

The Collins Connections

by Pat and Desley Collins

Long, long, ago, two young men discovered they shared an interest in motor cars and became life-long friends. One was married with two young sons, the other was single and competing in his Austin Lancer. Elaine (nee Swan) and her Mini Cooper had yet to arrive on the scene. Fast forward forty odd years and Pat and Desley (nee Crew) Collins and Vern and Elaine Hamilton now share another common interest – old MGs and the Mt Cotton Hill Climb. The intervening years include many interesting interconnections between the Collins, Hamilton, and Crew families and the MGCCQ.

Pat Collins was born on a dairy farm at Donaldson Road, Rocklea. During 1986-87, he and his brother subdivided part of the property into 'Collinsvale Industrial Estate'. They named Collinsvale Street in memory of their father. In 2005 MGCCQ decided to purchase its own premises and chose Unit 8/16 Collinsvale Street, part of Collinsvale Industrial Estate. Now Pat and Desley again have regular contact with the old farm but without the cows. Career building, study, and two young children meant that, for many years, their only affordable participation in motor-sport was as spectators, so Vern's burgeoning racing career particularly during the period when he was vying with Ivan Tighe and others for the National Formula 2 championship was a point of contact and involvement. When young sons, Michael (3 yrs) and Mitch (5 yrs) were photographed in Vern's Centaur in 1965, it was also possibly the beginning of Michael's interest in racing.



Michael, aged 3, in Vern Hamilton's Centaur

Lowood, Lakeside, Surfers Paradise and Mt Cotton Hill Climb were the usual motor racing venues where Vern starred and the two families met. Both Pat and Michael also took up Vern's offer of a few laps around Lakeside in his Isuzu race car. Pat had previously (1968) had a few laps around the racing pits in the Centaur Clubman.

During 1976, Pat learned about local off-road racing, contracted Tom Poots of Manx Buggies to build him a car, and 30 years of family involvement in off-road racing began. As well as being enthusiastic competitors, both Pat and Desley regularly directed events. Pat became a registered Qld state events director and Desley directed the first official short course off road event in the country. Together they got short-course events approved by CAMS. Pat became Queensland correspondent for *Bushdriver & Enduro* magazines in Australia, and contributed to *V.W. & Porsche* in California. He was made a life member of Brisbane Sporting Car Club for his contribution to the club and to off-riding in Queensland.



Pat and Desley at Morgan Pk. Ca 1980

Pat took delivery of his “Southern-Cross” buggy in October 1978. He picked the car up on Thursday night and drove on Friday to compete in his first event, a 300 km round of the Australian Off-Road championship held on Kindon Station near Goondiwindi. His navigator for the event was his then 16yr old younger son, Michael, and his pit crew included his wife Desley, and her brother Russell Crew, his wife Glenda and their two children Jason and Karly. His first test of the car was on the highway between Goondiwindi and Kindon. Midnight, Saturday, the cars lined up in the pitch dark for the count down and the whole family was hooked.

The Hamilton family now had the opportunity to return the favour and came to watch and support the Collins family play at local tracks.

For many years, the annual trips to compete in, or watch, each round of the Australian Championship were de rigueur. Hattah, Sealake, Griffith, Kempsey, Goondiwindi, Tara, Purga, Morgan Park (dirt track) and Cherribah became highlights of the family social and competition calendar.

During the early 80’s Patrick put on his psychologist’s cap and moved the macho world of off-roading into the modern era by initiating annual “Powder Puff” races for wives, girlfriends and daughters. Desley, with sister-in-law Glenda Crew (the same Glenda responsible for the MGCCQ website) in the navigator’s seat, proved they were too good for the rest of the field and starred in “The Women’s Weekly”. This innovation became an annual event and soon spread interstate.



Desley and Glenda win the first “Powder Puff” event 1980

Mike also showed his trust in his Mum by navigating for her in an open, long-course event, steering her to a very good finish.

It was about this time(1980/81) that the Collins and McConnell families first crossed paths. This was on the family farm beside Donaldson Rd. Desley entered her V.W., while Mike decided to drive the family LTD in club motorkhanas. He certainly entertained the spectators, but was unable to beat Alan in his motorkhana special. Twenty seven years later, Mike, in his Subaru WRX, still can’t beat Alan in his Van Dieman RF87.

