

PHOTOS FROM  
COURTNEY CHELEW  
AND THE  
WALLY PARKS  
NHRA MUSEUM



Above: Wally Parks—who made it all possible for more than 60 years, died in December at 94—was honored at the event. B&W right: Dean Moon's Mooneyes dragster at the Brighton Speed Trials, Brighton, England, in 1963. There were 45,000 fans on the beach Strand to see Sidney Allard race Dante Deuce in Mooneyes. Color photo: Same car today carefully restored and looking like it did then.

The California Hot Rod Reunion is like no other automotive event anywhere in the world. In fact, it may be the only automotive event where the machinery takes a back seat to the people. Drag racers, while few in number, are a close-knit group whether they drive a souped-up '55 Chevy or a Top Fuel Dragster. Each and every member maintains a certain amount of camaraderie with the others precisely because they are all drag racers. Once considered outlaws participating in an outlaw sport, the participants are drawn to each other: outside hostility breeds unity within—much like a wagon train of pioneers crossing hostile territory. As a result, lifelong friends travel from around the world to gather with other geezers and relive old times.

This reunion is a drag race, a swap meet, a hot rod show, a reunion of old timers and a thing called a Cacklefest, all wrapped into one four-day weekend. Much like other gatherings of car enthusiasts, it started in a rather peculiar way. It was around 1990 when a lot of us attended the funeral of well-known drag racer Joe Pisano. Joe died suddenly of a heart attack at a National drag racing event in Indianapolis; he was also owner of Venolia Pistons and his products were known worldwide. The turnout, as you can imagine, was huge and several of us gathered at a local watering hole after the service to glance back at old times. After several lengthy stories and several adult beverages, someone suggested we should gather at some mutually acceptable location for a big reunion of old racers—since the only time we saw one another was at some funeral. There had to be a more pleasant way to reunite and reconnect with one another.

Shortly thereafter, Steve Gibbs, vice president of the National Hot Rod Association and overseer of the Wally Parks/NHRA museum took the idea and ran with it. He used his considerable influence in the racing community and, with some help from other interested parties, determined the ideal location for a drag-racer reunion was the Mecca of Top Fuel Drag Racing: the historic Famoso Drag Strip just outside of Bakersfield, Calif. Famoso was the location of drag racing's premier event, the March Meet—AKA The U.S. Fuel and Gas Championship, which was first held in 1959. Our “new” event quickly acquired the name California Hot Rod Reunion.

Guided by his sense of community and the seat of his pants, Gibbs engaged Greg Sharp, NHRA Museum archivist and unofficial memory bank, to start turning a rush of ideas into reality. The second weekend in October was chosen as the date and arrangements were made with the track promoter

