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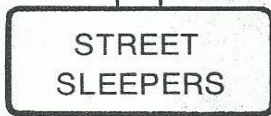
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## ABOUT REBELS ... AND A T

by Dick Wells

It was many years ago. I was barely more than a teenager, happily employed at Hank's Auto Store, a parts, accessories, speed equipment "hangout" for rodders in Lincoln, Nebraska; where the owner's name is still Clarence Williams, a mystery that continues to baffle many of the "Hank's" customers. It was in the days when we all wore tan baggy pants, coin-holder loafers, and had our hair cut so short we could, by virtue of our appearance, be accused of trying to achieve a likeness to Ray Brock. And when the Hank's employees wore poor-fitting, starched beige jackets which prompted our competitor down the street, Bill Smith at Speedway Motors, to ask upon meeting me for the first time (while wearing my Hank's jacket), "You work in a drug store?"

It was a brisk fall day, I remember. I was taking inventory, unconsciously dreaming of the day when I'd be on the management team of one of my many idols, Vic Edelbrock, Harry Weber, Racer Brown, Dean Moon, Phil Weiland, or? That dream was rudely interrupted when a few local hot rodders — Norm LeGrande (whom I recall had just gotten his driver's license), his brother Al; and Stan Dinges — dropped in to lay an idea on me. "What this town needs is a good car club," Norm insisted, "and we think you're the one who can put it all together, 'cause you talk to most of the guys when they come in here to get stuff for their cars."

A negative shake of the head and an "I'm too busy, and I don't know anything about car clubs," proved to be in vain. A few days later, I found myself among some 30 local rodders in Norm's back yard. There, under a big tree, next to which was Norm's current project (dropping an early Hemi into a '49 Plymouth), a new club was formed and titled the Rebels. (Nothing to rebel against; the name of the club was rationalized as meaning "rebels against unsafe driving." Ahem.)

But that humble beginning was a springboard, from which grew one of the area's larg-

est rodding groups, the Lincoln Timing Association (as many as a dozen member clubs strong at one time). Unbeknown then, it was indeed a pacesetter organization whose projects and holdings surpassed any other known to be in existence. Among the "holdings," a small abandoned warehouse which served as club garage and meeting place. It was on the outskirts of town in an industrial area, and I seem to recall that the entire building and adjacent parking lot were rented by the association for about \$75 a month, plus utilities. It was a great place for nightly meetings, both organized and casual, set up to accommodate eight cars which could be worked on in bays, with a couple of separate meeting rooms, fitted out with dozens of old, worn-out, over-stuffed sofas we used in place of chairs. The addition of a work bench, equipped with a set of tools donated by Hank's (maybe the *real* reason they wanted *me* to help organize the first club), resulted in a car clubber's dream come true.

We had a few problems, among them the heating system we used in the winter: An old pot-belly stove, in which we burned battery cases found stacked up in abundance behind the building. It worked fine until we learned that burning hard rubber produces toxic fumes which are fatal if inhaled over a period of time. That, and the time our 7-Up machine monitor stole all the proceeds to buy some badly needed part for his car. And the time a possum snuck into the garage area, and we all thought that the place had been invaded by the biggest rat in the world.

Among the dozen or so clubs of the Lincoln Timing Association, the Rebels proved to be the wealthiest, with some 75 dues-paying members. As such, our treasury allowed us to embark on a variety of projects, not the least of which was a club car. The decision to build a rod came during one of our regular meetings, and we all began scouting for a suitable purchase, a T or A from which we would combine our talents and build that long-awaited club car. Someone spotted a '26 T roadster pickup about 50 miles out of town. After negotiating a price, the purchase was made, the price paid: A staggering amount I remember to be about \$100! Since the owner suggested it could be driven away with the addition of a battery and air in the tires, we called upon the Hank's mechanic, Carl, for assistance. Carl was an elderly widower who had gotten his start as a mechanic before the advent of Ts and As. In his words, "I've been working on cars so long I can remember puttin' 'em up on blocks if they were goin' to be stored very long, 'cause they had hard rubber tires." And he had told us many times about putting together new Ts that were purchased and delivered in crates, the wood from which served to make floorboards.

