

My Drag Racing Days

as best recalled in 2011

by Thom Otto

Foreword

The idea to document some of the good old drag racing days started after I received an email this September from Troy Kempher in Illinois about a 32 roadster that once raced at the drag strip in Cedar Falls. His father had purchased a 32 roadster in 1970 and it had my name on the body of it.

Thanks to Troy Kempher for getting this started and I hope your Dad gets the roadster on the street soon. I believe Troy found me through our Class of 60 website. Thanks Sam Coleman!

This started out as the “32 Ford from Cedar Falls” story but soon evolved into “My Drag Racing Days”, but I enjoyed digging up the dear old memories. Many thanks to those that helped with some of the memories and if I’ve left some people, events, or things out, my apologies. I would hope this might inspire Bob Stewart and others to write about some their memories. That would be some good reading. I hope you enjoy this slice of my life.



Background

Around 1955 to 1956, Carlton Ricks purchased a completed 32 Ford roadster street machine in California and brought it to Cedar Falls, Iowa. I remember riding my bike a few blocks over to College Street to ride down the alley and peek into the Ricks's garage window admiring this great looking little street machine.

It was fender less except for the front cycle type fenders and had a chopped Carson top. The body was channeled around five inches over the frame. The flathead engine was well done with Offy heads, dual Stromberg carburetors, many chrome parts, a racing cam and high compression pistons. The car was painted burgundy and had a black canvas top. It was truly one of the best looking street machines in the Waterloo – Cedar Falls area.

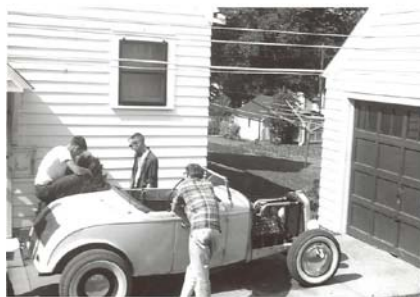
Later, Ricks sold it to the Larson family that had a construction business, and they painted it baby blue. Later, the Larsons sold it to Richard Voss, a Cedar Falls policeman.

1960

After graduating from Cedar Falls high school in May of 1960, I spent a good part of the remainder of 1960 in Southern California with Dennis Nichols, a friend that had moved to California with his parents a few years earlier. I worked with Dennis in his father's Tasty Freeze in Santa Ana during my stay in southern California. We went to many drag races together and then started crewing for one of Dennis's friends, Leland Kolb, who was racing a AA gas dragster. It was advertised as the worlds fastest "Ford" powered gas dragster. We raced many drag strips such as Pomona, Fontana, and Lions. Around Christmas time, I returned to Iowa with a renewed interest in drag racing.

1961

Now back in Cedar Falls and working at Chamberlain Corp. in Waterloo, I was thrilled to learn that Officer Voss wanted to sell the 32 roadster. If memory serves me correctly, I drove it away for about \$200. Although first gear was missing from the 39 ford transmission, everything else was in good shape. It didn't take long to repair the transmission and get a feel for how quick and fun the roadster was to drive.

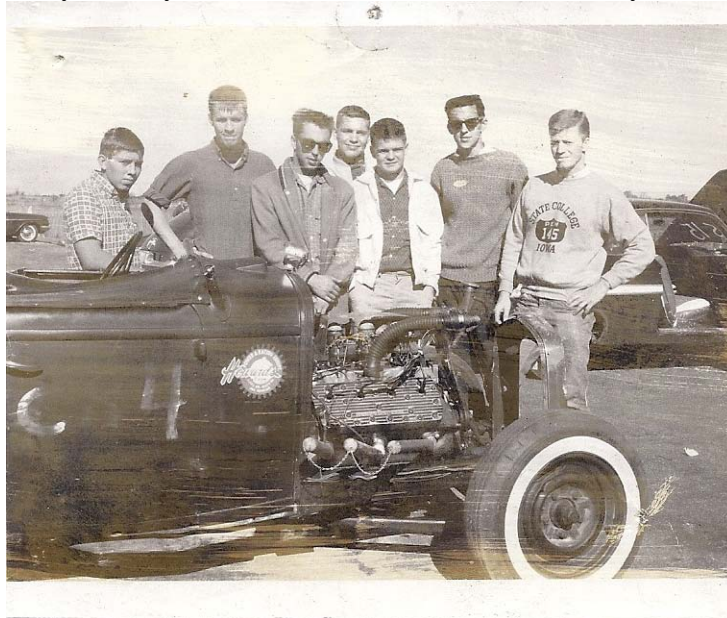


Checking out the new machine.



