

"DON'T BRING MUCH LUGGAGE," TOM Cotter said over the phone. "The Cobra's trunk isn't very big, with the spare and convertible top in there. We only have room for a couple of small duffel bags."

"No problem," I said.

In my experience, there has always been a powerful inverse relationship between the quality of a trip and the amount of stuff you pack. Generally speaking, the less luggage, the more exciting the car (see Formula 1) and the less opportunity you have for some form of dreaded social nonsense along the way.

So I cheerfully spent about 15 minutes packing for this one. A few changes of clothes, a camera, my old flying jacket and a hat for the Great American Desert. Done.

If only a few minutes were consumed in packing, it took Tom considerably longer than that to line up the car for our trip. A lifetime, essentially, if you don't count those sadly squandered juvenile years before you could tell one car from another.

"The first time I ever saw a Cobra," Tom told me, "I was in fifth grade. The book cover on my social studies book wasn't Princeton or Yale, but sports cars of the world; a Jag, an Aston Martin, a Lotus...and a wire-wheeled 289 Cobra. I've wanted one ever since."

Tom, who recently joined R&T as a Contributing Editor, has owned or raced many other sports cars all his adult life—including the Morris Minor vintage racer we co-drove at Sebring a few years ago—but the Cobra has always remained the Holy Grail.

Tom is originally from Long Island, but moved south to become director of public relations for Charlotte Motor Speedway and later started a public relations firm, promoting several of NASCAR's biggest teams. After years of long hours and hard work, he recently sold the business for considerably more money than I currently have in my checking account.

Among Shelby enthusiasts, I believe this is known as "Cobra Time."

Tom spent many months searching for the right Cobra, and he would call occa-

sionally to let me know how it was going. "I want a nice original 289 Cobra with wire wheels, all the street equipment and the standard 271-horsepower engine," he told me. "No big fender flares or race equipment. I want a car I can drive on the street."

One evening, two months ago, he called and said, "I've found my car. It's a '65, red with a black interior. Nice condition and very stock. The owner lives in Walnut Creek, California. I flew out and looked at it and we struck a deal. How would you like to help me drive it back to North Carolina?"

"No thanks," I said. "I have to mow the lawn that week."

Silence.

"Just kidding. I can be there in about 15 minutes."

I flew from Wisconsin into San Francisco on a warm, sunny day in May, and Tom picked me up at the airport in an Audi wagon belonging to Jacques Harguindeguy, the man who had owned the Cobra for the past seven years. Jacques and his wife, Betty, had put Tom up overnight while they signed all the papers, and Tom handed over a check for "more than \$100,000, but less than \$200,000," as he would tell the bluntly curious during our trip.

When we pulled into the driveway of the Harguindeguy's home, Tom opened the garage door, and there it was.

A beautiful car in deep, dusky red, top down, poised for the trip.

Much as I love the MGs, Healeys and Triumphs of the same era, there is something quite different about a Cobra, some quality that always makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. The car bristles with subtle chrome details overlaid on a set of beautiful curves, and it gives off an aura of aggression that few other English roadsters possess. It looks vaguely like some sort of Medieval weapon, as though the apparently harmless snaps across the back deck for the car's top might be the points of a mace that could be wielded on a chain. The Cobra, like certain Ferraris, has both beauty and brutality in its lines. When

# Cross-Country Cobra

**The next best thing to owning a stock,  
original 289 Cobra is helping a friend bring one home**

BY PETER EGAN • PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR





■ A sinuous road (Highway 6, heading toward Provo, Utah), a luxurious blanket of snow over craggy peaks and a '65 289 Cobra—all the makings of an excellent adventure.





■ Tom Cotter, R&T contributor, all-around good guy and the Cobra's new owner.

Carroll Shelby chose the AC chassis and body to contain his hard-hitting Ford drivetrain, he chose well.

With a few snapshots and handshakes, we slathered ourselves with sunscreen and were ready to go. Just like that; off the westbound plane and into an eastbound Cobra.

