



Mac & Phyllis Take a Trip

Traveling the country in search of fond memories in a 1960 Mercedes-Benz 190b

ARTICLE GARY ANDERSON | PHOTOGRAPHY TOM MOREHOUSE

David McChesney

Life is a journey, or so it is often said. But as Tom Morehouse tells the story on the weblog he calls “NutmegFlyer.com,” the journey does not need to end with one life. The journey that started when Tom’s father and mother met in 1944 took him 7,300 miles around the United States in his restored 1960 Mercedes-Benz 190b in the fall of 2013 – and it hasn’t ended yet.

The story begins during the last years of World War II, when Malcolm Morehouse of New York, an Army chief warrant officer who had served with the Signal Corps in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, was transferred to Southern California to teach the new technology of radar systems. There he met an independent young woman named Phyllis who had left a

nursing position in Baltimore to move to the West Coast and was working as a draftsman for an aircraft company. They were married in May 1945, and as soon as the war ended, they headed back to the East Coast to build a new life near where they had grown up.

But halfway through that journey, Malcolm was offered a position with the Sinclair Oil Corporation in Fort Worth. Given the uncertainties of a transitioning economy, Malcolm accepted the position and the young couple settled down in Texas, where they were to live for the rest of their lives.

Tom was born in Fort Worth in 1948, where he lived and graduated from Texas Christian University in 1970. Trained as an educator, Tom began teaching in south Texas but would



Tom Morehouse had planned to stop at most of the cities on the original 1959 promotional trip, but weather forced him to bypass the Pacific Northwest. Major destinations were Macungie, PA; Millfield, OH; Metamora, IL; Appleton, WI; LaCrescent, MN; Logan, UT; Palo Alto, CA; Tucson, AZ; Fort Worth, TX; Clarksville, TN; and Bedford, VA.



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eventually carry on the journey his parents began in 1946, moving to New England, and eventually retiring from the University of Connecticut in 2003.

Tom has always been interested in mechanical things, so after retiring he began restoring 1950s' automobiles. One day while reading an old car magazine – the June 1959 issue of Motor Trend – he was brought up short. In that issue an article caught his eye because it pictured a Mercedes-Benz just like his parents had driven.

The article was titled, “Is the Diesel the Coming Economy Car?” It described in words and pictures a promotional coast-to-coast trip by Mercedes-Benz in the 190D. Tom was dumbstruck by one of the pictures. A man in an overcoat,

hands in pockets, fedora on his head, was inspecting the 190D with two little boys standing next to him.

The man was Tom’s father, and the two little boys were Tom and his brother Steve.

Tom recalls that his father, working in the oil industry, was always fascinated by the latest developments in automobiles and often took his boys to see new cars and technologies when they arrived in Texas. The article started Tom thinking about his childhood and his parents.

After seeing that 190, his mother and father purchased a used 220S from the late 1950s, and then a 190b in the same ponton body style as the 190D they had been inspecting in the Motor Trend article. Tom remembered that his parents were



TOP: A copy of the June 1959 Motor Trend Magazine that Tom Morehouse found in his research produced an unexpected family connection. ABOVE, LEFT: The photo of Mac Morehouse with sons Tom and Steve, inspecting the 190D as it passed through Texas in 1959. ABOVE RIGHT: The Mercedes brochure showing the original route.



very proud of those cars. They had always promised each other that when they retired, they would take a cross-country trip in the old Mercedes.

Unfortunately, cancer and a heart attack brought an unexpected end to their dreams. But his memories of them gave Tom a “kick in the head” to make his own journey without further delay. Why not restore a 190 like theirs and make the trip in their memory? In addition, he could plan the trip to visit all the students, friends, and family with whom he had stayed in touch over the years, making the journey a pilgrimage through his own memories, as well.

Having set his course, Tom located a 1960 190b, in the same medium blue color as his parents’ car. It was mechanically

sound, but needed a lot of work to become roadworthy. Fortunately he only needed to share a link to his weblog with the International Ponton Owners Group and MBCA websites and he soon had as much assistance and advice as he could use. Local shops including Magno Restorations and Manny’s Imported Auto Service, and Tom Hanson of the Mercedes-Benz Classic Center were great sources for advice and repair parts.

Rating himself as a “shade-tree mechanic,” Tom was able to rebuild the brake system, rebuild the carburetor, correct some lamp cord wiring patches, replace the heating system (which would come in handy on the northern leg of the route), and clean up the interior a bit. He had no intention of



TOP: Departure, 10 a.m. on September 23, 2013. Tom holds the “Good Luck” card from fellow volunteers at the New England Air Museum. ABOVE LEFT: The 90-horsepower 4-cylinder M-121 engine, cleaned up, tuned, and ready to go. ABOVE RIGHT: A stop in Appleton, Wisconsin, to visit former student Paul Wilke, his wife Jill, and sons Tom and Matt.