A burnout in Cedar Falls

A lot of cruising the Avenues in Cedar Falls and Waterloo was done along with some street racing out in the boon docks. The 32 could hold its own against most late model cars being very quick off the line. Later that summer, a roll bar and other safety equipment was added and it was time to try the real drag strips. A tow bar was built to get it to the strip. I recall racing at Des Moines and Minneapolis strips with most ET's (elapsed times) in the low 15's and best 14.98, with speeds at approximately 90 mph. The drag racing bug really had my attention so what should I do next year?



Racing in 1961 at Minnesota Dragway. Left to right Roger Dow, Russ Clark, Tom Otto, Bill Jones, Roger Martinson, Gene Bernard, and Dick Lamb

1962

Over the winter, I had an opportunity to partner with several friends to turn the roadster into a full time B/ Altered drag car. With my friends, Bob Stewart from Dike and Russ Clark of Cedar Falls, we decided to use a 56 Buick engine with Hilborn fuel injection, Howard cam, vertex magneto, etc. A lot of the work was done in Bob's Grandma's garage in Dike and she always fed us well. The plan was to leave the engine in stock location using the existing early Ford drive train, a decision that we'll question later on.

Russ and I both obtained employment with Collins Radio in Cedar Rapids in the spring of 1962. This somewhat complicated the ability to get the roadster finished and ready to race. Finally by Labor Day weekend, the number 322 B altered/roadster was ready except we had not fired the engine yet. We hauled the car around Cedar Falls on the tow-bar trying to get it to fire with no luck. Getting late and giving up, we headed north to Minneapolis hoping that some of our racing friends up north might lend a hand.

Our plan was to race at both strips in the area, Twin Cities Speedway and Minnesota Dragway. Our first stop was at the Twin Cities track and it didn't take long to determine we had two hoses on the Hilborn fuel pump reversed. After correcting that issue, the Buick finally came to life. A number of passes were made to get tuned, and I was loving it, since we're turning in the 12's and around 110mph. This was a much better ride than the old flathead Ford. We ended the day by winning our class trophy and setting the track speed and ET records for our class. We raced at the Minnesota Dragway the next day, again winning our class with the roadster making very strong, consistent passes.

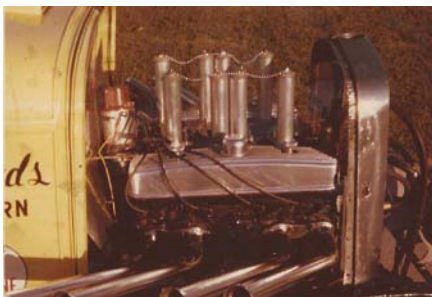


*Bob Stewart, Russ Clark, Tom Otto
at Des Moines Dragway*

Area Men Set New Record in Drag Class

Three area car enthusiasts set a new class record on their first time out at the Twin Cities Speedway dragstrip at Minneapolis, Minn. The three, Tom Otto, 1016 Iowa; Russ Clark, 1515 Columbia; and Bob Stewart, Dike, had just completed their car during the week-end, and were as surprised as the Minnesota drivers when they turned the top speed of their class.

The car is a 1932 Ford roadster with a '56 Buick engine. The engine has 322 cubic inches and is running an injection setup. Otto did the driving chores for the day with the car which runs in B roadster class, and has much competition. The new records set were 115.38 miles an hour for the quarter-mile run, and an elapsed time of 12.63 seconds. The old record time was 13.36 seconds for the quarter-mile trip.



The Mighty 322 inch Buick

We raced a few more times in the fall of 1962 at other strips. Then Russ got married to his high school sweetheart, Cathy and didn't have time to stay involved in racing. Roger Dow, a Cedar Falls friend currently living in Minneapolis, replaced Russ in the racing venture.

