

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Bunkie

In sales and racing alike, Pontiac once was monster. Those were the wide-track years, the 1960s, and Pontiac's most off-the-wall emporium was down in swampy Florida – Daytona Beach's notorious, go-go-go, “Best Damn Garage in Town.”

The Best Damn Garage in Town was Smokey Yunick's private boozing club, automotive laboratory, and general lair of lair of black magic. It also was the birthplace of whatever on a given day Smokey was naming his step-down Hudson Hornets, turbo-fire V8 Chevrolets, Ford rooster-backs. Smokey certified them standard Detroit iron, the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing declared them “Not in the spirit of the rules,” and most of the BDGT's infuriated competition slandered them as downright cheaters rigged with sneaky fuel cavities, fraudulent dimensions, and dirty-trick engines.



Hands-down within the NASCAR milieu, Smokey Yunick was the internal-combustion high priest, mad scientist, pirate outsider, whiskey mechanic and chief agitator devoted to the overthrow of all confining rules. NASCAR racing was young, the majority of Motor City manufacturers still were getting the hang of the race-of-Sunday-sell-on-Monday mantra, and Smokey – jumping ship and switching factories at every opportunity – knew how to play the factory game. By the time the hammer hit on that dreadful 1957 day, Smokey already was flying his third or fourth manufacture's flag of convenience.



And that truly was one dreadful 24 hours, June 6, 1957. Posterity named it the day of the Automobile Manufacturers Association ban, and it forced General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler - the Big Three - to roll up and quit subsidizing their complicated networks of covert NASCAR teams.

Suddenly the BDGT was off-limits to the Big Three,

and Smokey wasn't the only NASCAR witch whom the AMA ban rendered dead meat. But thanks to a savior named Bunkie Knudsen, Smokey was one of the first to get put back to work. Bunkie was of Motor City nobility; his father had been president of GM and a big shot at Ford prior to that.

So Bunkie, too, was plugged into the notion that a fat corporate automotive career was reserved for himself. Yet following 20 years worth of various postings at GM, he remained nothing but the general manager of a nowhere division, Pontiac, whose advertising slogan was "Heap Big," and whose detractors twisted into, "Big Heap."



Then the AMA's no-racing edict hit, and Bunkie bit on his brazen brainstorm of how Pontiac could go NASCAR racing while still respecting the factory ban. Almost overnight, Pontiac's mighty 421-inch wide-tracks spun NASCAR into the super-speedway era. Junior Johnson, Marvin Panch, Joe Weatherly, David Pearson, Cotton Owens, Paul Goldsmith, Buck Baker, Bobby Johns and Jack Smith were only a few of the ones Bunkie let in on the fun.

AMA ban or not, by the close of the 1961 season that was wide-track's greatest, Bunkie's Pontiacs had won 30 times. Bunkie's pet employees were Smokey and Smokey's bullet, Fireball Roberts. Following the same itinerary he'd used on other marques, Smokey in no time was hosing down all opposition. And Fireball was lashing Pontiacs sparkling in the ominous BDGT livery around Daytona and Charlotte in excess of 150 mph – and the Meyer-Drake Offs of the Indy 500 no longer were the fastest rigs going.

With velocities as hot as his, all of Fireball's wrecks were bound to gassers. Worn out from repairing Fireball's string of into-the-fence jobs, Smokey suggested that the next time Fireball was heading hell-bent toward a super-speedway fence that he mitigate matters by wrestling harder for control.

Fireball agreed to try. So, when a tire blew out at Charlotte, Fireball followed Smokey's suggestion. But it only exacerbated things, because so hard did the BDGT wide-track hit the concrete that its front end assembly went over the wall; landing in a field across the street from Charlotte.

"Didn't help. huh?" inquired Smokey. "I wish you'd of been in there with me," agreed Fireball. What little was left of Bunkie's Pontiac – even its crankshaft was broken – got

crushed and squeezed into a four-foot display on the driveway of the BDGT. What it was supposed to mean, only Smokey knew.

Bonnevilles, Catalinas and Star Chiefs moved out of Pontiac dealerships by the numbers. and Bunkie and Smokey shot the previously moribund division from nowhere to third place in national sales. After he was kicked upstairs at GM as a reward, Bunkie went right on establishing sales records and dabbling at racing. While running Chevrolet, he had Smoke trick out the Chevelle that rocked Daytona with Curtis Turner NASCAR's first three-mile-per-minute lap.

Even so, Bunkie, by the end of 1967, still hadn't been appointed president of GM. And so, in the manner of his famous father, he swashbuckled across all corporate boundaries and assumed the presidency of Ford. Bunkie's Dad, "Big Bill" Knudsen, had been Ford



production chief back in 1921, and for being overly ambitious had wound up taking the stiletto from Henry Ford I. Bunkie, too, paid the price of too much ambition. In 1969, surviving barely 19 months in the viper pits of Dearborn, and the Bloomfield Hills country club, he got zapped and fired by Henry Ford II, a.k.a. "Hank the Deuce." Henry I's grandson.

Because I wouldn't lie for him and report that he instead of Chickie Hirashima was chief mechanic on Jim Rathmann's epic 1960 win in the Indy 500, Smokey libeled me "an ass-hole writer." That ended our communication. But before that happened Smokey let me know how his old patron Bunkie, Pontiac's general manager during the dark prohibition seasons had nailed the ambiguity in the AMA ban that had permitted him to both flaunt it and obey it: Bunkie was a millionaire, and instead of Pontiac's money was spending his own.