

# Watkins Glen Memoirs



**A car for the Glen  
By Eric Davison**

Finding an SS100 for sale wasn't an easy task. They surely weren't listed in the classified sections of the local newspapers and, unlike today there was not much of a market for old sports cars. But, in the classified section of *Motor Dad* found one listed; a 3 1/2 liter, gunmetal gray, red carpets and red bucket seats. The price was just about what an MG TC cost at that time, about \$1800. Because the car was in England that opened up a possibility for paying for it.



**In 1949 the Garroway Jaguar SS100 appeared at the Glen. After seeing it, Charlie Davison decided that he had to have one but an SS100 was not easy to find. This is the Garroway (in passenger seat) SS100 at the Glen in 1950. Photo by Frank Shaffer.**

My paternal grandfather had died in 1946. He had lived in London and had been widowed about three years earlier. He had survived the Battle of Britain and all the horrors and privations of the war. He was scheduled to come to America and to live with us. The struggle to obtain the permissions necessary to leave England became more and more protracted and he eventually just gave up and expired.

His estate wasn't much, about 700 £ (something less than \$3000) all went to Dad. He was an only child. The money sat in the Bank of England. Cash was not to leave the country. For England every farthing counted.

But, by working through the Royal Automobile Club Dad was able to find a way to use some of the money. Dad sent cash to the RAC from the US. He was able to transfer money from his Bank

of England account to the RAC who then purchased the car and resold it to Dad and exported it to America. Complicated but it worked and the SS100 was on the way.

It came by boat to New York and was shipped by truck to Detroit. It was a rare warm February day when Dad arrived home with his prize. After dinner he pointed me to my coat and the garage with the statement "Let's see what it will do!"



**Charlie sitting in his pride and joy on the grid at Edenvale, Ontario, Canada in 1950. There, however, the pre-war Jag met up with two new XK120s, and he had to settle for third in his first race with the SS100. Harold Lance photo.**

Naturally the top was down. Most of the snow had melted and what remained were just a few piles of frozen gray sludge topped with black. There was a slight mist and we turned north off Oakland Street on to Hunter Boulevard, a wide stretch of pavement that bypassed downtown Birmingham. There was almost no traffic and once we cleared the city limits Dad put his foot in it. As beautiful as those Lucas headlamps were they barely penetrated the mist, more like a warm yellow glow came from them.

Within a few seconds we were doing 90 and climbing. It was exhilarating and fun for only a brief instant as coming up behind us was a car with flashing lights on top. We were busted. And, to make matters worse we were busted by Officer Brown of the local police force. Brownie, (as he was known as by me and a few of my friends who had encountered him for various acts of mischief) was a strict upholder of the law. Here was Dad, a basically serious and respectable member of the community going faster than hell in a car for which there were no papers at all, no



title, no registration and merely a British number plate, DWU838. For some reason we were let off with a warning. I believe that Officer Brown was curious. The admonishment to me was “Don’t tell your mother!”

The next step for the SS100 was to make it look more presentable. While it had sat idle during the war it showed some signs of heavy use. There were a few cracks and rips in the aluminum and the paint was in bad shape. Finding someone who could work with aluminum was not easy but eventually Dad located a man in Pontiac, about 12 miles away who was a bona fide aluminum craftsman.

Apparently he had a day job at a body shop and did his own work evenings and weekends. For the next month helping in the preparation for painting became a family affair. I cannot remember how many louvers there are in the hood of an SS100 but each one was sanded to the bare metal. For the most part it was my chore but my sister and my mom also took part. Eventually the car emerged from the shop all straightened and presentable with a lovely coat of white paint. The undersides of the fenders were red.



**Charlie Davison painted this watercolor of his SS100 in 1959, long after he had sold the car. He also painted at least 16 other cars, including three versions of the SS100, two Squires, an MG K3, an MG J2 an MG TC, the Farago Fiat, a 2.9 Alfa, two Bugattis, a McLaren Mark 6, a Lotus Elite, A Lotus 20 and a 30/98 Vauxhall. These illustrations were special gifts to family and friends.**

Dad and his friend Harold Lance spent a few lunch hours tearing around Detroit’s Belle Isle, Dad in the Jag and Harold in his MG TC. Their assignment was to try to determine which roads on the island would be best for a road race. Having been enthused by the success of Watkins Glen, the SCCA Detroit Region hoped to stage a race on Belle Isle. A suitable course was plotted, a plan developed and a presentation was made to Alfred E. Cobo, then the mayor of Detroit. Naturally the proposal fell on deaf ears. Racing eventually did come to Detroit when F1 ran on

the city streets for a few years before smarter heads determined that Belle Isle was the place and Champ Cars ran there until the city could no longer support the event.

