

WHEN I WAS A KID WATCHING DAVY Crockett movies and running around the deep woods of Wisconsin in a coonskin cap, I never dreamed I'd one day be on my knees adjusting the carbon-encrusted valves of a 1968 Morris Mini in a blacktop parking lot one block from the Alamo.

But there I was, within easy shooting distance of those hallowed walls, and if a sudden time warp had thrown me 164 years backward in history, the Mexican troops of General Antonio López de Santa Anna would have been advancing over this very spot, tripping over my tools and regarding the Mini with the same superstitious disbelief it engenders from the public even today. Probably they would have shot me.

I half wished somebody would shoot me now. The car had a variety of problems and I was trying to get it running right.

So why, you ask, would one fettle a Mini a block from the Alamo?

Let me explain.

A few months ago, a gentleman from suburban Chicago named Bill

Lone Star MINI



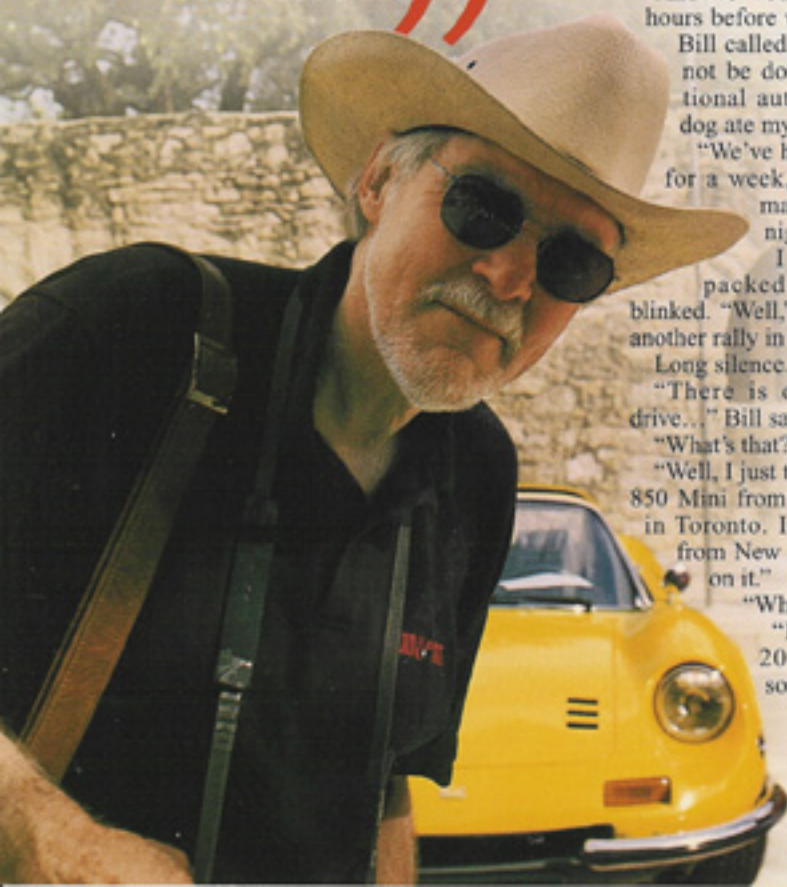
A thousand miles on 850 cc; the Little Car that Could attacks the Texas Hill Country Rally

BY PETER EGAN • PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR





“...about 12 hours before we were supposed to leave, Bill called and told me the car would not be done in time. Yes, the traditional automotive version of ‘The dog ate my homework.’”



Lillibridge called me and said he was just finishing up a two-year restoration on the Holy Grail of all Austin-Healeys, a 100S. Would I like to do a story on the car and join him as co-driver on the Texas 1000 Hill Country Rally?

How could I refuse? I've had six Austin-Healeys (okay, they've all been Bugeye Sprites) and I am an admitted Texophile, if there is such a word. I've crossed Texas on several road trips and once in a 1945 Piper Cub, and have always enjoyed that state's unique blend of genteel Southern hospitality and lively Western optimism. Also, the food and music are good. Added to that, the Hill Country Rally was being run by my old friends Rich and Jean Taylor.

