

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

VIVA CHUCK!

Throughout the middle and late decades of the Twentieth century, American racing drivers were enjoying an especially booming existence. Don Prudhomme, Tom McEwen and Johnny Mulligan, or, as the dragging digger trio of Los Angeles was individually known, “The Snake,” “The Mongoose,” and “The Zookeeper,” were gunning for 250 mph, and shattering all National Hot Rod Association AA Top Fuel records on the way there.

Down south in the National Stock Car Auto Racing’s super-speedway galaxy, all mph standards were exploding courtesy of Fireball Roberts, Little Joe Weatherly, Junior Johnson, Curtis Turner, and the lone fast Yankee in the mix, Freddie Lorenzen: banging bumpers with their two-ton, late- model rooster-backs, they were inventing an all-new, flat out, belly-down, slipstreaming style of racing.



The Indy 500, rich with Troy Ruttman, Rodger Ward, Jim Rathmann, and Eddie Sachs, was making room for A.J. Foyt, Parnelli Jones, and Mario Andretti.

Over east in sports cars, and before getting wiped out by the rain of Le Mans, Walt Hansgen was, with George Constantine, the Greek, and Dr. Dick Thompson, the racing dentist, flourishing with the Sports Car Club of America at Watkins Glen, and Bridgehampton.

Out west, L. A., as it usually did, with the SCCA and its California Sports Car Club, was producing so many national and International stars it was difficult keeping up with them all, i.e. Phil Hill, Richie Ginther, Dan Gurney, Ronnie Bucknum, Ken Miles, Bob Drake ...

In 1958, deciding to identify which one on these guys was America's fastest, Road & Track magazine concluded that none of them was ... and that the crown belonged to a red-haired, freckle-faced dark horse and danger hound named Chuck Daigh, who'd been a big war hero and high-risk combat paratrooper out of the Second World War; a factory stock car tough from all domestic super-speedways as well as Mexico's great Pan-American Road Race; a hurtling hot rod jockey and blazing flathead belly-tanker jockey off the flat and flat-out dry lakes of southern California; and was, everything considered, a chills 'n' thrills encyclopedia.

But R&T's choice was wrong. At the time the magazine made him its choice, Daigh didn't consider himself a racing driver at all.

His chosen vocation, and he considered it a noble one -- far superior to that of racing driver -- was being a risk-seeking, problem-solving, mercenary chief mechanic. And, just like the majority of chiefs, Daigh judged racing drivers an inferior species. "What is a racing driver?" he once mused, cryptically, "He's just a chief mechanic with his brains blown out."

A connoisseur of living on the ragged edge ever since he was a teenager, Daigh, who was 36 when R&T made him its pick, already had been on the receiving end of some pretty decent action gigs during the Second World War, including the 25 nighttime paratrooper drops made by himself and his brother Harold, when the Daighs and their trusty Brownings rifles, were components of the 82nd Airborne, chasing Hitler and his Reich across Italy, France, Belgium, and, finally, Germany.

Twenty-four of the jumps were accomplished without a hitch, but while completing the 25th, Chuck caught some ground fire that clipped his right arm; but he still made it to the Battle of the Bulge.

Then, following the armistice, in the late 1940s, there'd been all those hairy excursions across Muroc Dry Lake when he and Harold were among the movers and shakers of southern California's hot rod rebellion -- cranking their home-made 'rods

and 'tankers to better than 150 mph. Came 1952, 53, and 54, Daigh was in Mexico for the Pan-America Road Race, working for the two geniuses of Lincoln's factory racing squad, Clay Smith and Bill Stroppe.

He was conscripted as mercenary mechanic maintaining Lincoln's humongous, 130 mph, Capri models whose icon pedal-men chauffeurs were Indy 500 heroes Chuck Stevenson, Jack McGrath, Walt Faulkner, Johnny Mantz, and Billy Vukovich.



The Pan- Am's five-day-long, carnival erupted north from Guatemala's tropical frontier, and then rocketed clear to the border of Texas. Mercenary mechanics like Daigh were under suffer-in-silence orders to perform more than ordinary car prep but also to ride along as ballast, acting as problem-solvers and navigators to the Brickyard stars.

Every mercenary mechanic riding shotgun was guaranteed to spend all five days having the hell scared out of him, but the unspoken rules of engagement were simple. No whining was tolerated; giving driving advice was worse; criticizing the wheelmanship of Stevenson, McGrath, Faulkner, Mantz, and Vukovich was ... unpardonable.

