

Please enjoy reading about Mike Cook in this comprehensive interview before he passed.

A LIFETIME AT BONNEVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKE COOK

By Bill Hoddinott

Mike Cook, now 70, is one of the best-known names at Bonneville and El Mirage. He started driving fast Bonneville cars as a young man, got in the Bonneville and El Mirage 200 MPH Clubs and later in life licensed as an FIM and FIA meet organizer. For years in recent times, he organized the Bonneville Shootout Meets to provide a venue for FIM and FIA World Record attempts, and in '17 and '18 organized the FIM Meet at the Bolivian Salt Flats. Along the way Mike served several years as SCTA President. So, he's been around, and done it ALL in his time!

As his friends know, five years ago Mike had an accidental head injury with concussion and a degree of brain damage. This took a while for recovery but he is very close to 100% again nowadays. Mike is a great storyteller with a clear memory of everything. My friend Les Leggitt, who's known Mike most of his life, suggested him for an interview for SCTA Racing News Magazine, and your scribe was delighted when Mike agreed to it! Without more ado, let's start his story:

Bill Hoddinott: Mike, thank you very much for taking the time to chat with me for an interview for the SCTA Racing News Magazine. You know everyone in land speed racing and they know you!

Mike Cook: Sure, Bill, it will be fun!

Bill: Let's start right at the very beginning. Where were you born and raised and tell us about your parents.

Mike: I was born in Compton, California in 1952. My mom was Beverly Georgia Cook and my dad was Jessie Douglas Cook, who later earned national fame as part of the Stone-Woods-Cook blown gas Willys drag team. I have a sister Michelle and a brother Joe and both of them are still with me, but my mom and dad are gone. Everybody knows about my dad Doug and the famous '41 Willys which was in Hot Rod Magazine all the time in the '50s. Doug was the driver. When I was small, he was often gone because the team was touring around the country. Drag racing became a craze in the '50s due largely to Hot Rod Magazine and the NHRA. Drag strips sprang up everywhere, drawing large crowds for weekly races, or national meets. Strip owners were happy to pay good money for teams like dad's either to make exhibition runs, to compete in their meets, or to have match races with other well-known teams.

Bill: I was reading every word in Hot Rod from the early '50s on, and remember the Stone-Woods-Cook car very well. Tell us something about it.

Mike: There were two of them. The first used blown Oldsmobile power, but at a point they realized they needed more, and built another '41 Willys with blown iron Chrysler Hemi power. The class was always restricted to gas, not fuel, so they were known as Gassers.

Bill: In the '50s I knew all the lore of these engines, and might remind some of my fellow white-hairs that the



'49 Olds OHV V-8 appeared as a 303 - inch 'little brother' to the 331- inch Cadillac of the same year. Charles Kettering was the genius designer at GM who led the project. For many years GM let the Olds V-8s be a smaller version of the Cads as they both evolved. This even continued up to the 4.6 and 4.4 Cad Northstar and 4.0 Olds Aurora dohc all-aluminum V-8s of '93 and later.

One thing about the early Olds and Cad that I think makes an interesting technical point, is they had the two center cylinders on each bank exhausting into a port that was siamesed into a single outlet port on the cylinder head. This was all right for a road engine that wouldn't be highly stressed or have great heat in the head. The Smallblock Chevy V-8 that appeared in '55 and had tremendous success for many years as a production and race engine, had something a little similar. It was touted by GM at the time of introduction as a 'baby Cadillac' engine of 265 inches (eventually evolved to 400). The Smallblock Chevy always had the two center exhaust ports separate, but next to each other, which made an inherent hot area that had to be considered for long-distance NASCAR racing and some land speed applications. If the center of the cylinder head overheated, it could buckle up and let the head gasket leak.