"Sounds like fun," I said to Bill. "Let's do it."

And we would have, too, but about 12 hours before we were supposed to leave, Bill called and told me the car would not be done in time. Yes, the traditional automotive version of "The dog ate my homework."

"We've had four guys working on it for a week, but they aren't going to make it, even if they work all night," Bill said.

I looked at my suitcases, all packed by the front door and blinked. "Well," I said, "maybe we can do another rally in the spring."

Long silence.

"There is one other car we could drive..." Bill said, his voice trailing off.

"What's that?"

"Well, I just traded two MGCs for an old 850 Mini from my friend Mike Salter, up in Toronto. It's a right-hand-drive car from New Zealand with a lot of miles on it."

"What kind of shape is it in?"

"It looks pretty good from 20 feet away, but it burns some oil."

"Have you driven it?"

"I drove it around the block and into the trailer. It seems to run..."

Oh, boy. A thousand miles of Texas in a clapped-out Mini of unknown quality, mixing it up with Ferraris, Corvettes and Cobras. Could be fun, or, like the "floating" amphibious assault tank in World War II, the worst idea anyone ever had. Straight to the bottom.

"Well," I said at length, "Everybody's got to be somewhere, so I guess we might as well be in Texas, driving a Mini." I looked out my window as sleet rattled against the pane. "At least it'll be warm down there."

Early the next morning I drove to Bill's house in Cary, Illinois. The Mini was parked in the driveway, next to Bill's Ford Explorer and 20-ft. enclosed trailer. Time for a short exploratory drive.

The blue and white Mini looked better than I'd expected, and it started right up and seemed to idle okay, though pretty fast. A loose, slightly thrashy-sounding engine with no singularly terminal noises. I headed down the street, up through the gears. Clutch and gearbox okay, brakes pulling sharply to the left, as best they could, at each stop sign. Out on the highway, the Mini reached a maximum speed of about 59 mph (95 km/h) on the Kiwi speedometer.

The odometer didn't work, stuck at 100,000 km. Nor did the fuel gauge, turn signals or windshield wipers. There was no central rearview mirror. The end of the speedometer needle was bent like a witch's finger, and it seemed to be highly optimistic. Although it's hard to be optimistic about 59 mph.

"This car either needs a tuneup," I told Bill, "or the compression is gone. It's bog slow."

"We can get a tuneup kit at Jim Fletcher's Mini restoration shop, just a few miles away. Jim also has a set of wheels and tires for us, Mini-Lites with Yokohama A008s, to replace these semi-bald ones."

So we left.

We loaded up on spares at Fletcher's shop—plugs, points, condenser, water pump and throttle cable—and picked up the tires. "Anything else you can think of that we might need?" I asked Jim.

"Holy water," he said, "to sprinkle on that car before the rally. Good luck."

On the way to San Antonio we listened to some books on tape Bill had brought along, including Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Morrie was the author's old college professor, dying of ALS and passing on the message that you should back away from the daily rat-race and follow your heart rather than your inflexible plans, loosen up and go with the flow.

"I think Morrie would approve of this trip," Bill said, as our Explorer headlights

bored holes into the vast Texas night.

Drawn into the freeway vortex of San Antonio late at night, we found the Alamo and our hotel, the famous old Menger, right across the street. Some of the Menger's former guests include Teddy Roosevelt, Babe Ruth, Carrie Nation and Oscar Wilde, proof that separate rooms are best.

We parked the trailer in a nearby public parking lot and went to work on the Mini the next morning. While Bill changed the tires, I adjusted the valves and found the valve cover and head full of thick, baked-on sludge, like the inside of a barbecue grill. I installed some new racing plugs and then the car would not start. I put the old plugs back in and the car fired right up. In retrospect, I probably had the racing plugs gapped too wide for the tired old coil and ignition system.

The high idle and 59-mph top speed were caused by the gummed-up choke being stuck. I shoved it into the off position and the car ran fine. A quick wash with a parking lot hose, and we were off to the opening concours d'elegance in front of the Alamo.