Stroppe committed the greatest no-no of all by flipping out and making a 120 mph grab for Mantz's steering wheel, provoking Mantz to brake to a stop and ordering Stroppe out of their Lincoln so he could beat Stroppe's brains all over the Tehuentepec straightaway.

Daigh lost all respect for the talents skills, and knowledge of Indy 500 combatants – and of racing drivers generally – upon taking a test-drive for himself in one of the big Capris and finding the suspension underneath him so pitifully poor he barely stayed on the highway at all.

Yet when he berated Stevenson, McGrath, Faulkner, Mantz, and Vukovich for not complaining to Smith and Stroppe about the miserable handling, the quartet stared at

him as though he were crazy. They were winning, weren't they!? So everything must be just fine!

The 1954 abolition of the Mexican Road Race, didn't cost Daigh his job with Lincoln; he simply was routed to other factory racing assignments, all over the U.S., with Ford and General Motors. He also was drawn to amateur sports car road-racing, but not in Ferraris and Maseratis, but to Detroit and Dearborn V8 backyard specials, of which L.A. had a glut.

Among Daigh's first assignments was a dreadnought Kurtis-Kraft, whose giant Chrysler unleashed a bolt of flame through its twin four-barrels, causing Daigh to duck with every up-shift.



Then, at Palm Springs, the veteran racing car constructors Dick Troutman and Tom Barnes found themselves stuck with their newest invention, named the Troutman-Barnes Special, which Ken Miles, its assigned driver, was refusing to race. Daigh stepped in. And in that first Palm Springs meet, as debutantes, he and the Troutman-Barnes took third behind Masten Gregory's Tony Parravano Maserati and Ernie McAfee's Doheny family

Ferrari – not a bad beginning.

Honolulu was next, and Daigh finished runner-up behind Pete Woods and his D-Jag. Then, back in southern California, at Paramount Ranch, Daigh won. And he won again at Santa Barbara, trouncing Ginther's Ferrari.

But In 1957, life again became harrowing. Daigh lost his job with Ford, and, a few months afterward, had another employer, GM, withdraw from racing altogether. While Daigh was wondering what to do next, his old friends Troutman and Barnes telephoned saying that they had a great gig for him -- helping them build front-engine Scarabs --

“Dung Beetles” -- for the 21 –year-old heir to the Woolworth dime store fortune, Lance Reventlow, “the million dollar baby.”

Daigh accepted, and quickly it became a dream assignment. Reventlow Automobiles Inc. featured the greatest gathering of L.A. racing minds since the 1920s and the dominating reign of Harry A. Miller, whose namesake Indy machinery was conquering the 500.

In addition to Troutman and Barnes, the brain Phil Remington oversaw RAI’s general operations; vaunted Emil Diedt beat the beautiful aluminum coachwork (the same as he’d done for Miller), Jim Travers and Frank Coon, Billy Vukovich’s old co-



chief mechanics from the Brickyard, built and prepared Reventlow Automotive’s fuel-injected, fiercely bored and stroked, 327-cubic-inch, V8 Chevy stovebolts, which emblazoned a whole new, stock-block, roar on amateur sports car racing.

Daigh’s, original assignment, exactly as in Mexico, had been that of

mercenary mechanic. But Reventlow, as second-string Scarab driver, needed somebody who could be first-string. And that was Daigh.

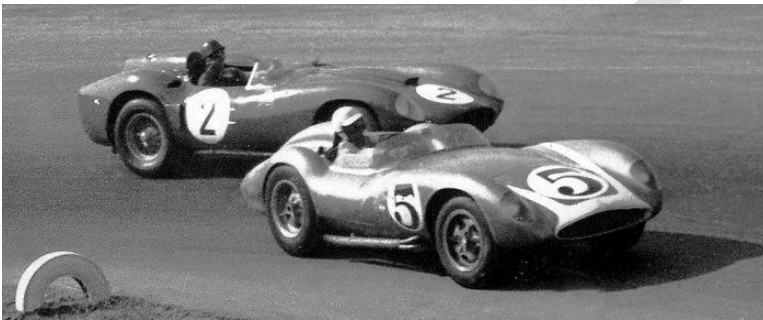
All of 1957 was spent preening and preparing Reventlow Automotive’s team of three Scarabs, and in 1958 RA was ready to go, and throughout the spring and summer the Scarab legions won at will almost everywhere they went -- hitting the biggest races on both coasts twice, and occasionally dropping in on a match out in the Midwest. They even made a Caribbean detour to swanky Nassau for Bahamas Speedweeks. Result: something like eight wins out of 13 starts, with all the out-classed Ferraris dashing for cover.