When Chevy produced the Big Block V-8s, they addressed this point and spaced the exhaust ports out equally on the head. Ever since then, most V-8 designs have been the same way. It is interesting to note that recent all-aluminum GM V-6 engines that are turbocharged have cylinder heads with all three exhaust ports led to a single outlet for convenient connection with the turbocharger. This obviously means more heat feeding into the cylinder head, and my GM engineer friends have told me it calls for, and gets, a bigger cooling system to cover it. But is perfectly satisfactory in practice and in field service. In the production car, the turbo is only used for short spurts for passing and merging and so forth.

I can see why Stone-Woods-Cook went from the Olds to the Chrysler Hemi, since the Olds had a wedge chamber and ever since '51 the Chrysler Hemi has had the crossflow design, historically preferred for racing engines. Here of course we do have to note with respect Kenny Duttweiler's turbo race engines for the very successful Speed Demon, which are based on the Smallblock Chevy and built of aftermarket racing components, including the said exhaust port arrangement!

Mike: All that is correct, Bill. Gas or fuel, blown or unblown, the Hemi has always been the ultimate. All the four-valve designs nowadays are just evolutions of the two-valve Hemi. So dad's team got more power with their blown gas Hemi and it was very successful. I must tell you that Doug was one of these 'naturals' who intuitively understands everything about building race engines, comparable perhaps with Les Leggitt today. So Doug did all the engine building and he was just as sharp with chassis ideas and getting the power down to the ground, so this big heavy '41 Willys coupe could blast down the quarter mile and do maybe 160 mph. Those Gassers always made a crowd-pleasing show, with lots of noise and tire smoke, and this big coupe lurching around. Doug knew every trick in the book about getting weight shift for traction by lifting the front end, and even had the two front wheels offset one ahead of the other to get a tiny advantage at the start without tripping the Red Light. The light beam went clear across the two front wheels so having one a little ahead of the other lengthened the time before the beam was connected again. This had no adverse effect on the car handling.

Bill: WOW! Talk about your subtleties and nuances! But racers always think hard about every trick they can come up with to get a competitive advantage, within the rules. Especially when serious appearance and prize money is at stake, as it was in the 'Gasser Wars'.

Bill: Okay, what was next?

Mike: Fast-forward to '65 and Stone had dropped out, so it was just Woods-Cook (should mention the second famous '41 Willys belongs to me now). The original Funny Cars were appearing and they decided to build one

using a '65 Mustang steel body on a race car chassis with a blown alcohol Hemi. They went on with their touring program successfully until Sept. 13, 1967 at the Alton, Illinois drag strip when Doug had a TERRIBLE accident at the end of the strip. He crashed violently at 160-165 and ended up in hospital with 49 broken bones. He survived, but we can imagine how he suffered. That ended his driving career. I should mention that he and my mom had divorced long before this, and I was 13 at the time. We heard about his accident, of course, but there was nothing we could do. Doug had become good friends with Big John Mazmanian, another Funny Car owner, and John cared for Doug closely during that horrible hospitalization and afterwards, getting Doug back on his feet. In fact, when Doug recovered enough, he went to work for John as an engine and car builder for years. But after that terrible accident, Doug had zero interest in driving any more race cars. He never liked me doing it either.

Bill: Understandably. Okay, your mom and Doug had divorced when you were small, and then what?

Mike: After a while, mom met and married Mel Chastain, who was a Bonneville racer still remembered to this day. I must tell you Mel was a very kind stepfather to me, we got along great. He always had a race car project going in the attached garage at our house, and I loved to watch and participate as much as I could. In fact, my mom used my urge to go out to the garage as a means of training me. If I was a 'bad boy' she wouldn't let go out there!

Bill: Tell us about Mel.

Mike: Long story short, his luck ran out at Bonneville in '70. I was 18 and out there, and he was to drive the Cagel-Clark streamliner, which had a Les Leggitt 300-inch blown fuel Hemi. The team wanted to get it over 300 mph and it DID, but at just about 308 mph the air got under the front of the car and it FLIPPED OVER BACKWARDS and started crashing end over end down the course!

