

R&T Happenings Dept



ALLAN GIRDLER PHOTO

MY PARTICIPATION in the New England "T" Register's Marathon was assured when TC owner Mike Williams telephoned for advice: Do I know anything about TC differentials?

"Swill me in a shallow pan of petrol if I don't," I said, quoting from the owner's manual for emphasis. "Working on TC differentials used to be all I ever did."

"My car goes 'click, click' when I shift."

"They all do. Nothing to worry about. Uh, it doesn't go 'clank, clank' does it?"

more than a tiny twinge. And I'm not sure there was even that.

Nostalgia wasn't a factor, then, in my enlistment for the marathon. What appealed most was a certain specious logic.

Primary sponsor is the New England "T" Register, an organization based on T-series MGs. Not a club, they say, because the members aren't people. One registers one's car. The car is the member. The owners (the owned would be just as accurate a description) tag along. The register has enjoyed a bewildering success. The co-founders expected

JOUNCING TOWARD ABINGDON

BY ALLAN GIRDLER

"A friend of mine has a spare differential he'll lend me for the trip."

"Bring it along."

I thought I was through with all that. In 1955, I bought an MG-TC. During the 14 years that followed I raced it, rallied it, drove close to 150,000 miles on the highway, literally from coast to coast. I got frostbitten in New York and watched passengers pass out from the heat in Texas and Kansas. I replaced every part in the car at least once and learned that I am so-so at upholstery and terrible at car-entry. Enjoyable, all of it, but when the car drove away without me in 1969 I cannot say my heart was pierced by

*1000 non-stop miles in a TC,
as seen (and felt) by a man
who thought he knew better*

maybe 150 owners to sign up for a newsletter, parts exchange, etc. At last count, there were 2000 MGs of TC, TD and TF designation enrolled.

Twice each year the Register hosts a get-together. The proper name is Gathering of the Faithful. The site usually is a resort hotel in New England. T-series MGs come from all over for rallies, gymkhanas, concours, parts swaps and a weekend of mutual admiration.

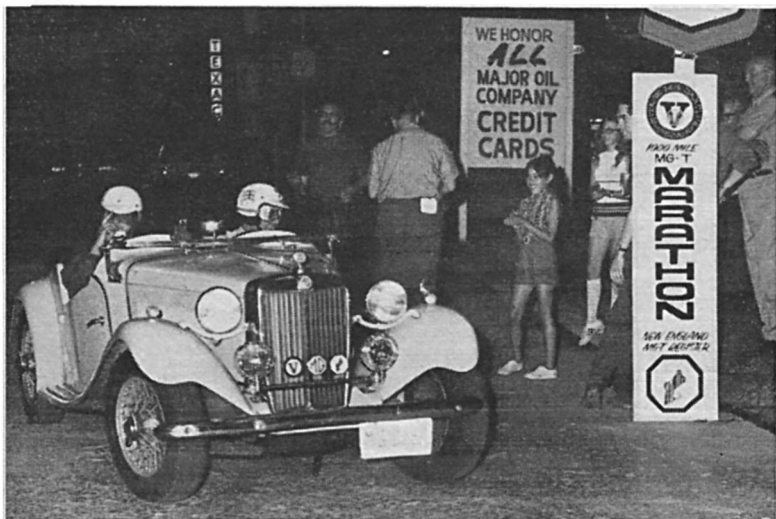
Parallel to the Register is the Vintage MG Car Club of Chicago. Same goals, same type of MG, a good share of dual registration.

Now. It occurred to Herb Nichols, TD owner and mem- ➤

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ber of both clubs, that several other dual members drive to the Gatherings. T-series people and cars are competition minded. And there aren't many places for them to compete. Why not, he reasoned, combine all this into a marathon, a timed drive from the midwest to the GOF, a 1000-mile test, roughly (interpret that any way you wish), of man and machine. Nichols drew up some rules, secured Register support and enlisted entries. The first marathon was run in 1968, with each successive run attracting more and better-prepared cars.



JIM WINDMEIER PHOTO

Eighteen cold, wet hours later, the windshield was still down.

The Marathon isn't a rally; the routing is flexible, the winners picked on elapsed time. Nor is it a race; most of the roads are major highways, with limits above the practical cruising speeds of the competitors.

