



FUEL FOR THOUGHT

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The Birth of Hot Rodding

Stunning. There is no better word to describe the photography in new book on early dry lakes racing. "The Birth of Hot Rodding" written and compiled by Robert Genat, it features the photographs from only one person: lakes racer Don Cox. Remarkable for a couple reasons, Cox shot color film in the 40's – when the medium was new and expensive – just after the war when extra cash was hard to come by and was prone to get passed over the parts counter for speed equipment. He was one of the few who thought enough about what was going on around him to use the best film available at the time. Because of Cox's foresight we enjoy a vivid look back in time when speed conquests were small increment, raw, knuckle bustin' affairs.

The "birth" of the hot rod genre is intensely told in images taken by a man who lived the dream, the dirt, the deeds, the danger and demise of countless parts on the road to greater speeds and enhanced performance. Looking at the photos you realize Kodak wasn't kidding about the archival properties of Kodachrome, especially if the slides were properly stored like these obviously were.

Author Genat's textbook writing style gives the reader a blunt, yet clear and concise picture of the early days of lakes racing. Reading the book, I had the sense of being transported back to the 40's with tube-style radio announcer providing brief, but interesting color commentary. Genat relied heavily on the archives of lakes racing historian Jack Underwood and racer turned reporter Veda Orr's CT News (California Timing News), which adds depth and authenticity to the story.

Starting in the 1920's, the story explains how early speedsters arrived at the lakes, coalesced first into car clubs then racing associations only to weather the heartaches and physical punishment of World War II before arriving back home with a zeal for some fun. The "bird's eye view" photos dominate the story of speed trials of Muroc, El Mirage and Harper dry lakes where racers and their "hopped up" cars laid the foundation for the speed equipment industry before discovering the majesty of the Bonneville Salt Flats and the convenience of drag racing.

A secondary tale unfolds through the photo captions, and even though some lack identification detail (which would be a tedious task to complete 60 years after the fact and require an eye-crossing examination of countless racing programs, results sheets and magazine and newspaper articles), it is obvious that "youngster" Genat understands the subject well enough to give insightful personality to the "side story". Others require little description: the contortionist view of Stu Hilborn in the midst of squeezing into his streamliner, or Ed "Alex" Stewart's grin as he tinkered with his '32 roadster to the numerous "head down, stare at engine" candids, the past is brought alive.

My main disappointment with this book is that the cover fails to pay proper respect to the vehicle that started it all: the venerable roadster. I questioned Genat who told me photo “just draws you in” and while I agree it is a stunner, it is a shame that marketing took precedence over historical accuracy. Land speed racing gets such little coverage by the media and respect from the publishing world that when a spotlight is cast it is my opinion the right car ought to be the star. Having said that, Chapter four is devoted to dry lakes roadsters so maybe I’m being too critical.

Weaving the dusty tale of early American speed purists, as well as the formation and development of land speed racing’s record keeping authority, the Southern California Timing Association (SCTA), Genat and Cox fill the 160 pages with a frank view of how land speed racing began and evolved in the western United States. More than just a rehash of previously printed material, first person recollections from pioneers Wally Parks, Alex Xydias, Fred Lobello, Jim Nelson, Stu Hilborn, Jack Calori, and many others give the story a gritty, refreshing depth.

Consider Nelson’s recounting of running flat out:

“You just get it (the car) up into high gear and then settle down and ask yourself what’s going to happen next. You’re scared the whole time you’re doing it. I never made a run with any racecar that I was ever in that I wasn’t a little apprehensive. I respected the thing because I knew it could do me in if I screwed up.”

If you have any desire to relive dry lakes racing’s “thrilling days of yesteryear” then the Birth of Hot Rodding belongs in your collection.

The Birth of Hot Rodding
The Story of the Dry Lakes Era
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The Author responds . . .

Hi, Louise:

Wow! I was blown away by your review. Thanks!!! I'll share it with Don, I'm sure he'll be pleased. He's overwhelmed by the response to the book. I kind of knew people would go nuts over his photos.

When you ask me about the cover, I answered without putting much thought into what I said. Yes, the photo did draw me in. I picked the cover, not MBI's marketing staff. I agonize over the

cover photo on my books. The way I chose a cover is to lay the slide sheet on the light table and see which one jumps out at me. This is the one. I agree that the lakes was the home of the roadsters and that's why I devoted an entire chapter to them (I own a '32 coupe and partial to coupes). While I don't know the exact number, I selected as many roadsters as possible to be in the book, especially '32s. I was especially glad to have a color photo of Veda Orr's '32. Too bad she wasn't in the photo. So, I think roadsters were given their due.

Back to the cover. If the cover car and driver (Phil Remington) had not been significant, even though it's a cool photo, I would have picked something else. I also like the cover photo because of the people around the car. One of the things I like about Don's photos is the fact there are people in them doing things. That being said I LOVED your review. You "got" the book. Other reviewers have missed the point.

One of the most interesting aspects of the entire story is WWII and how that changed so many people. It's worth a book alone. They were the Greatest Generation.

Oh yeah, "youngster," hell, I was one year old when some of these photos were taken.

Cheers...

Robert