

## **PART 1 – THE SPRITES Thirty Years of Austin Healeys**

by John Seaman - Wisconsin Chapter AHCA (written December 1999)

It was the summer of 1969. I had graduated in May after two years at Mohawk Valley Community College in Utica, N.Y., and I had just returned home from a June weekend at



the 6 Hours of Endurance races at Watkins Glen. My home was Long Lake, a small resort town in upstate New York, near Lake Placid. My college car at the time was a 1962 Dodge Lancer GT, and



while it was fun, it wasn't the car I really wanted. I was more interested in the handling of foreign sports cars than the raw power of other American muscle cars available then. I had heard about Austin Healeys from some of my college friends, and seen them in magazine articles. Money was also a factor, (since college students have none), and since Mom and Dad wouldn't help me buy an exotic sports car, (read dangerous), we had discussed the Austin Healey Sprite. I was planning on continuing my college education at Milwaukee School of Engineering, so I told my parents I needed an "economical" and "dependable" car to make the trip, preferably a new car. The nearest A-H dealer was Revelle Motors in Syracuse, N.Y., a



three hour drive from Long Lake, so Mom and I took several "day" trips to look at the cars and decide what I wanted. By August I was the owner of a bright red 1969 1275cc Austin Healey Sprite MKIV, which had a sticker price of \$2,300. Since I bought it brand new, I included some important options; like a wood steering wheel, oil cooler, radio, and Pirelli radials. I was really proud!

Talk about handling! It took the mountain roads around my home town with ease. You could take the mountain corners about 20 mph faster than the posted limit.

I made the trip to Milwaukee, WI that fall, and fortunately, it didn't take long to find other sports car enthusiasts at MSOE. There was a sports car club already organized, the MSOE SCC, so I joined and started participating in some events during my first semester at MSOE, (I had transferred in as a Junior, and spent my first year in the dorm). Some of the cars in the club were Triumphs, Javelins, Corvairs, and Saabs. I remember a friend and I drove the Sprite to Road America in early October to see where the track was, and found the track gate open. We went in to check it out, and there was no one around. We started driving around the track, then saw some maintenance people on the back side of the track picking up garbage. After taking a couple 4 min. 30 sec. laps around the track, we got out fast, in case they had notified the police. What a thrill!

I also met my future bride during my first year at MSOE. I needed a date for a "Speech Banquet", and had not met any girls yet, (MSOE had no female students). Several of my freshmen friends talked me into going on a "hay ride" jointly sponsored by several colleges in the Milwaukee area. I was a junior, and when I met Sandi, (a sophomore at UWM), we hit it off right from the start. Two of my friends from MSOE were



introduced to Sandi's friends from UWM, and we all ended up at MSOE late that night after returning from the hayride. I was the only one with a car on campus, so - you guessed it, all six of us piled into the two-seater Sprite, three in front, three sitting on the folded-down top, and left for UWM, taking the girls back to their dorm. I don't think the car ever forgave me, but it was the start of a romantic and enduring relationship for Sandi and me.

Our sports car club also had rallies, usually in the Kettle Moraine area, west of Milwaukee, around Holy Hill. I will never forget, when Sandi and I were laying out a course for a Gimmick Rally one Saturday, the transmission of the Sprite got stuck in first gear. We called her parents in Hartford WI, and they followed me for 15 miles back to their house at 10 - 15 mph in first gear. On the way, we also had a flat tire! (I think I impressed her parents by not losing my cool). That next weekend, I borrowed a chain-fall and in about four hours had the engine and transmission on the floor of her father's garage. The laygear bearings were shot, as was the layshaft, so the following weekend, I had new parts and proceeded to rebuild the Sprite transmission in her father's basement. By Sunday I had it all back together, and the Sprite was on the road again. When you are young, you are not afraid to tackle anything! This was the first of many times Sandi helped work on the Sprite, and how she hates to bleed the brakes, (pump / hold / let up / repeat).

I found out that winter in Wisconsin means "Ice Slaloms" to sports car enthusiasts. Events were held in January and February on Lake Nagawicka, or Lake Okauchee, west of Milwaukee. They were run by several clubs, (MSOE Sports Car Club, Marquette Univ. Motor Sports Assn, Milwaukee Sports Car Club), and sponsored by resort owners



who would plow a 1/2 mile race course on the frozen lake. The participant's cars would be grouped in different classes by engine size. Each car was individually timed around the course. I found the Sprite to be quite competitive in the "up to 2500 cc engine" class. Several of my friends would drive the car too, and in one event, I took first place, and they finished second and third driving the Sprite. The Pirelli radial tires were sticky on ice, and with the Sprite's superb handling, my times were almost as competitive as the Mini-Coopers and Saab Sonnets. **Results:** 2/21/70

"Ice'N'Glass" MSOE SCC - 1st in class, 3rd overall out of 17 cars. 2/13/71 "Ice Capades" MU MSA - 1st in class, 5th overall out of 30 cars.

