

Watkins Glen Memoirs



Prelude
By Eric Davison

The street years at Watkins Glen were magic to me. In our house the trip to “the Glen” was a yearly pilgrimage. The excitement, the fun and the life experiences that I enjoyed with my father are never to be forgotten.

My Dad, Charles H. A. Davison, Charlie to his friends was a wonderful father in every sense. He was loving, attentive and caring to all four of us kids and he and my mother Caroline were married for nearly 60 years. There are probably still a few old SCCA Detroiters out there who will remember him and his enthusiasm.



Charlie and Caroline Davison in 1950. They would be married for nearly 60 years.

I don't know when dad was actually bitten by the sports car bug but as long as I can remember, cars were just part of our lives and by any standard I was among the most fortunate of kids. We didn't have money but we had love, support and cars.

Among the characteristics that made him special was the fact that when it came to sports cars he had the enthusiasm of a 14-year old boy. His was badge number 18 in the Detroit Region of the SCCA, a group that assembled in 1948 at Little Harry's Restaurant on East Jefferson in response to a classified ad in the *Detroit News* that announced that sports car lovers were convening there to form a sports car association which became the Detroit Region of the SCCA.

Dad didn't have a sports car although provisional SCCA memberships were open to those who were not so fortunate as to own one. Full membership was limited to sports car owners. Most of the new Detroit Region members were provisional, or members that were enthusiasts but did not own a sports car. Detroit, after all, was the home of Chevys, Fords and Plymouths.

Everyone was excited to learn about the sports car race to be held in a small upstate New York town called Watkins Glen. The first running of the race was in 1948 but Dad decided not to travel the 600 miles to the Glen. I have to assume that while dad was a fanatic about sports cars

and sports car racing, he had a job and four kids to feed. Priorities! Additionally, it was about this time that dad, who had been a technical illustrator for a company that created training and instructional manuals for the military, decided to venture out on his own to take advantage of the need for artists and illustrators to do the ads for cars and trucks for the auto industry. It was a big risk for him and for the family and such a trip was not taken lightly.



Left: Charlie Davison in the Austin A40 at the Field Trials at Grampian Hill, 1948.

Dad was born in Chippenham, Wiltshire and immigrated with his parents to Canada shortly after WWI and finally to the US where he became a citizen in 1927. After the war his father, who returned to England before WWII, sent him a subscription to *Motor Magazine* and it was within those pages that names such as MG, Jaguar, Riley, Frazer-Nash, Lagonda and Allard became part of my lexicon.

In 1948 Dad replaced the old Hudson that he had driven through WW2 with an Austin A-40, a car created by the export-driven Brits to raise money for their rebirth as a nation. Dad bought the car from Falvey Motors, one of the first import car dealers in the area. Falvey Motors was located at the corner of Woodward Avenue and Long Lake Road in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

It was a converted gas station and he squeezed in Jaguars and Hillmans along with Austins.



Larry Falvey, the local foreign car dealer, stands next to an Austin A 90 Atlantic in front of the Davison residence.

Like Max Hoffman, Larry Falvey was an Austrian immigrant and had been a competition driver in his home country before the war. He sold dad on the A-40 by taking him for a demonstration drive. He drove west on Long Lake until he came to a place in the road where he could see in both directions and the road was wide enough. He then cranked the steering wheel hard over and executed a full 180 turn at about 30 mph. Dad was impressed because he knew that any such maneuver in a Ford would result in disaster and wrote a check for the A-40 on the spot.

The A-40 had leather bucket seats, a four-speed transmission with floor-mounted shift lever and a 1200 cc motor that would turn to 5000 rpm when coaxed. It wasn't a sports car but it surely was more fun than getting a Ford of that era and it cost less.

