

CHATTER

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THE AUSTIN HEALEY CLUB OF AMERICA, INC.



Recreating History - Sebring Sprite

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Atlanta

Jerry gives some pointers to friend and co-driver Bob Wagner.



The 1960 Bugeye was parked right in front of my studio's front door. The delicate features were as lovingly restored as any car I had ever seen. Scrutinizing every fine detail I eased into my parking spot.

The Sprite's owner was strolling out of the adjoining business and immediately became aware of a large drooling man gesturing in his direction.

This rather indelicate first meeting became the entre to a friendship that has lasted the last six years and a comradery with one of the finest people I have ever known. It is a privilege to introduce him to you.

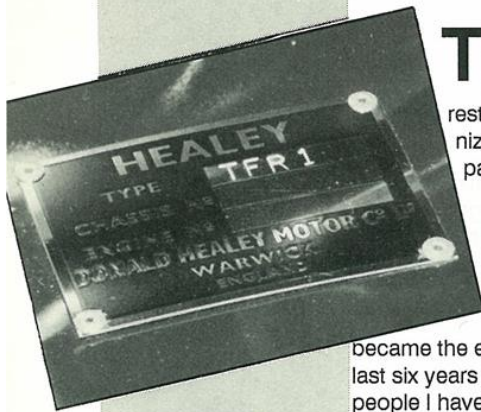
Jerry Etzel relocated his lovely wife and children from Iowa to Atlanta in 1984, started a new career with a new company and decided to find and restore an

example of his first car, a 1960 Bugeye Sprite.

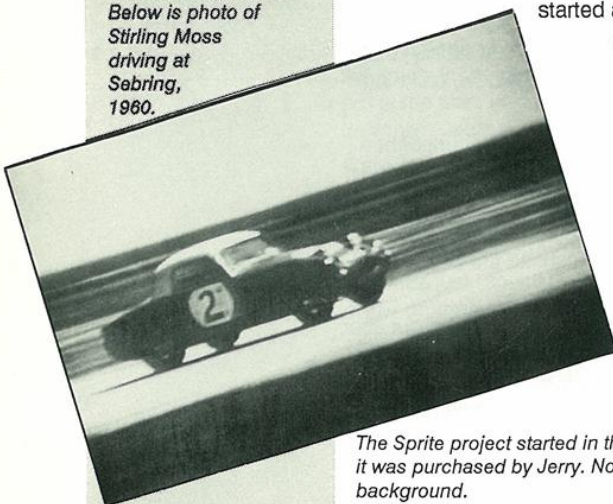
"I bought my first Sprite in 1969 for \$220.00. I restored it for another fifty bucks and painted it with some old blue lacquer that was lying around. It was a 1959 model and I loved that car. Since that time I've owned various motorcycles but I always missed the Sprite," he said.

The desire to vintage race evolved after Jerry restored the newly-purchased Sprite for street driving and became acquainted with Atlanta mechanic extraordinaire and British car expert, Bob Wagner.

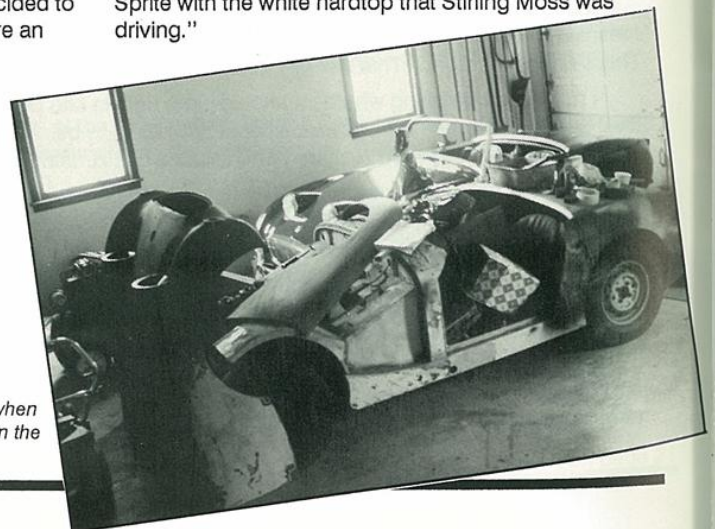
"There was this guy working at Bob's shop named Ed Costley who claimed to have beaten Stirling Moss at Sebring in 1960. I dismissed his comments as wishful thinking. He had a well-done amateur film of the races and here was Moss driving a 1959 Bugeye Sprite. I saw that film and I thought: Wow! How nice it would be to recreate the little red Sprite with the white hardtop that Stirling Moss was driving."



Jerry recreated Sebring Sprite chassis #TFR-1. The TFR refers to Targa Florio. Below is photo of Stirling Moss driving at Sebring, 1960.



The Sprite project started in the condition at left when it was purchased by Jerry. Note his street Sprite in the background.



Etzel viewed the remaining film footage of the later 12 hour race when Moss DNF'd in his Birdcage Maserati and sure enough, Costley beat him in an Elva MKIV.

