

A RACE AGAINST TIME



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RHODKA FAMILY

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RICHARD BRADY

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PROJECT 1320 ATTEMPTS TO CAPTURE THE MEMORIES

BY STEVE COLE

It was 1945 and 1946 as GIs, sailors, airmen and Marines came back from the “Big One”—World War II. They were full of plans and dreams to return to the civilian life they had left behind and trying some of the new ideals and skills they had picked up in the service. For many of them, one of those dreams was to get behind the wheel of the car they had left in the driveway when they went to war.

It often included getting their hands on the speed parts they heard about from the West Coast guys...the guys from southern California who took their “hot rods” out to the dry lakes—Muroc, El Mirage, Harper, Rosamond—to test their equipment and tuning skills against the others and the clock. Of course, the war put a stop to that, but the passion these southern California guys had for their cars and speed had spread like a virus among the like-thinkers from other regions of the country.

However, there were few places in the country that had the natural flat, smooth surfaces that the dry lakes afforded the SoCal guys, and the next best place, of course, was the street—much to the dismay of the not-so-understanding public and police.

While the public and the police forces were against this outlaw behavior, the street racing continued and the negative feelings continued to increase against the trend. In California, one individual, Wally Parks, a soft-spoken Oklahoma transplant, was running the renowned Southern California Timing Association (SCTA), and was

A Before the famed four door “Tijuana Taxi” Maverick came the Gapp & Roush Pro Stock Ford Pinto. Jack pulls the wheels out of the lights at the 1973 Popular Hot Rodding Nationals.

B Before the Christmas Tree, flagmen sent cars up the track. Here a Willys gasser leaves under the watchful eye of the flagman at Dragway 42, West Salem, Ohio.

C Tom “The Mongoose” McEwen fries the hides on his Mattel Hot Wheels/Coca-Cola/Carefree Gum-backed Plymouth Duster Funny Car at the 1973 U.S. Nationals.

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DON EWALD

PROJECT 1320



Racers often turned into successful manufacturers, and among the most well-known were the Hrudka Brothers—Tom and Joe—who founded Mr. Gasket. Here Tom hikes the front of their well-known red '41 Willys gasser at Dragway 42.



How do you describe a Fuel Altered? Nasty, violent, colorful, short wheel based cars with evil intentions. In the minds of many, fuel altered driven by colorful characters such as Wild Willy Borsch were what defined the sport in the late '60s and early 70s, as even burnouts were their own unique and sometimes dangerous shows.



Gassers were fan favorites—small cars, V8 engines in all sizes and configurations. Here Gene Altizer in the famed S&S Racing Team's Anglia A/Gasser is on the charge.

growing concerned about the street-racing problem. When Parks became editor of Hot Rod in the early 1950s, it gave him a pulpit to preach about his ideas to control street racing.

At the same time, the Santa Ana Drags were getting underway at an underused airfield, and the dry lakes crowd found new excitement, close to home, as did street racers with pairs of cars facing off against each other and the clocks. Parks had found his "vehicle" to bring the cars off the street and onto the drag strip. By 1951, he had formed the Na-

tional Hot Rod Association, and held the first sanctioned NHRA event at the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds parking lot in 1953, and the first "Nationals" at Great Bend, Kansas.

Fast forward to 2010...55 years have passed since the first National event, 59 years from the NHRA's formation and 60 since the first drag strip began operation in Santa Ana. Thousands of racers have made millions of passes toward the finish line, and millions of time slips marked their efforts. Some achieved greatness, others modest fame, while many others raced in obscurity.

Still others used their mechanical abilities to create new and/or improved products and moved them into the market to become businessmen—in turn leading to the performance automotive aftermarket, and the formation of SEMA (Speed Equipment Manufacturer's Association, now the Specialty Equipment Market Association).

However, as the sport moved the performance yardstick forward, the focus became the here and now, and the memories of those who blazed the trail with performance, ideas and products grew dimmer. Some of the pioneers were lost in tragedies on the track, while others passed on from non-racing accidents or natural causes. Their passing has been marked in the media (and in current times on the Internet as well).

As the surviving number of the pioneers who were there at or near the beginning of the sport (and the industry) dwindles, it has become clear there is a need for an attempt to collect the historic viewpoints of these men and women, on film and preserve the sense of the "who, what, why, when, where and how" of the growth of the sport over the decades.

This belief came into focus at a table during the 2009 International Drag Racing Hall of Fame induction dinner in Gainesville, Fla., when several industry and racing luminaries—Linda Vaughn, Traci Hrudka (daughter of Mr. Gasket co-founder Tom Hrudka), Harry Hibler, Carl Olson, Sid Waterman, Bruce Larson and Don Garlits—began the discussion of why little had been done to tell this story. After they went home, Ms. Hrudka decided to begin the push to bring the discussion to reality.

The reality took form as PROJECT 1320 and the Quarter Mile Entertainment Foundation, with the goal to preserve the history of the sport and performance aftermarket industry, using a documentary film series as the vehicle to accomplish it. To assist in planning and the execution of the daunting task, Traci began by approaching several people she knew had a passion for the history of the sport and the industry, as well as a long-term connection to one or both.



