictures at Watkins Glen, Brynfan Tyddyn, Road America, Bridgehampton, Thompson, Lime Rock, Road America, Beverly Mass., Westover AFB, Lockbourne AFB and Brynfan Tyddyn. The events included SCCA regional and nationals, NASCAR and Formula One races. His reports of these races appeared in *Sports Car*, the magazine of the Sports Car Club of America, and in *Road & Track*. With the best of words and pictures, Alix and the beautiful Nicole covered American sports car racing from '53 to '63.

In 1964, Alix was offered a chance to open up some new marketing opportunities for Kodak on the West Coast. He set up an office in Whittier, California, and began the expansion of Kodak's market dominance. Work, however, kept him out of the car scene. He lived in Whittier, but he also had a cabin up at Big Bear Lake. Then Nicole died. After a while, he remarried—to his secretary, Pat Iannotti. Alix and Pat went to Baja together. "It was a beautiful time," Pat recalled. They bought a vacation home on the water, at Big Bear Lake, California. It was there that they became interested in the shooting sports. "Pat would sometimes be at the lake by herself," Alix said, "so I bought her a .45 automatic for protection."



This is Maserati Row in the grassy paddock at Beverly, Massachusetts, in 1955. All are 300S models, for Briggs Cunningham, Bill Spear and Bill Lloyd. Photo: Alix Lafontant



*Railbirds Jim Clark, Richie Ginther and Pedro Rodriguez (left to right) share a laugh prior to the start of the 1963 U.S. Grand Prix at Watkins Glen.
Photo: Alix Lafontant*

Pat recalled, "I had grown up in the city, in Los Angeles, and we didn't have guns." So they went to a shooting range to practice. The pistol they had was a Colt that had been targetized. Pat became so good with it that she entered some target matches and frequently won. One of these was a match entered by a lot of young policemen.

One of them wasn't very nice and he said, "What's the little lady doing here?" At the end of the tournament, Pat outscored everyone else, including the one with bad manners. Shortly afterward, both Pat and Alix gravitated into trap shooting. They took it quite seriously, with \$6000 shotguns and a three-turret

shot shell reloading machine in the garage. They competed in California, Arizona and Colorado. Meets are scored on the basis of clay pigeons hit. Both were high-scoring clay pigeon shooters, but Pat was a little better, and a few times shot 200 out of 200. As Harry Hufford, past president of the Prescott Trap and Skeet Club, has said "Pat was one of the top women shooters in the west." We used to call her Annie Oakley. Alix had a shooting cap covered with "100" score badges from Federal Ammunition.



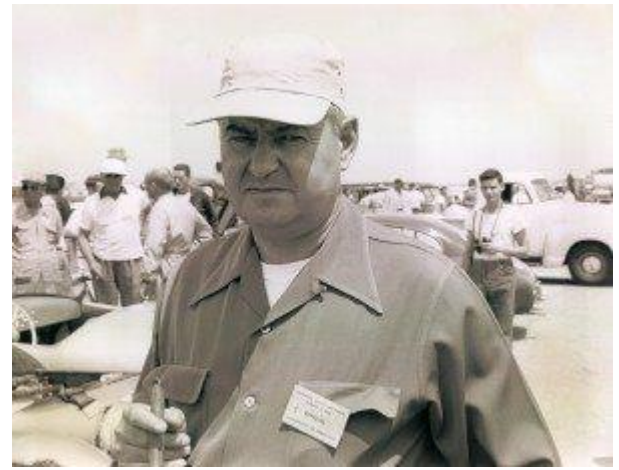
*This Lafontant image was Jim Kimberly's favorite picture of himself, and the one that he would regularly distribute to all of his many friends.
Photo: Alix Lafontant*

After he moved to California, he spent a lot of time down in Baja and went into Mexico City from time to time. He got to know the culture there. One of the traditions is the Mordido or bribe. Alix explained the way it worked. "Let's say you drive down a one-way street the wrong way and a policeman stops you. You do not just hand him a ten-dollar bill. You tell him, 'Oh I have been so careless. I was rushing to go to a business meeting. I am already late. I do not have the

time to see the judge. I wonder if you would do a great favor for me. Please tell him I plead guilty and hand him the fine.' At that time, the money is transferred quickly, smoothly, and legally."

In California, Alix also took up motorcycle riding. He was practicing for the Baja 1000 race and went over a hill with an unexpected backside. He flew through the air and when he landed broke his tailbone, a painful injury. With no ambulance to call, he rode back to a Mexican hospital for medical help on his own. During treatment, he received tainted blood, and this was to cause health problems for him later in life.

