

## **A few excerpts from the new book - "The History of Drag Racing by Doug Thorley and Friends!"**

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Written by Don Burdge

Why don't we sit down with builder-driver Doug Thorley and talk a little about his life and get some fore gleams of what will be in his book. Also, how you can contribute stories and pictures to this new book. Here is just a taste of what the book will be like.

### **THE EARLY DAYS**

Doug has been racing since he was a kid in Colorado. He was one of the first at the gate when Lion's Dragstrip opened in Long Beach, California. He is a legend in header development and along with many friends and competitors starting the world of quarter mile racing. Here is a recent interview that will give you an idea of what will be in his new book.

**Now let's go back to the beginning, how did you get started in racing?**

"I bought a '34 Ford convertible from a guy and began racing it. We'd go down to the theater in Ogden, Utah and meet up with 100's of other guys that came from miles around Denver, Salt Lake and even Idaho. I ran that car for a year and it was unbeatable and believe me many tried. I told everyone, 'If anyone ever beat me I'll sell it.'"

**Ignorant of how long ago this was I asked what did you do to soup up the cars?**

"Oh no I didn't know nothing about how to soup them up. The '34 was a convertible so it was heavier than other cars. The only thing I can tell you is it was an original car sold in the mile high city. An old timer mechanic once told me he thought that Detroit had given them higher compression out of the factory to compensate for the altitude in Denver. Otherwise it was just driving skills. But I was finally beat by a kid from Los Angeles who opened up a Merc agency called Tribe Lincoln Mercury. He'd moved in with a high dollar '32 hi-boy with a '48 Merc 3/8 x 3/8. He didn't beat me, he devoured me. I sold my car and started to build my own hi-boy."

**So tell us about your first effort to 'hot rod' a car.**

"In 1946 my grandfather died and I moved back to Cedar City where I found a '30 A and took it to the school workshop and made it into a hi-boy. It had used tires, an old beat up '32 grill, the hood was wired down with a piece of wire and a flathead engine. From there I drove the car to California and landed at the Long Beach Traffic Circle and a drive-in called 'The Clock.' There were hundreds of beautiful cars, they blew me away I couldn't believe the cars. Everyone would go down at midnight, book a race and head out to the orange groves. It was a ritual. Pretty soon I started to race the hi-boy, my piece of barbed wire Junker. It ran pretty good for what it was. But then in time CJ Hart and Lion's came along and I needed to upgrade."

### **MOVING ON TO FASTER CARS!**

**You later had what was called 'The World's Fastest Corvette' and then "Chevy 2 Much" and finally the Corvair. What was it like racing in those days?**

"Well for instance 'Chevy 2 Much.' I never won much in that car, but boy was it a crowd pleaser. With the four-speed it launched a whole lot better. But then it would jack the tires off the ground every shift and they'd go running by me at the 1/8 mile. It was a crowd pleaser and put on a show every time."

"They didn't want us floppers running on their good tracks. That's what they called us in the beginning 'floppers' then later the term funny car came in. There were maybe 50 of us from coast to coast. The original funny car guys on the West Coast were friends like Butch Leal, Don Nicholson, Hayden Proffitt, Jack Chrisman, Gas Rhonda to name a few."

**A question from those of us 'on the fence' in those days what made them funny cars and what made you personally get into building floppers?**

"We had a 10% engine setback, injection, fuel and any kind of slicks. There was no protesting at all in the funny car class. All you had to do was weigh in at 2000 pounds and run any car any way you wanted. And as to why go to funny cars that's easy, I just got tired of them tearing my car down with protests and when we'd go to all that trouble of tearing the engine down they'd find nothing wrong with the car. I hated that."

**What about that Corvair you always talk about so affectionately?**

"We went to Indy in 1967 and beat the factory-backed racing teams in the first Funny Car Eliminator ever at the U.S. Nationals. The Corvair was the fastest Chevy on earth that year. It catapulted me to a short-term partnership with American Motors and resulted in the first rear engine Javelin Funny Car."

## FRIENDS OVER THE YEARS

**Doug please tell us about some of your friends?**

"In 1958 I bought a dirt floor shop in East Los Angeles for \$1400. I was plastering days and working nights at the muffler shop. I'd built a few sets of headers for local racers and one of them appeared in *Hot Rod Magazine*. The blurb said something about 'Headers by Doug' and overnight I had orders for 5000 sets. So there we were me and two guys building them by hand."

"It has all been good. Good friends, good times and always helping each other out when we could. Before I sold the header business we used to have a yearly reunion at the shop. We'd invite everyone. It was like a 'whos-who' in the industry, yet we were all old friends. They'd come to the shop and we'd barbeque and be there all day. We'd talk and bench race."

"Of course Garlit's name would come up. I'd say he was a very-very brilliant builder/driver. He'd put car after car on the trailer. I remember when he had his foot half off in the hospital he come out of the hospital with 10 new ideas. The hospital is where he thought of the rear engine which would eliminate the problem everyone was having with front engine fires. Yep in those days almost every time he'd unload he'd immediately run low ET and top speed right off the trailer. Someone started calling him the 'Swamp Rat' because he was from Florida. I remember standing on the bridge in Riverside. I'd just won my class and then here he came by. He went under the bridge 4-5 car lengths ahead of the competition and the bridge shook. He was walking over everyone and putting them on the trailer big time."

"Someone would always bring up wheelie-bars. I don't know if I was the very first but I remember thinking I kept loosing with 'Chevy 2 Much' because of the big wheel stands. I'd beat the big boys out of the hole with the four speed but then lose because of the wheel stands. So I took a leaf spring (later to be called Wheelie Bars) out of a Chevy II and turned it upside down and went off the knuckle and right into the original spring mount. Originally we had no wheels on the

bar and the track owners complained about what we were doing to the track. So we put wheels on it so it wouldn't dig up the strip."

## TODAY

### **What are you keeping busy with today?**

Commenting about the recreation of his first funny car Doug added, "*Chevy 2 Much* is currently in the Wally Park's Museum where it has been since the museum first opened." 'My next project is to get my life story in book for before I die. For this purpose I've asked my friend Don Burdge to begin gathering materials and get started. He and I will be contacting over 100 former friends, competitors and fellow racers from the 50's, 60's and 70's. Thereafter, we will be asking them to contribute to our story. I'm asking each friend to write a few words, maybe even jot down some of the old stories about when we were together in the heyday. I've asked them to gather all the slides and photographs they can and send them to Don.'

### **What are Doug's plans?**

'We're going to write my life story, BUT it is actually going to be the life story of all of my friends. As you know many are famous racers and builders and drivers. On the other hand many of them never got much press. BUT all of them contributed to drag racing and its early beginnings. AND, we plan to include their names, stories and comments along with archival photographs in my book.'

For those Doug Thorley has already contacted please begin forwarding your information to us. For those who would like to contribute go to Don's website at [www.HistoricRaceCarForum.com](http://www.HistoricRaceCarForum.com) and go to the "News" tab and there click on the link "The History of Drag Racing As Told by Doug Thorley" and download the form and mail it to the his physical address noted on the form. This should be an exciting project for all of us!

### **What about the future of the sport?**

Doug's final thoughts are: "There aren't enough tracks. We need to get more cars out of the garage and out to the track. It is such a high end thing now, the average Joe Blow can't afford to go watch the pros, let alone build one. We need more strips to be built." Let's see what the future holds.

**Finally, by all means start sending in your stories and comments and old photos/slides for Doug's life history and the history of Drag Racing.**