



*Bob (left) and Jean Johnston with their passengers Bob and Joan Key*

## OUR CAPE MOTORING SCENE

# TIP TO TOP, BOB JOHNSTON STYLE

*By Derek Stuart-Findlay*

In early 1960, the Cape Argus held a Tip to Top competition as part of a Cape Town festival. The objective was to get from Cape Point (the Tip) to Maclear's Beacon on Table Mountain (the Top, at 1083 m). Competitors could choose to enter under three categories, historical, the fastest, and the most ingenious. No air travel was allowed and all speed limits had to be adhered to.

The event was spread over two weeks and spectators enjoyed the sight of antique bicycles, cars and ox-wagons trundling along the roads of the Peninsula with their passengers dressed in period gear.

The fastest category attracted intense competition and two large former rugby players had a tough experience. They had calculated they could save at least half an hour by dropping down from the lighthouse at Cape Point to a nearby beach, and racing across False Bay in speedboats piloted by friends. Sadly, one of their boats hit a dolphin as it screamed across the bay and sank almost immediately. The other boat, after picking them up, was slowed down by the extra load, and ripped its engine out as it was run up on the beach at Muizenberg. They mounted motorbikes but crushed the sump of one of them on a corner of the Forestry Road above Constantia Nek. Their last vehicle, a Lambretta scooter, struggled to carry the heavy pair and finally expired in a cloud of smoke some 30 metres short of the track up to the beacon. They made it to the top in just under three hours, a trifle short of the fastest run of an impressive 1 hour

33 min 41 sec by a contestant riding a BSA motorbike and running up Skeleton Gorge!

Ten years later, in 1970, The Star in the Transvaal laid on a considerably more ambitious Tip to Top Challenge, from the tip of the Hertzog Tower in Johannesburg to the top of Table Mountain in the Cape.

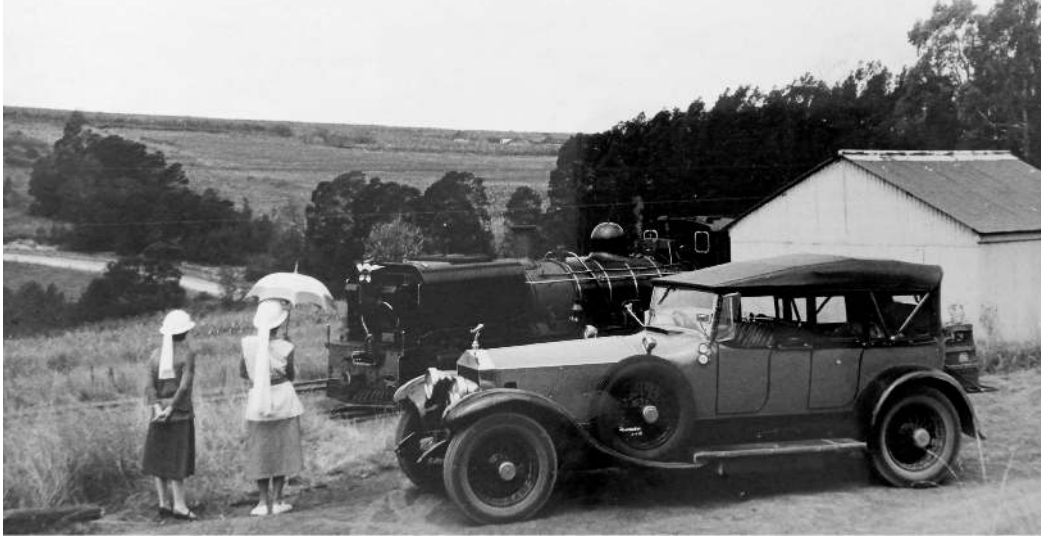
The SA Breweries, headquartered in Braamfontein, was celebrating its 75th anniversary that year, and asked its Public Relations manager, Bob Key, to represent the company in the competition. He and his wife Joan persuaded their friends Bob and Jean Johnston, to chase him in their 1921 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost as he raced around South Africa via Natal (KZN) in an impressive collection of antique vehicles. These proved to be a Tiger Moth aeroplane, a vintage motor cycle, a narrow-gauge railway train, a punt, a coach and pair and two old cars, a Maxwell and a Morris Cowley.

