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LOCAL NEWS

Austin group passes through on Route 66

By Julie Turner-The Daily Record

A little adventure in one's life can be a good thing, but how about a little adventure in a little car halfway around the world?

For a group of travelers from England, a trip from Chicago to Los Angeles on Route 66 fit the bill.

A group 10 people are driving five Austin Sevens (Baby Austins) — brought from the United Kingdom by sea — along “The Mother Road” and stopped in Lebanon for a spot of lunch at the Bell Restaurant after traveling from Cuba, Mo., on Tuesday before heading for Springfield.

They have dubbed their trip “five Baby Austins on the Mother Road.”

Their trip actually began Aug. 27, when the group left New York City for Chicago. They plan to end their 2,450-mile journey Sept. 21 in Los Angeles.

Chris Parkhurst, of Aylebury, England, said adventure is what the enthusiasts of the 750 Motor Club were looking for when came to the United States.

“We’ve gone around South America, all over Europe and looked at this,” he said, adding that it was also to pay tribute to a fellow Baby Austin enthusiast who died last year.

“(Ron Garside) always wanted to do this, so it’s a bit of a memorial. It’s what he always wanted to do, so we said, ‘Come on, let’s do it.’ So that’s what we did... It’s a challenge really. Anyone can get into a modern car and go.”

Parkhurst explained that the “Baby Austins” are Austin Sevens, manufactured in the United Kingdom from 1922 to 1939.

They are very durable cars that will go anywhere. The cars on the trip along Route 66 were manufactured from 1929 to 1939.

“They are very, very simple, ever economical and easy to repair,” he said. “You can also get all of the parts of them in the UK.”

The cars were long considered “ladies” cars, for their small size. Later, the Austin Sevens were seen as an affordable car for the working class.

“This was very much the Model T of England and the UK,” Parkhurst said. “All together, they made over 50,000 of these in different styles, but with the same dimensions and engine. They just changed the body. Lord Austin (the creator of the cars) was very much like Henry Ford in wanting to make a car that everyone could afford. It’s the same width of a motor bike and side car. If you were traveling in your husband’s sidecar, you might be a mess. Suddenly, this comes out and it’s the same size, but it’s dry and it’s warmer.”

The club believes they are the first Brits to travel Route 66 in the Sevens.

So far, there have been no major mechanical problems for the club and only one flat tire — pretty good for cars that were made before some their drivers were even born.

The top speed of the Sevens is about 50 mph, which made traffic in places like Chicago and New York City a little difficult, but the group has enjoyed the leisurely trip through America’s history at about 40 mph. The cars also get about 35 miles per gallon.

“That’s with an old engine,” Parkhurst said.

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Diana Garside, daughter of Ron Garside, was the organizer of the trip with the Baby Austins. Her fellow travelers, including her mother Veronica, were friends of her late father, and thought the trip along Route 66 would be a fitting tribute.

"My mom and I wanted to honor his and that's kind of what started the idea, but with these guys, it's any excuse to ride their cars," she laughed. "(Her father) would have really enjoyed this. He would have been amazed."

Unfortunately, the Garside Baby Austin was unable to make the journey to the US, but Diana and Veronica Garside were able to hitch a ride.

"Riding on the road and seeing all of the old signage and things has been really amazing," Diana Garside continued.

Veronica Garside, of Swindon Witts, England, said the trip was a fitting tribute to her husband.

"It's absolutely wonderful," she said. "A fitting way to remember Ron. He would love it. It was just the ambience of the whole thing he loved. He was born actually a few years too late. He should have been born 50 years earlier. It's just the ambience of anything old."

In 2000, Ron and Veronica Garside traveled on Route 66 and hoped one day to return to travel its entirety.

"I wish he was with us," Veronica Garside said. "It's been a lot of fun and it's not finished yet. It's just beautiful country and it goes on and on."

On her first trip on Route 66, Veronica Garside said her favorite city was one she discovered on a side trip, and really didn't expect it to catch her fancy.

"I love Las Vegas," she laughed. "It's brash, it's colorful, vulgar and I loved every minute of it. I did, I really did."

This isn't the first time the group traveled out of England with their antique automobiles. Last year, the 750 Motor Club traveled across Argentina and Chile.

"We went across Argentina and Chile, and through the Andes in five weeks," Parkhurst said. "That including going off road, through rivers and all that type of thing... You make this your adventure and holiday all in one."

Parkhurst and the Garsides have so far been the hospitality of those they have met along the way.

"It's been overwhelming really," Parkhurst said. "There has been a lot of willingness to show the towns and the routes to take. People really like the cars and people are waving to us. It's great."

He added that while the group stopped in Springfield, Ill., a group of motorcycle enthusiasts traded rides on their Harley-Davidsons for rides in the Sevens.

"The hospitality and the spirit of motoring has been amazing," Diana Garside said holding a Route 66 lunch box she found in North Carolina. "When people know that we're coming to town, they get out their old cars, whatever kind they happen to be, to meet us. It's just amazing."

Some members of the group had done a little homework on the Internet about Route 66, and Parkhurst said they have not been disappointed in what they have found once they began their trip, but he wished some communities would work to advise travelers a little more about the historic road.

"I wish there would be more signs," he said. "It's a tourist thing. A few more signs at critical points. Sometimes you can go through a junction and it's not until you are through the junction that you see the sign. Maybe the states or the cities can put a few more signs up at the interchanges. Some area, where they might be struggling to find a bit of income could work with somethings that's there. It could be marketed."

Parkhurst, who is retired from the Royal Air Force has been a frequent traveler to the U.S. in his career, but traveling along Route 66 was a new adventure.

"I came at least once a year," he said. "I love America, but this was a bit of a challenge."

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