1963

It is funny how "well made plans" can change in a heartbeat. Partners Stewart and Dow were off to serve their six months active duty with the US Army this racing season. I will be racing solo but using the tow vehicle Stewart and Dow picked up, a 50 Cadillac hearse. We had a lot of fun that season with the new tow car, also using it as the equipment hauler for the "Intruders", a band Russ Clark and I were playing in. Does it get any better than this? Racing and rock & roll all at the same time! I recall racing drag strips at Des Moines and Humbolt, Iowa, Cordova, and Minneapolis during this season, and winning some class trophies along the way. I also recall breaking some early Ford drive train parts during this season which needed to be improved.

Upon returning from Army duty, Stewart and Dow took the roadster to Minneapolis for updates and improvements prior to the 64' racing season.



Roger Dow and I at the World Series of Drags, Cordova, Ill.

1964

Well, this year it's my turn to take the season off and spend six months with the US Army at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. and Fort Riley, Kansas. Over the winter months Stewart and Dow did a great job of improving the roadster. They set the engine back to put more weight on the rear wheels. They improved the drive-train with a very strong Olds/Cad. rear-end, transmission, and setting the driver up centered in the car. Also, a better engine was built with a roller tappet cam and higher compression. Roger Dow did the driving with most of the racing done in Minneapolis. Later on, Stewart and Dow had an opportunity to pickup an A Fuel dragster powered by a small block Chevy. With Stewart driving, they campaigned the dragster to the end of the 64' season. The roadster remained parked until I returned home from my Army active duty stint. I then drove to Minneapolis in my 55 Chevy to buy out my partners, Stewart & Dow and bring the roadster back to Cedar Rapids. In Cedar Rapids I was living with four other guys in a house on Staub Court and somehow I landed the roadster in our single stall unattached garage. It's time to get the 32 roadster ready for next season.

1965

A lot of work and preparation needed to be done before we could go racing this year. A new engine was needed, a new tow car would be good, a new crew must be found, and I wanted to create a new look for the car with different paint and a new lettering scheme.

First, I found a 59 Olds 2 door car with a huge trunk on the repo lot at the Collins Credit Union lot. After purchasing it for \$700 (I'm sure a loan was involved), I was really pleased to find it also had air shocks. This machine can haul everything we need to go racing.



The 59 Olds and 322 at Staub Court in Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Second, a new paint job of poppy red was done by Ron Reem and lettering was done by Ed Otten. "*Adios*" was painted on the trunk lid. I've always said arrogance and stupidity are very similar.

Third, the new engine was the easy part. Due to limited funds, I plucked another nailhead 56 Buick 322 inch engine out of a junkyard, installed a cam and the other “bolt on-go fast stuff” and we’re ready to go racing. It should be a good engine with only 80,000 miles on it.

Fourth, I was very lucky to have found a great crew. Randy Schweiger was a good friend who had been our drummer in the Intruders band. He also brought along his pals, Tom Frady and Gene Wiediman. Tim Cooney, a college student that lived up the street from me also joined the team. Most importantly, a young lady that I had met at Collins Radio had come into my life. She really impressed me when I showed her the roadster and she said “Oh, that’s poppy red”. Jan Gadiant went racing with us whenever she could and to this day still enjoys telling “the boys” how she once gapped spark plugs with a feeler gauge on a drag car. We’re still crewing together after 44 years of marriage, but now, back to 1965.



New paint job and friend, Jan

With my National Guard obligation taking one weekend a month, a limited race schedule would be run this season. One memorable event happened early that year at Des Moines Dragway. While making a single tune-up pass near the finish line at well over 100 mph, a small bump on the track put the front end into a shimmy that broke the steering. Without steering at over 100 mph, I was very thankful the rear brakes were very evenly set allowing the roadster to come a stop while still on the drag strip. Just a reminder, this can be dangerous!

Early summer, after much anticipation, the NEITA Raceway in Cedar Falls opened. This would become our closest and home track. A fond memory occurred during one of our first visits to NEITA by winning Comp Eliminator which provided a cash prize of \$150 and a great trophy that I still have. Granted, the competition got stiffer as time went on and we never won it again.

It was always great when our Minneapolis friends came down, especially Stewart and Dow with the A/F Dragster unblown small block Chevy. It was turning around 190 mph. A great looking car called the “Mortician”. I’ll never forget Stewart asking if I wanted to drive it in a match race. My first dragster ride, I lost the match race but the pay was still

the same for Stewart. I recall turning around 160 mph in my losing effort and pulling the drag-chute handle out about three extra feet to get it stopped!

