

# ESCAPE ROAD

## Those little blue Simcas

*A generation after they raced, their fame is enduring*

By Roger Barlow

**A**re you the Roger Barlow who drove those little blue Simcas?"

That was the question put to me by a pair of scruffy, smelly, unshaven characters as I introduced myself after exiting the bush plane that had just brought me and my movie equipment to the banks of the Slave River near the Arctic Circle.

The question was also put to me in the South Pacific. I was there with Lowell Thomas to make a program dealing with the Geophysical Year and the launching of rockets to monitor the total eclipse of the sun for the *High Adventure* series on CBS. We had just lumbered in from Fiji to Pago Pago on a leased DC-4 with a ton of our gear. Lowell Thomas had introduced all of us to the man who ran the Pan Am air strip there. Then, as we were making our way down the ramp, the Pan Am rep did a sort of double take and started back towards me saying, "Good God, are you the Roger Barlow who raced those little blue Simcas?"

Those "Little Blue Simcas" hadn't been raced since 1951-53 and now, six or seven years later, they were still apparently remembered from the Arctic Circle to Pago Pago! In 1985, at a VW press gathering at the Watergate in Washington, a fellow journalist looked at my name badge and again uttered those heart-warming words, "Are you the Barlow who raced those little blue Simcas? I grew up in South Africa reading about you and those cars in *Road & Track*...my boyhood heroes!"

So what made those little blue cars so memorable? There were other far more famous marques—Cad Allards, MGs, XK120 Jaguars, Cunninghams, a host of Ford V8 specials, a few Porsches and even a Ferrari or two—racing in California Sports Car Club and SCCA events at Palm Springs, Pebble Beach, Golden Gate, Watkins Glen, Elhart Lake and other tracks.

The Simcas (the first one raced in 1951, the second was added in 1952) were petite and pretty and our modest *equipe* was neatly turned out in French racing blue coveralls (with those elegant white bird insignias embroidered by Mrs. B) at a time when most drivers and crews were appearing in greasy

T-shirts and blue jeans. Only Jim Kimberly's Ferrari team then sported real Pirelli racing coveralls.

What may have earned the Simcas such admiration and affection was that they were cheeky underdogs. Not purebred, expensive, pedigreed machines but ingratiating automotive mutts...standard Fiat 1100 en-

having an engine that could be tuned reliably to develop sufficient power to win, we reduced the weight of our car and left the engine pretty well alone, other than polishing ports, upping the compression just a tad and fitting an Abarth manifold with a pair of Webers.

Standard TC and TD MGs weighed about 1800-2000 pounds, special bodied ones were still 1300-1600 pounds. My first Simca weighed exactly 1112 pounds empty, the second only 1050; so even with only about 60 hp they easily outperformed the entire MG contingent, blown or unblown, and out-accelerated XK120s to 80 mph. Equally important, our light weight meant light work for the standard Simca brakes which were exceptionally effective to start

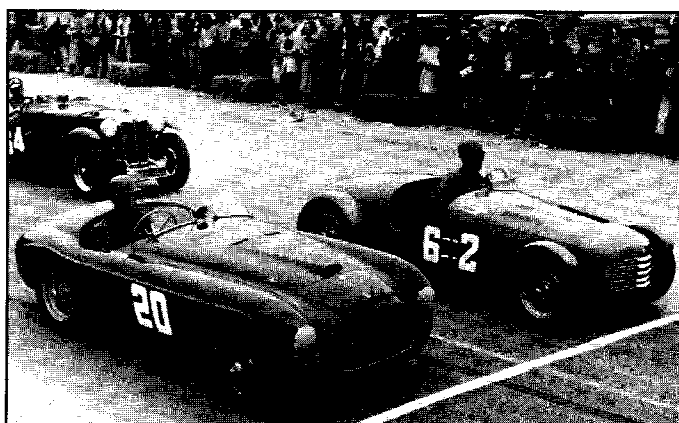
with, having Alfin drums which never overheated no matter how hard they were used. These brakes allowed me to drive appreciably deeper into a corner than any other cars on the course and were probably worth at least 15 hp. This gave us the winning edge over our competition with their cast iron drums that overheated and faded so badly after a few laps as to be almost useless. No matter how hard I used mine they not only lasted for an entire race but we ran the *entire season* on the same linings and could probably have used them for much of the next year!

Both Simcas had absolutely viceless handling, making it easy for me to look good in the asphalt corners of Elkhart Lake or on the dirt at Carrell Speedway—full throttle in third with the tail hung out all through the turns at each end.

At the wheel of these easy-to-drive cars I was high point driver in the under 1500cc class in 1951 and again in 1952 when, along with Phil Hill in the over 1500cc division, they earned me a Golden Steering Wheel Award. No one ever had more racing fun or success for less money: Each, including the aluminum body, cost less than \$4400.

After 35 years I still dream of again being at the wheel of one of them at some race. Maybe St. Peter will look up from his book at the Pearly Gates and say, "Good Lord, are you the Roger Barlow who drove those pretty blue Simcas?" Then if one is parked just inside on the street of gold, I'll know there's really a motorist's paradise.

So I better not lie about being famous from the Arctic Circle to Pago Pago. It turned out that the Pan Am man there used to live in Long Beach and saw the Simcas run at Palm Springs. The scruffy characters along the Slave River were photographers from Vancouver who had seen them at Pebble Beach and Golden Gate Park! ■



1951 Barlow-Simca (on the right) in its first appearance shared fourth row on Pebble Beach grid with Jim Kimberly's 2.0 liter Ferrari (left)

Roger Barlow photo

gine and chassis to start with, assembled in France from mainly Italian parts, bodied in California by Emil Diedt (bodymaker of Indycars) to a design jointly mine and Murray Nichols' and tuned by that lovable, unflappable Aussie, Bill Pringle.

But, I suppose, mainly it was because they won. Not only were they usually first in the 1500cc division, but very often they finished within the first five places in the over 1500cc class as well, beating out many XK120s, Allards, various Ford V8 specials and supercharged MGs. In 1951 my first Simca, after being completed just in time and driven the 350 miles from Hollywood to Pebble Beach the night before, shared row four with Jim Kimberly by virtue of qualifying 1.03 seconds faster than he did in his 2.0 liter Ferrari! This first time out we not only won the 1500cc class (with 1200cc) but finished fourth overall. In 1952 my second Simca was an even better performer. We were a David regularly hesting two to six liter automotive Goliaths. A little 'un beating a big 'un is a sure way to win the affection of the crowd, in whatever sport.

How did we do it with appreciably less power than the standard MG? Insofar as we could, we followed the path blazed by Amadeo Gordini with Simcas in France. Not