

# Going Home

Getting to the 30<sup>th</sup> Lotus Owners Gathering was only half the battle, one which I detailed in the article *LOG MATH 4+2=1*. Here we were in lovely Gettysburg with two cars over forty years old that had already travelled 2,345 miles with the assistance of our riding mechanics from the Lincoln Lotus Centre (LLC) now facing another 1,800 miles without them - only my wife Ann and me in one car each. Now some of you may know that Ann is a great sport about my playing with these old Lotus cars and she accompanies me on most all the trips I take. As a passenger. She had a total of ¼ mile of seat time driving the Seven and had never driven the Elan. So, we put her in the Elan. What, me worry?

Before we could leave, I had a problem to resolve on the Elan. We had attempted to refill the transmission with gear oil after arrival at the Eisenhower only to find the fill plug not removable. It was so stuck that three different attempts with multiple tools and muscles hadn't accomplished anything except rounding the formerly square shaped plug. If we were to get home it would need to be removable so oil could be added. In fact it needed some to start the trip. During the LOG we had made some half hearted attempts to find a repair shop without success. Now it was critical. Geoff Cole, while at the NAPA store, had the shop suggest "Rooster's Repair". Now, there is a name to inspire confidence, no? Out we went in the country west of Gettysburg to find Rooster. When we finally found the shop, Rooster wasn't there but "Junior" was. He caught me out with his opening line; "I'm only here because I don't work today". After clearing up that he was not at his "regular" heavy equipment mechanic job, he listened to our tale of woe and said "I have a tool that can loosen any bolt!" After 10 minutes, he admitted defeat and suggested high heat. Fearful of Elan flambé, I asked if there were any other way, so he brought out his last resort tool. It was a tapered socket-like affair with teeth that gripped when turned anti clockwise. Usually it would be hammered on the offending bolt head but there was no room to swing a hammer here. Instead, using a pry bar for leverage, he applied all the force he could muster on the top of the device and the plug turned. Once removed, he found a suitable plug for the hole, filled it with hypoid oil and we were on our way.

Brian Green, ace LLC guru, had kindly washed both cars and they looked resplendent despite the hard miles already run. Perhaps we should have done that before the Concours the previous Saturday as they really did clean up well, but we had wanted to present them as they arrived with all the patina they had earned. While many spent hours cleaning their cars for presentation, we had, after all, spent eight full days detailing ours. Apparently, the significance of our saga was lost and all they saw was the dirt. We still stood proud.

Geoff Cole, the other ace LLC guru, told Ann how to start the Elan as I was already ensconced in the Seven, a procedure that takes many minutes to accomplish, and, also, everyone knows one should never tell a spouse how to do any thing. Preparing to leave the Eisenhower Hotel, Ann had only one request. Before we left she wanted to stop to get Heinz Genuine Dill pickles which are not available in Colorado stores. I failed her...we left with no pickles! We made it all the way to Maryland without incident or pickles, a distance of some 15 miles. With only 1,785 more to go, we were practically home.

We had a pretty good experience with West Virginia once Ann began to believe in the powers of the Elan. At the beginning she would follow the recommended speeds for the 9% grades (one over 5 miles long) and twisty curves. These speeds are meant for logging trucks not Lotuses. As Ann put it “When we stopped you told me the Elan could handle these curves better than the Seven. It was those words that inspired me to trust Green Jean”. Green Jean, named after my mom, is Ann’s pet name for the Elan. As you might imagine our rate of progress picked up dramatically. The hardest part was driving into the setting sun. Some hill angles meant it was directly aimed at us and the low bonnet created a double dose of glare. We made it to Parkersburg, WV in the dark, tired but safe.

Ohio was uneventful so we were optimistic about our target of Indianapolis for the night until we got on the freeway surrounding the south side. Multiple lanes of big trucks, slow drivers and desperate moves to ramps and exit lanes were a lot to handle, but, again, it was heading into the setting sun that meant trouble. We couldn’t read the backlit signs. Just as we were about where I expected our exit to be coming up, I passed under the sign for it. Only then could I read it was closed for repair. Not having a plan “B” I was trying to dead reckon a route when a lady in a minivan slowed dramatically from about 50 mph to about 20 mph to let an 18 wheeler merge in from the right even though he had a long blend lane ahead. I slammed on my brakes and slowed just enough to miss her, hearing a simultaneous screech of tires behind me. That would be Ann. Luckily, she got stopped and even more luckily, no one was right on her bumper or we would have had a double meat Lotus sandwich. As we shakily passed the lady in the minivan, I noticed her obliviously yakking away on a cell phone. Figures! Finding a side road, we escaped the freeway, stopped and Ann said “That’s it! We’re off the Interstate until Denver!”