Carl doubted the advisability of driving the T 50 miles to the club garage. There was the question of the condition of the coils and the bands in the transmission, and no registration. So the call went out for a member who had a trailer hitch on his car. Charlie Hughes responded. I don't remember why Charlie had a trailer hitch on his car, a '47 Chevy coupe.

Charlie was a devoted hot rodder, and one of my good customers at Hank's. I remember that shortly before moving the T he came into the store to pick up a set of headers for his 6-cylinder Chevy. They had just been made available from Fenton. Cast iron headers for Chevy sixes. Wow! Charlie just had to have them, I decided, and I sold him the first set. Well, I think Hank's got Fenton's first prototype header system, because the fit was something less than accurate all the way through. It took Charlie two weeks to get them installed, despite the fact that he had the resources of his dad's auto repair shop, and the expense in reshaping and welding all the tubing became an investment of considerable proportions.

One bitter cold Sunday morning, I decided that I had better go over to help Charlie with his header problem; it was very cold, but the installation was nonetheless taking place. When I pulled up and parked, I honked the horn before going up to the house. As I approached the back door, I hadn't noticed that the porch was a solid sheet of ice. About the time I got halfway across the porch, Charlie had opened the door and stuck his head out into the cold to see who had honked. In that split second, I slipped on the ice, slid across the porch at speed, fell against the storm door, pressing the edge into Charlie's extended neck, causing his tongue to flop out and his eyes to bulge with a gag. We didn't work on his car that day . . . the combination of my accidental "attempted strangulation" and the fact that his only car was laid up for two weeks because I had talked him into a set of headers reduced the intensity of our friendship.

But that was after Charlie agreed to tow the Model T home to the club garage. We got Hank's mechanic, Carl, to help and in the biting cold we towed the T back to town after putting air in the tires; Carl rode high in the roadster pickup, droplets of ice forming beneath his tearing eyes due to the cold wind in his face. Charlie and I had the warmth of the heater in the tow car, and frequently looked back with the comment, "Cheeezzz, I don't see how he can stand it."

Once safe at home in the club garage, everyone had a chance to look over the new Rebels mascot. During that appraisal, when several of us were just standing around admiring the new possession, someone from the group commented, to the effect, that we should restore that one . . . it's in too good of shape to build a rod; we could find something else to "cut up" for a rod later on. Besides, we didn't have an engine at the time. So it was decided at our next meeting to restore our prize purchase, rather than dig into it; the plan being to later buy still another piece of vintage tin for a rod.

Mechanic Carl wasn't too receptive to our suggestion that he help us restore the T. I'm sure he knew at the time who would do all the work. But he finally gave in. Carl was commissioned to rebuild the 4-banger engine and trans; we found new transmission bands at nearby Singer Boys Auto Parts, as well as some of the other necessary pieces, such as valves, rings, and new coils (at Hank's we had

stock parts dating back only to Model As; Singer had "everything"). Carl did most of the engine and trans work (or was it all of it?), and when he was finished, at idle you could count the pistons firing because she'd idle so low and smooth. But the club members got into the act on the body — we sanded, filled in a few rust spots, and even chierred up the stock wooden spoke wheels under Carl's guidance; that required dressing them down with some kind of special oil, the name of which escapes me. And we were able to order a new exhaust system (exhaust pipe, muffler, tail pipe all one piece) from Goerlich's, of Dynatone Muffler fame, who still had a couple of units in their Chicago warehouse.

Soon thereafter we painted it. If "You can have any color as long as it's black," was Ford's rule, we decided we would have to rebel: Our T was painted white . . . and the club's emblem emblazened on each door (only one of which opened, remember?) in a dashing blue by our artist, Dale Heileman, who to this day will deny that one side had the emblem painted on crooked. Dale eagerly accepted the painting assignment. He had earlier gone out and bought a '27 T touring that had been completely restored, and for \$200. When he drove it home, his father was furious and made him take it back for a refund . . .