"Anyway, I was hooked," Etzel said sheepishly. "I made up my mind to recreate the Stirling Moss Sebring Sprite. Bob Wagner provided a lot of encouragement and a fellow vintage racer, Bob Hollander, gave me very sound advise."

Bob Hollander told Etzel to attend Skip Barber's racing school before he committed himself to any investment in hardware. Hollander cautioned Etzel to be sure he was mentally and physically prepared to race motorcars.

"That was the best advice I have ever gotten," Etzel said solemnly. "I had no idea what I was getting myself into."

"After College I taught school. I went to a local body shop and volunteered my services in exchange for an opportunity to learn the craft of paint and body work," Etzel said. "I felt pretty confident in my abilities to build and restore a car. I allocated \$7500.00 to locate and build my Sebring Sprite."

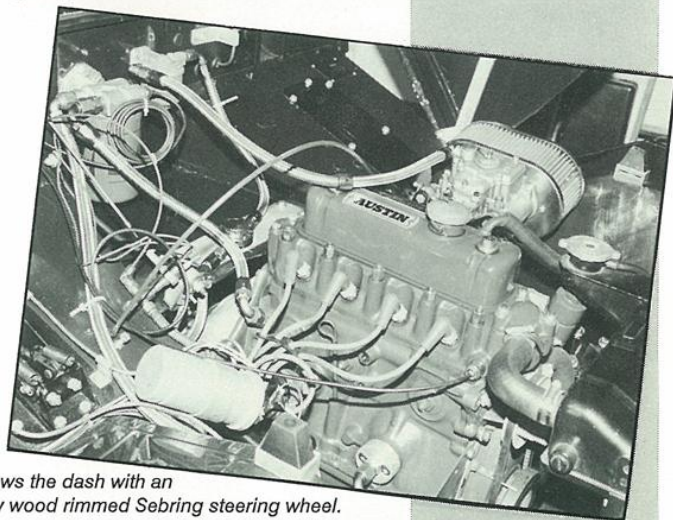
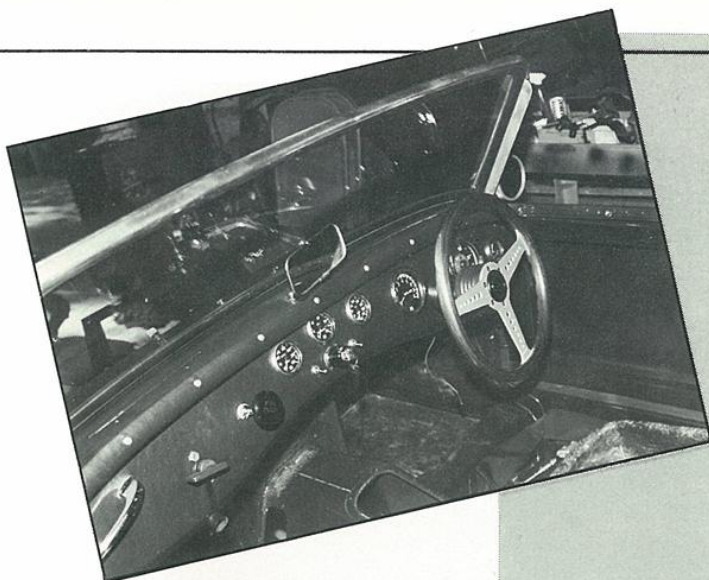
Shaking his head with laughter Etzel confessed he was completely unprepared for the financial undertaking he had begun.

"My gosh," he groaned. "The safety equipment alone cost me \$1500.00. That didn't include the helmet or fire suit. I felt like the biggest rube in the world with my new unscuffed helmet and my crispy new fireproof underwear."

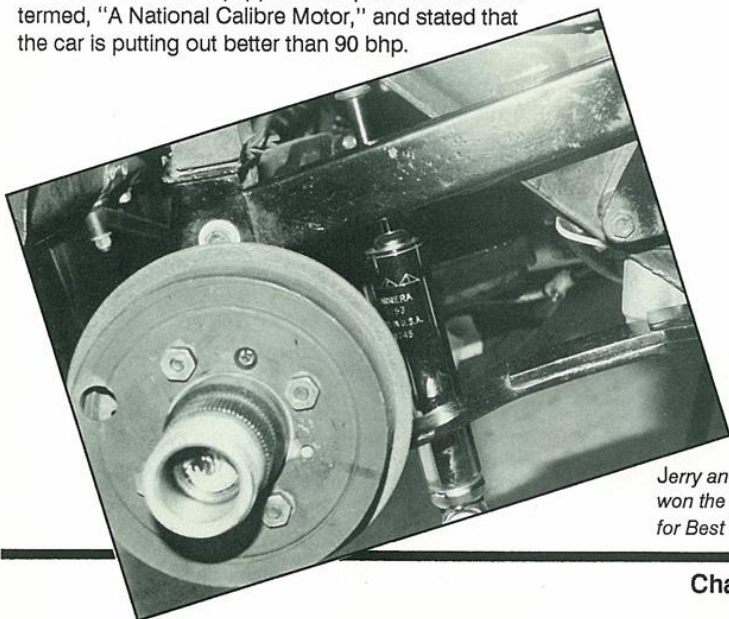
After 10 months of loving labor the little Sprite was ready for it's debut at Road Atlanta. Being witness to the result of Etzel and Co.'s labor let me assure you the car was magnificent: enough so that it won Best in Class in the Race Concours de Elegance.

