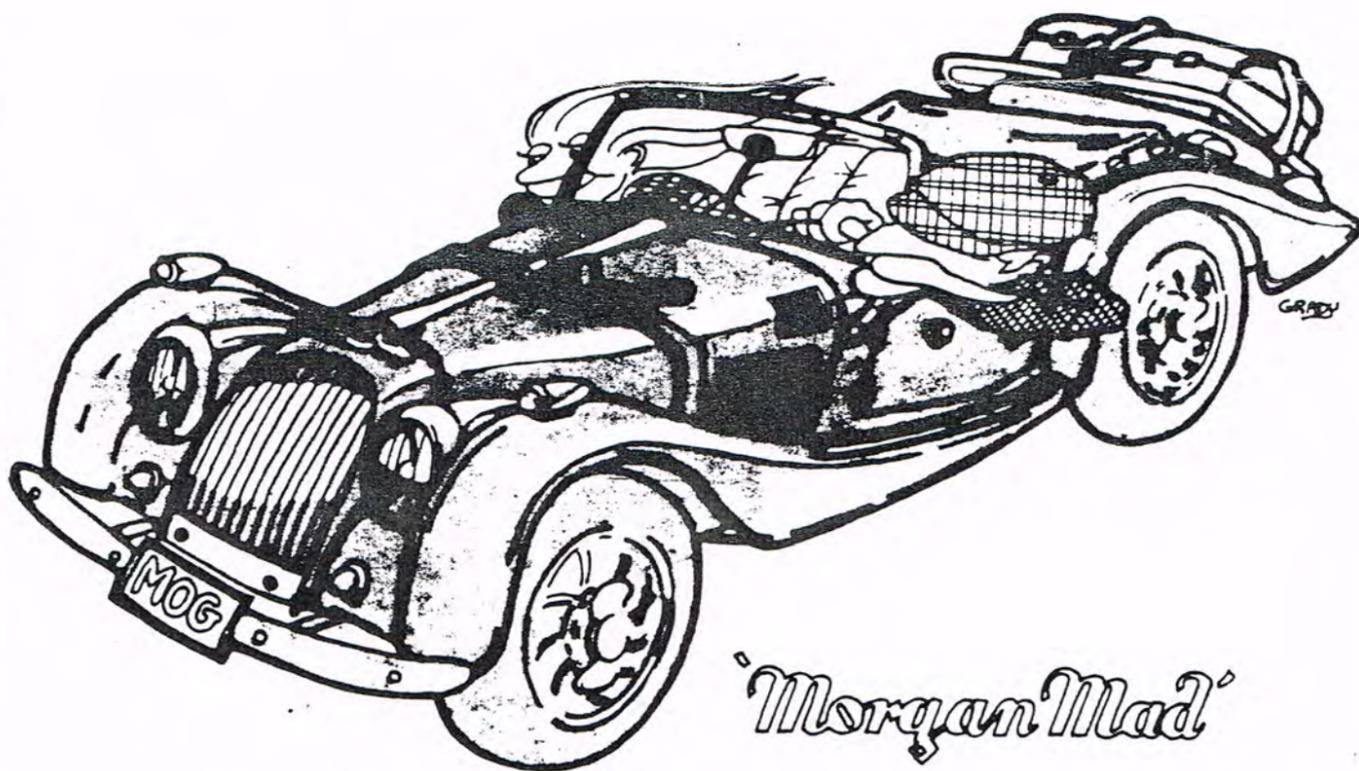




August '85"

Heading for the British Field Meet!



**OWNER'S
GROUP
NORTHWEST**

Nostalgia

by PHILIP SINGERMAN

A CHANCE MEETING WITH AN OLD LOVE DRIVES THE AUTHOR TO DISTRACTION

It was a flawless morning in late spring. I was driving north along Highway A1A, the coast road, not far from Daytona Beach, Fla., when the low-slung roadster, traveling very fast, passed me from the opposite direction. It was a yellow Morgan, frog-eyed and sassy, the first one I had seen on the road in years. I pulled over, got out of my car and sat down on a sand dune, awash in a sea of memories nearly 20 years old.

