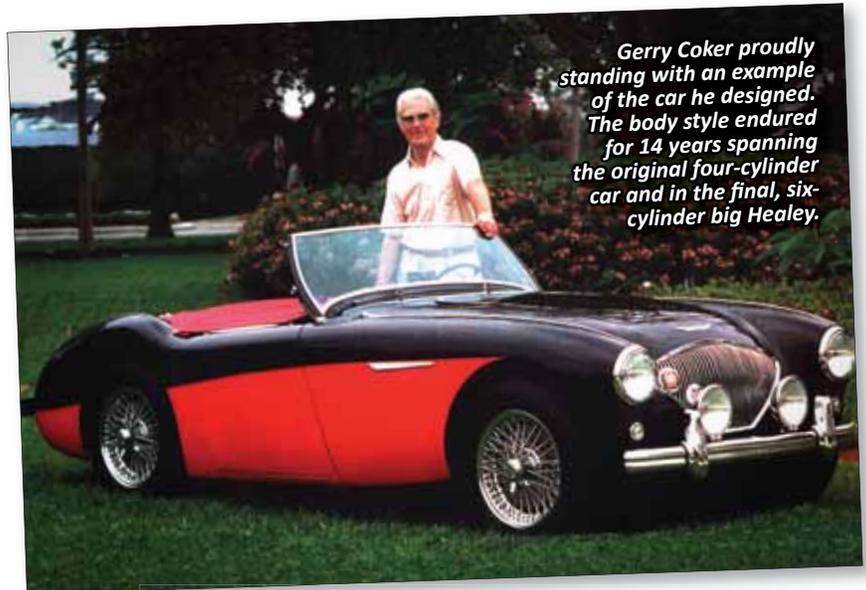


CELEBRATING THE 90TH BIRTHDAY OF GERRY COKER BODY DESIGNER OF THE AUSTIN-HEALEY 100

Bill Meade
Founder & Registrar,
Worldwide 100M "Le Mans" Registry
Contributing Editor, HEALEY MARQUE

The 1950s were a time when automobile designs reached levels of beauty many feel have never been equaled. Car designs of that era had shapes that were simple yet elegant. Bodies had sensuous, organic curves that were full and rounded and almost begged to be caressed. Because of these fantastic designs, people today still lust after these cars and it's why the Austin-Healey design is still growing in fame and stature nearly 60 years later!

The man Donald Healey hired to be Body Engineer for his Nash Healey, and later the Austin-Healey, was Gerry Coker. He was only twenty-eight years old at the time he started to work at Donald Healey Motor Company. After proving himself to Donald, Gerry was given the task of designing the body for the new Healey 100 that Donald was planning.



Gerry Coker proudly standing with an example of the car he designed. The body style endured for 14 years spanning the original four-cylinder car and in the final, six-cylinder big Healey.

The Coker-designed Streamliner set records on the Bonneville Salt Flats in 1954. This photo is of the replica built and run in 2009 to celebrate the 55th anniversary of the 1954 effort.



Donald Healey's factory in the early 1950s, about the time Gerry Coker started employment with Donald as Body Engineer for Nash Healey cars.



with stretching the body for the rear jump-seats. The new six-cylinder car largely continued with the body shape of the original 100 (made from 1953 to 1956) from 1957 until 1967, a total of 14 years for one body style being produced, unheard of in today's world of planned obsolescence for cars.

Gerry was born on June 24, 1922, in the small village of Duston in Northampton, England. Gerry's parents and two younger sisters were aware from his earliest years that Gerry loved drawing and making models. Nothing made him happier than building models of boats and ships and drawing cars and planes. At the local school in Duston, teachers said he excelled at making clay models, including animal models.

Over the years of his career, Gerry was responsible for the body design of the Austin-Healey 100, the 100M, 100S, the Bonneville Streamliner and the original Sprite prototype. Although Gerry had moved to America by the time the six-cylinder Austin-Healey was built, he helped design its new front grille which was about all that really changed, along

One of Gerry's earliest memories was at the age of six when he was allowed by his father to sit in the driver's seat of a huge red car on display at Mulliners, a major local garage. The car turned out to be the famous Sunbeam racer driven on Daytona Beach by Sir Henry Seagrave, breaking the world land speed record at 203 MPH. Who knew that one day this small boy would design another famous land-speed record-breaker!

