



Fuel For Thought

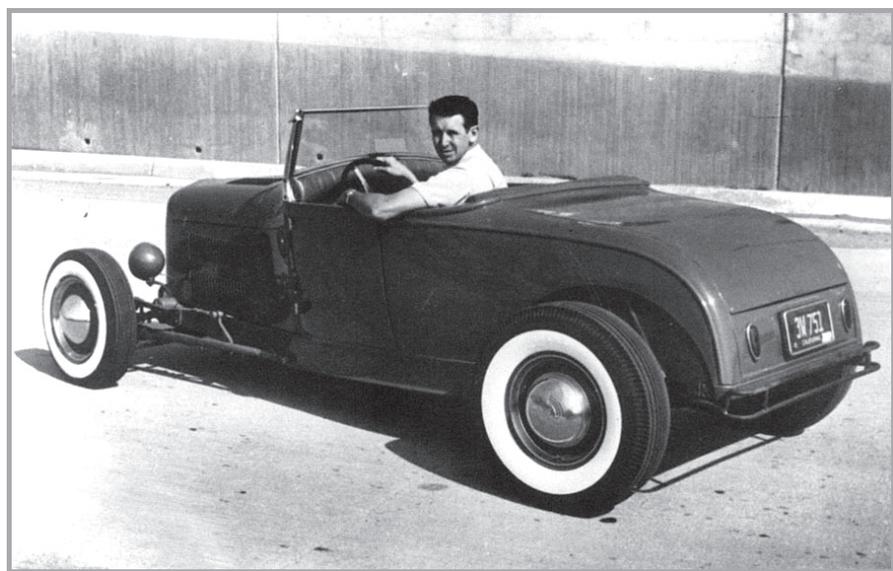
LandSpeed Louise

Speed Oracle Silenced, Wally Parks Makes Final Pass

He focused a speed lens though which we all now see. He recognized an unquenchable passion resident in American youth and harnessed their enthusiasm first on the California dry lakes, then on Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats before finally hitting on the idea that the lawless, dangerous side-by-side street racing could be legitimized on a national level and folded into mainstream motorsports.

His name was Wally Parks and while he certainly did not invent drag racing he most assuredly brought order to a chaos that will forever remain his legacy, bolstered each time a pair of high-performance machines rip off a few microns of rubber as their tires tear away from the starting line.

Wally died peacefully at 7pm on Friday, September 29, 2007 after living in 94 very rewarding years on earth. A lean, elegant man who never lost his edge, wit or vision and whose life's work set a foundation for thousands to enjoy not only a hobby, but to matriculate into a profession.



He grew up in the wild, untamed early days when American high performance was percolating up and out of youthful dreamers. Parks earned his first time tag on Muroc in 1933 driving his 1925 Chevy-4 cabriolet 82.19 mph and also tried the clocks at Rosamond, Harper and El Mirage dry lakes, each one of which produced its share of fast action and legends.

Parks was SCTA's first elected post-WWII president, a job that was more work than fun. I reach back to a 2005 interview for details.

"Among the toughest hurdles SCTA had to tackle was overcoming a bad image of illegal street racing by local media's

condemnation of all hot rods," Parks told me, "That reflected against the association and its member clubs. To counter, we organized the first public Hot Rod Show, presented in the Los Angeles Armory - as a public-relations effort that also served as Hot Rod Magazine's launch pad."

He first visited Bonneville in 1948, where the AAA was conducting land speed runs for FIA world record recognition.

"A purpose of my being there was to determine whether there was a chance that the SCTA might gain access to the salt for conducting one of its speed trials events," Parks said, "After contacting Bonneville's Utah custodian of the salt, the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce, Lee Ryan and I were able to gain permission for a 'one time trial' venture, which resulted in SCTA's presentation of its Bonneville Nationals in 1949."

At the inaugural event Parks drove the Burke & Francisco belly tank lakester and was the first member to join the salt's 'spin-out club'. He later became the sec-

ond editor of the Hot Rod Magazine before leaving publishing to devote himself to building and nurturing the NHRA.

He was always quick to make you aware that he felt himself more a conduit through which praise and criticism flowed, that he had lots of help, but nevertheless stood as the sports lightning rod. NHRA's members revere him so that even its trophies are lovingly referred to as "Wallys."

Parks did more than bench race when he retired from NHRA day-to-day operations, he spearheaded the NHRA Motorsports Museum project that opened its doors in 1998. When Parks cleared his 90th timing light, the museum honored

him by adding his name to the museum title. The 28,500-square-foot building on the edge of California's historic Los Angeles County Fairplex is open year-round.

While Parks will always be remembered for founding the NHRA, his heart never forgot the dry lakes way of life. Never. I took notice of how frail Wally looked while visiting with him in the NHRA suite at the 2007 Winternationals and made it a point to sit and talk with him much longer than normal.

We had the best seats in the house, a comfy sofa directly behind the starting line and carried on an in-depth, animated conversation that he clearly enjoyed. We spoke only of land speed history and paused only when the pro cars blasted off the line in the semi-finals. I knew where the guy's heart was.

Just before his passing, he was working feverishly with sons Richard and David to compile a book of the early days of the Southern California Timing Association (SCTA) using the groups monthly meeting notes - many of which he had taken himself when serving as the association's recording secretary.

You know the job, the one few want because it requires taking copious, clear notes. Well, with Parks it was part of how he was wired, something that came to him as easy as breathing. Right up to the end he authored numerous memos on a variety of topics. I was recipient of many of those memos and the occasional phone call if he felt the topic needed immediate attention. It was as though I was getting prophecy from the Speed Oracle of all things fast.