USAF General Curtis LeMay, seen here at the Lockbourne AFB sports car races, organized the Strategic Air Command base races as a way to improve morale and raise funds for airman and officer recreational facilities. He owned a 170 mph Allard, a former Le Mans car, and was mechanically adept, working on the car himself Photo: Alix Lafontant



He did keep in touch with some of the people in racing and did some work with magazine and book writers doing work that involved his photographs. The subjects included Jim Kimberly, the Cunningham Team, Brynfan Tyddyn, Watkins Glen and racing at the Lockbourne SAC Base. Eventually, those health problems took his life, and Pat passed away shortly afterward. The Lafontant photos live on in numerous published accounts of racing history and books that include 50 Years of Watkins Glen by Bill Green and J.J. O'Malley, They Started in MGs by Carl Goodwin and Formula One at Watkins Glen by Michael Argetsinger. Alix also contributed photography to a very interesting book written by Gene Kira about his friend Ray Carroll. It was titled The



Unforgettable Sea of Cortez: Baja California's Golden Age, 1947-1977.

This all-star group assembled at the drivers meeting before the Road America 500 at Elkhart Lake in 1957, (left to right) Phil Hill, Denise McLuggage, Jack McAfee, Jim Kimberly, Walt Hansgen and Carroll Shelby.

Photo: Alix Lafontant

Acknowledgements: Thanks to these people, without whom this article could not have been written: the late Cameron Argetsinger and his friends at the International Motor Racing Research Center at Watkins Glen, Elizabeth Lee Mulcock, Mike Marshall, Chris Junker, Louis Willsea, Dave and Dee Elder, David Cunningham, Louis Willsea, Dave Wild, George Morris, John Castle, Chris McAllister and Carl Dresie of the Finger Lakes Region, Sports Car Club of America, Harry Hufford and of course Alix and Pat Lafontant

WOMEN IN THE MGVR

The story of the MGVR has women clearly woven into the fabric. We've had racers, owners and women who helped start the organization. Two who truly did help MGVR get off the ground and were, in fact, founding members, are Sue Salzburg and Sarah Carr.

SUE SALZBURG:

A founding member of MGVR in 1981



- Crewed for BMC dealership's racing team in the 1960's while in high school.

- **SCCA member for many years**
- **VSCCA member for a number of years**
- **VARAC member for two years**
- **She was the race chairman of a number of Pennsylvania Hillclimb Association (PHA) events over the years**
- **Was the PHA newsletter editor three years**
- **Her 1956 MGA has a very significant and long racing history. It was a dealer imported MGA into the US as a race car when new, and has always been a race car**
- **Sue is retired now, but worked for Atlantic County, NJ as their “Energy Analyst and Assistant Chief Engineer”.**
- **She has had solo 1 and Regional licenses; Flagging and Communications; Scrutineer’s licenses; Solo Safety Steward; South Jersey Region Solo I chairperson.**
- **I watched her compete in the Giant’s Despair (Pa.) hillcimb just last year (2019). She still actively races in hillclimbs.**
- **Sue and her husband Dave live in May’s Landing, NJ and also have an old Jag they Hillclimb with.**
- **Sue has written a number of articles for the MGVR newsletter over the years.**
- **When asked why she had a full roll cage in the MGA she would tell stories of rolling their black A.**

