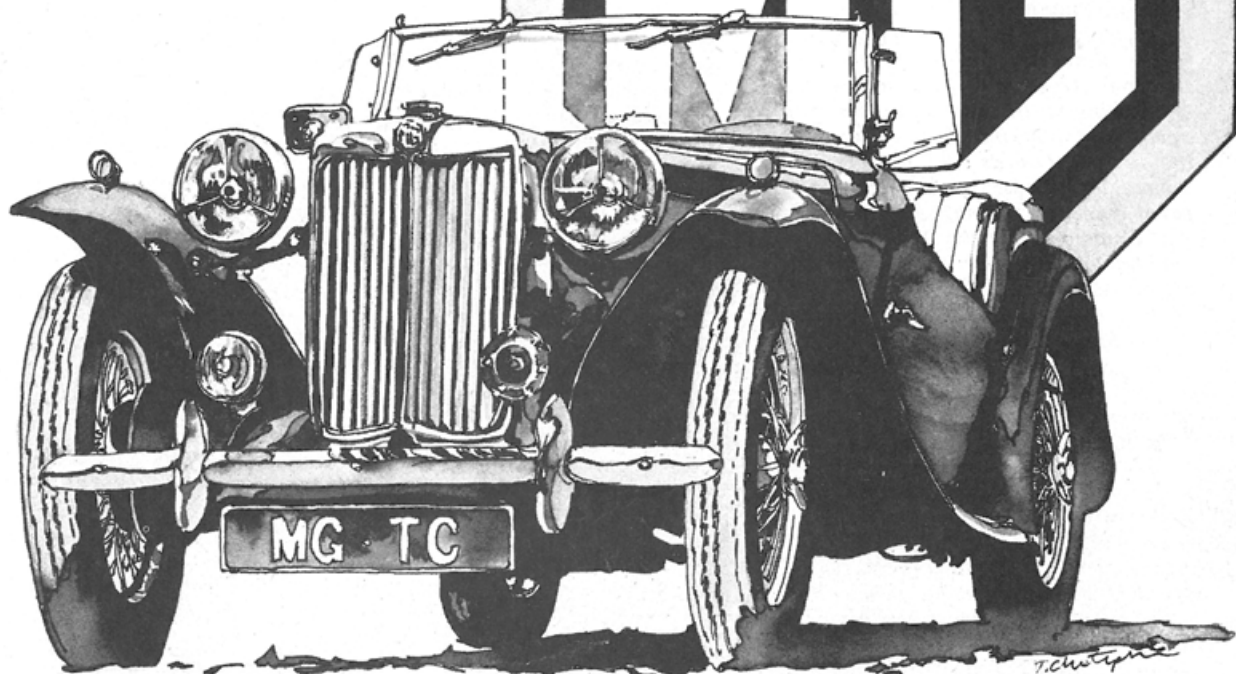


Farewell to MG

by Leon Mandel



ILLUSTRATED BY TOM CHRISTOPHER

Has the road really ended for one of the world's most beloved sports cars?

Kjell Qvale was shocked. Gene Fisher says he's damned if he understands it to this day. Joe Herson didn't even know it was coming; he had to find out from NBC and Reuters.

All of which was softball compared to the way the thing came down with almost 200 full-line Jaguar Rover Triumph dealers from the U.S. who were invited to Abingdon, England, in celebration of the 50th Anniversary of MG and their own success in the Colonies.

There was a parade of 50 years of great cars. There was a 350,000-cubic-foot hot-air balloon with an MGB hanging from it. Abingdon employees, startled to discover that insufficient hotel space had been booked for the Americans, opened their houses and took them in. Warmth and loyalty seeped over the little town like a Sistine nimbus. Whereupon the dealers were bundled off to London for cocktails and intimacy with Sir Michael Edwardes, chairman of BL Ltd., who gave a little welcoming speech, made a few wry

jokes and announced he was putting a number of his guests out of business.

MG was dead.

A lot of those dealers understood only that about 55% of their business had just been casually turned into corporate effluent. But others—the old-line MG people—felt as though the family business had just been torched and was burning to the ground before their very eyes, with a member of the family still inside.

