

# Watkins Glen Memoirs



**1949**  
**By Eric Davison**

For the 1949 event we were ready. My Dad and I had a cabin reserved at the Seneca Lodge and many of the Detroit Region were going to caravan to the Glen. There were but few sports cars, mostly MG TCs and the trip was planned so that passengers could be rotated and everyone could experience a ride in a sports car.

After an hour in an MG TC I was really full of enthusiasm. When dad and I continued on in the A-40 the conversation went something like, "Aw gee, dad, why don't we get an MG?" Dad was pretty straight forward. "First of all, we can't afford one and second, if and when I get a sports car it will be one with horsepower. MGs are really cute little cars but they have a tiny little four-cylinder motor and an MG will just about tear its guts out trying to keep up with a Ford."

It sounded almost like blasphemy coming from the dean of all English sports car lovers but, as they say, father knows best.



**Russ Sceli's Bugatti Type 57 entered but did not finish the Junior Grand Prix. Photo Harold Lance.**

The scene at Watkins Glen was even more exciting than my imagination. There were so many MGs that they hardly deserved a second look.

The first two XK 120s were there. One was driven in the parade by Max Hoffman, the New York distributor for just about everything imported. His was a silver blue and he brought a second one, a white one that had been promised to Jim Kimberly, the Chicago sportsman.

While Frank Griswold's 2.9 liter Alfa coupe didn't show up there was a much wider variety of automobiles than the previous year. This year Briggs Cunningham appeared with a 166SC Ferrari. He had previously raced it at Bridgehampton. It was a very tiny, modern and racy-looking vehicle and its 12-cylinder motor was a thing of beauty.



**Tony Pompeo, like many other entrants, was a car dealer and importer. It made sense to get the products out in front of an appreciative crowd. In 1949 he entered this Fiat 1100 S Mille Miglia and finished 22nd in the Grand Prix. Photo by Frank Shaffer.**

There were Cisitalias, that most beautiful of all post war sports cars. Another 2.9 liter Alfa made its appearance at the Glen, entered by California playboy Tommy Lee and it was driven by Mal Ord, an experienced and skillful driver. The front fenders had been removed, a move that seemed to me to be something that a hot rodder would do. The car did not perform well. That same car was later sold to Competition Motors in Los Angeles who sold it to a young Phil Hill who raced it very successfully in one of his steps towards a drive with Ferrari and a Formula One championship. It is now part of the Ralph Lauren collection.



**There were other celebrities at the Glen in addition to Garroway. James Melton was an opera singer who enjoyed collecting cars. He debuted at the Met's Magic Flute in 1942. Melton stands behind his Mercedes. He would later open a car museum in Florida. Photo by Frank Shaffer**

Most of the cars, competition or otherwise, were displayed in the Watkins Glen State park located just off Franklin Street at the foot of the falls. For us the highlight of the car display was the Jaguar SS100 of Dave Garroway. It was a beautiful yellow creation that had been 'customized' by Garroway. The SUs had been anodized, larger P100 headlamps had been fitted and the upholstery was alligator skin. While it was a bit garish, the long louvered hood, the bucket seats and the bold radiator set well back from the front axle made it very special looking. It fulfilled Dad's image of a traditional British sports car.

