

Memories of GB Sterne - Bob Sterne

A few recollections about my Dad.

He was a perfectionist, and he loved to fix things, just to show it could be done. He would line up all the screw head slots on any project he was working on, and berate me if I didn't do the same. His favourite saying was "if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing right". He could fix just about anything, and was frustrated that car components were becoming "sealed" units that were designed to be thrown away instead of repaired. The best example I can give of this is starter solenoids. He would grind them open, turn over the contact bar, file the terminals smooth and reassemble with bolts. This doubled their useful life. He seldom threw anything out, in fact he kept a bucket under the bench full of bent nails, which when he had time he would straighten to reuse.

When Bill or I were working on a project and got stumped, he would tell us to try again. If in frustration, we told him we couldn't do it, he would bellow "there's no such word as can't, only won't" and send us back to try again. If we finally gave up and admitted defeat, he would only say "you mean there is no way it can be fixed?" and if we didn't go back to trying, then God help us because in a few minutes the thing was working perfectly and we had to eat our words. I don't ever remember seeing something he couldn't fix, if he set his mind to it. I've seen him take apart many things, just to find out how they worked, and if he needed a special tool to do a particular job, he would usually just make it.

He was a very inventive guy, and often thought "outside the box". He was very creative in his solutions to problems, and like any good engineer, many things he would come up with would do several jobs using just one part, in other words light and efficient. I think he only made it to Grade 8 before going out into the working world, but a lack of formal education didn't hold him back. He had more common sense than anyone I've ever known, and his mechanical ability was next to none, something he undoubtedly inherited from his Grandfather, George Beatty, after whom he was named. Few people know that when he grew up in Edmonton, he was known as "Beatty" Sterne, during the Navy years as "George", and after returning to civilian life as "G.B".

One good example of his inventiveness and mechanical ability was the first air compressor we had in Sidney. He took a blown engine from a Model "T" Ford apart and converted it. Number 1 cylinder was unusable, so he took out that rod and piston and ran the engine on the centre two cylinders, modifying the intake and exhaust manifolds to prevent leaks. He poured the combustion chamber on #4 cylinder full of babbitt to raise the compression, and installed a poppet valve in the spark plug hole with a line running to the Air Tank. Then he removed the tappets from the valves on that cylinder, and installed a light spring under the intake valve so that it would open under the suction of the intake stroke. Every time the piston moved down, it would suck fresh air in through the intake port, and when the piston moved up, the air was forced into the Pressure Tank. Very simple and efficient. He mounted the individual spark coils on the wall and ran them with a transformer from house current. I think that compressor ran from when it was built, probably around 1947, until we moved to the second Garage about 1960.

When he was growing up, he became a crack shot with a rifle and shotgun, and I still have his target shooting jacket and .22 rifle, and Bill has his old shotgun. He used to go hunting with his motorcycle and sidecar, and come back with it loaded with game. I can remember him telling me of getting 23 green-head Mallards (ie drakes) in one morning, and his first "business venture" was as a boy, shooting rabbits, skinning them, and drying the pelts. He made 5 cents a pelt for his time, because he sold them for 6 cents and he figured he could get 25 rabbits with a box of 50 shells, and .22 shells cost 25 cents a box at the time. When we lived in Sidney, he and Bill hunted pheasants regularly, and I can remember having a goose dinner which he downed with a single shot in the head with the .22 while leaning against the office door in Sidney. He paced off the range, and it was just over 100 yards!

When the Morgan business declined because we could no longer bring in cars, Dad looked around for something else to sell, and his love of the Sea brought him to sailing. He became a dealer for the "Matilda" trailerable sailboats, made in Ontario, and had one himself, the "Lydiatoo". He never did as much sailing as he would have liked, but the few times I was out with him, he really enjoyed it. It is strange how many people who raced at Westwood went on to take up sailing as a hobby. From the noise and competition to the serenity of wind and sail, quite a contrast! Maybe it's because once you have tasted throwing a Morgan around a racetrack, nothing else can compete, and so a complete change of hobby is necessary.

