

WEBERS WANDERINGS
HEART OF DIXIE CHVA NATIONAL TOUR
A Brief Recap

Since nobody else from the Southland went to the 2005 National Tour, Lu and I set out solo on Sept. 6 in our 35 year old Datsun 51.0 sedan (somehow it still doesn't feel like "an old car") for Nashville. We had a fairly leisurely, uneventful 4 ½ day trip on the I-40, with stops in Williams AZ, Santa Rosa NM, Oklahoma City, and West Memphis AR, where we shared a motel with refugees from Hurricane Katrina. High gas price was \$3.19 in Barstow, low \$2.46 in Amarillo. We arrived at the Radisson Hotel in Nashville the afternoon of 9/10, and enjoyed a great reunion with many of our old CHVA friends.



That evening we all met in the lobby for our busses to take us a short distance to

"Musicland" and a performance at the Grand Ole Opry. Unfortunately, after the first bus left, the second one "ten minutes later" never arrived. Its absence provided more time for reunions and visiting, but made us a bit nervous as show time approached. Finally another loaded bus and a mini-bus showed up, and the remainder of our crowd rode standing room to the Opry and made it just in time to get seated in the balcony before the show, broadcast on live TV.

Lu and I went just because "it was the thing to do in Nashville, and we had never been there". Not really our kind of music, and very loud, so we snuck out after about what seemed to be a very long hour. Now we've been there. Another life's experience.

Sunday morning we assembled for an 8:45 drivers' meeting, and after a pause to remember 9/11, our leaders of the tour, Mike & Sandy Smith and Bruce & Char Kile briefed us on what was to come. They did an amazing job of last minute reorganizing after Katrina wiped out our scheduled final two days in Mobile.

Our 51 cars (we would grow in numbers as the tour progressed) were divided into two groups, to run about 115 minutes apart. Rather than call us group 1 & 2 or A & B, in keeping with the Heart of Dixie we were to be the Grits & Biscuits. To start, Kiles would lead the Grits in their '62 Buick Electra and Smiths would lead the Biscuits in their '55 Pontiac.

We were generally driving in order of car seniority, with the '39 Ford coupe of Harold & Claire Brackett (GA) and the '49 Ford club coupe of Mert & Sue Fowikes (VA) in front. Only about a ½ mile from the hotel we were rolling thru woods, then an area of very nice houses with well-manicured lawns on a winding two laner.

After a short pause to let a bicycle race pass by we were on four lanes for a while before a rest stop, then to two lanes paralleling the highway on our way to the little town of Wartrace. We took photos of all of the cars in front of a '30s Texaco station, then had lunch and entertainment at the Pick 'n Parlor and visited the local antique shops. All of these stayed open on Sunday just for our tour.

After lunch we drove a short distance to famed Bridlewood Horse Farm where they raise world champion Tennessee walking horses. Bridlewood was listed in the 2003 Rand McNally U.S. Atlas as one of the nation's top 20 attractions. Under the porte cachere of the main building rested a fine '65 Cadillac convert with a Continental kit. We saw a video on tile history and breeding of these high stepping steeds, then lined the corral as one was put through his paces. We then went to the breeding barn and learned the "intimate details" of this very lucrative business. Their World Champion stallion "Generator's Armed And Dangerous" is worth \$4 million! In the barn we oohed over a cute four-day-old foal. While most of us learned how much the horses earn doing what most of us guys do for fun. Lu stayed behind to pet the velvety nose of a horse. The horse seemed to like this, then licked the perspiration off Lu's arm, then went chomp on her arm! It didn't break the skin, but left a nice bruise. Thought we might have a lawsuit, but figured a \$4 million horse could hire a better lawyer than we could.

Then it was down tile road to nearby Shelbyville and the Super 8, where only one clerk was on duty to handle our whole gang. Poor planning by Super 8, who knew 51 reservations, were coming in at one time.

