

Where Are They Now?

by Bill Groak



Don Raleigh

There's an old axiom: "A 1,000 mile journey begins with one step." For PWA, that step took place in Don Raleigh's room at the Disneyland Hotel during the SEMA Show in 1969. Seriously, that's where the PWA began, with Raleigh, Don Smith, Jack Harris and two others sitting around creating performance aftermarket history. "We needed direction," Raleigh, now 72, said about the famous meeting. "There were numerous issues the warehouses needed to help manufacturers with, such as standardized pricing sheets and packaging. We needed to be better connected to the manufacturers. The WDs needed a voice."

Sitting on chairs and Raleigh's bed, the WDs began the journey that is the PWA today. And Raleigh was one of the main tour guides. "The industry was growing so fast back then. Things were selling off the shelves. But there was a lot of confusion in the distribution system. When we met in my hotel room, we had a list of items to discuss including a more standardized system for part numbers, better packaging - putting part numbers on both ends of boxes so it's easier ship and stock and other things that would make it easier for the warehouses to sell. Everything was all over the board."

Raleigh said the manufacturers, stalwart companies such as Edelbrock, Holley, Hedman, B&M and Hurst were receptive to the idea of a WD association. "What worked best for the warehouses worked best for the manufacturers. They accepted our help. We were their best customers."

And so PWA began, thanks in big part to Raleigh, who not surprisingly, was awarded the first PWA Pioneer Award in 1981. The ever-humble Raleigh earned more industry awards than a college football All-American. He's been WD of the Year and was inducted into the SEMA Hall of Fame in 1989. "There were a lot of awards back then. All the manufacturers gave them out. I've got some from Mr. Gasket, American Racing and more."

Raleigh said being inducted into the SEMA Hall of Fame with Vic Edelbrock Jr. was one of the many highlights of his career. "Being honored with Vic meant a lot to me. So did the Pioneer Award. The SEMA Hall of Fame and Pioneer Award are two of the most prestigious awards in the industry."

Besides helping create PWA, Raleigh had a huge impact on the specialty equipment industry. In 1959 he opened Don's Speed Shop in Edison, NJ. "It was a 24' x 12' retail store," he remembered. In 1966, Raleigh turned the speed shop into a high-performance warehouse and opened two others in East Hartford, CT and Baltimore, MD. In the mid-1970s, he went back into retail, launching Performance Centers of America, a string of stores that eventually grew to 21 outlets.

Raleigh's been out of the industry for about a dozen years, but he still keeps tabs on PWA and his friends. "I talk with Don Smith and John Towle," he said. "I sent Vic Edelbrock an old company catalog he didn't have. I talk to Isky [Ed Iskenderian] now and then. I run into people and shoot the breeze."

"Do I miss it? Sometimes, but things change. If you asked people today who I was, they wouldn't know. That's progress, I guess. Back then I was a big fish in a little industry. Today I'd be a little fish in a big industry. Once you're out, you're not as involved. I'm not too nostalgic. It was a different period of my life."

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PWA

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