The competition, planned for

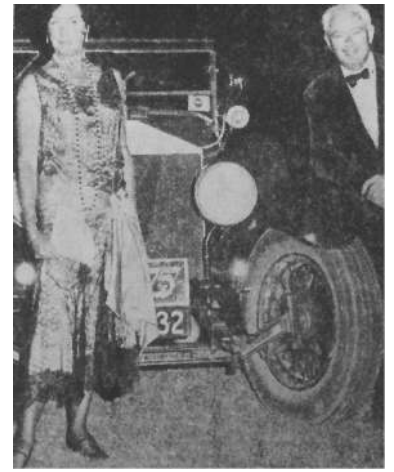
March 1970, certainly proved to be a challenge for the Johnstons. Leaving Johannesburg with Joan Key as their passenger, they followed old roads and maps for the 2400 km journey. For an authentic 1920s effect to suit the Silver Ghost, all their clothing, luggage, touring equipment and



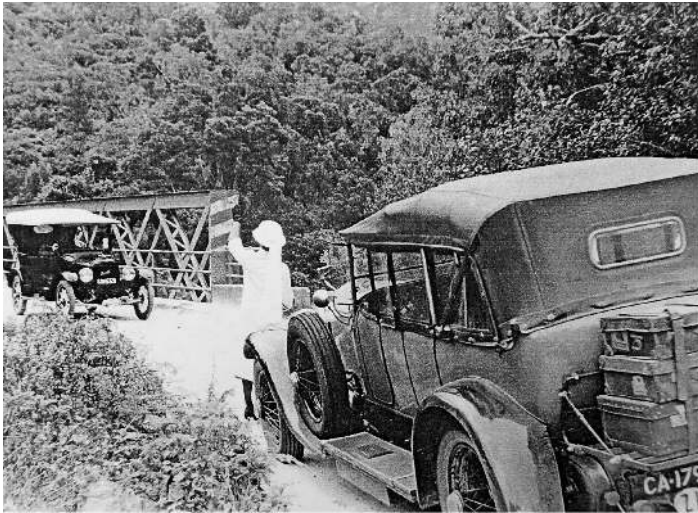
*Bob in party mood*



*Meeting the train in the Natal (KZN) Midlands*



*Dressed up for the party at Amanzi*



*Meeting the Maxwell on the old Passes Road*



*Waiting for the pont at Malgas*

even cameras were carefully chosen. The car carried tyre chains, a tow-rope, a spare tin of 'Texaco Motor Spirit' and an indispensable canvas water bag. Where feasible, original routes were followed, which meant stretches of rough and dusty unsurfaced roads.

In the Natal Midlands the South African Railways participated, halting a picturesque narrow gauge train at a remote siding to enable the Keys to ride on to the next town. The travellers were entertained

royally in Durban, Umtata, Uitenhage and George.

The party at Uitenhage was superb. It was held on the citrus farm Amanzi on the Sundays River, owned originally by Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, author of 'Jock of the Bushveld'. Their hosts were Sir Percy's grandson Patrick Niven and his wife Marina who had invited some eighty guests all in 1920s outfits. On the way to the farm the Rolls was 'held up' by a posse on horseback brandishing six

shooters. But the car, cruising through the thick bush on a sandy track, came round a corner so silently that the 'robbers' were taken by surprise and their horses scattered! One of the brigands was thrown by her mount and landed on her posterior right in front of the car.

That night Jean Johnston wore an authentic dress lent to her by an 87-year-old aunt. The celebration took off when Sir Percy's daughter and her husband, both in their eighties, arrived dressed as the acting partners Cicely Courtneidge and Jack Hulbert and launched the party with an exuberant demonstration of the Charleston. A highly memorable night of festivities followed.

The intrepid travellers, tiring fast, set off the next morning. Travelling to George on the old Passes Road, they met a 1916 Maxwell on the Goukamma River Bridge in the Homtini Pass. The car belonged to an old friend of the Johnstons, Rudi Reitz, who had been driving Bob Key ahead of them.

On the last day, after a deviation to cross the pont at Malgas on the

Breede River, the Silver Ghost pulled up at the SA Breweries office in Newlands at exactly 5.30 pm just as the reception cocktail party was about to commence. Bob Johnston, who had driven all the way, was exhausted but the Rolls had behaved impeccably. The next morning they accompanied Bob Key in a coach and pair to the foot of Table Mountain for his climb up Platteklip Gorge. Thankfully, the rest of the group was allowed to ascend in the cable car. At the top, in PR mode, Bob Key related to the press that the most frightening experience of the tiring trip was being charged by a bull while collecting water from a stream on the Phantom Pass outside Knysna!

Their journey secured a prize for meritorious effort but even more rewarding was a relaxed return to Johannesburg on the Blue Train care of SA Breweries.