The other rally entrants were already lined up. Two lovely rows of Jaguars, Cobras, Corvettes, Mercedes, Ferraris, a Porsche 356C and so on. No other Minis, and the only other older British cars were an exquisite yellow Lotus Elite, a Healey

3000 and a Jensen-Healey. Almost all cars were from the 1960s and early 1970s, except for a couple of Panoz Roadsters and a Jaguar XKR and an XJ-S.

Twenty-nine cars in all. Plus two "spare" cars, a Mustang GT and a Focus provided by Ford, which sponsored the rally. "Gosh," Bill said. "Maybe if we blow up the Mini, we can drive a Mustang in the rally!" His enthusiasm for this concept made me a little nervous.

Two things we discovered at the concours on the plaza in front of the Alamo: (1) People from all walks of life love the Mini on sight, and (2) most Americans no longer have any idea what it is. Several passersby in the crowd described it to their friends as "some kind of French car."

One father shepherded his little daughter over to the Mini and said, "Look at this funny little car, Nicole! How many clowns do you suppose you could fit in *there*?"

"At least two," I said, confidently. "That much we know for sure."

Nearly everyone who looked at the Mini asked how two big guys like us could possibly fit in such a little car. I tried to explain that the Mini is one of the best packaging jobs in the history of the automobile, small on the outside and big on the inside, and that it has more head, elbow and leg room than most modern economy cars—indeed, more than many large cars—and

■ A concours d'elegance kicks off the rally's festivities with an impressive collection of 1960s and 1970s-era classics held in front of the Alamo. Our faithful Mini is flocked by a gleaming assortment of Jaguars, Corvettes, Cobras, Mercedes and Ferraris.



that even the rear seats were quite comfortable. Everyone looked skeptical.

Late in the afternoon, I sneaked away from the concours and toured the Alamo. It's an important American shrine for me. I am always struck by the clear, sober courage of the men who stayed and refused to surrender, knowing they were doomed.

The occasional modern historian tries to debunk the mythology of the Alamo, but



it's a place that doesn't debunk very well. These were people with families, far from home, outnumbered 183 to about 3500. I am thankful that history hasn't asked me to try that predicament on for size.

After a group dinner, we took a chilly night tour boat cruise along the famous River Walk, a stretch of reborn architectural splendor that borders on the fantastic. Only a few decades ago, some citizens wanted to pave the river over and use it as a sewage canal. Tickets for that boat ride might have been harder to sell, though it works in Paris.

In the morning we loaded our 100-lb. tool kit into the surprisingly commodious trunk of the Mini (suitcases are carried to the next hotel in a luggage van) and were flagged off in front of the Alamo, headed for the Hill Country.

The Texas Hill Country is a picturesque region that rises out of the center of Texas like a green Oz of limestone ridges, small rivers and twisting roads, much as the Black Hills do in South Dakota. It's an area of rustic hobby ranches and real ranches, where goats and longhorns roam with the plentiful mule deer. As we would soon see.

Lyndon Johnson's ranch is at the northern edge of the Hill Country, and the famous little burg of Luckenbach—the Woodstock of Country Music—lies along a small creek to the west. The roads are wonderful for sports cars and motorcycles nearly everywhere, climbing over ridges with 25-mph switchbacks and sweeping down into serpentine river valleys. Mini country.

But first we had to get there.

We droned out of San Antonio on the freeways and I was pleasantly surprised to find the Mini running fine and free from fatal noises. It buzz-bombed along quite nicely at an indicated 100–120 km/h

(62–74 mph), keeping up with traffic easily, except on mild upgrades, where an immediate downshift to 3rd was needed to keep the little 34-bhp (at the best of times) 850 on boil. The only disconcerting sound was a rotational slap from the slightly decayed soft rubber donuts in the front axles—which, alarmingly, felt like actual bakery donuts when squeezed. After dunking in coffee.

But what the heck. We were running and we'd made it all the way out of downtown San Antonio. My worst fear was that we'd be towed back to the hotel in disgrace from five or six blocks away.

As we turned onto the small, tight country roads toward Bandera, the real charms of the Mini came back to me. I hadn't driven one any distance since my wife Barbara and I had taken a Mini 1000 on a delayed honeymoon trip over 2200 miles of back roads in England in 1973. I had remembered that drive fondly, but suspected that the passage of time might have rendered the Mini less remarkable in the light of technical progress since then.

