

Little Car – Big Trip

I was racing my vintage Lotus Elan S2 at the Northwest Historics in Seattle in July 2000, and saw a 1968 Lotus Seven S3 at the Lotus Corral in the paddock between races. While I had wanted a Seven for a while, the price was a little higher than I had budgeted, and I was uncertain about whether I wanted a right-hand drive car. I wasn't quite ready to act, so I left it there and headed back home to Colorado. About two weeks later I got a phone call from a friend in the Evergreen Lotus Club saying that the owner, was going to sell the car at a very attractive price to a guy who had had low balled him because it was the only offer he'd had. The number was *well* below the previous price, even below my most optimistic thought of what I hoped to pay. He said, "Make Bob a little better offer he'll sell to you and the car will go to a good home." I did...and, as they say, the rest is history.

However, I still had to collect the car and get it home to Denver. So, I looked at getting it shipped and even thought about retrieving it by taking my race trailer up to Snohomish, a pretty little town just north of Seattle, but finally decided I needed a little adventure. Since God protects drunks and fools, after several beers I made a one-way reservation and flew up to Seattle. My daughter, who lives there, met me at the airport and drove me to Snohomish and the waiting seller. After an hour spent with him familiarizing me with the things he knew and after giving Rebecca a short ride, I stopped in "downtown" Snohomish at a Quick Lube for oil and filter, fluid check, and to hit the lube points. At about 4:00 I started off towards Wenatchee, my destination in Denver only 1,350 miles away in a tiny, topless car about which I really knew nothing. I drove through evergreen hills on Highway 2, a great winding road next to a stream, up and over Stevens pass, through a light shower, and continued on to Moses Lake where I stopped for the night. It was a very pleasant and smooth, but also pretty short, first day. So far, so good!

In the morning, I zigzagged across eastern Washington, specifically through the town of Kahlotus, with a stop at the "general store" for a soft drink in celebration of the name, and then over the Snake River gorge and into Lewiston, Idaho. There I picked up Highway 12 which goes across the hump of Idaho, on 200 of the most beautiful miles of road I've ever driven. US 12 follows the Clearwater River up to the top of the pass and the Lochsa River down the other side, weaving and bobbing like the river adjacent, but with smooth asphalt instead of water. There are roads that make us grin because they suit the car we have, and this road, Highway 12 in Idaho, like Highway 2 in Washington is a definite "Grin Road" And with almost no traffic to break the rhythm of the curves, I was just grinning the whole way. As to why there was no traffic that would become very clear a bit later.

At Lolo Montana, I stopped for gas and noticed oil coating the rear of the car. Checking underneath, I found an axle seal leaking, and with no seal in my spares, I did what any owner of an old British car would do... just topped up the diff, and kept going. By the time I reached Denver I'd used more than 2 quarts of 90 wt. The gas stop in Lolo marked the end of the eastern traverse over passes and through flat farmland. Now, I would turn south and run through the valleys of Idaho with long ranges of mountains on both sides.

As I drove south through the Bitterroot Valley, two things awed me. The valley is one of the most spectacular places I've ever seen and parts were burned beyond belief. In the summer of 2000 fires were rampant throughout the west as it was one of the hottest summers on record in the Northwest. As one of the largest, the fire in the Bitterroot Valley meant that Hot Shots, the gypsy bands of what we used to call "smoke jumpers" had come from all over the country to attack this big fire. Hundreds of firefighters were visible just a 1/4-mile off the road. The light green Forest Service pumper fire trucks and equipment were the only vehicles coming north for over 90 minutes with no one but me going south. I was told that they had just opened the highway south two hours earlier. The acrid smell of burning and the blackened forest were each testament to the power of nature. These Hot Shots might be used to this but I'm no hotshot so I felt puny and alone.

Onward I went to my evening destination, Salmon, Idaho, the largest town between Montana and Rexburg, ID near Wyoming. Still, it's a town of only about 6,000 people. When I arrived about nightfall, I found that there were no rooms left within 60 miles. All were taken by firefighters. A fire Captain in the gas station said there were rooms in Challis, Idaho about 63 miles away. He was certain of this because he had just sent two of his men there. My target became Challis. As I got ready to leave, he warned me to be sure not to take the left fork onto Idaho 28 because there was nothing for 122 miles that way. So, I filled my gas tank, my differential, and my stomach, and headed south.

Off I blasted, air temperature dropping into the 40's and the clear sky clouding over from the Southwest. As I drove, it got darker and colder, even with the heat coming off the engine filling the foot well. The stars were magnificent since there was no, and I mean NO, ambient light. Well, that made that line of clouds even more distinct driving south. After about 45 minutes, and having seen no other cars going either way, I was concerned about where I was in relation to Challis. I finally saw a route marker...Idaho 28. I had taken the wrong fork! Hoo Boy! There would be nothing for another 80 miles ahead, or I could go back 40 miles and then south 60 more. Nothing to do but proceed. About then I felt so much more tiny and insignificant, I was glad that God protects fools, too.

Another car's headlights became visible in my mirror and that was reassuring. After a long time, he finally caught up to me and passed. I was happy to now have a car to follow through the dark night but after passing me he cut back into the right lane so sharply that his "strafing" move startled me and I lifted off the gas pedal abruptly. When I resumed my previous throttle setting, the car ran roughly and seemed to have lost power. The revs began falling slowly as the taillights of the car that had passed, the only car I'd seen in 45 minutes, disappeared over a low rise.

My car was barely able to sustain speed and I was certain that something major had failed leaving me to fend for myself in wild rural Idaho. I could picture the headline: ***"Idiot found frozen in Lotus position, half eaten by Bear."*** As I struggled to maintain forward motion and came over the rise, I saw a mercury vapor light ahead. A farm or ranch with kindhearted people, I hoped. It was, in fact, a crossroads with a tavern, a closed general store and several dark buildings. As I coasted to a stop and untangled myself from the

bowels of the Seven, I was startled by the presence of people behind me. I had been wearing earplugs, (not a complete fool) so they were quite close before I heard them.