Knowing I had to fill the transmission gear oil every 6-700 miles I planned to do so in Indianapolis in the morning before setting out. The thing was, would it be Ann or me in the gutter crawling under the Elan. Then I had an inspiration...Jiffy Lube. They have all the pieces to do the job and neither Ann nor I would need to get dirty. I found one nearby and we drove over there fully intending to depart toward the west from there. The Elan was handled in quick time after coaxing it over the pit opening that was within a half inch as wide as it’s track. The owner even said no charge for topping up, (Still, I gave him \$20). Alas, when turning into the shop, I had hit a curb stop with the sump on the Seven and it had a significant engine oil leak. I said I could keep it filled but the lube shop guy said that would be every 25 miles at this rate of leaking. I sat and thought.

Once again I would find myself at the mercy of strangers, but with an advantage every Lotus Ltd. member should know they also have...the club directory. Picking a name at random from Indianapolis area in the directory Ann had brought (one who had noted that he would help travelers) I dialed and got Ben Tackitt. Catching Ben off-guard with my request for a shop that could diagnose and help, he asked to call me back. In about five minutes he called and told me of a shop called Gasoline Alley Tune Up about two miles from where we were. He volunteered to come to us and lead us there, but I assured him we could get there on our own and would meet him there. Good to his word, he was at Gasoline Alley Tune Up, right next to Sarah Fisher Racing’s IndyCar shop, and the guys were willing and able to take on the repair. Diagnosing a bulging front crank seal, they

soon had determined all that was needed was a new seal and we could be on our way after a quick installation by Lyle the mechanic.

There was only one problem: no seal could be found. Checking all the usual suspects, plus Auto Zone and Checker, as well as the seal distributor who carries every conceivable seal for industry, John found nothing. Nada! Meanwhile I was calling Ray at RD and Jeff at JAE. Both had the seal and could ship it overnight. Not just yet, I said.

Not wanting to spend another night in Indy, (nothing personal all you Hoosiers) I asked if they might remember anyone who had the seal then I could have one shipped to replace it. Nope. Then I had a bright idea that there might be a small engine shop that dealt with Formula Ford prep. It is the same Kent engine. John from Gasoline Alley Tune Up remembered a shop like that about a block away at the other end of Gasoline Alley. When we got there he warned me to not expect much as most of these small shops know what they have but not where they put it and need to scrounge for things. Sure enough, the proprietor, a Kiwi who was just sitting down to eat his sack lunch, allowed as he may have one and would search for it after lunch. "Come back about 1:30" he said. As we first turned to go, I turned and pleaded with him to look now and eat later. Folding down an attic access ladder from the ceiling, he grudgingly climbed into his spares storehouse above. Within seconds he reappeared with a NOS Ford part of far better quality than the one on the car. Pulling out my wallet with a \$10 bill showing, I asked how much for the seal which is normally about \$5. Looking straight at my hands he said \$10. Cheerfully I peeled it off and handed it over. He could have said \$20 or even \$50, I would have paid.

Back to the shop and Lyle kindly deferred his lunch until after the seal was installed and by 12:45 we were on our way. Within a few miles it began to rain so I pulled into a bay of a car wash to get out of the rain while I got my rain suit on. I then got fully over heated while searching for the Rain-X that I knew was there but never could find. For the next hour I think I barely saw the road. Ann says we drove through some of the prettiest wood lands of the trip with wonderful fall colors made drab and soggy with a heavy rain. One place, the bridge over Walnut Creek, I would love to see again in bright sunlight.

Finally, the rain eased and we stopped for lunch at the Tastee Freeze in Montezuma, IN where we had the best burgers in years. The clouds had cleared so all we had to contend with was a nasty cold north wind as we crossed the Wabash River and made our way to Illinois. We stopped for gas in Springfield where a somewhat knowledgeable local asked "Did you build your Cat-er-Ham?" I said "Nope. It's not a Kate-er-um. It's a real Lotus." Not missing a beat he said, "So, who makes Lotus?" A little knowledge is dangerous!

