

Valley Custom Shop - part 1

Custom Car Magazine by Geoff Carter

The world is full of peaks and valleys, some big ones, some little ones, and some recognized only by their residents. Today, however, thanks to musical missionary Moon Unit Zappa, one place is known to the world as "The Valley";

It wasn't the Valley Girl, denizen of the shopping mall, who put southern California's San Fernando Valley on the map, though. We who wasted our youth and lunch money on pocket-sized hot rod and custom car magazines knew where "the valley" was years ago. It was the home of Valley Customs!

Oh, how we dreamed and drooled over feature after feature, cover after cover car after car. Each one longer, lower and sleeker than the one before. Such majestic beauty and harmonious proportion could only come from one place, the valley kingdom of Neil Emory and Clayton Jensen. Jensen is gone now and Emory no longer customizes cars for a daily living, but the memory of their masterpieces lives on.

To help you relive the feats of that dynamic duo, Custom Cars dispatched distinguished periodical person Geoff Carter to Fallbrook, California. His assignment was to obtain an interview with the surviving partner. He reports that the drive south from booming Orange County took a definite turn for the better when he left the jammed San Diego Freeway and headed toward the ocean. Atlantic, that is.

About 20 miles later he found the place just as his host described it, "Up a dirt road that looks like an orchard lane." He hadn't been prepared, however, for 3 ½ acres of wooded paradise inhabited by hawks, peacocks, cats and teddy bears.

Eleven years ago, with the design of a rough-hewn, two story house in his head, Neil had his nephew draw up the plans for bureaucratic approval. Then he tackled the construction himself. His talents are not limited to the transformation of automotive sheet metal.

Country Home recently featured the immaculate home with, "an eight page spread on the place and what we do," Neil explained modestly. "Nothing to do with cars. This is all the wife doing." Meanwhile, the wood and tin shop are nearing completion, along with a small store where Flore will show and sell the bears she makes and collects.

Seated in the two-story dining room, beneath the rustic sign of "Flores Country Store" and surrounded by hundreds of bears, interviewer and interviewee dug into the past. What we found was a veritable goldmine of trivia and nostalgia. Four hours later, our interviewer had enough material for several articles.

The following is Part One of a two-part chronicle which will conclude in our next issue.

CC- Let's start with a technical question, Neil. How many bears do you have in the house?

Emory- Oh, I don't know. There are probably 500. A lot of them that are in here she won't sell. They may have a little flaw in them, or they're the last ones from a piece of material she likes. She prefers designing them to the repetition of making a dozen or so at a time. She names the pattern after our grandkids, and I got a string of "em!

(Laughing).

We have 12 grandchildren and four great grandsons, and all the family's into automobiles. All the kids came and worked with me in the shop- little tots- push a broom, whatever.

CC- Where did your career start?
Did you grow up in Los Angeles area?

Emory- I grew up and went all through school in Burbank, California.

CC- Do you recall your first interest in cars, or more specifically, custom cars?

Emory- As a kid I used to draw them all the time. I guess that's what generates it, what you're interested in. You play with little toy cars...As a kid, even when I was just on a bicycle, I'd go to Hollywood, Pasadena, wherever I knew there was a custom shop doing anything; I'd go in there and just watch what they were doing.

CC- How many shops would there have been at that time?

Emory- Of the shops recognizable for what they did, there were only about six then. There were several coachbuilders, In those days Coachcraft was doing cars for actors and celebrity people. Darrin was up on Sunset Boulevard next to Troc. Boeman and Schwartz in Pasadena were doing all the big limo work. Of course, there were others like Murray Body and all that, but the main ones that were doing anything were mostly converting a car not necessarily building a total body from scratch- modifying the bodies for whatever look or purpose the customer wanted.

CC- What interested you in a career as a customizer?

Emory- First of all you had to realize it could be done. I remember when I was about six years old, way back in the beginning of the depression; there was a fellow who had a Star sedan. Right at the house he cut the top on it, and it looked so much better, because the windows were square and they became more rectangular. And all he had to do was lay it out, and saw it, and let it down and weld it.

As a little kid I was just fascinated by that, so I'd go over there and watch. Same as the custom shops I'd visit in high school. If you didn't interfere, they'd let you watch as long as you wanted.

CC- But you were able to get into all of them?

