

Member Spotlight

Gary Blakemore

By Monica Ledwon

This month's Gazette features a new member, Gary Blakemore with his 1947 Buick Super convertible and two Ford hotrods. He has spent his entire life in the automotive parts sales and engineering fields. An affable and knowledgeable man, he is a wizard in vintage stock and hot rod automobiles.

Gary was born at Deaconess Hospital and raised in South St. Louis. During his grade school years, he was most familiar with school detentions and visits to the principal's office. He admits he wasn't the best student. After the family moved to South County, Gary graduated from Lindbergh High School. But not before getting kicked out of a Spanish class by sticking chewing gum and fishing line to the bottom of the nearsighted teacher's trashcan and stringing it along the floor to his desk in the rear of the room. When the

teacher turned to the board, Gary pulled the line, when she looked at the class the trashcan stopped. He performed this magical trick several times before getting caught!

His earliest memory of interest in automobiles was at his father's repair shop. Around the age of 5, he would hang out at the shop with his dad on Saturdays and gather empty car part boxes with unique string pull openings. Gary amassed quite a collection of these boxes to display in his room. At 15, his dad bought him a 1940 Ford sedan, his first car. He immediately began taking it apart. This Ford led to many a Friday night garage car parties at his house with his buddies and their cars lined up and down the driveway. An extra benefit to this social activity was it attracted girls too!

Gary enrolled in SE Missouri State after high school but was only there a short time when his dad died. He then returned back home to help his mother. His dad had moved on from owning the repair shop to running his own business as a manufacturer's representative for several manufacturers. Gary and his mom decided to continue this business. Gary was sent to Detroit to be trained as a sales rep to sell the company wares at the age of 18.



After trying working for a year, Gary and his mother decided it just wasn't for him and resigned from the partnership. He continued his education at Bailey Tech's School of Mechanics. After completing the curriculum there, Gary was hired by McQuay-Norris, a piston ring manufacturer on the Hill. There, he was a junior engineer in parts development and was later promoted into marketing. While working at McQuay, Gary attained a two-year certificate in Mechanical Engineering at Florissant Valley Community College.

When McQuay-Norris was purchased by Eaton Corp., things got even better for Gary career-wise in the later seventies. He first was responsible again for marketing and advertising aftermarket parts. But the highlight of his career path with Eaton was a research project and presentation on the future of engine powerplants for passenger cars and trucks. He was responsible for a ten-year forecast on alternatives and investigated those such as electricity, liquid petroleum, propane, hydrogen, and gasoline. The end result was trucks will always run on diesel and viable options for the future of cars were gasoline and electric/hybrid. Gary recalls the military was very interested in seeing this forecast for their vehicles.

In time, Gary married his first wife, Kris, and they had two sons, Doug and Lee. Kris was always supportive of Gary's modified car projects at home throughout their marriage and always there to lend a hand or a delicate finger hold. Afterward, they have continued a very cordial relationship throughout the years making visits to the out-of-state sons and their five grandchildren by traveling together.

During the childrearing years, Gary realized a goal he'd set for himself back when he was in that library detention for the trash can incident. Reading a Hot Rod magazine to pass the time, he became drawn into an article on modified cars that raced the Bonneville Salt flats. He promised himself that one day he would experience the adrenaline rush on the Bonneville Salt Flats in his own hot rod.

With the help of car nut buddies, Gary found a junked '40 Ford coupe with a tree growing out of the engine cowl. They pulled the body off and drug the hulk on a wooden dolly to a clean, well-lighted place. The chassis was rebuilt by hand out of steel tubing totaling to 158ft. Suspension, steering, and brakes parts were also fabricated. Gary and his team succeeded in installing a rebuilt 1953 Mercury flathead engine with a super charger, fuel injected with alcohol and they added a roll cage. Body parts like fenders and hood and trunk were fashioned out of fiberglass. The day came in 1991 and the Ford set a speed record at 157mph for its class XF/ BVFCC: X(pre 1948 body style)F(Flathead)/B(blow)V(vintage)F(fuel)C(competition)C(coupe). The car has numerous



racing stickers on its windows following a total of ten runs on the flats. It was also featured on the cover of Hot Rod magazine's "Speed Week Article" in January 2008 featuring its exquisite flame art. Gary is most appreciative to his crew members Skip Berger, Vern Daffron, Jack Shea, Jim McKaughan, Duch Fuchs and Guy Morice for helping build and maintain his hot rod and travel with him during these years. This '40 Ford Coupe still lives in Gary's garage today.

In an additional garage area sets a '39 Ford coupe modified also to be a hot rod, but it is more street worthy with an all-steel body and 401 Buick Nailhead engine. That was the family cool car Gary drove around with Doug and Lee as young'uns in the backseat.



1940 Ford Coupe with a blown Ford Flathead engine that holds its 157MPH world class record at the Bonneville Salt Flats



As years went by, Gary retired from Eaton, but that did

not stop him working. He began his own business endeavors at selling automotive parts. Under Car Parts was his first enterprise selling chassis parts such as steering, suspension and brakes to wholesale shops. Gary expanded

Under Car Parts to three locations in the area surrounding St. Lois and the Metro-East. Then in 1980 he sold his business to APS, American Parts Systems in Houston and moved South to join their team for a while in parts marketing.

Gary resigned when APS was sold off and returned to St. Louis. Gary started another business named Car Parts Connection. That business was later sold to Un-Select. Since he's been in parts his entire life, Gary has a huge obsolete inventory from the '40's to the '70's to dissolve. So, he's been occupied with selling and trading via eBay off and on in recent years under the name of Crusin' Auto Parts.

In the '90's, by happenstance, a friend in Blair, Nebraska had become weary of a 1947 Super convertible he'd been working on. He coerced Gary to buy and take the car under his wing saying, "You need this car". As it was still drivable, he took the '47 to a Gateway Chapter



Buick show at the old Ackerman Buick dealership many moons ago and met some of the club members at that time. Though the Super ended up covered with a tarp for a few years, Gary now has the time to delve into its rejuvenation. He is not doing a frame off restoration, but certainly is doing a frame on, taking off every part and wire connection for the ongoing project. The engine is a 263 cubic inch Buick straight 8 from a 1950 Buick. The unique hand-built air cleaner was fabricated from fuel injector inlet cones and bent 3-inch exhaust pipe. The air cleaner lid is fully billet machined to cover the air cleaner elements inside.

One notable accomplishment of Gary occurred in 1977 when he helped to establish the specialized testing and training program sponsored by the National Service Institute for mechanics. Gary developed the National Institute of Automotive Service Excellence Certificate program whereby techs must pass certain tests such as HVAC, Suspension Repair, Transmission and Engine Rebuilding. This testing process helps independent repair shops to be able to promote their business with this Special Certificate that is prominently displayed at their place of business

Gary is enjoying a real retirement now. His very nice companion, Suzie, and he enjoy visits from his family to St. Louis and running around together to various social activities--like Buick club meetings.

The '47 is his main occupation now in a professionally equipped lower-level garage and making more club meetings. He enjoyed his first meeting, May 2, remarking that he loves hearing other's old car stories and getting acquainted with people that admire and treasure the Buick badge. Gary thinks our club should be commended for having the foresight of making the monthly Spotlight happen. It enables members to get to know one another better making car talk and camaraderie much easier.