The body disintegrated and the wreckage finally came to rest, with Mel safely in his harness in the completely intact roll cage, but the violent shocks of the G forces had damaged his brain. The ambulance carried him to the hospital in Salt Lake City where they kept him for two or three weeks; but there's little or nothing they can do for this type of injury. He did survive it, though, and got back home. But the injury had changed his personality so he could no longer get along with my mom, and after a while they had to split.

Bill: That is a very sad story, Mike, and reminds us those were the early days of Bonneville streamliner design. I know everyone else learned from that accident that streamliners have to be designed with careful attention to the aerodynamics. At very high speed air has a lot of physical force. Tell us about your own introduction to driving Bonneville cars, Mike.

Mike: That was in '73 in Les Leggitt's Lakester and the beginning of a new world for me since that same year, at 20, Penny and I got married and she's still with me today! In due course first our daughter Staci came along, then Mike Jr. and both of them are still with us now.

Bill: Great, Mike, not all of us have been lucky enough to keep the same wife for a lifetime, so this is good place to end Part 1. In Part 2 we'll start with that story.

PART TWO

Bill Hoddinott: Mike, what was your first introduction to motorsports?

Mike Cook: My dad Doug when I was small, and then Mel Chastain when I got a little older. I went to Paramount High School which was right next door to Compton, took all the shop courses, and absorbed them

like a sponge. At 16 or '17 I had a pal who was into stock car racing on the dirt tracks like Ascot half-mile, and I got a '65 Chevelle of my own and raced it a while, before my attention turned forever to Bonneville and El Mirage under Mel's influence.

As I said above, I was out at Bonneville in '70 and witnessed Mel's terrible crash in the streamliner, so I well understood what can happen, and the great importance of safe car and bike design.

Bill: As an aside here, Mike, what do you think of the recent emphasis on CG and CP in race car and bike design?

Mike: I agree with it 100%! I applaud Jeff Bryant and Tom Burkland for bringing that out, and you for doing the stories about it for Bonneville Racing News. I think all this, and Wendy Jeffries' efforts in publishing it, has made a big difference in safety at Bonneville and El Mirage nowadays. I believe most people understand the importance of it for safe high-speed handling. When I first went to Bonneville, I doubt many people did.

Bill: I was glad when Russ Eyres, the chair of the SCTA Roadster Committee, heartily endorsed it. Another man with a lot of influence. After all, CG and CP are just basic aerodynamic principles that go clear back over a hundred years to the Wright Brothers. No aircraft can fly safely without these important balance factors. Okay, in '73 you got your own first taste of a fast car at Bonneville, tell us about that.

Mike: As I said above, '73 was a VERY BIG YEAR for me! Twenty years old and married my sweetheart Penny, and we went to Bonneville for our honeymoon! I was already acquainted with Les Leggitt, he had his Lakester and asked me to drive it! I jumped at the chance, of course!

Bill: Tell us about the car.

Mike: It had a small 300-inch blown fuel iron Hemi which Les was running on 50% nitro. Our goal with it was to be the first open-wheel car to set a 300 mph record at Bonneville. It was the first Woody Gilmore lakester. Similar to his rear-engine dragsters but with heavier tubing. Some time afterwards Les sold that lakester and years later, he built his second lakester which did all the 300+ records at El Mirage. Brandon Leggitt has that car now and plans to race it at Bonneville this year. But this was early days when we all had a lot to learn.

Anyway, after I familiarized myself with the car a bit, we started making some serious passes, and right away when we started doing 295-298, the blower belt would fly off. After each pass we pulled the heads and pan to try to analyze what was going on. At that time you had to make three passes to get a record, and we were well over the class record, but couldn't keep the blower belts on. We were running the engine up to 8500 rpm, and the intake valves were floating into the pistons and getting bent. This caused backfiring into the blower manifold, and the big pressure surge would try to stop the rotors, and the stress on the drive belt would break it or make it come off. So we had to give up and go home without the record.

Bill: Okay, what was next?