Emory- At Coachcraft, you couldn't get in the front door, but Lynn Salter's machine shop was next door, and they had a common wall with a fire door at the back. Lynn did nearly all the mechanical and machine work on the midgets all these guys had in their garages around town, so I'd hang around them at their houses. In the early days we probably had as many race cars in Burbank as anywhere around. Midget race cars in almost every block (and the early ones were all handbuilt before Kurtis started an assembly line for them after the war).

Then, when they'd take their cars to Lynn's, I'd go along to clean parts or whatever I could do. I never got interested in the mechanics part of it, but when I got through I'd go through the door in back and watch what they were doing at Coachcraft. People in some other parts of the country just aren't exposed to that. I saw stuff being done and realized what it takes to do it, what's possible to do. That's the thing.

CC- Where did you get the experience and skills you needed to do custom bodywork?

Emory- When I got to seventh grade, I got exposed to wood shop and metal shop. The district was not rich through the depression so the board of education used school shops to do all the repair work on the school's equipment. So I was exposed to learning about wood and metal in seventh grade.

One of the first things that came along was the City of Burbank float in the Tournament of Roses parade. They always used the same chassis, but every year the design group would design a new float. I got involved with that the very first year I was there, building the framework off this chassis. It was already figured for us; it was the physical doing they used us for.

Of course, there came a time when this work got to a rush level, the repair work and the float thing. So they used the students to do whatever they could.

In those days, many of the families couldn't even afford the materials for the students' little projects. We had people working WPA or whatever, making their \$2.00 a day, and it took that much just to feed them. There wasn't any complaint from anybody. They were learning something, it wasn't costing them a dime, and the school district was benefiting.

Because they had, probably, six shop classes a day, they soon needed a coordinating foreman and I fell into that program. I got pass-out slips from all my classes, and at the end, the teacher just gave me a passing grade. If there wasn't a rush thing on, you'd be in that class, but the minute there was a rush on …pass! You'd go there and start coordinating that thing. You'd be there maybe three hours, or all day.

That's the way it went all the way through school. I took all the shop courses, and was involved in a lot of projects the whole time. We even got into manufacturing.

For me, it was perfect. I'm not a bookworm; I had no intention of going to college. I wanted to work with my hands. That was well established when I was real small. Some guys finished college and don't know what they want to do.

CC- When did your customizing career begin?

Emory-
All of us started about that same time, that have been in it all these years. It goes way back, just like Joe Bailon is celebrating his 51st year. He and I started at the same time. Same way with those that were into racing equipment, but we all started young, that's the thing. As a kid, I had four businesses before I got out of high school.

CC- Were these all auto-related businesses?

Emory- Not all directly. The first business I put together when I was 12 years old was a car detailing service out at Warner Brothers Studio. They had a VIP area where the department heads and their assistants, stock players, people that were in the higher levels at the studio parked.

I got permission to go in and solicit each car owner to clean up their car daily, when I was going to school. I had to hire a friend of mine to help me after the first month, because I'd solicited too many accounts too quick. A couple years later I sold out to him, so he and his brother did it. Then he got out of it, and he sold it to his brother and somebody else, so it kept going on that way.

After that, I went into service station work, but what do you learn in the service station business? Your lubrication- in those days you didn't so repair work, to speak of- but total lubrication and customer service. That's when I started my lowering business.

Back in those days, lowering a car the cheap was just coming into play. It was those Fords with their long shackles. Well, I stated making shackles because they were hard to come by. Very few places had them because that kind of thing wasn't a trend. Nobody had really gotten started running later cars lowered. That was just a thin where southern California, as usual, starts the trend going, you know, and eventually it spreads. Of course, now it goes across the country rapidly. Before, they were 10 years behind, or whatever (laughing).

CC- Our readers in other parts of the world will be glad to know that you smiled when you said that, Neil.

Emory- Yeah, so as I was getting into high school, I was manufacturing shackles of different lengths. I had a jack and I'd go from service station to service station, make an appointment with their customers to leave their car, and I'd lower it for them. Carried all this gear with me in my car (Laughing), and lowered them on the spot! So anyways, it was just that working in the station.

Then we had a station; three of us ran a 24-hour station one year in high school. Worked seven days a week. We still went to school and kept the station open. I also manufactured mufflers. Whatever you could do to make a living, because those days, you know, things weren't easy.

CC- Was survival your motivation to be a businessman?

