

Valley Custom Shop - part 3

Custom Car Magazine by Geoff Carter

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Norm lived about six miles away from us on an egg farm, and he brought it to us in the rough. He'd chopped it all down, and put the pieces together, we went ahead and did all the finish work on the car and painted it.

After it was running he broke windshields right and left because it had so darn much power. He said, "We've got to do something about this windshield." I grabbed some rod we had, measured it up. And put them on as supports from the windshield down to the backside of the headlight brackets and said, "Go try it." It worked out, so we took them off and had the chrome plated, and that was that.

Now everyone has support rods, but back then it was because the windshield brackets weren't strong enough, and with that much power he'd just break windshields like that (snaps fingers). It just became style, like the chopped boxes on the glass bodies.

Then he got onto Sunset strip with that thing. And the studios would continually damage it. Their insurance would take care if it, so he would come back with a check to repair it. We'd use the money to fix whatever had to be fixed and with the extra bucks clean up other areas. We made frame covers to hide all the extra holes, just simple things that could be done up a little neater. It was all done so slowly it never showed up in the series.

Norm had to have a tow vehicle because he had to move the roadster so often. When his dad got a new car, Norm took over the Cad as a tow car; we painted it to match the roadster, and did a few little dinky things to it.

CC- Tell us how the flames on the roadster came about.

Emory- The studio was chipping the roadster up so bad, we told Norm to go to Jefferies to get flames put on it to cover things up. Then when it came back all chipped up, it was easier to match the flames than the metallic blue paint.

Then Norm wanted to start another project, so he went out in the desert and picked up a T touring body. That thing was rotted out and had 500 bullet holes in it if it had one. It's the one they used on My Mother the Car.

When we sold the car to the studio they changed it, put on the brass radiator and hung a basket on the back. Under the basket was a trailer hitch you could see if you looked closely. It was there for a reason. Norm would use the touring to tow the bucket if both cars were needed at the studio. If all three cars were needed, the Cadillac was used to tow his trailer with the bucket on it. The trailer had a hitch on the back and he'd hook the touring on with a tow bar. I saw that and said, "Man you are crazy," which he is.

CC- How crazy is he?

Emory- One time, Norm had just put his steering back together when he came into the shop and said, "Whew, sure glad I got here! I almost lost it!"

I said, "what's the matter?" He turns the steering wheel this way, and the wheels go that way. He said "I got it all backwards! I had to learn to drive this thing all over again!"

CC- The Kookie car and the Polynesian have been cloned, would you rather see new developments?

Emory- Cloning the old cars is fine and dandy, because nobody knows where most of the originals are. Some of them were destroyed, we know that, or someone who has no interest in them has them locked up somewhere. Bad wrecks wiped some of them out, and there are still many of them sitting around exactly the way they were. They're still in red primer. They may have been sold 15 or 20 times, and nobody's ever touched them. Sitting outside all these years, there's nothing left but a shell that has been rusted and rotted away.

My kids are always trying to track down originals. Once in a while they run across one and they'll buy it. They've got one of them put away now that we're going to bring over here as soon as we get some more space.

CC- Which car is that?

Emory- The '34 coupe I was telling you about (Part 2, cc Volume 2, Number 1). Grabowski bought it, but before he moved to Arkansas he called and asked if I wanted to buy it. I didn't have time for it right then, so he sold the body to someone in the Valley and took the frame and built another car on it.

The guys at Super Bell bought it to build as a Bonneville racer. But then it showed up at the Pomona Swap Meet after the partners separated their holdings and one of them wanted to cash out the car. My son Gary bought it.

CC- How long will it be before it's finally finished?

Emory- Who knows, it's back up at Gary's, now. He's got 40 cars up there.

CC- Do you know of any other Valley Custom cars being restored?

Emory- The Ray Vega car, a '38 convertible sedan, was destroyed after it was sold. Back in 1975, when I was getting ready to move here, I got a call from a fellow who said he found a car I'd done some work on. It was behind a farmhouse in Palmdale. He couldn't tell what it was other than some kind of custom. He looked through some old magazines and identified the car by the interior.

Ray's mother hand-tooled the car's Mexican leather, that was her trade, and it was still in the car. Part of the interior was destroyed I'm sure. When the car was wrecked it took out the left front corner to the windshield post, and killed the driver.