Parks paid me the highest personal and professional compliment when he reviewed my book, Bonneville Salt Flats, offered up with a generous hug from both he and Barbara. They had picked up the book the evening before, he sat down to read it and came back the following day with a neatly typed letter that read in part:

"LandSpeed Louise has captured the essence of what is magical in the salt's many attractions for special breed of automotive experimenters . . . (we) are deeply indebted to author Noeth for her preservation of that awesome history." This from a man who not only lived the very history I chronicled, but was one of its keystone architects. Humbling.

Land speed racers know all about doing great things on tight budgets. I revel in their company, see genius in their speeds and wonder in their deeds.

Parks, like countless others, was attracted to the sport of land speed racing

because it is rooted in the freedom of unencumbered thinking, experimenting and daring. Note that from this humble amateur sport came the multi-billion dollar performance parts industry.

"Ed Winfield, with his camshafts, carburetors and cylinder heads, was among the first and most prominent," said Parks, "Edelbrock, Evans, Meyer, Weiand, Navarro, Offenhauser and others produced intake manifolds and aluminum cylinder heads, Harman-Collins, Spalding and Kong Jackson were ignition gurus, while Iskenderian was in the forefront as a grassroots cam grinder, Schiefer and Weber flywheels and clutches dominated."

Parks was perpetually on the lookout for ways to attract new enthusiasts, fortify safety and encourage competitive spirit.

"Land speed racing, its participants and officials have maintained a labor-of-love concept that overrides attempts to commercialize—and where record-settings are the prime rewards. It has always been one of the most challenging and exciting forms of motorsports competition. It allows veterans and newcomers to compete against the clock in its myriad classes of straight-line action, where nothing really becomes obsolete.

The feel and thrill of chasing a single black line to its extremity, headed for a floating mountain in the distance and then turning out to await one's results in miles per hour - it's hard to match! Max speed achievement has always been a measure of skill and efficiency, almost as much as winning races. With recorded speeds as targets to be conquered, land, water and air contests aimed at official recognition, or just bragging rights, are goals for adventurers."

I'm going to end this printed eulogy on an upbeat, resonating note highlighting Park's stewardship. I once asked him if he had any advice for the young speedsters who are just now finding their way to halls of horsepower. Here is what he said:

"Today's 'young speeders' are little different than we were at their age—except that their cars, fresh off the showroom floor, have much more in power and maneuverability than most of our early hot rods. The same urge is there, to 'try it out' somewhere. But today's traffic, unlike isolated roads or the dry lakes, is a formidable substitute. The challenges may be the same, but safe facilities are too few—except for those fortunate in having drag strips that can accommodate go-fast ambitions and energies. Most drag strips today offer 'Street Legal' classes, supported by law enforce-

ment, to help discourage illegal street racing. It's a far cry from the desert time trials of the 1930s, but it can offer some same satisfactions in results."

God Speed Wally and give my regards to Barbara...

Champagne Set Toasts Ab Jenkins

While more than 540 entries brought themselves to the starting line at the 59th annual Bonneville Nationals this past August, a land speed racing historical marker was cemented with the champagne set a few hundred miles due west at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance.

Ab Jenkins' Mormon Meteor was chosen as "Best of Show" – a first for any land speed car. The Pebble show is an oh-so veerrrrry fancy car show where entrants try years to gain an invitation on



the green to be judged with intense scrutiny. Think Riddler Award, or AMBR in a tux. Jenkins' Meteor is one of only a handful of race machines to have ever claimed top honors. I'll bet Ab is smilin' down from his Mormon heaven.

This is where Ralph Lauren walked off with the same prize years ago, as did Phil Hill, who unlike the clothing stylist set a record on the salt in a MG in the '50s.

Back in 1935 Jenkins, always a solo act, was forced by sponsors to share driving chores and Indianapolis co-driver Tony Gulotta. The pair set several 24-hour speed endurance records despite a fire, electrical system and tire failure at speed. Jenkins' supercharged stock engine was personally prepped by Augie Duesenberg.

In 2004, sixty-nine years later, restored to glory by Chris Charlton of Maine, Jenkins' car sold for a staggering \$45 million at a Pebble Beach Auction held by Gooding and Company. 

Note: Photojournalist Louise Ann Noeth is the authoress of the award-winning book, *Bonneville: The Fastest Place on Earth*, a complete historical review of the first 50 years of land speed racing now out of print. To explore some of her other work log onto: www.landspeedproductions.biz

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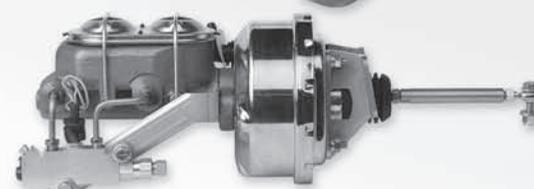
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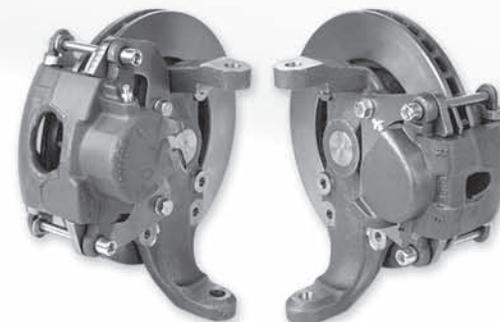
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