RAI’s big target had been the same as everyone’s, the inaugural Los Angeles Times Grand Prix at Riverside Raceway, 200 miles in L.A.’s broiling heat. Some 70,000 spectators came out to watch, making the GP history’s biggest sports car race, as well as the first professional one. Heavy pride was on the line for the winner.

Taking no chances, Ferrari's distributor for the west coast, John von Neumann, for whom beating the Scarabs was an obsession, imported major cannon: a set of 4.1-liter models for himself and Phil Hill, and a 3-liter Testa Rossa for Ginther.

Getting off to a fast start for the Scarabs, Daigh beat all the Ferraris by clocking a sensational time trials lap which obliterated Riverside's track record. But because he knew all about engines, he knew his Scarab's own, with its over-working push-rods, couldn't tolerate such temperature without cooking itself. At the start, nonetheless, Daigh burst into first with only Hill's Ferrari choosing to go with him.

Hill's 4.1-litre job, which was by far Riverside's fastest Ferrari – faster than Daigh's Scarab. So, upon hitting the mile-long back straightaway, the battle switched from drivers to engines: Daigh and his bow-tie stovebolt and Hill in the Ferrari whose shrieking V12 had, at Monza, in June's Race of Two Worlds, frightened silly all the Meyer-Drakes.



Daigh's Scarab didn't cream Hill's Ferrari, but it didn't get creamed, either. And, when temps hit the 90s, and Hill's 4.1 died of heat stroke of its own, Daigh and his almost-overheating Scarab won the Times GP

in a runaway,

And, Road & Track, by the strength of this single GP victory -- and Chuck Daigh never had another one this big -- was moved to crown Daigh "America's fastest racing driver." Go figure.

Ironically, just when his racing driver career seemed to really be taking off, it all but ended, because Daigh and the rest of the talents at RA were committed to hunkering down and taking a year's sabbatical from sports car racing in order to go to Europe and race Formula One. So all three Scarabs were put on the market, and at the pittance price of \$17,500 apiece.

They sold quickly, one of them going to a roughneck Corvette driver named Jim Jeffords, whose sponsor, Nickey Chevrolet of Chicago, painted it sickly purple.

Selling its Scarabs so quickly, and cheaply, afterward was judged a critical mistake by RAI: had it kept possession of them, Daigh could have continued winning in 1959 the same as he had in 1958. Instead, “America’s fastest racing driver,” was to pass 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, and 1963--the final five seasons of his career -- racing sports cars and one F1 machine that were all real eight balls.

1959: Kicking off the southern California season is another newspaper race, the Examiner Grand Prix, conducted not at Riverside but on a parking lot at the L.A. County Fairgrounds, a joke circuit of 11 mundane curves squeezed into barely two miles. The hottest hunk of iron Daigh lines up for himself is the three-year-old Bill Murphy Kurtis-Kraft, a heavyweight brute whose nailhead Buick of nearly seven litres – the most ordinance of anything in the GP – is wildly unsuited for such confining spaces and almost impossible to hold control.

Daigh, tries his hardest ... The roughneck Jeffords and his Nickey Scarab is the combination Daigh, lusts most to beat, because he can’t stomach some Chi-town tribe imagining it can make a Scarab run faster than he and the gang back at RAI.

But, defeating the Nickey and Jeffords won’t be easy, though, because in the first corner on the opening lap, demonstrating how to race roughneck-style, Jeffords, sending unruly traffic flying in all directions, stuffs the Nickey Scarab into the middle of a dense pack. Shortly afterwards, he deprives Daigh of the opportunity to blow off the Nickey Scarab and himself by detonating it.

Daigh has a bad afternoon himself. The best his Murphy Buick can finish is eighth, four miles behind, and the Murphy’s oven of a cockpit decorates his backside with scars in the second degree. Miles, in a pop-gun Porsche RS, the smallest car in the race, out-lasts Daigh’s and the rest of the big-bores and wins the GP....