Mike: In '74 and '75 I teamed with Bill Burke and Les to form Burke-Cook-Leggitt and run Bill's yellow-red-orange Avanti he named "California Sunshine". This was a stock-body Studebaker Avanti with Les' 300-inch blown fuel Hemi set back a ways from the front axle, which we thought was a good idea in those days. More weight on the back wheels helped traction. This meant the firewall being relocated rearward, and my driver's seat and roll cage back in the original back seat area of the car. Les solved the blower belt and backfiring problem, and I drove the car 201 mph at El Mirage which got me into the EM 200 MPH Club.

Bill: I imagine the engine setback allowed Les to build a fuel tank to put ahead of the engine, the ideal place to feed the mechanical fuel injection pump.

Mike: That is correct.

Bill: What was next?

Mike: After the Avanti I teamed with Bill Burke on a Vega. Which at first was a Chevy Vega steel body on a race car chassis and a couple of small blown fuel Hemis. Our objective was the points championship at El Mirage. We did get the championship after a year or two. After a time we replaced the steel Vega body with a fiberglass funny car body we bought from John Force, and installed a Leggitt 426 blown fuel Hemi. This put the car up to 252 mph at El Mirage. It held its class record and was quite a thrill to drive. It ended up in a fireball, though.

Bill: Wow, tell us what happened.

Mike: I was just at the lights at El Mirage, when a piston burned, which broke a rod and the oil came out on the headers creating a big fire from the nitro which gets in the oil! The cockpit was full of fire so I pulled the chute. So much fire was going out the roof hatch it instantly burned the chute risers off! Now I'm sitting in the fire pulling on the hand brake to get the car stopped. At the same time I'm leaned over and kicking at the driver-side window to get it out. Get the car stopped with the brakes, managed to kick the window out, and tumbled out of it, into the arms of my crewman who was there already to help. I had my own crew members spotted down the course to help in an emergency, so didn't have to wait for the EM SCTA crew.

Bill: Omigod, you must have been burned more or less with all that fire!

Mike: No, not a bit of it, so well did my firesuit, helmet, gloves and boots protect me. I never had an injury in a race car, Bill. The fiberglass John Force body itself caught fire, though, and was destroyed. The car was pretty much a total loss. We cut it up and scrapped what we couldn't salvage.

Bill: Did the car have a fire system in it?

Mike: Yes, fortunately.

Bill: Okay, what was next?

Mike: In '89 Ford Motor Company donated a brand-new Thunderbird car to me, the sixth off the new production line, with which to make a racer for Bonneville and El Mirage. We built a racing chassis for it from 2" x 6" steel tubing with a 1/4" wall, which is very strong and rigid, with the stock wheelbase which is mandatory for Fuel Altered Class.

Bill: What engine did you use?

Mike: A JP-1 blown alcohol Hemi, 500 cubic inches for A Class. This all-aluminum Hemi was state-of-the-art at the time. We mounted it back at 25% of the wheelbase to help get traction. Traction is the biggest challenge at El Mirage and Bonneville with a high-power engine.

Bill: You didn't go for any nitro.

Mike: No, there wasn't any point to it, traction was our limiting factor, not power. Blown methanol is a little easier to handle and tune with than nitro, anyway. We ran the car for five or six years in the '90s and I still have it today.

Bill: Can you describe making a pass in it for us?

Mike: Sure. The car had a two-speed Lenco in it with an air shifter, no neutral, so for startup and launching the driver had to hold the clutch in. The rear axle was a 9" Ford with a 2.40 gear and Positraction in it. High gear in the Lenco was a 30% overdrive since we needed that with the 2.40 gear.

Bill: You preferred the Positraction to a spool.

Mike: Yes, I felt it was safer if one rear wheel lost traction. Anyway, engine's running, your crew pushes you with the pickup, off you go, when you have enough speed you ease the clutch in and give the engine some throttle. Just a little alt first because you have to feel for traction. The process is just throttling and feeling for traction, a little more throttle as speed increases. You get to 7500 on the tach and button the air-shifter to make an instant change to high gear. We set our class record at El Mirage at 249 and at Bonneville, 298.

