

Craig Breedlove was one of the founding fathers of the Igniters. He was too young at the time to drive legally but he did have wheels of his own – a little deuce coupe – and, zowie, he was great at auto mechanics! It was a skill that would ultimately lead him to world fame as a setter of world land speed records. Five-times. Firstly at Bonneville Flats in northwestern Utah on August 5, 1963. On that day he was the first man to exceed 400 miles per hour in his original three-wheeled, jet-powered vehicle, *Spirit of America*. Breedlove was 26 years old. In the next couple of years he set records for going 500 and 600 miles an hour. Half a century later he's an old dude but still seeking a new record, surpassing 800 miles per hour is the goal these days. And it all started in Venice with him hanging out with his buds in someone's garage, up to their shoulders in grease, collectively pumping life into their hot rod dreams. dh



Craig Breedlove in 1963 with a model of his record setting Spirit of America

Hot Rod

by Delores Hanney

They were a clutch of Venice High School guys whose cohesion and self-definition found its glue in a shared passion for hot rods. Said passion caught fire on a fall Friday night, following the weekly sports night in the boys' gym then burgers at the Piccadilly drive in. All twitterpated by the intoxicating post-midnight clandestineness of it, at a given signal they caravanned – among a bunch of other kids in a search of a thrill – to Culver Boulevard, the little used, straight-shot of a two-lane street, there to witness a drag race between a deuce coupe and a roadster.

Brick one on the path towards the birth of The Igniters Car Club and a cozy pod of lifelong friendships.

Their High School epic unfolded during the years following World War II, when the Venice High student body boogied along across a seventh-through-twelfth grade continuum. They were in the ninth grade when my guide to The Igniters, Marv Gelbart, began to hang out with Doug Sarian, Roger Rourke and other incipient Igniters. As teachers were feeding their minds full of algebra, biology, Shakespeare and good grammar, Marv, in particular, simultaneously, stuffed *his* brain with auto smarts. Most of the others were already more sophisticated on the subject, breezily fluent with such jargon as 'channel' and 'Dago front axle,' as well as automotive anatomy and physiology.

This was the era in which hot rods first exploded onto the teen cultural scene. Herein, owners

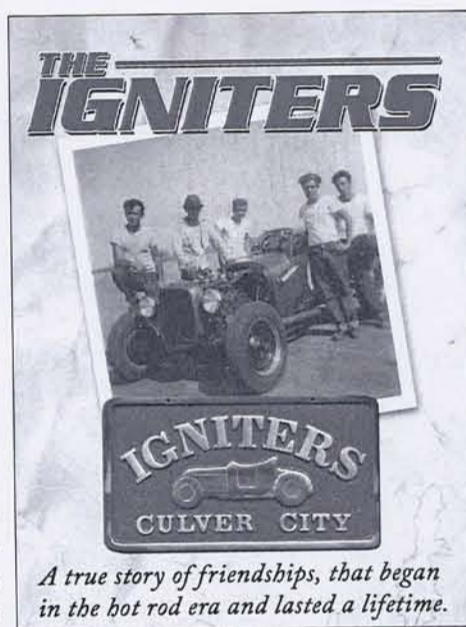
and their mechanically inclined sidekicks revitalized old cars into racers via enthusiastic infusions of jivey modifications, high-performance accoutrements and endless hours of work.

The summer before junior year, jobs were hard to come by to finance an adolescent hot rodder wannabe's dreams, since vets then were up for preferential hiring. Marv, Doug, Roger, Tommy Brown and Don 'Hickey' Hickman took inventory of the lamentably limited options and trundled off to the Beaumont-Banning vicinity to pick fruit.

From its inception, the enterprise was fraught with challenges. Roger's 1933 DeSoto threw a rod on the first day, seventeen miles outside of Palm Springs. The farmer who hired them to thin apples went all shifty and shady when it came time to pay but was decidedly disabused of his dishonest intention by a rep from the Department of Agriculture. In Hemet, the DeSoto's engine

and tranny blew. While picking apricots, the ladder he was standing on suffered a major breakdown, pitching Roger to the ground with a disastrous consequence in the form of a badly busted up arm. Their hustling swansong saw Hickey and Marv schlepping engine blocks and washing acres of windows at a big gas station in exchange for the petrol to get them back home.

Regrettably, they still had no funding for their hot rod aspirations upon that return the weekend before school resumed. Yet Marv and Roger and Hickey were as fat with satisfaction as a county



A true story of friendships, that began in the hot rod era and lasted a lifetime.



It started in 1947 and the friendships remain today. This picture shows club members in 2008. Marvin Gelbart is third from the left.

fair blue ribbonist in china painting at having persevered through the relentless botherations to ultimately succeed in that part of their objective calling for them to work and take care of themselves all summer.

Jobs were more gettable now, so one after another they found employment, then bought cars and in a team effort commenced souping them up to conform to their individual hot roddy visions.

They were cleaning up Tommy's tools and garage one Thursday afternoon, after lowering Marv's car, when Roger first floated the idea of founding a car club of their own. With its view to recognition and racing on dry lakes everyone

was instantly onboard with the notion. They met a week later to review the Russetta Timing Association's rules and regs and costs. Failure to belong to such an association left a club flapping around under renegade status, powerful magnets of police interference. Lubed with a little beer, they contemplated possible club names. Briefly considered then quickly flushed were 'The Fender Benders,' 'The Choppers,' 'The Bosch Boys.' When someone suggested 'The Igniters,' the whole room got still.

Oddly, the plaques that proclaimed their proud car club membership said, "The Igniters, Culver City," though all but one – of more than a dozen – were students at Venice High. They fudged the location because nearby Culver City was halloved ground in terms of hot rodding, and they wanted to glom its cachet. Also to dodge sneering putdowns such as "Venice Wharf Rats."

Cogitations, speculations and ruminations on girls sucked up nearly as much of their attention as hot rods. But *that's* another story.

For the complete account, Marvin Gelbart's book, The Igniters, is available as a paperback and on Kindle from Amazon.com