CC- You mentioned that seeing Ron Dunn's sectioned '50 Ford at the Motorama was what sold your work to Jack Stewart. Did you get much of your business from shows?

Emory- The Motorama is the only show we ever attended, I mean there was so much to do in those days. The minute we had an available stall, there was another car that fit in that slot. My father-in-law lived about a mile and a half away. We would have as many as six cars in his driveway every night. We would open in the morning and have to go move cars. He couldn't get into his garage for a month at a time, his driveway was so full.

At the last Motorama, we had 13 entries. The Polynesian was brought out from Ohio and had to have some work done on it. They all did to get ready to show. People were using these cars, you know.

Well, anyway, we got them down there, 13 entries, and we ended up with 15 trophies. They weren't all first place, but if they weren't they were second. And Stewart, with the Polynesian, got his class, and a trophy for traveling the farthest distance. There was something else, like sweepstakes, maybe he got that too. I can't remember that far back.

But that created quite a stir. We looked like we pulled off something that we shouldn't have done. Thank God, the promoter, Pete Peterson had whoever was in charge of the judging select people outside the industry to be judges. You know, it's like the shows you go to now where they have the chief of police pick what he likes. They had picked a group of people to judge, the L.A. Times auto editor, somebody from Ford assembly plant, and someone else, who just picked what they liked.

CC- Did you associate with other customizers of the day?

Emory- I never really associated with any of our competitors. We did what our people wanted. Other shops would only do what they wanted to do. Everybody has a different way of working.

CC- It seems that Valley Custom's reputation for innovation and versatility was well deserved, but in 1960, you got out of it why?

Emory- We all wanted to get closer to the beach and the Valley was getting pretty smoggy. I sold my house and moved.

CC-How long did Clayton operate Valley Custom after you left?

Emory- Oh, about a year, then he sold the shop to somebody else. Clayton took all the when he sold. We had a fenced yard full of cars, all kinds of cars. The owners would leave them and never come back.

We had one, a '36 Ford roadster, that a towed in. He said 'I'll be back and tell you what I want done.' Never saw the man again!

Another was a '37 Olds coupe that already had been chopped and lowered. It had a bunch of brand-new parts with it, '48 Old torpedo fenders, and '47 Olds bumpers still in the wrappers. The owner made three trips hauling stuff in. Then we never saw him again. No idea what happened to him.

CC- What did Clayton do after he left Valley Custom?

Emory- He got a job with the state of California. He did bodywork and painting for them. Then he got injured on the job. I don't think that was settled until after he died.

CC- And when was that?

Emory- He died in 1983 or '84

CC- Are you able to keep in touch with today's custom car scene?

Emory- Oh yeah, KKOA had me come up for their Hall of Fame thing. Valley Custom must have been the first partnership they put in the KKOA Hall of Fame. Then I went back to Springfield, they had a bunch of us on stage for a rap session.

I go to Paso Robles for the West Coast Kustom meet. Then this last

fall we went to Auburn for the Joe Bailon Cruise. I've got a pretty good idea what's going on.

CC- What do you do to pass the time here in the hills? Somebody in this house obviously collects antiques.

Emory- We've always been interested in antiques, primitive American, early, one of a kind. These chairs we're sitting in are all handmade. One for each child in the family, there's a name underneath identifying who it was made for.

My wife started bringing me things that needed repair or refinishing. I would do that at night as a diversion from working on cars. Then she'd take what ever it was back, and trade it for something else.

CC- Is that when you quit working on cars?

Emory- No, I still work on cars, always have, but on a different basis. My sons do the daily routine on the cars; I do it as I get a chance. Right now I have a Pantera out in the garage we're building for Dick Flint

CC- Tell us about your sons' businesses.

Emory- Gary, the oldest, is in Costa Mesa and has Porsche Parts Obsolete. He put the company together, but has just acquired it from the backers that set him up.

Don, my second son, came up here when we did. He has always painted for me. He started painting when he was 12 years old.

Spending a day with Neil Emory makes the past come alive. Now, its hard to comprehend that Rod & Custom was sill "glovebox-sized" when the Valley Custom Shop closed its doors 12-too short years. Thanks to Neil and his family for sharing their part of custom car history.