When spring came, and ice was no longer safe for driving, we had to wait until other clubs started their spring Autocross events. These events were held at mall parking lots in the Milwaukee area. The courses were usually set up with the more powerful cars in mind, and I found the competition to be pretty tough. The little Sprite was underpowered when the course had many straight-aways in it.



On tight, narrow courses, though, (like Capital Court), the Sprite really did well.

**Results:** 4/25/70 “Taurus Slalom” Mustang Club - 5th in-class, 19th overall out of 60 cars. While back home in Long Lake, New York over Thanksgiving recess, I entered “Carl’s Chiller” at Albany, finishing 3rd in class, 13th overall out of 55 cars 11/5/72. Sandi and I joined the SCCA, (Sports Car Club of America), in 1972, and I “worked” corners at Regional and National races at Blackhawk and Road America tracks for the next few years. Sandi enjoyed racing also, and became proficient at Timing and Scoring.

After graduation from MSOE in 1972, my college friend Jeff, from New York State, came out and joined me for a trip out West. We took my Sprite, and traveled 7,300 miles in 15 days, visiting sites like Mt. Rushmore, Badlands, Yellowstone, Grand Tetons, Las Vegas, San Francisco, Bakersfield, Santa Fe, Grand Canyon, Rocky Mountains, and then back to Milwaukee. The amazing fact about our trip, aside from accomplishing it at all, was that the Sprite suffered from a head gasket leak that slowly boiled all the water out of the radiator. This happened during the first few days of the trip, and since neither of us had enough money or were willing to spend the time to get it fixed, we kept going. We made sure the water was not getting into the oil, and carried several milk jugs of water all the time. Every 3-4 hours we had to stop for ½ hour and let it cool down enough to refill the little radiator. It was a challenge going across the Mojave Desert! How foolish we were then, but it seemed like the thing to do at the time. Believe it or not, the little Sprite held together, making the whole trip that way - what a tough little car! Back in Milwaukee, I bought a new head gasket, scrapped the carbon off the valves, threw it back together, and then Jeff and I headed for New York State, another 1000 miles away, a fitting conclusion to my college experience.

I returned to Wisconsin to find work in the fall of 1972, starting a job with Doerr Electric in Cedarburg, WI. In the fall of 1973, Sandi and I were married, renting in Cedarburg. Sandi learned to drive “stick shift” on our honeymoon. We still tease each other about that, but she caught on pretty quick. In 1974 I had the opportunity to buy a 1960 Bugeye. I had always wanted one, and I found it in the Milwaukee paper, for \$450. It was starting to get pretty rusty, but that didn’t bother me. It was a good “runner”. Sandi drove the ’69 Sprite to Mt. Sinai in Milwaukee for a total of seven years, where she was a Medical Technologist, and I started driving the ’60 Bugeye to my new job at the West Bend Company. Both cars got us through the winters, by starting them every 3 hours in “below zero” weather. I also bought a 1969 Fiat 124 Sport Coupe from a co-worker in 1974 for \$800. It had a blown engine. I rebuilt the engine in our apartment spare bedroom over the winter, and also found another



69 Fiat parts car the next spring. One of my co-workers picked up a ’63 Healey 3000, so our parking space(s) looked like a used car lot for a couple of months! It’s a wonder the building management didn’t complain. By this time, we had saved enough money to move to the



country to find more room. We bought a house between Cedarburg and Jackson, WI. We needed a vehicle to plow our driveway, so in Oct. 1975, I found a used 1974 International Scout. Next summer, I carpeted the interior, bought some huge BFG summer tires and white mag wheels. But I still wanted a Bugeye in better shape, so I sold the Fiat in April 1976 for \$1500. Sandi and I also joined the Austin Healey Club of America in June 1976. There was no local chapter at that time. In August 1977 I found a Bugeye that sounded like it was in pretty good shape in New London, WI. They say not to buy a car at night, but I did. I paid \$900 for it, a fair price at the time. I sold the old Bugeye in May 1978 for \$850, after driving it for four years, keeping the best parts for the new Bugeye.