There were four teenagers. Again, my mind fashioned a headline ***"Rural gang dismembers man foolish enough to be driving an ancient Lotus with Lucas electrics - well after dark."***

It turns out they were great kids who had heard the car struggling and saw it under the light, and now wanted to see it. I explained my predicament, and wondered aloud if there were a warm place to catch some sleep and work on the car in the morning. One eager lad suggested I check at the Motel in "town". Where, asked I? Right there, said he, as he pointed to a dark house just across the intersection. So, I walked over and dutifully knocked on the door. A light came on inside, illuminating a man who had clearly fallen asleep in front of the TV, who then staggered to the door turning on the porch light. This, in turn, illuminated the "No Vacancy" sign. I remarked on the sign and was about to request the porch floor when he said, "Oh, Mother always forgets that. I think we have one left." Thinking he may be related to Norman Bates, I was relieved when "Mother" turned out to be his wife who ran the business. She sent me to a tiny cabin out behind the house usually rented to hunters and fishermen. In the Seven I sputtered around the house to an ice-cold cabin. It had a propane wall heater that finally scorched the temperature up to almost 60 degrees. I'd deal with car problems in the morning. I was exhausted.

Morning dawned clear and bright with a new blanket of snow on the mountains ringing this long valley. There was no fire evident here and the fall colors were beautiful. If only I didn't have a crippled car and over 700 miles still to go. There was frost on the car, but the sun was warming things so I took off the bonnet to have a look. The first thing that jumped out at me was a hose from the block up to the intake manifold that had popped out of a hole in the block. Well, it could be this I thought, as I looked around for other possible problems. I put the hose back in and noted that the other end went into the manifold below the carburetor. It was the PCV hose, and I realized the intake manifold would have been sucking air in after the fuel was mixed in the carb, resulting in a very lean mixture. No wonder it wouldn't run right! As I fired it up it ran great. I felt smug and breathed a sigh of relief. Man solved! It ran beautifully the rest of the trip.

Down through Idaho, into Wyoming, the scenery was spectacular - with snowcapped peaks, evergreen forests and rolling foothills up and through Driggs, Idaho. The two-lane roads were lightly traveled and the weather was a perfect 65 degrees and sunny. Over the pass, through the Grand Tetons, the car was in its element; with a rhythm and flow that one writer calls "Road Dancing." Another "Grin Road!" The winding curves led me right into Jackson Hole. There I stopped for a very pleasant lunch of a great cheeseburger and a beer. Sitting on the deck in the sun, looking over at the little Seven that got me here I felt one of those rare moments of real bliss. It wasn't much of a car; some tubes and sheet aluminum, an engine, four wheels with fiberglass covers, and two seats, yet it was all I really needed...in fact, all anyone might need. It got me here in good style and with any luck would get me the rest of the way home to Denver. Time to break my reverie!

I forced myself to get going again down Highway 191 south to the town of Pinedale. For some 75 miles it was lovely, but then it became rocky buttes and brown, dry, scrub brush. I was spit out of the beauty onto the ugly high prairie toward (yuck) Rock Springs. For the next 230 miles the Wyoming wind tried to rip my head right off my neck. This was the worst part of the trip; one for which the Seven is ill suited. The Grin Roads were gone, replaced by Grim Roads for 230 miles. I needed a hardtop and a fifth gear.

To get from Rock Springs to a southerly road into Colorado, requires 175 miles on Interstate 80 with the big trucks. Really Big, Fast, Trucks! I stayed in the right lane at about 65-mph, and hugged the right line as semis went by, trying to suck me into their wake. Looking up at the wheel centers of the big trailers impressed upon me again that I would be but a speed bump if they ran over me. As hard as I was pushing it seemed ironic that I could have driven under most of the trailers and hooked on for a free ride! Just before I was to finally turn off the big slab onto southbound two-lane Highway 130, a Wyoming Trooper stopped me. He hadn't seen a license plate from the westbound lane in his mirror, so he turned around and gave chase. After checking turn signals and brake lights, he admitted that he just wanted to see "what in the hell that little car was, anyway." We talked awhile and he wished me well and told me "to be careful next to those big trucks!" As if I needed to be reminded.

The rest of the trip was delightful. Highway 130 became a Grin Road called Highway 230 south of Saratoga and I stayed grinning as I crossed into Colorado. On what was now Colorado 125, the grins continued until I stopped for a late lunch in Walden. Thoreau's Walden was a bit different, yet the serenity and beauty must have been similar. He wanted to let go of a complicated life and get back to simpler things. I'm sure in the year 2000 the Seven would have filled the premise of simplicity. Through Granby and Winter Park on US 40 I grinned and at Berthoud Pass went over the Continental Divide at 11,500 feet and ran solid and true right on into Denver...grinning all the way.

I was home safe and sound after four days and five states. And, most amazingly of all, I had travelled 1,350 miles in an old, small, unfamiliar, right hand drive car with no top or weather protection, and without major problems, through some of the most remote space in this country. Remote space that was on fire no less! Everywhere I stopped people were both cheerful and friendly; charmed by this simple, little, open car. They asked at every stop where I had come from and where I was going. When I told them there was usually a low whistle and a head shake as they expressed encouragement for the journey and delight with the car. At the same time their delight was mixed with doubt about my sanity. I almost got a sense of their wistfulness that they didn't have the chutzpah to give it a go. I wasn't sure at first either, but, in retrospect, it was the most memorable trip I had ever taken. Until I took the next one...but that's another story!