

Coming Home

My original plan was to drive some 2,600 miles with a group of about 55 Lotus Seven type vehicles on the USA 2005 tour from Houston to San Francisco, but my 1968 Lotus Seven needed repair after 2,300, holing a piston from running too hard at Willow Springs Raceway. I struggled into Tehachapi, CA, spewing oil at a rate that would embarrass the Exxon Valdez. After suitable time and a generous application of money, the car was pronounced fit to travel under its own power home to Colorado. Knowing mountain weather, I had arranged with a friend and fellow Lotus owner Bill Roushey to tow my trailer to a point west of the Rockies until I joined him west of the potential bad weather. I had the perfect plan! Remember, Grasshopper, hubris is always tested.

Starting out for home at 5:00PM on November 11, 2005 from Vacaville, CA, I quickly discovered several things about California drivers after edging my way on to I-80... They drive big SUV's & trucks with very bright lights that pierce down the neck of a Seven driver and they drive them fast. I thought 80 was the route number, but it must be the suggested speed ... in the slow lane. Never have I felt so small and disposable. I wouldn't have amounted to much more than a speed bump to most of these vehicles. But I soldiered on hugging the right lane with the hope that once past Sacramento, things would be better as I had planned a route over the Sierras on US 50, a lovely winding road through Lake Tahoe and into Carson City, NV. I would have made it fine, too, but for three things. First, the misunderstanding, second, the weather; and, finally, the belt.

The Misunderstanding: Since they had only finished the rebuild that day, one of the shop guys had gone for a test drive, which, considering the 1350 mile trip on which I was about to embark, was a great idea. He said the gas gauge was on empty so he stopped to put in \$5.00 worth and I thought I heard 5 gallons. At \$3.29 a gallon that is a huge difference. I ran out of gas in the dark on the eastern part of Sacramento where the highway is 8 or 10 lanes wide, with no shoulder! Fortunately, I carry a spare gallon (since the gauge always reads empty), so I put it in with the cars and trucks whizzing by and made it to a gas station. After a refill of the spare gallon jug, the tank and the driver (20 oz Coke and a giant Snickers bar) it was on the road again. And that's when I met problem two.

The Weather: I had been a devoted student of the Weather Channel for about two weeks as I confirmed the dates for the trip and was pleased to note a high pressure dome was resting over the whole southwest for the weekend of my trip. As is often the case with western weather, local conditions belie the forecast and do as they please. Climbing the western slope of the Sierras I encountered a light mist. It wasn't really too bad until I got to Placerville where it started coming over the windshield and I simply couldn't see. I saw a small motel where the kindly innkeeper allowed me to park under the registration portico - the only cover around. The temp had fallen to about 40 degrees and the motel room managed to get to about 60 with the puny wall heater available, so I tucked in with the idea of an early start and a big day. I awoke before first light, shivering. I decided to get a jump on the day, dressed with every layer I could summon and opened the door to ... Snow.

At this point, the choice was to press on regardless, or call Bill and abandon the plan. As I have said before, God protects drunks and fools and I clearly wasn't drunk! Press On! The good news was that the sun came out and the road was dry within a few miles, it had been a little local system. On the other hand, as I climbed in altitude, it definitely got colder. And colder. And colder. By the time I got to the summit at 7,735 feet above sea level, it was about 16 degrees and I was getting stiff hands that could barely grip the wheel. So I stopped in South Lake Tahoe at the most wonderful International House of Pancakes restaurant a bit after 7:00 AM. They had just opened. The entire staff came out to look at this tiny car with the bundled up fool. And they gave me a huge mug of hot tea to wrap my hands around. Of course, after my two course dinner, I was starved and believing that loading up on calories would keep me warm, I had the biggest breakfast in months. Finally, fully filled and thawed, I rebundled and went out to the car when the waitress came out with a camera to document the stupidity of the human species.

Holding my head as high as I dared while keeping it out of the wind, I pressed on to the downhill run to Carson City. In the next hour I lost about 3,000 feet of elevation and gained about 30 degrees of temperature. Ahhh! One state down, three more to go.