SARAH CARR

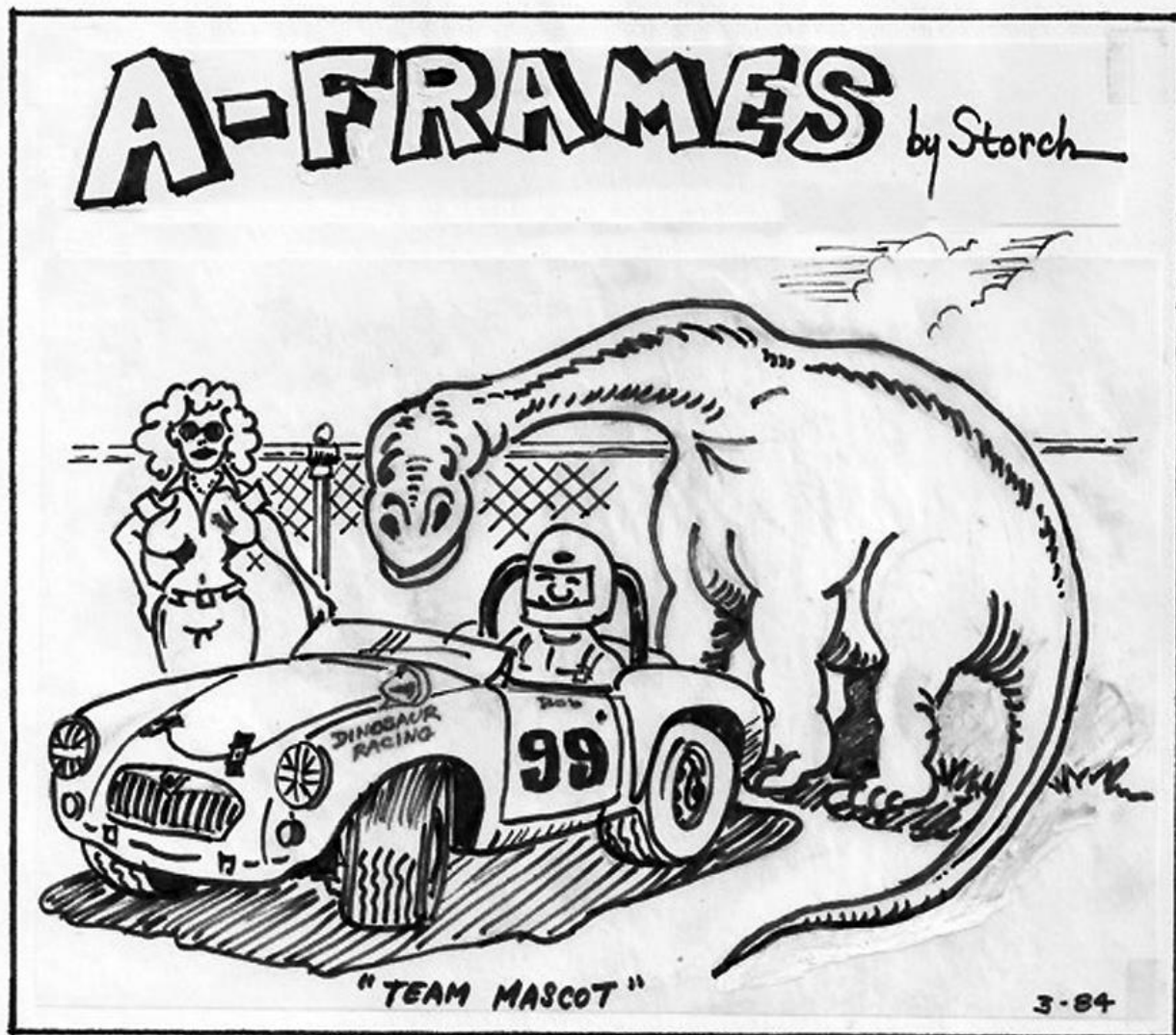
A founding member of MGVR in 1981



- Worked as a librarian
- Owned her MGTD since 1973
- VSCCA member and raced her TD for several years
- She suggested MGVR use the quote *“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers”* – which MGVR used. It is from Shakespeare’s *“Henry V”*. As Henry is wandering through his soldiers’ camp on the day of the battle of Agincourt, thinking that soon these lowly men will be fighting for King and Country: *“For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my bother”* ... and Sarah figured

shedding a bit of blood or money on MG's was appropriate

- Sara raced at Lime Rock a number of times.
- She has raced with the VSCCA, VARAC, and NEMGTR. She stopped racing after several years but can still be seen at vintage race meets.



When Sue was racing her MGA in SCCA events, her competitors said she was racing an old dinosaur". MG racer Jerry Storch took that comment to pen and came up with this great cartoon.

For Sale



From Manley Ford: manley776@yahoo.com



Left is a photo of one of my #1169 Flywheels. Asking \$100 plus shipping for new the ones. \$50 for the used one. Parts are located at a storage unit I have in Caledonia, MI (near Grand Rapids)

Quantity	part #	Description
3 in stock	1097	New Flywheel. 65-68 MGB 3 sync to std. clutch (Note MGA & early MGBs 63 – 64 ½ are the same and have larger bolt circle. Also have screw seal like MGA)
At least 1	35-1102	new 3 sync 5-Main race flywheel with bolt holes for race clutch.
1		Used MGA / early B race FW - 3 sync
2	1169	New MGB 3 sync FW w/ race clutch bolt circle
2	0995	New MGB 4 sync FW with race clutch bolt circle



FIVE GENUINE, ACTUAL 1960's MINILITE MAGNESIUM WHEELS.
Centred 185R15 metric radial tires are mounted on 4 of them.

