6,000 miles in an MGA (With Altitude)

(**Part One)** By Ralph Poupard

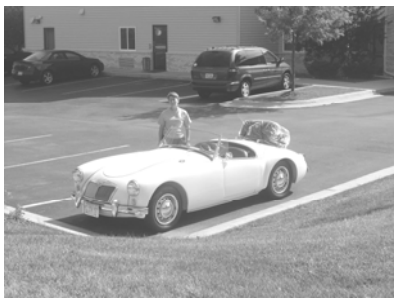
It all started at GT-30 in Mackinaw in 2005. Peter Tilbury, chair of the NAMGAR GT-32 organizing committee gave a presentation on GT-32 to be held in Whistler BC in 2007. Kathi and I started to dream about an epic road trip. I had always dreamed about making the drive out to the west coast, and making that trek in an MG made it all seem more exciting (or crazy). Of course it was not a trip to be taken lightly. We knew the uphill climbs would be steep and the down hills as well! The temperatures would be extreme, and the hours of driving at highway speeds would be grueling. A serious drive train breakdown would turn this adventure into a disaster with a megabucks shipping bill to have an MG shipped back home, and either renting a car to continue, or returning home with our tails between our legs. Not a pleasant thought. We considered buying or renting a trailer to tow the car, but we just didn't have a powerful enough vehicle to tow what would be close to 4,000 lbs. So it was either MGA, MGB, or one of the modern cars. I had requested to take my 4 weeks vacation from work all at once for this trip over a year ago, and Kathi is retired.

I tossed it around for months. Non MG people remarked: "Are you crazy?" I mentioned the idea of driving the MGA to fellow club member Graham Creswick, and he advised "You'd better bring a lot of spare parts". I had already started massing a stock of parts: belts, hoses, water pump, fuel pump(s), ignition parts, generator, lubricants, brake seals and so on to the point where the pile was becoming larger than the limited trunk space of an MGA! I began stuffing parts under the spare tire, in the spare battery tray, and every nook and cranny. That left space in the trunk for exactly a laptop computer, one sleeping bag and one pair of shoes. The rest had to go behind the side curtain pouch and on the luggage rack. I began to imagine the limited horsepower of the MGA 1500 engine dwindling due to the cargo weight, and the wind resistance of the luggage on the rack. For those who don't know, our MGA it is a 1957 roadster that I rebuilt myself (a scary enough thought!) from a rusted hulk. It is restored to a very original specification with the only modifications being a spin on oil filter, a fan shroud and a Lucas sport coil. This was going to make it very interesting. In the month prior to leaving I checked everything on the car out to the best of my ability. Dale Brown had driven out to Whistler in his Malibu (smart guy!) about a week before we were to leave. Lise had flown out previously and he was meeting her there. He gave us some sound advice and we altered our planned route slightly.

And so it was on Saturday, July 14th we left at 2:00 PM (way later than planned) in the tightly packed MGA. We drove through Michigan on US 12 in the Irish Hills. It was a nice peaceful ride, but that was about to change once we hit the freeways. We drove through Indiana and through Chicago with no delays other than at the toll booths. The MGA was running well and sounded neat going under overpasses and tunnels. Darkness had fallen when we stopped to look for a motel just past Chicago on I-90. The first motel was surrounded by heavy traffic and the front desk person said "You haven't heard about the big Greek Festival?" Well, we hadn't but we then knew we had to push on for a while yet. We finally stopped in Rockford for the night.

The next morning we drove through the remainder of Illinois, Wisconsin, and to Fergus Falls MN with the MGA running fine. The heat was building outside of the car and inside. The engine temperature was about 195 to 198°F, which was usually where it seemed to settle out after about 4 or 5 hours of freeway driving. Kathi fired up our air conditioning - a spray bottle to mist ourselves. This is surprisingly effective but requires frequent re-applications! This was our best driving day of the entire trip, 503 miles. The next morning we drove through the remainder of Minnesota and into North Dakota. As we were driving on I-94 we were gaining on a vehicle ahead that looked unusual from a distance. As we got closer to it we discovered that it was an MGA Coupe towing a trailer, headed to the same place we were. Out of all the cars and roads and miles on the way to GT-32 it seemed incredible that we would come across another MGA on the way to Whistler, by chance. We drove together for about 40 minutes, but they had a different route and timing planned than we did, and pulled off I-94 to head for the border between North Dakota and Saskatchewan one exit before we did.

