

Foster's Romance with Gears And Clutch Still Flourishes

"The best music in the world is made by a gaggle of four-cylinder sports cars rallying through a canyon."

That's John E. Foster, 77-13, talking. This 12-year Lockheed veteran, who recently was named supervisor of engineering publications services, organized the first non-racing sports car club in America and served as its president for 10 years.

It was in 1948 that American interest began to grow for sports cars. "There were only a handful of sports car owners in this area then—among them Clark Gable and Gary Cooper," Foster recalls.

Car buffs used to gather Saturday mornings at the only sports car dealer in the Los Angeles area. "One day I happened to mention the rallies, hill-climbs and gymkhanas we enjoyed in England before World War II. All of a sudden, I found myself running the first sports-car rally ever held in America," he said.

"When we used to rally in England, our check points were at the center of town activity, the town pub. In our first rallies in southern California, we had a somewhat less glamorous check point to head for: the local Foster (no relation) Freeze ice cream stand."

Out of those Saturday meetings of car owners and first rallies was born the Four-Cylinder Club of America, so named because four-cylinder cars dominated the sports car field at this time—the British MG, Singer, Morgan, Austin and Hillman and the Italian Siatta. Today the club has 2500 members in chapters all over the country. Foster was recently honored by the club for building interest in this sport in the United States.

Foster's pioneering efforts also led to the staging of the first concours d'elegance at the Ambassador Hotel in 1953.

The Lockheed engineer's attachment to sports cars began in a club at Bristol Aeroplane Company in England, where he was a design engineer. His first car: a 1929 Bull-Nose Morris he bought used in 1935. Today, he drives an MGB.

World War II put a damper on Foster's hobby. His car was destroyed by a Nazi bomb. But while on night fighter duty with the RAF, Foster evened the score by strafing a German staff car in Holland—against regulations. A commendation from the Dutch government softened the RAF's disciplinary action: the staff car he had destroyed was found to be carrying top German officers bent on carrying out reprisals on a Dutch town that was aiding the underground.

Foster's seven years with the RAF also took him to India and Southeast Asia. War's end found him designing Snowmobiles at the Canadian Arsenals. He then joined a Bristol affiliate, Fairchild Aviation of Canada.

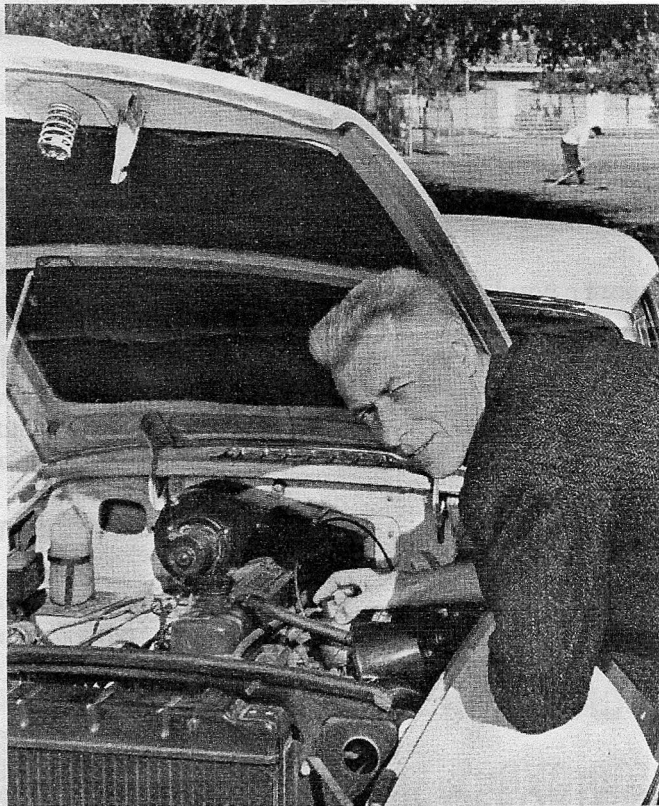
Foster came to the Los Angeles area in 1947 after Lockheed had expressed an interest in his engineering talents. "After I arrived, they found that I wasn't a U.S. citizen, so I figuratively camped on your doorstep until my citizenship came through."

The wait proved to be beneficial for American sports car hobbyists. It was during an assignment as a public relations director for the British Motors Corp. that he began organizing events for early-day enthusiasts and helped form the Four-Cylinder

Club. "By 1955, however, my one-time avocation had become a full-time vocation. I was attending 300 meetings a year and the fun was beginning to go out of it," Foster said.

He joined Lockheed that year as an F-104 service engineering specialist, an assignment that continued until Jan. 1 of this year, when he was named to supervise the engineering publications services group.

Although participation with other Lockheed employees in the Skycombers flying club now vies with Foster's affection for sports cars, you'll not find him deserting his first love. Not while you hear four-cylinder music echoing from that friendly canyon on a sunny Sunday, anyway.



IN TUNE—Under the bonnet are engine "music" and John Foster.