

## Memories of Eldred Norman - a larrikin innovator



Months ago Dino Mattea asked me for an article about his father (which is easy, since Dad was an interesting fellow) and about himself (which is much more difficult, hence the delay). So here goes...

by **Bill Norman (pictured left)**

Handicapping was normal in the early days of Australian motor racing - a fact which sometimes saw ordinary sports cars winning pre-war Australian Grands Prix. But the 1950s brought proper "first across the line" racing, ending any chance that a privateer driving an Austin 7 could finish at the pointy end of an AGP. At Albert Park in 1953 a new Austin Healey finished sixth outright, but Jaguar XK120s and indeed all other road-equipped sports cars were nowhere to be seen ...until the TR2, that is. When Eldred Norman's new TR2 finished fourth outright in the 1954 AGP at Southport it was the best AGP result for any proper sports car in the outright era. Eldred also won outright both sports car races at Southport, and this after an epic 1500-mile journey from Adelaide, towing 88 gallons of methanol on a trailer hitched behind the TR2.

Fathers tend to present a godlike image to their children, but with the wisdom of hindsight I know mine was, by today's conformist standards, an outrageous larrikin. As a motor trader, Dad naturally had "trade" number plates, but his idea about number plates was a trifle unconventional. He regularly tested monopostos in the Adelaide hills with trade plates around his neck.

Dad's first racing car was the Double V8. He built the monster from WW2 parts obtained in Papua-New Guinea from the departing Americans in 1946. (To give you a clearer picture of Eldred, he also brought back a submachinegun and 1000 rounds of .45 ammunition. This was only ever used to hammer in the soil around fenceposts when building Collingrove Hillclimb. For years a case of hundreds of bullets lay open in the shed for the three children to play with. Also in the shed was a quantity of gelnite which Dad finally disposed of when it began to weep nitro.) The Double V8 used two sidevalve Ford V8s in line astern, joined by a large four-row drive chain. A sprocket with two rows of teeth replaced the front engine's flywheel, while a second sprocket with two rows replaced the rear V8's front crankshaft pulley. Some of the chassis and running gear was based on a Dodge weapon carrier and the two different aluminium bodies derived from warplanes. Suspension was eventually all independent and the brakes were water-cooled via an SU fuel pump.

The Double V8 was SA- registered and driven long distances to compete at tracks such as Fisherman's Bend, Victoria, though contemporary photos show no sign of mufflers. The drum brakes were laughably inadequate and the V8s overheated in long races, but the car did briefly lead the 1951 Australian Grand Prix at Narrogin, WA. Dad sold the car to Syd Anderson after the 1951 AGP. He bought a pre-war 1.51litre Maserati from a visiting Englishman, thereby sowing the seeds of a lifelong contempt for small capacity engines with multiple camshafts. The supercharged Maserati made

lots of noise but was never very fast; worse, it had an insatiable appetite for pistons. Replacing a melted piston was difficult, as I should know. At the age of six Dad employed me in an honorary capacity tightening the Maserati engine's many inaccessible nuts, one-sixth. of a turn at a time.

By 1953 the Maserati was gone and SA's first Triumph TR2 was on order. Ours was a very early model which I was told weighed only 15.3 hundredweight due to a part-aluminium body. It was registered SA 1435, originally having disc wheels and no overdrive, white body and red interior. The TR2 was always intended for competition; both wires and overdrive were ordered immediately and Dad began building a supercharged, methanol-burning TR engine. The engine was encouraged by a GM 271 Roots blower driven 1.1 times engine speed for 12psi boost. Eldred experimented with home-made fuel injection, eventually returning to a 2" SU carburettor. Despite using four vee belts for drive, belt-slip was a problem in long races. (At the end of the AGP boost was down to 8psi.) Engine internals were largely standard but the crankshaft was ground undersize, then built up with hard chrome.