Bob's Silver Ghost had proved herself once more. Almost twenty years before, in 1953, he and Jean had set out from Johannesburg on a tour of the Rhodesias (Zambia and Zimbabwe). Comments from friends had ranged from "Don't



*On the road in the Rhodesias (Zimbabwe/Zambia)*



*Climbing in the Highlands*

risk this fine old car” to a blunt “You’ll never make it”. Undeterred, they had set off with a full load of spare tyres, tools, camping equipment, chains, a towrope and luggage. The officials at Beit Bridge were intrigued and told them that their Rolls was the oldest car to cross the border for at least twenty years. The old lady showed her dislike of the Southern Rhodesia strip roads by developing a severe front wheel shimmy, but forged on to Bulawayo, Wankie, Victoria Falls Livingstone and Lusaka, where she found the Northern Rhodesian dirt roads much more to her liking. Returning via the Chirundu Bridge over the Zambezi, the shimmy was cured in

Salisbury (Harare) by fitting thin steel wedges between the springs and the front axle. They travelled east to Inyanga and south to Umtali and the Great Ruins at Zimbabwe, taking some appalling roads off the beaten track. By the time they’d returned to Johannesburg they’d covered 4800 km, double the distance of the later Tip to Top adventure.

Bob loved his Silver Ghost, 45 SG, and still owned her when he died in 2010 at the age of 87.

*Acknowledgements to An Alien of Eccentric Ability by Derek du Toit, Chronicle Feb, March 2009, and Bob’s niece Hilary Saunders*



*River crossing off the beaten track*



# Let’s Talk Car Radio Tapes

By John Booth

For almost as long as cars have been the mainstay of every day transport, some sort of musical device followed. As far back as 1933 Laurel and Hardy did an amusing skit where an ‘in-car entertainment system’ (wind-up phonograph) was fixed under the bonnet of their car and operated by a pull cord.

Fast forward to the 1950s when heavy valve radios were the in thing for cars. They were AM radios and used a ‘vibrator’ system to step up the voltage to run the vacuum tubes. These radios were not only very expensive to purchase but also incredibly heavy. Bang went a few engine horses to run and cart them around.

By the mid to late 1950s car radios were moving towards transistors. Valves or vacuum tubes were on their way out. The transistor radio used both AM (Amplitude Modulation) and FM (Frequency Modulation) frequencies. The race was now on to produce a cost-effective radio with good reception. It is here the Japanese took the lead in car radio production - in particular the Sony Corporation.

forward to the next one. Sure, you could change channels, but you were still restricted to what they pumped out.

Then, in the mid 1960s, came the revolution of the 8-track tape.

The 8-track tape lasted through to the late 1970s. Finally, you could buy a tape of your favourite band and play it all day long. It would play continuously in an endless loop. They were not without problems though. They would jam as the tape got dirty. If left in a hot car, the sound quality would deteriorate. Often the tape would stick together, causing it to spool out of the player onto the floor of the car, but it was progress nevertheless.



*Inside of an 8-track tape. The tape is pulled off the inner part of the reel then fed back onto the outside, giving continuous playing*



*His Masters Voice valve radio from a Rover P4 90. Stealing 4 amps at 12v when the amp was just idling*



*The famous STP sticker*

One of the problems with all radios is that you are forced to listen to broadcasts from radio stations. Tough if you do not like the song they are playing and cannot not fast

Imagine you are in your MK1 Ford Cortina, adorned with STP and Gunston stickers. You are far away from your dad, shouting at you to turn that racket off, on the open road and a radio station is playing “Chirpy, Chirpy, Cheep” which you are sick and tired of (although your mom still likes it). So you switch on your 8-track tape player and out comes Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” blasting through your 5w speakers. Man, you have made it in life!!!

Then along came another breakthrough in the form of the cassette tape. The cassette tape was invented by Phillips but improved by TDK. Cassettes appeared commercially in car radio tapes in the early 1970s, with most manu-

**When buying a car radio most people look for performance...and price.**

**Maybe that's why over half the car radios in South Africa are Supersonics.**

**SPARTAN 5** Wave-bands (F.M., B.C. and 2 S.W.) 4 watts output. Built-in automatic frequency control. Fits in original equipment. Original manufacturer. R59.00.

**MODEL AN 107** The car radio with five pre-select buttons. Crystal clear reception on 2 F.M. and 3 B.C. bands. R79.00.

**SPACE 4750** Special wide reception. Control 2 S.W., 2 F.M., B.C. and 3 S.W. bands. Rebuilt on a 2 S.W. base. Built-in automatic frequency control. R129.00.

**AUTOPORT** Top performance both in and out of your car. Locks into the car automatically. Set off the car it's a four-speed 4-band (B.C. and 3 S.W.) R79.00.

Prices include full custom-built installation kit.

*Early 1970s Supersonic transistor car radio advert*