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a 190 like theirs
and make the trip
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impressing anyone with the car’s appearance, and it wouldn’t be entering any concours events along the way, but safety and reliability would be critical on a trip that would traverse some lonely spots and cover an estimated 7,000 miles.

Tom will be the first to say that we have to take life as it comes, and so he was disappointed – but not dismayed – when he bumped into some medical problems of his own. However, these only increased his determination to make the trip. On September 23, 2013, he very carefully placed his parents’ wedding photo in the corner of the windshield where he could see it as he drove, and headed west.

Over the first three weeks, Tom began to satisfy his promise to himself to visit the friends around the country with

whom he had shared milestones in life. These visits would be the high points of his journey, surpassing even the most spectacular scenery in their emotional impact.

By the time Tom reached the Rockies, the car was running fine but weather and politics wouldn’t cooperate in helping him to stay on his itinerary. Early snow storms in South Dakota and Wyoming shut down the roads and waylaid him for a couple of days in Sioux Falls. Then storms in Congress closed the government and he had to skip his planned visits to Mount Rushmore, Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks because they were closed.

Heading southwest through Nevada, Tom noticed on his usual morning flight check that his fan belt needed tightening,



TOP: Entering Pennsylvania on the first day of the trip. The wedding photo of Mac and Phyllis was always on the dashboard. **ABOVE LEFT:** Bear Lake, between Utah and Idaho. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Tom with fellow British Car Forum member Keith Mott and his excellent Austin-Healey BT7, on the road to Beaver Mountain near Logan, Utah.



so he pulled in at a Ford dealer in Elko. Driving into the service area, he brought work to a halt as a dozen young mechanics came out to look at the “old car.” Looking under the hood, one young man asked, “What’s the round thing with all the wires sticking out of it?” Tom had to explain the function of a distributor to him. Only one of the mechanics had ever even seen a carburetor, and that only because he had once worked at a restoration shop near Reno.

They did manage to diagnose an adjusting bolt on the generator that was too badly worn to hold fan-belt tension, and rigged a spacer to make use of the unstripped threads, but even with a fully equipped garage behind them, they had to use the 17mm open-end wrench from the 190’s original tool kit because it was the only way to reach the bolt.

By the end of Week Four, Tom had reached the westernmost point in the journey and marked the ceremony by anointing the 190 with salt water from the Pacific Ocean. From here he would trace his parents’ original drive east back in 1946. In Tucson, Arizona, he spent time with his brother Steve, recalling their shared interest in tinkering that had been engendered by their father during those childhood trips to look at interesting automobiles.

By the end of Week Five, with more than 6,000 miles under the wheels and no major issues, Tom had made it to Fort Worth, where he renewed friendships going back to his college and early teaching days, including Harriet Woldt, now retired from Texas Christian University, whom Tom remembers as the best teacher he ever had.



TOP: Filling up with Dino Supreme near Salt Lake City. Dad worked for Sinclair for over 20 years. BOTTOM LEFT: Splashing some Pacific Ocean water on the Ponton, at the farthest point west. BOTTOM RIGHT: The B-36 “City of Fort Worth,” named for the town where Tom and his brother Steve grew up, at the Pima, Arizona, Air and Space Museum.



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When Tom reached western Tennessee, the car was beginning to lose power and becoming more difficult to start, finally dying at a stop sign in Clarksville. But what seemed like a serious and possibly trip-ending issue was quickly diagnosed. The friend he had come to visit there, Mickey Richaud who was a buddy from the British Car Forum, had the answer. Remember that distributor – common to both German and British cars of the day? During those thousands of miles, the set-screw on the points had loosened and the cam follower had worn so that the points had finally refused to open. In less than 10 minutes, Richaud had reset the points and the problem was resolved.

From Tennessee, the last week of the journey was smooth and pleasant, giving Tom the opportunity to reflect on all

the old memories renewed and new memories created during the journey. As he later described it in his blog, “When you visit people you’ve known for over 50 years, you get a sense of what in German is called *Lebenslauf*, the course of a life. You see how their lives have run, and have a better perspective on how your own life has run. You reflect on how your own life has changed others – and how they’ve changed you. You appreciate more than ever the strength and beauty of the United States and its people, and the family we all belong to.”

Tom carried his parents’ wedding picture with him for all 7,300 miles and six weeks of his journey, sharing the photo with many people along the way. Thirty years after they originally planned their journey, Tom could finally say, “Mac and Phyllis took their trip.”



TOP: After 7,300 miles across two generations of memories, the 190 finally is back in New England. ABOVE LEFT: British Car Forum member Mickey Richaud, and his wife Janet, at their home in Clarksville, Tennessee. Mickey fixed the distributor. ABOVE RIGHT: Visiting former teacher Harriet Woldt, retired from Texas Christian University.