Tom climbed behind the wheel and I reached inside the door, pulled down on the leather latch-string and slid into the passenger seat and looked around. Here was one of my favorite cars of all time, yet I'd never so much as sat in a 289 Cobra.

Comfortable leather seats (well-broken-in originals), lots of leg room, wide, aviation-style lap belts, a full panel of American Stewart-Warner gauges, dished wood-rimmed wheel, Mustang-style 4-speed shift lever with the lift-for-reverse T-handle under the knob. Volkswagen turn-signal and horn lever on the right side of the wheel. Roomy side-pockets in the doors, a nice big glovebox in front of the passenger.

Knobs and heater controls right out of my dad's 1962 Falcon station wagon. The sight of them almost made me dizzy, like the strong aroma of perfume nearly forgotten from an early date in high school.

"What's this?" I said, pointing to a small toggle switch on the dash.

"I think it's for the electric radiator fan," Jacques said. "I just leave it on."

Tom pulled out the Falcon choke knob, turned the key and the 271-bhp Ford 289 V-8 whomped immediately to life in a mellow, loping cadence. I turned to Tom and grinned.

"Wonderful sound, isn't it?" he said. "Wait'll we get out on the road. This thing sounds like a Chris-Craft with underwater tailpipes."

Indeed it did. Road music.

As we moved into traffic, Tom tapped on the instrument panel and said, "No tach. I didn't have time to get it fixed." We pulled into a local gas station to fill up, and a mechanic who had done maintenance work on the Cobra came out and wished us luck on our trip. He also offered a final benediction: "If you have car trou-

ble," he said with mock solemnity, "may you have it far away from here."

Tom drove into the gathering snarl of rush-hour traffic on I-580, slowing to walking speed, with the temperature gauge crossing the 210 mark toward 220, but it never steamed or coughed up any water. A sign on a bank near the freeway said it was 96 degrees. The cockpit, with its thin layer of carpet, was plenty warm, but not shoe-melting hot.

Fifty miles down the road, the exhaust note suddenly got loud and obnoxious. Tom shook his head. "It's the front left gasket at the bottom of the exhaust header," he said. "It was blown out when I test drove the car two months ago and we had it replaced. I've got some spare gaskets in the glovebox."

We pulled off at 5-Star Muffler Express in Manteca, and a man came outside and glanced at the car. "MG, eh? I don't think we've got the tools to work on it."

"No, it's a Cobra," Tom said, "with a 289 Ford engine."

"Well, bring it in then and we'll take a look."

With the car up on the hoist, I had my first good look at the underside of a Cobra: four discs, independent rear suspension with fabricated steel lower A-arms, two big round chassis tubes with welded-on outriggers to support the body, the differential bolted into the rear box section that also supports the transverse leaf springs.

All very straightforward, neat and tidy. Rather elemental next to the E-Type chassis I'd just reassembled, but a little friendlier and simpler, with a reassuring heft to the components.

The mechanic pointed out that the threads on our lower manifold studs were in poor shape, so they couldn't snug the gasket down as tight as it should be. We decided to take our chances and drive on.

When we finally got off the busy four-lane roads, headed toward Yosemite, Tom pulled over to let me drive on our first open stretch of two-lane road with real curves.

All righty, then.

The first thing that strikes you about driving a Cobra is how "normal" it is. The clutch is moderate-to-light; the T-10 Borg-Warner gearbox moves through its gates with a pleasant, easy click; the unboosted 4-wheel Girling disc brakes are perfectly linear—they don't require heavy pressure, but the harder you push, the harder they stop. The steering is light and "natural." Devoid of quirks, it turns in nicely and unwinds with normal self-centering effort.

Ride, too, is surprisingly middle-of-the-road. Tom's car was not equipped with the optional factory anti-roll bar package, but stayed dead flat in corners, with tons of grip and remarkably civilized compliance over bumps and dips.

In short, there's nothing fussy, cranky or odd about the car. It would have answered all the 1960s' American expectations for how an automobile should operate—a set of standards that were quite highly developed by then. The only real hair-shirt aspect to the car is its Erector Set top and side curtains. Otherwise, it's like driving a Mustang with a lightweight English chassis, which you might expect.