We raced NEITA the remainder of the season winning our class regularly. We also raced at the the World Series Event at Cordova. My memories of Cordova were having fun but experiencing bad luck at the same time. We never ever won anything at Cordova.



The Mortician AF/D

1966

Many plans for the upcoming season were in the works with Stewart & Dow moving up to AA Fuel with a new race car. We were planning to make a trip to California, catch the Winter Nationals and give some crew help to Tom Hoover and help Stewart & Dow pickup their new Woody Gilmore chassis.

In February, Tim Cooney and I were driving to Minneapolis to finalize plans for our trip west. Tim missed a bad curve north of Osage, Iowa, and the good old 59 Olds left the road and sheared off a utility pole. We ended up in the Osage hospital for a several days. Tim had a broken jaw that impaired his beer intake for awhile. I had a fractured right leg, numerous facial cuts and soon got transferred to Sartori Hospital in Cedar Falls to be closer to home. I finally got released a month later after having a steel rod installed inside my lower leg to keep it together. Oh, the dear old 59 Olds did not survive.

I had a cast on my right leg that went from my butt to my toes! My new friends were my crutches. It seems strange by today's standards that Collins Radio Co. did not allow anyone on their property with crutches. I was in for an extended 1966 vacation but the pay wasn't too good. Collins did provide me with a ride to Dallas on the company plane so I could spend some recovery time with my sister, Shirley and her family in Garland, Texas.

Upon returning to Iowa, I found a nice black 63 Buick Riviera to replace the Olds and somehow figured out how to drive with the left leg. Now I was really mobile again. I could hang out at Johnny Rapp's Sinclair station in Cedar Falls where I had worked and hung out in my younger days. Johnny was a great friend and mentor to me since my father died when I was eight. Johnny thought we should get the race car going again, so we used his pickup to transport the roadster back to Cedar Falls from Cedar Rapids. He also had a garage available next to the gas station. Keith Custer, a longtime Cedar Falls friend offered to drive the racecar while I had my cast on. The Sinclair station had a great service bay to work on the roadster after hours.

We did make some adjustments so Keith could fit in the cockpit by moving the body back on the frame about 6 inches since Keith was about 5 inches tall than me. I remember hopping around on my good leg carrying heads and other parts in the station.



*Keith Custer driving at NEITA Raceway in Cedar Falls in 1966
Randy Schweiger shown in left photo*

We got back to racing at NEITA and the car was doing well with Keith driving turning mid 12's, about 112 mph. Johnny thought we could do better if we put a little more into the engine, so he helped out with some upgrades. Better cam, pistons, and a few other goodies were acquired. By the time we had the engine ready, I finally had a new cast below my knee that allowed me to drive again. The engine really sounded healthier with more compression and the new cam, and I'll never forget the first pass. We turned for the first time in the mid 11's around 120 mph. Needless to say, I got some funny looks and comments getting into a race car with a cast on.



*Left - Roger Dow working on the AA/F record holder from Minneapolis
Right - Johnny Rapp by his push/tow truck and the 322 B/A*

Another memorable event happened in 1966. I gave Jan an engagement ring on a park bench in Island Park in Cedar Falls next to the Cedar River. I'll never forget a fisherman giving us a bad time when we kissed. To celebrate, we rode in the back of Johnny's pickup sitting on lawn chairs, to the Des Moines Dragway that night with John and his wife Bev up front.. Oh, he did have a topper on the truck! I don't remember the racing but I sure remember the ride. I can't believe Jan didn't throw the ring out the window that night but I'm glad she didn't. We finished the season at NEITA and attended the World Series at Cordova.

Stewart and Dow with several other partners had the AA Fuel car running well and were the first to ever exceed 200mph at NEITA, a record that stood for several years.

By fall I finally got the cast off so it's time to get back to the job, National Guard, and all the other things in Cedar Rapids.

1967

It was decided to leave the race car at Johnny's station in Cedar Falls and pay rent for the garage rather than haul the car back to Cedar Rapids every weekend. The race car didn't require a lot of prep work before racing because the Buick engine and drive train were very reliable. The drag strip was only a few miles away so we used John's pickup as our tow and push vehicle.

Then Jim George approached me with an interesting offer. Jim had been a friend for many years in Cedar Falls and had purchased a great looking dragster but needed an engine. The offer was to partner up with his dragster and my engine, sharing common expenses and alternating the driving chores every other weekend.

