

# Gerry Coker, A Personal Recollection

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I had the great honor of knowing and working with Gerry Coker and his charming wife, Marion, for the last 25 years. As each year has passed, I came to realize that Gerry was one of those rare individuals who combines great talent and intelligence with the attributes of a genuine gentleman.

Gerry, Marion and I first met in 1996 at the Austin-Healey Conclave in Ashville, North Carolina. This was one of those events you would forever remember. It was held on the massive, beautiful grounds of George Vanderbilt's 250-room estate named "Biltmore," built in 1895. Over 300 Austin-Healeys filled the front lawn in a magnificent display.

Gerry, Marion and I had lunch on the grounds that day and talked about Gerry's background as the

The Austin-Healey world is deeply saddened by the recent loss of Gerry Coker, who worked hand and hand with Donald Healey, as his body designer/stylist, creating the first Healey 100 automobile. The Austin-Healey is one of those rare automotive designs that lived on during 15 years of production retaining the same basic body design.

Now, 66 years later, the car is collected and appreciated by thousands of enthusiasts worldwide and driven regularly by these same fans. Without a doubt, the fame of this car is largely attributable to its flowing, beautiful body style. Again and again, the automotive world has voted it as one of the ten best car designs of all times!



*Gerry and Marion on their wedding day, June 13, 1953. DMH had wanted Gerry to attend the 24-Hour Race at Le Mans, but Marion and the wedding won out!*

**A**T Styvechale Church, to-day, Mr. Gerald Charles Coker, only son of Mrs. Coker, 22, Cecily Road, Coventry, and the late Mr. A. C. Coker, married Miss Marion Joan Rosemary Cains, only child of Mr. and Mrs. A. E. V. Cains, 10, Arnold Avenue.

The bridegroom is body designer to the Donald Healey Motor Co., Ltd. The bride is a secretary with the firm of R. A. Rotherham and Co.

The bride was given away by her father, and her attendants were Miss Joan Loftus, Miss Grace Kelly, and Miss Josie Coker. Mr. Arthur Simpson was best man.

body designer of the Austin-Healey. We also discussed my ongoing effort of founding a Worldwide Registry for the rare 100M performance car Gerry helped to conceive and execute.

man. It was customary in the 1950s for company staff to not often be given much recognition for their roles in bringing a new car design to market. It was a natural tendency for the public to attribute the body design to the owner of the car company. In this case, the initial plan for a new Healey sports car was that of automotive genius, Donald Healey, who had brought about what would become the Healey 100 through several previous models.



*Coker with his timeless design.*

When this car was first planned to be built, Donald's directions to Gerry included only the general size of the proposed car and that it should fit the market between the MG and the Jaguar sports cars. His exact instruction to Gerry was, "See what you can come up with" for an exterior body design. As the design progressed, Donald and Gerry worked together on some design points such as considering small tail fins and the shape of the grille, but the overall design was Gerry's.

Gerry was most enthusiastic about the 100M Registry concept and offered to serve as one of the five Founding Advisors along with Brian Healey, John Wheatley, Anders Ditlev Clausager, and Roy Jackson-Moore. That was the beginning of a long working relationship that allowed Gerry and me to stay in ongoing contact for the last 25 years. This friendship was highlighted in 2017 when I visited Gerry and Marion in Sarasota, Florida to film a "Welcoming Introduction for the Healey International Meet" to be held in Monterey, California in September 2017. The visit also coincided with celebration of his 95th Birthday.



*Bill Meade presenting the "Award of Accomplishment" to Coker in 1997 at the International Meet in Park City, Utah.*



*Coker reunited many years later with Donald Healey at a club meeting in the 1980s.*

After the final design was committed to, it's a matter of record that Donald wasn't very happy about the car's look, especially the front grille treatment. In a personal letter to me from Roger Menadue, Chief Experimental Engineer for Donald, dated October 1997, Roger reported that Donald and Geoffrey Healey had told Gerry that the new 100 was not a good enough design to display at Earls Court. Donald's instruction to Roger was that he was not to take the car to the Earls Court in the company transport.

The one thing I became aware of after getting to know Gerry was that many Austin-Healey owners and admirers didn't know the Healey body design was the work of this talented



Coker posing in Meade's 100M at Lake Tahoe in 2002.

Roger felt that not letting the public see this car would be a big lost opportunity. Roger Menadue said he felt the car was a "world beater" and he was determined do whatever it would take for it to be seen at Earls Court. Roger got around Donald's orders by taking the car to Earls Court at 6 a.m., before the Healey company had even opened. As Roger reported in his letter, "That car made history at Earls Court and made Donald world famous overnight."

