

# Starved Rock... or Bust!

By David Mathews

Photos by Wally Wright and Richard Sjolund

**O**minous. Threatening. Foreboding. Oh Boy... you're gonna get drenched!

The weather forecast for the Midwest 356 Club's annual spring driving tour on Saturday, May 18, was all of that and then some. Because the forecast was the long-range, official, weather.com prognostication and not some spur-of-the-moment, shoot-from-the-hip guesstimate, it provided five full days to worry, procrastinate, think of excuses... or to buy an extra bottle of Rain-X and hope for the best. By late Friday afternoon, I decided to damn the torpedoes and proceed with fingers crossed and rain jacket tossed onto the jump seat behind me, just in case.

Ed Leed and Eric Smith, both stalwart members of the Midwest 356 Club, had invited me to join their group on this excursion a couple of weeks before. Eager to enjoy some miles behind the wheel of my new-to-me, Ruby Red T5 cabriolet, I jumped at the chance. Of course I was somewhat apprehensive to undertake such a long journey in a 60-year old car driven sparingly by its former owner the past few decades, but, you know... I was eager.

A day or two after I brought Ruby home, I drove it over to Mark Eskuche's race shop, Ecurie Engineering, for a quick once-over. After driving Ruby a couple of miles, he pronounced her healthy but in need of a brake caliper rebuild and clutch adjustment. Fortunately, he would squeeze it in for repairs before the 18th. Mark is a good friend.

Knowing that Ruby would now start on command, run like the wind when I pressed the accelerator pedal, shift when I engaged the clutch pedal, and stop when I pushed that last remaining pedal down there, she and I were ready for our 400-mile bonding experience and successful integration with the Midwest 356 crew. I hoped.

Saturday. Overcast. Drizzly. As my luck would have it, the weather forecast was 100-percent correct. The one bright spot was that Channahon State Park, the rendezvous and starting point for the Spring Drive, was supposed to be sunny and warm. The park is adjacent to Lock Six of the historic Illinois-Michigan Canal, 150 miles or so south of Milwaukee. With a kiss from my wife (and a shake of her head), I drove down our driveway, windshield wipers slapping, and headed south into a misty rain and a new adventure.



The author's Ruby Red T5 cabriolet.



Richard Sjolund (L) clarifies driving instructions, while Bill Lee and Cheryl Lee appear skeptical.





My trip took longer than I anticipated. A phenomenon occurs after traveling in a modern vehicle for a period of time—that of getting used to those modern conveniences, particularly electronic ones. My T5 was not equipped with SiriusXM radio, nor GPS for path plotting. The cigar lighter worked, but because of Ruby's vintage six-volt electrical system, the power socket was useless to me other than to ignite an occasional cigar.

In preparation for my trip, I Google-mapped a backroads route, the printout of which was difficult to read when puttering along at 45 mph. And even more difficult to understand. I struggled to figure out how far I'd come and how much farther I had to go. Road construction, detours, and lawn service guys in their beat-up pick-up trucks created further distractions.

Finally, after concluding that I had no earthly idea where I was supposed to go on this scenic route and, more to the point, when I was gonna reach Channahon, I threw pages of line-by-line instructions into the jump seat behind me (atop my rain gear) grabbed my cell phone, entered my destination, put the phone on speaker, rested it on my right thigh, and headed to the nearest toll road.

This was a bit unnerving. Huge semis added to my angst. Seventy-five-foot-long tractor trailers motoring along at 80 mph created rollicking turbulence for my old car, and gastrointestinal discomfort to me. There is something to be said for the adage, "Old cars belong on back roads." But throwing caution to the wind, I journeyed on. Time was of the essence.

I arrived at the pre-drive, instructional/cautionary briefing only five minutes late. Immediately I knew my drive was worth it. Thirteen

tubs in the parking lot—60-year-old Porsches ready for some vigorous road work. Tom Funk, who with Eric Smith planned and designed the 2019 Spring Drive, contributed to the confidence of this group. "I knew most of those drivers," said Funk. "I talked up the drive and assured them that if something happened along the way, the club had the resources/references to help. Our goal at my shop was to make those cars run beautifully, so the owners had confidence on a drive like that."

And the weather? Glorious. Sunny. Warm. It was time to lower the top and button down the boot of my T5. A time to nod hello to old friends. To smile at new friends. To be grateful for driving great cars on great roads with great people.

Eric did a super job of explaining what we were to expect, and what was expected of us. The I&M Canal area is the go-to place for local car clubs, motorcycle clubs, and families in minivans. The terrain features rolling hills, elevation changes, and beautiful scenery. Completed in 1848, according to the Encyclopedia of Chicago, "... the Illinois & Michigan Canal joined the Chicago River at Bridgeport near Chicago with the Illinois River at LaSalle, 96 miles distant. The canal provided a direct water link between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River, and help to shift the center of Midwestern trade from St. Louis to Chicago."

