

## **A 4,000+ mile tour in an Austin-Healey Sprite**

Roger and I spent most of May in our Austin-Healey Bugeye Sprite on a LONG road trip. Steve Kirby, an Austin-Healey Club of America (AHCA) member from the Association of Southern California area club, designed a 2-week driving tour called the "Smokies to the Ozarks." When Steve announced the tour last year, I thought, "that would be fun." Little did I realize how the definition of "fun" could change over time.

Our group was made up of 31 vehicles and 54 people; there were 26 Big Healeys, two Bugeye Sprites, one Italian Mini, one Cobra and one Porche.

We left on April 30 heading to Nashville, Tennessee, the starting point for our tour. We had no problems on the way there, and enjoyed 3 days in Nashville, including a visit to the Grand Ole Opry. We toured Centennial Park to see a full-sized replica of the (Greek) Parthenon and a drive to Lane Motor Museum, a specialty place with many mini and one-off cars. (Check the website at [LaneMotorMuseum.org](http://LaneMotorMuseum.org).)

However, while driving from Nashville to Chattanooga, we hit what appeared to be a large hubcap. It was, of course, in our travel lane and with fast traffic in either lane beside us, there was no way to avoid it. Thus began our "tour de flat tire" as we continued on the tour, including a stop at the Jack Daniel's Distillery tour.

After our visit to Ruby Falls on day 4 (well worth the time), we returned to the parking lot to find a flat tire. Thankfully, there was one Healey friend still there, and he helped Roger change the tire. (Note to self: remember to INCLUDE the bag with the jack and knock-off hammer when packing everything for the trip. Roger accidentally forgot this... it turned out to be an IMPORTANT item on this trip.)

It was now day 5 of the tour, so we went to Coker Tire in Chattanooga (you might know them as a major supplier of LBC tires) for a tire fix. Bought a new tube which the staff at the next-door Cocker Museum installed for us. This got us on the road to Asheville, our next destination for lunch and a tour of the Biltmore Estate.

The Healey gods did not look kindly on us, as 10 miles out of town the same (allegedly fixed) tire went flat again. We were stranded on the roadside, in the rain, for about two hours while AAA Road Service tried to find us. (Second note to self: always pay attention to the direction and mile marker of your travel. This would have helped the AAA operator send the rollback truck toward the correct city.) The tow truck driver took us to a local Firestone Tire store, which, due to the tire's age, could not repair the spare on our car. (Third note to self: no matter how much tread the tires have, CHECK THE TIRE'S YEAR OF MANUFACTURE before beginning a road trip.) We basically lost an entire day with this problem, including both activities at the Biltmore Estate.

Day 6 was a “freestyle day” which we enjoyed touring and shopping in Asheville. (They have THE BEST SHOE STORE around!) Met friends and had lunch at the famous Tupulo Honey Café.

The next challenge was to deal with the bad spare tire. Found a small, local tire shop that could get us a new set the next day, so we hung around the hotel for the day...not wanting to drive around on an (obviously) bad tire.

The next day was repair day: Roger worked on the clutch (more about that later), fixed the wipers (they stopped working yesterday in the rain—blown fuse; always carry spares), and fixed the gas tank meter. HURRAH! Four new tires and we are off to catch up with the rest of the tour group.

The next day was a tour of the Kentucky Bourbon Trail and Maker’s Mark Distillery in Loretto, Kentucky. Clutch continued to give problems...apparently it didn’t want to release when downshifting, so there was some unintended gear grinding! That’s a task for repair when we return from our next (non-Healey trip) on June 14.

Amidst the various tour days, we had the opportunity to drive both “The Rattler” (Highway 276) and the “Tail of the Dragon” (US 129). Both are well-know mountain roads with hundreds of curves and switchbacks...enough to raise anyone’s blood pressure worrying about possible failing brakes! And just to top things off, one of our group actually got a *speeding ticket* on the Tail of the Dragon. He trusts his brakes and tires more than I would.

My trip report would be remiss if I didn’t recount our visit to the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Kentucky. This is a must-see place for any admirer of the Corvette car – classic or latest version. Most impressive is learning the history of the sinkhole that measured 40 feet wide, 60 feet long, and 30 feet deep. The hole caused the collapse of the bedrock roof of a prehistoric cave that resulted in the catastrophic failure of the museum floor on February 12, 2014. This collapse “ate” eight classic collector Corvettes. One of the cars was recovered from the hole but could not be restored and is on display.