Having gotten a late start, we stopped for the night in Jacksonville, IL. Ann wanted to keep going to Hannibal, MO, but I was beat and it was getting dark fast. The next morning we got up early and drove in quite cold temperatures for a while on our way toward lunch at St. Joseph, MO. Ann had expressed a desire for a burrito of all things so when I spied a Taco Bell logo on an exit sign, we made our exit. Slowing at the Taco Bell, I heard a scraping sound from the Seven but decided to eat first and let things cool down. After lunch it seemed quieter so we made our way to the quick lube for our planned top up of the Elan's transmission oil. By the time we went the half mile the scraping noise in the Seven was now a grinding noise. I found the generator fan scraping

on the body of the generator. It was apparent the belt had been over tightened as it didn't deflect at all when pushed between the pulleys. I loosened it but to no avail. The bushings were shot and it would not charge the battery. There was but one solution, I pulled out the back up belt I got in tiny Eureka Nevada when I last had this problem and bypassed the generator. Next stop: the local Kmart for a cheap battery charger which I found for \$33. Westward Ho!

We continued without problem into middle Kansas, to a little town called Belleville, and the S&H Motel, a typical 10 unit motor court from the '50's. After registering I asked if there were an outlet where I might plug in my car for the night. As it turned out there was a regular customer who stayed there a couple of nights a week already plugged into the only outlet. He took core samples from telephone poles in the area, and had two battery chargers to recharge his drill batteries each night for the next days work. Sharon McGee, the lady that owned and ran the little motel kindly found an extension cord and a place to plug in so all the batteries could get a full boost. Leaving the Seven to charge we went to dinner at the Belle Villa restaurant in the Elan upon Sharon's high recommendation.

It turned out to be a great suggestion as Doug, the proprietor, had Tri Tip on the menu. Typically found in central California, (I always have some from the food vendors at Laguna Seca when there) Tri Tip is a particular piece from the bottom of the sirloin prepared with a rub of garlic and salt/pepper that is delicious. I asked Doug how he happened to have this fine delicacy on the menu in the middle of Kansas. He replied "I was taught how to make it by a California buddy while I was in the service. It's always been on the menu in my restaurants". It was excellent! If you are ever in Belleview KS, stop at the Belle Villa. I ate all of mine but Ann couldn't finish hers so we got a little box and took it back to the S&H Motel refrigerator. Before retiring I went to check the battery which was fully charged so I unplugged and went to bed. We, and the battery, were full.

In the morning we awoke to a temperature around 40 degrees so we bundled up and put the Tri Tip in the footwell of the Seven which was just like having it in the refrigerator. After about an hour the car temp and the ambient had climbed and that footwell just behind the exhaust manifold was no longer cold; it was like a warming oven. The Tri Tip was being reheated nicely. When we stopped the meat was a perfect eating temperature, tender and not a bit overcooked. Ahhh, road food!

Gas in western Kansas and eastern Colorado is scarce. I mention this because I did not realize that none of the small towns on the map would have gas stations. None. They had post offices, parks, schools, stores, houses and bars, but no fuel. We began to get nervous and I wished I had filled in Bird City, KS. We had stopped at Big Ed's there for lunch upon Dan Crow's recommendation that it was the best steak he had ever eaten and a "Do not miss". The sign said "Ladies Welcome" but, apparently, they were not, as it was closed. Fortunately, the Coors truck was making a delivery and the guy was nice enough to tell us as he pointed next door that "right there!" were hot meals. So, we each ate an enchilada at the grocery store, "right there." Once we left Kansas it was at least 150 miles to the first station I knew. When one is low on gas in a small car in big sky country with a "whole lotta nothin" around it tends to lead to worrying. Thankfully we made it to Anton, CO to find a two pump place where nothing had been touched or changed for fifty years.

The pumps had to be manually reset, with a spinning glass showing the fuel was being pumped, and a uniformed attendant. Looking at his nametag, I read it twice to be sure I saw what I thought I saw...the name Festus. For a minute, as I looked for Matt Dillon and Miss Kitty, Ann thought I'd made a wrong turn and we were back in Dodge City.