Monday morning we had another lovely "taste of Tennessee" drive on fine two lane roads to Lynchburg. After parking, we wandered through the interesting shops around the town square. In front of the first antique store was a perfect original 1965 Datsun 1200 pickup truck that the owner had kept since new. No way would he part with it. A candy store was offering free samples of "Topsy Cake" which is soaked in the town's most

famous product. They sold quite a few boxes.

We remained in two groups, with one touring the Jack Daniels Distillery and the other walking to the early seating at Miss Mary Bobo's Boarding House where we experienced some fine southern dining. Our group was seated at five large tables, each with 11 diners and one hostess who gave us some of the history of the beautiful old building. Miss Mary assumed ownership of this 1867 hotel in 1908 and ran it until she died in 1983, just shy of 102 years old. It is an historical landmark, as is the distillery.

We enjoyed a great family style luncheon of catfish, meatloaf, macaroni casserole, corn meal biscuits, black eyed peas, turnip greens, fried okra (original thought, yuck! But really good!), and baked apples. We topped it all off with fudge pie seasoned with the local product (yummy). Local hint: if a recipe calls for vanilla, try substituting Old #7!

Thoroughly stuffed, we Grits traded places with the Biscuits and toured the distillery. We gathered in a fine large reception room filled with many exhibits and history. Jack was really Jasper Newton Daniel, and stood only 5'2", but was quite dapper and did well with the ladies of the time (who wouldn't if you owned a popular distillery?). He learned the art of making "licker" at age 13. He made it pretty good, and in 1866 he became the first to register his distillery with the U.S. Government when it began taxing booze. Old #7 is still made from the original 1866 recipe, using iron free spring water from the property. In 1895 he switched from crocks to the present square bottles with black labels to signify that you would get a square deal from Jack Daniel.

This is one large facility, and over 200 million liters are stored in warehouses in Lynchburg. We did a lot of hiking, and finally ended up back at the reception room, where they gave us complimentary *lemonade!* Lynchburg is in a dry county, no booze sold or dispensed! Fortunately it can apparently still be used in baking goods. Whoopie!

We left Lynchburg in a good mood, but it dimmed a bit as we proceeded through Fayetteville, with a zillion red lights, all seemingly timed to stop traffic and break up our group. We continued south and into Alabama, and our spirits were restored when we efficiently checked into another beautiful Radisson in Huntsville with a great central courtyard. That evening there was a nice happy hour with copious food, courtesy of hotel.

On Tuesday morning, after a sit-down hotel breakfast, we had a very short drive to U.S. Space & Rocket Center for one more great tour. We passed an SR - 71 "stealth" and parked in the shadow of a huge Saturn V moon rocket before entering this super space museum. It is just loaded with great exhibits and activities, with a yard full of historical rockets. We easily spent most of the day here, with a break for a hamburger "sack lunch" in the cafeteria. A high point was the I-MAX theater with a showing of "Operation Red Flag", a joint multi-nation air combat exercise that took place out of Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. It would surely make you want to think twice about taking on our air power, especially as a tank driver. Vroom!

Some folks left on their own, but the space nuts stayed till 3:00 for an hour's drive to the Best Western in Gadsden AL. "Unfortunately", because of some hurricane refugees, some of us had to stay across the way at the \$100/night Comfort Suites. Webers were among the drawing winners for the fine suites, where we still only had to pay the much smaller Best Western charge. Tough duty.

When we gassed up we noticed 93.5 octane gas available for \$2.96, not uncommon here in the south.

Wednesday, after a 6:45 drivers' meeting with much dew on the cars, we hustled about 35 miles down the road to the Talladega Super Speedway, where drivers of modern iron car-pooled and we in the old iron had the thrill of hustling three laps around this very impressive track behind the pace truck at 80 mph. The turns are banked at 33°, and the noise up on the banks was deafening. That was Lu screaming, "Get down off this bank right now!" Of course, I didn't hear her. What fun. She did speak to me later in the day.

