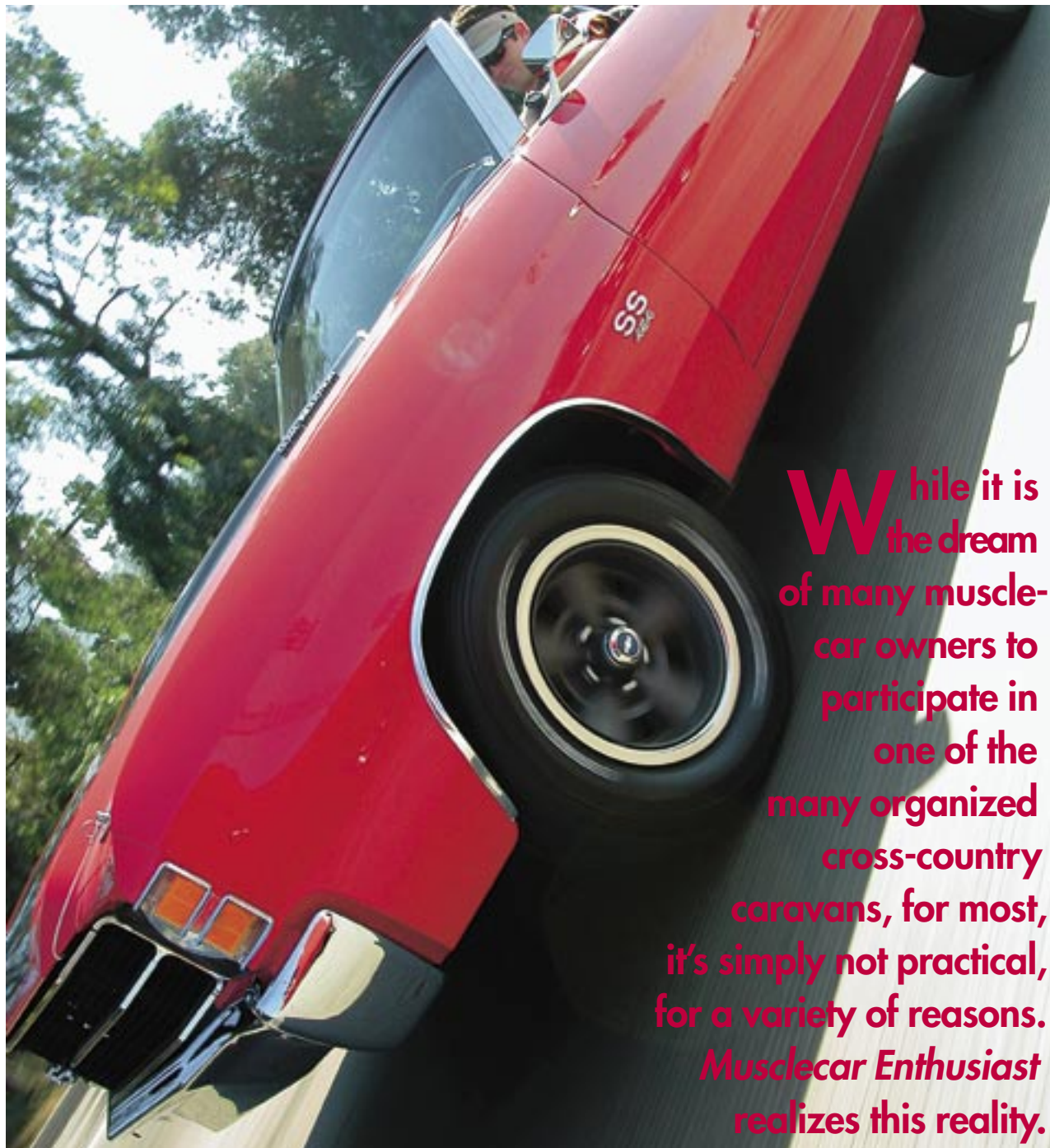


CALIFORNIA CRUISIN'

Our intrepid contributing editor unearths some of LA's musclecar heritage during our tour of Southern California

text and photography by Richard Truesdell



While it is the dream of many musclecar owners to participate in one of the many organized cross-country caravans, for most, it's simply not practical, for a variety of reasons. *Musclecar Enthusiast* realizes this reality.