During all the years my Dad raced and sold Morgans, he tried to get a Club going for enthusiasts. It never happened until after he retired, when a few local owners got together and formed the Morgan Owner's Group, Northwest. This group has grown and grown over the years, and happily, before my father's death in 1990, they were able to see a large group of Morgans gather at their retirement cottage in Qualicum on Vancouver Island. The warmth and fellowship of that happy occasion, the stories told, and the memories relived, only dent the surface of our deep involvement and love for the Morgan and the special people who own them. The one quote I remember from that day is "you can ask to borrow my wife, but NEVER ask to borrow my Morgan!" It is this type of camaraderie, this intensity of the love of the Morgan, which is the Morgan factory's enduring legacy.

The last Morgan my father owned was a 1972 Plus 8, White with Black Wings, of course. It was never raced, and is now lovingly owned by my brother Bill. He attends many of the MOGNW events, as does my long time friend, Dave Collis, who served his apprenticeship as a Mechanic under my Dad at Sterne Motors. Dave still has the Blue and Black 4/4 - 2 seater which he raced for many years.

Unfortunately, I have been without a Morgan since 1980, when as a young married man, I gave up my beloved Mog to renovate my parent's house which I had purchased to raise my young family. My life took another path, designing and manufacturing Radio-Controlled Racing Yachts, at which I have been most successful. My designs have won many National and International events, including a World Championship in 1980, and a string of 7 U.S. National titles in a 9 year period. However, there is hardly a day goes by that I don't fondly remember being behind the wheel of my 4/4 - 2 seater, or my Dad's Plus 8, blasting around the Westwood racing circuit, which is now a subdivision, covered in (very expensive) homes, and only a few minutes from where I live today.

The Navy.

Dad's Navy days....So many stories I can't remember them all.

Convoy duty in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, their tiny wooden Fairmile sub-chaser sandwiched between massive freighters. Total blackout, and being able to reach out and strike a match on a rusty hull. Seas so rough he was able to see the ASDIC dome underneath another Fairmile in their flotilla, as the ship leapt off a huge wave. It was a third of the way back from the bow, and 4 feet below the hull.

Refuelling in Cuba by "bucket brigade" in the hot tropic sun. The Fairmiles used aviation gasoline. An order coming down after a tragic explosion and fire on a Fairmile that when refuelling, the Main Breaker was to be pulled. This, of course, would disable the fans that vented the bilges and tank compartments. My Dad disregarded the order, and was nearly court-martialled over it. When an officer "with eggs all over his cap" (ie high ranking) told him to pull the breaker, he refused because it was too dangerous. The officer told him to have one of his men do it! My Dad told the officer that he would not have any man in his command do anything he was not prepared to do himself and told the Officer he could "pull it himself". After all hell broke loose, eventually, the order was rescinded.

While on shore leave in the Southern U.S., my Dad was hassled by the Shore Patrol for "being out after curfew", which didn't apply to the Canadian seamen. An argument ensued, resulting in two large SP's on the ground, and my Dad limping back to his Ship. He lost a prized Fountain Pen in the scuffle, and was called to the headquarters of the U.S. Shore Patrol the next day to have it returned. The C.O. wanted to see the "man who tangled with his SP's and lived to tell about it".

My favourite Navy story was "Racing Fairmiles on the West Coast". The War never really touched those on this Coast, at least in terms of action. The Fairmiles would patrol the Straights of Juan deFuca, and then be relieved by another Flotilla. They would then race all the way back to the Victoria breakwater, for bragging rights, and to be the first to refuel and take on provisions - and hence the first to get shore leave. My Dad won every race (what a surprise), and it was said that "Sterne's crew went ashore on the heaving line" (ie the first thing to hit the dock).

I'm sure that this success was due in no small part to his savvy with engines. The engines in the Fairmile were converted Aircraft V-12's and didn't take kindly to running at low throttle for extended periods. My Dad would simply shut one off, and could thereby run the other engine up higher in the "powerband" while cruising with the convoys or patrolling. It made the boat a bit slower off the mark, and was completely in contravention to regulations, but if you had to go any distance, both engines pulled cleanly, and without fouled spark plugs. The dual

plug arrangement had a nasty habit of drilling a hole right through the cylinder head if one plug fouled, causing the engine to ping.

