

Introduction

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When permission from Smokey could be obtained, there was a time when a visit behind the locked doors and painted-black windows of the “Best Damn Garage in Town” produced feelings the environment was simply electric with creativity and technology. In reality, it wasn’t just the racecars, engine development or a fertile ground for experimentation. Over time, I realized it was how Smokey’s mind worked, regarding almost anything that sparked his interests. The genius of his perspectives, the speed and skill by which he could carve away non-essentials of an issue, and his ability to craft steps that solved problems were all reflected throughout the shop.

Here was a man whose mind fed on innovation, of finding ways to accomplish objectives and achieve goals “outside the box” for his conventional-thinking peers. Information he gathered and applied was among his most guarded secrets, evidenced by the fact that when questions to any of his people became too probing, the classic response was always, “You better ask Smokey.” Of the many advantages he created, this was but one. His keen wit and ability to express himself became as recognizable as his white pants and shirt, flat-crowned hat, hat-mounted glasses, piercing gaze and bare-to-the-bones vocabulary. Virtually every time I visited his shop, I came away with perspectives I’d not even remotely considered...about numerous subjects he sliced up with precision and clarity.

Upon meeting him in 1965, I later realized nothing within his spheres of interest, especially if it had to do with convention, was sacred. He didn't choose to be different for the sake of being that way. Instead, it became clear that reasons he sought and paths he took simply happened to create that image, leading him to conclusions others often either overlooked or in which they failed to find value. He was seldom mistaken...about much of anything.

In particular, his fascination for "things mechanical" spurred him into finding alternatives to conventional problem solutions...one of Smokey's visible trademarks. Inventions were a byproduct of his gift for creating "alternatives." Whenever I came up against an automotive issue for which a solution was difficult to find, consultation with him consistently shed new light.

Today, Smokey's shop is hauntingly absent of the bustle and cloak of secrecy for which it became legend. But the evidence of times past is still there.

Looking around, you discover the now-eroding tower that carried his "windmill" project into both the academia and pages of Popular Science magazine, a head-clearing reminder of his quest to harness energy by unconventional ways. Parts shelves carry dust-covered experimental engine pieces absent of factory parts numbers. And, if you recognize the components, elements from his infamous "hot vapor" engine can also be found...none of which bear any resemblance to the black and gold racecars that drew attention at the track like metal dust to magnets. Who but Smokey would dare paint his cars with the number thirteen? And who but those who really don't know him would be surprised at his honorary doctorate degree from the Daytona Beach Community College, in recognition of the many technological contributions made and young minds opened by the prying efforts of "Dr. Yunick."

If never before now, I realize Smokey's playing field was that of technology. Racing, safety and the impact he had upon them just happened to be some of the games he chose, and the lore of stories lying in his trail demonstrates he often wrote his own rules by which to play...particularly if you followed his NASCAR exploits. From time to time, I was fortunate to be part of his "game," finding out his rules frequently became yours.

Looking back, it was my privilege to develop a personal relationship in working with Smokey for almost forty years. From that perspective, I am convinced any attempt to describe the value of his many technological contributions would be akin to painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa. They clearly speak for themselves...as the following pages reveal.