First, there's the time commitment necessary, often a week or more away from day-to-day obligations. Then there's the prospect of putting hundreds, if not thousands of miles,

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on a car that over the past several years, has escalated dramatically in value, taking advantage of the hyperinflation that has struck the musclecar marketplace.

In response, *Musclecar Enthusiast* organized our first informal Musclecar Tour, a day-long trip that gathered six classic musclecars and their owners, driving from sunrise-to-sundown,

March 2004

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1 Since I didn't have room to run photo 6 anywhere, and since this first photo wall really needed a car photo, I used this XR-7G photo instead. OK? **2** Art Hopkins (alt. Lynn Brokaw) checks out the hardware at Blair's. **3** The backroom at Blair's is a speed parts treasure trove. **4** A Chrysler Hemi lurks in the machine shop at Blair's.



visiting iconic locations from Southern California's hot rod past. In the process, we reinforced the simple fact that these cars were made to be driven, and along more than 120 miles, generated incalculable smiles and thumbs-up, wherever they were seen.

The Genesis

The idea of the Muscledar Tour started during conversations between Editor Steve Statham and myself after putting together the Blue Collar Bees story that appeared in the December 2003 issue of Muscledar Enthusiast

(pages 14-18). Steve asked me to see if I could design a route that could be driven in a day, stopping along the way at as many as a half-dozen locations that were directly related to Southern California's muscledar heritage. With the help of muscledar enthusiast and owner Al Nocita, a long time resident of Southern California (and owner of a half-dozen prime muscledars himself) we mapped out a route starting in his hometown of Monrovia for breakfast, ending up at Irwindale Speedway where he treated all of the

participants to an evening of exciting circle track racing from his luxury box at Southern California latest speedway and 1/8-mile drag strip.

After Al and I determined the general route, I planned it out in detail, using a combination of vintage road maps (see sidebar) and their contemporary equivalent online, www.mapquest.com. Together a route of 120 miles was finalized.

Next came the selection of the muscledars. As I think you'll agree, we succeeded in assembling a killer collection of vintage Detroit iron. Invitations went out to a group of more than a dozen owners, and the cars that ran the entire tour are a great cross section of muscledar history. They include a '70 AAR 'Cuda, two rare selections, the '68 Cougar XR-7G and the '69 AMC SC/Rambler, and our cover car, the '71 454 Chevelle ragtop. Along the way we picked two additional cars, the '67 Cougar and the '73 AMC Javelin/AMX. On a special Saturday in October, these cars and their lucky owners collectively covered more than 900 miles without even a single incidence of overheating.

Breakfast Le Roy's Highland Restaurant, Monrovia (8:30-9:45)

Meeting just after sunrise at Le Roy's Highland Restaurant, the entire group assembled for the first time. The informal gathering of a half dozen muscledars in the parking lot drew an immediate crowd, even though it's not uncommon for car junkies to gather here. Introductions were made: Gary Maibe would be driving his '67 Cougar; his friends Art and Wanda Hopkins would be driving their '68 Cougar; Lynn and Gloria Brokaw would be behind the wheel of their '69 SC/Rambler; Kenn Funk would handle the driving chores for his '70 'Cuda; and 20-year old Keith Hayes would be wheeling Mike Scott's '71 Chevelle through LA's notorious pot holes.

Over a hearty breakfast, with equally scintillating car talk, I handed out the day's itinerary, which

included copies of maps circa 1964 and 1970. We all talked about how times had changed and then headed out to the parking lot, noticing the throng that had surrounded the cars. After taking some photos of the group, we headed a few miles west to Blair's Speed Shop in Pasadena.