One winter, my Dad's Fairmile flotilla went to patrol the Caribbean, and he got off watch after they had anchored and decided to go swimming. He got in his bathing suit, and went up on deck, and looked over the side at some of the guys. The water was crystal clear, and you could see the bottom very clearly, with all the rocks and coral. He dove in and swam over to the guys, and they asked him if he thought he could dive to the bottom. My Dad used to be on the swim team in Edmonton, and I have seen him swim the length of the Crystal Garden's pool in Victoria underwater, which is 50 metres, on one breath, and that was when he was in his 50's. The bottom looked like it was maybe 15 feet down, so he said "no problem". He took a normal breath, did a duck dive, and down he went. Well, needless to say, the other guys already knew that it was really deep, and the clear water fooled you into thinking it wasn't, and they figured there was no way that Dad could make it.

After he was down about 20 feet, he realized that it was a lot deeper than he thought, but he kept going. He swam on down, feeling the pressure building, and grabbed a handful of sand to prove he made it and started back up. By the time he reached the surface, he was nearly unconscious, but held up his hand and let the sand trickle out. He told me "there was no way I was going to come back up without proof I made it". Now THAT's determination !

Edmonton Police days

Regarding the motorcycle accident which nearly took Dad's life while he was in the Edmonton Police Force. I heard it as follows: He was returning from a First Aid course, and a girl ran into the street. Dad nearly got stopped, but the girl ran into the corner formed by the front wheel and handlebars, and twisted them sideways, throwing my Dad over the handlebars. He was quite experienced in tumbling as a kid, and had fallen off motorcycles enough times, so he braced himself for a "tuck and roll" landing. Unfortunately, there was a fire hydrant in the way, his hands straddled it, and it caught him in the forehead. He was taken to hospital, and not expected to live. There just happened to be a brilliant Neurosurgeon on call that night, and they took him immediately to surgery. After a few days in a coma, he regained consciousness, and was eventually released from hospital. The first thing he did when he got home was fire up the motorcycle and ride it around the block to make sure it was OK !

A few days later, he went to see the Doctor for a follow-up. When the doctor asked him how he got their, he said "on my motorcycle". The astonished Doctor explained to him that after such a serious head injury he shouldn't be riding, but I can imagine how much my Dad would have listened to that advice. His only complaint was the huge scar on his forehead, and the Doctor simply said "well, when they walk past the coffin to pay their last respects, they don't look very close". He had never expected my Dad to recover. They later removed most of the scar, and my Dad had what looked like a premature wrinkle on his forehead ever after. A while later, my Dad got a bad cold, and the centre of his forehead began to swell up. Apparently, one of his sinuses was damaged, and couldn't drain properly. Eventually, the abscess broke, and collapsed inward, causing what my Dad described as "another belly button" in the middle of his forehead, a feature that he had the rest of his life. Occasionally, during a bad cold, it would discharge slightly, and you would see him wiping it. Other than that, it never caused any problem, and my Dad never, ever, had a headache, from the accident onwards.

Police story #1

My Dad & I were on a business trip in the Plus 4 Plus, in the mid 1960's. If I recall, the purpose of the trip was to try and establish, or visit, Dealerships in the Northwest. We visited Edmonton, Spokane, the Tri-Cities, and the Seattle area, on a "circle tour" of the Northwest. I can remember Dad carving through the Thompson River valley, thoroughly enjoying the winding road.

