

RETROSPECTIVE ON LIFE WITH A MORRIS



This brief article will not discuss fitting a larger carburetor, relining your brakes, or changing your spark plugs or updating your Morris. It is not about club news, showing a car at a car show, a car for sale, or what color to paint your car. Rather, it is a reflection on how the Morris Minor automobile fit into the better part of a person's life for almost five decades.

I have come to realize that the month of June 2008 marks the 48th year of my personal involvement with a single particular Morris Minor, MAT3L839171 a pearl grey, red interior tourer that was purchased on an overseas delivery program by my late father, Rear Admiral Joseph F. Quilter of Portola Valley California. The history of this car began on June 14, 1960 when it was built and June 30th 1960 it was duly claimed by my older sister, Jane Quilter at the Morris Garages Limited, Cowley, Oxford, England. The arrangement was my father purchased the car for my sister with the understanding she could use it for an extended European tour as a college graduation present but when the tour was complete it would be delivered to a port of departure for San Francisco and upon arrival it would become my father's machine. Little did he know that he would drive this car for the next 40 years until the day before his death at 93 years. So where did I, the son and current owner, fit into this Morris picture?

It all began back in the hot humid summer of 1954 in Charleston South Carolina where two middle aged neighbor women across the street from our home had an almond green 1953 Morris two door sedan as their only car. As a small boy at the time I took a special liking to this "child sized" car and would spend hours sitting on the curb admiring this little machine, so different from the normal Detroit iron that populated the streets of America at the time. When it became known to me that the family would soon relocate to California and would be needing an additional car to our trusty 1953 Dodge station wagon, my mantra to my father for six months was "Dad, you gotta buy a Morris Minor".

I have come to realize my attraction to this car set in motion an avocation to the English car that has been a defining factor in my entire life. Having recently retired from 32 years from the USA arm of the British Leyland Motor Corporation, Jaguar Rover Triumph and most recently Jaguar Land Rover North America, almost my entire working life was involved with the administration of the British car in America.

So, upon arriving in Menlo Park in late 1954, my father, taking the advise of a six year old, rode the Southern Pacific commuter train some 30 miles to San Francisco and came back with a used, actually quite used, white 1953 Morris Minor convertible from the British Motor Car Distributors used car inventory. I was in heaven, the family finally had their own Morris. That Morris saw my father through the Masters of Business Administration program at Stanford University and upon landing a new job at nearby Lockheed Missiles and Space Corporation he was so pleased with his first Morris experience he splurged and traded up to a new one, a pale yellow 1957 tourer with the new and improved 948cc engine. In the family this car was always referred to as the butter colored Morris. Actually my father always gave his cars names and since a Minor was just that, pretty minor among the gargantuan American cars, he nicknamed it the Pip Squeak but this was immediately shorted to the "Pip".

Then in 1960 along came my sister and her college graduation and that resulted in the 1960 Pip which remains in the family to this day. And so I, as the originator of the Morris affiliation in the family, this car now falls to my stewardship as its principal driver and custodian. Not that I was not its chief washer, polisher, vacuumer and maintenance person from the day it landed on the wharf in San Francisco. Now some two score and eight years hence it remains a cherished family heirloom. Reflecting back on the fact that some 90 percent of my life has been affected by a Morris Minor it was appropriate that I disassembled it this spring for a complete inside, outside, under the fenders, under the hood respray in its factory pearl gray color. Now resplendent in its shiny new paint with its proper red pinstripe my father would be proud. The car has well out lived him. I got to mentally reminiscing about my life with Morris Minors and recalled my first dirt country road driving lesson from my father during our tenure with the white 1953 convertible. That places it back when I was but 9 years old. The pearl grey Pip was my driving learners permit car, the car I took my California driving test in when I was one day over 16 years old, the car I took my first date in, the car I put countless country road miles in with friends who were often also Morris aficionados or owners, the car I drove to San Francisco to take my SAT tests, the car I spent many hours Sunday touring the winding hilly county roads west of Palo Alto California with my father driving me and listening to that familiar exhaust burble while kneeing on the back seat and watching the road disappear in the distance. It was the car that my father used to successfully impart to me the finer points of how to finesse the mechanical attributes of a potentially fragile little machine. The car in which he taught me there was no need for a starter if you were parked on only a minor slope. The car a high school buddy and I took a mid winter 700 mile trip to bone chilling cold weather in southern Oregon. And not to forget the dozens of nighttime sport car rallyes that snaked around the roads of the suburban and rural mid San Francisco Peninsula. Gas was cheap, traffic was light, and driving was fun. Time and distance and navigational courses with such names as Rebel Reblution, June 30, 1971, Fools Gold, March 28, 1970, and Excedrin Headache, January 2, 1970 in which a second place award was earned. And most recently, the car I drove a young neighbor couple to their wedding in. My elegant white vintage Jaguar sedan was eschewed for this duty because the Morris was "cuter".

Over my forty eight years with this car there is virtually not a part of it I have not cleaned, polished, taken apart, adjusted, overhauled or simply inspected for proper appearance or operation. I can mentally visualize the engine compartment and every component in it with my eyes closed. I remember when I was a boy there were a few automotive eccentrics who still drove their Model A Fords in a world of Ford Galaxies , Dodge Chargers, and Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser station wagons. So now almost five decades since my Morris' manufacture and over 6 decades since its design, is this machine as irrelevant an artifact of automotive history as the Model A was in the mid sixties? Can I continue to ignore its low 37 horsepower performance balking the progress of a sea of impatient soccer mom yuppies in their six liter SUVs or the young and arrogant in their M series BMWs whose headlong rush to the next stop light stands only as a manifestation of excess testosterone? Or young 20 something males in their sky high four wheel drive pickups with road grader sized tires? Is there no respect for the display of automotive history in an age of SAT Nav systems, blue tooth connectivity and i Pod music?

So whither go this Morris, now that I enter the final third of my life? Will this little car be an irrelevant artifact of automotive history unsuitable for even periodic use in any semblance of an urban area? This car outlived my father and I suspect it may out live me. And when I finally come to the end of the road will there be a future custodian and steward of this well preserved little machine? Will there be spare parts to keep it in pristine condition? Will there be craftsmen with the skill, interest, and knowledge to carry out the periodic maintenance and repairs and most importantly, will there be a caring steward to drive it with finesse and gentleness in respect to its history and antiquarian status?

John F. Quilter