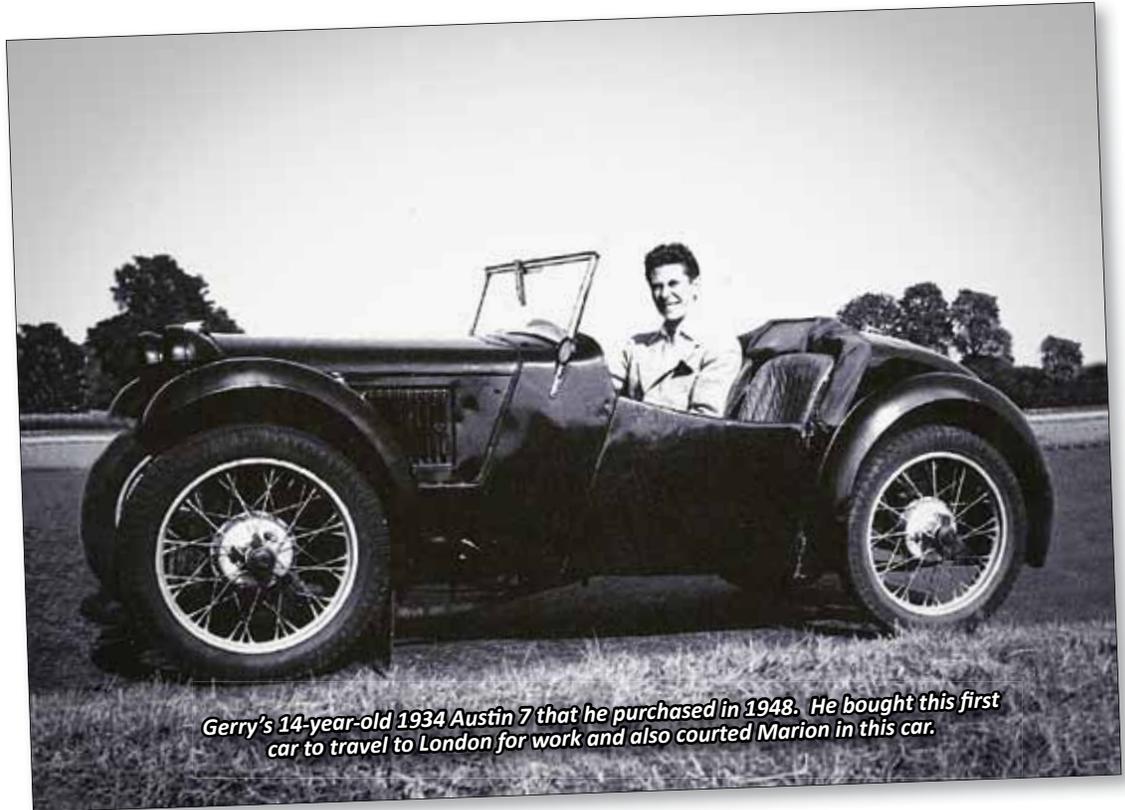
Gerry's father was employed at Mulliners as assistant manager for the large garage. At age 14, Gerry was given his first job at Cedus Engineering by the owner whose Hudson Terraplane was serviced by Gerry's father and where Gerry learned machine tool operation.

In 1939 at age 16, Gerry joined the Humber Motor Company as an apprentice design draughtsman. This was to be for a five-year period which also included continuing education for Gerry at Coventry Technical College in engineering science. This apprenticeship covered everything relative to the design and manufacture of the automobile.

Unfortunately, while in this job, World War II broke out. Because Gerry was already working in the factory that would become responsible for design and production of army vehicles, this became an authorized alternative for him to military service. Gerry was also a volunteer during the bombing raids on Coventry where he was responsible for putting out incendiary bomb fires.

One of Gerry's worst memories of the horrors of war was when an unexploded bomb fell on his company's building. Gerry's Department had been burnt to the ground during the night, and sadly, four bomb disposal experts were blown up trying to deactivate the unexploded bomb. Gerry worked guard duty keeping people out of range of the unexploded bomb.