I had owned a Morgan once, a red one, a 4/4 Competition, built in 1965. It had chrome wire wheels and a thick leather "bonnet strap" pulled tight across its long, louvered hood. Like every Morgan, it was idiosyncratic and ornery—a conveyance that demanded accommodation. You might one day leave it, wild, unpre-

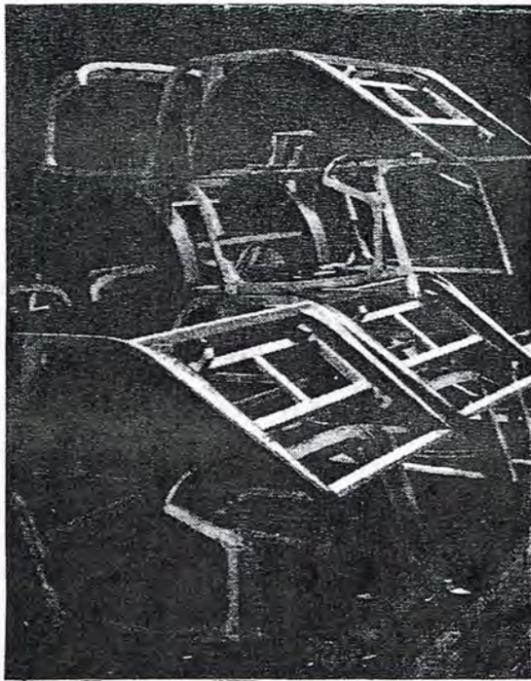
dictable lover that it could be, but you would never stop loving it. Morgans have been called the first and last of the real sports cars, and in terms of bouncing, jouncing and high-spirited performance the title is accurate. The only air conditioning is the wind in your face, the only cruise control a powerful right foot.

The wooden body frame of my Morgan was attached to a steel chassis. The floorboards were really *boards*. You could peek through the spokes of the spare tire, which was set in a round opening in the slanting rear deck, and see honest-to-goodness English ash. Each spring, for as long as I owned that car, I would crawl underneath, poke for dry rot with an ice pick and then brush on wood preservative wherever I could reach. The firmness of the black leather seat cushions could be varied by inflating or deflating their rubber bladders. The front suspension, designed in 1909 by H.F.S. Morgan himself, was lubricated by a shot of oil, which one could release by briefly stepping on a button before setting out for a ride.

Whether you stepped on the button or not, my Morgan had a certain speed at which a mysterious vibration occurred. At precisely 48 mph the steering wheel transformed itself into a jackhammer, while the tires did an independent flamenco dance on the pavement and the front fenders rattled like a tin roof in a hailstorm. At 51 mph the car rode as smooth as could be. I rebuilt the front end twice and succeeded in adjusting the parameters of the seizure to 46 and 49 mph, but I was never able to get rid of it.

When it rained, water dripped in under the windshield and under the doors. The windows, or side curtains, as they were called, were removable. But even when fastened in place, they flapped like the wings of a crazed goose. The gearshift knob was beside the driver's right hand, as one might expect, but the lever bent at a right angle and disappeared under the dashboard where it dropped down into the transmission. This made shifting the car a push-pull operation much like playing shuffleboard.

But don't get me wrong. Discomfort



Wooden frames are piled high at the factory.

and weirdness aside, my Morgan was a dream. It was lithe and quick. The faster it went, the better it hugged the road until 46 mph. Its Weber carburetor hissed like an angry python. Its snarling exhaust set my body aquiver from toe to throat. On a

moonlit night, with the top and windows tucked behind the seats and the pavement rushing by at 100 mph inches from my elbow, I felt more at one with a machine than at any other time in my life.

I bought my Morgan in 1966 for \$2,300 from a young couple in New York City. They had just had a baby and needed a vehicle with more room. Both of them cried when they handed me the keys. I was living on eastern Long Island in those days, and as I drove the car home on a broiling summer afternoon on the jammed-up Long Island Expressway, a middle-aged woman in the next lane, riding in a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce, handed me a chicken-salad sandwich and an ice-cold Coke. "Thanks," I shouted. "How

about a ride?" she yelled. I said fine, and as neither the Rolls nor the Morgan was moving, she walked over and climbed in beside me. I followed the Rolls to her home in the Hamptons, which was only slightly smaller than the American Muse-

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um of Natural History. "Young man," she said, "I haven't had this much fun since I flew a crop duster on my grandfather's farm."

