

# A Detour From Reality

## THE ADVENTURES OF A MIDDLE AGED MR. TOAD

by Robert S. Bell

**"Bring a hammer in case you have to beat on the fuel pump. . . ."**

**T**HESE WORDS ECHOED in my head as I sidled into my 1960 Austin-Healey 3000 late one February night to drive from Eugene to Newport on the Oregon coast. A New York film company commissioned by a Canadian beer brewer was in the process of pro-

ducing a yuppie-type TV commercial. With the help of Warren Merrill, whose Salem-based concern recruits filmmakers to Oregon, several spectacular spots along the Oregon coast had been selected for filming. The director of the 25-member company of crew and actors wanted to use re-

stored British motor cars for some of the scenes.

Rex Urban, owner of Mini Motors, whose firm restored my Healey a few years ago, had been contacted by Merrill who inquired if he could provide some British cars . . . "a white one, a green one, a blue one. . ." and

so on.

The nature of film producing, as I have come to learn, is that everything is wanted yesterday and then may not be used. Thus Rex's call from his Salem home asking of my availability and use of the A-H for one, two, three or maybe four days, or maybe not at all, came only a few hours before prospective filming along the coast.

I told Rex I would consider and call him back.

Hanging up, a mental image formed in my mind's eye of the old Healey suddenly being catapulted out from under a car blanket in the obscurity of the garage and into 30 seconds of star-studded TV limelight, surrounded by a bevy of Beautiful People sipping exotic imported spirits.

Actually it took me as long to make up my mind as it did Mr. Toad of *The Wind in the Willows* when he was dazzled by the prospect of wheeling around in his "wonderful red motor-car." What I needed was a couple of hours to rearrange my work schedule. That luckily accomplished, I telephoned Rex and told him thumbs up.

*I envisioned the Beautiful People going through their paces using someone else's British roadster. . .*

**H**UNKERED OVER THE steering wheel of the blue British roadster and roaring through the coastal mountain range in the middle of a starry night, strange noises belched from under the bonnet and I wondered aloud about Rex's advice concerning the hammer. In 12 years of ownership this fine old English racing car had survived my multiple marriages, two obstreperous offspring, three jobs and had held my "youth" in high gear. But in all those years I had yet to experience the joys of a malfunctioning electric fuel pump or as many miles in a single outing. Hearing a particularly ominous "thunk," I envisioned the Beautiful People going through their paces using someone else's British roadster, while I lay on the side of the road by the ancient broken machine, beating the beejebers out of the fuel pump.

Happily though, I pulled into the Newport Hilton parking lot at 11 pm without so much as another cough from the old buggy, which acted as if this trip was made daily. I spied the two other English cars to be used in the film and began to feel giddy. "Fantasy Land, here I come," I thought and sauntered into the lobby wearing shades, fully prepared to grant interviews to an adoring mob of media personalities. Of course, the place was empty save for a sleepy night clerk and two noisy drunks who had long overstayed their welcome to the bar.

Sliding up to the desk, I told the night clerk I was "with the film company," and she said, "Oh yes, Mr. Bell, you are in room 310, and you also have a message."

The message, it seems, filtered out from some unknown source within the depths of the company saying the group had spent the day filming at Devil's Elbow state park and the "blue one" would be needed for Thursday morning in Bandon, some 150 miles to the south.

This communique and others like it in the ensuing days seemed to materialize out of nowhere. As the idea for the beer commercial began to take form and assume life, I could identify no one specific "general" as being "in charge." Rather, there were lots of generals, all of whom seemed to be in charge. To an outsider this bizarre business seemed one of dis-

order and disarray. Yet a purpose was being served, a product was being made, people were being paid for their "work" and a mountain of money was being spent. The producers had rented two huge Wine-bagos, a couple of large panel trucks to haul equipment, and a half-dozen or so cars, besides paying hotel space, meals, and salaries for its crew and appendages, like myself. Everyone played a role in this fleeting saga until, at the end, it dispersed like smoke in the wind. Deceptively there was an order and rhythm to the whole enterprise.

"Just lie back and enjoy it, Bob," I said to myself, "and hope the fuel pump doesn't misbehave."

Winter on the Oregon coast is traditionally dark, stormy and blustery. In fact natives migrate to the coast in February in order to watch firsthand the sometimes raging storms. This February week, however, was uncharacteristically warm, calm, blue, uncrowded, and almost Mediterranean-like. Oregonians winked at each other when they told the visitors about the "normal" weather for this time of year.

One abrupt East-coaster blurted out that he saw no good reason to travel all the way west when they were enjoying the same beautiful weather at their beaches.

I'd forgotten how New Yorkers tend to think of their city as the center of the universe and all outside as uncharted, inhospitable wilderness. When I mentioned the error in making this film on the East coast because "the ocean would be on the wrong side," the actor just gave me an uncomprehending stare.

*I was quickly adjusting to this strange world of image-making. . .*

**T**EN PM WEDNESDAY night found me in Coos Bay having oysters and wine at the Thunderbird with Rex, his wife Teri, and a part-Indian Oregonian named Dave, who had just graduated from clown school in Florida. Like Mr. Toad, who had been easily seduced into unreality, I was quickly adjusting to this strange world of image-making and ready for more.

Somewhat later, one of the generals, wearing a baseball cap and a scarf of the colors of the British flag, strode up and announced we would caravan at 6 am to Bullard's Beach state park near Bandon, about 20 miles south. First, they would "shoot the sea plane" by the lighthouse, then "do the roadster."

And line up we did, an assembly of rolling stock rivaling any wagon train the Oregon Trail had ever seen. At 5 am someone asked where coffee for the crew could be found. I located a restaurant at 5:30 that had just opened and will never forget the incredulous look on the sleepy waitress' face when she was told we needed three gallons of coffee in 20 minutes.

A long, flat ribbon of a road nestling behind a low-lying sand dune and the ocean was the site chosen to use the "blue one." With actors and others milling about, we pulled the top off the Healey and waited anxiously while the camera crew stationed themselves some distance at right angles to the road.

A bright red, water tanker truck from the City of Bandon slowly hosed down several hundred yards of the road which, to the camera's eye, I was told, would create the effect of making the road appear to dazzle.

The youthful actor who would drive



PHOTOS BY ROBERT BELL

Bell's Austin Healey at Bandon Lighthouse.

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Eugene, Oregon 97405  
(503) 484-0519

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