

July Supplement 2015 - North to Alaska Trip

We have been asked a number of times why we decided to drive our Austin Healey to Alaska. Partly because it is there, but mainly because in 2012 four Healeys (Thomas, Wilford, and Yule from Southern Ontario and Bagheris from Atlanta) drove together to Rendezvous in Parksville, BC; looked at a sign showing the road to Alaska, and said to each other "We have to go there one day". This was the day! Unknown to me at the time Lenard Thomas had known that Smitty had Alaska on his Healey bucket list. Len had worked on an outline of an Alaska Healey drive from that time and in 2014 I detailed the routes, stops, and hotel reservations from that plan using the Juneau to Prince Rupert ferry as the key.

On May 29 Diane and I drove to Orillia to join Lenard and Martha Thomas. The next day we drove to Sault Ste. Marie to join Rick Thomas from the Southern Ontario Club plus the Bagheris and the Bagbys from Georgia. The following picture is our "First Dinner" together.



From the left are: Pauline Thomas (she had to work and could not join us), Judy Bagheri, Martha Thomas, Pat Bagby, Diane Wilford, Laurie Wilford, Wright Bagby, Lenard Thomas, Nader Bagheri, and Rick Thomas.

We left Thunder Bay the next morning. This North Shore of Lake Superior is beautiful but was our longest drive of the trip at 710 kilometers. Below is the group on the way to Kenora at the Goose in Wawa.



From Thunder Bay we drove to Kenora and spent two nights. This sequence of driving three days and then spending two nights gave us a nice break from driving, plus we can wash clothes and make any car repairs required. Thanks to Levina Yule for suggesting it!

From Kenora we met Jean Caron at Vintage Roadster Restoration in Winnipeg. He was working on two Healeys that day. We then drove to Edmonton and met up with the final two cars from California. Smith Brody of Smitty 5 Speed fame, is 88 years young and had driving a Healey to Alaska on his bucket list for years. His daughter Leslie and her husband John McGrath drove their Healey 100 to accompany Smitty. We then drove together to Dawson City and posed for Mile 0 of the Alaska Highway!



We drove to Fort Nelson and had our first mechanical problem. The generator mounting bracket on Smitty's car broke. This is a common Healey problem and the bracket had been previously repaired. Fortunately the Hotel reception contacted a mobile welder and he made a new steel bracket in a couple of hours. Even strangers like to help with Austin Healeys.



Under mainly sunny skies we drove through B.C and spent the first night in the Yukon at Watson Lake. Lenard and Martha took a little 400 kilometer detour along a gravel road to Laird, North West Territories. Because it was there. Below are the cars entering the Yukon near Watson Lake.



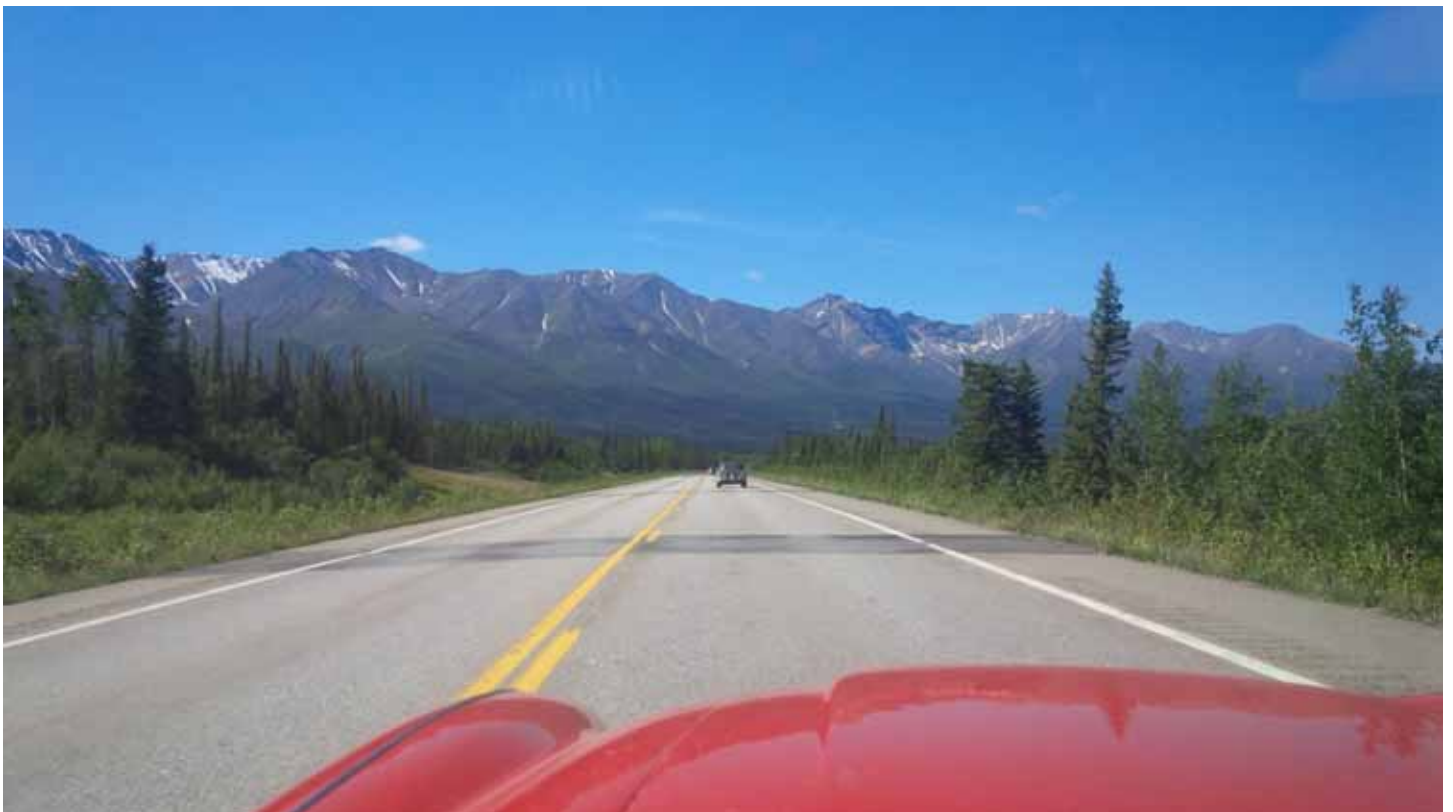
We then drove to Whitehorse and Dawson City in the Yukon. There was some road construction and some gravel but the roads were mainly paved.