While at Humber, Gerry was involved in several significant wartime projects. One was to develop a complete set of drawings of a VW truck captured by the English forces from Rommel's *Afrika Korps*. Government officials wanted to review the design to see if it might be a threat to England's automotive industry after the war. Gerry developed complete sectional drawings of the VW engine and transmission, but government officials decided the VW shouldn't be worried about as a challenge to England's automobile designs. This, of course, can be seen today as a serious misjudgment by those officials.



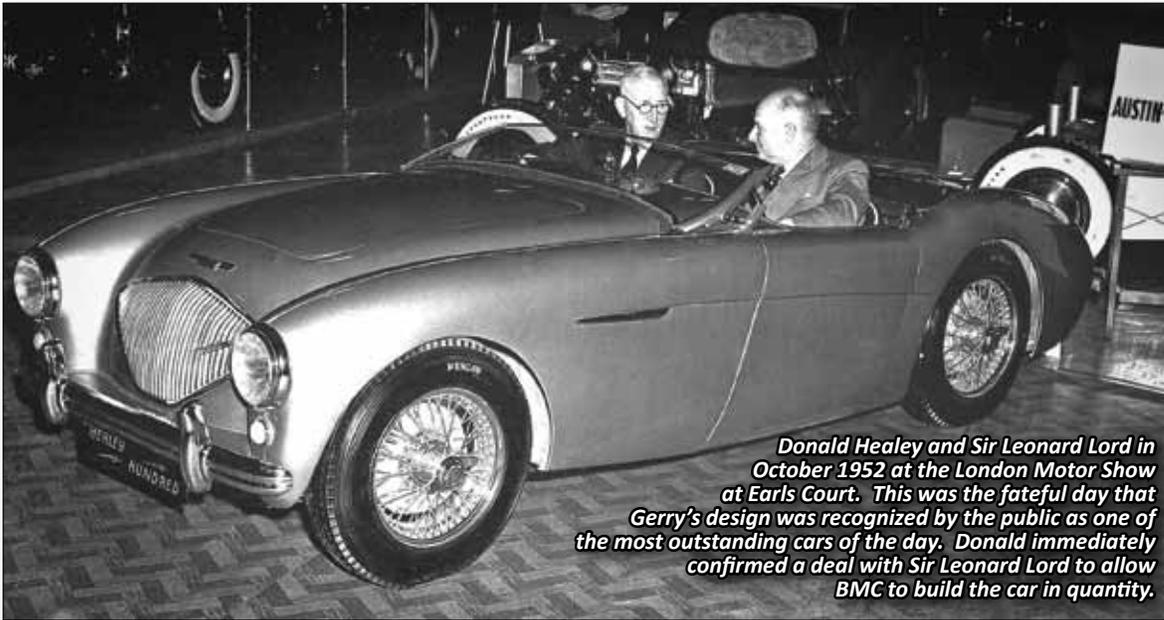
Gerry's 14-year-old 1934 Austin 7 that he purchased in 1948. He bought this first car to travel to London for work and also courted Marion in this car.

After two years, Gerry was offered the opportunity to complete his course as designer with the Humber Experimental Department. He needed to show project designs, pictorials and finished clay models to Sir William Rootes, which he successfully accomplished. Humber produced Hillman cars, Sunbeam, Humber and Talbot vehicles.

While working in the Humber Experimental Design Department, Gerry was under the direction of an Italian engineer named Sampietro, known as Sammy (who years later was to design the chassis for a Donald Healey car). In 1948, Gerry accepted a job offer to be chief draughtsman with



Gerry Coker, right, and Barry Bilbie worked together on the Healey 100 development in 1951. Barry was the chassis designer and Gerry the body designer.



Donald Healey and Sir Leonard Lord in October 1952 at the London Motor Show at Earls Court. This was the fateful day that Gerry's design was recognized by the public as one of the most outstanding cars of the day. Donald immediately confirmed a deal with Sir Leonard Lord to allow BMC to build the car in quantity.

well documented many times. Most people are familiar with the fact that Donald Healey was not taken with the design Gerry had proposed for the Healey 100. What is generally not known is that Donald was really dead set against showing this new design at the London Motor Show at Earls Court.