The Marathon is an Act of Faith, a pilgrimage to a spiritual Abingdon, to a cool little corner of New England where the year moves only from 1948 to 1954 and back again.

The object is to drive from a pre-determined point to the GOF and to do it in the least possible time, stopping only for fuel and mechanical derangements. (All former T-series owners pause here and reflect. An Act of Faith, indeed.)

There are two major rules: T-series MGs only and no non-T engine swaps. Winners are determined by elapsed time multiplied by a handicap. Scratch car is the TF 1500, in theory the T-series best suited to fast—well, relatively fast—cruising. The older the car and smaller the engine, the larger the handicap. The intent is to encourage the older cars to compete and to not lose heart when newer models whiz past.

The first marathons started from the midwest. For 1971, by popular demand, there were starting points east and west, so New England-based faithful could participate.

The man for whom I crewed didn't actually need much help. Mike Williams bought his TC in baskets and restored it, after practicing on two Austin-Healeys and an MG TF. Nor did he bring the differential. After stowing the sidecurtains, tools, gaskets, a spare half shaft, oil, gear lube, first aid kit and suitcase, there wasn't any room. Our provision for the trip was a sack of turkey sandwiches: "I asked my wife what will keep for a long time without refrigeration,

and she said turkey would keep the longest." So turkey it was.

To date, no one has actually built an MG for the marathon, but the regulars do equip their cars with the event very much in mind. Nichols' car looks like the modified TDs of 20 years ago, with 8-port aluminum head, hood strap replacing the side panels, velocity stacks in place of air cleaners, etc. Another TD was supercharged. A third has an MGA rear axle, complete with 4.3:1 ring and pinion. Doesn't climb hills very well, he said, but it surely helps on the flat. The only pure-stock TD in the western contingent did what he could and ran the distance with windshield folded to minimize wind resistance.

But the rival we feared most created terror by his very lack of preparation. Owner Bob Pickard drove his TC, Charley, 700 miles from home to starting line. Charley has 247,000 miles on the odometer, sounds like a sack of nails and holds the TC record for the marathon. A clear case of supernatural forces at work.

The western starting point was a gas station at the western edge of Michigan, adjacent to an Interstate that leads to Detroit. The route was across Michigan to Windsor, Canada, and on to Toronto and Montreal. From there we could go east in Canada and veer due south to the gathering at Waterville Valley, New Hampshire. Or an entrant could head south from Montreal and work east through Vermont.

Our TC had the lowest serial number, so we were the first car away. The start was at night, in order, I guess, to have the teams fresh during the darkness while being deluded out of fatigue by the rising sun. Which is how it works out, I found.

Mike took the first stint behind the wheel. Mind, I didn't just sit there. The copilot's duties included handing over turkey sandwiches, shining a flashlight on the coolant gauge mounted in the radiator cap and on the oil pressure gauge, located in the dashboard but minus illumination for some obscure electrical reason, and—most important—looking back to see if anything was gaining on us.

We had the idea, correct as it happened, that we were the slowest car in the western group. The entrants left at 5-minute intervals. If we were passed by the second car in one hour, we reckoned, that would mean he had 5 mph on us, and so on down the list.

An uneventful hour passed. Then another, while Mike sawed at the wheel and I peered at the gauges. Three hours out, the marathon turned into a dead heat. Charley went by, with the first TD a minute behind him, the second TD a minute after that and the supercharged TD two minutes after that. They all waved.

Very discouraging. Without consulting me, Mike and Pickard had agreed to dispense with the handicap. The TCs would face the TDs even up. We were the slowest, and all we had to look forward to was mechanical troubles for

Owner/driver Mike Williams and his triple-threat TC.



ALLAN GIRDLER PHOTO



Robert Herlin's supercharged K-3 Magnette was the star of the gathering.

everybody else, a prospect not conducive to sportsmanship.

For example: All the cars were close together at the first fuel stop, save one TD which evidently had taken a wrong turn. We all laughed.

My turn. Driving a TC again felt familiar, in some ways. The tiny pedals, the upright posture, the flexed elbows were just as I remembered them. By the time I sold my TC, though, it had undergone modifications that provided half again as big an engine and exactly twice the stock power. I had forgotten how much of the TC's wonderful exhaust was brag, and how little of that powerful roar was fact.

