

## Valley Custom Shop - part 2

Custom Car Magazine by Geoff Carter

The Valley Custom shop was the famous partnership of Neil Emory and Clayton Jensen. Although in operation only through the years of 1948-1960, its reputation for quality and style was known far and wide.

Clayton is gone now, and Neil no longer customizes cars for a daily living, but the memory of their masterpieces lives on. To hone our recollections of their unforgettable efforts, Custom Car Magazine sent Geoff Carter to Fallbrook, California to interview the surviving partner.

Parts one of our three-part chronicles appeared in the last issue of CCM. It dealt with Neil's personal history, from his earliest influences and inspirations to the beginning of Valley Customs.

CC- What was the custom car business like in 1948 when you started the Valley Custom Shop?

Emory- The custom trend got real strong after the war. There got to be more of it, and more shows. Southern California was the center of the world for street roadsters, custom cars, race cars, you name it. Magazines were just forming. Pete Peterson and his buddies were selling HOT ROD mags at Bonelli Stadium.

CC- Was the southern California attraction because of the weather, serviceman who passed through the area during the war, or what?

Emory- Well, accumulated people, and their various interests. But I was born in L.A. myself. That's why I was there, and never left.

CC- How did you sell a job at Valley Custom?

Emory- Customers came and said, "I just saw so-and-so's car and that's what I want to do with my car." I'd say, "That isn't what you want to do with your car. Now, we can do it, and we will do it, but already gave it away. You called the car by the guy's name. Why doesn't your car look like your car and have your name?" Most everything we built was because it was what we like.

CC- Did you make drawings to show them what their cars might look like?

Emory- On the floor with chalk. That's probably what creates more interest because all of the sudden you're seeing something different. A lot of shops still do that. Big shops like Bohman & Schwartz in Pasadena, they made a full scale drawing on the left hand wall as you entered. You could measure your work right of the wall. Our operation was always so small, we didn't even have a chalkboard.

CC- What did most of your customers want, small jobs or complete cars?

Emory- Of course, a lot of them wanted something cheap and simple, but pretty soon they'd drive in an all of a sudden they wanted to do the whole car.

When Spence Murry brought the Dream Truck in, it was on a '41 Chevy club coupe chassis. He said, "I want the frame and a lowering kit in the front end." About the time we're doing this, GM comes out with that mid-year body change on their pick-ups and had the curved windshield and he says, "I changed my mind/ I'm gonna make a truck out of this."

We still have in the family a '34 coupe that's never been completed- never left the shop in ten years. The guy would keep coming in with his paycheck and we'd do a little more on it. He got

married, sold his interest to someone else, and he came in, and we just kept going.

CC- What cars did you prefer to work on?

Whatever the customer brought in was fine, but 95 percent of our work was Ford. Didn't do many Chevrolets.

CC- What set your shop's product apart from the others?

Emory- Gil Ayala and Barris and Gaylord down in the southern part of L.A. were doing the same kind of cars. You couldn't tell what shop they were out of. Some had been through all three shops anyway, but they all had the same type of look.

Everybody who came in wanted an inch lower than the last one. That's when they got windows that were this big (about 3 inches). That's when they lost the proportion of the top to this heavy, heavy body.

CC- How many of those cars were built back in the 50's?

Emory- All the shops put together couldn't have done more than 50-75 cars. Maybe 100. There's more being done today than were in that 10- to 15- year period. Every state, New Zealand, Sweden. But they're picking up the nostalgia, that's the thing, because that's the way it was done.

CC- What is the reason for this

greater number now?

Emory- Older guys that remember the old books and magazines were interested then, but didn't have opportunity, money, anybody to do it. Now, they're doing what they wanted then.

CC- was Valley custom known for any particular treatment? It sounds like it was the shop that would do anything.

Emory- Well, we did a lot of different thins. Some things were pretty standard. Everybody was frenching lights, so you started looking for different ways to French lights onto a different car.

And there were the street roadsters&hellip; you could line a jillion of them up and the color's the only difference. Nearly everybody was using something that was available. If you had a '32, you had a '32 hood, plain sides, no sides, '32 grill shell. That's why we started trying to design front ends for them, and belly pans. Half the cars had already been channeled; they'd do that themselves, then we'd have to go back and take out some of the stress and strains.

Remember the original NHRA logo? The profile is Dick Flint's roadster. He did what he could, and we did all the finish work. He had an idea; he wanted the front end to be different. I drew it out on the floor and he still couldn't get the picture of what it would look like, so I mocked it up in baling wire, tacking it on until it was the shape I wanted to show him. That was the first time we'd been able to do a total front end. That's probably the most popular of the street roadsters that we did. It's now being completely rebuilt up in Fresno.