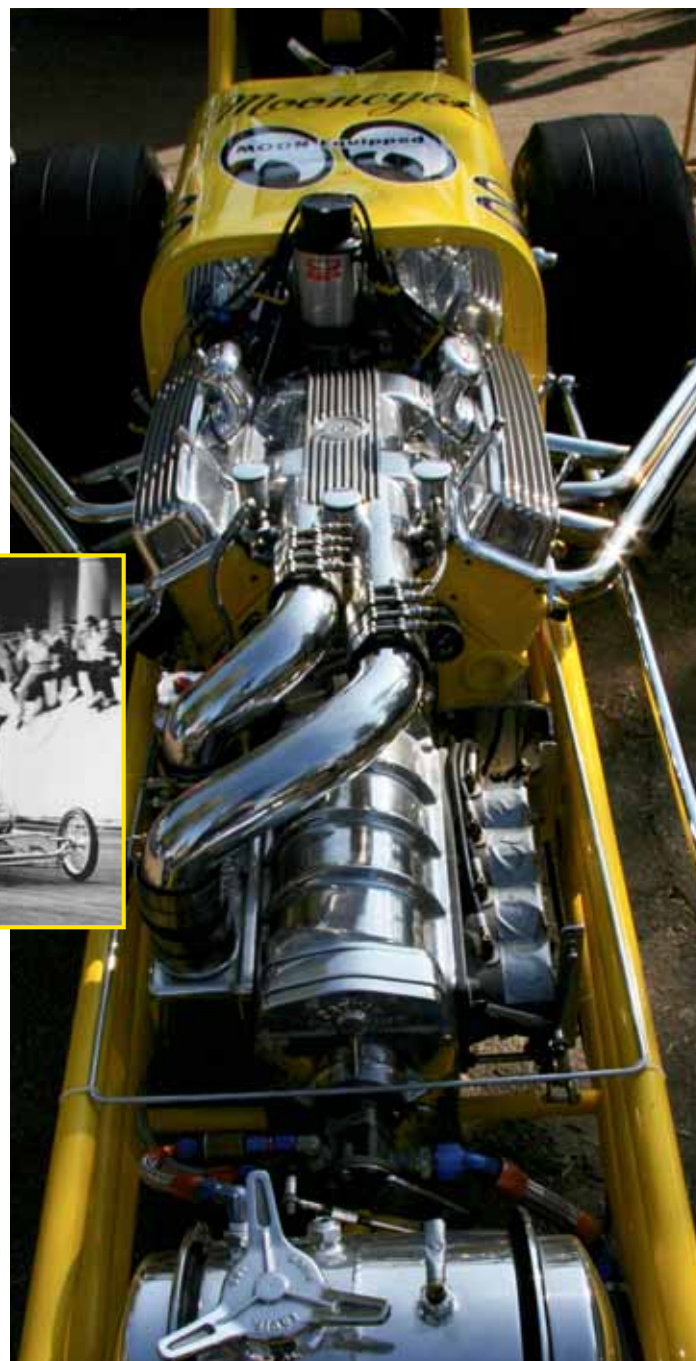


# GUTSY GEEZERS

AKA the California Hot Rod Reunion

BY—NO, MAKE THAT—INCLUDING

DON PRIETO





Left: Author Don Prieto's view from the restored Hustler VI that crashed at this very track in 1965. Below: He sets the car's fuel injectors barrel valve to accommodate 98percent Nitromethane fuel.

Below left: Noted customizer Gene Winfield and his Bonneville roadster enjoying the attention of the spectators.

Bottom: Tommy Larkin of Chatsworth, California, (left) and Glen Cupit of New Orleans are having the time of their lives reliving the past.





Above: A couple of coupes have a go as part of the actual racing that supports the reunion. Right: Bobby Langley sitting in the recreated Scorpion II. The original participated in the event in Texas that eventually brought Don Garlits to California. That race led to the annual U.S. Fuel and Gas Championship. Below: Butch Mass at the wheel of the "flamin" Creitz and Donovan recreation. One of the loudest cacklers in a field of 100.

to make the necessary preparations. Gibbs and Sharp decided to have a diversified event—something for everyone. They also determined that since it was going to be a one-time event, it should bring as many old racers as possible. Word spread through the drag-racing world via the NHRA house organ, *National Dragster*. Other publications jumped on the bandwagon and helped to promote the California Hot Rod Reunion.

The turnout was terrific as some ten thousand interested spectators came to see the Nostalgia drag races and the former stars. Art Chrisman (winner of the very first U.S. Fuel and Gas Championships) kicked off the event on race day in

the Hustler. He proceeded to smoke the tires the entire length of the quarter mile, much to the delight of those present. That set the tone.

Fast-forward 16 years: The term "Gathering of Geezers" becomes more and more relevant. Gray hair and walking canes appear with regularity, as those of us who raced in the golden era of front-engine dragsters head down that well-worn path.

Don Garlits, who single-handedly ended the front-engine dragster era when he cut off the front of his foot in a transmission explosion and subsequently introduced a dragster with the engine in the rear, made the trip from Florida and





brought with him two of his historic front-engine cars in the form of Swamp Rat III and Swamp Rat VI.

Tommy Ivo, another big name from that bygone era, also made the trek to Bakersfield. Ivo had raced Garlits thousands of times on various dragstrips across the country and he was on hand to participate in the Cacklefest in a newly created reproduction of his "Barnstormer" dragster. He even had a poster printed with photos of his many exploits for the event. Not only did he have them made, but autographed and handed out these collectable items free of charge.