Bill: This powertrain sounds like the same one Les Leggitt came up with, two-speed Lenco with overdrive on high gear, and 9" Ford rear axle.

Mike: That's right, except Les usually preferred a spool in the rear axle to lock the wheels together. He's still using the same equipment in the Beast Studebaker today.

Bill: You mentioned you still have this T-Bird today, and you have some others of your Dad's race cars.

Mike: Yes, my Dad Doug first raced a '37 Chevy coupe with a blown small block Chevy before he teamed with Stone and Woods on the famous '41 Willys blown gasser. There were two Stone-Woods-Cook '41 Willys gassers. Another man has the first one, with the blown Olds, and I have the second one with the blown Hemi today which is fully restored and in the Lions Museum in Long Beach. The Lions Dragstrip is long gone, but the Lions have a very fine museum full of period drag cars there now, including my Willys.

Bill: How did you make your living all down through the years, Mike?

Mike: I always had a big garage at my house, we lived first in Paramount and then moved to Norco where we still are. I made my living building race cars in it for customers. My friend Gary Garcia worked with me for many years on this, and a few other people for short periods. In recent times we made fiberglass bodies and tonneau covers. I'm retired now.

Bill: Still a lot to go here, Mike, about your service as President of the SCTA, the years you ran the Bonneville Shootout FIA/FIM Records events, and the times you went up to Bolivia. We'll get into that in Part 3.

PART THREE

Bill Hoddinott: Mike, you served two terms as SCTA President, when was that?

Mike Cook: 1998-99 and 2004-05. This was an exciting and demanding job, you're responsible for everything, working through all the committees. A big part of the job is being Bonneville Speed Week Meet Director. I enjoyed all of it.

Bill: A bit later you started up the Bonneville Shootout Events, which ran from 2006 through 2019. Tell us how that came about.

Mike: No-one has ever questioned the accuracy and integrity of SCTA Bonneville and El Mirage timing and class records, but the FIA and FIM are the recognized World authorities for speed records and so naturally, some Bonneville teams were interested in setting FIA and FIM records. I was approached to see about making this happen.

You realize that FIA and FIM records require two-way passes over the same measured kilometer and mile within two hours for FIM and one hour for FIA. This means a minimum 12-mile course at Bonneville to give room for acceleration and safe stopping. Obviously there was no way this could be combined with normal Bonneville which are running cars and bikes one after the other on one-way courses.

So, I approached Dave Petrali of the USAC (FIA representative in the United States) to find out how I could get licensed to organize sanctioned FIA record meets at Bonneville.

Bill: Let me interrupt here, Dave is a son of Joe Petrali, who was a famous professional motorcycle racer in the '20s and '30s and then became a professional with USAC.

Mike: Correct. Anyway, Dave guided me through the steps to become licensed to organize FIA meets at Bonneville. This involved having licensed timers, a licensed surveyor to set out the course with great accuracy, licensed FIA stewards and so forth to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the timing and the new records. Mike Akatiff approached me later to add FIM so he and Rocky Robinson could run the Ack Attack motorcycle streamliner at my meets. So, I went through the required steps for this. As you know, Mike and Rocky were successful in setting the FIM world speed record at 376 mph in 2010 which still stands. They have been up to Bolivia twice to try for 400 mph but ran into technical issues both times. They are presently scheduled to go to Bolivia in August this year ('23) for another shot at it. The air drag is much less at the Bolivian Salt Flats' 12,000-foot elevation but the thin air increases the challenge of tuning the electronic fuel injection for the two turbocharged Suzuki Hayabusa engines. But I've talked to Mike Ack and I know they want the 400mph mark very very badly. That is such a high figure it would be very hard for any other team ever to beat it.

Bill: I know a lot of teams have set FIA and FIM records over the years you put on these meets, Mike, and they took a lot of work to bring all the pieces of the puzzle together for a smooth-running meet.