Next time: Ralph, Saskatchewan and beyond.



6,000 miles in an MGA (With Altitude) - Part Two By Ralph Poupard

Last month we left off as we were driving through North Dakota toward the border with Saskatchewan. We had been following an MGA Coupe that was towing a small trailer, which turned off I-94 one exit before we did. When we got to the border, the customs agent told us that there was another MG with a trailer that had passed through about 10 minutes earlier. We continued on Hwy 39 to Estevan, SK.

The best way to describe Estevan is a working town. In these here parts a real man drives a huge 4 door 4X4 pickup truck. A diesel engine and a thorough application of mud move you up a notch. Our MGA was totally out of place here to say the least. Our motel gave us a coupon for a free breakfast in the attached restaurant. What they didn't tell us that it was going to take over an hour to be served and receive this breakfast, giving us a later start than planned.

We continued on Hwy 39 until we came upon the town of Ralph, Saskatchewan. We stopped for the necessary photos, but it appeared that Ralph consisted of one house, and a small ATV repair shop. There was a lonely one lane dirt road heading south, but it appeared that there was no more to Ralph. We guessed that Ralph must be the name of the guy that lives in the house.

We stayed on 39 until Moose Jaw, where we picked up Hwy 1, the Trans Canada Highway. The MGA droned along throughout the day through Saskatchewan and into Alberta, stopping in Medicine Hat, Alberta for the night. (Don't you love the names of these cities?) Everywhere the MGA was parked, even at gas stations, it attracted attention. Usually people under the age of about 35 say "cool car", but had no idea what it was. Of course many people recognized it as a British sports car, and they, their brother, father, mother, friends, etc. had owned one. They marveled at the thought of us driving all the way to BC in this LBC. Medicine Hat was no exception, and one of my favorite quotes occurred in the motel parking lot as I was checking the oil. An older gentleman
came over and told me that he "*almost* bought one of those once". I told him "Gee, you should have, just think of the fun you are missing!" For the second time today there was a Ralph landmark - Ralph's Sports Pub - across the street from our motel. Tomorrow we would hit the foothills and be in the Rockies. I mounted a set of deer whistles to the front bumper.

On day 5 the drive through Calgary was a bit frustrating. Heavy traffic, traffic lights, and lots of idling. Finally breaking free of the city, the mountains appeared in the distance. We continued through Canmore and the gates at Banff National Park stopping for lunch in Lake Louise. The scenery was just like on a postcard. Unfortunately there was not much time to hang around since we had plans of reaching Vancouver on Thursday. We continued through Yoho, Glacier, and Revelstoke National Parks, and stopped for the night in the town of Revelstoke.

Day 6 brought rain, so it was up with the top and side curtains. It had been so hotdriving the last few days, we weren't going to complain. The cool air and rain kept the engine temperature low and the MGA drove up the hills and climbs with no rise of the temperature gauge at all. Some MGA owners like to call this temperature increase the "altimeter effect". We each needed a towel on our outboard knee to absorb the water that was leaking in the top corner of the side curtains. Other than that there were only a few hundred drips from the windshield header!

We continued into Coquitlam, a suburb of Vancouver and thanks to our GPS, found our friends, Doreen and Pat's home without a problem. Pat offered to let me keep the MGA in their spacious garage and wash it the next day if I wanted. The MGA was in good company, parked next to their '95 Dodge Viper roadster. We stayed at their home the next 2 nights and had a great time sight seeing and visiting, while the MGA rested in the garage.