First Stop Blair's Speed Shop, Pasadena (10:00 - 11:00)

Seven miles was all it took to reach the first stop, Blair's Speed Shop in Pasadena. If anything is a truly a throwback to the musclecar's '60s heyday, it's Blair's, located at 2771 E Foothill Boulevard in Pasadena. Established by Don and Dave Blair, it has been a gathering spot for Foothill area motor heads since 1946. According to current owner Phil Lukens, who has worked at the shop since 1968 and purchased the business from the Blair brothers in 1975, "Guys visited Blair's in the mid-'60s to purchase camshafts, headers and slicks which lowered their times down from the 15s to the 13s," he said. "Of course changing the final drive ratios helped too. In the late '60s things changed so fast. As GM, Ford and Mopar started offering factory-built musclecars that ran in the 12s right from the showroom floor, we sold fewer parts and started doing a lot more machine work."

Lukens gave all the participants a tour, including the catacombs behind the counter areas that included the fully equipped machine shop. One could only imagine how much horsepower was "liberated" over the years at the hands of skilled mechanics, and how many seconds were shaved off the ETs of the cars that emerged from this hot rod Mecca.

Second Stop Moon Equipment, Santa Fe Springs (11:30 - 12:15)

What is more iconic than a pair of Mooneyes? Founded by pioneer Dean Moon following World War II, he opened Moon Automotive in a shed behind his father's cafe in www.musclicarenthusiast.com



Santa Fe Springs. Soon afterwards, Moon started producing his own line of speed parts that included throttle linkages and the popular foot-shaped gas pedals that became a requirement in almost any modified car. As musclecars started their rise, he moved to its current location and he acquired Potvin Cams and with the company came its popular front-mounted supercharger kits. Additionally, Bill Jenks, a cam

designer and grinder, stayed on and still runs the camshaft part of the business. Dean Moon was instrumental in the founding of SEMA, the Specialty Equipment Market Association, and served as an original board member and president. Dean Moon passed away on June 4, 1987, at the age of 60, and after a brief period of inactivity the company underwent reorganization and returned to business as Mooneyes

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7 Jack Baugher rumbles through the Frisco's drive-thru in his 1973 Javelin AMX. **8** Our caravan drew plenty of looks during the lunch rush at Frisco's.

USA. Current CEO Shige Sukanuma and President Chico Kodama have continued the Moon tradition. The Moon trademark is as popular as ever and has spawned several overseas affiliates, most notably in Japan.

Moon Equipment HQ is about 25 miles south on the San Gabriel Freeway (I-605) from Blair's. When we arrived the Moon staff greeted everyone, and while I concentrated on photographic issues, our group was given a tour of their facilities. Within one of the garages, we were treated to a classic Moon-equipped slingshot dragster (I built this exact rail as an AMT kit as a kid). The Moon showroom is fully equipped, not only with a wide selection of speed parts, but an extensive book store, with editions relating to hot rodding's history that are unavailable almost anywhere else.

Third Stop Frisco's Drive-In, Downey (12:30 - 1:30)

Less than five miles away we found the logical place to schedule our lunch stop. While it only recreates the '50s and '60s, Frisco's in Downey is a well-known local car culture landmark, and has been the location for countless magazine and advertising shoots. While we were running a bit behind schedule (always figure that as the tour moves forward, delays will be inevitable so factor in additional time for each connecting leg).

Famous for both their food and their car-friendly hospitality, Frisco's general manager Jesse Acosta welcomed our group with open arms even though they were packed for the lunchtime rush. With their famed

poodle-skirted waitresses on roller skates, it was the perfect place to take a break. Each Wednesday night for years Frisco's has hosted their own cruise night and you're encouraged to bring your own set of pre-'73 wheels. It was at Frisco's that we picked up the last member for our caravan, Jack Baugher, who joined us with his one-owner '73 Javelin/AMX with its rare Pierre Cardin interior trim.

Fourth Stop Old Irwindale Speedway site, Irwindale (2:00 - 2:30)

South Motor Avenue in Irwindale (population 1,446), currently the site of the regional Miller Brewing Plant, was the next stop on our itinerary. Suggested by Al Nocita, the bottling plant sits on ground that once was an earlier iteration of Irwindale Speedway but that's not why he suggested this particular stretch of LA County real estate. It seems that back in the '60s, when he was much younger, South Motor Avenue served as an unofficial racing venue and Nocita was a willing and active participant.

