

il **Quadrifoglio**



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The Soul of a Club

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The Soul of a Club

A stylized illustration of a road leading to a mountain peak. The road is dark with a yellow dashed line down the center. The mountains are purple and blue. The Alfa Romeo logo is prominently displayed on the peak, glowing with a starburst effect.

Alfa Romeo

As surely as there are gaggles of geese and prides of lions, there is a natural social instinct in man which leads him to want to join others of his kind. Pat Braden, Editor of the Alfa Owner Magazine, examines the urge as it applies to owners of Alfa Romeo automobiles.

The earliest meeting of American Alfa Romeo enthusiasts I know about was a pre-WW II gathering of East coast owners who got together occasionally at Frank Griswold's shop in New York to compare notes on their cars. I believe Ralph Stein mentioned the group in one of his automobile articles. The premiere event of this group occurred when Griswold took delivery of a brand new 8C2900 B from the factory and everybody flocked to see the car when it finally arrived at the port. It must have been quite a gathering, because the only other Alfas likely to have been there were the legendary six- and eight-cylinder masterpieces of the designer Vittorio Jano. These were fabulously expensive cars, with extensive alloy casting and the very latest in technical design. I can best describe their cost by saying that an Alfa purchaser in the 1930s with cash in hand could choose between buying an Alfa or a house.

The cost of these exotic cars helps explain the need for getting together, and the American Alfa Romeo Owners Club arose out of a combination of pride of ownership and the need for technical information to assure the investment was properly cared for. Both needs are still the foundation of the Alfa club.

I've helped promulgate the idea that the American Alfa Romeo Owners Club grew up in Chicago. This is an opportunity to recant, and clarify the record a bit. In fact, there were two Alfa clubs in the mid-West in the late '50s, the older one being a group in Detroit. The Detroit group clustered around several Alfa dealerships in those early years, primarily Falvey motors in the Detroit area, Brooks Motors in Lansing, Michigan and Chuck Stoddard's dealership outside Cleveland, Ohio. The Detroit group eventually affiliated itself with the Chicago club. The story of the Chicago group's growth into the national organization of Alfa owners is well known, so I won't repeat it here.

I do need to observe, however, that the National organization is a kind of parent, helping local chapters fill the needs of their members. It offers a regular monthly magazine which provides technical and topical information about Alfas as well as



An Alfa/Porsche owners clubs "joint" solo event at Orange Airport, Orange, MA. October, 1983.



Alfa Club Boston to Cape Cod Tour. July, 1984

ALFA ROMEO EUROPEAN DELIVERY PROGRAM

UPDATE

Since our announcement in the Winter '84 edition of 11 Quadrifoglio, we are pleased to report that the response to the program has been very exciting. In addition to the hassle-free "Ambassador" service arranged for you when you arrive in Frankfurt, we have developed a series of tours to take you through Europe in your new Alfa.

Convenient drop-off points have been finalized with the leading shipping agent in Europe who will get your vehicle back to you shortly after you arrive home.

As a special part of the program, Alfa Owners Club members can put together a "New Car Caravan" for a unique tour of Europe ending in Milano with a visit to the Alfa museum. All that is required is a minimum of 5 members purchasing their new Alfas for European delivery.

For further details contact:

Alfa Romeo European Delivery Department
250 Sylvan Avenue
Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 07632
or
Your Local Alfa Romeo Dealer

operating as a national resource for cars and parts. The national publication also helps promote individual efforts such as the (almost) annual trip to Italy initiated by Fred DiMatteo of the New England chapter.

In contrast to the annual national meeting, local chapters meet typically once a month. The activities of the local chapters are totally a function of what the members like best, and show the true pulse of the club.

Gaining technical information is certainly one of the major reasons for Alfa club membership. The Giulietta brought Alfa ownership to people who could never before have afforded the marque. The earliest American purchasers of Giuliettas were attracted by the technical details of the car, as well as its lovely Italian styling. The flocking instinct served a very essential purpose for these early purchasers. There was no real dealer organization, parts were occasionally difficult to find and the cars had enough individual character that some instruction was necessary before the owner could realize the full potential of the machinery.

We were fond, in the late '50s, of saying that the Alfa wasn't idiot-proof like American cars. You could break a Giulietta if you didn't treat it right, therefore there were real reasons for learning all you could about the nature of the car. There was some trepidation of driving a car at a steady 4000 rpm, some awkwardness in getting a Veloce underway without stalling the engine, which really didn't wake up until about 3500 rpm, and a good deal of concern on how best to start the cars in the winter cold. Modern Alfas are not quite so demanding of their owners, of course, but they still demand attention, and Alfa clubs help ensure that the attention paid is the right kind.

