● It was an evil sounding, raucous little bastard that would lure you into a corner all cozily understeering the way you'd expect from a car with 2-liters worth of good stout cast iron way up front, then throw up its hands and bumble off backward.

There was nothing delicate about it, either. None of your clipping daisies with a knockoff. You drove it like a USAC Sprinter, all elbows and shoulders, and when the weird harmonics set in at 3700 revs and it gave off that hairy chested bellow, it sounded ready to take on any Super Car in town. All 100 advertised horsepower of it.

Strangest of all, it never quit running. Somehow, electronics notwithstanding, the flat top pistons kept popping up and down and the valves kept clattering away mile after mile after mile.

Unforgiving, brawny, dependable . . . it was, in short, everything a British sports car was not.

At the same time, it seemed the very epitomy of traditional British machinery. The oddly trapezoidal lines, the tooth rattling four-banger engine, the built-in agony of the cockpit, the 19-snap cloth top that was designed to channel the rain at you instead of vice versa, all were in the mold of the typical mid-Fifties British sports car.

So it was a puzzle. An enigma that wasn't what it seemed and seemed to be what it wasn't. Which was the mystery, the unfathomable stubborn charm of the TR-3. Or, to its intimates (who learned the hard way to deal with its mechanical idiosyncracies) the TR-goddam-3. More correctly, the TR-2, TR-3, TR-3A and TR-3B. In all 83,572 sports cars that are still showing people a viable alternative to Detroit seven years after the last one left Coventry.

In retrospect, the TR-3 had no business being such a marvelous misfit. It sprang, after all, from an impeccably British background. The paternal side of the line was a succession of incredibly dull saloons and tourers extending all the way back to 1903. Its mother was a tractor.

Further, it owed its existence, ultimately, to a gentleman named Reginald W. Maudslay, whose feelings about car design didn't bode awfully well for sports cars. He explained, "I don't want any of these new ideas. I want my car to be composed purely of those components whose principles have been tried and tested and accepted as reliable standards."

With that, in 1903, the company that would one day give birth to the TR-3 was founded. Not unexpectedly, Maudslay called it the Standard Motor Company.

For some 50 years, the "nothing new" principle guided the fortunes of the company, and guided them rather well. Although no one was shouting loud huzzahs over the cars Maudslay produced, they were selling well. Then the First World War brought lucrative government contracts for everything from BE-12 bi-planes to Stokes Trench Mortars. This allowed Standard to expand its factories so that at war's end the company could get on in style with the job at hand: grinding out thousands of reliable, conservative cars for thousands of reliable, conservative customers.

When Maudslay died in 1934, the company continued on in his tradition. Even after the Second World War, which yielded its share of government contracts for the firm, more of the same dull cars seemed to be in the offing. And as a matter of fact Standard *did* produce a gaggle of re-hashed 1939 designs after the war. But a bizarre set of circumstances was developing: so bizarre that the Standard Motor Company, as it was before the war, would not survive but would turn into something entirely new; so bizarre, that it lead to the birth of the TR-goddam-3.

First, in 1945, Standard bought a down-and-out ragamuffin of a company called Triumph. An automotive off-shoot of the prosperous Triumph motorcycle operation, it had been floundering even before the war. Then the Heinkels and Dorniers of the Luftwaffe came to finish off the job. So what Standard got for its money was Triumph's "good will" and a whole lot of bomb craters. And an outlet for some new products.

With one eye firmly on the profit ledger, Standard set its new subsidiary to work on an unlikely project. Not a car. Not even a motorcycle. But, of all things, a *tractor*! It was to be a four-wheel-drive machine based on an 8-hp Standard car engine.

The project itself never amounted to anything. But it turned out to have been a pretty good move anyway. Triumph, instead of making its own tractors, wound up with a fat contract to produce the Ferguson tractor. More importantly, that contract included a license to produce the Ferguson engine—a 2-liter in-line Four with chrome wet-liners in a cast-iron block.

The company's first move was to design a car around the tractor motor. It was a dumb, bulbous little family car called the Vanguard, built with one eye on the anemic postwar economy in Europe and the other eye on the newly stringent vehicle tax laws. The same engine wound up in another pair of cars—cars that were being produced more or less with Triumph's left hand while the right concentrated on the tractor business. These were an odd-looking but interesting roadster and a handsome razor-edge saloon, both called the TR-1800.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the ocean, another event in the bizarre sequence was underway. America had discovered the sports car. Thousands were outfitting themselves in tweed caps and string-backed gloves and spending big money for anything automotive that looked slinky and came from overseas. The boom was on, money was flowing and MG and Jaguar were selling more cars than they made.