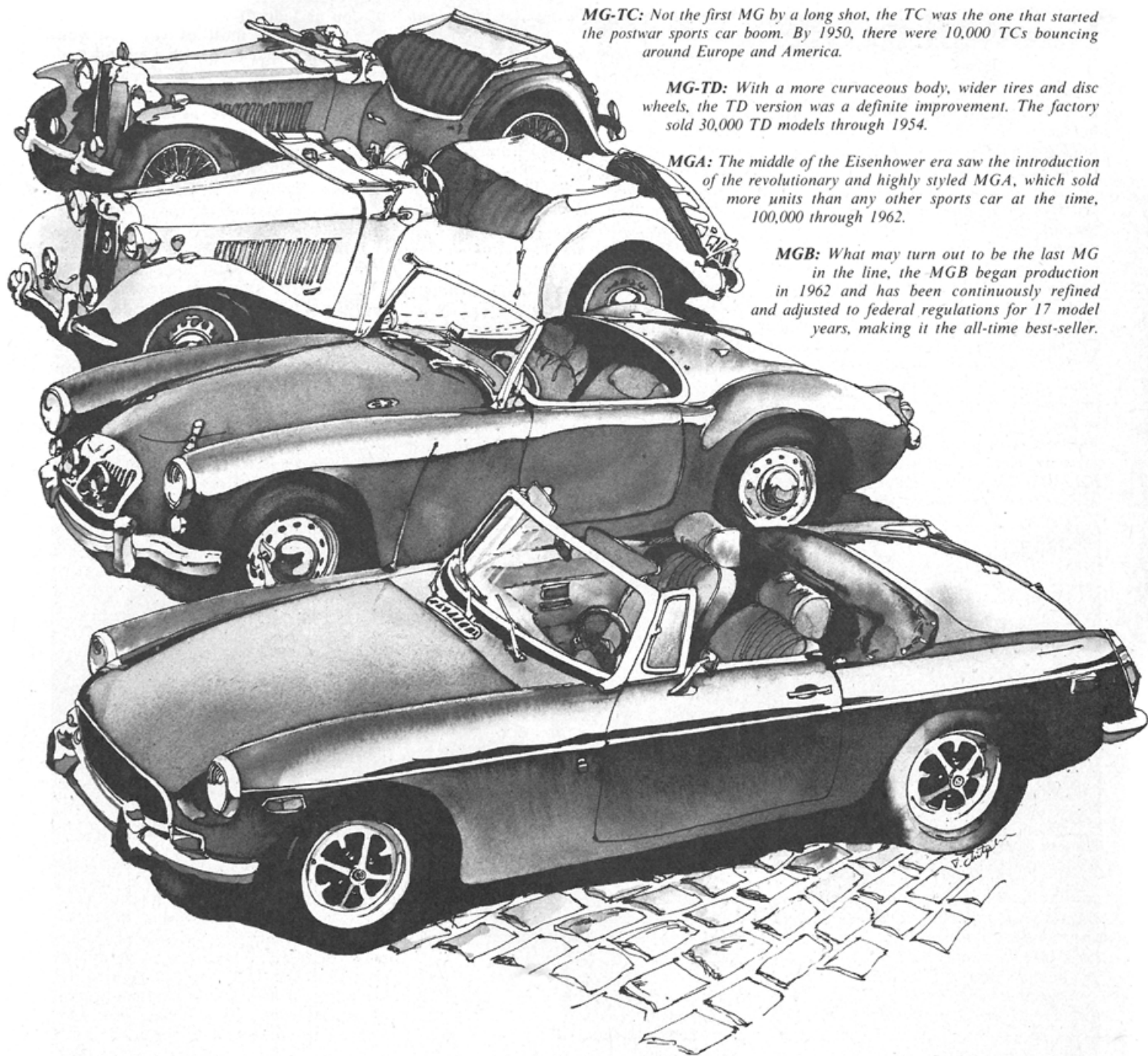
As late as a month after the genteel massacre, American dealers and distributors were still flabbergasted. Joe Herson, who heard about the death of the MG from David Brinkley, is the chairman of the JRT national dealer council. He thinks if his dealers can't persuade Sir Michael to reverse the sentence, "... a lot of dealers will go out of business." Gene Fisher, whose lean, successful distributorship in the Southwest is about to be eaten alive by JRT, thinks the U.S. arm of BL may find itself swallowing a corpse. Fisher thinks

