L. M. (Sonny) Tough

Here in the St. Louis area 2004 seems to be the year to reflect on the past. Not only are we in the midst of celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Worlds Fair, and the 200th anniversary of the return of the Lewis and Clark expedition, but also this year marks the 25th anniversary of the Gateway Healey Association. Al Nelson and myself (both members of Gateway Healey) thought this would be a good time to interview one of the most colorful and memorable members of the Gateway Healey Association "Lyttleton Morgan Tough the III, aka (Sonny)". Here are a few excerpts from that interview that we feel would be of interest to Austin Healey enthusiasts.

"Sonny" first started selling sports cars in July 1967 for "Continental Cars LTD" a BMC dealership located in Florissant, Missouri. Continental Cars LTD was the distributor of British Cars and parts serving many dealers throughout the Midwest. At the time they were selling Austin Healey's, Jaguars, and MG sports cars. Then from October of 1967 to about May of 1968 Sonny moved to their new location on Pershing Avenue in St. Louis. Sonny related to us that the popularity of Austin Healeys made Continental Cars LTD the successful business it became.

From May of 1968 to October of 1968, Sonny and a fellow salesman, started their own dealership located near Brentwood Blvd. and Manchester. They named the dealership "Abingdon Motors", taking the name from the town where MG's were manufactured. They later moved the dealership to Watson Rd. (then Route '66). Sonny and his partner were very successful at that location and even turned a profit the first year of business. Later, Sonny sold his share of the business and worked elsewhere.

"Sonny" along with Bill Hallenbeck (part owner of Continental Cars LTD) has the distinction of bringing to the USA the first Healey club -- The "Healey Drivers Club." As Sonny recalls "Bill and I decided if we're going to be selling Austin Healeys it might be a good idea to form a club just for Austin Healey owners." After some discussion, Bill remembered, from his recent trip to England, there already was a club devoted to Healey motorcars back in England, the "Healey Drivers Club." Perhaps they would be interested in starting memberships in the USA. (The Healey Driver's Club was started by Peter Cavanaugh, Brian Healey and others, with most of their early members owning older 2.4 Liter Healey's.) As Sonny recalls they were more than excited about extending memberships to the US, even providing a

silver Challenge cup to each Center. They decided the US clubs would be called "Centers," thus the Missouri Center was formed. Sonny is first to point out that he didn't do most of the legwork involved with starting the new club but after all was decided, no one wanted to be President. So Sonny said "Well, hell then, I'll be the first president." Sonny still has that cup and displays it proudly he recalls Brian Healey saying "do what you want with this cup".

We asked Sonny to describe the first time he saw an Austin Healey. Sonny recalled, "I was driving to work on Debaliver Avenue in St. Louis one morning when I noticed a stunning, silver-blue car parked in front of an old filling station that had been turned into a car dealer's lot named "Continental Cars LTD." Sonny had made friends with a mechanic there. His name was Gene Nelson, whom later became the sales manager for Continental Cars LTD. Sonny asked Gene, "Who does that car belong to?" Gene told him that was the new Austin Healey, and Donald Healey himself was driving the car around the country lining up dealers. In fact Donald Healey himself and Chris Pratt (one of the owners of Continental Cars) were out to lunch together at this very moment. Now, Gene and Sonny spent some time going over the new car. You can imagine the excitement when Gene said, "Want to go for a ride?" "You bet!" (or something to that effect) So Sonny and Gene took off, Gene driving, in the only Austin Healey 100/4 in the USA! They drove through Forest Park, which at that time had no stop signs and no posted speed limit. Sonny was really smitten with the car, and Gene drove very fast over many small hills and curves. On many of those hills Sonny said they became airborne! In fact, on one of those airborne occasions they came down so hard they broke a U-joint. "Now, what do we do?" said Sonny. Here we are driving a new car with no spare parts, and it can't be driven. Gene knew of a Jaguar dealership close by on Big Bend Blvd. So Off they went on foot. Now, spare parts were hard to come by in those days but Gene knew the Jaguar dealer had a brand new MKV Jaguar they kept in the basement, which they were stealing parts off of to keep their customer cars on the road. With a little help they removed a U-joint from the Jaguar and had it on the Austin Healey. It was a little larger, but fit just fine. Donald Healey was never told of the incident, and indeed the owner of Continental Cars wasn't told until months later.

We asked Sonny about his first Austin Healey he personally owned. "It was a British Racing Green '54 BN1 model that had been repainted white with a red stripe. The original owner had gone off to Princeton and his dad didn't want the car after driving it to work

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in the rain one day. It sat in a Phillips 66 gas station for several months, I would check on it every chance I got. The owner was asking \$2500, which was more than I had at the time. One day the car was gone and I thought, so was my chance to own a Healey. When he asked a mechanic working there what happened to the car, he said the owner had just taken it home. I located the owner and finally bought the car for \$1200, with the help of a loan from my Mom."

Sonny's second Austin Healey, his current car, is a 1955 BN1, 100M model. A Vice President from GE had bought the car for racing and bent the left rear wheel in practice. He brought the car back to Continental to get the wheel fixed. They fixed it and parked the car up on the second story storage lot ready for customer pick up. The owner ended up getting transferred and forgot about the car. It sat in the back corner of the second story lot gathering dust. Periodically Sonny would check on the car and pester Gene Nelson, now the service manager, that if they ever sold the car he wanted to buy it. One lucky day Gene told him the owner of Continental Cars, Chris Pratt, had called the owner of the '55 BN1 and in conversation the owner asked Chris if he could get rid of it for him. So Chris just bought the car back. Gene brought the car down and put two new batteries in it. Sonny went up to talk to Chris and asked what he wanted for the car. Chris told him he had just paid \$1400, and he'd have to make a profit. "How about \$1450? But wouldn't you like to take it for a drive first?" Sonny took it along the same route he normally took in his1954 model, promptly spun out making the first turn on the cobblestone streets of St. Louis, and said "Geez, I have to have this car." Once again Sonny borrowed the money from his Mom. bought it, and eventually sold the 1954 for \$1600.

At Conclave 1999 in St. Louis, Tom Kovacs (Fourintune restorations) examined the car and told Sonny that the car, BN1L227462 (Sonny's), was one of the early production 100 M's modified at Warwick. *Tom remembers that Geoff Healey recalled and told him possibly 200 or more BN1cars were modified to Le Mans specification.* All the work was done at the Warwick shop. The louvered hoods were sent back to Jensen to be taken apart and louvered and then re-assembled and re-painted. Later it was....Jensen to provide the bonnet on the initial order.

Sonny is currently 87 years young and recalls these memories quite well. Indeed there are many more. Such as the time Sonny and two friends went racing throughout the Midwest in a "Bugeye." Sonny is still very active in Gateway Healey functions attending many of our car shows and social events. During the 1999 Conclave "Meet Me in St. Louis" (some of you may have attended) Sonny drove Keith Bester's car around Gateway International Racetrack, turning in a very respectable time. Sonny was 82 years old at that time.

Sonny being a "Scotsman" always is quick with a joke, and also just as quick to offer you a Scotch and soda.

.. Al Nelson and John Lore wrote this article, with comments from Tom Kovacs.