

# 1950's AUTO DEALER EXTRADONARE



Although Kent Emigh's experience and exposure to autos such as Jaguar, Rolls Royce, Porsche and MG's was more prevalent than that of Austin-



Kent Emigh in his Mercedes 300 SL Gullwing

Healeys here is an interesting and nostalgic glimpse into the life and times of what it was like to be a dealer of English and European autos back in the early 1950's.



I was fortunate enough to once again meet Sir Sterling Moss at Pebble Beach in 2011

Back in the 50's running a car dealership was at best a challenge. Everything was difficult. There was no help from the manufacturers with anything. We simply had to figure it out by ourselves. Even things taken for granted today such as factory training for the mechanics didn't exist.

In the war years at the age 15 on our Indiana Farms, I was responsible for the transition to Tractors and power farm Machinery. It was To become the groundwork for a future in The European automotive industry.

Beyond training of mechanics on all of the finest Cars Europe had to offer ,we had to learn spare Parts systems, advertising and sales introduction And promotion from the beginning. And so it was Back in the day, difficult but a very exciting life.

It all began in Indianapolis, Indiana which had always been an automobile town. In fact 198 different auto manufacturers had their start in Indiana. In 1952 along with a business partner, John Schaler from Indianapolis, we created the states first European auto agency, *Auto Imports Ltd.* Our product line included MG, Sunbeam-Talbot, Rover and Rolls Royce. Our first location was a building that at one time had been a Swiss goat dairy. Among the guest's at our Grand opening was Mr. Eli Lilly (of pharmaceutical Fame) ,purchasing our first Rolls Royce sale and was delivered the following day.

We expanded our business and moved into larger quarters near downtown. John, my partner was primarily responsible for sales while I handled other procedures like training the mechanics to repair all the makes we sold Of special interest

Were the GI's returning from WW II with many Unknown makes of automobiles. Finding parts And solving service problems was not easy.

Our MG importer was S.H. Arnolt of Chicago which made it convenient to pick up the most popular British car of the day the MG TD. They cost \$1,995 plus \$100 inland freight. The 200 mile trip from Chicago to Indianapolis in the winter with no heaters was a challenging experience. Happily, an early MG/Jaguar accessory business in Los Angeles had an excellent heater kit available.

In the summer of 1953, after several meetings with a Mr. Max Hoffman, a successful importer/distributor in New York City, we became the first authorized dealers for Jaguar, Mercedes Benz and Porsche in Indiana. With such quality products our business grew quickly. Meetings with the Hoffman organization in New York were brief but important. The new car preparation facilities were located in midtown Manhattan. A typical day involved taking

An early flight from Indianapolis to LaGuardia airport NYC, picking up a New Mercedes or Jaguar already sold or for the showroom floor, putting it in a midtown parking garage. I would then use taxi's for transportation to fill parts orders, sort out service issues and meet friends at the Hotel Henry Hudson, which was headquarters of the Newly formed Sports Car Club of America.

After dinner with friends and a Broadway show or Radio City Music Hall performance the long day was just beginning. At 11:00 pm I would return

To the parking garage to pick up The car for an all night 725 mile Drive back to Indianapolis.

I did this many, many times as selling truck loads of cars was Not so easy and personal business Contacts most important.

By 1954 we had moved again to an even larger facility in downtown Indianapolis. We developed a large Rolls Royce clientele, and introduced the Austin Healey 100 sports car, and the complete line of Volkswagens Surprisingly, Porsche and Volkswagen were initially difficult to sell in the Indiana market but that all changed by 1956.



companies found it necessary to change importers or form their own U.S. offices. Such changes would lead to more stateside inventories, better new car preparation, warranty procedures, advertising, etc. All of these changes affected the product lines we could represent. I sold my original corporation which then became the exclusive Volkswagen dealership with 4 dealerships around Indianapolis.

After selling my stake in Auto Imports, Ltd. I continued on in the sales and service of European cars. Many of which went on to become post war classics. Direct importing was not allowed in my earlier times but by now found Europe full of interesting and valuable pre-owned cars. My car buying trips were planned in the fall to enjoy the International auto shows, Oktoberfest in Munich and Rhine wine festivals. I will always remember the great classic cars I found hidden away in castles and villages of Europe and Great Britain. I am most grateful for all those 60 years and the great times and people I met along the way.



Pictured L to R are Robert Megenheimer, Kent Emigh, Mel Torme (seated) and John Schaler, in the demonstrator Austin-Healey.

At this time little was known about the research and development of the Healey 100's in Indiana but the results were exciting. The style, quality and name was the ideal sports car for our market. It fit perfectly between the MG-TD and the Jaguar XK120/140.

Along the way of my career in the auto business there were many exciting times and people. For instance, during the 1953 Indianapolis 500 race month Mel Torme was performing at a local night club. His interest in Healeys was well known

so we decided to loan him our demonstrator with Lucas flame throwers and an SCCA badge. Because of Mel we sold a few cars. Later he purchased a Sebring 100S model from a NY importer.

Indianapolis winters were long and hard even with all the wonderful autos we handled. Even with all the wonderful cars we handled. So to get away we would head to Sebring, Florida each March in a new Jaguar or Mercedes as the Healeys stayed behind with the sales manager.