

2010 Watkins Glen Vintage Grand Prix Festival

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Sixty years ago on a balmy September day, I stood behind some hay bales with my Dad anxiously awaiting the coming thunder. The hay was not on a farm, but on a street corner in downtown Watkins Glen. This was Milliken's Corner and those bales were supposed protection from anyone replicating Milliken's maneuver. The welcome thunder was not of the meteorological variety, but the kind emanating from unrestricted exhaust.

The calm anticipation was shattered by the exciting spectacle of Alfas, Bugattis, Cad Allards, Healeys, Jaguars, Ferraris, MGs, even a Talbot and Veritas.....all braking and frantically down-shifting to scrub speed produced from the long downhill, going into this sharp left-hander soon followed by a right onto the main straight normally called Franklin Street. I watched in awe as Erwin Goldschmidt powered his red Allard J2 through this maze 15 times, each a little faster on his way to victory. Three years earlier Bill Milliken drifted his '27 Bugatti through here 3 times, before barrel rolling the Bug and christening this hallowed site with his name at the dawn of postwar US sports car racing.

If this wasn't enough karma as to site, then factor in the year 2010 as the centennial for Alfa Romeo and you have my undivided attention. One of the 2 fifty-year-old Giuliettas (a Sprint and a Spider) that have graced my garage for the past 3 decades was going to haul me to the Glen from Baltimore. Weather would choose which wheels would celebrate this confluence of automotive history.

I learned from my friend in all things Alfa, literary and cinematic, Russ Baer, that there would be a Tour de Marque on Friday just for Alfas as they were featured for the Festival. With only a week to go John Merrill, tour organizer, graciously found a slot for my car and me. Wings of Eagles air museum, laps at the fabled Watkins Glen International Track and the original 6.6 mile open road course through town were tour highlights I could not live without.

Thursday afternoon was marked by perfect conditions and a favorable weekend forecast with a shaky Sunday. So I checked the fluids and tires of my Spider and found the oil on my dipstick and the oil on my garage floor to be nearly equal in cleanliness. With these good omens my navigator and noted automotive journalist and author of "Prototypes" (IMSA GTP), Jim Martin and I fired up 1300 willing cc's and motored off.

Getting there is indeed *and at least* half the fun. Once past Harrisburg and traffic of I-83, we became immersed in the beauty and serenity of US route 15 through central Pennsylvania. It curves with the path of the Susquehanna River and undulates with hills of the Alleghenies. My navigator, surprising me with a suppressed knowledge of geology, noted that these mountains were once the height of the Rockies. I am now comforted in knowing I am not alone in losing height with age.

All of this would be quite enjoyable in say a Toyota Avalon, but ramp up the fun factor exponentially. We are in an open, small bore Italian classic, singing opera out the tailpipe in notes that only 5000 RPMs can produce. Who needs big bore, air conditioning, stereo, blue tooth and 2000 pounds of mandated safety ballast? In 3.5 hours we stopped for fuel just short of the New York line and put the top up for the half hour final leg to the scenic Finger Lake Region. I can't recall a more pleasant trip. This ancient Alfa is a delight to drive, provides a compliant ride and a surprising amount of comfort and room. Windup windows, user-friendly tops, all syncro trannys and double overhead cams were not commonplace in affordable sports cars of the day.

Friday morning was cloudy enough to mandate top up motoring to the nearby Corning/Elmira airport, home of the Wings of Eagles, which reminded me of the Smithsonian in miniature. Here you can find early Banshee and Phantom carrier-based aircraft, a second generation Phantom F4, an F15 Strike Eagle, and a WW II Avenger like President Bush flew and replications of a German Heinkel jet (1st to fly) and a Japanese Kamikaze. This initial tour event could easily qualify for the whole enchilada, but today it formed the gathering point for approximately 90 Alfas of various vintage and designation. Outside we witnessed a double rainbow, a good omen for the events to come. It also signaled the Spider drivers it was OK to drop the top. While in formation in the parking lot, we made acquaintance with Alfisti nearby. The air horn sounded, sending all scurrying to their cockpits to rev up. The local constabulary kept the roads to the track clear of interlopers so that we could traverse the 20-mile journey briskly and smartly.

Tour marshals parked us in orderly fashion and we then sat down to a delicious brunch, overlooking a portion of the track that I could not wait to get to. My patience was placated by the stimulation of new friends with common bonds, swapping engrossing car stories. Under instructions "not to pass" we were led onto the track. I cannot get over that I am now driving my car on the same pavement that Jimmy Clark and other greats drove their GP cars on. OK, pay attention! You have only 3 laps to figure this out from a new perspective. I recognize the "Boot", my favorite place to watch from. But this isn't watching, it's driving. All right, anybody can go fast in a straight line but the curves are where the fun is. I quickly adopt the strategy, remember the no passing rule, of slow straights and lets mash it in the corners and see what this little car will do. A little over 6000 RPM and perfect balance provide an experience that can only be described as being sexual and religious all at the same time. There is a vast majority of sports cars out there that are faster, and I have driven most of them, but none are as much fun and gives the same satisfying feeling as the little Alfa Giulietta Spider. My intrepid navigator captured the full orgasmic episode, including my (insert your own adjective) grin.

