

## Old Customs Never Die

By Bob Schmeichel

If you have been into old cars for the last 40 to 50 years, you would understand the trends that have evolved since the end of World War II in 1945. The young GI's back then had gained a bunch of mechanical knowledge working everything from jeeps to airplanes. They pretty much learned what it took to make something go faster at the government's expense while doing their duty during war time. Some who came back home had the insatiable need for speed. Although money was tight back then, the ones who wanted to go faster did what they knew worked. They would buy a \$10 or \$15 1930-something car and strip it down to bare essentials to lighten and streamline leaving only a body without fenders, a frame and an engine. They toyed around with adding another carburetor or two to get more power and wind in their face with no regard for safety.

During those early years, some of the returning GI's even created businesses building engine parts to sell to the novice to make more power and add to the growing speed picture. This style or trend of car eventually led to high-speed, timed events on dry lake beds and later leading to the Bonneville Salt Flat Racing and a new, evolving sport called drag racing. The Bonneville Salt Flats as well as drag racing has a heavy following even up to today with people who love speed while putting their hearts, souls and a lot of money into it to achieve their goals

In the 50s and 60s the car trend seemed to shift to customizing cars to have something no one else had. It usually involved removing all the identifiable trim on the outside of a car, thus the terms nosed and decked came about. Outside door handles were removed and the top was chopped along with the body maybe channeled to lower the outward appearance. Many things were redone right down to creating a new body by transferring a piece from one car to another and improving the looks in whatever wild way they could imagine. Many of these hand-crafted and created old cars back then had newer, larger engines installed by their creators still with speed in mind and are highly sought after today. Ed Roth, Bill Cushenberry, Alexander Brothers, Barris Brothers, Blackie Gejeien, Bill Hines, Darryl Starbird and Dean Jeffries are just a few of the names who made a big impression on the custom car scene nationally through the L.A. Roaster show along with the publication of *Hot Rod* magazine. That scene blossomed from there and continues even up to today.

Here in South Dakota in the 1960s we had Gary Gerhardt who was enthralled with building a custom car himself because of all the pictures he had seen in *Hot Rod* magazine then. His car of choice to start out with was a 1949 Ford 2-door sedan. Seeing the end result in his mind's eye, he hit it hard and heavy with what he wanted to do to make it individualized. He nosed and decked the car, removed the outside door handles, removed the drip rails, rounded the door corners, chopped the top 4 inches while doing the body work in lead and reshaping the trunk. After a few years with all he had done with the car to change its original identity and not seeing the end, he lost interest in the car. Because of that, it set for the next 25 years until Ken Hedges bought the car on a whim. Ken Hedges realized later that he wasn't going to do anything with the car and in 1990 offered to sell it to Larry Johnston who lived in the Aberdeen area. Larry was excited to get the car knowing of it and how much work was already done. Yet when Ken delivered the car to Larry's house, Larry said he was a little bit overwhelmed seeing the interior area loaded up with seat springs, window trim pieces, fenders and everything else relating to the transformation piled up in a heap. It took three or four years before Larry really dove into this new project setting in the corner of his garage. Once the motivation was there, Larry decided to take it a little further with body modifications he did himself. One area was changing the hood of the car to one off a '51 Ford, which kind of slicked up the front end. On the rear end of the car, Larry frenched the taillights (a term referring to being sunk into the body) to finish out the desired custom look he was going for. Also along the way, Larry installed a Plymouth Voltaire sub frame on the front of the frame to get his desired lowered ride height along with an 8-inch Maverick rear end with lowering blocks. Larry then installed a 318 Chrysler engine and 904 torque flight trans that came out of a local highway patrol car. After getting the car mechanically sound and having it ready to paint, Larry then hired Tracey Batest to paint the car a base-coat clear-coat metallic grey color. The car was finished by Larry after that totally to what you see today. Although this customized '49 Ford is not the only old car Larry and Dawn Johnston have, they have driven it all over the country putting 40,000 miles on since its completion. Larry said besides the car having a really comfortable ride, the old highway patrol car engine in the '49 still gets 20 to 22 mpg along with the car getting more attention than anyone could ask for. Life gets fun every time they get into the '49 to go for a ride!!



SCHMEICHEL 2014