Aged 7, I remember going for long test runs in the Adelaide hills with rain pouring in between hood and windscreen at high speed. I would kneel on the passenger seat and steer with one hand - oh joy!.The overdrive was manually operated by a lever beside the transmission tunnel - no risky solenoid for Dad. And as for tyres, why would you want anything better than Adelaide-made Hardie cross plies! Their virtue was they were free and in fairness the Hardies never did blow out, despite running at up to 125mph on the TR2 and 140mph on the Zephyr Special. The body of the TR2 was completely standard, apart from a passenger tonneau, single aero screen and headlight tape. No roll bar or seatbelt in those days of course, and the 'fireproof race suit' was a pair of cotton overalls.

Motor racing was a gentleman's sport in the 1950s so all forms of on-car advertising were banned, but rivalry between the States was absurdly intense, causing competitors to record their state of origin on each car. The car proved stunningly fast and reliable at the Grand Prix, and without any rebuild it then towed the trailer, trophies and prizemoney 1500 miles back to Adelaide, rattling gently from cracked pistons, but otherwise ready to repeat the performance. You will recall that at this meeting the mighty Maybach broke in half at two chassis welds, depositing Stan Jones in the scrub at 100mph. He survived to win the 1958 AGP at Longford. Typically, having engineered a race winner Eldred completely lost interest in the TR2. The car was raced briefly by his good friend Andy Brown (also long deceased) then disappeared from the planet. The TR2 has not been sighted since and may have been wrecked.

Dad's next car was his most innovative - the unique "frameless" Zephyr Special, built in the first 10 weeks of 1955. This car, to the horror of scrutineers, was literally supported and held together by the engine. Eldred bolted an FJ Holden cross member to the front of a Zephyr block and a six inch hydraulic tube to its rear, which in turn carried the rear mounted clutch, transaxle and rear suspension. It was compact, light, rigid, had a perfect weight distribution and low polar moment of inertia. Best of all, the supercharged Zephyr six had so much torque that it could pull an 85mph first gear off the grid. Unlike the TR2 the Zephyr is still around, lovingly restored and maintained by Graeme and Robyn Snape of Gundagai. It is certainly one of Australia's fastest formula libre "specials", but is too noisy for today's decibel

watchers and has attracted many a black flag for rattling the timing box. Funny how you don't get complaints about the historic ERAs or the Maseratis...

In 1956 Dad sold the Zephyr Special to Keith Rilstone and built a large astronomical telescope in our tin shed, then a rotating observatory in the "plane paddock" (we had an old bomber there, of course). Scientists from the Weapons Research Establishment would visit to see his home-made automatic telescope mirror-grinding machine complete a cycle, watching as it automatically applied paste, water, rotated, oscillated, separated, etc, grinding mirrors to a tolerance of three millionth of an inch.

Despite his best efforts, Dad never lost his interest in cars, becoming a manufacturer of superchargers. He was building me a supercharged Hillman Imp V8 when he died and always believed supercharging was the cheapest way to useable performance. Sadly Eldred never saw General Motors, Jaguar, Mercedes Benz and Toyota producing blown production cars - he would have loved to see this confirmation of his dreams!

As to me, not much to say...once a journalist, then Sydney based manufacturer, then a farmer. Started racing at Mallala in a Standard 10 aged 17. Won first race due to handicapping mistake. All downhill since! Second car was Steve Tillett's 1947 MGTC special which had won the 1951 AGP on handicap. Supercharged it twice got outright FTD at Lakeview Hillclimb in 1965, which may be the last outright win for any MGTC. Lots of cars since - none as nice as my homemade Nissan Clubman TC2!

- Bill Norman

(Ed notes: Following in his father's tradition, Bill drives his Clubman to and from the circuits and then takes it out on track and, in the case of the Hillclimb, to break his own record yet again. As well as that, at the July round of the Tighe series, he drove this car to a 4<sup>th</sup> place outright with a 43.87 run! )