Ivo's re-creation of one of his famous cars is indicative of the phenomenon of recreating fuel dragsters that no longer exist and restoring those that are found. The California Hot Rod Reunion has spawned a renewed interest in racecars built and raced in the '60s era. At the initial reunion there were a couple of intact cars on display for all to see. The Geezers, including myself, became intrigued with the idea of finding our old cars and returning them to their former glory—not for competition, but just to have and appreciate.

One young man, Bill Pitts, who is a self-confessed fence hanger and fan of those golden era racers, took it one step further. He restored a dragster of that era and contacted all of the people who made it part of the scene back then. They all agreed to help him anyway they could and would be there when and wherever he displayed "their" former car. At a later reunion, all principals were present. With former owner Ron Winkle, complete with his crew, and original driver "Jeep" Hampshire on hand, it was decided to start the engine—not race it—on 80-percent Nitro methane; a typical load of fuel from that period. The crowd surrounding the running dragster in the pits was ten deep; they wanted to hear one of these dinosaurs run. This event was pivotal in the lives of many an old drag racer. The following year, there were suddenly 12 of these machines and the explosive firing, revving and flame-throwing became...cackling.

The interest in similar projects snowballed, as many geezers sought and found their own old cars, their family's car or a car they were involved with. Others, who are not lucky enough to find an old car, took to reproducing famous old cars with the approval of the original owners, as in the case of the Ivo Barnstormer. The cacklers began coming out of the woodwork. So much so that collective cackling with multiple cars became a "Cacklefest." Understand that many of these dragsters cost from \$50k to \$100k to refurbish—all just to listen to the engine make noise, nitro fumes and flames. It is considered by some to be a very bizarre activity,

but not to those who are reliving their pasts and awakening aged sensory organs. One cannot adequately describe the thump of each cylinder as it explodes the nitro, penetrating the chest wall with heavy vibrations, while the nitrogen byproduct of the flaming combustion brings tears (literally) to the eyes of all present.

In addition, some 95 Top Fuel Dragsters from the '50s and '60s, refurbished to their former glory, were brought to the event. These nitro-burners were started up all at once after dark on Saturday night to the thrill and delight of all in attendance. The thunder and flames that belched forth cannot be matched anywhere.

No reunion is ever complete without recognizing a few of the key participants and this reunion was no different. As with the past 15 Reunions, a group of individuals were selected by the staff at the NHRA Museum to be honored for their contribution to the sport of drag racing.

The honorees were Grand Marshall Ed "the Ace" McCulloch, multiple champion in both Top Fuel and Funny Car; chassis builder extraordinaire John Buttera; the Top Fuel team of Rocky Childs and Jim Albert; historic Speed Sport Roadster racer Gary "Red" Greth; Orange County Raceway principal and race pilot, Mike Jones; and the invincible Top Fuel team of Mike Kuhl and Carl Olson. All were presented with commemorative trophies, while their exploits were outlined (including scrapbook photos) in the race program given to each and every attendee—a very nice gesture indeed.

Drag racing started out as a participant sport with very little concern for spectators. The early Top Fuel and Gas championships at Bakersfield were held in front of a stand full of watchers, but most of them were racers' families and crews. It was the formative years of the '50s and '60s that created this close-knit group and they are returning to the place where it all started. Renewing old friendships with fellow racers and greeting the thousands of new-generation drag racers—who still consider the Famoso dragstrip to be the Mecca of tire smoke and nitro fumes—is the underlying purpose of the event. And they have four full days to do it.

As I put my car in line to participate in this year's Cacklefest, I found myself in the midst of many of the racers and racecars I raced nearly 50 years ago. As I brought the Chrysler Hemi to life, the flames appeared, the noise rose to a roar and I realized I was doing everything I had done 50 years ago. The only thing missing was the thrill of the speed...oh, and one other thing, no DANGER. I'll be back next year.



Clockwise from upper left: Tommy Ivo grinning in the reproduction of his most successful racers...the Barnstormer. (Note: Barnstormer was a nickname it got because it barnstormed around the country). Looking every bit like 1954, the Glass Slipper of the Cortopassi brothers has made all 14 reunions. Don Garlits from some 40 years ago and today signing autographs like a rock star. The reunion brings out veteran drag race cars of all shapes and sizes.