

# John Hill's

## Memories of Sebring and Le Mans 1960

by Dick Lunny

Many of us have envisaged being in a Steve McQueen movie, or serving in the Healey pits at Le Mans, or having the opportunity to be driven around the English countryside by Roger Menadue in his personal 100-4 Le Mans" company car." Well, in 1960 a young man from Florida had all the planets align as he experienced some of the most wonderful Healey motoring memories imaginable.

Raised in Avon Park, Florida, John Hill attended the very first Sebring road race in 1950 and was even drafted to serve as an official timer as a 16-year-old high school student. He tagged along with his mother, a local teacher who ran a concession stand as a charity fundraiser. When the organizers realized he had assisted in scoring while his dad raced speedboats, they gave him a stopwatch and a pair of binoculars. The race itself was somewhat unspectacular, especially in terms of modern road racing, and it was won by a portly Crosley Hotshot. But the passion for motor racing was firmly established and this fledgling teenager was setting in motion a lifelong devotion to racing British sports-cars.

Avon Park's proximity to Sebring caught the eye of the British Motor Corporation (BMC) folks as they chose the Sebring race to be the springboard for their marketing efforts to promote the Austin-Healey and MG sports-cars to the American market. They contracted to use Murphy's Garage as their off-track support facility and the nearby Reed's Motel as their team's housing site. John's best friend was Mr. Murphy's youngest son and that relationship provided him with the entrée he'd needed to befriend the likes of Roger Menadue, Healey's chief engineer, and Geoff Healey. John's local knowledge and willingness to serve as the BMC team's "gofer" made him an indispensable member of the Sebring crew while he proceeded to Georgia Tech as an electrical engineering student and later as a young Army electronics specialist stationed at nearby Cape Canaveral. Fortunately, his Spring Breaks fell during the Sebring races and he was able to schedule leaves from his Army responsibilities at Cape Canaveral to drive his 100-6 personal car back home to work with the BMC teams.



But the story for Healey enthusiasts really comes together during the 1960 Sebring event where BMC brought three factory prepared Sprites and three MGA's to compete on the cement runways of the old Air Force base. Making the Sebring races interesting for the spectators was the presence of many international driving legends including Stirling and Pat Moss, Graham Hill, Bruce McLaren, Paul Hawkins, Dan Gurney, John Sprinzel and Pedro Rodriguez. Added to this was the extra star power of actor Steve McQueen and young American BMC driver, John Colgate. During practice the Healey team discovered problems with the clutch discs on all three cars and with Murphy's Garage filled with activities on the MGAs, the Healey team turned to young John Hill, who offered his father's boat shop as an alternative location to work on the cars. In a matter of a few hours, John and Paul Hawkins changed all the clutch plates on the three Sebring Sprite prototypes. Then during the four-hour race, one of the cars broke down, out on the course and Donald Healey needed someone to go out into the Florida sunshine to locate the car and determine if a fix could be found. Stepping forward was young John, but without a full track pass he was officially restricted to the paddock area. Donald quickly removed his personal official pass and gave it to John to wear as he trekked out to the car, then back to the pits for a Wentworth wrench, then back to the car so the driver could repair the damaged fuel line. Under FIA rules, only the driver can repair a car on the track using tools carried in the race car, so bringing a wrench from the pits was outside the "rules". John put the wrench in the pocket of his blue BMC coveralls, and when the nearby official was distracted he shook the wrench out for the driver to make the repair. The Targa Florio Sprite of Stirling Moss was 2nd overall and 1st in Class in the four hour 1000cc race after leading the race for over three hours and losing the Abarth that didn't need to stop for tires. John Sprinzel's factory prepared Falcon Sprite prototype won its class (41st overall) in the 12 Hour race while struggling with head gasket issues throughout the race. Everyone on the team was very happy with the results. John Hill still has Donald Healey's Sebring credentials as a wonderful memento.

