Morgan Make-Over

by Lee Harman

So OK, I admit that our 1956 Plus Four Morgan is…(how shall I say?)…Not Stock. From the Harley Davidson Eyebrows, the Nelson dual through-the-cowl K+N filters, to the Harman chrome disc wheels, our Mog of 27 years is no thoroughbred.

It should come, then, as no surprise that this is especially true where the engine is concerned. And a runner she has always been until the demise of High Octane Gasoline. Put together in the heyday of octane rich gas, the milled TR4 head, ported and polished intakes and exhausts, headers and "a bit of a cam" all made the car a real goer….until 96 octane gas went away. Then 94. Now, 92. Away went the performance no matter the timing adjustments. Running hard and fast became a frustrating, pinging, third gear exercise to keep up with the pack. Many times I wondered how long the motor could take the beating.

Then came the most amazing transformation I've experienced in my Morganeering years…electronic, cockpit adjustable timing control. Here's the story.

Last year's Caboose Run found several of us enjoying Kay's adventuresome curvy roads to Colville. A really fun, fast trip. Bill Button and I discussed our pinging, low power trip, and discussed timing adjustments made from the cockpit. I wondered if a mechanical advance attached to the distributor advance/retard knob would work. Professor Bill came up with The Better Mousetrap in the form of MSD 6A Ignition Boost (part number 6200) and MSD Adjustable Spark Timing Control (part number 8680). Both are available via NAPA or other fine parts stores. Takes a couple of evenings to install and costs about $350.00, U.S. Wild Bill came to VanDusen absolutely raving about his car's changed performance AND boasted about driving to the show on 87 (YES, 87!) octane gas. Remembering last year's Caboose performance of our two Plus Fours, "Preposterous" crossed my mind. Out of desperation, with fingers crossed, I followed Bill's lead, bought the parts and, well, the results were astounding.

Finishing the install on the eve of this year's fabulous Caboose Run, I headed up the closest hill around, selected fourth gear until pinging began. Dialed back (retarded) the cockpit mounted timing control from full advance of 15 degrees to 13.5. Instantly, no ping and increased power. The next day, pulled Washington Pass hill (well, all hills in the North Cascades route) in fourth, full of power, sans pinging. Fueled 7 gallons worth of 87 octane in Winthrop and experienced pinging in fourth gear at 40 mph on the way out of town. Dialed the control to 11.5: no pinging and return of power. More 87 octane at Soap Lake (now about 80% mixture of 87 and 92 octane). More pinging during 40 mph, fourth gear acceleration. Remedied by again retarding the timing, this time to 10 degrees. Blasted through the hills towards the Caboose, only slowed by wife Judy's admonitions to "slow down!"

After Kay and Theresa's fine holiday, I filled up and was now burning pure 87 octane. The settings dropped back to 9 degrees, where I experienced continued performance and no detonation problems all the way back through the Cascades. Interestingly, as we descended out of the mountains, pinging returned requiring a further two adjustments, ending at 6 degrees. At this setting burning 87 octane gas at essentially sea level, performance was better than burning 92 octane without the MSD devices. Averaged 25.5 mpg. The car is absolutely changed and I haven't "tweaked" the system yet. For instance, with the mandatory spark booster, you're asked to sequentially check performance while increasing spark plug gap 5 thousandths at a time up to a max gap of 50 thousandths. Can't wait to try that simple mod. The MSD system was easy to install and works from either points or electronic ignition setups. All connecting parts and instructions were supplied and the equipment mounted nicely on the scuttle box.

So my hat's off to Kay and Theresa for finding such terrific routes to their secret Caboose hideaway. Don't miss it next year. And my hat's off to Billy Button for solving long-standing detonation problems for me. It's truly a remarkable improvement.