Not long afterward, at Sebring’s 12 Hours, Daigh, who so far has made a career beating up on Ferraris, gets the surprise of his season when the factory gifts him with a V12 from its works team, mating him with Gurney.



Three-quarters of the enduro is run in torrential rain, with Daigh and

Gurney leading. They are then called in to turn over their first place Testa Rossa to senior drivers Hill and Oliver Gendebien, who subsequently win. Gurney and Daigh are both co-credited with portions of the victory, and Daigh won't win anything else for the following three seasons...

The month of May means Indianapolis, and the Indy 500 is the classic Daigh most wishes to be part of. Meyer-Drake roadster teams, unfortunately, don't believe he is "America's fastest racing driver," nor are they impressed with his mercenary mechanic and sports car-racing talents. The best chair Daigh is able to scare up is in a dud of a Kuzma, one so dodgy that in the previous year's 500 even the great Ruttman had given up on it.

And Daigh faces an additional problem. The Brickyard's strange, tap-dancing, abracadabra of compelling a Meyer-Drake Offy roadster to "take a set" by backing off early, avoiding the brakes, then nailing the throttle, feels foreign -- and wrong -- to Daigh. So he misses time-trialing for the 500-- a great disappointment...

The disappointing year continues. It's spring, and in Connecticut, in a Formula Libre show at tiny Lime Rock, Daigh finds himself behind the wheel of another eight-ball of equipment, a worn out 250F Maserati Formula One car, once the property of chaotic Camoradi U.S.A.

Trouncing the big Aston Martin of Constantine the Greek, holder of Lime Rock's lap record, Daigh is himself embarrassed, as is everyone else, by winner Rodger Ward's Brenn buzzbomb -- an extraordinary 11-year-old circle track midget wiping out Daigh's FI Maser, Constantine's DBR-2 and all the rest of Lime Rock's formula and sports cars....

Back in southern California again, for a Riverside summertime Kiwanis Grand Prix, Daigh and the rest of RAI's troupe find themselves staring hard at the hated opponents they most want to annihilate, Jeffords and their old Scarab, with its ghastly purple livery. So Daigh and Troutman and Barnes rescue from mothballs their antediluvian Mercury Special, which they re-fire with one of RAI's tricked-out V8s.

Jeffords hasn't a chance against this combo, and Daigh leads the GP before throwing a re-cap. Winner of the GP is Ginther, in the same Ferrari 4.1 that in last year's Times

GP had smashed up and disabled a Scarab raced by the Scarab bank himself, Lance Reventlow....

The sports car racing season ends, as it usually does, in October, back at Riverside, with Daigh the defending champion of another Times GP. This time he's racing John Edgar's NASCAR Pontiac engine-powered Maserati, a notorious eight-ball which a few seasons earlier caught the railing at turn six head-on, re-arranging Carroll Shelby's face.

Daigh qualifies on the front row but his crew continues working on the Pontiac while the other cars are getting lined up. Just as Daigh is taking his position and the starter is waving the green, the Maser loses its clutch, then its rear end, and stalls. Gurney, just in back of Daigh in Frank Arciero's Ferrari 4.9 is himself rammed from behind and cold-cocked by the racing plumber Jack Graham in his own Pontiac-powered Aston Martin. So Daigh doesn't complete a single lap and instead spends his afternoon watching the Ferrari of Hill, his fellow duelist from the previous year, and co-winner of Sebring, win the GP. ...

1960: Though always under contract to RAI, Daigh is free to work as a hired gun, and does so in March, sharing with Ginther a Ferrari in the Sebring 12 Hours, and in June going to Le Mans to partner up with Gregory in a fast Camoradi U.S.A, Maserati Birdcage.

But the duo is ill-suited: Gregory knows nothing about racing cars, Daigh almost too much. Listening to Gregory explaining how he intends to blast their streamlined Birdcage down the 170 mph Mulsanne straightaway with revs ticking along at a hard, steady 7,000,. Daigh cautions his un-mechanical teammate that if he does that he's certain to unload everything from the flywheel to the front radiator pulley. Which Gregory does – even the head lamps are knocked out by the explosion.

Then, in October, back at Riverside for the third annual Times GP, Daigh finds work with the Briggs Cunningham scuderia, which is fielding several hot Maserati Birdcages and one pokey Jag-powered Lister. Daigh lands the Lister, which is so slow it gets lapped by the GP's winner Billy Krause, in yet another Birdcage....