In appreciation of his efforts, John Hill was invited to join the Healey team for Le Mans, if he could get himself over to Europe. Being a young Army specialist, he quickly put in for leave and arranged for a MATS flight to London. Once he landed he travelled down to Healey's dealership in London where Roger Menadue picked him in Roger's former Le Mans 100-4 prototype "company car". Roger drove him around the English countryside and introduced him to his wife and daughter. John especially remembers going to Stratford-on-Avon and Shakespeare's home where Roger seemed to be known by all the staff and got John a great behind-the-scenes tour of the home and museum. John spent a week in Paris before heading over to Le Mans where he once again hooked up with the Healey team and joined John Colgate as the only Americans in the compound located at a rural inn in a small village a few miles from the race venue. Colgate was there to team with John Dalton driving the Falcon Sprite prototype that had run at Sebring. Once again, John Hill's Florida experience proved invaluable as the FIA officials deemed the low cut windscreen on the Falcon Sprite unacceptable and forced the team to cobble together a "full" windscreen that had a propensity to capture every bug in the vicinity of the track.

John suggested that a small bug deflector located on the bonnet would solve the problem, and he quickly fabricated one out of some Plexiglas that saved the day for the Colgate/ Dalton team which finished the race and won their class.

John's life moved on to full-time employment in the NASA program that culminated with his name being placed on the moon in recognition of his work on the Apollo program. He bought a factory MGA Twin Cam race-car from a NASA associate in 1962 and successfully campaigned it in Florida until 1968. He got married and had a son who is now a career Army Airborne Green Beret stationed at nearby Fort Bragg. With his son's help, the Twin Cam is being restored to be a retired street-legal race car. Now retired and living outside Columbia, South Carolina, he enjoyed recalling his Healey adventures in 1960 to former AHCA president, Carl Brown, and Healey vintage Sprite racer, John Jones, from the Carolinas Austin-Healey Club. As the ten-year Twin Cam restoration project is nearing completion, John has decided to clear out some of the historic mementos that fill shelves in his office, cabinets in his garage and boxes in his attic. He accumulated much of his treasure trove of goodies as the BMC teams left used and excess parts and pieces at Murphy's Garage rather than ship them back to England. Among the items he is donating to the Healey Museum effort is the seat insert used by Stirling Moss when he co-drove a Sprite at Sebring with John Sprinzel, and the Sebring credentials of Donald Healey he used to take the wrench out to the stricken car in 1960. He also has the red Le Mans "MECANIC" armband and his Le Mans pit credentials, plus some neat home movies he took at Sebring, Daytona and Le Mans.



Making our visit even more interesting I called John Colgate while we were there and they were able to resurrect friendship and Le Mans experience after 50y ears. Sometimes you hear of someone finding an exceptional or historic car in a barn, but rarely do you uncover a piece of personal history that fills in gaps and memories of the storied Austin-Healey racing experience. It was a privilege to meet John Hill and record his fascinating story. I can only hope to find a few more somewhere.

### **John Hill's Personal Memories and Impressions [of those involved]:**

**Donald Healey** - Carefree, very personable. He let Geoff run the show.

**Geoff Healey** - Friendly, but serious when it came time to race. Really knew his business, always tried to be helpful and was on top of the situation.

**Roger Menadue** - He had a dry humor, but very witty. He was very sharp mechanically. He was always the first to ask the drivers how the car was doing, and then made the necessary adjustment.

**Stirling Moss** - One hell of a driver, he had an amazing ability to get peak performance out of everything he drove. He never lorded over folks, very

considerate.

**Pat Moss** - All woman, very strong personality as well as physically.

**John Colgate** - A cool guy. He had very competitive lap times comparable or better than Dalton at Le Mans. He was a very good looking guy and very friendly. He was the only other American on the BMC Le Mans team with John Hill.

**Paul Hawkins** - Most like an American on the BMC team although he was from New Zealand. Drove a Sebring Sprite at Sebring and his first American car, John's father's big Cadillac. He was John's Le Mans roommate.

**John Sprinzel** - A happy-go-lucky guy who enjoyed what he was doing. Friendly with the ladies in London and played around at the pool at Reed's Motel.

**Bob Olthoff** - A very businesslike individual. He wrote out just how to fix his Twin Cam race-car's suspension to BMC Competition specifications on a napkin during one race at Sebring.

**BMC Team Trailer/lorry** - One of the real draws for the English drivers at both Sebring and Le Mans, no matter what car they were driving. Graham Hill was one of many who came to the BMC pits for tea and to get away from the Italians.