Roger added, "Gerry left us after a while and went to Chrysler U.S. and then on to Ford in Detroit, a very disillusioned and

disappointed man, a genius who was never recognized." Of course, after the new Healey wowed the public and Sir Leonard Lord proposed to Donald the joint manufacture and distribution of the Healey 100, Donald recognized that Gerry's design had been exactly what the public wanted.

The original 100 design by Gerry Coker went on to sell 14,634 cars (BN1, BN2, 100S, 100M). Then Gerry helped design a new grille look for the 1957 six-cylinder, slightly larger cars that sold around 44,000 more cars. Keep in mind, this was basically one car design with only minor updates that continued in production from 1953 to 1967, for a total of almost 15 years. That is a record in anyone's book!

As I knew Gerry longer and learned more about the history of the design and

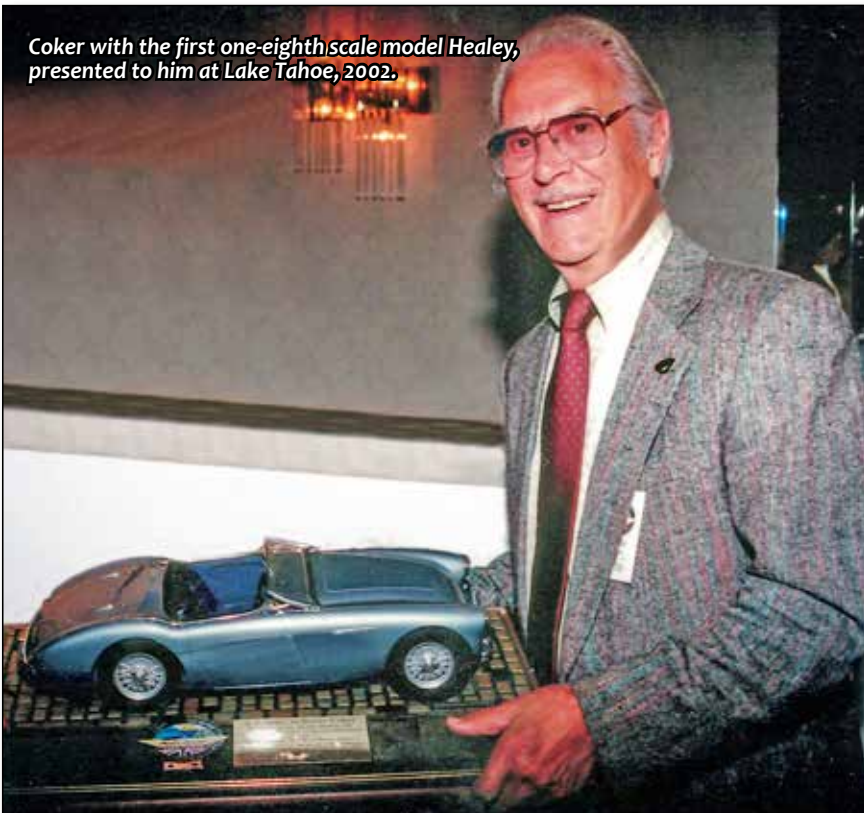
construction of the Austin-Healey 100, I felt I really wanted to do something that would help bring Gerry's role as body designer to the public and especially to Healey fans. I began to talk with Austin-Healey clubs around the US and even in foreign countries about sponsoring an International Award of Accomplishment to be presented to Gerry Coker at an International gathering of Austin-Healey owners.

The plan came to fruition in 1997, at the Park City, Utah International Austin-Healey Meet, where the clubs jointly presented Gerry a stunning 18-inch tall silver cup which

read, "International Award of Accomplishment presented to Gerry Coker for his brilliant work as body designer of the classic Austin-Healey 100. Presented by the Worldwide 100M Le Mans Registry, the Austin-Healey Club of America, Austin-Healey Club USA, Austin-Healey Sports and Touring Club and the Austin-Healey Club of Japan." This award turned out to be a major springboard for Healey clubs to begin truly acknowledging Gerry's major role in the creation, fame and now classic car status, which the Austin-Healey had achieved.

In 2002, when the 50th Anniversary of the birth of the Austin-Healey arrived, a major meet was held in Lake Tahoe, California. This was a once-in-a-lifetime event that Gerry and I both attended along with over 1,000 enthusiasts. Lake Tahoe International was probably the largest single gathering of Austin-Healey cars in history.