On Saturday, July 21 we left for Whistler and GT-32. The weather prediction was for heavy rain, but at first it was just a few sprinkles. As we entered Hwy 99, the Sea to Sky Highway, the rain increased intensity. Soon we had the towels back on our outboard knees. Basically it was raining inside the MGA, just not as hard as it was outside. We arrived in Whistler in the early evening, still driving in heavy rain. We checked into the Delta Whistler Inn after traveling 2686 miles. The room we had was actually a suite with a full kitchen and living room, and built in laundry, which we were in dire need of by that point. There was a fantastic balcony looking onto Whistler Mountain, that I found to be perfect to enjoy coffee in the morning and a few beers later in the day and evening. The GT had arranged great prices for the rooms, otherwise we could not have afforded this suite. Sunday the rain continued, and some MGs began arriving.

On Monday GT-32 began. Fellow WDMGC member Bruce Read arrived in his 1959 MGA. Tuesday was the car show at the Whistler Golf Club, which was designed by Arnold Palmer. With the beautiful golf course, flower gardens and the mountains for a backdrop it was like a mini Pebble Beach (without the million dollar cars). My favorite car was UMO 95 the #38 Twin Cam Coupe Sebring race car, meticulously restored. After the show, time was spent at the vendor sales and tech sessions, and of course the nightly hospitality suite. Wednesday was driving day and we went on the tour to Lillooet. Hwy.99, leading there, was something else, with some 2nd gear corkscrew turns and many steep grades. There were plenty of photo opportunities with the snow capped mountains in the background. After a picnic lunch we started the drive back to Whistler. About halfway back we noticed an Iris blue MGA that was pulled over on the side of the road with a problem. Bruce and ourselves stopped to see if we could help. The car had lost its brake fluid, having a *major* leak at the left rear wheel cylinder. The owner said he was sure he could make it back to Whistler using the gears and hand brake. We said OK, but if you don't mind, we'll *follow* you.I knew there were some steep downhills, one in particular at 18%. It was a brave move, but using 2nd gear on the steep grades he managed to make it back down without going over the edge of a cliff! As for the 4 wheel drum brakes on our 1500,they were never an issue during the entire trip, showing little wear and no noticeable fade.

Thursday we took the gondola and chair lift and hiked to the peak of Whistler Mountain, one of the future event sites for the 2010 Winter Olympics. That evening we attended the awards banquet. We were surprised to have won 4th place in the MGA 1500 class, and along with Bruce Read received a 2,000 mile plaque for our drive to the GT. Friday, all too soon the GT was over, but our trip was less than half over. The organizing committee of GT-32 are to be congratulated, this one will be a hard act to follow.

Friday our destination was Grand Forks BC to visit my sister Denise and her husband Larry. Grand Forks is on Hwy 3 in south central BC about 30 miles from the border with Washington State. So, it was back down Hwy 99 to Vancouver, back up Hwy 1 to the town of Hope, where we had a nice picnic lunch, on to Hwy 3, and through the Okanagan. It was obviously very dry in south central BC as all the vegetation lookedfried, except where they irrigate the orchards and vineyards. We didn't know that Canada had one, but we learned that at the town of Osoyoos there exists Canada's only official desert. The heat was intense at 110° F. Just past the town there is a 25 minute steep climb with some 2nd gear curves. This all proved to be a bit much for the MGA's cooling system and we pulled over at a scenic lookout. After about a 30 minute cool down and picture taking session, we continued on to Grand Forks arriving after dark with no further problems. Several times deer crossed our path, and I'm not sure if it was the sound of the deer whistles or the sound of the car that caused them to turn to stare at us! It was a wonderful night in the Kootenay Mountains with a crystal clear sky and full moon to aid our faithful Lucas lighting system.

Next Time: Grand Forks, looped in Kamloops, Jasper, the Icefields, Drumheller and home.