I received an interesting letter from Roger Menadue (Donald's

the new consulting firm that Dr. Sampietro was forming in London.

When Gerry started work in London, he had to ride his Triumph Tiger 100 motorcycle the 90 miles round trip to work from Coventry to the west end of London, come rain or shine. After enduring pouring rains once too many times, he traded his bike for an old, well-used 1934 Austin Seven car.

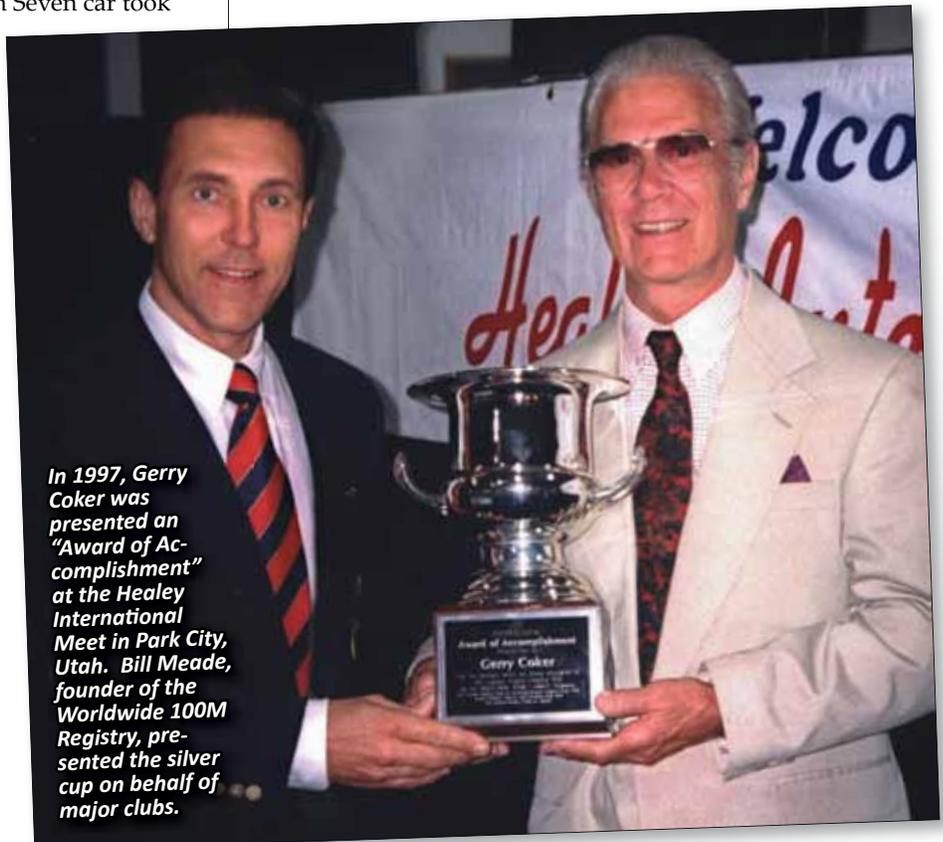
1950 was to be a fateful year for Gerry Coker. During that summer he met his beloved partner and future wife, Marion, at a church badminton club. The used Austin Seven car took them on their first memorable dates.

Their friends said Marion clearly wasn't impressed with Gerry because of his old, tattered Austin Seven! This was the beginning of a relationship that has grown and flourished and served as a strong anchoring force in both Gerry's and Marion's life. June 13, 1953, was their wedding date and they recently celebrated their 59th wedding anniversary.

