



A story of a young boys journey growing up in a family Chrysler Dealership and having a passion for cars birthed in his heart and soul to becoming the worlds premier Morgan Sports car restorer and connoisseur of all things Morgan.

BY ROBERT COUCH

# My Story

A young boy's journey through a world of cars to becoming a young man and the USA's premier Morgan Restorer.

On Dec. 12, 2006 at a Pacific NW Morgan club party I was asked the the following question, Who is Robert Couch? I sat quiet for a few moments as I pondered the question and I shot back with "what do you mean". The man said "where did Robert Couch come from and how did he become the USA's premier Morgan sports car restorer?" I then proceeded to tell, for the first time in my life, "my story" to him. About 45 minutes later he looked at me with his eyes wide open and said "man, you have got to write that down, not just for all us Morgan folks to read but for everyone to read and know about, it's quite a story."

So this is: "MY STORY".

My name is Robert Couch and I was born August 20th 1950 into the world of a family owned Automobile dealership. I lived in a small New England town in the NW corner of Ct. called New Preston. It's a quaint little town at the foot of a large lake called Lake Waramaug. This is a story of my journey from a very young boy with a love for cars to becoming the premier Morgan restorer in the USA. In the spring of 2006 I was diagnosed with brain cancer and after having major surgery it has become necessary for me to quit this passion of my heart. I hope that this story is an inspiration to all those who have the chance to read it. It has been very therapeutic for me to write it. Cars have been the passion of my life since I was a small boy.

I have been telling so many people all these years that I was born with motor oil in my veins that I have come to believe the story myself. I was the son of a man whose father at a young age opened a Chrysler dealership in 1932 in New Preston. He was very successful and after 15 years, moved from a little garage into a custom built large brick garage just down the road from his first shop. Proud of his name, the garage had great big raised letters across the front which read "NORMAN W COUCH INC". He sold Chryslers, Plymouths and De-soto's, remember that brand name? He also sold Diamond T trucks and became the first Saab dealer in the USA. It would be these funny little 2 strokes that I would cut my teeth on, man if I owned one I owned twenty. I learned to tune two stroke motors to make them run circles around their nemesis the VW Beetle. I learned how to convert a three speed to a four speed and to shift the H pattern on the column backwards because that's what happened with that swap. Never had to worry about the car being stolen!



At the famous Lime Rock Race Track On Oct. 12, 1957 -The first Little Le Mans Endurance race was run, a 12-hour race for small sedans. The race was held each year until 1962. It was a new concept at the time, but the Little Le Mans race was the forerunner of the popular Show-Room Stock racing of today. Saab fielded a factory team which was based and run through my Dad's garage. They even won some of the early races. There are pictures of these cars and my dad's team in the book that has been written on Lime Rock. The book is titled "Lime Rock Park 35 Years of Racing". I also have from my Dad's collection of stuff, pictures of him and little Robby by his side in the pits with the pit crew from his garage. I guess I cut my teeth in competition at an early age.



My mom and dad also found their competitive niche in long distance rallying. They were members of the Naugatuck Sports Car Club and competed often on day long and their favorite type long distance overnight rallies throughout New England. Here is a photo of them both, proud to display their first of many first place overnight rally wins. I would give my eye teeth to own that car today, a fully dressed 750 GT ready to rally, complete with factory in dash Helda Speed Pilot, wooden Nardi steering wheel, fully reclining rally banana seats and full bed kit for two to sleep in the car.



[Back to the main story.](#)

As a young boy around all types of cars and trucks most every day, I was in awe of these things called automobiles. Our house was within walking distance of the shop. How great it was to spend all my free time at the "shop". I became very fascinated by what made these automobiles tick, and I became fascinated with the men who seemed to be so busy around these machines all day. So like any young boy in a family auto business with oil in his veins I wanted to know all there was to