Leaving Dawson City we took a ferry across the river and knew we were in for a challenge. The road from Dawson the US border was supposed to be pavement and then 60 miles of gravel to Chicken, Alaska. It was 120 miles of gravel!



This is "Top of the World Highway" and the scenery was becoming more beautiful as we headed North-West. Tundra gave way to hills and then the mountains. It was truly breathtaking!



We arrived at Delta Junction, the end of the Alaska Highway after leaving Tok, Alaska on our way to Fairbanks. Below are the Southern Ontario cars at the final signpost.



We spent two nights in Fairbanks and headed for Anchorage. Unfortunately there was a Wildfire that closed the parks Highway between Denali and Anchorage. The only route was to backtrack to the Stevenson and Glenn Highways and this was under construction as you can see.



We spent three nights in Anchorage, drove to Seward and visited the Exit Glacier. Did I mention that the scenery was spectacular! Of course we had to visit a Brewery as well. These cars do get thirsty.



This was our half-way point. We were now on our way home!

From Anchorage we drove back to Tok and had another problem with the Black car. The Toyota transmission would only engage 4th and 5th gear, and even they were noisy. Smitty felt the car would be hard to fix because of his modifications (air, cruise, tilt, power windows, etc) and he decided to have it flat-bedded to the ferry at Haines. Earl Kagna, a member of the BC Healey Club arranged to ship a replacement Toyota transmission to Prince Rupert for us to switch it there. A flat bed picked Smitty up in the morning but could only go to the border where another truck was supposed to meet up. This never happened.

While driving from Tok to Haines Junction my car had a front wheel bearing fail. This was not a big issue since we carry spares, but the old bearing was welded to the axle and required a torch to remove it. This took about two hours and we were back on the road. This was the worst section of road on the trip. Between frost heaved pavement that sent the car into the air, broken sections, potholes, and heavy gravel in sections under repair this section of the Alaska Highway made Top of the World Highway look like an interstate in comparison.

Below is a picture from Haines Junction, Yukon to Haines, Alaska. Not our first stop in Alaska, but the first with a nice sign to take a picture.



We loaded on a ferry for the four hour ride from Haines to Juneau. Juneau has no roads running to it. Your choice when visiting is by air or by sea!



We spent two nights in Juneau, found a project Healey 3000 tri-carb and visited Mendelssohn Glacier among other tours. We then boarded the ferry to Prince Rupert for a 29 hour boat ride. Warm, calm seas, good food, good company, and spectacular scenery plus a Whale show. A highlight of the trip!



In Prince Rupert the decision was made to part company with our California friends. The Black car was going to require a lift and a few days to repair the transmission. It turns out the modifications to the car required removal of the modified

rack and pinion steering assembly and an exhaust manifold as well as detailing all the electrical components in the transmission tunnel. We great reluctance, we said our "Goodbyes" near the Ferry terminal.



We drove South in BC through Terrace, Prince George, Kamloops, and Creston before heading to Kalispell and "Going to the Sun Road" in Glacier National Park.





In Kalispel the two Georgia cars of Bagheri and Bagby decided to head South East for home. While the trip had been exciting, we had been on the road for 30 days and Montana changes quickly from mountains to plains. It is always sad to part ways with friends. Austin Healeys build many friendships from Coast to Coast and "goodbyes" will lead to "Hellos" in future drives. The rest of the drive was mainly flat and uneventful.





We had a month of dry, sunny weather and the lack of rain was responsible for forest fires that hung like fog through much of our trip East.





In Willingdon, North Dakota the final three Ontario Healeys parted ways. Lenard and Martha were driving quickly to Orillia. Rick and Lynn were taking the original route to Sault Ste. Marie, while Diane and I had to detour to Winnipeg to visit family.

After Winnipeg we drove three days across the North Superior route. Beautiful and sunny but not as much fun alone as it had been with a group. In total we drove 15,924 kilometers (9,895 miles) with 41 days away from home. According to my GPS we were driving the Healey 180 hours and 19 minutes.



When planning the trip we had concerns about tires, bears and bugs that never materialized; about road conditions and availability of quality gas that was only a bit of a concern, and of the Healeys reliability. No problem! It was a great adventure.