Nevada. The empty West. The part of US 50 which is officially called (you can look it up) "The Loneliest Road in America" It is a beautiful two lane highway in perfect condition that runs roughly east/west across the center of Nevada and has none of the I-80 truck traffic that is so nerve wracking in a Seven. There are about a dozen little ranges of "mountains" that run in parallel fashion, north/south across the state. US 50 runs straight as a string across the valley floors between these ranges and then wiggles up and over to the next valley floor then straight til the next wiggle...an absolutely perfect sports car road except for one thing. It is "The Loneliest Road in America"

Once you leave Fallon at the western edge of Nevada until you reach Ely in the Eastern part of Nevada, a distance of 256 miles, there are only two towns with any services at all: Austin and Eureka. Fallon to Austin is about 110 miles, another 75 or so to Eureka and then 73 more to Ely. In between these points is a whole lot of empty! No gas, no food, people, or cell phone service, and almost no traffic. One vehicle every half hour is typical, and sometimes one can go an hour without seeing any other traffic. No worry for me though, I have a new motor and a PLAN. Again hubris is tested by problem three.

The Belt. Somewhere between Austin and Eureka, on a flat straight highway that I could clearly see five miles in either direction, the charging light on the dash panel lit up. What could be up, I thought, that the system isn't charging? So I began slowing and prepared to pull off to the shoulder although I could have parked in the middle of the highway with no concern of being hit. As I eased to a stop I noticed the temp gauge rising rapidly. Aha! Fan belt! No water circulation from the belt driven pump would do that. So, off with the bonnet and nose cone to have a look. There was the culprit, a loose bolt in the generator bracket, and the generator lying on its side. Apparently, the bolt in the front bracket hadn't been fully tightened and backed out from the vibration at some point. The poorly supported generator had broken the back plate and the fan belt was thrown. But when?

It could have been a quarter mile or two miles back. And even if I found the belt, the broken bracket wouldn't support the generator. And there wasn't a soul around; just the wind, the sky and the road: "The Loneliest Road in America".

There are times when we really want some solitude and quiet, yet we cannot find it in our hustle bustle world. Then there are times when the most beautiful thing we could have is a friendly face for support. This was one of those times. And yet, there was nothing. No sound. No sign of human habitation. No cell reception. I was totally, completely, fully alone. If I were to get out of here, it was going to be up to me to figure it out.

I summoned up my best MacGyver attitude and went to search for something to turn into a suitable fan belt. Now, there isn't much room for spares in a Seven, so pickings were slim. I had a small tool kit with some wire and hose, spare clothing, and my gas jug, all tied down with bungee cords. YES, that's it, a bungee cord! I found one that looked to be a bit short, figuring that it would stretch, and began taking off the wire hook ends. Prying them off with a screwdriver and small pair of pliers took the better part of 30 minutes. Then I had to wire the ends together with my fine wire, like a bungee surgeon, which took another 15. During this time, not one vehicle passed.



Finally, I had what looked somewhat like a fan belt. Green, puny and stretchy, maybe, but it was a beautiful fan belt to me. I slipped it over the crank and water pump pulleys, bypassing the generator. I figured I could make it quite a way without draining the battery and Bill was within 400 miles. I started the car and it worked! It turned the water pump. I let the car tick over for a few minutes and the temp stayed steady. Eureka!

Yes that was my destination, but I wasn't sure how far it was. 20 miles? 40 miles? 60 miles? Well, I'd better button this up and get going. But before that, I thought I'd rev it a few times to make sure I had a solution that really worked. I flipped the throttle and the bungee flew. Well, I thought, the load of the water pump could have stretched one side and allowed the other to come off. I remounted the belt and this time I'd just ease the throttle up smoothly and gently. It worked perfectly until about 1,700 rpm. Each time I got to that speed the bungee would fly off. So I set off for Eureka at 1,600 rpm. First, second, third gear and we were moving. It worked fine. In fourth gear I was moving at about 24 miles per hour. Eight times as fast as the pioneers, yet still slow enough to see the varied scenery of central Nevada up close, and about a third the speed of the cars that passed.