know about automobiles and become like these master mechanics. It was so exciting for me when I became old enough to be given simple tasks around the shop like sweeping and cleaning. I got to be close to the men who worked their trade. I fantasized every day I was there about the day I would be able to lay my hands on these wonderful automobiles like they did. At some point in the mid 60's I "grew up enough" to work "the island." Who knows or remembers what that term "the island" means? I was so excited, I was going to be able to touch and actually do something to automobiles with my hands. I used to marvel at the Island boy as he worked the island and all his activity. Boy did it look like fun. Little did I know! Often the customer who drove up to the island to fill up his car spent no more than a dollar on gas, gas being maybe 20 cents a gallon at that time. The car was gassed up, windshield and rear window cleaned, tire pressures checked, oil and battery level checked and any other request by the customer was given your personal attention. My grandfather learned at a young age how to serve the customer. Customers were never a means to an end, but the very reason for your existence, always treated with the most respect and courtesy that could be given every day no matter what. This attitude enabled him to go from a small business to a full service garage in just a few short years. These traits were instilled in me as a very young man and have been carried over into my own business ethics all these years. These ethics are just as valid today as then, thanks Gram-pa and thanks Dad. Getting gas in those days was almost like getting a full service in the shop. Try to get that kind of attention today! And this went on day after day, hour after hour, in the sun, rain, or the freezing snow. The tips were great. When was the last time you tipped a gas station attendant? It's a time that has forever passed us by and I for one miss it. It's in our hearts though, and every time I think of it I kind of settle into a nice comfortable place. I couldn't wait to work the Island, how naive I was. Man it was hard but as a young boy with bigger aspirations I made it work, I started to grow up a bit fast at this point. Every night I had to close out the gas sales part of the till. Let me tell you this was one of those 200 pound behemoths that were pre computer days and it was a chore. The biggest problem was reconciling the gas sales with cash, I got real good at keeping track of the gas money. Every night the tanks were "stuck and measured" and compared against the sales. At age sixteen, after proving myself to be trustworthy and a hard worker at the island, my Uncle Ed, Norman's brother who ran the whole service department of the garage, gave me the opportunity to help the service man service cars. I felt like I had gone to heaven, my dream was coming true. I will never forget the moment I was given the okay, it's like it happened yesterday. Where was my dad in all this? He ran the car sales department, but I'll bet he was always keeping an eye on number one son. So to make a very long and maybe somewhat boring story shorter we will move forward in a big jump. I moved up the ladder from service man to full time shop mechanic in about a year and most of my time was spent working on Saabs. I remember my first job, I was so excited, I got to work among the men who fascinated me all those years, I became part of the "gang". Removing the engine assembly out of these cars was normally done by hand, that was the way we did a clutch job on those little 750 and 850-cc Saabs. Those little 750 and 850-cc engines were quite easy to lift out by hand and I was a strong young man with a strong back. I also remember being in charge of burning out the tail pipes from these cars. These little 2 stroke motors were notorious for plugging exhaust systems with a thick black goo and eventually a car would stop running because it was like having a potato stuffed in the tail pipe! I would take a very large welders torch and burn the stuff out of the tail pipe. It was like trying to hold onto a little rocket when this black goo started to burn!

After a short stint in the air-force after graduation I found myself back home in familiar territory. I was welcomed back into the fold but it was a different place than when I had left. I still at this point in my fledgling automotive career had not done any real serious mechanical work but I kept learning and asking and looking and soaking up as much as I could. I still marveled at and was always questioning the master mechanics who had been there since the shop opened. My grandfather treated his employees with the same respect as customers. Then in the early 70's things started to go wrong. My uncle sold his share of the business to two young men with lots of money and no business sense. Things started to go downhill. Remember the early 70's and the long gas lines? Chryslers at that

point were maybe the worst brand of cars that you could be selling. Chrysler was headed for the trash. Remember how we bailed them out? I saw the writing on the wall and quit my job, walking out in frustration and sadness. It seemed as though my career had just gone down the tubes. How little did I know the meaning of that day I walked out the door.

While hanging out one day I met a wonderful young man named Phil Rosette from Torrington Ct. He had been racing Formula Fords in England for a couple of years with an English friend from London. Phil decided that he wanted me to go to England with him and wrench Formula 3's that they were planning to race. So with sponsorship in hand and tickets to Toronto to fly to London, both Phil and I departed. I was beginning a new phase of my life, race-cars! Who would have thought, it sounded too good to be true.