Overall, I guess I was expecting more kit-car crudeness out of this rather quickly developed Anglo-American hybrid, but instead it's a car of considerable finesse and refined ergonomics. The people who joined the two halves of its soul knew what they were doing. There are no unsightly seams.

The other half of the Cobra's soul, of course, is the 289 Ford engine, the solid-lifter, 4-barrel K-Code version lifted right out of the High Performance Mustang.

It would be fun to say this engine provides stupefying levels of acceleration that make you bleed from the ear, but that would probably be more true of the 427 Cobra. The 289 is merely torquey, instantly responsive and very fast. Our R&T road test from June 1964 produced a 0-60 time of 6.6 seconds, a quarter mile of 14.0 sec. at 99.5 mph and a projected top speed of 139 mph at 6900 rpm in high gear.

The R&T test mentioned that you could achieve 60 mph in 1st gear and 100 mph in 3rd and said our first impression of the Cobra was "one of blinding acceleration in all gears," adding, "the passing ability of the car at any speed is nothing short of sensational."

And so it is; the 289 moves this 2170-lb. car away from a stop effortlessly, accelerates hard through the gears, providing a gratifying full body press into the seat leather and hits a satisfying rush of snarling speed at the top end. It flat gets up and moves, and use of the accelerator pedal makes you smile so much, you get a headache from grinning.

One of the nicest aspects of the engine is its tractability. You can almost idle through a town in 4th gear, but out on the highway it

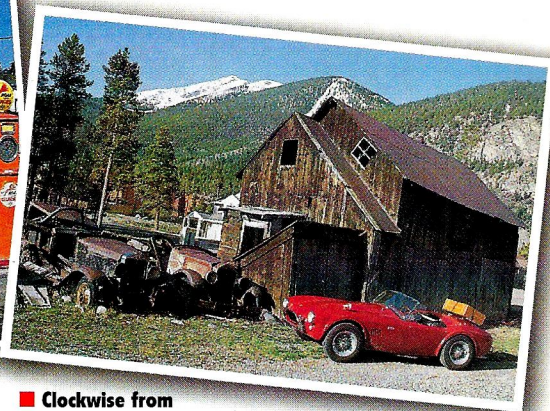


makes quick, effective passes around slower traffic with almost lazy indifference in the same gear. Uphill, downhill, it doesn't care.

Strangely, what the Cobra reminds me of most, in both its exhaust note at cruising speed and its solid, no-nonsense feel, is my friend Tony Buechler's P-51D Mustang fighter plane. Both are clean, uncluttered designs of surprising simplicity and great effectiveness, and both possess a quality of effortless performance with deep, untapped reserves. The P-51, of course, was an excellent American airframe with a great British engine, and the Cobra did it the other way around. Maybe we should combine our efforts more often.

We stopped for the night at Groveland, a historic 49er gold-mining town in the heart of Mark Twain and Bret Harte country, just north of Yosemite. We got a couple of rooms at the beautifully restored old Groveland Hotel, where the manager said our rooms would cost \$127 each, "but that includes breakfast."

I was tempted to say, "I can't eat that much," but held my piece. We were in big-time tourist country, after all. We had beers and buffalo burgers next door at the Iron Door Saloon, "the oldest saloon in California." We asked the bartender if he had any Cobra Malt Liquor, but he didn't. At the bar, a hard-drinking fellow in a cowboy hat told me his life's story at such length my brain suddenly became full and I had to leave.



Back at the room, my bed had two huge teddy bears on it, but since we have a good friend who collects teddy bears, I won't say anything more about that.

In the morning, we had hoped to motor over the Sierra Nevada through Yosemite's Tioga Pass, but the road was still closed with spring snow, so we had to backtrack and take Highway 108 through Sonora Pass (9628 ft.), a beautiful drive nevertheless. Perfect Cobra country. We drove with the top down and collars up in the cool morning mountain air.

