

SIXTY YEARS WITH A 1934 AUSTIN

Glenn Davis

It was late summer, 1950, and the country was fully occupied addressing the pent-up demand that had accumulated during the Great Depression and WW II. Many of the young men who returned to Southern California from their service around the world had started families, moved to the suburbs and were now looking to play as hard as they had worked in the previous two decades. Some had learned new skills which they applied to building hot rods to race on the dry lakes. Others returned from Europe with an appreciation of the sports cars and economy sedans they had driven and acquired during their time



Here is the Austin in early 1948 on a day we drove from Los Angeles to Glendale to check on the new house our family was building at the time.

abroad. These were cars such as the MG, Triumph, Singer, Hillman Minx, Sunbeam and Austin.

In Glendale, California, where our family moved in 1948, an ex Royal Air Force pilot and entrepreneur named John Foster joined forces with a mechanically inclined partner named Glenn Fancher and formed Angell Motors, a small auto dealership specializing in sales and service of British Austins and Hillmans. As the cars sold it became clear that their new owners wanted more than just transportation from their new small cars. The cars were fun to drive and the people who purchased

them wanted to drive them at every opportunity. People began to hang around the dealership and talk to those who had not yet purchased a car but were interested. John Foster, being a clever fellow, decided to have some fun and stimulate interest in his enterprise by organizing a driving tour. This event took place on August 6, 1950, (Ed Note: To see the handwritten notes, go here: http://www.fourcylinderclubhistory.com/?page_id=1270) and included eight Austin A40s, five Hillmans and one MG. Their owners spent a delightful day touring to San Gabriel Canyon where they enjoyed a picnic. The group had such a great time they decided to repeat the event, starting earlier, driving farther and making it a timed run with a prize for the best driving effort.

Consequently, a “rally” was organized for Sunday, September 10, 1950. Eighteen entrants showed up at Angell Motors and were briefed on the 70 mile run through the mountains to Bouquet Canyon, north of Los Angeles. Each driver was asked to estimate their average driving speed and the slower cars left first. According to the hand written notes compiled by John Foster, (Ed Note: To see handwritten notes on this event, go to: http://www.fourcylinderclubhistory.com/?page_id=1270) the first car off was, “Ralph Davis @ 9:45 a.m., average estimated speed 21 mph, in U.S.A. Bantam vintage 1934ish.” I was seven years old in

1950 and, although not mentioned in John Foster's notes, I was my dad's navigator, riding in that very first car leaving on that very first rally of what later became the Four Cylinder Club of America (FCCA).

According to the rally log, cars were clocked out by Mr. Foster at one minute intervals and clocked in at the No. 2 campground in Bouquet Canyon by Mr. Fancher. completed the course in 204.37 minutes, which was close to 21 mph, but not close enough to win the beautiful 18" trophy. (To see a photo of this trophy and photos of the rally in progress, go here: http://www.fourcylinderclubhistory.com/?page_id=999) To make matters more interesting, we arrived at the picnic site with a distinct knocking sound coming from the Austin's engine. Most of the group enjoyed a leisurely picnic followed by a game of baseball, with the last participants leaving at 6 p.m. However, as noted in the log book, "Mr. Davis spent all afternoon putting a leather shim in the main bearing of his U.S. Bantam which burned a bearing, made an excellent on the spot job, and drove away in fine style."

My memory of the day is dim, but I do remember sitting on a picnic table under an oak tree while my dad worked on the Austin. I don't remember being particularly worried because we were among friends and my dad had always found a way to get us home after a breakdown. I do remember the smell of the oil that was drained out of the engine and watching my dad walk around holding his pants up with his hands after he sacrificed his leather belt to make shims for the bearings. As before, we made it home OK and minimized the level of difficulty of the repairs when reporting the adventure to my mom.

Further rallies were held in the fall of 1950 and by January of 1951 the group had organized into an official car club. Over the next two decades the FCCA grew to include hundreds of members organized into chapters in ten states across the country. The oil shortages of the seventies eventually curtailed the club's rallies, which were its most popular events and caused the membership to decline. Nevertheless, the club remained active until 1996 and the original corporate entity survives today as a Datsun enthusiasts' group (called the Five-Ten Owners Club). Some of the original members continue to hold reunions and one has

undertaken the construction of a website charting the history of the group. (Ed Note: You're already on this web site!)