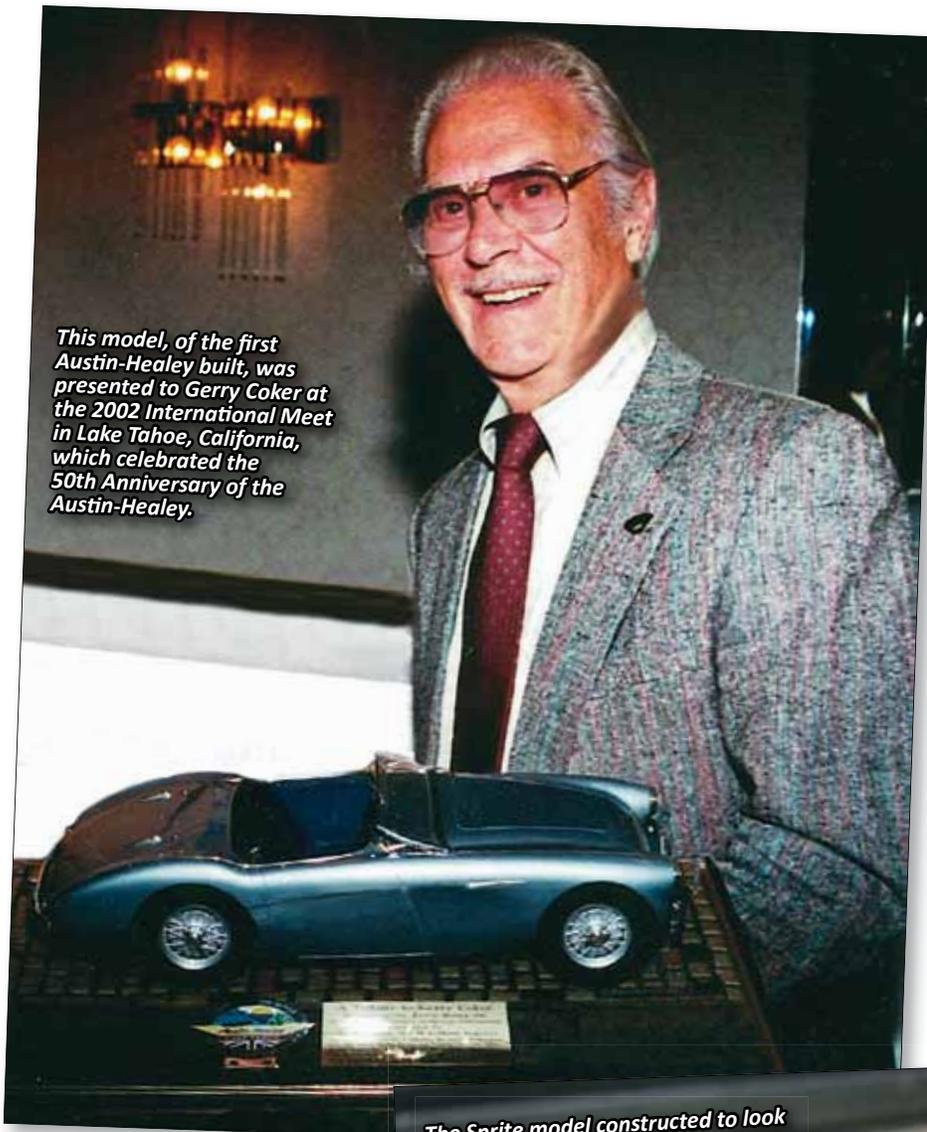
The new London job lasted only about two years when Sampietro's engineering firm closed. After the job loss, Gerry returned to Coventry to undertake looking for new work. He ran into his old boss Sammy who told him that Donald Healey was looking for a body engineer to run a new Nash Healey body program. Sammy arranged an interview for Gerry with Donald Healey at his home in Leamington Spa and, as they say, the rest is history. Gerry immediately began his career in 1950 with Donald which would lead to the designing of a car that would be famous for decades to come.

Much has been written about Gerry's body design for the Austin-Healey 100. That story will not be repeated here because it has been

Chief Engineer in the 1950s) in October of 1997 which included some shocking history. Roger was writing to thank me for the Award of Recognition that the Worldwide 100M Registry and other clubs had presented to Gerry and Roger at the Healey International Meet in Park City, Utah, in 1997 for their role in building the new Healey 100. Roger wrote, "It was called a "Healey Hundred" then and Gerry Coker had styled it. Gerry was told in no uncertain words, that no way was that car going down to Earls Court (the Motor Show) and



In 1997, Gerry Coker was presented an "Award of Accomplishment" at the Healey International Meet in Park City, Utah. Bill Meade, founder of the Worldwide 100M Registry, presented the silver cup on behalf of major clubs.