After settling down in London, this country boy who had never been further away from Ct. than Dover AFB in Dover Delaware found London to be quite a shock, but one heck of a place to live. Then the bull hit the fan. Sponsorship was canceled for a lot of amateur racers. The gas crunch and it's financial woes had struck us this time. What were we to do? We were two young men with very little money, lots of energy, but we needed a plan. Cars were cheap and with the Federal DOT laws in effect since 1967 all the neat little sports cars from Europe were disappearing from the shores of the USA. How about importing some cars into the states and selling them. That must be a market. We had very little money so the cars that attracted our checkbook were two classic British cars, Mini Cooper S's and Lotus Super Seven's. So with one of us in the US, Phil at my parents house selling the cars, and me in the UK repairing, detailing and shipping, we had a plan. We had a "Flat" (no not a flat tire, an apartment) and two 10 x 20 lockup garages side by side. These lockups are the precursor to today's storage buildings that every town has. We had two of these side by side and I would tune, do minor repair, and clean up and detail these cars and ship them back to sell. We were buying pristine one owner Mini Cooper S's, (be prepared to cry), for \$50.00 to \$200 US. We had the 998's, 1071's and 1275's, dry suspension, and wet suspension. We even bought some that were full blown rally cars that were so fast it would scare you to drive them. I don't know how the British allowed these cars on the road but they went around corners like a train on tracks. What a car. We had pristine Lotus 7's that were nearly brand new kits and a few with Ford BDA race motors that were so fast they were frightening to drive. They road like a buckboard. So for a few years we imported and sold these cars and lived like poor playboys flying back and forth across the Atlantic. My automotive career was certainly taking an interesting twist. Constantly tuning and doing light repairs to these cars was building a base under me. Little did I know that I was being prepared for something far greater. Cars were getting hard to find and business was getting really slow. It seemed like every dealer and his brother were importing from the UK so pre-67 cars were getting hard to come by. Nothing after 1967 could be imported into the USA at this time because of the DOT safety and emission laws.

Then the gas crisis of the 70's finally took it's toll on my dad's dealership. After 35 years the business folded into the grips of the gas crisis. He was one of many Chrysler dealerships to go through that fate. So we came home and I helped close down and disperse what had been one of the most endearing parts of my life. I felt like a part of my heart was being torn out and that I was burying an old friend.

Phil and I tried our hand at buying and selling cars in the states and we failed but in the process we met a gentleman in northern New Jersey who had a huge collection of rare cars and was looking for someone to manage and keep up his collection. We took the job. While working one day doing some detail work on a Jag SS90, (I said his collection was rare), a gentleman from NYC by the name of Jack Artley came in and was very impressed with the detailing work that I was doing. He asked me if I would be interested in restoring some vintage race cars that he was going to buy. I jumped on the offer before he finished his question. I was miserable and wanted out of where I was. I talked to my partner Phil who also wanted out. We parted company and I went back to London in the

summer of 1977 for a long needed vacation, with orders from Jack to look for a vintage race car. I still at this point in my career had never done any real serious mechanical work on anything, nor had I ever "restored" a car. In my first week in London, in one of the motor car magazines, there was this rare Morgan factory race car for sale behind a pub. It was known as a Morgan TT car with plate number CAB652. I called Jack, gave him the information on the car, and into the libraries of New York City he went to research the car.

He called me back the next day with question after question. Each question was answered positively, proving that the car was indeed as advertised, a very very rare Morgan factory race car. The car was purchased with the intent to restore it to its former glory. Payment was made, shipping arranged, and the car was on its way. As I returned to my folks home Jack and I awaited the arrival of the car from England. I prepared the little garage shop at my dad's house for a place to restore it. I then began to ponder what a restoration was and how in the world this young man from a small New England town was going to accomplish such a task. The car arrived, I picked it up at the New Jersey docks and drove it to the shop. I especially remember the spirited ride along the Sawmill River Parkway, and the cold fall breeze in my face. I was going to cut my teeth on this funny little car called a Morgan. How little did I know that my future was wrapped up in this little car. The time was the fall of 1977. The racing history of this car is long and glorious and well documented. This story is not meant to be a redo of all that information, it is a story of a young man's journey through his love for cars. I knew I needed to learn some things so into the best restoration shops in the east I went. I looked, I watched, and I asked a lot of questions. I wanted to