At a gas stop, two guys skidded up in an old pickup truck and the driver hung out the door and said, "I gotta know: Is that a real one?"

"Yes," Tom said, "a '65."

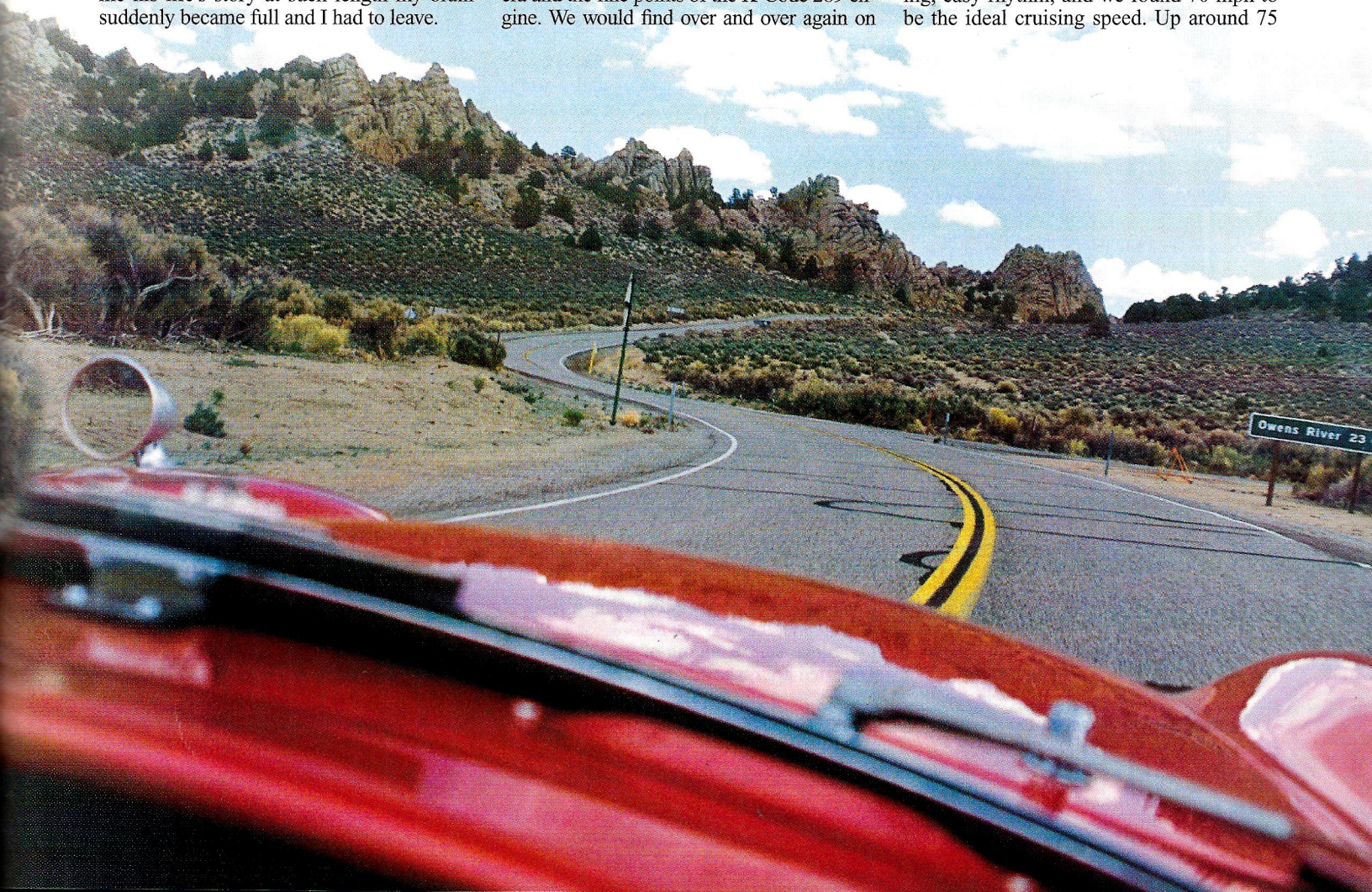
"Wow!" They leapt out and expounded with considerable expertise on the glories of Carroll Shelby, the Ford Total Performance era and the fine points of the K-Code 289 engine. We would find over and over again on

■ Clockwise from below: Distinctive rock formations near Mono Lake, California; vintage pumps at the first fill-up in Walnut Creek; and a view of the Rockies (and a couple of rusty Old Timers) in Colorado.

the trip that people either seemed to know everything about Cobras or nothing at all.