We produced a special movie of Gerry Coker's career and design accomplishments for the opening gathering and also presented Gerry a hand-built 1/8 scale, 18-inch model of the first Austin-Healey in recognition of his contribution to the new Healey 100. I had the honor of hosting a joint dinner for Gerry and Marion that was attended by other notables such as Roy Jackson-Moore and his wife. Roy was North



Coker with the first one-eighth scale model Healey, presented to him at Lake Tahoe, 2002.

American Austin Competition Manager and was also a driver at the Bonneville Salt Flats record runs in 1954.

This remembrance and tribute to Gerry Coker would not be complete without mentioning his role in designing the record-setting Austin-Healey Streamliner that established a record on the Bonneville Salt Flats of 192 MPH and was later recreated and run on the Salt Flats in 2009. There is an entirely separate story on Gerry's work designing this car. (Refer to past issues for March, May, August and November 2009 of **HEALEY MARQUE** for this story.)

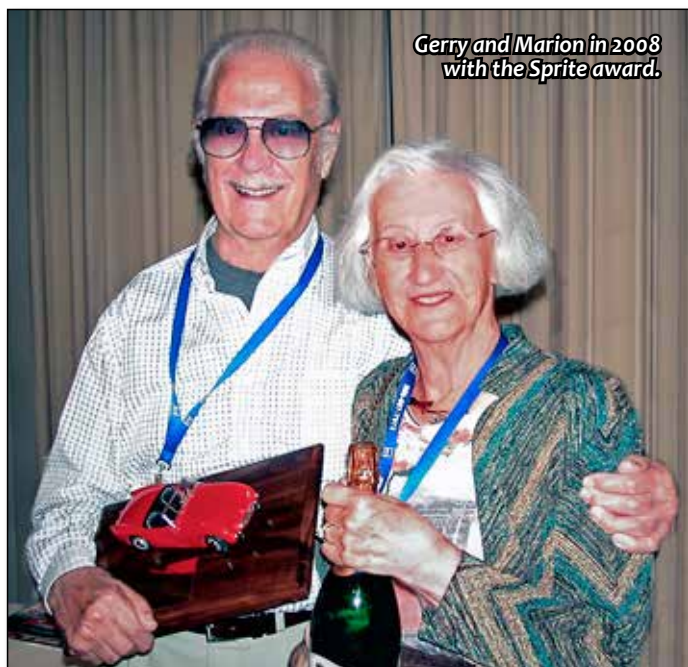
One episode of Gerry Coker's life and design career that cannot go unmentioned was his desire to help Donald Healey create a modestly priced little sports car called the Sprite. Gerry told me his original design was inspired by the Ferrari's Testarossa look, with a forward, shark-like grille and smooth, sloped, headlight-free bonnet. But it was not to be. Gerry and Marion moved to the US shortly after he did the design work on the Sprite. To Gerry's shock when he finally saw the production Sprite at a car dealership, he was dismayed by the "Bugeye" headlights and the loss of the Ferrari-like grille. This was yet another disappointment in the life of a car designer.

Even though the new Sprite did not have the sleek refinement of Gerry's original design, it did sell in large numbers due



*Close-up of the model of the Sprite as Coker designed it, seen here at the 2008 Conclave.*

Having known Gerry and Marion for 25 years, the one outstanding memory I have is that you could not ask to meet people who better reflect the admirable traits of kindness, gentleness and good humor, all topped by Gerry Coker's fantastic design talent that has brought so much delight and fun into the lives of so many people. Gerry will long be remembered as a great friend and for his remarkable talents and contributions to the automotive world.



*Gerry and Marion in 2008 with the Sprite award.*

to the small price and its fun-to-drive character. Gerry was presented with a handmade scale model (only two in existence) of his original "Testarossa" Sprite design at the 2008 San Diego Conclave by six US Healey clubs.

The one thing I know was not a disappointment in Gerry's life was his wonderful 67-year marriage to Marion. They married in England on June 13, 1953, and Marion and Gerry have traveled the world and shared many memorable times, many of which took place at international Austin-Healey gatherings attended by appreciative fans of his work.



*Gerry and Marion, August 2018.*

**SPECIAL NOTE:**

If any readers would like to obtain personal DVD copies or thumb drives of the two short films mentioned in this article highlighting Gerry's story, request, "Coker's Life, presented at Open Roads 2002" and the second DVD, "Gerry Coker's Welcome to Attendees of Monterey International 2017." Order the two DVDs or thumb drives (specify which) by sending an email request to: [billmeade100mregistry.com](mailto:billmeade100mregistry.com) (you will be invoiced by Paypal for \$23 to cover reproduction and postage costs.