Not so.

I am willing to stand on the sweeping statement that the Mini offers the most fun you can have—even now—on any winding road. Period. Nothing else is even close. The BMW folks have their work cut out for them, duplicating the charming feel and simplicity of this car. It's that rarest of all things, a thrilling car that makes you laugh, even as you saw at the wheel to save your life.

Throw the Mini into a hard downhill bend, downshift and stand on it and the 10-in. front tires simply pull the car through the corner, unflustered, at ridiculous speed. The low center of gravity, light, precise steering and lack of body roll allow it to corner like a go kart. Except, unlike a go

“...the Mini rotated
360 degrees in an endless,
howling spin...”



kart, it has real suspension. Our car was equipped with the later Hydrolastic, or “wet,” suspension, which gives the Mini a

remarkably supple and sophisticated ride for such a short-wheelbase car. The handling is magical.

No wonder Minis won three Monte Carlo Rallies outright, and hundreds of others, against cars of every size and displacement. With some real horsepower—as in 1275 Cooper S—the car would be unbeat-

able in the mountains and hills.

Ours, of course, was not a Cooper S, so we essentially had to wring its poor little neck and drive like a bat out of hell every second of every stage during the rally to arrive at the finish on time. Other cars would get there 5 or 10 minutes early and wait to cross the line on the exact second, while we would come skidding in like a bridegroom late for his own wedding and



barely make our time.

We zeroed our first stage the first day, right on the second, then got lost looking for a turn on the second stage because we had no odometer. It's hard to look for a turnoff at 26.4 miles when you have no odometer. The human mind is not a very precise measuring instrument of distance, especially on a crazy carnival ride like the Mini. It's the original Wild Mouse.

And as we were wild mousing at about 70 mph down a steep hill near a park called Enchanted Rock the second day, a couple of large mule deer (everything looks large from a Mini) bounded out in front of us. I hit the brakes and swerved between the deer and the Mini rotated 360 degrees in an endless, howling spin that took us halfway down the hill in a cloud of tire smoke and dust. I thought we were sure to go on the roof, but the Mini stayed flat as a pancake on all four tires and slid to a stop backward on the shoulder.

When the dust cleared, I said to Bill, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said. Then, as an afterthought, he asked, "Did my coffee cup spill? I left it wedged in the door pocket over on your side."

I looked down at the tall plastic travel mug and checked the lid. "Didn't spill a drop," I told him.

"Great cupholders," Bill remarked.

We would brake for about 20 more deer during the rally, but none so close.

Later that day, we passed a flatbed truck with one of the rally's two Cobras on it. Mechanic Steve Markowski told us the Ford 289 had pulled a rocker stud out of the cylinder head.

"I guess it just couldn't take the relentless pressure from our 850 Mini," Bill said to me, winding out the engine with a thrashy roar as we accelerated back up to speed.

■ A bust of the late Texas humorist, Hondo Crouch, stands proudly outside the Luckenbach, Texas, post office/tavern. Purchased by Crouch in 1970, the town was later immortalized by the 1978 Waylon Jennings song, "Luckenbach, Texas."

"Very few cars can stand up to the punishment of hot pursuit by an A-Series BMC engine," I said.

If the days were hectic, the evenings were serene. On succeeding evenings we ate, drank and slept well. First we stayed in Fredericksburg, the famous German settlement in the heart of the Hill Country, then at the YO Resort in Kerrville, the Guadalupe River Ranch near Boerne and back to the Menger. On the rally, all meals and rooms were provided, along with beer and wine, at a cost of \$3500 for a car and two people. This included a flatbed emergency truck, two mechanics, a timing and scoring staff, maps and a pair of backup cars. One was the Mustang GT that Bill half hoped we'd drive.

But we didn't. The Mini wouldn't blow up, no matter how hard we drove it. And we drove it hard.

On one stage during the third day, we left our checkpoint after fueling up and realized we had 60 minutes to go 54.2 miles on some very tight and hilly roads. Bill drove absolutely flat-out, banging shifts and zapping the engine to what we imagined to be its redline (no tach) for a solid hour and got to the checkpoint only seconds early. We zeroed the stage.