"In our first race we suffered a broken crankshaft on the last lap," Etzel sighed. "I was thrilled at the experience but I kept thinking, what have I gotten myself into?"

Now Etzel has equipped the Sprite with what he termed, "A National Calibre Motor," and stated that the car is putting out better than 90 bhp.



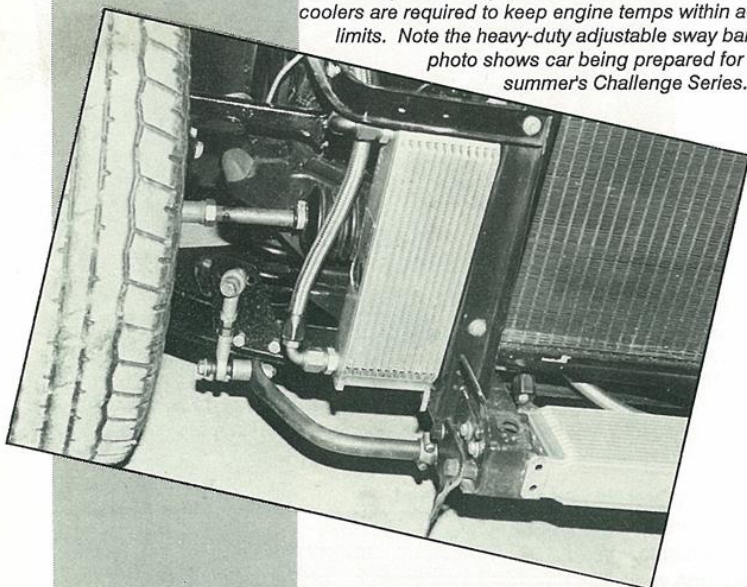
Top photo shows the dash with an original factory wood rimmed Sebring steering wheel. Note the placement of temperature and pressure gauges for easy driver viewing, and the Halon fire suppression system. Otherwise, dash is original RHD. The photo below shows the 948cc, 90+ H.P. engine. Below left shows brake assembly with 7" diameter brakes (1960 Sebring Sprites were equipped with 8" brakes) and heavy-duty three leaf competition quarter elliptical springs.



Jerry and car at 1989 Sebring Vintage race where it won the prestigious Montague B. Thomas Award for Best owner prepared car.



Finished Sprite leads pack at Road Atlanta. Below two oil coolers are required to keep engine temps within acceptable limits. Note the heavy-duty adjustable sway bar. Bottom photo shows car being prepared for this summer's Challenge Series.



"I started out with \$7500.00 and a half-baked idea I could go racing," he laughed. "Now I have a car with three times that invested, a trailer to pull the car, a new truck ordered to pull the trailer, the tools, the spares etc. But I wouldn't change anything. This adventure has given me the opportunity to mix with some of the finest people I have ever known. Most egos are left behind when people come to the track. We are here because of the love of fine machinery and each other's ingenuity, as well as the genius of those who first built these cars."

Etzel professed a love of the early racing mystique. He fondly recalled images of men in leather helmets, racing massive front-engined Indy Cars.

Not wishing to dwell on the danger of the racing, he was frank about the reality of driving high performance cars in competition.

"We're turning some pretty respectable lap times on treaded tires," he stated. "The first thing I did was take out a large term life policy. I have two kids. I can't ignore the reality that even though safety equipment has made tremendous progress, people sometimes die in racing accidents."

Etzel was quick to add that he feels far more at risk each day on Atlanta's freeways than on the pavement of Sebring or Mid Ohio.

"People on the freeways are completely insane," he exclaimed. "They have no idea of the limits of their cars or the consequences of their actions."

Etzel expressed anticipation at the season's upcoming races, in particular the events at Mid Ohio, which this year places Austin-Healey as the featured Marque.

This writer has strong memories of the 1988 Vintage Races at Mid Ohio. It was in the middle of the Great Drought. Jerry and I towed his car from Atlanta to the track. I offered my services as companion and helper in between bouts of race photography and heatstroke. The racing and ambiance was terrific, especially the gargantuan hamburgers at nearby Buck's Tavern.

The Future?

"Well, I'm restoring a Lotus 20 Formula Junior," Jerry said wistfully. "It has a nice history, winning at the 1962 Sebring Formula Jr. race. The winning driver, Pat Pigott was killed later that year in a Lotus 23 at Riverside."

"The cars are really the stars at these events," Etzel commented. "We are just sharing a bit of history, romance and beauty with each other. I'm very lucky to be a part of this sport."

Arni Katz is a professional freelance photographer and writer in Miami and Atlanta. As a photojournalist, his work includes covering the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as sports car racing in such magazines as Sportscars Illustrated. Currently Arni owns a Cobra.