There was a stretch of fairly deserted road north of us. It went from Adams Road to Woodward Avenue. It was curvy. Big, long sweeping curves and we would take turns seeing how fast we could go. That was fun! Over the next few months Dad participated in rallies and time trials and when time came to submit an entry for the Glen, he did so and was assigned number 71 and was entered in the Seneca Cup race.

Prior to the race at the Glen there was a race scheduled in Canada, at an airport in Edenvale, Ontario. Dad entered figuring that he had best know something of his cars' and his own capabilities prior to the big show.



**SS100 at Edenvale. Behind Charlie, who is sitting in the Jag is from left, Mel Brown and Glen Smith, both friends and fellow enthusiasts. The Edenvale event would be a good try out before the Watkins Glen race in September. Harold Lance photo.**

In preparation for Edenvale and beyond new rings were fitted and the valves were ground. I was given an important assignment; put some miles on the car before it went racing. About 300 miles was deemed sufficient. While I was 15, I had a provisional license that allowed me to drive when accompanied by a licensed driver. I had a couple of buddies who were 16 and fully licensed that were quick to volunteer. While there were three of us and only two seats there was a small shelf behind the seats that was over the differential. By putting one leg down behind the seat and the

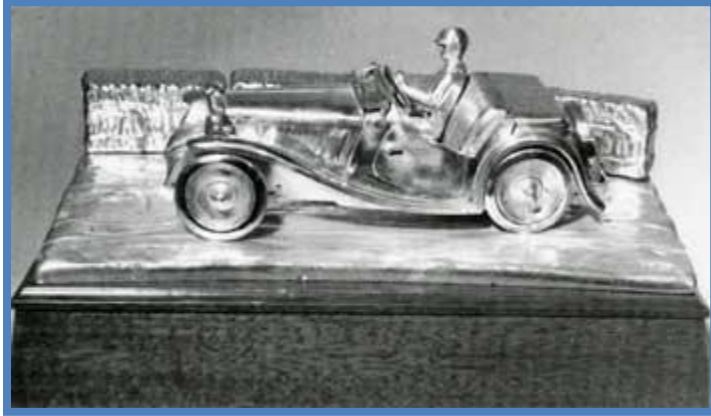
other bent severely the third passenger could sit perpendicular to the car. We had to make many stops to let the two passengers switch seats.

Part of the assignment was to give the car occasional bursts of speed. To accomplish this we utilized the old Willow Run Expressway, a strip that connected Detroit to the Willow Run facility where Ford had cranked out B-24 bombers during the war. For a time Willow run served as the main airport for Detroit. The expressway was wide and during the week little travelled and I pushed the SS to the limit a couple of times.



**Bob Collins was a popular driver from Detroit and accompanied Charlie Davison and his crew to the race at Edenvale, Ontario. He would die after rolling his MGTC and left Davison shaken but undeterred. Harold Lance photo.**

I didn't make the trip to Edenvale. I had a job and it was deemed far more important that I honor my commitment to the job than travel to Edenvale. A couple of Dad's friends went along to give support and to be there if anything went wrong. There were five cars in his heat which included two XK120s, Dad found that the XKs were faster on the straights but that he was faster through and out of the corners. The XKs were relatively softly sprung and the tighter SS was quicker. In addition the large brakes on the SS gave him a decided braking advantage. It was nip and tuck for the race but the finish line was at the end of a straight and both XKs were ahead by inches at the flag. Dad had fun and was more enthusiastic than ever about racing at the Glen.



**Later, Davison would be instrumental in creating the Collins Trophy. The Detroit Region of the SCCA had this trophy created from a design by George Gaston. It was awarded to Robert Ferguson in 1952 for outstanding performance in an car with less than 1600cc.**

There was a tragic side to the Edenvale event. Bob Collins a well-liked young Detroit enthusiast over cooked his MG TC and spun, leaving the course and collapsing a wheel. The car rolled over

on top of him killing him. While Dad, like everyone else, was really upset at this turn of events, they all realized that Collins had been driving over his head; had spun several times and had taken unnecessary risks

This time 'Don't tell your mother' would not have worked. Collins was a frequent visitor to our garage and Mom usually fed all the garagistas. She was saddened by this turn of events but realized that Dad was determined to have his go at the Glen. Hers was not to be the killjoy.

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