This model, of the first Austin-Healey built, was presented to Gerry Coker at the 2002 International Meet in Lake Tahoe, California, which celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the Austin-Healey.

Of course, in the ensuing years Donald Healey realized that Coker's body design was timeless and exactly what the public wanted, but it was customary in the 1950s for any automotive company's creative design staff to remain in the background with little recognition. Even today, the real designers of cars are often left unmentioned until enthusiasts begin to uncover the people behind the cars.

Gerry and Marion's life has been kept full during their more recent years of retirement. They have established both a winter home in Sarasota, Florida, and a summer home in Cashiers, North Carolina.

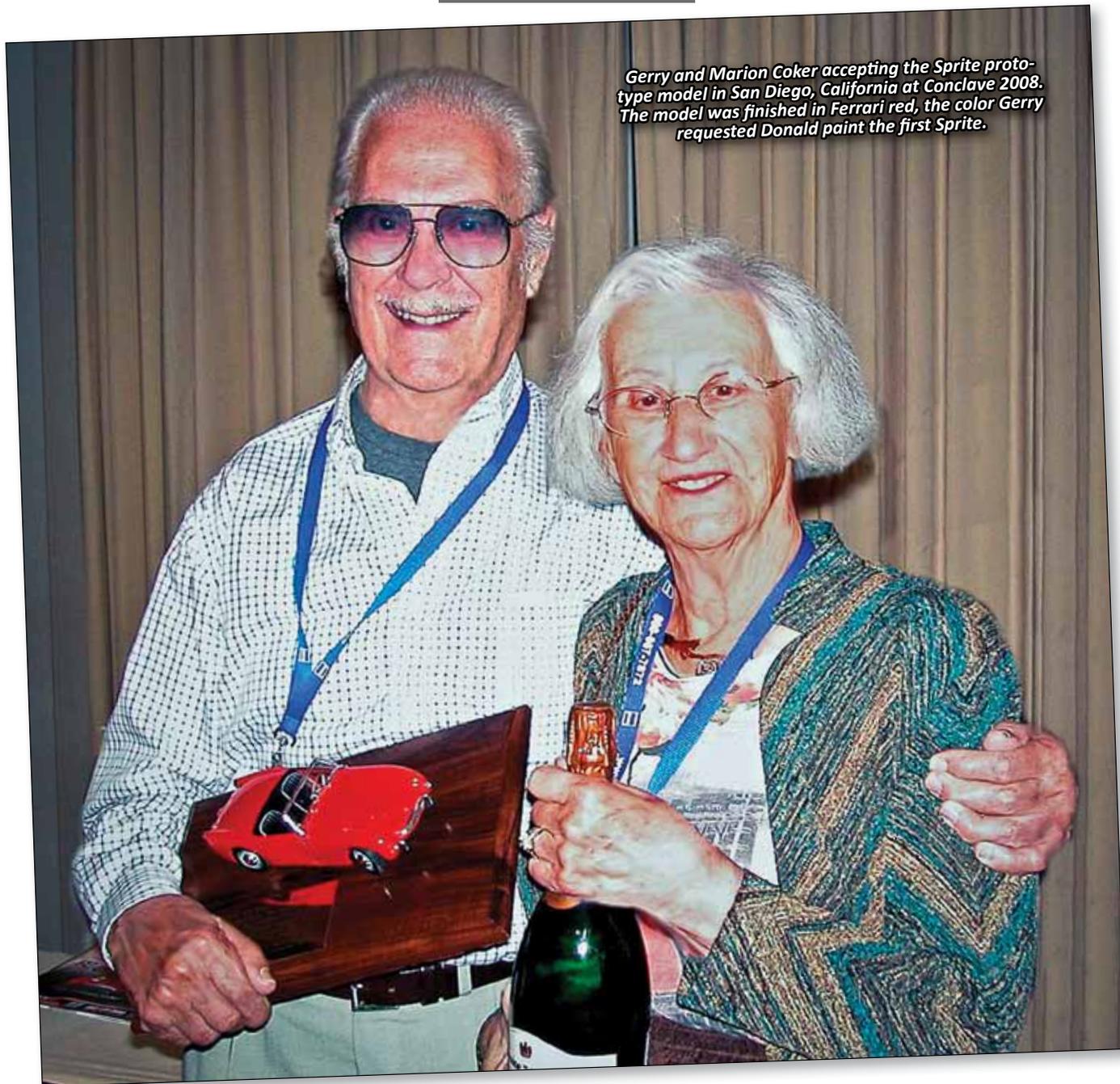
Today Gerry is invited to many national and regional Austin-Healey gatherings for enthusiasts to hear directly from the body designer about the colorful history that surrounded the development of the Austin-Healey 100 and later models. Because of Gerry's young age at the time he designed the Healey 100, we are fortunate he is able to share his wonderful life and career experiences at the Donald Healey Motor Company.