And the steering! Terrible! In top condition, TC steering is bad enough. With all possible modifications, it's barely tolerable. This car had a bad unit. Mike adjusted, to no avail. Either it was heavy, vague and notchy or it was heavy, vague, notchy and sloppy.

We kept Charley in sight across Detroit and through the tunnel to Canada, but then he pulled away. Past midnight, now, and getting colder. We unfolded the windshield at dusk, put up the top when it was truly dark. Mike burrowed through the parts and equipment, hauled the front side-curtains out of their bin and installed them, all on the move. Great skill involved there, although maybe you'd have to try it to appreciate it.

All my old skills came back. Stuffing the left hand into the heater, winding the right hand through the spokes of the steering wheel and stuffing it into the other heater outlet. Jamming the left leg between clutch pedal and transmission tunnel so as to unbend the knee. Folding the left leg between gearshift and seat cushion when heat from the transmission blisters the foot.

I was reminded of Le Mans—no, wait! Guiding a TC at 65 mph must require the same degree of skill and concentration as guiding a 917 at 240 mph. True, the MG gives you more time to keep between the curbs but you need a much larger arc of correction.

And at Le Mans when one's driving stint is done, one climbs out of the car, withdraws to a quiet room and lies down on a soft cot. In the Marathon the co-driver is still plugged in, bolt upright, wind chilling his kidneys, exhaust howling in his ear, the water temperature and oil pressure gauges still demanding his attention, the driver still demanding turkey sandwiches. (Actually, I just said that for effect. The demand for turkey sandwiches slackened considerably after the first dozen.)

During my tenure of ownership I did just about everything that can be done in a TC. Sleeping wasn't one of them. Mike managed, somehow, to doze while curled up with his jacket over his head. "Ya slept all night," I said later. "I had my eyes closed for 40 minutes," he countered.

Do not get an impression of gloom and discomfort. The

cheeriest things happened, like passing Charley, reduced to 55 mph by (we learned later) an oil-soaked clutch. As we passed them, I waved.

Returning to acts of faith for a moment, the supercharged TD had the only service car in the marathon. Somewhere west of Toronto a fan blade broke off and sliced through the lower radiator pipe. When the back-up car arrived it towed the TD to the nearest town, where the car was left for repairs. This was the only retirement of the event, that is, the man who prepared to have the car let him down *did* have the car let him down. The moral is obvious.

We caught the blown TD before his support car did. The crew was standing next to it, with disconsolation writ large

JIM WINDMEIER PHOTO



Marathon founder Herb Nichols, right, vs a frozen thermostat.

on their faces, allowing me to use that famous racing quip: "Nothing trivial, I hope."

Mike laughed and laughed. There's a fatigue factor here. Canadian winters buckle the pavement something fierce, and a TC goes over the buckles in great crashing leaps and bounds. So do the occupants. My image of us sailing toward in unison reminded me of my favorite Laurel and Hardy movie. I said as much. When we stopped to adjust the water pipe to the heater, Mike climbed out with, "Be right back, Ollie," and I laughed. It seemed funny at the time.

As the sky lightened, our spirits rose. At the 10-hour ➡➡➡

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mark, we had covered exactly 570 miles. The TC course record was a 53-mph average, so we looked like contenders again. Especially when we passed the stock TD, hood open, occupants puzzled, just outside Toronto.

Another high point: A Canadian T-series fan provides coffee and doughnuts for the Marathoners. This year he was invited to crew a trans-Canada rally, which he did, leaving his wife to brew gallons of coffee, buy sacks of doughnuts and load them and three small children into the family station wagon at dawn and spend several hours ministering to passing Marathoners. It was indeed a welcome wagon. I am only sorry that several entrants weren't willing to use five minutes taking advantage of her hospitality. But the kids said they enjoyed eating one dozen doughnuts each.

Somewhere between Toronto and Montreal—I know, that's a long somewhere, but I was driving, not navigating—we caught one of the eastern contingent's TDs. They started half an hour before we did, so we were ahead, and craftily tucked in behind, as they had driven through Montreal previously. A good thing, too, because our map reading would have got us lost.