CC- Most custom shops were not known for working on street roadsters, were they?

Emory- No, but we did a lot of street work. We'd make hood tops and hood sides, one after another. Sometimes four or five cars at a time.

Form it up and put it in primer and they'd be gone.

CC- Many of your jobs included sectioned bodies, although few other shops did it. Why on both counts?

Emory- Well, it was a lot of work, but we thought it brought better proportion to the lines of a car. We probably did more sectioning than two dozen other shops combined.

Ralph Gillek's '40 Ford was the first car that we sectioned. A lot of people that are into the '40s think that car was the most fantastic, and they still talk about it.

We sectioned the body, cut the windshield slightly- we didn't make drastic cuts to try to keep the proportions going, see- and z'd the frame on a dropped axle. Had the old Studebaker taillights that everybody wanted filled hood and Carson top. Still had the running boards, but they had the low sleek appearance.

When Ralph died, Clayton bought all of Ralph's things from his mother, so one of Clayton's sons has that car up in Salt Lake City. It's in his garage, all apart; He's supposedly going to totally restore it.

CC- How much would a section job cost me 30 years ago?

Emory- Oh, most of them, we got about \$750.

CC- That was probably a bargain, even then. What job required the most complicated metal forming?

Emory- That might be the So-Cal Streamliner. We were one block from Lockheed. Those engineers, the exec people, department heads, everybody over there, they'd take their coffee break and they'd come and see what the hell we were doing. It's a place that was convenient for the time they had just to nose around and get away from the plant. They were in and out of there all the time.

When we started building it, some of those engineers said, "Good Lord, what are you doing with that piece of material?" because of all the numbers on it. They knew we were going for a world speed record, and they said, "You can't use that material on the nose of that car; it will disintegrate under the air pressure."

I said, "All I know is that it's workable." I would go down to Industrial Metal Salvage up in San Fernando Road and go through, whether it was aluminum or steel or whatever, to buy a piece of material I would work by hand- and we did. We'd bend the stuff over a piece of pipe, whatever we had, to get it started, Start cutting and pulling it in. Soon, we got a patchwork quilt.

We didn't have rolling machines or anything. The only thing we did have was Chicago Pneumatic air hammer. We'd clamp that noisy sucker in a vise and stand there and run that metal through. We could start getting some form to it that way, but we had to be extremely careful because the hammer would leave a series of marks down through the metal. We'd have to work all the marks out, so what we could so that way was very limited. But anyway, that's how the job was done.

It was the hard way, but we didn't think of it. That's the only way we knew how to do it, and that's all we had to work with, so we did it.

CC- I believe you were also known for your hammer-welding.

Emory- That was something else that very few

shops would do. There's no real secret to it, but you do have to have a kind of feel for it. But one of the things that we did constantly was hammer-weld wherever it could be reached. Naturally, we come to something where we can't get to the backside of that piece of material. Then we got to do like everybody else does. You do the best job of getting it as good and straight as you can, and you're going to have to fill it.

So everything those days was, if you didn't hammer-weld it, it isn't done right. &ldquo;What do you mean you used lead on it?

CC- Now we think lead is the &ldquo;old time craftsman's&rdquo; things to use.

Emory- Well, most of the shops were using tons of lead, and we used it where we couldn't hammer-weld it, or where we had some hard places to form, and we could get the general shape pretty darn close, and we could do a finish with it.

Otherwise, we were going to spend hours trying to do a little area just because it's so awkward to do it by hand, putting all these little pieces together, but we tried to work it as close as we could, and then go ahead and lead over that. But lead was always a problem because it never worked well with paint.

CC- It still worked better than the accursed &ldquo;Bondo&rdquo; right?

Emory- Plastics have developed to the point now where they are a good mate with paint- providing they're both done right. If they're not prepared right and applied right, forget it. That's always been true with lead, too, if it isn't done the way it's supposed to be. There's a lot of shortcuts to anything. Too many people used to lead over paint and everything else. Smear paint over the whole thing, it's not going to bond.

We take all the lead out of Porsches, because we find over the years, the steel's rotted away behind the lead. The lead might be the only thing holding it together. And over the years, the lead moves and

you'll see little weeping lines where it was used to feather out and blend out to the steel. Those lines would develop in the rockers on almost all those early Porsches.

CC-You mentioned working on Porsches. When did you start that?

Emory- We started Porsches when we had Valley Custom. When

The first Porsche came out of the factory in 1950, there were no dealerships. By '51, we were working on them. They were fussy owners, and they didn't want the local blacksmith working on it.