In August of 1997, Gerry was presented a large silver cup Award of Accomplishment at Healey International, held in Park City, Utah. This major award was put together by the Worldwide 100M Registry and co-sponsored by a number of other major clubs. The purpose of the award was to publicly recognize Gerry

he had better start looking for another job. I said no, Gerry is a genius, that car is a World Beater. I fought Donald and Geoffrey for two weeks leading up to the Show. I was told, that if I took that car to Earls Court that I was not to use Works Transportation. I got around this by leaving at 6 o'clock in the morning with the Works Truck so that I beat them all. That car made history at Earls Court and made Donald World famous overnight. Gerry left us after a while and went to Chrysler in the U.S. and then on to Ford in Detroit, a very disillusioned and disappointed man – a genius who was never fully recognized at the time. Sincerely, Roger Menadue"

The Sprite model constructed to look like Gerry Coker's original design. This racy look included disappearing headlights and a forward-sloping grille to give the car a shark-like front nose. The model was presented to Gerry Coker in 2008 at the Sprite 50th Anniversary Conclave.





Gerry and Marion Coker accepting the Sprite prototype model in San Diego, California at Conclave 2008. The model was finished in Ferrari red, the color Gerry requested Donald paint the first Sprite.

for the major role he played as body designer of the Austin-Healey 100.

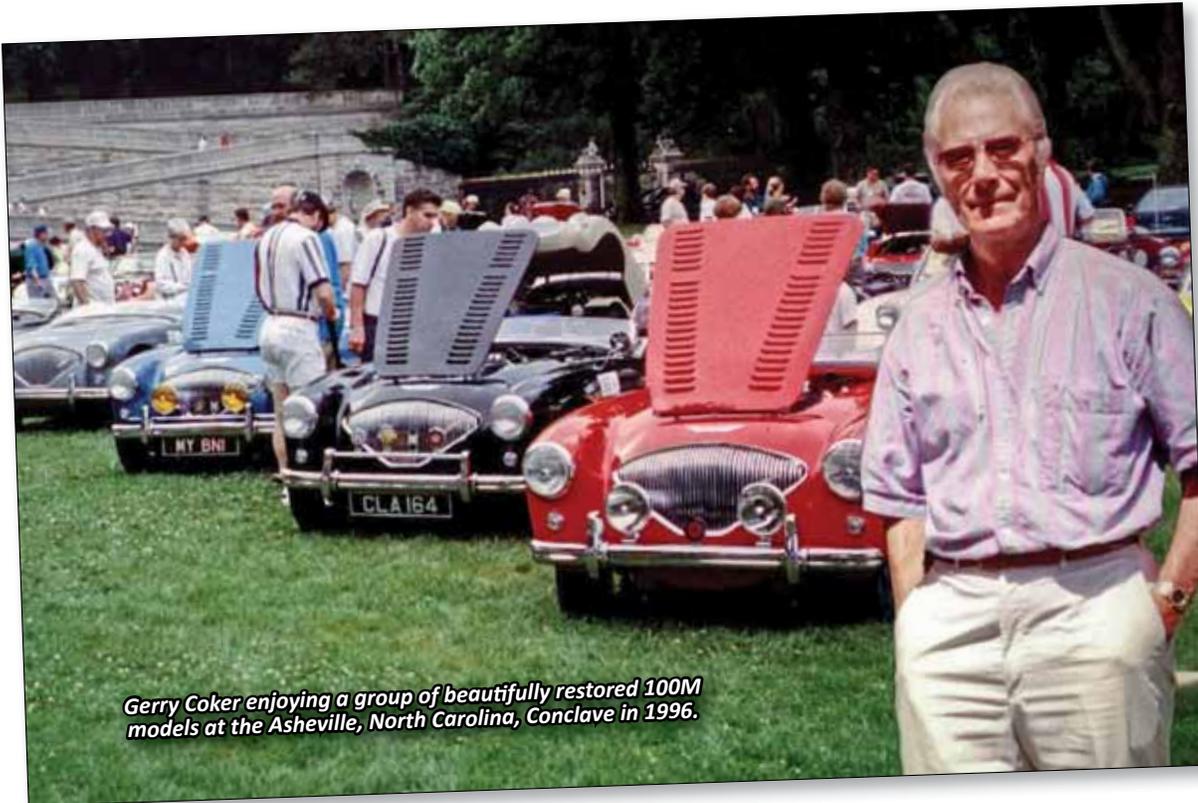
Then in 2002, at the 50th Anniversary International Meet in Lake Tahoe, California, Gerry was presented with an 18-inch long 1/8th scale model of the very first silver-blue Healey 100. The model was hand-built by the Healey Toy Factory in Banbury, England. Over 1,000 people gathered to celebrate the anniversary of 50 years since the Austin-Healey burst onto the scene at Earls Court in England. This award was organized by the Worldwide 100M Registry and supported by major Healey clubs internationally. A movie short was produced for the event that told the story of Gerry's life around the designing of the first Austin-Healey.