The only other part of the trip that sticks in my mind shows a lot about what my Dad, an ex-policeman, thought about your average traffic cop, and their equipment. We were somewhere in Washington state, and my Dad noticed a Police Cruiser, from what I remember a mid to late 50's sedan (no doubt with drum brakes all around, and probably smaller than those on the back of the Morgan), in the mirror. We drove for a long time, right at the 70mph speed limit, and eventually the Cruiser pulled up on our left on the freeway. My Dad had a suspicion that they were going to pull us over, and warned me that he might make a pretty quick stop. There was a light on the right front fender of the Cop car, pointing backwards, with the word "Police" on it. My dad had already determined that there

was no other cars even close behind us, and sure enough the light blinked on. Dad made a perfectly controlled panic stop, pulling over onto the shoulder of the road at the same time, the disc brakes on the +4+ hauling us from 70 to zero in probably about 170 feet, tires complaining, on the verge of locking up, just the way you would brake going into the hairpin at Westwood.

The surprised and astonished Cops hit the brakes, locking up and releasing the brakes several times, and finally slid to a stop what looked to me like a quarter of a mile down the road. The two Cops got out of the car, and WALKED all the way back to us. My Dad, by the time they got there, was sitting on the fender of the +4+, his wallet out and waiting, and smoking a cigarette! When the cops got close enough, the first thing out of their mouth was "What the HELL kind of brakes have you got on that car ?" It was all I could do to keep a straight face. It turned out that they had stopped us "because we were driving the U.S.A. with a B.C. Dealer's plate, and they wanted to know why". To this day, I think it was because they wanted to know what kind of car it was. They of course did nothing but bid us a pleasant day, and walked back to the Police car, to the tune of the +4+ accelerating rapidly past them.

Police story #2.

Dad & I were in the Super Sport, coming back from Spokane. Dad had lost the rear license plate during the race, and took the front plate off and put it on the back (no decals in those days), as he figured he was less likely to attract attention that way, and we couldn't get a new plate until Monday anyway. We were in downtown Vancouver on the way to the Tsawwassen ferry to go back home, and a motorcycle Cop pulled us over. When he got off the bike, he came up to Dad and asked where his front license plate was. Without thinking, my Dad says "It's on the back!". The cop, fortunately one with a sense of humour, said "that's an Irish answer if I ever heard, one. Try again!". So my Dad explained what happened. We got a warning ticket for no front plate, and a reminder to get one on Monday.

While this was going on, two beat Cops stopped to see what was going on, and to look at the car, of course. They insisted on looking at the engine, and my Dad, growing anxious because we had a ferry to catch, grudgingly obliged. Then another Cop car pulled up alongside, lights flashing, wondering why 3 cops had gathered. When told (in jest) by the original motorcycle cop that he had caught my Dad going 80 on Granville St. and what should he do, the new arrivals said "well, at least give him a warning". Soon, Dad was showing off the Weber carbs to all 5 Cops, giving his usual sales pitch! When the cops finally left, we had the wildest ride to the Ferry you can imagine. I remember seeing nearly 6000rpm in top on Hwy. 17 a couple of times. Good thing there were no police around then! We barely made the last ferry of the night.

Police story #3.

Actually, this is more of a Court Room drama. My Dad was once called to court to testify on behalf of a Victoria Motor Sports Club member who was accused of dangerous driving after being stopped on the old West Saanich road for driving his Austin Healey much too fast. The police chased him, no light on, for several miles before finally catching up to him at a stop light and pulling him over. They were driving a very old tank of a car, with nearly bald tires, and it was raining. In those days, the twisty old West Saanich road was posted at 50mph, and it took a very good car to average that, especially in the rain.

The police testified in court that they had nearly lost control several times trying to apprehend the driver of the Healey, and described the conditions. When my Dad took the stand, he testified that he had recently fitted the Healey with Michelin X tyres, renowned for their performance in the rain. When he was shown pictures of the tyres on the Police Car, he apparently laughed out loud in court, berating the officers for driving such a dangerously equipped vehicle. He said that if anyone was driving dangerously, it wasn't the accused, but the Cops! Apparently, when pressed, the officers admitted that they were never really close enough to the Healey to clock him properly. Not only did he get off on the dangerous driving charge, he even beat the speeding ticket!