See, before Porsche started, we were doing a lot of English cars, and then the sports cars and the passenger cars were already here. We would do the early Rolls and the early Bentley or the Morgan and the MGs and all the different ones that they were building prior to World War II. But we got into more and more Porsches, to where we did basically nothing but Porsches in the last 30 years.

CC- Was your Porsche work straight bodywork and restoration?

Emory- We built cars for a lot of dealers- still do- who used them for display cars on their showroom floors. Practically every Porsche dealer in California has one of our cars- if not a dozen, totally restored- that they bring out whenever they want to do some kind of special event.

Of course, back in the early days, Doane Spencer started putting V8-60s in MGs. Of course, we were doing work for him on his own cars; I met him back before I got married. He's now in Cayucos. Doane still has his 'Bird that we worked on.

We worked on that '32 of his, too; the one that Neal East has now. We made the steel top for that, and did the rolling of the cowl and dash and blending it into the doors- everything else on that car had been done for years.

CC- Many of your cars had 'd frames, another challenging modification. Why did you go to that much trouble?

Emory- The trouble with all channeled cars is you lose too much seating space; they're cramped. As far as I know, we probably had a start of the frame 'ing because I never cared for the way the other shops were just cutting a little 'c' out and weakening the frame, but it was quick to do and inexpensive.

CC- Did you do anything else to lower a car?

Emory- We always modified all the springs and 'd the frame so we had full travel. We could put the frame clear to the deck. We got to where we were 'ing frames constantly.

Of course, along with the 'd frame, we used So- Cal dropped axles on all the cars. They were right there in town with us so that got to be a standard thing.

Those with coil springs, we would pull the springs and take them to Hellwig, which was right on the edge of Glendale, then. We'd take them in and the old man would redo the whole spring to the size that we wanted. Then we'd install the air bag so we could control them.

CC- How did you arrive at some of these ideas that weren't common practice?

Emory- We used to cut the floor out and do a road test on them. We couldn't begin to count how many times that U-joint was doing this (jerking motion) under power. The springs start to flex and everything. That poor U-joint is working itself to death, so Traction-Master was brought out to control all that. We got more power out of them and we weren't busting up joints.

Anyway, we used to study all that to see what else we had to do to control it, and try to do something correct. It's all an experiment anyway.

Then we started manufacturing lowering kits for coil front suspension by mail-order, so the guys could lower their cars and have a good ride and control. We made up two different packages, One was a total bolt-on kit for the front, which would do the same as your dropped axle would for a straight axle.

The whole unit sat on top of the lower A frame, then a spacer went on the upper, which could be a shock or an arm, whichever system was being used.

We would have loved to be into spindle manufacturing, as they're doing today, but nobody could afford that type of thing then.

CC- Your kits worked without altering the springs?

Emory-we used the stock spring. All we did was reposition the frame relative to the ground, so we could use the stock frame.

But that's what we kept trying to do all the time- give and control to the car, but there was always a cheaper way to get the job done. Just take the torch and warm the springs and let the sucker go.

CC- Tell us about some of the cars that came out of the Valley Custom Shop.

Emory- Ron Dunn's '50 Ford coupe was sectioned on a new car. That car has been restyled on time and it's been sitting ever since- still belongs to (I believe) a cousin of Dunn's.

About two years ago. I got a call from a fellow up in Paso Robles that I met up there at a West Coast Customs meet, and he knew where the car was. He is trying to acquire it and thought he had a deal going, but I don't know that it ever materialized. I doubt it, because I haven't heard from him since.

The Polynesian, of course, that's another sectioned car. Jack Stewart came back from the service, came in to the Motorama there at the Pan Pacific Auditorium, and saw Dunn's car on display. He talked to us there and said he'd like to do the same kind of treatment to his 88, so we did that for him. It was about a year old when we got the car, and it went complete.

CC- This wasn't the L.A Roadsters' Jack Stewart, right?

Emory- No, that's what confuses everybody. This Jack Stewart is still an Ohio man.

CC- I know you've seen the car that John Ballard cloned from the Polynesian. What do you think of it?

Emory- Well, he wanted to buy the original car, but he finally gave up trying to find it - never got a hold of me- but he finally went to Florida and found another 88 to work with, took it back up to

Indiana, and he has precisely cloned the car- everything we did through all the magazine coverage.

There's a lot of ink in that car because one of the first books put out by Petersen has 75 pages on all the work that we did. It shows it being sectioned, step-by-step, and how we restyled the grille and everything.

Like I say, that car has been totally duplicated, but the original car has also been recovered. Jack Stewart told me about it when I was there at Springfield, and the KKOA managed to get all of us together at on time.