That sort of thing wasn't likely to go unnoticed at the Standard works, of course. So, just six months before the 1952 Earls Court Auto Show, the company decided to claim a piece of the action. A hastily devised roadster body with cut down doors, a bobbed-tail and a puckered little grille was clapped onto a Vanguard frame, the trusty tractor motor was dropped in place and—*voilà*—the 1952 show car from Triumph.

Out on the test track the thing turned out to handle like a three-legged camel but that was a minor detail—besides that wouldn't be apparent on the show stand. So it was off to Earls Court. There, even though the most dim-bulb showgoer could see it had no provision for luggage, it was a hit. More importantly, it hunkered down neatly into the market gap between the 1250cc MG and the 3.5-liter Jaguar.

So the engineers set about making the TR-1 (yes, there really was a TR-1) into something you could drive without maiming yourself and which could carry something more substantial than a Dopp Kit. Retaining the same basic body, they gave it a longer tail with a hint of a trunk, devised a new frame, fiddled with the suspension and by 1953 were producing the TR-2. It came on like Genghis Kahn in the marketplace.

For that matter, it did pretty well on the road, too. As soon as the photographers were done with it, Ken Richardson, then competition director of Triumph, took the prototype, stuck on a belly-pan and some streamlining, removed the windscreen and was clocked at 124 mph down the Jabbeke highway in Belgium—a new record. And almost as soon as it hit this country the TR was the super plan in E-production racing. It was low, it was little (11.55 square feet of frontal area without the windscreen), it would turn 100 mph century and then some, and it had torque to burn for starts and digging out of slow corners (remember, the engine was originally designed to pull a two-bottom plow).

Getting it stopped could be an adventure, but even that was alleviated in 1957 when the car (by this time it had been through a series of minor design changes and was called the TR-3) came with a set of Girling disc brakes in front.

Best of all from a racing standpoint was the fact that it never, never broke down. You practically had to throw rocks in the sump to blow the engine and one of the favorite pastimes of TR-3 fans is swapping stories of TR-3s that survived hideous disasters and kept going.

For instance, there was one TR-3 that actually ran the last 12 laps of a race at Bainbridge, Georgia, in 1965 on only three wheels—and finished third in class. An off-course excursion early in the race ripped out the left front suspension, leaving the wheel dangling from the upper A-arm and the steering arm. The driver commented, "It was pretty sloppy in a right hand turn after that, but it ran like stink down the straights and through the left handers, so I just kept on going and hoped the corner crews wouldn't notice."

Another TR-3 ran a whole race at Courtland, Alabama, with the wrist pin in number four cylinder machining a deep groove in the bore after its retaining clip fell out. And still another TR-3 flipped at the Chimney Rock, North Carolina, hill-climb, was righted, had the oil topped up and went on to win its class.

The stories are almost endless, but the point is that the TR was virtually indestructible and it was fast for its time—it was also cheap. So for years it had pretty much its own way cleaning up championship after championship in SCCA and international competition.

Not that there weren't some ups and downs along the way. In 1957, for example, the AC Bristol arrived on the scene looking as alluring as a Port Said hooker and running like some kind of 12-liter Atlas-Agena. The TR-3 was so badly outclassed it couldn't even stay within rock throwing distance on the track.

Things took a turn for the better in 1959, thanks to R.W. "Kas" Kastner, who was a hero TR-3 racer in California. He became obsessed with the nutball notion that the TR-3 could be induced to beat the dreaded invader of E-production. Creating a "production" TR-3 like no one in England had ever seen, Kastner proceeded to hustle the AC right out of its championship on its own home stomping grounds in California.

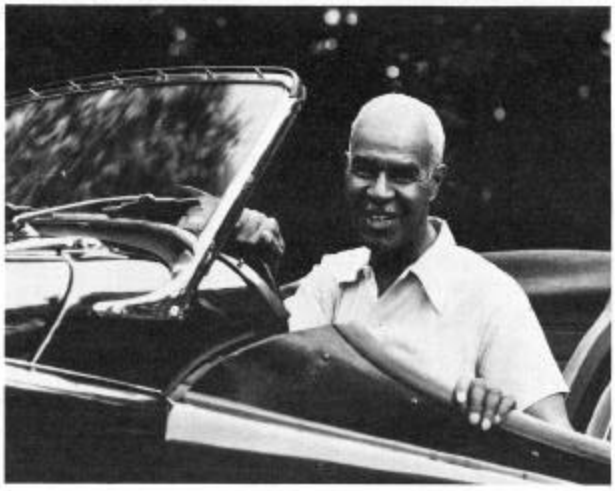
For years, the TR-3 had its way with the competition. Despite the fact that it went out of production at the end of the 1962 run, the marvelous misfit kept on winning, filling the grid at the annual championship ARRC and often as not bringing home the silverware. It was positively embarrassing. The factory's first blush of pride for the car soon turned to doubt, then to outright dismay. After all, the car wasn't even in production anymore. There were new models to sell. Sheepishly, the factory reduced its support money for winning TR-3s. Finally the money was cut off completely. The SCCA, taking the hint, bumped the car back into E-production where—it was assumed—the senile ole campaigner wouldn't be able to cut the mustard anymore. But it could and did and still does. Not as often as before, of course, but often enough to bring a twinge to the engineers who made her.

