

Jack Lawrence - In his Own Words

(from a presentation at the Simone Museum, Philadelphia, PA, May 2015)

I was brought up in a small town of Ellington in Western New York State about 20 miles from Jamestown and Chautauqua Lake. At an early age I started to get an interest in anything mechanical. I took apart clocks, radios, etc., but can't remember putting anything back together. I started putting together makeshift "cars" out of junk wheels and other parts. I made a wood frame go-cart with a Briggs & Stratton 1 hp t-head engine with a poppet intake valve that was not very quick and would not go up hills. There were many such projects.

By the time I was 16. I had become a gofer, helper, and sometimes a nuisance, at the local steam-powered saw mill. Later it would convert to Caterpillar diesel. I worked my tail off loading a dump truck with saw dust just to be able to drive it to the dump site and back.

I got my driver's license and that led to a Whizzer kit that I installed on my bike. Now I had new found freedom.

My next project was a Marmon oval track car. It was referred to as a jalopy racer and was run at the dirt track Pennyroyal Speedway in Leon, NY. The chassis was a Marmon 78 model that had been stripped from the cowl back leaving just a driver's seat. It raced several events, then my pal George Mason and I added a Model A Ford coupe body with the top cut off to the Marmon chassis. This was in 1947-48.

The car was fitted with Dayton knock-off wire wheels which proved unworthy of the task. We solved the problem by welding disc wheels to the Dayton hubs. The car had no roll bar, a bench seat with surplus aircraft seat belts and the only brake was on the right-rear. The front axle was damaged in racing and was replaced with an Auburn sedan axle.

Our driver was Bill Rexford and he, along with Lloyd Moore, another local driver who raced at the Pennyroyal track, moved onto NASCAR in 1949. Bill became the youngest champion in NASCAR history when he won the title in 1950 at the age of 23.

Rexford blew up the 8 cyl. Marmon engine creating holes in the sides of the block large enough that by squatting down in the pits we could see the crowd on the outside of the track. Because the engine was splash lubricated we were able to finish the race. Afterwards George and I walked the track and found the rod standing on end in the dust.

We replaced the Marmon engine with a Roosevelt 8 cyl. flathead without a flywheel. We just bolted the Marmon clutch disc directly to the crankshaft and either pushed or hand cranked it to get it started.

After high school in 1949, I enlisted in the Air Force. I was schooled in Texas on air frames and engines. I spent the rest of my enlistment in England as a T-6 crew chief and later, flight chief. I got out of the service in 1952 and came home with a Triumph Tiger motorcycle.

I spent six months at Alfred State Tech taking a diesel course. There were no jobs available so I dropped out. Then I worked as an auto mechanic, a draftsman on steel windows and as a machinist at Art Metal Corporation in Jamestown. The only good thing about the boring drafting job was that I worked with a gal who introduced me to her sister. Patricia and I have kept steady company ever since. We were hitched in 1955.

I was working on foreign cars at night while doing the machinist job during the day. Finally, Pat and I decided to start our business, Motor Sports Service.

Somewhere along the way, I bought a 1950 Morris Minor that I modified with some body changes, an Austin A-40 engine and gearbox and larger front drum brakes. It could run competitively with an MG TD.

Next I bought a Morris Minor pickup in Toronto that had a rod knock. I put Hypoid lube in the engine and drove it home. It made the Queen Elizabeth Highway very smelly. That Morris Minor became our new service truck.

About the same time, Pat and I bought an MG TF 1500 which I ran in my first driver's school and novice race in 1957. I can't remember doing much to the MG to get it ready for racing and I thought that I was a pretty hard driver. I was more concerned about my membership card and entry form clearing in time for the race as it was a last minute decision.

I borrowed an old Cromwell leather helmet that I have since looked for to buy back. My race uniform was an ex-air force flight suit soaked in Borax and boric acid that supposedly made it fire proof.

My first race was in the Novice Class I at Dunkirk, NY on an airport course. The first turn was 180 degrees and I soon found myself driving the last half of it through the "jing-weeds." So much for my thinking that racing would be a piece of cake.

We were then told that we could run our first race in the under 2-litre class. I finished way back in 12th place.

I then sold the MG and bought an AC Ace that I partially restored. I ran one hillclimb and finished first in class, but mostly we autocrossed it a lot.

For the next two or three years Stu Northrup and I prepared his MGA. We both raced "Old Rusty" - me in regional races and Stu in national events.