The first International Off-Road event, over 1000 km, was run at Kempsey in July 1981 and the Collins family had to be in it. Patrick and Michael would share the driving, while Desley and Russell Crew would rotate as navigator. Patrick and Desley started the race and after 700 km of the roughest terrain imaginable, Michael and Russell, wet through and covered in mud, were lying 3rd outright when the gearbox died. This was probably the first real indication of Michael's driving skills and it wasn't long before he bought his own car. It was a Manx Towd that had, in its earlier life, participated in a 'top six' shoot-out at Mt Cotton hill-climb when driven by Tom Poots of Manx Buggies. Mike, with Uncle Russell as navigator, subsequently competed against Pat and Desley.



Desley, Mike and Russell (playing in the mud)

In 1981, Patrick, with Desley in the navigator's seat, came 4th outright in an Australian National Championship round, probably the highlight of their off-roading career together. That might also have been the event when, while travelling at 140kph down a wheat station farm track at about 4.00am, Desley demonstrated such complete confidence in Pat's driving ability that she left him to it and went to sleep.



Pat & Desley in the lengthened Southern Cross

By 1989 Patrick, after damaging a vertebrae in an argument with a tree, had handed the Southern Cross over to Mike and bought Jim Reddiex's highly modified Citroen GS rally car, while Desley had her own off-roader. With 3 vehicles to prepare and repair, the workload was pretty unrealistic, especially when Mike was the only qualified person on the team. During that year, Pat directed the Braemar round of the Qld Off-Road Championships and Mike, with elder brother Mitch in the navigator's seat, came second outright while Desley followed further down the field.

Unfortunately, the Citroen suspension couldn't stand up to off-road tracks and Pat had to retire from the sport, but not before he had shown his skill in short course events by taking out several 1st in class titles. Desley and Michael continued to race their cars until the decision was made to pool our resources to buy a better car. Mike and his wife, Carol, flew off to California in November 1993 and came back with a left hand drive Jimco which Mike and Desley raced, and became newsworthy as the only Mother and Son combination, until November 2001 when, after winning the Queensland round of the Australian Off-Road Championships and coming 2nd outright for the year, Desley ceremoniously handed her helmet over to Carol who then went on to navigate Michael into another Qld first place before they retired the Jimco and concentrated on "The Hill".



Mike and Desley in the left hand drive Jimco, winning a round of the 2001 National Off-Rd Championship.

Meanwhile, Russell, who had been a dedicated navigator and valued preparation and pit assistant for Pat, Mike and Desley, decided that he would build his own off-roader – a “Baja” based on a V.W. with a Corvair engine. With the car nearing completion, he sold it and bought an MGB roadster, joined the MGCCQ, and turned his attention to hill-climbing and sprints. He quietly worked his way up to setting records. His Open Group S record still stands. Jason eventually broke his Club record in April 2004. It was now time for the Collins family to become spectators again and Collins’ corner at Mt Cotton was born. Russell, enthusiastic about his new sport and how much fun you could have without all the hard work and costs of off-roading, pushed Mike to have a go – which of course he eventually did. Mt Cotton became a real family affair with the growing Collins/Crew contingent becoming more and more vocal in their cheers as first Russell, then Michael, and finally Jason, set records in their relative classes. The challenge is now between Mike in his WRX and Vern in his Elfin 623. Both have been clocked under 44secs, but Vern currently has the edge.



Mike, a “Friend of Mt Cotton”, in his Subaru



Russell’s MGB

Now the tide has turned again and the next generation has stepped in. Mike and Carols’ eldest son Jae had his first run on the hill at the June “Come & Try” day and is anxiously awaiting the arrival of Dad’s new Chenoweth off-roader from USA so he can jump into the navigator’s seat.

Once again the Collins family is planning to travel as a team, hopefully, to Alice Springs next winter, where Mike and Jae plan to compete in the 460km Finke Desert Race, reputedly the toughest off-road event in the country. Meanwhile, Pat and Vern are enjoying each other’s company and, along with Elaine, driving MGs at ‘The Hill’.



Pat and Vern - 2007 National Meeting Concours