### In Acton London ready to ship to Ct.



know how the masters did it and I was determined to know the difference between a good job and a excellent job and learn how to do a excellent job. I became a woodworker; all the wood in the body needed to be replaced. I became a full fledged mechanic: learning to rebuild and restore every aspect of the car and I learned how to spray paint from a painters gun. This little car was full of so many strange things that I also learned to be a master sleuth, researching and finding parts and specifications for this rare 1938 Morgan. All the while I was learning my trade in this car, Jack was researching the full history of this car, and he was having a ball. What a history it was. In the future, understanding the history of this car would make all the difference for my career.

The restoration was finished in the spring of 1980. Because of the rarity of the Morgan, the car was invited to compete in the first Chinetti invitational concours at Lime Rock Race Track. At the time, there were lots of vintage race cars being professionally restored. It was becoming a market



unto its own. There was no real place at the time for these beautifully restored cars to be seen as a group and to compete, so it was decided by the Chinetti business to start a venue for these cars to be displayed and shown annually at Lime Rock Race Track. Chinetti's were the Ferrari dealers in the Northeast. CAB652 as she is known got to go for the first time in years before her peers and show her stuff before the most beautifully restored million dollar Ferrari's, Porsche's and others. Since it was the first restoration of this quiet young man from Ct. I held out little hope for any placing in the competition. CAB652 sparkled like a jewel, and she became the center of attention. The million dollar Ferrari's looked worried and so did some of the owners! Rene Dryfus, the very famous past Grand Prix driver, was the head judge. The winner of the concours came down to two cars, CAB652 and a very famous factory Porsche race car. Mr Dryfus spoke to the owner of the Porsche and asked him if he knew the racing history of the car, and as the story goes the owner just laughed and said that the car was nothing more than an investment. Mr Dryfus came before Jack and me and asked us about our little sweetheart and we both rattled off the full history of the car. Impressed, he turned slowly and gazed at our little beauty with a smile on his face that I can still see today. He slowly raised his hand and pointed at the Morgan and said "the Morgan gets it." I almost passed out. So many people fell in love with this little car, being so cute and beautiful, so different, so small as to be almost huggable. This quiet young man from Connecticut was simply blown away that his very first restoration defeated million dollar cars with million dollar restorations. What in the world was going to happen to this young man? Because of the car's success at the concours, Road and Track Magazine committed to doing an article in the August 1980 issue, in the Salon section. William Motta a famous writer for Road and Track and professional painter did a gorgeous watercolor of the front of the car, which the owner has to this day. This painting is featured in the salon section of the 1980 issue of Road and Track. I seriously began to wonder where this was all going. One major concours win and a feature in Road and Track. I could not have written a better script, it was after all my first restoration.



We then decided to take the car to the National Morgan Meet in Luray Virginia. We towed the car to Virginia, prepped it, and showed it. Again everyone was in awe of the car, having never seen one of these rare factory TT race cars and never having seen a Morgan restored to the level of quality that CAB652 was restored to. A new standard was being set. The car won every trophy that was available to win. It clearly seemed as though a career in Morgan restoration lay before me. As it turned out, the next two Morgans I restored over the next two years also won the National Morgan Meet the 2 years they were shown. A steady flow of work began coming my way by word of mouth.

I had to move into a much larger shop, kind of what happened to my grand-pa when he started his business. I've never once advertised for restoration work up to this day.

It turned out that this young man from New England ended up being the right guy in the right place at the right time.

Only now because of this major illness in my life I have had to give up this passion of my heart but I have been blessed with a second chance at this journey called life. As of early spring 2007 I am cancer free and ready to discover the next passion of my heart. Maybe once again I will find myself as the right guy in the right place at the right time!

To be continued?..... Robert Couch Sequim Wa.