The intended use of the Rebels T: Parades and occasional sprints around town to advertise the club and its members' good, safe driving intentions.

Before we could schedule the T for anything, however, it was necessary for us "crazy hot rodders" (to use Carl's description after working with us in the restoration process) to learn how to drive it. You know, the three-pedal system for low gear/drive, reverse, and "brake"; with the best brake a mash on the reverse gear pedal, because T brakes leave a lot to be desired. So at a club meeting, it was decided that the following Sunday afternoon would be "driver's ed" day, when any members who wanted to could get Model T driving instructions from Carl.

The first couple of tries were successful. The members listened carefully to Carl's instructions, drove slowly around the club house parking lot and the deserted street than ran in front. The third member to try, however, was indeed a hot rodder. He all but ignored Carl's instructions, confidently climbed aboard, and we helped him fire it up (by cranking — we had the electric started accessory, but it ran down the battery too quickly). Off he went, under full throttle. The VW has nothing on a T. When you hit low gear, with any revs up at all, the T shoots off in a lurch. The club member, whose name I've forgotten, was on his way, chugging around the parking lot, struggling with the super-quick steering. Other club members, who had moments earlier stood around idly discussing their own cars with fellow rodders while awaiting their turn, soon took notice of the Model T, which was fast becoming out of control, rattling its way in erratic circles with the driver frantically trying to regain some degree of control. Although we could never prove it true, I'm sure he was frantically

searching for the clutch and brake pedal that simply do not exist on a T; and in those frenzied moments, completely forgot about the steering post throttle which he had pulled down for all-out speed.

Amid the dust and clatter were shouting and waving arms; Carl stood back against a wall shaking his head in disgust and muttering indistinguishable criticisms. Others stared with wide eyes and open mouths in disbelief. Suddenly the gleaming white T disappeared *inside* the club garage, through the wide open door, where the sound of the sputtering exhaust was quickly overshadowed by the clank of tools falling to the floor, shuffling, running feet, and loud shouting. In a few nerve-tingling moments, the T re-appeared, steaming out the door, the driver still gripping the wheel with white knuckles, and he proceeded down the drive, onto the street, with club members scattering to get out of his way . . . except for those who leaned against their own rods with outstretched arms as if to be protecting against a collision.

The T finally lurched to a stop — I think it ran out of gas — down the street. To this day, it has never been explained how the driver entered the garage door, turned the T around in the tight quarters, then exited through the same door . . . without a single scratch on the T.

In the months that followed, the club learned a lot about Model Ts: They were hard starters, and the frequent response to taking it out for a spin was, "You ain't gettin' me to crank that thing!" We hadn't experienced any broken arms or wrists, because Carl's instructions on how to hold your hand (open) against the crank handle had been emphasized. Sometimes it didn't take much to start it. If it was hot, it would *occasionally* start simply by turning on the ignition . . . if the piston/distributor relationship happened to be correct, a buzzing coil's spark would give life to the combustion cycle with one zap, and it would shudder to life and idle.

It was a typical T with a few "bugs" to be sorted out, and our club members were poorly equipped to refine the tuning. Carl had long since resigned himself from the project because he tired of the harrassment and teasing by members who didn't hesitate to suggest the possibility of installing multiple carbs, Mallory dual-point ignition, an electric fuel pump . . . The Rebels T became known for its curious behavior. It would always start and run until it got to its destination, but would refuse to fire for the drive back; in parades, it ran hot, and more often than not, was good for only about half the parade course; and as a showpiece, it wasn't a hot rod, nor an antique, because it was painted white and somewhere along the line someone said that the pickup bed was the wrong year.

Today, word has it that either Woody Walters or Ron Bonebright of the Rebels Auto Club still know of the T's whereabouts. If so, we'd like to share that information with ROD ACTION readers, maybe even locate a picture of it, because it is symbolic of the fun and enjoyment a car club can experience through a single project. ▼