Our Smokies tour included stops in Nashville, Chattanooga, and Gatlinburg, Tennessee; Asheville and Robbinsville, North Carolina; Lexington, Bardstown, and Bowling Green, Kentucky; and Popular Bluff, Missouri. Note the tour did not visit these cities in the order listed here...we backtracked a lot to maximize vistas of the beautiful scenery on the mountain roads and the availability of hotel rooms needed for so large a group.

We finished the Smokies part of the tour and headed to Branson, Missouri, the location of AHCA’s annual Conclave. The host hotel was Chateau on the Lake, an upscale hotel that offered (and charged for) covered parking to protect the Healeys from the expected

(and received) hailstorm on the first night of our arrival. Needless to say, with the clutch problem still with us, we didn't do a lot of extra driving. But we did appreciate the Popular Car Show, the "Tour de Branson" (road rally), the Gymkhana (held at the parking lot of the Dolly Pardon Stampede), and attendance at a performance of the Dolly Pardon Stampede. (Fourth note to self: don't eat for 2 days before attending this performance. The meal is huge!)

There were a couple of specialty cars on view during Conclave: a hand-built Sebring Sprite and a hand-built Devlin. There were also three Nash Healeys: one supposedly Donald Healey's personal car and two from Stephen Plaster's Evergreen Digital Showroom in Lebanon, Missouri. For a sense of the Conclave activities, visit the website at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbYK9thx\\_4I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbYK9thx_4I) for a recap of the week's activities.

The Healey gods finally did look kindly upon us. At Thursday night's banquet, I won the 50-50 raffle. The \$650 prize bought my new tires with a few dollars to spare.

About the jackets we are wearing in the attached picture...before moving back to Florida in 2016, Roger and I were members of the Gulf Coast Healey Club in Houston, Texas. In 1986, Texas celebrated its Sesquicentennial (don't worry, it means a 150-year celebration; I didn't know then what it meant either). One of our club members found (online) the jackets with the Texas Lone Star logo prominently displayed and suggested we buy them as "club jackets." Roger and I jumped on the opportunity and, once they were received, I realized the jackets were a perfect place to display the many patches we had collected over the years when attending Healey events.

I threw the jackets in the luggage at the last minute, thinking they would be good if the evenings turned cool. I had no idea they would attract so much attention. We got looks, inquiries, and "how neat" comments every time we wore them, both around the car folks and "out in public." Along the way, I realized that any way we can promote our LBCs is really a great thing.

On Friday, May 30, we started home and generally had no trouble except for the continued touchy clutch. Roger has determined (and I tend to agree) that this will probably be our last LONG drive in either the Bugeye or the Big Healey (once it is on the road). But we did prove one thing: even senior citizens can drive 4,056 miles in a small LBC and survive!

### **Observations:**

1. America runs (lives) on 18 wheels. Try to think of anything you use that did not in some way travel on an 18-wheel semi tractor/trailer before you purchased it.

2. The weathermen (women) routinely lie. I thought I was being clever by checking weather.com for advance information about the weather along our tour route. Hardly any day matched the weatherman's predictions, hence a continued re-shifting of luggage.
3. The newly created PACKING CUBES are wonderful! They are so flexible they fit into all the nooks and crannies of a Sprite "trunk" (actually the space behind the two seats).
4. Virtually every arterial road in most states is FULL of potholes. And the interstate roads are not much better!
5. Re #4 above. MANY of the major interstate highways and local roads are under construction / repair. This makes driving a LBC even more hair-raising as you are considerably closer to that aforementioned 18-wheeler.
6. Almost every other car on the road is bigger than our LBC. So, you must pay REALLY CLOSE ATTENTION to what those other drivers are doing, as they can't seem to stay in their own driving lane while ogling you.
7. America has some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. Think forests, caves, waterfalls, open fields, mountains, etc. etc.
8. If you can "survive" a month in a small British car with your spouse and still be talking to each other, you have a good marriage / partnership. 'Nuf said!
9. If you can still walk after 400-500 miles a day in a Bugeye (or other, older LBC), you deserve a free visit to the hotel's spa. And a massage too.
10. People really like looking at a different kind of car. Number of thumbs up, sideways camera shots, waves, high fives, horn toots, etc. = TMTC\*

Edie & Roger Lowery

\*TMTC = too many to count