



Kas Kastner

BY JIM DONNELLY
PHOTOGRAPHY FROM
THE R.W. KASTNER COLLECTION

His birth certificate doesn't say "Kas," but we're certain that Kas Kastner does have an actual first name. He's just not saying what it is. It's never appeared in any of the books that document his role in the rise of the British sports car on our shores. Most pointedly, the books he's penned exclude it, too.

"You can call me R.W. Kastner," he told us flatly. "Or you can call me Kas. Or Mister Kastner. It's your choice. That's all I use."

That's tough to argue with. Likewise, you can't deny that Kastner is one of the consequential individuals in the great post-war emergence of the imported road car, especially from Great Britain. He's fixed them, sold them, raced them and in all three endeavors, assured curious buyers of their legitimacy and fun. You can make a forceful verbal or written presentation that when it comes to Triumph cars, Kastner is the most influential American in their history. He is assured of affection from enthusiasts because Kastner came up the same way they did, discovering the tiny, upright roadsters of England and never turning away from them.

Kastner is just turning 80. His life began in his hometown of Batavia, New York, between Buffalo and Rochester, and

not grossly distant from where sporting rakes once swerved around the houses in Alexandria Bay or in Watkins Glen, where the circuit would one day take shape. Kastner enlisted in the Army, was stationed for a time in Colorado until his discharge, and once a civilian again, decided he much preferred the mountains to western New York's relative flatness. Returning to Colorado, he shot pool for a time before finding a mechanic's slot at a Chevrolet retailer in tiny Delta, west of the Rockies. A winter of chattering from sub-zero gales howling down their slopes convinced him to see a warmer locale, Salt Lake City.

Kastner opened an independent repair shop there in 1953, mailing away to England for a variety of arcane repair manuals, and to Germany for metric and British Standard tools to work on them, which were almost unknown in American garages back then, particularly in the mountain West. By this time, additionally, Kastner was already driving his first sports car, a Crosley Super Sport, soon supplanted by an M.G. TD after, as he tells it, "I managed to break the Crosley irreparably after about three months."

That same year, Kastner traveled farther west to Pebble Beach and its first road races at Monterey. It was an epiphany, especially the part when Ken Miles, a hatchet-faced émigré from England, took the overall win that day in an M.G. Special, the kind of homebuilt sports racer using production mechanicals that was gaining a lot of adherents in 1950s California. En route back to Salt Lake City, Kastner decided to build his own, and did so using M.G. power, a homebuilt chassis welded (after he taught himself how) from electrical conduit, and a body fashioned from sheets of .019 aluminum that the Sears down the street from his shop sold for \$4 apiece. He pieced them together using sheetmetal screws—pop rivets had yet to be invented. Kastner ran his first road race through the streets of Aspen, Colorado, and competed in innumerable hillclimbs.

Shortly, he heard that Triumph was looking for dealers in the western United States, along with service managers, and decided to check one out. He recalled, "I was six feet four, and the TR was the first car in which I could actually get the seat back far enough to clear my knees from the steering wheel. It was a wonder. I was in love right then."

Kastner was at a Colorado hillclimb when he got a call offering a job at Williamson Motors, near the corner of Pico Boulevard and Western Avenue in Los Angeles, as a mechanic; it took him 90 days to become Williamson's service manager. While still racing an M.G., Kastner went down to check out a BMC dealership nearby and ran into old crony Joe Richards, who had showed him the first Triumph he ever saw in Salt Lake City. He parlayed that contact into employment at Cal Sales in Gardena, California, the distributor for Triumph cars in 11 western states. By June 1958, he was the firm's service and parts supervisor.

If you grew up in the West and fell in love with a Triumph from the early 1960s, Kastner deserves credit. Back then, Cal Sales' preparation area occupied almost two square blocks where the cars went after they were shipped, sans bumpers, from the docks at San Pedro. The bumper, windscreens and such were attached, paint checked and the cars tested before being sent to dealers, with Kastner managing a prep staff of 70. Cal Sales also ran a Triumph special, whose drivers once included Phil Hill, and Kastner soon got a TR3 and went racing, winning the 1959 SCCA F Production Pacific Coast championship and California Sports Car Club title.

After the Triumph factory bought the distributorship, Kastner was told to quit racing because executives of the firm were barred from it. He was building performance parts in his home shop, along with writing manuals on how to race-tune Triumph products when the company asked him to start its U.S. competition department. He pulled three TR3s off the Cal Sales lot and, after his normal workday, prepped them to run at Sebring, where they finished first, second and fourth in class. The success of Triumph in U.S. racing, most of all in amateur classes, rests heavily on his shoulders.

Kastner left Triumph after 1970 to start his own racing business, eventually joining Roy Woods Racing in 1973 and heading three Indy car starts, in addition to Can-Am and Formula 5000. Later, he headed Nissan's GTP effort. He satisfies himself today as an elder statesman of sports cars, though he doesn't currently own one, by his definition.

"I'd need a three-car garage, and I don't have one," Kastner explained. "If I did, I'd build myself a roadster based on a Spitfire." 🇬🇧