We would also be asked at least a hundred times if this was "a real one." The huge number of Cobra replicas out there has made people wary of expending their carefully cultivated stores of enthusiasm. Originality makes them beam with approval.

After cruising past the strange mineral formations of Mono Lake, we dropped down to Highway 6 to cross Nevada's basin and range country. Driving into a short rain shower, we got drenched, but the desert air dried us out in minutes. The car hammered across the desert with a soothing, easy rhythm, and we found 70 mph to be the ideal cruising speed. Up around 75





or 80, a slight imbalance in the front wheels caused a little steering-wheel shimmy and made things less serene.

We noticed the speedometer seemed somewhat pessimistic, so we timed ourselves between mile markers and discovered a 10-percent speedometer error. An indicated 70 mph was actually about 77, and so on. The engine was not terribly hectic at higher speeds (70 mph equals 3475 rpm, according to our old road test), but a 5th speed would have calmed things down nicely, and the torquey 289 could easily have pulled a lower numeric axle ratio than the 3.77 it uses. Still, if the Cobra is geared a little short, it's always ready to go, and rockets to 100 mph with a brief prod of the pedal.

Our exhaust manifold gasket blew out again that afternoon, and when we stopped in Ely for the night, Tom vowed to have it fixed properly. "We'll have to put new studs on the manifold flange," he said.

We got it repaired expertly the next morning at Carney Brothers Garage, just down the street from our motel. The garage was full of Briggs & Stratton-powered go karts and Junior Dragsters. A mechanic named Joe Mondragon removed the whole exhaust manifold and heated and replaced the studs. After that, no more problems.

One of the garage-owning brothers, Richard Carney, refused to charge us anything for the two-hour repair.

"You're crazy," Tom said.

"No," he replied, "I'm just a racer. Have a good trip."

We put in gas and drove, put in gas and drove. Drank bottled water and Gatorade, put in gas and drove. The sun was hot, and our bottled water quickly got warm enough to make tea. "Ahh, I love the taste of hot water on a sweltering desert afternoon," I said, quaffing the stuff with mock pleasure. "Also, this steaming hot Gatorade I found under the seat is excellent."

On nearly every fill-up, regardless of mountains or driving conditions, we got a little over 18 mpg. Tom occasionally added some lead substitute and octane booster. We could never sense any difference, but, with an 11.6:1 compression ratio, it made us feel good. The car didn't like midgrade fuel and pinged like a Jamaican steel drum band when we couldn't get 93-octane unleaded. Sometimes 93 wasn't so good, either. I'm sorry to say many of our nation's gas stations seem to have an octane honesty problem, and the Cobra's engine was a very effective lie detector.

We stayed the night in Roosevelt, Utah, then stopped at an antique shop in Craig, Colorado, the next day to look for a suitcase.

Since the beginning of the trip, Tom had wanted a vintage suitcase to put on the Cobra's original equipment luggage rack. This, incidentally, was shown on the original invoice, which also told us that Cobra

CSX 2490 was sold by Jack Loftus Ford, Hinsdale, Illinois, with a base price of \$5195 and a class A accessory package including luggage rack, white sidewall tires, a radio, anti-freeze and freight, for a total sticker price of \$5779.55.

Tom found an old brown Samsonite for \$11 and we put the car cover in it to free up some trunk space and strapped it on the rack with bungees.

"Great," Tom said, sliding behind the wheel, "now all we can see out the rearview mirror is the suitcase."

"Still, it looks good on there," I offered.