6,000 miles in an MGA (With Altitude) *Part Three*

By Ralph Poupard

In the last episode we had just arrived in Grand Forks, located in south central BC. to visit my sister and her husband. When we arrived, Denise and Larry had a great dinner of salmon steaks waiting for us. We sat on one of the porches that surround their house with a bottle of wine, the full moon shining, and the sound of owls in the distance. Ah, it doesn't get a lot better than this. During our stay we visited Nelson BC, and on another day enjoyed a 3 hour ride through calm and white water down the Kettle River on inner tubes, with a refreshment cooler in tow. One of the highlights was a visit to a historic site that is under restoration from a semi ruined state. It is a former Doukhabor dorm. What is a Doukhabor? They were a pacifist religious sect in Russia in the latter part of the 19th century, who were exiled for defying the Czar, many of them settling in the Grand Forks area. The area of Grand Forks seems to be a haven for like minded people. Many former (and still subscribing) hippies live in the area as well as a large number of U.S draft dodgers from the Viet Nam era. We had a great dinner at the beautifully restored Grand Forks Railway Station, which is now a pub. We thought, boy, whata perfect place this would be for a club meeting, but maybe a little out of the way! The next morning I returned to take a few pictures of the MGA in front of the former station. On Thursday, August 2nd it was time to leave on our zig - zag course.

We decided to backtrack and drive through the Okanogan, planning on stopping in Kamloops for the night. This day was extremely hot reaching 108°F again. Despite the temperature the MGA was keeping its cool nicely. I would like to have said that we completed the trip without a significant problem, but it was not to be. As we were driving through Kamloops BC on Hwy #1, and we were about 1/2 mile from the exit we planned to take, the MGA began misfiring badly. It sounded like it had dropped to 2 cylinders. We made it through the exit ramp, and I pulled off on a side street where the car stalled and would not restart. I tried rapping the fuel pump but there was no reaction. We were able to push it a bit and coast downhill into a gas station. I still suspected fuel starvation, and sure enough there was no fuel at the carbs. The fuel pump had failed. It would cycle once every time the key was turned on, but not continue cycling. This was the rebuilt SU fuel pump I had bought and installed in Gatlinburg last year, and I wasn't impressed. Vowing never to be caught without a spare again, I had a new electronic SU fuel pump in the boot, so we had a 2 hour pit stop while I installed it. About 1/2 hour of that was unpacking the entire car and repacking it again! We found a nice motel nearby, and had a late evening dinner at a restaurant with a great patio, right on the river. It was a pleasant night with a warm breeze, and by the time we had dinner and a few beverages, we were feeling a lot better, and actually laughing about the fuel pump incident.

Friday, we drove up Hwy 5 through light rain, stopping at Mount Terry Fox, and then on to Hwy 16 through the Yellowhead Pass and on to Jasper. Our timing was not ideal since it was the Canadian Civic Holiday weekend, and all the campgrounds in Jasper were full. We ended up staying 2 nights in a motel, and the 3rd night found a campground. Our youngest daughter, Elise, was working in Edmonton, Alberta for the summer and met us in Jasper. This posed a problem with the 2 seat MGA, and some of our side trips required Elise and Kathi to be shuttled to the destination! The MGA was running fine again with its new fuel pump. We took the Tram and hiked the remainder of the way to the peak of Whistler's Mountain. While driving on the road near Whistler's campground a car going the other direction stopped and a girl jumped out waving at us. It was our niece, who was also working in Alberta, and was camping in Jasper. There could only be one white MGA in Jasper so it had to be us. Jasper is a beautiful area and town - highly recommended.

On Monday Elise left for Edmonton and we left on Hwy 93, also called the Icefields Parkway, heading south. This road, passing through the glacier fields and mountains, has been called the most scenic drive in the world, and lived up to its reputation. We stopped at Athabasca Falls, where the icy waters of the Athabasca River pass on their way to the Arctic Ocean. We stopped at some of the many viewing areas on the Parkway, and at one stop we met up with four A's, only these were Ford Model A's! This group had driven from Trenton Ontario through Dawson City, Yukon, up the (gravel) Dempster Highway to the Arctic Circle, and were on their way home. On the long uphill climb to the Columbia icefield they were stopping at almost every viewing area to prevent the engines from overheating. We hiked up to the Athabasca lacier at the Columbia Icefield and then continued driving to Lake Louise. At that point we were going to join up with Hwy 1, but there was a massive traffic jam, so we headed down the Bow Valley Parkway instead. Because of the threat of animals on the road the speed limit was 60 km/hr, which seemed ridiculously low. A Chevy Cavalier flew past several cars behind us, and passed us like we were standing still. Over the next hill - you guessed it, a radar trap, and the Cavalier was nabbed! We managed to get lucky this time with the Cavalier running interference for us, and this was the only radar trap that we saw on the entire trip. We camped overnight at Tunnel Mountain in Banff National Park. Before dawn we awoke to the sound of wolves howling. They were quite close, and what an amazing sound it was!

