



Hap Richardson by Marion

Carter

In my association with Tony Ferrari, who in the past competed in the bay area in a red MGA twin cam, (No. 38), and in our continuing attendance at the historic car races, reminiscing about cars and drivers of the prior years we found common ground in a fine character from the early days of road racing, one Hap Richardson. I never knew his first name, or even how he became to be known as Hap, but he was a happy fellow. I was interested and later involved in sports cars in the 50's as they began to appear on the west coast where I lived in San Diego, first in the Navy, then as a San Diego State student, and finally a Convair employee.

I remember attending my first race in 1954 at Torrey Pines. The course was a relatively flat piece of real estate where the old government buildings had been demolished leaving just the wartime low bidder's streets of old asphalt. A few hay bales were thrown down at critical turns on the track and crowd control consisted of snow fencing and more hay bales quite near the actual road, where everyone stood there was no seating unless you brought your own and you couldn't see if you did. There were no driver's requirements for helmets, seat belts, fire suits, roll bars, etc. You raced in your street clothes; cap optional. Preparation of most cars for racing consisted of placing masking tape across the headlights usually in an x-pattern and removing the hub caps if you had them.

At the time I drove a 1949 Buick convertible that probably weighed over 5,000 pounds; equipped with an automatic dynaflush transmission that required time to reach nominal speed, and cornered like a whale, but it was sheer luxury. But I wasn't through, from there I went to a yellow 1951 Cadillac convertible. The Cadillac was a lemon (it was the right color) which expired incrementally until the transmission went, making me a walking student the last semester before graduation.

Now gainfully employed at Convair, no longer afoot, and a believer, I was able to acquire a TR3 and I was on my way to fun. I joined several sports car clubs, competed in autocrosses, rallies, etc. The principal club was Convair Sports Car Club where the president of the company attended, driving his new SLR. I even edited a club magazine called **The Steering Column**.

Somewhere along the line I came to acknowledge that a TR3 was not a stunning design when compared to many others of that era, but like a homely child I grew to love it. I once wrote an article about how that feeling gradually develops within such a car owner and was surprised to get a call from a Los Angeles car magazine asking permission to re-print it. I was so thrilled I quickly gave them the right, never did see it though. My favorites were the original Austin Healey 100 and the XK 120. I was once parked in Balboa Park doing homework when a new powder blue XK 120 parked by me. I walked over to tell him magnificent it looked. He said get in and he let me drive him around for half an hour; now that made my day. The dreadful sports car equivalent of a Pontiac Aztek of that era was the Daimler SP250, hard to believe it was built in Coventry.

Okay that is sufficient digression, let's get back to Hap. With my many sport car friends I attended southern California racing events in San Diego, Santa Barbara, Palm Springs, even Las Vegas. Somewhere along the way, through Marge Binks or her sister Mary Ann, I came to know Hap as he competed his old XK 120. Even then he was a character larger than life, with a very patient and pleasant wife. He wore a huge sombrero, larger every time you saw him, and always had a big cigar (unlit during the race but still available for chewing). The cigars also got larger and larger, eventually he acquired a huge fake cigar that resembled a child's baseball bat which he gleefully flaunted. He was a big tall man, with black hair, the actor Victor French reminds me of him, except Hap was larger in any dimension.

He told me he was big enough at 13 that he lied about his age and joined the Navy. Then after 20 years or so, he fessed up and retired from the Navy at a relatively young age. He was a Navy SeaBee and when he finally decided to take his street XK 120 onto the track his Navy buddies built him a "one of a kind", SeaBee designed, roll bar (rudimentary ones were required by then). It appeared exceptionally hefty, an upright steel post behind his seat with bracing running to either side and something to the rear, but there was none diagonally across the

passenger seat. He had to modify that unusual design in ensuing years as SCCA kept implementing new safety requirements for roll bars nearly every year. You can see the cigar and his original SeaBee fabricated roll bar in the photo below.