My Morgan was that kind of car. It seemed to do something to people, make them act crazy, throw caution to the wind and have a little fun. Two weeks later I was doing about 75 in a 40-mph zone. I came around a corner, and there was a cop, leaning against the fender of his cruiser. He had me cold. I didn't even bother to hit the brake. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him smile at me and wave. He never moved.

Once I missed the turn for the public beach in Southampton. I turned around in the driveway of an oceanfront estate and a man came running toward me, waving wildly. I thought I was going to be arrested for trespassing. Estate owners had little patience with the longhairs, or "freaks," as we were called then. The next thing you know I was driving this man to town for cigarettes and hot-dog rolls, and then I spent three days cavorting with him and his friends.

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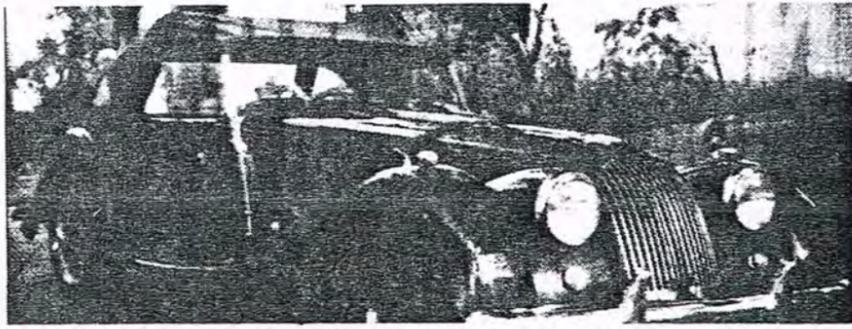
Another time, I came out of a restaurant and found a note under the windshield wiper. "Lordy, what a car!" it read. "Can I have a ride?" There was a phone number and a woman's name at the bottom. I called her up. We went for a ride one beautiful fall afternoon, and when I dropped her off she took a small camera from her purse and had me take a picture of her sitting behind the wheel. I never saw her again. I wonder if she saved the photograph.

I left Long Island shortly after that and moved to Gloucester, Mass., where I tended bar. People came from all over to see the Morgan, which had assumed legendary proportions, in part because it beat a GTO in a race between Gloucester and Rockport. "Hot damn," said an enormous Finn who ran a fishing boat thereabouts. "A four-cylinder engine and it beat that big monster? Lemme buy that car a drink." One night everyone in the bar sang a song to the car. It was to the tune of *Down by the Old Mill Stream* and, as I recall, began, "Down at the High Line Bar; In my Morgan car." Think of it. Twenty-five or 30 adults standing in a parking lot at 1 a.m. singing to a car.

I sold my Morgan one spring to pay a debt. I put an ad in *The New York Times*, and the first person who saw the car bought it. He drove 250 miles to my front yard, took one look at the car and said, "I'll take it." "Don't you want to drive it?" I asked. "Sure, I'll drive it," he said, "but I'm going to buy it anyway." After it was gone, a number of generous friends and relatives told me they would gladly have put up the money I needed and kept my Morgan in storage until I could afford to buy it back. "We wouldn't even have driven it," they all promised. "It would have been enough just to have it around." But they were too late, and the man I'd sold it to wouldn't sell it back, not even for \$1,000 more than he had paid me; an era in my life was over.

Since then I've owned cars that were faster, handled better and were more expensive than my Morgan, but no cop has ever smiled at one of them, no woman has ever left a note on one of their windshields, and no bar full of people has ever burst into song at their presence.

In 1978, nine years after I sold the car, I traveled to the Morgan factory in England. I wanted to see what kind of people build a car that combines contemporary



Although it is long gone, the red Morgan with the bonnet strap will never be forgotten.

swiftness with manufacturing techniques that were abandoned by the rest of the auto industry before WW II. I found the Morgan Motor Co., Ltd. housed, as it has been since 1910, in an interconnected row of barnlike brick buildings. There were no robots, no conveyor belts. Morgans are built by hand. In the dispatch bay two long rows of new Morgans sat awaiting shipment. Above them, a stuffed owl presided, as it has for 30 years. It was placed there to ward off any sparrows that might fly down and scratch the new cars' paint.

