



E Life, Etc.

Home / Print / Thursday / E Life, Etc.

Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday

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Riding Route 66 for dad

Bynum woman rides in caravan of vintage cars

MATT EHLERS, Staff Writer

Years ago, she was embarrassed by his hobby, in the way that kids are when their dads revel publicly in things big and loud and old.

Diana Garside would rather have taken the bus to school than be ferried by her father, Ron, who drove decades-old Austin Sevens. If she missed the bus?

"I would demand to be dropped a mile away," she said. "'Mortified,' I think, is the word."

Today, though, Garside is probably somewhere in Oklahoma, pattering along at 35 mph in an Austin Seven, a car that to the untrained eye resembles a Model T. She started in Chicago and is headed toward Santa Monica, Calif., traveling the old Route 66 in tribute to her dad, who died before he could realize his dream.

A handful of his car buddies from England are with her, having shipped over their cars to help Garside with her quest.

"It's amazing. I'm just floored by it. The passion these people have and the lengths they've gone to -- I'm just amazed," said Garside, a few days before she started her journey.

Garside, 38, lives in Bynum but grew up in England, where her dad worked for the post office, and on Austin Sevens in his spare time. Built in the '20s and '30s, Austin Sevens are credited with being the first affordable, reliable automobiles in the United Kingdom.

Ron first glimpsed Route 66 after a trip to the Grand Canyon. "My dad fell in love with it right there," she said.

Garside, who is deputy chief toxicologist for the N.C. Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, originally moved to the U.S. to pursue postdoctoral studies. During a visit home, she asked her dad if there was something he'd like to do before he died. She figured he might like to visit the Great Wall of China.

Instead, he mentioned driving an Austin Seven across Route 66.

Stricken with heart disease, he died unexpectedly in October 2005. Back in England for the funeral, Garside told some of his car buddies about his idea. It wasn't until Christmas, however, that a serious plan began to emerge. That's when Garside found a Route 66 guidebook in her stocking, courtesy of Vince Leek, a friend of her father's.

Organizers shipped five Austin Sevens from England to Newark, N.J. The cars arrived toward the end of August, and their drivers and navigators made the slow journey toward Chicago, the easternmost point of Route 66. The group left Chicago on Sunday, hoping to make the 2,400-mile journey in about three weeks.

Although Route 66 succumbed to interstates and has been officially decommissioned by the federal government, much of the old route still exists and travelers can closely approximate the original journey.

Leek, who served as the journey's main organizer, figured it would cost about \$6,000 for each car to make the trip. That includes shipping the cars, plus meals and accommodations for two occupants in each car. So far, they have made it without major mechanical issues. But each of the owners is an accomplished Austin Seven mechanic. "If you couldn't repair them, you couldn't run them," said Leek, 68.



Vince Leek drives a 1929 Austin Seven Chummy in New York's Times Square.
Photo Courtesy of Diana Garside

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About the Austin Seven

Manufactured by the Austin Motor Co., the four-cylinder Austin Seven was produced between 1922 and 1939 in the United Kingdom. Dubbed "the motor for the millions," the car was designed for the everyman and nearly 300,000 eventually were made. The car tops out at about 50 mph.

Online

For more pictures, an itinerary and a daily diary, see Diana Garside's blog at www.a7route66.typepad.com.

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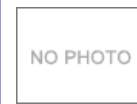
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Speaking by cell phone Monday while driving in a rented Hyundai that's serving as the expedition's support car, Garside said her dad would be impressed by all the people along the route who have come out to see the cars. The group even drove in the Labor Day parade in Pontiac, Ill.

"He would be awed by the turnout," said Garside, who was in the car with her mother, Veronica. "We all are."

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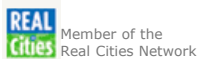
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