Many local clubs include some "tech session" events which usually involve the dismantling of an Alfa engine, transmission or accessory. Fewer and fewer Alfa owners are performing their own maintenance, for as cars become more complex, the investment in special tools becomes a real challenge. Nevertheless, working on one's own car is both satisfying and rewarding—pro-

viding it still runs when you've finished. Again, members in the club range from those who have never changed a spark plug to those whose engines develop, perhaps, double the horsepower of the stock version, the result of secrets which may be hinted at but never fully divulged.

The growing popularity of Alfa in the United States has solved many of the parts distribution and technical problems of the earlier years, but there still remain numerous attractions to club membership.

A properly prepared and driven Alfa is one of the joys of life, and that aspect of ownership explains another reason for Alfa owners to get together. The distillation of the appeal is the current *Mille Miglia*, where proud owners can gather and show the object of their pride to each other as well as onlookers. It is not a weak passion we speak of: several West-coast Alfa owners fly their cars to the *Mille Miglia* each year to participate. Their cars are worth tens of thousands of dollars and the transportation costs range in the thousands of dollars. No one doubts that the pleasure is worth the cost.

Alfa owners like driving fast, and the Club offers the best opportunity to do so in absolutely legal style. I think occasionally how much fun it must have been in the 1930s for a Connecticut owner to drive his 6C1750 or 8C2300 into "town" at speeds which doubled the best that most American cars of the era could offer. I once owned an 8C2300 which was used, legend has it, to crash the Hungarian border after the war. Even in the 1950's there were few cars capable of bettering the speed of that 1932 Alfa Romeo.

The major speed event of the Alfa Romeo Owners Club coincides with its annual meeting. A proper nearby race track is a tradition, and one day of the convention is given over to circulating the track at whatever speed the driver can manage. Many owners come with little more than minimal high-speed protection: helmets are mandatory on the track. Others trailer cars which could never legally touch a public street.

But Alfa club members can test their skills with their cars more frequently than once a year. Local clubs



help owners participate in all levels of racing and frequently put on their own events at local tracks. In addition, they sponsor parking-lot events where absolute speeds are modest but driving skills are fully tested. These events require the driver to navigate a very short and twisting course without knocking down the pylons which line his way. These events are not just for dilettants, and occasionally drivers will enter these trials with a preparation and determination more appropriate for an international grand prix.

Another event typically sponsored by local clubs is the rally. This is not supposed to be a speed event since it takes place on public roads. It is supposed to provide a leisurely tour through lovely countryside. Success in the event depends on participants arriving at exactly the right point at the right time. One must always drive at the specified speed, following a specified course. And not get lost: there's the rub, for if you should get lost, the time/speed equation is considerably upset. For the beginner, it's best to forget about maintaining an average speed and simply concentrate on not getting lost. Those who are very experienced at rallying show up with portable computers, a clipboard covered with stopwatches and grim determination.

There is considerably more drama in a rally than the rules might



suggest. I have personally found rallying to be the acid test of a marriage relationship, and thus gave it up after the first try which ended with my wife crying quietly in the navigator's seat: a missed turn can take on major proportions in a rally, and reveal weaknesses in a marriage never before encountered. The popular "marriage encounter" session would probably be improved if it were simply a two-day rally.

Many chapters are very active socially. Events may range from block-purchases of seats at racing events to parties at which Alfas are (almost) never mentioned. When club members go to races, they do so in swarms of brightly polished Alfas, much to the envy of owners of lesser cars. And the Alfa car-park is sure to be a mandatory stop for all those not glued to the side of the track.

Purely social events take the form of annual Christmas parties, Halloween parties or summer picnics. The social events are successful because Alfa owners tend to be a homogeneous group. The age range of Alfa ownership is surprisingly large, but all members tend to cluster around a single personality type: somewhat compulsive about Alfa ownership, refined in their tastes, willing to share information, generally outgoing and not at all status conscious.

Social events are a godsend for the "Alfa Widow" who loses her hus-



band each weekend to the garage or track. The events are genuine family affairs at which children and spouses are expected. In passing, I can also observe that the gender of the enthusiast is not always masculine: the number of Alfa "widowers" is growing.

It is a curious fact that Alfa owners are not so elitist as the owners of some other marques. I won't be more specific, but some marque clubs have a distinct snob appeal which they foster. There's none of that in any Alfa chapter I've ever attended.

It's surprising how few Alfa owners belong to the club. Many, who dismiss membership because they aren't "joiners", are left to search for their own technical information or source of specialty parts. The same non-joiners also have to do their own research for the best places for repair.

Alfa dealerships frequently sponsor chapters of the club by providing a meeting room and, occasionally, refreshments and other pleasantries. Many dealerships and parts suppliers offer discounts to club members. There has been a conscious effort on the part of the club and the American distributor to form a synergistic relationship, for both groups can benefit by working closely together. Both realize that membership in the club is a happy facet of Alfa ownership.

Pat Braden

Photography: E.C. Ritvo