Emory- I don't know. Most kids had to go out and knock on a door for a job. There were so many kids out there trying to do that, if you could generate something on your own, make yourself available... When I was eight years old, I was Soliciting house to house to do anything they wanted done-mow their lawn, or go in and strip wallpaper.

I built clothesline poles for the women. I worked with my hands all the time. I'd just go to the lumberyard and bring the material home, cut it all up so it would bolt together, take it down on the bicycle, mix up the cement, put in the post, set the thing up. All you had to do was look at a clothesline and you knew how to build it, yet the husband, he didn't know how to do it, or wouldn't, or whatever.

But that's the way things go. That way you could make 25 cents an hour, unless you bid the job and you'd do it for so much money. Even with that little detail thing, I serviced a car for five cents per day.

CC- How long did it take you to do one?

Emory- Well, we did them quick, because all we were doing was going from car to car; we knew which ones were our customers. The fellow that I had working for me, he'd work one side and I'd work the other.

If the car was unlocked, we'd take a whisk broom and whisk out the inside and running boards before we started whipping

down. We'd wipe our half of the car off, and clean the windshield, and we were through. The glass was clean- if it needed them- because we were doing everyday, unless they didn't come to work.

Sometimes some of them didn't bring the car to work that day, or they brought another car that we didn't know they were driving, because otherwise we would have serviced it. We'd go right down the rows; we could tell which. They really didn't have assigned parking places, but they would usually park in about the same spot.

I just used a card file and a punch card system that I made up. Each card would be good for four weeks. It had letters right around the boarder of the card- one letter would represent each day of the week- and at the end was a paid thing. In the center of the card was "Emory Detailing" and the license number-didn't even bother with the name, just the license number- on there to I.D. the car, and that's all there was. If they wanted extra work done- a lot of times they decided they'd want them waxed or something- I just made a note on the back of the card.

We knew all the cars by memory; knew which cars were there that day. We didn't have to punch them out until we were done wiping because we just got to know everybody; that's the thing.

I could run a card for a whole month and not collect anything, but soon as I caught them coming in or out, or driving out something- maybe I'd have a couple of cards for a couple of months on them-they'd pay it. Then you just punch out the corners and it's all paid up.

CC- Besides an occasional wax job, what other types of work would you do for your clients?

Emory- Back in 1938, one of our customers bought a new Pontiac convert, and he said to me, "I want a cover made." What he was talking about was a tonneau cover, but there were very few on new cars in those days. They'd have to go to a trim shop and explain what they wanted. I had never made a tonneau cover, but I said, "OK." I went to JCPenney and bought "Muslin. (Laughing) went to an auto upholsterer in town and bought all the snap fixtures and everything to put it in, and just measured the thing up. I didn't know how to sew, so I took it home and told my mom, "I need this thing sewn up."

I had already patterned it out and cut it out

from the dimensions, and made the cover come over and cover the wheel. Made it fit the taper of the windshield so it stretched straight into the dash. It had the snaps on the inside the dash, because that's all he wanted it for. Something to cover up the seats and dash in the sun so he didn't have to put up the top every time he came in.

Then the trend came along, and everybody that was concerned about their car had a tonneau cover. When you get back early '30s, though, there were so many things that weren't a fad or a trend. Nobody had any need for them, then things came along…

CC- Growing up during the depression, you must have been about the right age to serve our country during World War II. How did you spend those years?

Emory- I had to get out of anything to do with cars because of the draft, so I went into the defense plant at Douglas Aircraft. Worked up in "Master Layout" with the engineering, blueprints, and lofting figures. We'd make a full scale development of the surface. We had to develop this entire part, an aluminum stamping for example, in flat pattern and produce all the information, all the details, all of the bend allowances, all the lines for forming, what ever it took to manufacture it, the information was all on it. That's what I did for Douglas.

Then we built the first three jet fighters in a new brick building that's probably part of the UCLA campus now. It was right on the edge of the campus. It probably got absorbed by the school because it was a government building. This was all secret project work; you had to be cleared.

We were probably about half way into that project when I got drafted. See, I got five induction notices, but they kept getting me deferred because of the work that I was doing. I thought that this was as important a thing as I could possibly do for the war effort anyway.

I mean, they sent me to school for about nine months of engineering that I didn't have for background. When I went through personnel and showed my credits and everything, they asked if I'd go to school. They had a government crash program that they handpicked us to go to at Compton Junior College.