Tuesday, we left for Drumheller, Alberta, home of the Royal Tyrrell Museum. Located in the badlands of Alberta, the museum and surrounding area are a hotbed of dinosaur fossils. We drove down local roads, and for about 20 miles Hwy. 9 was closed for reconstruction and replaced with a dirt surface detour. This road was terrible, with bone jarring bumps. Even at low speed, it felt like the MGA was going to break something as we bounced over the potholes. Clouds of dust were everywhere and unknown to me was plugging the air filters on our car. The world renowned museum is incredible, with full dinosaur skeleton displays, lab viewing areas, and countless displays of what life once was like in this region.

We spent the night in Drumheller, where we encountered our first thunderstorm of the trip. There was no hail in this storm, thankfully, and much of the dust got washed off the car. The next day we spent another hot day driving through the remainder of Alberta and most of the way through Saskatchewan and found a motel in Moose Jaw. We had been running through very large amounts of dragon flies, moths, and butterflies. The windshield and front of the car were just plastered with the insects. The large wings posed a problem when they hit the radiator, blocking large areas of it completely off. At every fuel stop and sometimes before that, I had to brush them off the rad to prevent overheating. They also began to get sucked into the carburetor air filters.

On Thursday we drove down to Portal again, and crossed into North Dakota. The large winged insect massacre continued, and on US 52 we hit another major road construction site. This time it was fresh tar and chips for 38 miles. 38 miles? Are you kidding? I considered backtracking but it was over 50 miles back to the next possible alternate road. So we crawled through the site, adding a layer of tar and dust to the layer of insects. We spent the night in Jamestown ND.

Friday we continued through Minnesota and into Wisconsin. By now the plugged air filters were causing the car to run rich. I hadn't brought any spares, and after a stop at an auto parts store was unable to find filters that would fit properly. After a large traffic jam in the heat in St. Paul MN, we stopped for dinner and I leaned the carbs out a bit in an attempt to overcome the rich mixture. At this point the heat was getting to us and the MGA needed some fresh air filters, so we decided to avoid the Chicago area and take the SS Badger ferry across Lake Michigan. We found a motel in Wausau and drove to the terminal Saturday morning. The ferry was expensive, but we think worth it, since it probably saved more than a tank of gas and we were able to rest during the 4 hour crossing instead of fighting traffic. It was a perfect, bright sunny day, and the temperature was more pleasant than it had been for days.

After disembarking in Luddington, MI the remainder of the drive home through Michigan and Essex County was uneventful, with light traffic except when passing through the Detroit Metro area. The MGA was idling as if the mixture was a bit rich, but was running well at speed. At about 10 pm, August 11th we pulled into our driveway after 6,086 miles, and about 23 million crankshaft revolutions.

It literally took me 3 weeks of evenings to change all the fluids, perform a full tune up, and clean the car. There was tar and filth everywhere. Oil that had leaked had blown back under the car. Like a fool I of course cleaned the underside of the car also. Would I consider doing a long trip like this again? Absolutely. There are memories from this odyssey that will last a lifetime, and we saw sights that were beyond our wildest dreams. There were a few minor problems but we were able to handle them on our own. The hot weather was a force to be reckoned with, but personally I can take it as long as I have plenty of water to keep hydrated and the car doesn't overheat. Kathi and I were still talking to each other at the end
of the trip, and I never once got "This is the last time I ever go along with one of your dumb ideas!" If you ever feel inclined to take a long road trip like this - do it.

We had a fantastic time, took our A out, got it dirty, and we made it back with the car running under its own power. And isn't that what MGs were made for?