the end of MG may signify the end of British cars in the American market. But Kjell Qvale, who bought, operated and then closed the Jensen factory in England, is strangely understanding of Edwardes' predicament: "What he's trying to do is reduce a floundering giant to a workable operation," says Qvale.

"And that means major surgery."

Those words must have come hard to Kjell Qvale, whose own enormous success with British Motor Car Distributors on the West Coast began when he imported his first MG in 1947. It's hard for some of us to remember, but in the '50s and early '60s, British cars sold like Hondas in the U.S. More than anyone, Qvale was the wizard behind that minor miracle. Of course he was and is an astute businessman. But then—and now—Qvale embraces what he admits is an irrational view of MG. A cold man, Qvale nonetheless admits that he feels "emotional" about the car.

Cut now to a time in America when our national symbol of culture is Dick



MG-TC: Not the first MG by a long shot, the TC was the one that started the postwar sports car boom. By 1950, there were 10,000 TCs bouncing around Europe and America.

MG-TD: With a more curvaceous body, wider tires and disc wheels, the TD version was a definite improvement. The factory sold 30,000 TD models through 1954.

MGA: The middle of the Eisenhower era saw the introduction of the revolutionary and highly styled MGA, which sold more units than any other sports car at the time, 100,000 through 1962.

MGB: What may turn out to be the last MG in the line, the MGB began production in 1962 and has been continuously refined and adjusted to federal regulations for 17 model years, making it the all-time best-seller.

madness overcame a young American male (and almost all MG buyers at first were men) when he first set eyes on an MG. It sat there on its 19-inch wire wheels, lean and tough with its cut-down doors and big steering wheel, challenging everyone who saw it to get in and *drive*. It was a best-of-show terror in the midst of a herd of Holsteins. It was the welterweight champion of the world at a Daughters of the American Revolution tea. It was the pre-sleep fantasy of every inchoate racer, come to life in chronometric tachometer, leather buckets, long-stroke 4-banger engine, Skinner's Union dual carburetors: it was freedom, adventure, life itself.

And not only *perceived* that way but put to use in the cause of celebrating the automobile. There wasn't a major town in the country without its MG club. It was the first coming together of secret car worshippers, the first coalesc-

ing of what would turn into a vast body of men and women who *understood*. It was a post-pagan festival in honor of mobility. It was a national party, and only the car-aware were there, not by invitation, but as a result of a spontaneous understanding that something wonderful was happening on the highways of the nation.

We waved to one another, we spent our weekends in the feckless pursuit of time/speed/distance driving, we raced without rollbars or helmets to the laughter and cheers of our wives, our friends, and even our insurance brokers, who were still too naive to isolate the car as a social menace. We took home our new MGs with the tenderness, passion, and the expectations we had brought heretofore only to our wedding nights. We were rarely disappointed. We drove them with an insouciance that outsiders surely saw as arrogance:

certain of our choice, certain of ourselves, certain of our—and MG's—future. We gave our evenings to bench racing and to conversational maneuvers designed to set us above and apart from our fellow MG owners as possessors of tiny bits of useless knowledge about Old Number One, or Tazio Nuvolari's Tourist Trophy drive in the K3 Magnette. We were World War One fighter pilots. We were Knute Rockne football players. We were Scott Fitzgerald expatriates. We were an automotive elite.

And now a wide shot, please, of the Greenwood Inn, Olympia, Washington, midway through the gentle Summer of '77. It is a lovely spot, perched on a knoll near a lovely town. Washington State this summer is bursting with the riches of the land. The trees that shade this handsome and understated hotel are heavy with foliage; the grass around the parking lots is so vibrantly green the col-