Bob Meets Peter Morgan

I met Peter Morgan in person twice. The first time was in the summer of 1964, when I was fortunate enough to tour through Europe with a group of 250 Canadian high school graduates. I was only 15 at the time, and I can clearly remember the highlight of my trip being my visit to the Works. I was staying in Bristol at the time, and caught the train to Malvern, to be met by Mr. Morgan in a Plus 4 Plus. We drove to the factory, and he gave me a personal tour,

and I remember seeing a couple of Morgans under construction for my father's Company. I still have vivid memories of watching the cars being built by hand; the body framing parts being made in the woodworking shop; the kingpins being turned on a lathe while the machine operator dialled in by hand a "bit of correction" for the taper the old machine was producing; a craftsman installing the wire edge in the bonnet by hand; and the elderly gentleman building a grille, bending the bars by hand and laying them in the old jig for hand soldering. I still get a smile when I think about it.

Mr. Morgan retired to his office and assigned a worker to follow me around and answer any questions, and then we went to The Morgan home for a late lunch. I met Charles Morgan and his mother, and remember seeing Charles's large Model Railroad layout. I had never seen anything like it, very impressive! After lunch, we returned to the factory, and I wandered around, surrounded by the wonder and mystique that only the Morgan factory can provide, seen through the excited eyes of a teenager who had been around Morgans and racing as long as he could remember. I knew then that I would someday own and race a Morgan, and eventually that dream came true for me. The Morgan family have made this dream possible for so many over the years.

When it came time to leave, I remember shaking Mr. Morgan's hand, and I remember the kindness and friendship in his voice and eyes, and that wonderful smile. He called in a young Draftsman and threw him the keys to the Plus 4 Plus, and said, "take Mr. Sterne back to his place in Bristol, and by the way, I have a dinner appointment this evening and need the car back by 5:00 pm." I didn't know it at the time, but it was apparently a 40 mile trip to Bristol, and it was 4:00 pm. After blasting along at speeds up to about 110 mph over 3 lane country roads, with passing in both directions in the centre lane, we arrived at my hotel in Bristol in just 28 minutes, an average of over 80mph. I'm sure the young man had no trouble having the car back at the Works in plenty of time Mr. Morgan's dinner appointment! That ride is forever burned in my memory, along with some of my many race victories driving my own Morgans in later years.

I met Peter Morgan again, many years later, when he came to visit us here in Vancouver. This was after the Morgan could no longer be imported into Canada, and my father and I discussed with him the possibility of altering the car so that we could continue to import them. Although Peter sympathized with us, the factory was, of course, so busy, that he couldn't possibly produce a variant just for us. Canada, at the time, had a special exemption for limited production vehicles, but the car had to have a placard affixed that stated that the vehicle did not comply with such and such safety standards. Peter Morgan felt that this was like saying that the Morgan wasn't safe, and we all knew that this simply wasn't true. He had no intention of affixing such a plaque, and although this meant the death of the Morgan in Canada, both my father and I admitted that we could understand his position, and respected and shared his pride in the marquee. The final number of Morgans imported by my father stood at about 160 cars, during the period from 1955 to 1972.

The three generations of The Morgan family can take extreme pride in the legacy they have left to the World of Motorsport, and to Morgan lovers everywhere. Every time a Morgan owner turns a key, and that glorious exhaust note rises to his ears; every time he bends it into a corner and feels the car respond as if it's a very part of him; and every time he smiles as he washes his precious Morgan, rubbing his hands over her sensuous curves; Peter Morgan will feel the warmth, love, and admiration of his extended family.

You don't drive a Morgan - you put it on - it becomes a part of you forever...

GB's Trophies.

When my Dad's race wins got to 200, we applied to the Guinness Book of World Records for recognition.... with all the appropriate documentation.... supporting letters from the ICSCC and the SCCBC.... We asked for TWO records.... one for the most race wins by a driver (since broken by Richard Petty at 206?).... and the other for the most race wins by a single driver in a single marquee.... a record which would probably have stood forever.... Their answer?.... Stirling Moss was a professional driver and they weren't interested in my Dad because he was an amateur! So much for "World Records". The record did NOT state it was for professional drivers, and you can BET that both Moss and Petty included MANY victories that were NOT achieved during their professional career. When Stirling Moss was at Westwood, he REFUSED to wear any helmet except my Dad's. We have photos of him driving Bob McLean's Lotus 23B against "Flying Phil" Gagliardi who drove my Dad's Super Sport.