"And we can put stickers on it from our trip," Tom said.

We adjusted the Ray-Dot fender mirror so the driver could see over his left shoulder, and then headed up into the high Rockies, dropping down to the ski town of Frisco. We found rooms at the Frisco Lodge, a friendly little place where I once stayed on a ski trip to nearby Copper Mountain.

We had "dinner" at the bar of an excellent micro-brewery down the street and spent the evening compiling Top Ten Lists of our favorite cars, at dozens of different price levels.

The Cobra, of course, was Tom's Favorite Car of All Time.

I decided the Cobra was my third, after the D-Type Jaguar and the Aston Martin DBR-1. But I had already concluded that if I had to pick a favorite to actually drive on the street, it would be the Cobra. No contest.

In the morning mountain sun, we twisted our way down Highways 9 and 24 to Pikes Peak, passed through a brief snow shower, and drove almost to the top of the mountain—the last 1000 ft. were closed because of snow and mud. I climbed up on a ridge to take a picture of the car and my heart pounded so hard I wondered if I might be having a heart attack in the thin 13,000-ft. air.

I sat down for a minute and looked around at the snow-capped Rockies and out upon the Great Plains. You could do worse, I concluded, than die of a heart attack on Pikes Peak, delivered by Cobra.

We bought some suitcase stickers ("Real Men Don't Need Guardrails") in a gift shop and bumbled down the mountain. At a gas station near Colorado Springs, the cashier asked, "Is that a Turner?"

"No," Tom said, "it's a Cobra."

He stared at Tom blankly. "Is that made by Chevy?"

When we got in the car, Tom said, "How can a guy know about Turners, but not Cobras?"

"He's a rare bird," I said. "There can't be 49 people in all of America who have ever seen a Turner."

"And we're two of 'em. That leaves 47."

A few miles later our car stopped running. Right on a busy four-lane feeding into Colorado Springs. Hood up on the narrow shoulder, with semis skimming our fender paint.



We had spark, but no gas to the carburetor. We emptied out the trunk and checked the fuel pump. It looked like an American-made pump, but I smacked it with a wrench anyway, just in case it was English. Nothing. The fuses were okay too. We finally realized the mystery toggle switch on the dash was a fuel-pump switch. We'd bumped it while wiping some Pikes Peak dust off the dash.

I flicked the switch on and the fuel pump clicked like a set of castanets. "I love simple repairs," I said.

Speaking of accumulated dust, Tom had decided by this point in the trip that we would *not* wash the car on the way home, but let the grunge accumulate and wear the dirt as a badge of honor, an idea I also favored. He wanted to arrive in North Carolina with Pikes Peak mud on the fenders. "It's kind of fun to know you have the dirtiest Cobra in America," he said.

We blasted down onto the Great Plains, stopping for the night at Dodge City, Kansas. Home of Matt Dillon, Kitty, Doc and Chester. A nest of folklore close to my heart. *Guns* was a religion in our house. At least for my dad and me.

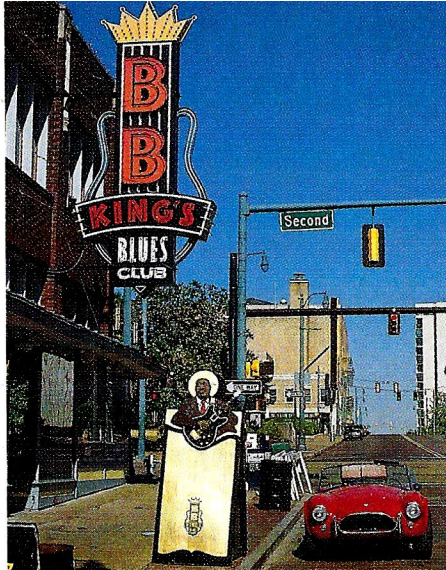
Crossing Kansas on Highway 160, we rolled down into the green hills of Oklahoma and into Arkansas, finally stopping for the night in Bentonville, world headquarters of Wal-Mart. Presumably a town with no Main Street merchants left, but very inexpensive soap and deodorant. Always a plus for two dusty guys in a hot Cobra.