Next, Pat and I bought an Austin Healey Sprite bug-eye. I ran this car in five races in 1963. Pat took it to driver's school at Watkins Glen, then ran two races: a win and a DNF. We ran Pirelli Stelvios, a street version of their Formula 1 tire.

Our next purchase was an Elva MK VI Coventry Climax from Don Wolfe in Cleveland. This was my first rear engine sports car weighing just 950# wringing wet. I loved this car and did well with it getting 7 firsts, including 3 national wins, in 11 weekends.

I had one DNF when I lost it on a right hand turn at Thompson. I had no warning – just gone. I hit a windrow of dirt on the berm that launched me upside down. I landed in a grove of ironwood saplings that kept my roll bar from ever touching the ground. The problem was that I couldn't get out of the car. I had to wait for a split start that met with a problem. Janet Guthrie hit the rear of an MG that balked on the start and caused the MG to catch fire. The rest of the field started and proceeded past my position. Help finally arrived in the form of a guy standing on the bottom of my car asking me if I was OK. I tried to tell him that I needed to get out but my adrenalin was so high and I was talking so fast he couldn't understand me. My concern was the fuel tanks on either side of the cockpit were leaking past the caps. Finally, both the car and I got out of the trees with little damage to either. I found out later that another car had dumped oil in that location which explains the accident.

By 1966 I had installed a 1315 series Alfa engine that I destroked to 1150 cc. I finished off the Elva by ending up in an earthen bank at Watkins Glen. I was chasing Oscar Koveleski through the chicane when a hose ruptured directly behind my shoulders. I got distracted enough that I was too hot speed-wise, and otherwise, and went straight into the escape area that had been tapered to form an embankment which I hit and tore up the car pretty badly. We sold off the parts of the Elva that were salvageable.

In 1967 a Bobsy SR-3 kit car was built using the Alfa engine modified from 1150 cc to 1275 for the CSR class. I ran this car in 38 races from 1967 through 1971 earning 13 first place finishes, 5 seconds and 3 thirds. In the 1969 runoffs at Daytona, I got fifth after starting on the pole.

After running a Saab 99 in 1973-74 and 1976-77 against much lighter cars such as the Datsun 510, I started thinking about a Saab Sonett. Jim Hayden from Buffalo was racing his '68 Sonett V-4 and I got involved in some modifications to his 1500 cc car. I drove it once at Nelson Ledges and was impressed.

At that time Al Oag worked for me. We decided to set up a Sonett III for him. We started by designing molds for wheel opening flares, which was quite a project in itself. The Sonett had a 62 hp engine that we modified to achieve 125 hp. We built a roll cage, added a fuel cell and changed springs and shocks. We used a stock transaxle although we did change the outer CV joints and wheel bearings to those from a Saab 900.

Next we started on a second Sonett for me with the same basic modifications. After some growing pains both race cars became competitive in F Production class. Eventually Al had a chance to drive in VW pro series and sold his car.

An interesting note: a photo of the body sitting on our maintenance dolly with its roll cage installed was featured in a Saab booklet.

I proceeded to race and upgrade my Sonett. By 1983 the car was excellent - winning every one of the 6 national races entered. The highlight was capturing the Atlanta runoffs beating Bob Criss with a last lap pass.

We continued with much success over the next couple of years. This success brought considerable criticism from the British car entrants. SCAA began talking about putting us into E Production, but after a bit of prodding from Ray Longhitano and me, we ended up in GT-4. This designation opened up modifications for the car such as air-cooled brakes and free induction. I ran the car a few more years, but changes to approved fuel and competitors doing their homework made it harder to win. I decided to build a new chassis.

The new chassis was built on a 30 inch square steel table top that was part of an hydraulic die table on wheels that moved from 28" to 44" high. The chassis stayed on the table until the frame needed to be painted and the bottom paneled, then was put back on the table until the car was about 98% complete.

The best part of staying in class was not having to buy or build a new engine, transaxle or many other key components. Drafting design time, detailing drawings, obtaining material and the actual building time equaled about 1700 hours. In addition, I spent about \$2,500 for new parts. Fortunately I had indispensable help from Dave Irwin who crewed for me for several years.

We had received approval from the SCCA competition board before starting the design of the new chassis. We had been okayed to run 15" OEM wheels since I had informed them that if I was required to run 13" wheels I would build the new chassis to rear wheel drive specifications.

I ran the new chassis for three seasons with good success, then the rules were changed to require all GT-4 cars to be on 13" tires. I quit.