Richardson

Hap operated as a one man team, no crew. I persuaded him that I should be his pit crew. I was not a mechanic, just a go-for, and I wanted free admission to the track and the paddock. He did his own mechanical work in his pit. He did not even trust me to remove, let alone reinstall, spark plugs. Before a race he always pulled them and washed them in a coffee can of gasoline. My main assignment was to polish the red Jag, and that was a never ending job, paint in those years, especially red English paint, oxidized even as you looked at it, and he wanted it to shine. There is a lot of surface to an XK 120, and it never shone like the example at the top of this page.

I think the hardest job I ever did for Hap was during a race at the old Del Mar fairgrounds when his car ceased to run far from the finish line. Maybe he forgot to rinse the plugs in gasoline. I don't know if he was correct but he determined for some reason that he had to push the car across the start/ finish line to receive points or something. I joined him but he told me to not touch the car until he had pushed it across the line. That thing was heavy and he was exhausted when he got there, he

flopped down to the ground; turned it over to me to push and steer it the rest of the way to his pit.



In those days we used to camp in the pits with our cars at the Santa Barbara Road Races at Goleta, held annually on Memorial Day and again on Labor Day. That is where I first saw the original Old Yaller. I wasn't pitting for Hap by that time, by then I regularly secured press passes for the races from the San Diego Tribune where I reported race results, etc. I recall getting into difficulty with a driver when I reported his wife was in Las Vegas with him. He angrily told me next day, that was not his wife; she was home in San Diego.

I often convened with Hap in the evenings while I plied him with beer, and we swapped sea stories, jokes, and lies for whatever audience we might accumulate. The course was comprised of old left over asphalt streets running around ancient buildings, flat, no banking, etc. Below is a poor quality photo of Hap (64) racing at Santa Barbara, you can see how much taller he is than his roll bar, and obviously this is after I stopped shining the old XK 120. He told me his dream was for to someone to take a good photo of him deep in a turn, cigar in place, with strains of great concentration on his face, that he could have a first-rate copy of. I don't know if he ever got one or not. With my press pass in those days I could stand anywhere I wanted, but the cameras and the photographic skills I possessed in that era would have resulted in nothing more than a fast moving red blur, no visible cornering stress.



On one of the turns at Santa Barbara, perhaps turn 3 or 4, there was a telephone pole very near the left hand edge of the road with a board fence behind it, as you exited a 90 degree flat right turn. The officials had piled a couple of hay bales in front of the pole, but it looked ominous. I asked Hap about it, and he said, “I figured it out, if I hit the accelerator full, half way around the corner, and aim the car right at the pole, the back end will drift left enough that it straightens out and I clear it just fine” .

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Hap up close and personal in Turn 8 at Riverside, the original SeaBee roll bar intact, California plates still in place, but no visible cigar.

In 1962 I moved from San Diego to the San Francisco bay area, married my former secretary, adopted her two young sons, bought my first house, quickly outgrew the new Corvair coupe I had given up the TR3 for, and found myself mired in Detroit

station wagons. I became so domesticated I gave in to the demands to stop displaying my trophies; gave them to my new sons to play with, who unknown to me, went through the neighborhood selling them to kids for 25 cents each. I could walk through my environs and view my hardware on the window sills of others.

By then Tony Ferrari was involved in racing his MGA twin cam in the SF region and he came to know of Hap who had also moved to the bay area, but I was not around. Tony also came to recognize him as a genuine character, a fixture in the local sport car competition, still with the old red Jag, the sombrero, and the cigars.



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This photo of Hap and the old XK 120 was taken at Laguna Seca, you can witness the size of this big happy fellow, you can still make out the original old SeaBee constructed upright roll bar from 1956, probably hopelessly welded to the frame, located under the more currently required roll bar. Obviously he still wants the red car to shine, except here he is doing it, not me. Although Hap competed this old car for decades, the only modifications visible in this photo are the wheels, definitely not of Coventry design, but providing considerably more grip for “Bite by Bruce” recaps. He managed to retain No. 64 through all those SCCA years, whether San Diego or San Francisco Region.

I did hear occasional radio ads for Hap’s trailer company located in Seaside near Monterrey but I never saw him again. I wish I had taken the effort to do so but I had way too many irons in the fire.

* Photos attributed to Tam McPartland