Those engineers, it seems, had wrought something particularly rare and fine. An honest car. No pretensions, no illusions. Four wheels and an engine laid out in the simplest possible fashion.

You sat in the plain leather bucket seats with your legs out in front of you straight as sticks to the firewall where hung the requisite three pedals. The throttle, although it operated through a Rube Goldberg collection of ball-jointed rods, bell cranks, cotter pins and bedsprings, was direct and responsive. X amount of input yielded X amount of engine noise every time.

A flat, plain dashboard held all the instruments and switches you needed to get on with your driving. The mechanical tach drove directly off the distributor and registered on a big Smith's dial immediately in front of you with enthusiastic swoops of the needle. Next to it was an equally excitable speedometer. Nearby, clustered

(Continued on page 86)



Even devotees like Roy Wilkens admit a TR-3's prime attribute is durability.

• NAACP head Roy Wilkens was out shopping for a birthday present when he saw it on a Brooklyn used car lot, surrounded by battered MGA's and Renault Caravelles. A knockout it wasn't but the odometer said it had only logged break-in miles and an instant sale it was.

Roy Wilkens was then sixty and the proud owner of a TR-3, walnut shift knob and all. "I bought it strictly for fun," he says, "and I've had a hell of a lot of fun out of it." Ten years and numerous week-end jaunts later he still sneaks down to his garage at night to clean the motor, saddlesoap the seats, and "keep those chrome spokes looking like chrome."

His short trips around New York have logged scarcely more than 35,000 miles in the past decade and his car is still in mint condition. "I've had it painted once, but apart from an occasional tune-up job, I haven't had to touch the engine or the transmission." His only complaint is hardly news to anyone who has ever owned a British car: "It overheats in traffic."

Wilkens has also learned what most TR-3 owners have experienced: "My wife won't drive it unless her car is in the shop because she says it rides like a buckboard and steers like a truck." Experience and a few sudden showers hardly forces him to give testimonials to the design of the convertible top. "You need an army to put up the top in a sudden rain storm," he says, "and you can be sure that if the rain drops start falling fast, you'll sure as hell get wet before everything is snapped into place."

But ten years of TR-3 ownership have taught Roy Wilkens the fundamental truth: "It won't give you ecstacy in the way it's engineered like a Porsche, but it's one hell of a sturdy little car that's real fun to drive."

(Continued from page 74)

in a small panel at the center of the dash, were the other appropriate dials: "Fuel," "Amps," "Oil Press" and "Water Temp" (often as not in degrees centigrade). In all, six plain white-on-black dials that told their story with Hemingwayesque directness.

The shift lever had a hard rubber knob that soon lost its hardness and felt like a fistfull of cold oatmeal. But it stood severely upright in the middle of the transmission hump and it changed gears with a satisfying "snick." And, although the synchronizers lasted only about a week, it took terrible abuse to cause a serious malfunction of the gearbox. You simply learned to shift by ear, like a proper driver should.

It was honest in motion, too. The macadam whizzed past in a blur just under your elbow, which stuck out over the cut-down door. The breezes fluttered your collar, your sleeves, even your pants cuffs down in the footwell. In fact with the top and side curtains down you stood a pretty good chance of being flapped insensible by your clothes. At 70 mph you knew you were, by gosh, *doing* 70 mph.

In the end that basic honesty—which made it a winner on the track—was what did the car in at the marketplace. Through the years minor changes like a new color scheme for the badge and major changes like a series of new heads failed to alter the basic personality of the car. Even in 1962 when it was all gussied up with a TR-4 engine (2138cc) and a TR-4 gearbox (fully synchronized) it was still stubborn, straightforward and honest as an oak tree. It was still the TR-goddam-3, even if the factory called it a TR-3B.

And so, by 1961, a year before its final demise, the end was in sight. A new car was being born in Coventry. Boxy in line, refined in concept (at least by comparison to the rustic, lusty TR-3), the TR-4 reflected a new generation's ideas about driving. Although the TR-4 was at first little more than a TR-3 with a civilized body, that difference was enough. The new generation had little use for the rain-water-in-the-ear school of driving that spawned the TR-3.

But before you write off the TR-3 as a relic from an earlier time, please notice one thing. Notice who is at the wheel of the next TR-3 you see on the road.

Odds on he's yours. Maybe with a beard. And with a post-teenybopper with a Mighty-Mouse appliquéd tee-shirt at his side. Grinning and blipping that wonderful throttle as he goes. And where is your generation gap *now*, sir? •