After our laps we spent a couple hours roaming thru the very large International Motor-sports Hall Of Fame Museum, which houses many famous i-ace cars and memorabilia. One very interesting "race car" was the 1940 Mercury sedan that was raced by Sam Packard on the sand at Daytona Beach in 1947. Other than having the head lights removed and the paint job, it looked just like a regular sedan. It had the mohair bench seats without seat belts, no roll bar, the original dash and instruments and old steering wheel. It was truly a "stock car", a far cry from today's racers.

After the museum we drove to the back straight grandstands for a great lunch of bar-b-q beef, potato and macaroni salad, rolls, and soft drinks, It was quite breezy and pleasant, and as we ate the cars of famous drivers such as Mark Martin, Rick) Rudd, Matt Kenseth, and Greg Biffle were driving practice laps. What a lovely lunchtime serenade -the music of those Roush Ford V-8s singing by at 200 mph.

After lunch our leaders changed hats". Mike Smith would now lead the Grits and Bruce Kife took over the Biscuits for the rest of the tour.

Mike led us another 35 miles south to the little town of Sylacauga and a tour of the Blue Bell Creamery and Ice Cream factory. After a couple of cute videos on the history of the plant (founded in 1907) and watching the production line, we enjoyed samples of there yummy products.

Then it was down the road to the beautiful Holiday Inn in Montgomery, where we would spend the next four nights. Here again, they managed to only field one reservation clerk, even knowing our group, now grown to about 60, was coming en masse. It made for a long line, but our irritation was tempered by our good mood and camaraderie. They did scare up a couple more clerks, but it was still more than an hour for some at the rear to check in.

Thursday morning, after a drivers' mtg. in the 'Holidome', the large covered central atrium, we left at 9 AM for a drive to downtown Montgomery. We convened in the restored 1898 train station which now serves as tile visitors' center. Most of us took in a short movie on the history of the city, and then took advantage of the city tours on the "Lightning Route Trolleys". One of the "trolleys" was actually a motorized replica of the nation's first electric streetcars, which began service in Montgomery in 1886. The other was a restored 1955 GMC bus exactly like the one on which Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man, sparking the civil rights movement.

The drivers were very entertaining as they pointed out the sights of the city, which is not only the capital of Alabama, but also the capitol building also served as the site where Jefferson Davis took the oath of office as President of The Confederate States Of America. It is the one of the only state capitol buildings designated a National Historical Landmark and has been restored to its Civil War era appearance.

We also passed the first White House of tile Confederacy where Davis and his family lived when Montgomery was the capital of the CSA. Our drivers pointed out many other landmarks and attractions. Any passenger was able to leave the trolley to investigate and return to continue the ride at leisure. Many of us took advantage of this to spend some hours visiting Old Alabama Town, a collection of over forty restored buildings depicting life in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the evening, we enjoyed the wine, cheese, and Moon Pie party out of the hospitality room and in the Holidome, with some fine piano entertainment and accompaniment to some of the singers in our tour. Another great time.

Friday we had originally been scheduled to continue south to Mobile, but Katrina literally blew this plan out of the water. In another example of superb leadership, our hosts managed a last minute rescheduling of out-final two days of the tour.

Instead, there was a drive into Georgia and visit to Warm Springs. After lunch at Bulloch House, who's specialty is fried green tomatoes and fried apples, there was a tour of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Little White House" where he vacationed and finally passed away. There was a spot of rain on this tour, but not enough for wipers. After returning to the Holiday we were free to sample the many 'fine eateries in the area.

Saturday began with a tour to Tuskegee and the site of airfield where the famed all-black squadron that came to be known as the Tuskegee Airman trained. Not much there now besides a hangar and a temporary building with a good movie of their history and some exhibits. The site has now been finally acquired by the National Parks Service with plans to build a nice permanent museum.