The Windmill Story.

My Dad, as a teenager, was sent to the Peace River country in Northern Alberta, to install the biggest windmill Beatty Brothers made. The tower was, I think, 70 feet, and was made in 6'7" sections and assembled from the ground up. Once the tower, with its tiny wooden platform at the top, was completed, the gearbox and the fan and tail has to be hoisted up and assembled. Normally my Dad would have another chap help him, but in this case the farmer didn't want to pay for a second man, and told my Dad he would help him.

The two of them climbed the tower, and spent quite a long time assembling the powerhead of the Windmill. The farmer seemed fine, but when he climbed down off the tower, he kneeled down, kissed the ground, and told my Dad that if "that contraption" ever needed servicing, he would have to bring someone to help him because "I'm NEVER going back up there". My Dad had a good laugh, and went on to the next installation!

I have found a vintage Beatty Pumper (windmill) just North of Kelowna, and I am installing it on our property in Coalmont, just West of Princeton, BC. It will be dedicated to my Great-Grandfather, George Beatty, my Grandfather, W.H.S. Sterne, and my Dad.

Racing in the Glory Days at Westwood

There was a prank my Dad and Jack Murray (with my Mom's help) pulled at Westwood in the early 1960's. Jack was from Seattle, and raced against my Dad with a TR3, and later with a black Plus 4 2 seater, beating Dad in nearly every race after he bought the Morgan. Then he bought the first Super Sport we brought in, a high-bodied 1962, Flame with Black wings. I have a photo of Jack & Dad in the hairpin at Westwood in about 1961. Anyway, Jack got dressed up as a woman, complete with dress and wig, donned my Dad's helmet, and entered Dad's 1960 4-seater in a Novice race at Westwood. So that nobody would know what was going on, he waited until the cars went from pre-grid out onto the grid, then came flying down the hill, through the pits, and right out onto the track, just in time for the Starter (who was in on the gag) to drop the green flag. The announcer, wasn't in on the gag, and started talking about this woman in Dad's car that suddenly joined the race. He went by the name of Mary Williams.

Being a fabulous driver, Jack, skirt billowing and curls flying, overtook the field and was soon in second place. When he got close to the leader, the guy started to drive harder and harder, so much so that Jack got worried about the guy crashing. Jack decided that if he passed him, he might calm down, so going into the hairpin, he dove down the inside, and flipped his curls at the guy on the way by. The guy went nuts, and Jack became so concerned about his safety, he backed off and let the guy by, and things calmed down. In the meantime, the announcer was going nuts, and everybody was coming to talk to Mom to try and find out who the gal was. Mom mumbled something about "some friend of G.B's" and stomped off. Dad just grinned and kept quiet.

Now, Jack didn't belong in the Novice race, and didn't want to take anything away from the new drivers, so on the last lap, he came out of the hairpin, and started turning the key on and off to pretend the car was cutting out. Coming out of the Esses, he coasted to a stop, on the infield side, and got out and started pushing the car to the finish line. All those in the pits could now see Jack's long hairy legs, and started to laugh, but the announcer (on the infield) was going crazy, talking about this poor woman trying to get her car to the finish. A very gallant Roy Curtis, who handled the communications system, came dashing over from the infield to help push, and Jack, trying not to laugh, looked away from him and continued to push. After they crossed the finish line. Jack took off his helmet, flipped his curls at the gallant gentleman, and said "thanks, Roy". All a very flustered Roy Curtis could manage was "for Christ's sake!... Jack Murray !!!"

Surely this, better than any other story, tells of the fun it was to race sports cars in the glory days. I have a photo of Jack, wearing Dad's helmet, complete with flowing curls and a dress, standing beside Dad's 1960 4 seater. It was taken after the race.

R.B. (Bob) Sterne