Threading through the Ozarks on Highways 62, 9 and 14, we suddenly found ourselves descending out of the lush, twisting roads and hillbilly culture of the Ozarks onto the flat and fertile northern edge of the Mississippi Delta, that hot expanse of cotton and rice country that is the cradle of Blues and Rock 'n' Roll. From fiddles to slide guitar in just a few miles of travel.

Crossing the Mississippi at sunset, we found rooms at the famous old Peabody Hotel, then headed out on the legendary Beale Street for the evening. The place was jumping. We had some great gumbo at a small café and then heard Little Jimmy King (Albert King's grandson) at BB King's Club. Little Jimmy King, incidentally, is about 6 ft. 4 in., but I suppose he was little at some point in his life. In any case, he's a superb guitarist.

The next day we drove all the way across Tennessee on Highway 64, with a scenic detour into Lynchburg, home of Jack Daniel's, for a late lunch. It would have been nice to buy some Jack Daniel's in Lynchburg, like bringing holy water home from Lourdes, but the whole county around the distillery is dry. To take the Lourdes analogy one step further, this is like forbidding Catholicism in the vicinity of the Vatican. Apparently it makes sense to someone.

Nightfall found us in Ducktown, Ten-



■ BB King's Blues Club on Beale Street in Memphis; below, suitcase-sticker travelogue.

nessee, near the North Carolina border. Ducktown was also dry, despite its name, so we drove across the county line in a noble quest for the coveted but elusive King Cobra Malt Liquor. We found some at last in a liquor store and bought hamburgers at a Sonic drive-in, then feasted in my motel room and toasted Carroll Shelby with our plastic cups full of Cobra.

The last day was maybe the best of the trip. Top down across the Blue Ridge, sun shining and the forests greener than green. When you have a Cobra, North Carolina is a good place to come home to. It has some of the most stunningly beautiful roads in the U.S.

As we reverberated along under the canopy of green, Tom said, "I've wanted to do this all my life, to take a trip like this in a Cobra. But it was like a carrot on a stick that I could never reach. When they were \$5000, I was in high school and didn't have \$100. When Cobras went for \$20,000, I could afford about \$900 for a sports car. Ownership was something I never really thought I'd achieve."

I nodded. "There was about one month in my life," I said, "when I could have stretched my finances to the limit and bought one. It was when I got home from Vietnam in 1970 and had all my accu-

mulated combat pay. Cobras were relatively cheap, and I actually considered looking for one. But I decided to visit Europe, get married and finish college instead, so I bought a clapped-out \$600 Volkswagen."

As we drove along, I pondered that chain of events and realized I'd probably do it all over again, exactly the same way. A coveted car should never stunt your life, but should make it more rich and interesting. Tom had bought his Cobra at precisely the right time, when the pressure was off and there was nothing to tarnish the moment.

Tom had promised his son, Brian, that he would be home in time for his Tuesday night Little League game at 6 p.m. After nine days on the road, we pulled into the ballpark at 30 seconds after 6.

Tom shut off the engine and we sat in the car for a moment with the sound of the wind and the car resonating in our ears. We'd traveled 3161 miles (indicated) with only a few minutes of rain, and a couple of snow flurries near Pikes Peak. We'd never put the top up, nor even taken it out of the trunk to look at it. Perfect weather all the way across the U.S. Some kind of miracle.

A good thing, too, because the next night Tom and his wife, Pat, threw a party at their home and invited a bunch of sports-car friends over. We had a 427 Cobra, another 289 Cobra, an MGB-GT and a Bugeye Sprite in the driveway. Just for fun, we decided to put up the top, which had probably been folded and stored in the trunk for 20 years. When we tried to stretch it onto the frame, the seams fell apart from rotten thread.

A little while later it started to rain.

Timing, in cars and in weather and life, is everything. I felt that somewhere in his lifetime of hard work, hope and the love of charismatic machines, Tom had won either the karma or grace to give us a perfect trip. ☺

