

Ken Stevenson Reminisces About His Father, Mentors, Auto Racing and Jack O'Hara

By Ken Stevenson

Chesapeake Region AACA

My father was my car hero. Wes Stevenson could fix anything. He was good friends with Leonard Rhinehart who became President of National AACA in 1962. I remember my Dad taking me to Hershey when I was 7 or 8 years old when the whole show was in the infield of the stadium. Dad also took me to local dirt tracks in the area like Westport and Dorsey Speedway. At age thirteen I started working at Larry Watts' Crown station on the corner of York Road and Stevenson Lane. I washed cars and cleaned the floors of the two bay shop. The next mentor to influence my life was one of the best mechanics I knew, Joe Cornkey.

When I was fourteen years old, my neighbor, Hank Ratrie and I paid \$50 for a 1953 Oldsmobile. After taking the Olds apart, and not remembering what happened to it, we paid another \$50 for a 1949 Chevrolet, six cylinder that had a rod rap. Hank and I removed shims from the connecting rods to adjust rod bearing clearance and proceeded to terrorize the neighborhood. A young couple with two children had recently moved into the neighborhood. The man was a young Penn State graduate engineer named Jack O'Hara. My Dad died three days before Christmas in 1960 and two weeks after my sixteenth birthday. My car life then moved onto drag racing.

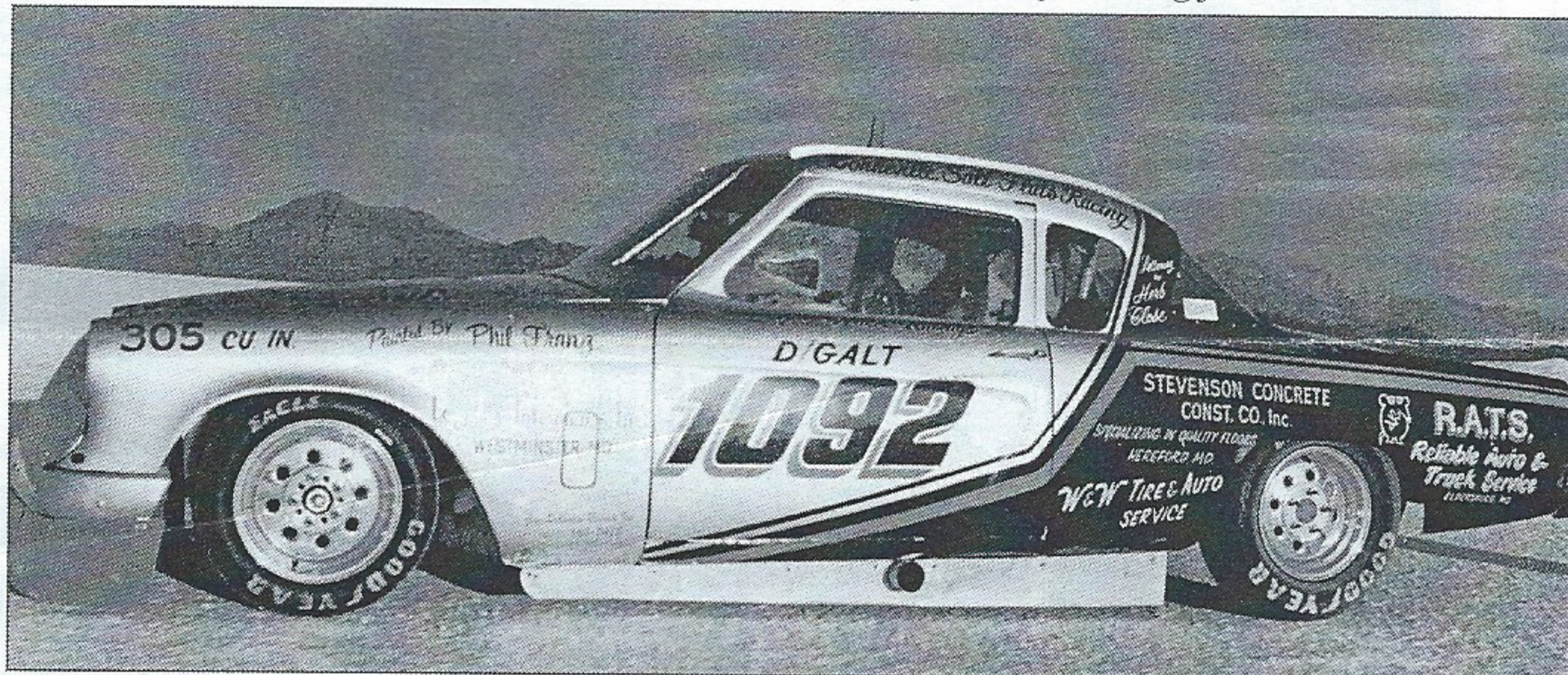
My first time seeing a drag race was when Dave Dockendorff and I hitchhiked north on Interstate 83. The first car to pick us up was going straight to York US 30 Dragway. What a thrill, seeing all the stuff you read about in magazines in person! It was 1961 and Drag Racing was a really big deal for me. I was working as many hours as I could to support my racing habit. My school buddies, Bill Thune, Ray Minter, Ernie Chubb and I were hooked on drag racing big time.

