

## BIOGRAPHY, AN OVERVIEW: **Dick Wells**

Dick Wells began his career in the field of motorsports much the same as other Americans, when he was a teenager and got his driver's license for the first time. His interest in cars became apparent quickly. At age 16 his dad gave him the family's 1936 Chevy two-door, today known as the model with "suicide doors." There was one problem with the car: It jumped out of high gear when traveling at a normal speed, so when he and his pals were out cruising, one had to hold the floor-shift lever down to avoid having the car pop out of gear. At 16, he remembers, he simply didn't have the money to get it repaired, and at that point, he didn't have the knowledge to repair it on his own.

His father had mixed emotions about Dick's interest in cars. The Chevy was polished and waxed so often that the paint was wearing through to the primer in many spots, but after an experience with his pal, he chose not to repaint it.

Here's what happened:

His high school friend, Dale, also had 1936 Chevy, which he decided to paint. The two 16-year-olds began on a Saturday morning, when Dale's parents left home to go shopping. Dale got out his mother's all-new vacuum cleaner with a spray-paint attachment, and they proceeded to paint the Chevy a bright blue color, outdoors on a brisk autumn day. Having no knowledge of painting, and indeed masking, the Chevy took on an odd look with blue wheels and tires, and small openings in all of the windows; the finish was akin to thick sandpaper, filled with the remnants of twigs and leaves. Dick told Dale, "The blue tires don't look all THAT bad, do they?" Dale was forlorn; he should have been frightened. Painting the car outdoors meant that the vacuum cleaner sucked up dry leaves and twigs and destroyed his mother's new prized vacuum.

And Dick favored "odd" cars. He even had a 1948 Crosley station wagon while in high school. Made sense: Very good economy. But there was a downside: it never started on a cold Nebraska winter morning. Then the

upside: it was small, light and easy to push. Problems were not infrequent. His friend Paul played the tuba in the Lincoln High School marching band. On one bitter cold day, Paul asked Dick for a ride home from school...with his tuba in tow. Dick scratched his head and said, "It would have to be you or the tuba. Both won't fit in the Crosley." Paul was incensed didn't understand, and never spoke to Dick again. The Lincoln High School football team on one occasion picked up the Crosley, carried it up the stairs to the main entrance to the school, and left it there, crosswise, so the doors couldn't be opened. The principal was angry and demanded that the coach force the team to "...put that car back down on the street where it belongs!"

But eventually Dick got the hot rod bug and fixed up a black 1948 Ford two-door—lowered it, installed dual exhaust, box-style fender skirts, and added the "cat's meow" of the day: twin Appleton spotlights. Eventually he needed a good job to pay for all of the toys, and he began by working in an automotive parts store in Lincoln, Nebraska, as a stockroom clerk, then quickly moved up to become a salesman, and after a few years took over as manager. The store, Hank's Auto Store, sold auto parts and speed equipment. Later, Dick was hired by Speedway Motors, today one of the largest distributors of automotive performance equipment in the United States, and he remained there as assistant manager until relocating from his native Lincoln to the Los Angeles area.

It was in California that he became actively involved in motorsports as a career pursuit. He was the first editor of *National Dragster* when it was introduced and published by the National Hot Rod Association in 1960. It was at *National Dragster* he began to "build" on his name as an automotive journalist. From being a staff member at NHRA, at the urging of Tex Smith, Dick became the managing editor—and later feature editor—of *Hot Rod* magazine, then the largest automotive magazine in the world. He also served as the executive editor of *Motor Trend* magazine, and at Petersen Publishing Company, the publisher of *Hot Rod* and *Motor Trend*, he was eventually promoted to director of special events, during which tenure he produced various hot rod shows and races, including helping out on the Motor Trend

500 and Hot Rod Magazine Championship Drag Races at Riverside Raceway. More importantly, he produced the first and now annual trade-only SEMA Show. Held each year in Las Vegas, the SEMA Show is the only one of its kind in the world, a 1.5-million-square-foot extravaganza in the Las Vegas Convention Center. Dick's first effort to produce the SEMA Show, in 1967, working with icons Ray Brock and Alex Xydias of hot rodding fame, was made up of 98 booths, staged under the grandstands at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles.

Dick was the first active president of the National Street Rod Association, and he is credited with the massive street rod movement in the U.S., the largest motorsports hobbyist activity in which tens of thousands of individuals participate by building and driving their own hot rods. He started the Street Rod Nationals, an event which today attracts upward of 12,000 pre-1949 hot rods each year to participate. The street rod parts market is now a major segment of the specialty automotive aftermarket, which includes racing equipment for drag racing, circle track racing and other forms of automotive competition sports. Wells is credited with being the "father" of today's robust street rod specialty industry segment. A footnote to his credit: Often regarded as a grudging complainer, Wells said that Boyd Coddington of Boyd's Wheel fame was the only one to shake his hand and say, "Thank you. No one else will tell you, but I know we wouldn't be in business if it wasn't for your vision and determination to build this industry."

As an association specialist, Dick has served as executive director of several groups, among them the Performance Warehouse Association and the Auto International Association, both national organizations in the automotive aftermarket. He applies a unique creative talent to association management, specifically services provided to participating member companies and/or individual members.

Mr. Wells has been repeatedly honored for his dedication and contributions to industry causes, including the prestigious SEMA Person of

the Year in 1977; he was inducted into the SEMA Industry Hall of Fame in 1993. He was presented the International Specialty Car Association (ISCA) Founder's Award in 1994, and in 1996 the Street Rod Marketing Alliance, SRMA, presented him with its Industry Recognition Award. In 2001 he was among those honored with the NHRA Pioneer's Award.

In addition to his writing skills, he has done emcee gigs in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. His spontaneous wit and humor have been applauded. He has also co-hosted a cable television show, "Rolling Art," which features unique and exotic cars, from customs to carmakers' concept vehicles.

Dick recently retired as the vice president of corporate projects for the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA), a trade association of some 5,000 businesses in the specialty and performance automotive products field. (In the 1970s, he spent five years as the executive director of SEMA.) Mr. Wells is also a member of the board of directors of the National Hot Rod Association, a position he has held continuously since 1979. He once served as one of NHRA's delegates to ACCUS, the Automobile Competition Committee of the United States, the U.S. arm of the FIA, where he was the group's secretary.

Dick resides in Orange, Calif.; his favorite pastime, outside of cars and auto racing, are dogs (he has two, Morgan and Sophie) and recreational vehicles, motorhomes in particular.

March 2007