If this wasn't enough, we now motor into town and assemble into a false grid on Franklin Street for all festival visitors to behold. After an appropriate interlude the air horn sounds again and 90 Alfas serve up their distinctive chorus of camshafts and carburetors. We now motor off on 2 laps of the fabled 6.6-mile course that gave birth to sports car racing, as we know it. And please note, the inaugural Grand Prix of 1948 was won by a '38 Alfa 8C2900, driven Frank Griswold. During the following 3 years I saw Cunningham, Fitch, Hansgen, Kimberly, Spear, Weaver, Johnston, Wacker (I could go on) drive on this very pavement. I can feel the history as I take the first turn off Franklin by the entrance to the actual Glen. Six grand in 3rd gear carries me up Old Corning Hill and out into the countryside. I employ the same strategy that gave such pleasure at the closed circuit, slow straights and give it hell in the twistys. This serves me well as we take the right-hander around Seneca Lodge. Some more uphill to the White House Esses, zooming under the railroad bridge and setting up for School House Corner. What a prelude for the curving downhill into the iconic Stone Bridge. At the halfway point we accelerate through some sweepers leading up to Archie's Corner. Now a straightaway that crosses the tracks that sent many of the legendary racers airborne. By the Upper Glen Entrance we enter Friar's Corner to the left and begin a long downhill fast right-hand sweeper, during which you get a glimpse of Lake Seneca and a corner of the village. Holy cow, I know what's at the bottom of this hill! I lay back a bit and begin my downshifting routine. I will be in second for Milliken's Corner. Must be smart here for this is the corner of corners, *at least for me*. With satisfaction achieved, I quickly set up for the left on to Franklin and accelerate out of the corner enough for the spectators to enjoy my exhaust note and then slow down to a leisurely parade down the main straight so the crowd can see how good I look in my car. It's now time to accelerate for Old Corning Hill and lap 2 of heaven.

My little white Spider gets a deserved rest in Lafayette Park, reserved for "Principetia" (my friend Russ says 'anything beyond mere machinery deserves a name') and her friends. While people ogle our Alfas, we walk the streets and ogle the other fabulous cars on hand, including many of the 150+ vintage racers. There were Alfa TZ 1s, Sprint Zagatos, a Ferrari SWB 250, a Maserati 4.5 Competition Coupe, Ginettas, Elvas, Jags, Allards, authentic Shelby Cobras, etc. The Heritage gathering featured the really rare Alfas and Allards, the honored marques. Griswold's Alfa and Goldschmidt's Allard were the highlights. P3's and 8C2600 Monzas complimented the winning 8C2900 and a K1 (the first Allard), K2's, J2's, a Palm Beach and a revival J2 did the same for the British marque that pioneered the concept of stuffing an American V8 into a nimble British chassis. Carroll Shelby took this concept to the max a decade later with his mighty Cobras. In between, Briggs Cunningham did this in an American chassis of his own design and then successfully took on all Europe could offer.

One of the most competitive drivers of these Cadillac Allard beasts was a gentleman named Bill Pollock. He and Elliot Forbes-Robinson, a champion from the 70's and 80's both gave entertaining talks in the park gazebo in a program called "The Legends Speak". This treat was punctuated with an opportunity to chat with Bill about my own Allard experience. Because I was able to drive one of the two K2's my Dad sold as a dealer in Erie, I could empathize with Pollock's stories about what a handful Allards were in hard cornering. They didn't like to stop either but they sure were fast, he related.

The afternoon wound down with a concours by the Glen entrance. There was a stunning Aston Martin Drophead, a Ferrari 275 GTB, a Bentley Continental and a D Type Jag plus a Shelby Daytona Coupe (both of which could have been replicars). And as dusk was near, the heritage cars took off on their honorary laps, led by the pre-war Alfas with Allards in the next group. What a sight (and sounds too) to see these legends roll!

Saturday dawned bright and sunny. So it's top down and off to the track to see these cars run like they were meant to.....all out and loud. As satisfying as that is, it is also thrilling to scrutinize these racers up close in the pits and chat with the interesting owners and drivers. The first canopied pit I visit has two Alfas, a TZ1 and a rare 3000 Competition Coupe. There were other rare and exciting cars there that did not make it into the village the day before. Think Maserati 250F and other Grand Prix open wheelers, a McClarin Mk I and other rolling thunder from the Cam-Am series, and a pair of Berlinettas, one a Short Wheelbase and the other a Boxer; the latter sharing its pit with a vintage Alfa 6C2600.

The owner/driver of a pretty Ginetta G4 related how it felt to carve corners in his quick little jewel. He used to race for real and got into vintage racing in '98 with the G4, which he trailers from Virginia. I share this chat, typical of countless others, because I think I would look good racing in one of these products of the once thriving British cottage industry of club racers. While strolling from pit to pit, one encounters another group of interesting people and their cars, parked or puttering around. One such example of this was a couple of guys in a Flat Rad '49 Morgan 2+2, not over-restored or restored at all for that matter. I mention this happy encounter because it reminded me of the '53 Dad had as his personal car and I used to borrow (highjack is a more appropriate term) on occasion.

Ah, so many memories combined with new experiences. Great people, great cars (some never seen by me before) and of course the new driving experiences which led to a deeper appreciation of the static and dynamic virtues of my trusty little Alfa. The track showed me chassis balance that I would never explore on the open road. The round trip provided 8 hours of trouble free, high revving, never boring driving. We never held anyone up and no one had a better time.