Daigh's reputation as "America's fastest racing driver," already slipping, comes under additional pressure when RA's FI Scarabs go abroad. Desperately under-

powered with their scaled-back Meyer-Drakes and thoroughly outmoded front-engines, the awkward vehicles are in trouble from the moment they hit England.



Daigh cracks up at Silverstone, bruising his ribs and injuring his pelvis -- the only serious wounds a racing car ever gives him. He finds Belgium more congenial than England because Spa-Francorchamps is the same real estate he parachuted into when he was attached to the 82nd Airborne, and

winning the Battle of the Bulge.

Patron Lance Reventlow's passion for F1 cools upon seeing Spa for the first time and learning that the Masta and La Carriere corners are expected to be negotiated without lifting.

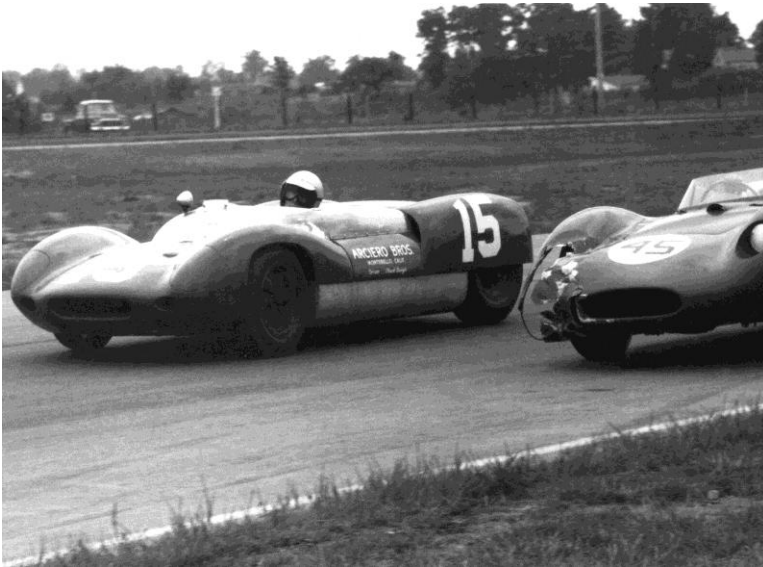
Shortly after he cancels the Scarab F1 project and Daigh gets sent home.

Reventlow keeps RAI going through 1961 and into 1962 -- he even commissions a rear-engine Scarab sports car -- but nothing really comes of it. Renouncing racing for skiing is the "million dollar baby's" great mistake because skiing kills him: his private plane crashes in the Colorado Rockies...

Daigh carries on, barely. In 1961, he and Augie Pabst are occasional teammates, with Pabst the only one besides Daigh who can make a Scarab stand up and talk...

In 1962, Daigh adds Jim Hall and Mickey Thompson to the long roster of names employing him. He partners with Hall, at Sebring, in the first front-engine Chaparral created by Troutman and Barnes. At the Indy 500, Daigh again misses the show, this time in Thompson's aluminum block Buick rear-engine.

Back with Scuderia Cunningham in the Times GP. Daigh straps on, a big, crude, Maserati Birdcage coupe (a duplicate of the ones which later will burn Marvin Panch at Daytona and kill Lucky Casner at Le Mans) which blows out so much oil that he's forced to steer the monster one-handed, using the other to clean the windshield with a rag ...



Daigh is front-engine driver and the 1960s is the decade of the rear-engine car, but Daigh trailers Arciero's Lotus 19 sports car to Canada, winning a big GP at Mosport, the first and only professional race he's won in five years since the Times GP....

Daigh died in 2008, aged 84. Time at last did him in. Having become Holley carburetion expert on Ford's

GT40 and MK II endurance programs Daigh was secretly plotting to work himself into some seat time at Daytona and Le Mans, where his unique driver/mechanic talents would be just what Ford needed.

But this was 1966. And after Ford's great geezers Hansgen and Miles both bought it in crashes, FoMoCo decided to make age an issue and mandated that nobody above 40 could race its toys. So Daigh had nothing to do but resume his life as a risk-taking, thrills 'n' chills encyclopedia, and returned to his roots as ride-along mercenary mechanic, not in Mexican Road Race Capri Model Lincolns but now in gargantuan marine cigarette boats, occasionally skippering the big canoes himself.

Viva Chuck Daigh!