

The Devon that Raced Pebble Beach

By Bill Wilkman

An Austin A40 Devon is a very unlikely race car. It's tall, with a narrow track, and its 1.2 liter four cylinder engine provides less than stellar performance. It was designed by the Austin Motorcar Company at the end of World War II with two purposes on mind; one, to provide economical family transportation for a postwar market hungry for anything on four wheels and, two, to bring badly needed money into Britain's decimated economy. In the post-war environment of limited materials and economic poverty, the British government gave steel allocation priority to products that could be exported for infusions of much needed cash. The Austin A40 Devon met these market and economic needs admirably. It was well received by buyers all over the world and, during its production from 1947 through 1951 it proved to be the biggest single source of export dollars for Great Britain's struggling economy. But it was never intended for wheel-to-wheel competition.

Britain's need for export cash, caused it to enter markets heretofore untapped on any serious level. Among those markets was the United States. Pre-war, the USA was almost totally dominated by domestic brands and auto racing was pretty much confined to oval tracks. American soldiers returning from World War II changed all that. They brought with them small "foreign" cars and a new-found passion for racing on public roads closed for the purpose. To meet the market demand and new-found passion for these cars, dealerships were formed and clubs created.



Dave Albee completes a practice lap as Arnold Stubbs leaves the track in his V8 powered MG-TC and friend Bill Freedauer gets ready to enter the track in his MG-TD.

For the most part, America's crop of neophyte racers used two seat sports cars for their road racing adventures. Heretofore unheard of brands like MG, Jaguar, Allard, Singer, Simca, and the like, crowded racing events with cars separated into classes by engine size. The road racing of sedans (or saloons) did not catch on in the USA, until later in the 1950s, when manufacturers began making bread-and-butter cars that combined sport with practicality. So seeing an Austin A40 Devon mixing it up with a gaggle of MGs was an odd sight, even in those

early days of experimentation.

One of the earliest American road races was a series of events held at Pebble Beach in Northern California. The Pebble Beach races were held annually from 1950 through 1956 on the serpentine, forest-lined roads of the exclusive Pebble Beach community. Sanctioned by the Sports Car Club of America, the route was originally 1.8 miles long, but was lengthened after 1951 to 2.1 miles. The last race on the 1.8 mile course was held in 1956, when Ernie McAfee missed a shift and crashed into a tree, causing his death.



It's the start of the Cypress Point Light Car Race, and Dave Albee's Devon looks huge in comparison with the gaggle of MGs and the Crosley Hot Shot that follow in hot pursuit.

But this is not a story of tragedy; it is about a young man who was looking for adventure and who figured he would find plenty of it at the first Pebble Beach race held on November 5, 1950. Dave Albee was a college student at Los Angeles City College and a member of the newly formed Four Cylinder Club of America. His four cylinder car was a 1948 Austin A40 Devon purchased new from Angell Motors in Pasadena. Dave heard about the Pebble Beach races while attending a sports car event at Torrey Pines, a locale that would later have its own series of sports car competitions.

Road racing was a rather simple affair in 1950. Go to any sports car race today and you will see scads of motor homes, transporters, and fully equipped pits. Not so in 1950. Dave, like most racers of his day, drove his "race car" to and from his racing venue, some 325 miles in this case. In the trunk, he carried a sleeping bag and the car's factory equipped tool roll and spare tire.

Things were also pretty simple with regard to safety. Back then, all a driver needed was a safety belt and a helmet. Dave's safety belt was an Army surplus item, installed before heading to Pebble Beach. He did not own a helmet, and could not afford to buy one, so he borrowed one from fellow Four Cylinder Club member Bill Freedauer, who was at Pebble Beach to race his MG. Race car inspection was uncomplicated as well. Steering had to be reasonably tight and things like mufflers, wheels, and bumpers, had to be securely attached. Hubcaps were verboten and headlights had to be taped. Dave's Devon passed all of these tests, however, his car was found deficient in one area. The tread on one of his front tires was judged to be too worn. The inspector told him to get a new tire and return for a re-inspection. Well, money was tight and a tire was not in the budget, so Dave did the next best thing. If he couldn't afford a new tire, maybe he could make his existing tire *look* like it had adequate tread. The solution came from, Betty Freedauer, in the form of an eyebrow pencil. The borrowed pencil in hand, Dave darkened the grooves that formed the worn tire's tread. The darkened

grooves gave the tire the appearance of deeper tread, and, when he called the tech inspector over for a re-inspection, voila, he passed and was assigned car number 3.

Today's American road racers have to successfully complete a racing school and then spend several races under the close scrutiny of course marshals, their cars identified with "X" markings to denote their novice status. Not so, in 1950. Dave, like many early-day U.S. road racers, had virtually no racing experience. His "schooling" consisted of nothing more than a few practice laps

around the Pebble Beach course. To obtain a race license, all he had to do was fill out a form and pay a fee. While this may seem rather loose, things got even looser in Dave's case. When informed of the race license fee, he complained that it was more than he could afford. After a bit of haggling, Dave left, license in hand, purchased at a deep discount.

The 1950 Pebble Beach event was a one-day affair, and Dave raced in the first event of the day, the Cypress Point Light Car Race for cars with 750 1500cc engines. A total of 18 cars started with Dave's group, including some race drivers, like John Von Neumann and E. Forbes Robinson, who would later go on to relative notoriety. The field was dominated by MGs, including six TDs, nine TCs, and one NA. Dave's was the only Devon, and, as would be expected, his car was no match for the lighter sports cars.

So, what was it like to race an Austin A40 Devon? Well, Dave reports that even practice was hair-raising, as it was open to all cars, from relatively tame 4 cylinder MGs to screaming V-8 powered Allards. Dave says he spent 75% of his time watching his mirrors, a tough enough task for any driver, but especially challenging for Dave, who had lost one eye at age 14. He put in a solid performance during practice, however, earned a mid-field position on the starting grid. During the race, Dave reports, the main challenge was keeping the car on the road. Only portions of the track were paved. In paved sections, the car leaned precipitously, while in the gravel sections it either wanted to plough straight off the road or spin in little circles. One particular corner gave the Devon its most significant challenge. This was a downhill straight leading to a hairpin turn. Approaching this turn, the Austin's hydromechanical brakes often faded to oblivion, requiring lots of downshifting and plenty of prayers. Dave finished the race, placing last among eleven survivors. While, on the surface, this may seem disappointing, other factors need to be considered. First, Dave started mid-grid, indicating he had a better qualifying time than many of his fellow competitors. Second, a large



Heading toward the treacherous hairpin corner on the start-finish straight-away, Dave looks for track room with MGs nipping at his Devon's tail.

number of the entrants didn't even finish the race. And, third, Dave was an absolute novice, racing a car not well suited for competitive purposes, against pure sports cars, many driven by more experienced drivers.

Dave only raced his Devon once, but he kept the car for several years before trading it for an MG-TD. Recalling the Devon, Dave had nothing but good things to say about the car. He found it to be very sturdy, well made, and reliable. In contrast, he found the MG to be finicky and prone to problems. Dave went on to work as a field representative for Koni shock absorbers. Today, he is retired in Cameron Park, California.

Many thanks to Dave Albee for sharing his memories of the 1950 Pebble Beach Race and to Al Moss for allowing me to take stills from his DVD set, Films of the Fabulous