In the nearly one hour drive to Eureka, one car passed me in the same direction at about 80 and two went by the other way. I had plenty of time to reflect on the place around me and I thought of the pioneers who had no road at all. As lost and alone as I felt, it was nothing compared to their situation. They were brave folks indeed. All this reflection was accompanied by the reassuring click, click, click of the bungee fan belt as it spun merrily around, the wire touching each pulley. As long as I heard that reassuring sound, all was well. Finally I reached the booming metropolis of Eureka, Nevada, Population 600. As this was a Saturday about 3:00 PM, much of the commercial part of Eureka was closed for the weekend, but the fellow at the gas station said the hardware store was open and maybe they could help. So I clicked up Main Street to the hardware emporium. The very kindly lady who owned the store asked what I needed. I said, "A fan belt for a 1968 Lotus Seven". I may as well have asked for a Flux Capacitor for my DeLorean.

She said she had lots of belts if I could just tell her what size I needed. So I got a length of wire rope and went out to measure. Taking off the bonnet and nose again, I rolled one front wheel up on the curb to get a bit more working room, and carefully wrapped the wire rope around both pulleys and marked the overlap spot with my pinched thumb and finger. Into the store I marched, where we found a matching size Gates belt for a washing machine. Nothing ventured, nothing gained they say so out to the waiting car I went. It was a struggle to get the belt over the flange on the crank pulley so I put the car into fourth gear and gently rocked it forward. On popped the belt. As I checked for fit, I found a perfect half inch of deflection...neither too loose nor too tight.

It was now after 3:30 and I had a long way to Richfield, Utah. Without a generator, I would need to follow the Lucas mantra for certain; Be home before dark! There was no way I could make that, and Eureka had cell signal, so I took a chance and called Bill. As is the case in much of any successful outcome, I was lucky. I reached Bill as he was checking into the motel in Richfield. He hadn't even taken his things up yet, and cheerfully said he would head west with the trailer immediately. Now my mission was clear, drive as fast as possible toward Bill. Every mile I could make would be two less for him...one west and another retracing east.

I drove with utter abandon; faster than I had since Willow Springs, disregarding the break in rules for the motor. I drifted around the curves in the wiggle parts and flew at a varying but high rpm on the flats. I made the 73 mile trip to Ely in less than an hour, wiggles included, and stopped for gas and to phone Bill. I had a message from him saying he had passed Delta Utah and was rolling west on 50. I left a message for him saying I was headed east from Ely toward Utah. It was now past 4:30 and the light was getting dimmer. The sun goes behind the hills and though it isn't "dark" it is "darker". I replaced my sunglasses with clear goggles and zipped my jacket and hood tightly before setting off. Again I flew toward the east without lights, but with the benefit of a full moon and a clear sky. As there was almost no traffic, I was doing quite well.

When an occasional vehicle would appear, I could see them for miles before they were near and I would ease over to the right shoulder to give plenty of room. I was tempted to turn my lights on, but was more concerned about running out of battery than I was of seeing and being seen. That was almost my undoing. After another 30 or 40 minutes in what was now full darkness, I saw an approaching vehicle and eased over to the right.

As he passed, I realized it was Bill with the trailer who was now flying *away* from me. I hit the brakes and pumped them to make the brake lights flash, preparing to turn around and begin the chase. Just as I slowed enough to make the turn, I saw all of Bill's brake lights on the Range Rover and the trailer light up the evening sky in the most beautiful display of red imaginable. Bill had come about 175 miles west and I had gone about 150 east. We got the Seven secured on the trailer and headed for Richfield.

Sunday morning we headed off to Denver with a clear weather report and the Seven safe and secure on the trailer. We cruised smoothly east to about Rifle CO where we began to encounter rain. By the time we got to Glenwood Springs, it was turning to snow. When we passed Vail, we were in the thick of an unforecast, full blown, winter storm, with 10 to 12 inches expected and winds too. Trucks were chaining up and on the pass several were jackknifed and had slid off the road. Bill was as steady as a rock and we slowly made it over the top. The conditions were bad all the way to the tunnel but gradually got better as we came down the eastern slope toward Denver. We stopped for a break in Downieville and took the attached picture. As Buzz Bilberry said, "Why has he sprayed his car with expanding foam? Does it help keep the snow out or something?"



Every trip I have taken in the Seven has been memorable, unlike the dozens I have taken in a "real" car. I think that is what keeps me setting off on these boondoggles; the sense that getting there is not a foregone conclusion. It is a bit of welcome adventure in a too regular and regulated world, I guess. And, besides, how many stories would be worth writing about driving a Minivan across Interstate 80?