



PORT TOWNSEND & JEFFERSON COUNTY LEADER

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Rakers Car Club celebrates 50th anniversary

By Patrick J. Sullivan, Leader Staff Writer

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Fifty years ago, teenagers and young men in Jefferson County were just revving up to the "hot rod" scene involving customized automobiles, often pieced together from wrecking yards.

And then along came the new cars of 1957, further fueling the need for speed and style.

"Fifty-seven was the best-looking year ever for cars, as far as I was concerned and still am, really," says Bill Eldridge, who was a high school sophomore at Chimacum that year. "The 1957, no matter if it was a Studebaker or a Chevrolet or a Mercury or a Plymouth - whatever it was, it just had style."

Gates are open at the Rakers Car Club show from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, June 23 at Memorial Athletic Field in downtown Port Townsend. – Photo by Patrick J. Sullivan

Eldridge is now serving his third term as president of the Rakers Car Club, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this Saturday by hosting the fourth annual Rakers Cruz In at Memorial Athletic Field in downtown Port Townsend.

"You'll meet the nicest people at a car show," Eldridge says. "There's a lot of pride and a lot of fun involved."

Dragster at noon

Motor vehicles and motorcycles of all types and years are welcome for a \$20 entry fee starting at 8 a.m. Gates are open to spectators from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Spectators age 12 and younger enter free; all others pay \$5. A DJ will play car show music all day; there are no on-site concessions and no vendors. Rakers T-shirts, designed by member Karl Sebastian, and dash plaques are available to the public.

Back again for a special appearance is Wayne "The Peregrine" King of Gardiner with his vintage top fuel dragster - the second fastest race car in the nation in 1964. King was the 11th driver to reach 200 mph. He'll start the dragster's 354-hemi engine only once - at high noon. Bring your earplugs.

It's unclear how many 1957 cars will be at Saturday's show. Eldridge's '57 Corvette is in pieces in his garage. The club has another '57 Vette and two '57 Ford Rancheros.

"We encourage anyone with a '57 to bring it down," Eldridge says. "That was just a special year for cars."

Car clubs

The Flywheels was the first Jefferson County car club, formed in 1955. Its logo was a bumblebee atop a flathead

V-8 engine with prominent carburetor and pipes, with large wheels on the rear and small wheels on the front.

"That was a time when hot rods were happening," says Robin Bergstrom, who helped design The Flywheels' club plaque and owns Bergstrom Antique Autos in Port Townsend.

Military men stationed here with the U.S. Navy or Coast Guard, often with California connections, introduced the first hot rods to Jefferson County.

"We'd see a '32 Deuce that would be in town and our eyeballs would fall out of our head," Bergstrom recalls. "That evening we'd be working to try and get something to look that way."

Eldridge says that several car magazines were being published by the late 1950s, another good place for ideas. "The old junkyards were bulging with old car parts, so a guy could just set off to create something" based on what he had seen or read about, Eldridge says.

The Rakers formed in 1957 and eventually merged with Flywheels members. The Rakers logo is patterned after a 1939 Ford, "raked" with a low front end and higher rear end.

Hot rod clubs had a bad reputation at the time - partly due to Hollywood movies - and the Rakers specifically made efforts to combat any reputation of being a hot rod gang. "Courtesy cards" were printed, and when members would stop to assist motorists in trouble, a card would be passed.

Early ideas

Bergstrom says that Ford Model Ts' and Model A's were initially the hot rod cars of choice for teens, basically because the wrecking yards were full of them. "After [World War II] people were starting to get ahead and they wanted new cars," says Bergstrom. "For us kids, we started out with what we could afford."

The priorities were a strong engine and good brakes. His first customized car was a 1940 Chevy.

"With any of the cars, you had to have wicked pipes," he says. They'd stuff stainless steel pads into the exhaust pipes to "tone it down" while driving in town, "but you'd rev it up and blow the pads out and be as loud as ever."

It was 1957 when Eldridge bought his first car: a 1930 Model A purchased for \$75 from the original owner in Chimacum. The next year he got a 1939 Ford coupe, and that's what he had when he joined the Rakers.

The Rakers were about a year old when Eldridge came to the Port Townsend Community Center for his first meeting in summer 1958 - and was elected club secretary/treasurer. Eldridge was a Raker until 1960, when he went off to college - and sold his Rakers jacket and plaque. "I haven't seen one of those jackets since," he notes.

The Rakers faded away in the mid-1960s, but a car club reincarnation came with the Peninsula Puddle Jumpers, a group that lasted through the 1970s. The Olympic Sports Car Association - foreign cars, mostly - formed in the late '60s and staged road rallies on Whidbey Island in the 1970s and time trials on the far side of Lake Crescent.

"When we took off with our cars we'd have wide open spaces and roads to ourselves," Bergstrom recalls of the rally days. "You can't do events like that now because of the traffic."

Rakers are back

Eldridge was club secretary/treasurer for nearly two years when the Rakers reformed in 2001, and he now is finishing his third consecutive year as president. He extended his two-year presidential term to help with this golden anniversary car show.

The Rakers have about 100 members, most from Jefferson but with a good share from Kitsap and Clallam counties; the club meeting is 7 p.m. the first Tuesday of each month upstairs in the Highway Twenty Roadhouse in Port Townsend.

Will the rising price of gasoline change these car club crews?

"Nope," says Bergstrom. "It's not going to affect the hobbyists. They joke about it. But they don't talk about cutting back because it's what they've chosen to do. Maybe if it hits \$4 a gallon, some people will rethink a little bit. It's

still not that big of a deal if you're just driving to car shows and swap meets."

(Contact Patrick J. Sullivan, also a Raker member, at psullivan@ptleader.com.)

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