Outside Montreal we passed the last mandatory gate, a tollbridge. Here I made our Maximum Blunder. We had the choice of going east in Canada then veering due south to the center of New Hampshire, or going south from Montreal into Vermont and then east.

Mike had worked it out on the map, and wanted to go east then south. The TD headed south.

"Better roads the other way," Mike said.

"Those people have proved they know better than our maps," I said. My will prevailed, mostly because I was driving at the time, and I quickly wished it hadn't.

The land between Montreal and the ocean is covered with mountains and valleys, the latter running north-south. We got south quickly but then learned we had to meander over the hills, on narrow country roads.

Any other occasion, fine, but time was running out. Strange, the human mind. While we crawled across the endless plains, all we could think of was the machinery. For the last 100 miles the gauges, the pressures and temperatures, the odd noises were all forgotten. We had more important things to worry about. The 57-mph average fell victim to 40-mph corners.

We couldn't find the instructions in the jumbled equipment. We took a wrong turn. "Haw, haw," said a local with that rural good humor that makes big cities so attractive, "all you MG guys are a-gittin' lost."

Indeed. We couldn't even find the finish line. 'Round and 'round the hotel parking lot we whirled in a shower of mud and curses, furiously beeping the horn in the 3-long pattern supposed to notify the timers that we had, at last, arrived.

After one or two circuits, we followed the waving hands

to a table containing the scorers, who collected our toll tickets and clocked us in. The last 7 miles took 17 minutes. The finish line was hubcap deep in T-series cars. Not realizing that only a fraction of the Register cars run in the marathon I thought we were among the final finishers. Not content to compare our efforts with Le Mans, I glumly thought of Indy, another place where Rookies Never Win.

There is a happy ending but first, the Gathering. What the Faithful mostly do when gathered is talk about and look at their own and each others cars. There was a rally, a concours d'elegance, a swap meet, a gymkhana and a raffle. All low in pressure. We missed the rally but I inferred that it was chiefly a drive around the New Hampshire countryside. Beautiful place to drive, with or without checkpoints. The concours had several spectacular cars, a supercharged K3 Magnette for example, and a couple of incredible restorations, but many entries were simply daily MGs, washed and waxed for the occasion. The gymkhana was more gimmick than go-fast, with a lap in forward gears and a lap in reverse. And the raffle prize was a J2 Midget in dreadful condition; the sort of prize you'd be happy to win and happy not to win.

Mike struck a blow against specialization. His TC placed fourth in class in the concours and was both the only marathon car to win a prize and the only prize winner to run the marathon. Next, he had second-best time of day in the gymkhana. I think there should have been some sort of Big Man of Gathering award, so he could have won it.

On to the banquet. Very clubby, as one would expect and enjoy if one likes MGs, as I do. There were door prizes, one of which was a book, courtesy of R&T. That won me many smiles and appreciations, although in fact I hadn't known about our donation until it was made.

Then they began to announce the marathon winners. Consternation reigned at the marathon table when Bob Pickard won fifth place. Remember, both TCs agreed at the start to waive their handicap. But Bob was eighth on raw time and fifth in the awards, which we took to mean that the waiver hadn't been accepted.

Sure enough, the announcers worked their way higher and higher in the placings, reeling off the names of teams behind us on raw time. Then, the grand prize, first place, let's hear it for Mike and me!

Mike just sat there, half pleased to win and half upset because he had been given the win against his intentions. I loudly whispered that he'd better get up and accept the prize or he'd hurt the feelings of the men who had done all the scoring and set up the rules. His good manners prevailed and he agreed to be the winner.

The next morning Mike started his second 1000 miles of the weekend. Solo. Pleading the press of business, I hitched a ride to Boston in a TF. Along the way we stopped at a garage near the hotel, to deliver parts and advice to a TD that suffered a broken axle in the slalom. That's the way these things go sometimes, he said. Everything went right for me, so I enjoyed the gathering. So did those for whom everything went wrong. I don't know a more convincing recommendation for an event than that.

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Well-wishers and just plain curious thronged the starting line.



MIKE WILLIAMS PHOTO

The winner, at speed and in reverse.



SCOTT NILSON PHOTO