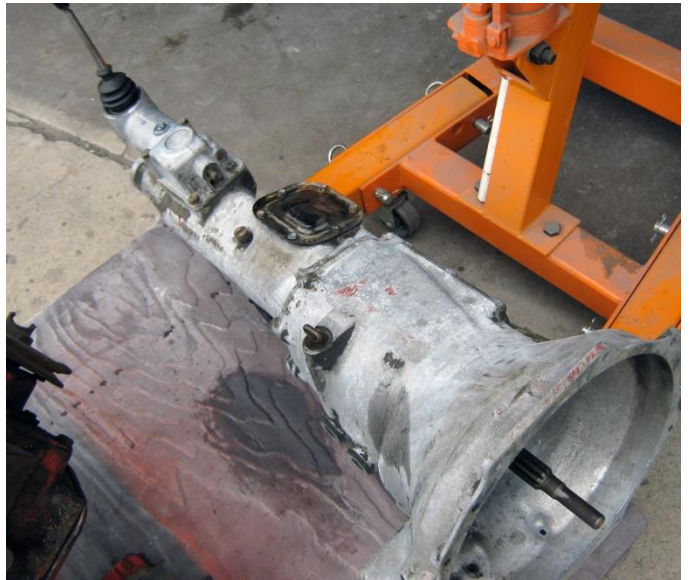
No cracks, little damage other than 40+ years of life. Used by Vern Harvey on his MGA race car and later on the road. Lug nuts and spacers included. You cannot buy genuine magnesium wheels like these. Clean to look like new or keep as original. Not aluminum replicas but the real, period correct wheels.

\$500 for two or \$900 for all four, shipping not included
Dave Nicholas davnik6@gmail.com

MG PARTS DEAL

I'm trying to get rid of all my un-needed MG stuff, as my Hershey flea market days are over. Does anyone need an MGA 1500 engine-gearbox-driveshaft-steering rack-radiator, 4. 3 diff (Some pix below). Condition unknown—they were bought at Rhinebeck flea market years ago. I have one person who might be interested, but just now thought of my fellow MGVR members.

Pricing? I'm pretty much flying blind here – would \$900/all seem reasonable? SARAH CARR (570) 240-5331 britfan1@epix.net



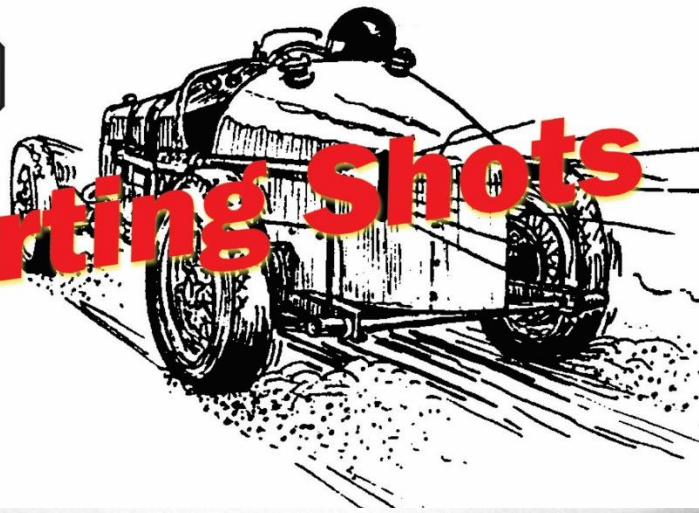
MGVR "Official" Regalia Dan & Jane Leonard

Email: ddl@leonardpaper.com telephone 410-343-0365

Outer Banks Polo, tan with dark accent stitched logo, sizes Small thru XL	\$30.00
Long Sleeve Blue Denim stitched logo, sizes Small thru XL NEW LOWER PRICE	\$25.00
Sweatshirt, Gray Heavy Weight (perfect for the fall) stitched logo, sizes Small thru XXL NEW LOWER PRICE	\$20.00
Gray T-Shirt, MG collage; sizes Small thru XL	\$12.00
Tan hat, embroidered logo, one size fits all	\$10.00
Ladies Pink Hat with embroidered logo	\$10.00
Ladies White Polo	\$25.00
MGVR Bumper Sticker	\$3.00
Embroidered Patch	\$4.00
<i>New Item</i> MGVR Trailer Stickers Octagon 11-1/4"	\$10.00*
Small MGVR stickers Octagon 5 1/2"	\$2.50*
<i>MGVR Challenge Coin</i> 'don't leave home without it'	\$10.00
Twill Button Down Shirt, Blue, or Putty	\$32.00



Parting Shots



Sebring, Florida 1959. The twin cam coupes arrive by transport