Gerry's most recent recognition of his work was in June 2008 at the Sprite 50th Anniversary Conclave in San Diego,

California, where a model of the original Sprite design was presented to Gerry. He had envisioned the original design for the Sprite to be a racy, sleek shape. Unfortunately, when the car was built, the racy, sleek elements were deleted and in their place the "Bugeye" lights were installed and the original shark-like sloping nose was set upright, making it into a smiling face.

Even though the production Sprite did not follow Coker's exact design, Sprite owners have loved the underlying Coker influence. The prototype model award was built by the Worldwide 100M Registry and presented by several large Healey clubs.

In recent years, Gerry has developed a hobby designing and making silver jewelry. Gerry has also enjoyed sports car activities from races to shows, to club gatherings. Gerry and Marion are frequently seen together enjoying Healey



Gerry Coker enjoying a group of beautifully restored 100M models at the Asheville, North Carolina, Conclave in 1996.

designer for his new Austin-Healey.

Many wise people feel the true purpose of life is to be of service to others and to bring as much happiness to others as possible; for in giving we receive. Based on this deeper understanding of life's meaning, Gerry Coker's life can certainly be said to be highly successful. The amount of enjoyment Gerry's automotive body designs

gatherings all over the United States.

The Austin-Healey has certainly been recognized as one of the outstanding automotive body designs of the last 60 years. In article after article discussing the best car designs of the past, the name of Austin-Healey seems to appear in almost every list. Additionally, the monetary value of the Austin-Healey has continued to climb higher than all comparable British sports cars of the era.

The performance and reliability of the Austin-Healey was generally quite good for its time, and successes in racing and rallying helped the car to gain a strong reputation with the public. However, more than anything else, the thing about the Austin-Healey that has kept it alive and sought-after as a collectable for nearly six decades is its beautiful body design.

Friends described Donald Healey as a man who knew the automobile business inside and out. His successes in rallying and high-speed record runs gave him the knowledge to build cars that really performed like race-breed thoroughbreds. All of that being said, the one thing Donald got right more than anything else, was hiring a young, talented, progressive

Years later, Gerry Coker and Donald Healey enjoyed many times together reminiscing about the challenging years of automobile manufacturing in the 1950s. This photo was taken at a Healey event in the early 1980s.



have brought to tens of thousands of Austin-Healey owners is a testament to his career, his service and his giving personality.

The world feels a deep sense of gratitude towards Gerry Coker for his amazing accomplishments in the automotive design world.

Thank you Gerry Coker and Happy 90th Birthday! **HM**