When the ad for the Bugeye was in the paper, I received a call from Chuck Walker III, a Healey enthusiast who had moved to Milwaukee from Indiana, inquiring if I would be interested in starting a local club for Austin Healeys. I was definitely interested, so he planned the first meeting at John Hawk's English Pub in downtown Milwaukee sometime in the spring of 1978. Chuck had been in another chapter of the Austin Healey Club of America, and wanted to start a Wisconsin chapter. Some of the Healey enthusiasts with their wives or friends attending the first few organizational meetings, to the best of my memory, were Tom Kovacs, Ken Zirtzlaff, Bob Walerstein, Jim Lucas, Fred Thomas, Jim Fitzpatrick, Charlie Brown, Dave Woerpel, Jim May, Jim Happ, Alan Roberson and Bob Lewenauer. We were the "Charter Members" of the Wisconsin Chapter of the Austin Healey Club of America.



Sandi and I had been married for five years, so it was time to think about a family. Our son Daniel was born in November 1978. Two years later, Sandi had quit her job at Mt. Sinai, and our second child, daughter Betsy, was born in September 1980. I changed jobs, from West Bend Co. to Kohler Co., that same year, and we moved to Sheboygan Falls.

Conclave 1983 was held at Olympia Resort in Oconomowoc, WI. The Wisconsin Chapter co-sponsored the event with the Illinois Chapter of the AHCA. I was starting to get really interested in vintage racing at the time, and had made some contacts with Chicago Historic Races, Ltd. I arranged for the Conclave participants to take a "road trip" to Road America for the July Historic Races, and then have an "All Healey" track touring event just for us. It was an



exciting way to cap off a great event, and seeing all those Healeys driving around the track was a spectacle to behold. To everyone's surprise, the front page of Autoweek gave the Austin Healey marque a boost in popularity with a great picture in the August 1983 issue; (my car is fourth in line). My little Bugeye really had to work to keep up with the Big Healeys, and the temp gauge was almost pinned! The Bugeye was also competitive in the Gymkana in the Olympia parking lot on a real tight course, winning first place in its class. I knew an engine rebuild was in store though, as the oil pressure when the engine was hot was zero to 10 lb. range at idle. The Bugeye engine did get rebuilt the following year. As the President of the Wisconsin Chapter during the years of 1983 and 1984, I was very proud of the Club's accomplishments. Our club membership grew over six years from a meager beginning to 85 members in 1984.

The '69 Sprite continued to be my "summer driver" throughout the 1980's. In 1980, at 125,000 miles, it needed a rebuilt head, as the original valves and seats finally gave up. Compression was 165-75-150-170. In 1983 with 147,300 miles on the rebuilt head it had compression readings of 185-170-180-160. I also removed and replaced the rotted floor boards. By 1985 the second set of rocker panels had rotted away, and I had to reinforce



the rear spring mounts. The car still drove OK in 1989, and the engine was still strong, (with oil changes every 3000 miles), however, I noticed the frame was sagging, and the doors wouldn't shut. With my other projects, I knew I would not be able to afford restoration, so I reluctantly sold it almost exactly 20 years after I bought it, in September 1989, for \$900 with over 155,000

original miles. That is the only time I shed tears selling a car, and I still get a feeling of "loneliness" remembering our travels together. What a great car!

I think my most memorable "Healey" event, was the 1990 Austin Healey Conclave at Clock Tower Resort in Rockford IL and the North American Challenge Series July 20 - 24 at Road America in Elkhart Lake. This was the greatest gathering of racing Austin Healeys ever assembled. A very strong contingent of English Healeys led by ferocious John Chattam with support from Steve Bicknell, David Long,



Mike Windsor, Dave Hardy, Ted Worswick, Roly Nix, Pete Farmer, Colin Percy, and Peter Kuprianoff, faced competition from the best United States Healey drivers - Phillip Coombs, Dan Pendergraft, Richard Mayor and Bob Wilson. Making the event even more exciting, we were selected to be the host family for Dave, Jan, Neale, Michelle, and Danielle Hardy for a whole week! We all had

a great time, learning each other's customs, and watching some great competitive racing from some great historic cars. Unfortunately, Dave was critically injured in a terrible racing accident in England in 1995, and passed away from complications due to his injuries in the spring of 1999.

I finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in class at the 1990 Conclave Autocross.

In the mid-1980's I became involved in videotaping Vintage Races at Road America. Working through the local "public access" Cable station in Sheboygan, (WSCS), I have produced hour-long shows of drivers and cars at the Chicago Historic and Vintage Fall Festival Road America events from 1985 to present. My current project is completing a 1962 MkII 3000 Tri-Carb four-seater ground-up restoration, (purchased in 1984). The car was finally on the road in October 1998, and after putting 400 miles on the car in 1999, I am looking forward to getting bumpers mounted and attending more car shows and events in the summer of 2000. That story will be saved for another time, (SEE PART II – The Big Healey Story).



We have enjoyed making so many friends in the Healey Club, (twenty-three years as of June 1999), and as they say, Healeys become a part of your life. Happy Healeying from John, Sandi, Dan and Betsy Seaman.