It is not clear that the '34 Austin participated in any further rally activities because my dad soon acquired a British Austin A40 as his daily driver and rally car. The '34



Charter American Bantam Society member, Ralph Davis, with unrestored Austin, 1995.



Top: Restoration in progress, 1996.
Middle: Dick Beagle, nearly completed car, 2003.
Bottom: Current custodian, Glenn Davis, 2010.

remained a fixture around our house for the next forty years or so and emerged from the back of the garage in 1995 to become both my dad's and Dick Beagle's last restoration project.

With both my dad and Dick in declining health, things had bogged down by 2002 when I became involved. Nevertheless, after significant digging through my dad's extensive parts collection aided by invaluable help from Norm Booth and other club members, we located the pieces required to complete the car and showed it for the first time at the ABS Trophy meet in Solvang in 2003.

I inherited the car in July, 2004, and since then it has been a regular participant in ABS tours and activities. This past October, sixty years after competing in that first FCCA rally, the Austin successfully completed the tour through the streets and hills of Ventura and, on the following day, it was awarded the first place trophy in the Austin class at the 2010 ABS Trophy Meet.

This little Austin has been with me my entire life. It was the car on which I first learned to drive and the car in which my dad and I had our conversation about "the birds and the bees". Sunday rides with my dad around Southern California are among my earliest memories and the search for parts for the car's restoration was our last project together. As noted, the car played a role in the founding of both the FCCA and the ABS. Any time I drive it the sounds, smells and the feeling of the steering wheel remind me of the many good times the car has provided for over sixty years.

See the next page for more background on Glenn Davis' Bantam. It is a story written by his dad, Ralph Davis, for the Austin Bantam Society newsletter Rooster Tails, November 1970.

HOW I BECAME INTERESTED

Ralph Davis

(From the Austin Bantam Society newsletter, Rooster Tails, November, 1970)

The former owner of my 1933 coupe had placed it in a garage for engine repairs, as well as a new paint job, where it first came to my attention. The car stood until the tires became soft before the bills for refurbishing this little gem could be cleared. One day when I dropped by to check on it, the car had disappeared.

A few days later I happened upon this same car, standing on the street with tires slashed, wires pulled from the engine, and every window glass broken.

I rang the doorbell and the lady of the house informed me it had been damaged at night by some of her husband's friends.



1933 Austin (with '32 parts car) in 1955

The regret I expressed brought her response that her husband's friends were getting even with him for damage he had done to their car during a drunken rage, and she lived in fear he would either get killed in this little car, or as a result of it!

At the wife's request, I took the car to the the garage of one of my friends who happened to live nearby, and hid it until this woman could catch her husband in the mood to sign off the pink slip, so

she could sell the car to me.

For many years this little car served me well as a go-to-work automobile, and over a period of years took me many miles at very little over all expense.

My purchase of this little coupe took place almost twenty-five years ago, and since it still remains in my possession, although at present it is not running, I look forward to the day when I can restore it.

One of these days you may be surprised to see this car put in an appearance at one of our PBAC functions.

Notes from Ralph's son, Glenn Davis:

1) We always believed the Austin was a 1933 because it had '33 bumpers and that was how it was registered. However, in 2003 when I took the car to the Highway Patrol for a VIN check, they determined it was actually a 1934. That was a happy coincidence because the double-bar '33 bumpers had been replaced with single-bar '34 bumpers during the restoration — just because my dad preferred the look.

2) The plate glass driver's door window was lowered when the vandalism described above took place and was not replaced with safety glass until the car was restored some fifty years later.

3) A note found on a scrap of paper stated that the Austin was purchased on 11/21/47 for \$250. This was the second Austin that my dad purchased after he returned from Japan in 1946. The first was a '31 coupe that was ultimately parted out to keep the '34 running.

4) PBAC stands for Pacific Bantam Austin Club, the name of the Austin Bantam Society before it became an international organization.