Today, as a reminder of its past, it houses a number of automotive-related shops. Behind the fence at Hansen Chassis we spied a raw '65 Dodge Coronet B-Body Mopar undergoing the start of what looked like a ground-up restoration. Later we learned that it belonged to Al Nocita and would form the basis for his next Mosher-built Super Stock recreation.

Fifth Stop NHRA Museum, Pomona (3:15 - 4:00)

Continuing to head east, on Interstate 210 rather than Foothill Boulevard (Route 66), as was our original intent, we visited the Wally Parks NHRA Museum in Pomona. It was there that we toured the facility, taking group photos under the Wally Parks statute in the museum's foyer, and beside Jimmy Clark's '64 Lotus Indy car and Tommy Grove's '63 Plymouth Super Stock (best known as the Melrose Missile III).

While we took more than 500 photos over the course of the day's

activities, it is possible that none is quite as striking as the shot of the four primary vehicles parked in front of the museum's front entrance. The SC/Rambler, 'Cuda, Chevelle and Cougar made quite a sight in all their Technicolor splendor. Guests, as they entered and exited the museum, were curious as we setup the cars for the photo shoot and commented on how great they looked side-by-side.

Sixth Stop So-Cal Speedshop, Pomona (4:30 - 5:00)

Probably no name is as famous in hot rod circles as So-Cal Speed Shop. Founded in 1946 on Olive Avenue in Burbank by Alex Xydias, the seminal SoCal Speed Shop moved to a larger facility at 1104 South Victory Boulevard in Burbank where Xydias erected a Sears Roebuck prefab two-car garage to handle his rapidly expanding business. Although Xydias closed the SoCal Speed Shop in 1961, at the dawn of the musclecar era, at the same time a young hot rodder named Pete Chapouris was making his mark with a 1932 Ford that mated a Chevy V-8 to a Packard trans from Blair's Speed Shop. Later, in 1995, Chapouris opened The Pete Chapouris Group (PC3g) at 1357 East Grand Avenue in Pomona. On November 21, 1997, it all came full circle when PC3g changed its name, with Xydias' blessing, to So-Cal Speed Shop. Today SoCal Speed Shop serves speed enthusiasts nationwide and around the world from facilities in Arizona, Colorado and Texas as well as the original Pomona location. While best known for their classic hot rods, musclecar enthusiasts find that current SoCal Speed Shop is able to assist in locating correct vintage components for the most demanding restorations.

Due to delays en route, the showroom was closed down for the day but behind its walls, the So-Cal team was busy preparing vehicles both for Bonneville the following week and the SEMA Show in three weeks. While disappointed at their inability to tour the facilities, this did not stop the group from posing www.musclicarenthusiast.com



9 Tour vehicles looked right at home in front of the NHRA museum in Pomona. **10** Our musclecar owners and drivers assemble under the statue of Wally Parks at the NHRA museum.

for additional photos in front of the building where their award winning 2002 Dodge Ram push truck was parked.

Final Stop Irwindale Speedway, Irwindale (6:00 - 11:00)

In spite of the fact that it was Saturday, LA's freeways were as clogged as ever, slowing the caravan in its quest to reach its final stop, the new Irwindale Speedway. This purpose-built facility is state-of-the-art in every respect, hosting a wide variety of banked oval and 1/8-mile drag racing action. While it was our hope to circle the track with our six cars, delays and a full slate of pre-race activities, including a 18-wheeler show, eliminated this possibility.

After parking the cars under the bleachers, it was finally time to sit back and enjoy the spectacular sunset and a full evening packed with racing. It was at that point that I made a discovery. The special mirrors

SOURCES

Le Roy's Highland Restaurant
523 W Huntington Dr.
Monrovia, CA 91016
(626) 357-5076

Blair's Speed Shop
2771 E Foothill Blvd.
Pasadena, CA 91107
(626) 795-7201

MOONEYES USA, Inc.
10820 S. Norwalk Blvd.
Santa Fe Springs, CA 90670
(562) 944-6311

Frisco's Carhop Drive-In Diner
12050 Woodruff Ave.
Downey, CA 90242
(562) 803-6301