I said, 'Well, I'm married and I can't afford to go to school. I have to work.' They said 'Oh, we'll pay you to go to school,' and I said 'Where do I sign?'

The course took in everything. Engineers of theory from USC, and practical experience engineers that worked in field, taught us eight hours of class work and we got a day's pay. But we also had eight hours of homework every night.

They would let you- what we call in high school-cheat. Instead of memorizing formulas, you dial that formula on the card and start working the problem. In those days we didn't even have calculators of any type until I went to work at Douglas and we had a 100-key calculator. I thought that was the greatest piece of machinery I ever saw in my life (Laughing) to do all this work and use logarithms and go to it. Think how slow that compared with what you have today!

But when they came through with blanket order, 'Anybody under 26 years old was drafted,' that was for me. They got the aircraft finished, and flew them with pusher props, but the jet engines weren't ready until the war was over.

CC-Which branch of service drafted you?

Emory- When I got into the service, first I went through Navy boot camp. Our company was supposed to be there five weeks, but I was there three months.

I was so sick of getting out on the fender and marching for six hours with all these guys that were so stupid they'd trip over their own feet. We'd rehearse and rehearse, and these guys couldn't get it through their heads, couldn't tell their right foot from their left.

Then after you completed your busywork, they'd assign you all day to pick up cigarette butts. I didn't smoke, yet I had to go out and pick up everybody else's cigarette butts they threw on the ground for something to do all day.

I told myself, "This is crazy!" I did more in one hour when I was working there in aircraft than I did the whole time I was in boot camp. It was something important that had to be done.

When our orders finally came through, 95 percent of us were going up here to Oceanside to learn to operate amphibians, because they were getting started on the invasion stuff.

I thought, Man, what do I need with this? I was thoroughly disgusted with it since the day I went in. I didn't want to go in the first place.

CC- Did you start Valley Customs as soon as you got out of the Navy?

Emory- When I got out of the Navy in '46 I went to work the next morning in a shop doing general repair. I worked there about a year, but that wasn't what I wanted to do. Soon, though, that little custom job would come in, and they'd go ahead and do it anyway.

Then, when the owner sold out and went to rebuilding wrecks, totals, I went to him. He had a partner who was a mechanic, and himself, he was a painter. The three of us were rebuilding totals, but after probably 18 months, General Motors built their assembly plant out there in Van Nuys.

By now he was getting to the point where he didn't want to paint cars anymore, so he decided to go over and take a job with them stripping wheels. (That only lasted about another year or two before they quit putting any stripes on wheels, but he worked there for several years).

When he had sold his shop and went to building these totals, he and his partner had bought the property which was an old abandoned dairy. They'd torn down some of the dairy buildings and made a log shed they were doing these cars in, and they were living in the old farmhouse. So he told me, 'If you want, you can go ahead and come in here and so bodywork or whatever you want to do, because I'm going to be working at the factory.'

His partner was getting ready to do something else, too, so I said, 'OK, I'll rent the place from you.' I got one of the fellows I had met when I worked at the bodyshop in town that wanted to come with me, and the two of us started general repair out there.

We picked up and delivery service, and we got some of the people who worked with the studios, and they'd need something done with their cars. We'd picked them up at the studio, take them out there and do them, and take them back to them.

CC- This was still general repair bodywork?

Emory- Just straight bodywork, and that probably lasted another year. My partner was just crazy about the desert; that's where he spent all his weekends. He and his wife would go and lie out in the sun in some Godforsaken part of the desert.

He finally came in one day and said they decided they were going to move. They'd never owned a house, and they were going to go down and buy a house in the desert. So he went down just outside Indio and he put in a bodyshop down there.

So I just took the place myself and that's the beginning of Valley Customs, though we didn't go by that name then. We started that in 1948, working there on this dairy property.

CC- When and how Clayton Jensen enter the picture?

Emory- He was my brother-in-law, and he was getting ready to go back to Salt Lake where he was from.

But my sister-in-law didn't really want to go. She'd go, but she didn't want to leave because her family was here. So I told him, "Before you go, why don't you just come on and work in the shop";

He didn't know anything about bodywork, but he had a little mechanical experience from the Army because he was in the motor pool all the time. So I said, "Well, I don't like mechanical work- I don't do it- but somebody has to do it. Most all these cars need something mechanical done, and you can sand the cars and pick up on other.";

So I brought him in and made him a partner. That's when we got started working into custom cars which is what I wanted to do all along.