The A-40 served as his commuter car as well as a sporty vehicle for use in SCCA events. The Press on Regardless Rally was a Detroit Region event and we participated with the A-40. There was a British-style field trial in Oakland County's Grampian Hills. Dad managed to not turn it on its side while negotiating the course. He did get it up on two wheels and I got what was to become a familiar admonishment: "Don't tell your mother!" One night we removed the Austin's muffler so that we could hear what a four-cylinder motor sounded like at 5000 rpm. The tach we added was proof that 5000 was attainable.

With participation in other Detroit Region rallies and trials I soon became familiar with names such as Alfa Romeo, Citroen and Fiat. An exhibition of French cars at Detroit's Masonic Auditorium added Delage, Delahaye, Hotchkiss, Panhard, Renault and Talbot to the list of cars that I was familiar with and subsequently longed for.

Harold Lance's MGTC with his brother tending to the car. Harold would take hundreds of photos and color slides at the Glen. Lance photo.



I will never forget the first MG that we saw. It was probably in 1947. We were driving back from Detroit on Second Avenue. Old Detroiters may remember that when Second crossed Six Mile Road it curved around to the right and then twisted back to the left (north) as it blended into Woodward.

We were driving yet another Hudson, this time it was Mom's 1947 Super Six. Dad had worked for Hudson before the war and Ford and Chevy dealers were accepting payments just to be put on the waiting list for new cars. After a period of postwar shortages, Hudsons were available and with no extra fees. Just after we crossed Six Mile Road, dad swept the car to the curb and jumped out. "Come on, Eric, there's an MG!" Sure enough, parked at a gas station was a red TC. The owner wasn't around but we spent a few minutes in admiration while Dad gave me a thorough explanation of the fine points while the rest of the family waited in the car. The rest of the family

was Mom, my older sister who really wasn't interested and my younger twin brother and sister, ten years my junior.



Cunningham in the Buick with a Mercedes body. The hot rod finished second. How could this be, they wondered? Lance Photo.

While Birmingham, Michigan was a bedroom community for Detroit and hence, "Detroit Iron" oriented there was enough curiosity about the rare foreign cars that appeared. Plus, Dad was a favorite among my pals because of his enthusiasm. Any of my friends who hung around our house were soon converted or, at least became foreign car friendly.

October 1948 rolled around and although we didn't make it to the Glen, Dad's good friend and fellow SCCA member Harold Lance did go and he took lots of slides that were a feature presentation at the next SCCA meeting at Little Harry's. Since I wasn't old enough to go to Little Harry's bar and restaurant, Harold Lance came to the house and we had a leisurely slide presentation. It was awesome. Alfa Romeos, Bugattis and a host of other sports and racing cars that had been in storage for the duration of the war were on the city streets of Watkins Glen. Some were raced and some were just there to be admired. It was like a revival meeting.



Weaver in the Maserati V8R1 leads eventual winner Frank Griswold in the Alfa 2.9. Harold Lance photo.

While a beautiful 2.9 liter Alfa was the winner of that first race, it was hard to generate much enthusiasm for the Cunningham entered BuMerc that finished second. Cunningham had raced the car prior to the war and here it was again. But for us it was hard to imagine a Buick doing anything on a race track.

At that time, what are now considered to be classics and treasured were just old cars. At the high school I attended there were at various times vehicles such as a V16 Cadillac roadster, a '32 Packard roadster and an Auburn Phaeton in the parking lot. These were just cars that people wanted to be rid of. Owners had suffered with them through the war and now that new Fords, Olds, etc. were available the lumbering old vehicles were put out to pasture for almost nothing; \$40 for the Packard. A used car lot in town offered a Cord Beverly sedan with a missing fender for \$200. After Lance's show, Dad was more determined than ever to get to the Glen and began to plan for the 1949 race.

The Dumont Delahaye 135 M on the streets in 1949—it was entered in the 1948 race but was a DNS. Photo Frank Shaffer.

Note: In the lead photo, George Weaver backs his Maserati V8R1 out of the truck at Smalley's Garage, 1948. Harold Lance