Fast forward to marrying my schoolmate sweetheart in 1965. I was driving a 1960 Corvette, three years later our first daughter was born. I sold my Corvette for \$1,700 and a 1967 Volkswagen Beetle was purchased and served as the family car.

Twenty years later, and now the father of two wonderful daughters, Kimberly and Jill, I got involved with my good friend Jack Koenig and a 1953 Studebaker. With the help of many car guys, we did most of the fabricating and engineering on the car. We were up to our elbows in land speed racing. We became original members of the newly organized 'East Coast Timing Association.' We attended their first meet in Moultrie, Georgia. We then joined the Utah Salt Flats Racing Association (USFRA). We towed the car to Bonneville Salt Flats three or four times to run on the salt. I signed onto the Studebaker for a five year term, good, bad or indifferent. I was there for five years. It was a thrill to drive the Studebaker to 175 mph on the salt.



The late Jack O'Hara is behind the wheel of his 1947 Ford Convertible as his good friend, Ken Stevenson rides 'shotgun.' The above picture was taken January 2, 2002. Must have been a nice day because the top is down on the Ford. They're probably looking for a car show.

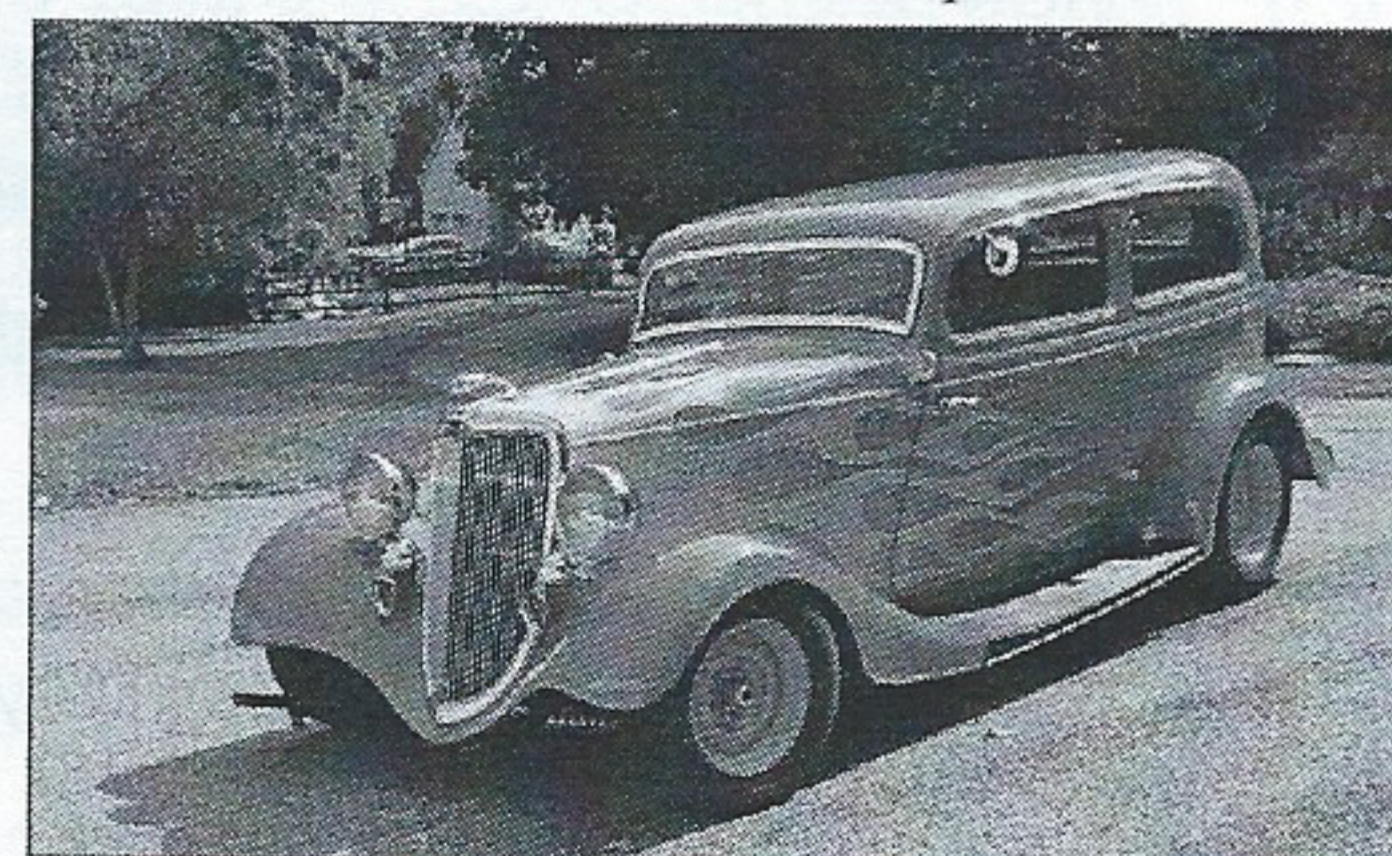


Ken and his buddies were thrilled when Jack Koenig's 1953 Studebaker coupe 'tore up' the Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah, back in the day when it was clocked at 175.1 miles per hour!



Ken isn't ALL go fast parts and 'flames' as his original 1939 Ford business coupe attests.

In 1997, I started to build a 1934 Ford standard sedan hot rod. I didn't want to chop up a good steel body, so I bought a fiberglass body and new frame. The car is finally finished and has a 5.0 Ford engine and five speed transmission. I also own a 1967 Cobra Daytona reproduction land speed racing car that I purchased from the original builder, Monti Gatti. The car last ran at Bonneville in 1995 and was driven by driver John Paxon who clocked in around 239 mph! I reunited with Jack O'Hara through a business deal. Jack told me about the early Ford V8 Club and the Chesapeake



Ken's 1934 Ford two-door sedan 'hot rod' Region of AACA which I joined. Jack and I did many garage tours and outings with his car but I wanted my own early Ford V8. In the spring of 2015, Jack O'Hara, Al Zimmerman and I drove to Culpepper, Virginia to look at a 1939 Ford standard coupe with a 60 horsepower flathead motor and original interior. Al's 'old car transportation' brought the car back in his enclosed trailer. Thank you Al!

I credit Jack O'Hara for getting me involved with old cars again. Jack's passing in August 2015 has left a void in my life, though his memory remains very much alive in the people he touched.