Back to the hotel for a lunch break, then a small car-pool caravan journeyed to the woodsy suburb of Wetumpka and a visit to the Smiths' and "Mike's Garage". While the ladies enjoyed the handiwork of Sandy ("Quilter") the men toured The Garage, where we found he really does own Pontiacs. Mike's handle is "Star Chief" but most of us regular National tourers had never seen him drive a Pontiac on tour. We sort of thought "Star Chief" just wanted to feel superior to "Captain Kirk" (B.K.Showaiter from OR).

Mike built this very nice large garage himself, and it houses '55 and '54 tudor hardtops, both with factory air, and another '54 under construction with many bits and pieces all neatly organized. Upstairs is Mike's office, and the main garage is lined with memorabilia, signs, and hubcaps.

Unfortunately, the Pontiac garage also was temporarily housing a DeSoto. It was the rare and until a bit earlier beautiful '51 fordor station wagon driven all the way from Gridley CA by Bob "Iron Doe" and Ruth Trueax. Bob had failed to yield in time after a left turn arrow and the wagon was center punched by a BMW S.U.V.. Not good. Luckily, Ruth was not really hurt.

After sodas in the garage, we hiked down a bit of a hill to the wooden fenced "Retirement Home for Vintage Vehicles". Here a few more rusty Pontiacs rested peacefully, surrounded by a zillion miscellaneous hubcaps hanging on the fence. On the way up to Smiths' Ken Olson's '57 Ford Fliptop had lost a wheel cover. No problem. Mike plucked a good one off of his fence and Ken was back in business.

Back to the hotel in time to rest a bit and clean up for the finale banquet under the Holidome. After stuffing ourselves with a fine buffet, the festivities got under way. They opened with a hilarious skit by "Auntie Sue" (Mike's sister) who reported a hillbilly's view of the tour as a passenger with Smiths. There were drawings for some lovely quilts by Sandy (she also quilted each of the tourers "goody bags"). Webers passed out the CHVA writing awards, and Bruce & Mike handed out the individual tour awards. Instead of the usual plaques, each tourer received a clock made from a hub cap/wheel cover representing either the brand they had driven on the tour or at least one of the old cars with which they are commonly identified. This was really great, and took a tremendous amount of work.

Most popular car awards were presented:

Pre-1950 Mert & Sue Fowlkes, '49 Ford (VA)
1950-'55 Larry & Lynn Carter, '55 Chevy Bel Air (FL)
1956-'59 Dick & Charlotte Klaas, '57 Pontiac convert. (TX)
1960-64 Rich Gibbs, '60 Buick Electra 225 (KS)
1965-66 Eric & Carolyn Beeby, '65 T-Bird (CA)
1967—69 David & Sally Black, '67 Buick Wildcat (GA)
1970-78 Randy & Ellen Huebner, '72 Chevelie (CA)
Tour Favorite Harold & Claire Brackett, '39 Ford coupe (GA)

CHVA President Randy then presented the CHVA's most prestigious award, the Al Newman, for outstanding service to our club, which went to past President Randy Wright.

"Screwdriver" Gerry Gorley gave us a briefing on the plans for the April 29—May 6 2006 National Tour in Texas. It will be another great one.

An honorarium was presented to the Kiles and Smiths with our heartfelt thanks for all of the tremendous effort they put into making this a really great tour. This was followed by what is always the hardest part of a National Tour - saying farewells until we meet again to all of our many old and new friends.

We had an uneventful trip home, with stops in Ruston Mississippi, Abilene TX, Van Horn TX, Benson AZ, and Scottsdale AZ to visit our daughter and son—in-law. The only significant rain we had on the whole tour was a 10-minute downpour coming into Benson.

The Datsun racked up 4808 miles with no significant problems, and usually got 30 to 31 mpg with the air conditioning on. It now has over 264,000 miles. Great little car.

Great tour. You really ought to try to experience the best touring club in the country. The tours have provided us with some of the best vacation trips we have ever had.