Mike: I must thank everybody who worked with me on these events. We had lots of fun, but it was a lot of hard work, and the expenses for the officials were considerable, and that had to be divided among the entries.

Bill: The last of these Shootout meets was in '19, and you tell me that's IT for this activity; why is that?

Mike: The main thing is the Bonneville Salt Flats have been reduced so much by the salt mining the BLM has allowed, that it's almost impossible to find 12 miles of good salt on which to lay out a good, safe course. SAFETY is always the prime consideration!

After '19 the covid pandemic came over everything, so that stopped things dead for a while. But as you know, Bill, I had that nasty accident a few years ago which resulted in a brain injury. Since then I've been okay, and improving, but there is too much chance I might forget something important which could cause confusion in the meet or trouble for some team. I can't have that.

Bill: In '17 and '18 you organized the FIM part of the Top One Oil Bolivian Salt Flats event. Those were the last

Bolivia meets to date, but Mike Akatiff does have the next one set for August this year.

I think it is very interesting that Andre Rodrigues and his wife Caroline Giostri of Curitiba, Brazil were the prime movers on the first two Bolivia meets. Andre had been in touch with the late Jack Costella, one of our famous Bonneville car designers and record-breakers for many years. Andre had built a lakester of his own following Jack's plans. In 2016 he and Caroline organized an informal meet where he got some of his fellow racers up to the event and they ran their equipment for GPS times, since they lacked official timing equipment. Jack traveled all the way up to Bolivia on his own from San Jose, California, to attend. Andre had an 1100cc motorcycle engine in the car, and drove it about 180 mph or so, after Jack had inspected the car minutely and declared it race-worthy.

The next year, 2017, Andre and Caroline went MUCH further to get the Bolivian government involved, and Mike Akatiff got you and Jack to come along since you had the authority to get the FIM sanction for the meet. Top One Oil sponsored it and the Bolivian government supported it in every way, to the extent of the President of Bolivia, Evo Morales, making a personal appearance and giving a speech of welcome to the racers! There were singing and dancing girls in national costumes, and altogether it was a pretty FABULOUS SUCCESS! Mike and Rocky ran the World Record streamliner (but had trouble with it as noted) and the late Ralph Hudson and Al Lamb brought their near-300 mph 1000cc sit-on turbo bikes to run for FIM class records. They had a duel for the class record and Ralph came out on top with a class record in the 290s, and a one-way pass over 300! Other bike racers also competed.

In '18 Top One Oil again sponsored an event up at Bolivia, and you were engaged to be the FIM event organizer. Once again Mike and Rocky ran the world record streamliner, and Ralph ran his bike.. So, this was another successful meet.

Mike: I was wondering how things would go up at such a high altitude, but I didn't feel any ill health effects from it. A couple of other people did, but nothing very serious.

Bolivia has EVERYTHING we wish Bonneville had, in terms of the enormous salt flats which are much bigger than Bonneville's ever were, and the salt is THICK rather than so thin. Once again the mining over the years the BLM has permitted has really hurt our beloved Bonneville for land speed racing purposes. But Bolivia also has challenges, the first being the logistics of getting your equipment up there. Then the hotel is quite a distance from the course which means a long drive before and after each day's event. Also a lot of local arrangements have to be made, but the Bolivian government is 100% supportive because they want the tourism.

I am very glad I got to go up to Bolivia twice, Bill, both times were unforgettable experiences.

Bill: Mike, I guess that brings us up to now. Any final thoughts?

Mike: My thanks to you and Jill for your interest in my story. I am grateful to all the many friends who have helped me and teamed with me down through the years on our racing projects, with SCTA, with the Bonneville Shootouts, and with the Bolivia adventures. I'm grateful to my wife Penny for sticking with me and letting me do all these things over our lifetime together. Life has been very very good, and I look forward to a lot more of it!

Copyright 2023 Bill Hoddinott

(Scroll Down for Pics)