After some serious thought I decided to retire the 322 roadster in favor of dragster racing. I had always been a huge Tommy Ivo fan and this car had an Ivo look with the Buick engine and a great body. Jim and I embarked on fitting the Buick into the dragster. I remember some long nights in Jim's garage before we got to go racing.

The "Little Grecian" fit into the C Gas Dragster class and turned in the mid 10's, around 135 mph. When racing against other classes, the difference was the ET difference between the national record holders of both classes. Strangely, Dennis Nichols in Santa Ana held the national record for C Gas Dragster while we were running that class.

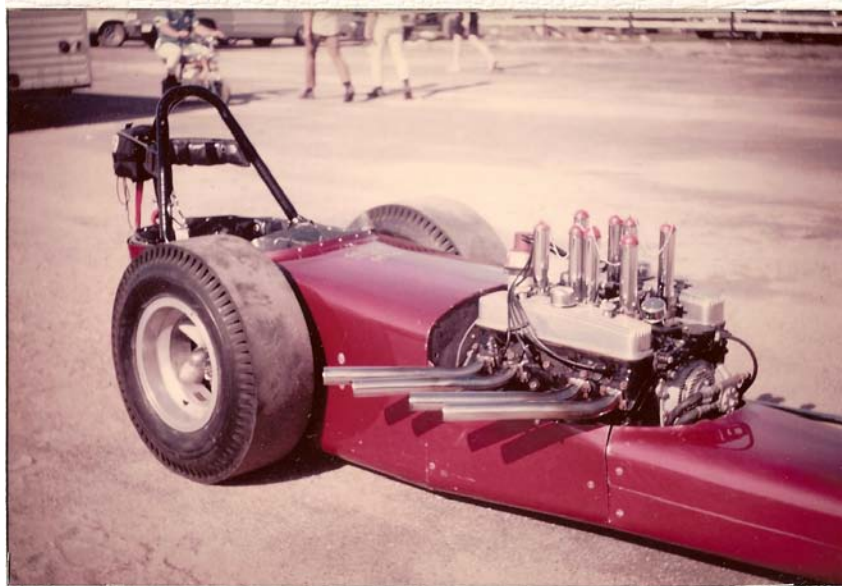
We traveled some to Cordova, Des Moines, but raced mostly at NEITA. I enjoyed the ride and the car was easy and fun to drive. We were one of the earlier enclosed trailers around NEITA.

Later on I sold the roadster to Ken Sturm from Waterloo who was a friend of Keith Custer's.



Driving the “Little Grecian” at NEITA

As the season wound down, I had new priorities to think about. First, a wedding in October, a new place to live, a new life with Jan and all at once, racing wasn't quite so important.



The “Little Grecian” in 1967

Finish Line at the World Series – Cordova 1965



Racing the “Little Screamer” at NEITA

CLOSING

It didn't take long to realize after getting married, racing would not fit into our budget as we started saving for a house and other things. The racing provided some great times and I wouldn't trade the memories for anything.

I told Jim George to run the Buick as long as he wanted, just don't put any nitro in it. I got it back a few years later after the clutch blew part of the block away.

Its funny how racing and competition can permanently find a home in your spirit. Over the years I have competed in countless running events including some half marathons, downhill ski racing, and too may sailing regattas and races to count, racing everything from a 12 foot sunfish to a 38 foot C & C. My most recent racing experience was making a few passes in my Corvette at the Tri States Drag Strip last summer. The bad news is, they now give you your reaction time but turning 13.5's at 105 mph was still a blast.

I'll never forget seeing the roadster for the last time after I sold it. Somewhere near Plainfield, Iowa, sitting outside without an engine looking forgotten. I had hopes that someone would bring this great little car back to life someday in the future.

I have sometimes questioned my wisdom or lack of it for taking a great little 32 Ford roadster and turning it into a race car. I have sometimes wondered what that car might have done with better equipment like a B&M hydro transmission and sprung rear-end.

The reality is, we'll never know and what's done is done!

ENJOY THE MEMORIES AS THEY WERE!

Many thanks to my editor and resident spell / grammar checker, including all past & present tense issues, my wife & best friend, Jan



Jan & Thom Otto - 2010

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