Down the line were the various assembly shops. The wood shop, where the rolling chassis is taken to be fitted with handcrafted sections of ash and where the coachmakers carefully hang the wooden doors after the rest of the frame is in place; the panel-beater shop, where men with special hammers beat the steel panels and nail them to the frame; the area where the cars are wired by hand; the place where they are painted. There were around 100 employees at the factory, almost all of them trained on the job. Turnover has always been virtually nonexistent. Tuffy Burston, foreman of the machine shop, has been there the longest—since 1916. "Yes, they're wonderful autos," he said. "Of course, I've never owned one. I don't know how to drive." [Burston died recently, making Tony Brough the senior employee, with 45 years of service.]

The next day I met Peter Morgan, son of founder H.F.S., and now the owner of the company. Morgan, a handsome, well-dressed man, sat warming himself by the ubiquitous coal stove. "We make 350 or so cars per year," he told me. "I'd like to get production up to between 400 and 500, but not by sacrificing the way they're built."

Morgan, who learned automotive design as a child sitting in his father's study next to the company's machine shop, is saddened by American regulations that have kept him from directly exporting his cars to the U.S. since 1972. The engine in

the Morgan does not conform to U.S. exhaust emission standards, and the cost of developing an engine that continues to meet changing U.S. specifications is prohibitive for so small a company.

But you can still buy a Morgan in this country. An enthusiast named Bill Fink, proprietor of Isis Imports in San Francisco, brings in 24 or so each year. In his shop he fits them out to run on propane instead of gasoline. He also does all manner of structural modifications—about 100 hours' worth for each car—to bring them up to government safety standards. There's a six-month waiting list for his cars, which cost \$22,000 for four-cylinder models and \$26,000 for those equipped with V-8s. Doctors, lawyers and bankers buy them. They have ceased being affordable to aspiring writers tending bar for a living.

I had been sitting in the sand 10 minutes or so when I decided to find that yellow Morgan. Maybe, I told myself, it was one of Fink's conversions. I had never seen one of those. Maybe it was an old one, completely restored, stripped down and repainted. Maybe, by some astounding coincidence, it was mine. I jumped into my car and began driving furiously south on A1A, looking down every conceivable turnoff as I went. Finally, I spotted the car in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven. I zoomed into the lot, jammed on my brakes and leaped out. Suddenly I got a glimpse of my own foolishness. What the hell was I doing? What was I chasing? What would I say to these strangers, who might take me for a lunatic? I walked over to the Morgan. A man and woman in their early 30s sat sipping orange juice. In the luggage compartment behind them was a large Irish setter. The three of them eyed me warily. "I had a Morgan once," I said. "It was red." The man looked at me silently for a moment. Then he raised his left hand, made a circle with his thumb and index finger, and smiled. "Yes, indeed," I said, and I got back into my car and drove away. ■

To: The Morgan Club Members:

I trust all had an enjoyable July for Morgening--no overheating, just routine excellent driving weather. August should prove to be eventful as well, with the All British Field Meet beginning the 30th and ending Sept. 1.

Most of you should have received mailers on the event, and I'd like to see a real good turnout for the show on Saturday the 31st. If anyone needs an entry form, they are available through John Rollin at 295-6278, or I understand that Dave Crockett may have some spare forms. Hope to see all of you there.

From the Seattle contingency: Al and Anita Sansom, Bob and Loretta Nelson and Dennis and Jacque Morrison attended the Westwood Classic Car races in BC, joined by Jeff and Less Burkholder. SEVEN Morgans in all appeared for the event, with a 4/4 and a 1947 3-wheeler actually racing.

Seattle International Race Way will host the classic car races this year Sept. 13 and 14--please let Bob Nelson know if anyone intends to attend--he'll have info on inside club parking for Morgans. His phone numbers are: 206 743 5244 and 206 387 3241.

Lastly for the Field meet here, I am informed that 3 cars are coming from BC and 5 from Seattle--Bob suggests coordinating through him to meet and travel South together. We down here look forward to seeing you all! (Northern news courtesy of Bob Nelson).

The "King Pin Rallye" will be held Sunday, August 25, 1985 at 11:00 AM meeting at the First Interstate Bank parking lot at Jantzen Beach. Good weather has been arranged, and I hope to see lots of cars there for the event.

The next meeting will be Tuesday night, August 20 at the Horse Brass at 7:30 PM(or as we heard ad nauseum in the UK "haf eight").

Happy Morgening!

