

Going Back to 1966

By Bob Schmeichel

I remember the mid 60s like they were yesterday. Anyone who was into cars then had a need for speed found in quarter-mile drag racing to see who was faster. For me that was big stuff and hanging around older guys who did that all the time gave me the bug early in life. I rode along a lot of times and if they couldn't wait to race in Sioux City, or the newly opened Thunder Valley Drag Strip, quick trips were made out into the country or even onto the interstate on the south side of Sioux Falls between Western Avenue and Minnesota Avenue. It was short and sweet and either gave you feel-good bragging rights or not. Anyone street racing in town found out it wasn't too smart and getting caught would yield a ticket that added points against your driving record. Having too many points could cause your driver's license to be suspended for six months to a year. So most who street raced went out into the country, did the deed quickly and left the scene to not draw attention. Most of the hot cars I noticed then were two-door sedan cars (all makes) with 4 speeds and 250 to 425 horsepower. At least that was what they claimed. The two-door sedan body style was popular among racers because it was lighter and stronger than a two-door hardtop car enabling it to take the twisting torque of some engines without cracking the body someplace.

In 1966, Tom Olsen bought a 1963 Chevy Bel Air two-door sedan from Stacey Snetsinger. It had a 300-horse 327 with a 4-speed trans. It was a pretty basic car at the time, but Tom was bound and determined to have fun with it. As Tom was telling me the story about the '63, he mentioned he was the seventh owner of the 3-year-old car. I said, "What was up with that?" He replied with apparently people didn't keep cars very long then, to which I thought was kind of strange. Tom admitted to street racing the '63 almost nightly but not without a cost. During the nine months that Tom had the car, he said he knocked out 18 rear ends, which has always seemed to be a weak area on 1958 to 1964 Chevy's. In order to maximize the 300 horsepower the engine had, Tom played around with different rear end gear ratios (4.11 to 5.38) along with adding slicks and always seemed to end up with the same results. The rear end would sometimes break and he would wind up fixing it alongside the road. When Tom wasn't out cruising around looking for a race, he and Joyce were at the Barrell Drive Inn having a snack, visiting with all the other car people in town, and looking like a scene out of the *American Graffiti* movie. Then in February of 1967, Tom decided to join the Army in a specialized field, so he sold the '63 Chevy. Tom and Joyce got married in July of 1969 and Tom was done with the Army in February of 1970. After that, life began as a family with having children and moving forward in life. Then in 1982, Tom and Joyce decided they would like to have the '63 back to have fun with again. After searching for the car through later owners, they found out that it was totaled out near Watertown years ago. So not being discouraged, the search was on to recreate a car that they had 15 years earlier. As a surprise, Joyce found and bought 1963 Biscayne that came from around Lake Poinsett. After getting it home, they saw that it had a little more rust than they wanted to deal with. Then only a couple days after that, Bob Thoen spotted a '63 Bel Air in St. Peter, Minnesota, with a for sale sign on it and told Tom about it. The next day Tom raced to St. Peter, saw the car and bought it. Although it was not the correct outside color, it had the correct inside interior color and the main body was in good shape. So for the next year, Tom and Joyce thrashed on their project parting out three other cars for the desired pieces to finish their new car to match the way they remembered their earlier '63. Tom put together a correct 300-horse 327 with a Muncie 4-speed trans, installed the combination then off to get it painted. As of August of last year, the car was 30 years old and still looks new today. Tom said he has driven the '63 to the Super Chevy Show in Indy 14 times over the years and winning Best in his class the seventh time out in 1990. Out of all the cars that Tom and Joyce have owned over the years, even with their 1969 SS 396 Chevelle, the '63 Bel Air seems to get more attention and remains a favorite piece of their past. Getting old doesn't mean we have to feel old even though our bodies are telling us different. Wanna race!!