Wally Parks NHRA Motorsports Museum
1101 West McKinley Ave.
Pomona, CA 91768
(909) 622-3454

So-Cal Speed Shop
1357 E Grand Ave.
Pomona, CA 91766
(909) 469-6171

Irwindale Speedway
500 Speedway Dr.
Irwindale, CA 91706
(626) 358-1100

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11 Tour participants settled in for an evening of racing at Irwindale Speedway.

that adorned both the XR-7G and the SC/Rambler appeared to be the same. This prompted Art Hopkins, Lynn Brokaw and I into a discussion on

their relative prices. Seems that in both Ford and AMC circles, these rare mirrors are currently priced in the stratosphere.

While we were having our discussion, our host, Al Nocita, was on the PA system, announcing our arrival and inviting spectators to take a look at our collection of vintage musclecar history. After that we took an elevator up to his luxury box where he treated everyone to the hospitality (and food) that Irwindale's catering operation is justifiably famous for.

All agreed that the day was special, from start to finish. While the notorious LA traffic played havoc with the schedule, that was the sum total of the difficulties encountered. The six cars traversed the route with nary a hiccup, proving the old adage that these cars were made to be driven. Special thanks must be given to Al Nocita, without whose help and knowledge of the LA musclecar scene, the planning of this project would have been made far more difficult.

MC

VINTAGE ROAD MAPS

Given that I'll collect almost anything automobile related, it should come as no surprise that I have an extensive road map collection. When it came time to plan the route for the Musclecar Tour of Southern California, I looked no further than my own dusty bookshelves to find a series of Los Angeles road maps to help lay out our route.

It shocked me, not having grown up in Southern California, just how quickly LA's famous freeway system developed, especially in the region northeast of the city. Looking at a map from 1963, the

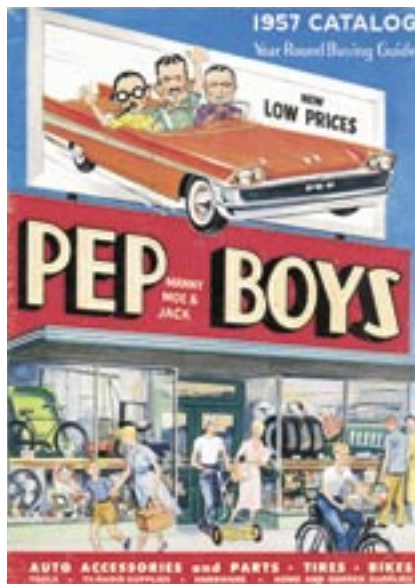
dawn of the musclecar era, most of the major freeways had yet to be completed and surface streets like Foothill Blvd. (US 66) and Imperial Highway (CA-90) still were primary means of getting from one place to another. But by 1970 the spider-like threads of the freeways had spread across all of greater LA.

What I found most shocking is that most of the classic roadside architecture that we associate with this golden era of high octane automotive enthusiasm has virtually disappeared. No where is this more evident than along the

foothills north of LA over the roads that once made up US 66 as it entered Los Angeles county on its way to its western terminus at the world famous Santa Monica Pier.

There's not a single, restored classic '50s-era service station to be found. While some have been converted into other businesses, often auto-related, most have simply been replaced by anonymous canopied combination gas station and convenience stores. What a shame that we have bulldozed so much of our rich automotive heritage in the name of "progress." Even the famed Azusa Drive-In has fallen into a sad state of disrepair, now basically the home for student parking for a local college.

If you want to collect vintage road maps, I can offer several suggestions. First, check the listings on eBay. That's probably the easiest place to start and prices for widely distributed maps run from one to 10 dollars, especially for maps from the '60s. Another great place to look is local antique and second-hand shops. Finally, if you really catch the bug, join the Road Map Collectors Association's mailing list at www.roadmaps.org. Their helpful members will help you track down that elusive state map from the year your car was built.



Vintage Texaco map dates from 1964; Chevron map from the early 1970s. Period auto-culture architecture like this Pep Boys store has largely disappeared from Southern California.