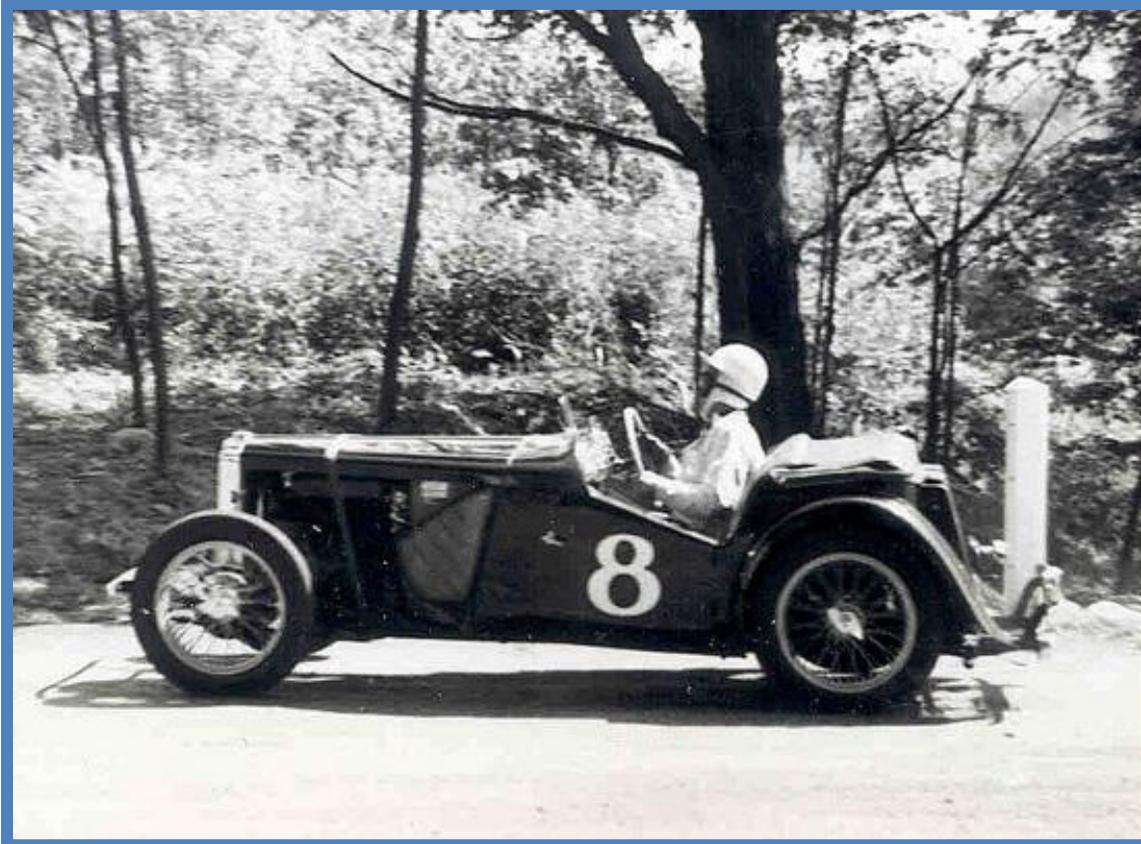


**The Garroway SS100 was equipped with large P100 headlights, nerf bars and special upholstery. It was not to be missed. But the lines were Charlie Davison's ideal of a traditional British sports car. Charlie Davison photo.**

At the time Garroway was a radio and TV personality from Chicago when Chicago was the epicenter of radio and TV broadcasting and programming for the US. He had a charming Sunday night TV show, *Garroway at Large*, that featured his friendly chat, guests and a chimp named J. Fred Muggs. Garroway eventually went to New York to become the first host of the *Today Show*. But, most important of all, he was a genuine sports car enthusiast.

Because the races were run on city streets and special dispensation had been received by the New York Central Railway to halt trains only during the races, there was no way in which high speed practice could be accomplished. Therefore the streets of the town and of the rest of the course as it wound its way through the country side were constantly filled with the sounds of cars with open exhausts touring around in an effort to learn this very long and difficult circuit.

The Seneca Cup race was four laps around and was open to open wheeled cars as a formula libre event. It was also open to anyone else who wanted to gain some experience. The race was won by George Weaver in his extremely potent Maserati V8R1, beating Briggs Cunningham in the Ferrari.



**Fred Wacker served for many years as the President of the SCCA and raced a wide variety of cars. In 1949 he entered this MGTC, placing 6th in the main event. Later, Wacker would be the unfortunate driver of the “Eight Ball” Allard that was involved in the fatal accident at the Glen.**

It was at this point that I began to recognize exhaust notes. Never having heard anything other than an MG (and our A-40) revving up it was fun to be able to determine what car was approaching by its sound. The Ford V8s had a big throaty snarl. The straight-eight cars had a booming roar although the Duesenberg had a much deeper boom. The Ferrari was in a class of its own, more of a scream. The little Cisitalia had a crisp crackle. The noise coming from the Maserati was thrilling.

The main event was won by Sam Collier driving a vintage Riley Nine powered by a Mercury V8. It beat Cunningham’s Ferrari although it did not seem right to me that the basically ugly hot rod creation could best the sleek thoroughbred Ferrari.

I had insisted on taking color pictures, but at the time about the fastest color slide film was about ASA 20 or so. Dad just laughed at me, saying that I would be lucky to get anything. He was right but I did get a few. For one race he took the camera and went to the outside of the first turn. He wisely positioned me in a safer place as there was not much between the spectators and the speeding race cars except a few hay bales.



**German cars were still very rare in the U.S. but in 1949, this BMW Cabriolet was seen on the streets of Watkins Glen. The powerful six cylinder engine was used by Bristol and AC to power their cars. Photo by Frank Shaffer.**