We soldiered on into Denver metro rush hour traffic, a real concern for Ann after her Indianapolis stress. We found it was just early enough that we were able to be ahead of the normal rush hour traffic and, using east Colfax instead of I-70, run smoothly to our driveway and switch off with a great sense of accomplishment accompanied by abject relief that we were home safely. The cars had brought us home after 4,141 miles of every kind of road and a wide variety of weather. No disasters and no speeding or other traffic ticket. While we had some inconveniences, each of these contributed to the adventure rather than ruining it. But we were beat! Ann and I would clean the cars and unpack the junk the next day when I would find the Rain-X *exactly* where I put it in the back of the Seven. Today we would rest and relax from the vibe of the road.

After a few days of recovery and rumination I had the following thoughts regarding:

**Scale** - The USA is a **BIG** place and these Lotus cars we drive are small and vulnerable. It is almost as if the Elan and Seven are  $\frac{3}{4}$  size models of "real" cars and, although they did everything we asked of them, Ann and I felt at risk everywhere there was multi-lane traffic, especially where the big trucks roamed. Clearly, we would have been little more than a speed bump to them. We found we enjoyed the travel more on the secondary roads. That is really no surprise as those are like the English roads for which these cars were designed. Also, there was little or no respect shown to our two tiny green cars that were obviously travelling together. People would pull in between us anytime there was more than a car length gap, separating us and making us lose visual contact between each other with a big car in between. It was if they couldn't even see us. Or, worse yet, they could see us and did it anyway. Sharon at the S&H Motel perhaps said it best with her comment "Those look like keychain cars"

**Anachronism** –There is a lot missing from cars 42 and 45 years old that we take for granted in a modern car; simple weather protection for example. Even in the Elan with top installed and windows up a surprising amount of rain came in around the joints. Modern cars run at half the RPM for a given speed in top gear so they are much more relaxed. I noted that the Elan turned almost fourteen and a half MILLION engine revolutions on this trip – that's a lot of spinning. Generator, clutch, overheating car (*and* driver) are simply not part of automobile worries in even the most basic modern car. We found 350-400 miles a day was all we could do and we were worn out. We routinely do double those mileages per day in our current cars and are not really fatigued.

**Weather & Wind** –These are not really a concern for modern cars, while they are key to any trip in an old Lotus. The wind is omnipresent and affects decisions including what to wear and whether to pass. A cool sunny day is a delight but too warm or too cold means discomfort especially sitting in traffic when it is too hot. Rain creates another set of issues and wind and rain together means misery rather than inconvenience. A small temperature change can be felt immediately when going through a valley or over a river. Smells that never reach our noses in a modern car are omnipresent.

All in all, it is an awakening to travel as we did many years ago, both because it shows how far we have come in design and build quality of our cars and because it shows how insulated from the real world we have become in a modern automobile. I shared this thought with my friend Mike Ingelido upon my return as I was picking up a suitcase he had brought back from Gettysburg for us in his very modern and capable car. He listened to my tales of discomfort and said that I was not the only one who had had difficulty. He stated: "There were two or three times, maybe more, where, for a moment, I completely lost the signal on the XM satellite surround sound".

**A Simulation** - Several people have asked me what it was like to drive the Seven all that way. Here is the best I can offer. Take two small pieces of plywood and place them on the seat bottom and back respectively before you sit. Roll down just the two front windows to provide some of the proper buffeting. Turn on the heater to full hot with all the air aimed at the footwell to simulate the engine heat coming off the Seven. Install a heat lamp aimed at the left side of your face. Turn it on. Now, take one bungee cord and wrap it around your legs just above the knees and add another one around your arms and shoulders just above the elbows. If you have a car with selectable gears, find a gear that gives you about 16 miles per hour per 1,000 rpm and accelerate to 4,200 rpm probably second or third gear. Drive 1,800 miles

Of course, that really doesn't complete the experience of being dwarfed by 18 wheelers whose wheel centers are at eye level and where I can read road signs *under* the trailer. Or seeing the sweep of sky and scenery from an open car. Or getting the mesmerizing reflections off the tapered headlight buckets. Or the immediacy of the control input where, as soon as you think it, it happens. Right now. And it certainly doesn't convey the satisfaction of having beaten Kansas in such a car. Or the worry of whether Ann is doing OK in the Elan behind me. Of course, she did fine. I wonder how many other wives would be willing to do what she did. What a treasure I have in Ann.

Would I do it again? Probably not such a big trip and probably not on such big roads. Maybe I'll take a jaunt down the Mississippi river road from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico with lots of time and an ace Lincoln Lotus Centre riding mechanic along.

Yeah, that's the ticket.