Our stop was in the parking lot of an indoor go-kart track called the Thunder Zone. "Want to race some karts?" I asked.

Bill shook his head. "I've been doing that for an hour."

Our next stop was the little village of Luckenbach, Texas, which is nothing but a bar and post office in one building and a

■ The Mini is loved wherever it goes (including downtown Luckenbach, Texas), consistently engaging those who know what it is and thoroughly amusing those who don't.

A GOOD RAIN
& A BABY CALF
are Always Welcome

blues in a law

dance hall across the street. The town was made famous in a Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings song and has been the site of many country music festivals and performances over the years.

I came through this place with my friend Chris Beebe, 14 years ago, when we were driving a Model A Ford across the country to California. On that trip we made friends with a gentleman named Ken Morgan who—it turned out—owned half of Luckenbach, and he invited us to stay at his nearby ranch. Ken was a retired Continental Airlines pilot who liked cars, and had a Jaguar XK-150 back at the ranch.

When Barb and I flew our Piper Cub across the country a year later, Ken invited us to stay on the ranch, and he and his wife Kathy showed us around and took us to dinner. Wonderful people, and I hadn't seen them since 1987, the summer of the



Oliver North hearings.

I called Ken from the bar in Luckenbach and invited him over for a beer. He showed up looking thin and fit as ever, not aged much, and said Kathy wasn't feeling well and he couldn't stay too long.

A very good country swing band was playing in the tiny rustic bar, and as it got dark and the tourists left, the bar began to fill up with locals. More musicians kept arriving with fiddle and guitar cases, sitting in on various songs. We had a few Lone

Stars with Ken, and the music seemed to be getting better and better.

It was one of those magical evenings that seem to happen only in Luckenbach, when everything is right. Good music, nice people, old friends.

Bill leaned over to me and said, "I'm going out to the Mini to get my cell phone. I'll tell the timing and scoring guys not to wait for us at the hotel."

I looked at him and said, "Are you sure? We can still make the stage."



"I think Morrie would stay here," he said, "and visit with an old friend."

We drove in a thick fog to the Guadalupe River Ranch that night, scanning the road for deer in our one dim headlight, feeling like Holmes and Watson lost on the bogs of Dartmoor with a Lucas flashlight. We finally found the place.

The next day brought us—flat-out again—back to San Antonio and the Menger Hotel. On that last afternoon, we moved out to pass a truck going downhill and Bill pegged the speedometer just beyond its 145-km/h mark, or 90-plus mph. The Mini sounded like a Stuka dive bomber with a loose timing chain. I tried not to visualize our tiny connecting rods.

An hour later, we eased to a stop in front of the Alamo after four days of driving, and it was over. The Mini was still running.

The car smelled a little hot when we parked it. We'd been leaking coolant and steam from the bottom of the radiator that last day, adding water from ditches and creeks to keep going. We'd used a quart of oil—and half a can of STP—each day and averaged 32 mpg. The rubber drive joints in the front axles were noisier than ever at the end, but nothing broke. It was a tough little car.

At the awards dinner that night Rich and Jean Taylor announced the overall winners: Charles and Carol Goolsbee in their 1974



Mercedes-Benz 450SL. We were ranked 21st out of 29 cars, but we got a "Spirit of Vintage Rallying" award for our hard-pressed efforts in what Rich said was "the smallest car in the group, and the smallest engine ever to compete in our nine years of vintage rallies."

Bill looked at the results and pointed out to me that we'd finished ahead of two Ferraris, two Cobras and a Corvette, among others.

"Very few cars can stand up to the relentless pursuit of an 850 Mini," I reprised.

In the morning we drove the Mini back to our trailer, which was parked at a ranch 30 miles north of San Antonio. About a mile from the ranch, our rear motor mount broke. The whole drivetrain tilted forward and Bill was unable to engage 2nd or 4th gears.

We drove onto the trailer in 1st.

"Rest-and-rebuild time for the Mini," I said, "the little car that gave its all." 