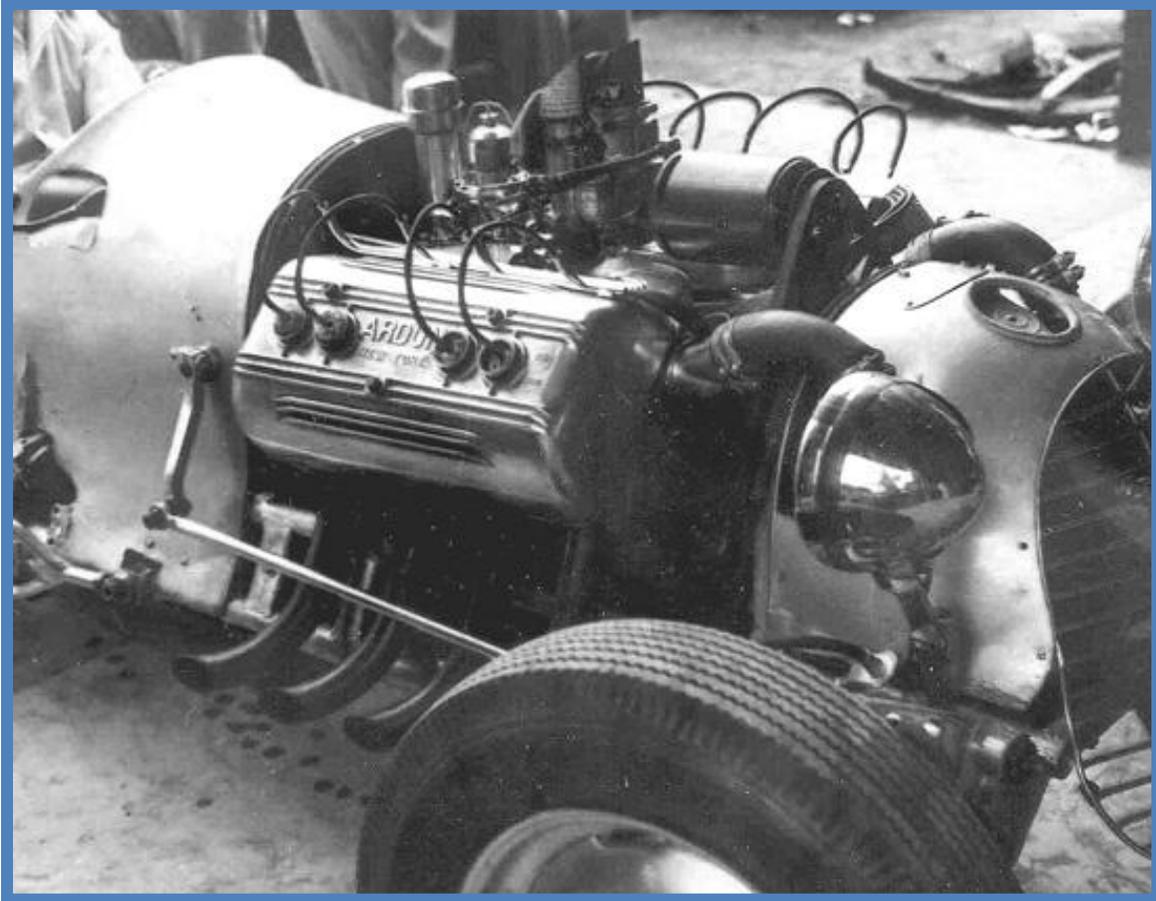
Positioned as he was, dad was able to get some interesting pictures of the back end of a few cars as those with oversteering tendencies made for some exciting spins. One shot that he didn't get was that of Dave Garroway in his SS100 overcooking it. Dad didn't get that shot as he was too busy getting out of the way. However, the sight of Garroway cranking the wheel hard to the left, standing on the gas and spinning around to regain the track was a sight to behold...wheels spinning, stones flying and black streaks on the pavement. It was a sports car with guts.

One of the entrants from Detroit, a 1750 Alfa with Castagna coachwork was one that also spun in front of him. The car was owned by George Hendrie and driven by Louis Turco. They had removed the doors in an effort to save weight.



Standing a bit too close to the action, Charlie Davison caught the rear end of the Castagna bodied 1750 Alfa driven with exuberance by Louis Turco. Photo by Charlie Davison.

Dad got a shot of Cunningham in the Ferrari coming around the first turn amongst a group of cars from another era including the 30/98 Vauxhall of George Felton. It was a sign of things of come. Zora Arkus Duntov, well before his Corvette years, was also there in his Allard J2 powered by his own Ardun (ARKus DUNtov) hemi head on a standard Ford block.



**After the war, Zora Arkus Duntov created a hemi head for the Ford V8. He raced it at the Glen in 1948 installed in an Allard. Here, Frank Shaffer photographed this Ardun head at the Glen in 1949, but it does not appear to be in the Duntov Allard J2; it is probably the Ardun Special driven by Paul Timmins. Photo by Frank Shaffer.**

There was a lot of history being made.

Our drive home was full of conversation about the cars and the racing. However, dad had reached a conclusion. He said to me, “We are coming back next year and I am going to enter in an SS100.”

My dad rarely made statements that he couldn’t back up but I, for the life of me, couldn’t figure out how he was going to pull off that miracle.

“I’ll find a way,” he said.

Note: The lead photo is Cunningham in the Ferrari 166, caught by Charlie Davison.

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