We sauntered over to the lock. We "ooh'd" and "aah'd." We checked our phones. We lined up along a side road. We tightened our seatbelts. And we were off. The next stop—Lock Seven.

That 15-minute stop provided the first real opportunity to meet some other members—Pamela Brundage with her PCA National Concours-winning 1962 B Super 90; Curt Crowell and his 1964 C coupe, for which he spent an astronomical \$800 in 1982; and the newest participant,





Clockwise from top: A bevy of Bavarian beauties at Five Mile Bridge. Members enjoying lunch and conversation while weathering the storm. Completed in 1848, the I&M Canal allowed commerce to flow between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River, one lock at a time.





Radar confirms the obvious.



Club photographer Wally Wright, on the glamorous side of the camera lens.

Jason Kick, who drove his Guards Red 911 Cabriolet because his 1961 B Super 90 coupe was currently under renovation. Jason explained, “I bought [it] about a year ago. A decent driver, it looked pretty good from ten feet away. I took it upon myself to strip it to bare metal and repaint it. It’s been quite an undertaking. I’m kind of going for the Outlaw look.”

The rest of the 50-mile drive to Starved Rock State Park was just as exhilarating as the first five. Tom and Eric’s route led us through wooded glens, over truss bridges, past turn-of-the-century Gingerbread homes, around sweeping turns, and down 5,000-rpm straights. Satellite radio? Who needed it?

But, as bad luck would have it, good things ground to an end. Dark clouds rose front of me, and to the north of me, and the direction into which I had 180 miles to go to get home. A thunderstorm was imminent.

**T**he Midwest 356 Club was formed in 2004 by enthusiasts interested in getting more from their 356 experience.” This succinct description from the club’s website captures its reason for being. When asked why he and a few other enthusiasts created the club, charter member Tom Funk responded quickly.

“Having [a 356] is driving,” Tom explained that most of the “found-ing fathers” of the Midwest 356 Club were members of PCA. Many still hold dual membership. But as other Porsche models grew bigger, more powerful, and faster, 356 owners were literally left in the dust. A desire to maintain camaraderie with like-minded owners, and to continue with events that were 356-friendly and model specific, drove their effort to branch off... to do their own thing.

The Midwest 356 Club is active year-round, with social events, tech sessions, road trips, and driving events like their recent Spring Drive. Although the club does its own thing locally, be it with multi-marque concours or popular Cars and Coffee shine and shows, many members attend national 356 Registry Holidays and integrate with PCA at local and national events.

Based in Chicago, Midwest 356 members come from Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Its membership represents all demographics, all socio-economic groups, and a wide variety of style preferences, from classic concours contenders to the modified Outlaw types.

To a person, all of the members share the same philosophy about their club. The cars brought them together, but members keep the club together. The following comments are representative:

As much as I hated to cut my day short, I pulled up, latched the roof, rolled up the windows, and changed direction. Not a moment too soon. Rain came in biblical proportions. Lightning flashed; thunder clapped. I fully expected to see Noah and his ark... that was if Rain-X and my wipers could have cleared the deluge from my windshield. And, of course, the windshield fogged up instantly, the remedy to which was a cotton cloth I’d stuffed in the door pocket.

One may conclude that this initial trip, my maiden voyage as it were, with my T5 would dissuade me from another long-range adventure. That I should stick to neighborhood show and shines. That I shouldn’t venture out of the city limits. Nope. My admiration for the model grew with each mile. I’ve owned many cars and sold most of them. My T5 is a keeper. **356**

**Eric Smith**, Midwest 356 Club President: “The social aspect is a big part of our club. Our club calendar shows frequent breakfast meetings that generally bring 30 or so people to the table. Most of our members are men, but there are several women in the club who actively participate in all of our activities.”

**Curt Crowell**, a PCA member as well as one of the earliest members of Midwest 356: “I enjoy the camaraderie of the club. We have the same interests. Ultimately, what ties you together is the commonality of the cars along with the personality of the people. You get to know them. The social aspect is very important.”

**Jason Kick**: “To see that many 356s in one place was a unique experience. The route Tom and Eric put together was special. I go to Starved Rock about once a year and always wanted to drive one of my Porsches through the twisties and the hills. When I heard the club was going there, I thought, ‘Wow... it doesn’t get better than that.’ It was great to see all the members who still had the passion and were not afraid to drive their cars. It was awesome.”

Jason went a little further, adding, “I hope the next generation appreciates these cars like we do and will continue the legacy. Hopefully, I can help with that effort.”

**Tom Funk**, charter member and owner of 356 Works in Glenview, Illinois: “Back around 2004, we were just a bunch of guys, limping along with this 356 club idea. Some of us thought we could use more organization, so we called the Porsche 356 Registry office and got some good advice. Along with the help and hard work of some really good guys, we got this club going.”