Before, I was doing this on the side. I started doing custom work when I was in high school, and that goes back in the earlier era- when I was in school and going around to all the custom shops.

CC- Were you able to concentrate solely, then, on custom work?

Emory- In our early days in doing bodywork as a custom deal, we did very little straight repair work. Usually it was only involved if we were doing some custom work on the rest of the car.

We also did a lot of aircraft repair work. All the small aircraft, and the handbuilts, still had a lot of fabric on them, but there were a lot of aluminum pieces, engine nacelles, the wheel fairings.

It was all hand work.

CC- was this strictly repair work, or did you do metal forming and fabrication too?

Emory- Some of it that came in for repair was actually destroyed, and we'd make that.

CC- What equipment did you use for metal forming?

Emory- Everything by hand, hammer and dolly. We didn't have equipment! The English wheel was just showing up over in this country at that time. They brought two of them, in and two guys to run them. That was a few years after the war. I think those wheels are still at California Metal Shaping.

CC- Was there enough custom business then to keep you busy, or did you still have to fill in with repair work?

Emory- Well, we did both, but I never did anything mechanical in the way of powertrain or anything like that. When we got Valley Customs started, after I brought Clayton into it and he started picking up a little metal work, he did a lot of our general repair work.

We were only there a few months on the dairy property when we located a service station in Burbank that we could lease. So we moved up there and took the station deal. We got the franchise for the station, and we had the obligation of the pumps, but the gallonage wasn't there. It used to be on the state highway and the highway had moved. After a couple years of pumping gas along with the bodywork, we got them to abandon it.

That was really when Valley Customs started and that would have been late '48. When we got that going, we stayed there as partners until 1960. All the history of Valley Customs happened in those 12 years.

CC- How much of the operation was Clayton able to pick up?

Emory- I would do the design and layout work, then Clayton could come in right behind me. Often, we might be right in the middle of repairing something and a customer would come in. I'd go take care of Customer, and Clayton would pick up right where I left off. He could do any of the operations, but the first time we did something we'd never done before, I'd work out how we'd go about it, and he followed right along. I could get it formed and he could take right over with the finish work.

He was quick to learn, even though he had never worked a piece of metal in his life. The combination worked out great.

CC- What marked the end of Valley Customs?

Emory- In 1960 I sold my home and moved down to Newport Beach. Clayton continued with the shop for about a year, but he was looking for something where he had medical coverage, because he did have medical problems all the time we were together, and it was costly for him. You didn't make enough money to afford insurance.

You did a lot of cars in those days, but shop rate was only \$3.00 an hour. So how many hours can you put in a day? You finally establish fixed prices for everything, and if you get to where you could perform that job quickly, maybe you could make \$4.50 an hour out of it. (Laughing) By the time you figured it all up, though, you had put so many hours in, you had no idea. You were so busy working that you didn't have any time to think of the management end of it. All you're doing was try to make a living.

We all had families to feed, and complications like buying a house and everything it takes, you know; you just put in the hours. When you got done and you finally collect some money, you paid a bunch of bills and you were probably still behind. (Laughing) But that's the way it was. There wasn't big money around.

Oh, we did some cars for people that were well to do, but prices are prices, and there's competition everywhere. It didn't matter if the guy was the lube man at a service station or a studio actor, you had an established thing you did and you'd run an estimate for this and this. In the early days, though, you were working with people that you were lucky if they came in and they wanted their headlights frenched.

That's fine. We'd do that and we may not see the guy again for a year or two, if ever. Meanwhile, he'd go down to one of the other shops. He might go down to George's and they would do something on it. He'd go over to somebody else and they do something on it. He'd go over to somebody else, people that you never even heard of would do some more work on it, because it was all by price.

All of the sudden this car might end up getting completed (which they very seldom were) and appear in a magazine. You might never know that you even worked on it, you know. That's the way the thing went.

Once in awhile you get a car to do complete. You kept seeing this person as a regular's customer, although maybe he didn't have it all done at once, but he wanted the one shop to do it. That way, those cars may have gotten finished, but a lot of them never did.

Among other thing, in the conclusion of our interview, Neil Emory will tell us about some of the cars Valley Customs finished, where they are now, and his views on customizing today. Don't miss it in the next issue of Custom Cars