George Bolthoff with his blown Chrysler-powered AA/GD gas dragster looks to the finish line. Note the stop-light (upper center) used to start the cars.

Within a month following the induction dinner in March, the Quarter Mile Entertainment Foundation (QMEF) had been launched, and the concept of PROJECT 1320 was laid out. The focus would be to interview the surviving legends and get the stories about the growth of this uniquely American sport in a digital format. The group to be interviewed would encompass racers, performance parts manufacturers, track owners, journalists, photographers, sponsors, automaker motorsports executives, as well as key surviving members of the sanctioning bodies.

The interviews would form the core of a 25-episode documentary series designed for cable television, and would define how a group of non-conformist guys (and gals) would transition from a dare-devil, devil-may-care image (from the general public and media's point of view) to a highly popular motorsport which would eventually embrace over 100,000 participants. It would also showcase how American (and Canadian) ingenuity to build the proverbial better mouse trap led to the formation of an industry that generates, according to the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) in excess of \$40 billion annually.

So, why a documentary? Hasn't the sport seen many websites and books, plus magazines devoted to the sport develop over the years?

Says QMEF Chairman, Traci Hrudka, "There have been many magazines and websites, and even museums that are dedicated to drag racing, and they are important to the sport. However, there has not been an effort to examine the sport from many different angles and do so in an educational and entertaining fashion.

"There have been efforts to gain the first person narratives from the



RICHARD BRADY

A tough opponent in the early Pro Stock days was Don Carlton with the Motown Missile Mopars. Here the "Missile" launches hard at the 1973 Popular Hot Rodding Nationals at U.S. 131, Martin, Michigan.

pioneers of the sport and the industry, but aside from SEMA's own efforts to archive the industry's history, none of other efforts have been driven by people from within the sport and the aftermarket," Hrudka added.

"There are two very critical reasons for the effort.

"First, we must preserve our heritage. We have seen several documentaries about World War II, as well as other sports, which have interviewed those who were on the front lines, and the legends of the sport. These gave us the perspective of 'reality,' the feeling of emotion because we could see it in their faces and hear it in their voices. So it is with our 'pioneers' and 'legends.' We need to know what it took and how these guys and their contemporaries did it. In preserving this heritage we also recognize the fact that there were a lot of pioneers that received little or no recognition for their efforts but were still very much a part of the history.

"Second, we are losing our legends who can tell those stories about what it was like 'back in the day.' One of the first

tasks of the Foundation was to identify the surviving legends. We identified about 150 of the surviving legends who are at risk, because of age and/or health. Since March, we have lost nine of them. Further, at least four more are in nursing homes with Alzheimer's disease or dementia.

"We have to complete this task quickly, if we are going to have a meaningful historical record of why and how the sport and industry we love will be told in the words of those who helped make it happen," Hrudka said.

The documentary episodes will cover the period from the late 1940s to the end of the decade of the 1980s. That period saw the sport (and the industry) grow with the war veterans and their contemporaries; and then exploded with the coming of age of the "Baby Boomers," who seized their parent's passion and made it their own. It was also the period where the sport and the industry relied on "seat of the pants" ingenuity to make its progress.

The episodes will examine the sport's changes from many directions, using the commentaries of the legends to give first-hand explanations.

It will look at the sport by decades, how various classes evolved (including why some grew and others fell by the wayside), the influences and contributions of the sanctioning bodies, how the writers and photographers helped fuel the passion for the sport, as well as the influence of sponsors, the participation of Detroit's automakers, the development of the performance parts market and other aspects.



DON EWALD

One of the most famed and feared Gassers, the Stone, Woods & Cook Willys. This is the lightweight B/G "Swindler A" car campaigned in 1964 (note the black paint, later repainted the trademark light blue).

The efforts of the Quarter Mile Entertainment Foundation have been, to this point, funded out-of-pocket by the directors as the structure of PROJECT 1320 has been developed, and the initial elements of the marketing plan have been implemented. Now, the need for support from the fans and the industry which grew with drag racing is needed to push the PROJECT 1320 effort from the planning board to beginning the production process.

Drag racing fans can become a "Friend of PROJECT 1320" when they sign up at the "Friends" website, www.project1320.com. When filming begins this year, the Friends members will be able to see the behind-the-scenes activities of the interviews—the goofs, gaffs and the funny stuff, as well as the serious side of things—from the perspective of the film crew who will have mini digital cameras recording the process. Members also will get a discounted price on the 5-disc boxed DVD set of the documentary. For the industry, the Foundation is offering a wide range of options to support the effort. For both individuals and companies, their support is a tax-deductible contribution, since the Foundation is a pending Internal Revenue Service 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

"We have received solid support from many fans who have joined the 'Friends' cause," says Hrudka. "In addition to their financial support, they have also provided considerable amounts of home movies, still photographs and video tape, which we're digitizing and will use with the interviews. Much of this material has been seen only by friends and families, so we'll be getting a fresh look at a lot of interesting material.

"We truly need the support of the industry and the fans to make this effort a reality, and in a sport where time is the crucial factor, we are in a race against time!

"It has often been said that you cannot know or understand where you are going if you do not look behind you and understand where you have been. We feel this is so true with our sport, our industry." **DRR**

