

Where Are They Now?

by William Groak



Dick Wells, right and Wally Parks

Dick Wells

"Everybody knows Dick Wells." That was the running joke at SEMA when Wells was a vice president there a decade ago. Guess what? It wasn't a joke.

Everybody in the performance aftermarket, or so it seems, really does know Wells. Here's a guy who started his career as a stockroom clerk at Hank's Auto Store in Lincoln, NE more than 50 years ago and eventually became the right-hand man and confidant of icons such as Wally Parks and Bob Petersen. Along the way, Wells has been a loyal friend and guiding force for industry associations such as the PWA and SEMA.

From Hank's, Wells went to Bill Smith's Speedway Motors, but that was just the beginning of an eclectic career. Wells left Nebraska for sunny California and a shot at motorsports and automotive journalism.

Check this resume: First editor of National Dragster; managing editor - and later feature editor-of Hot Rod magazine; executive editor of Motor Trend magazine. At Petersen Publishing, Wells eventually became director of special events, producing hot rod shows and races, including the Motor Trend 500 and Hot Rod Magazine Championship Drag Races at Riverside Raceway. More importantly, he produced the first SEMA Show in 1967, staging it under the grandstands at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles

But wait, there's more: Wells was the first active president of the National Street Rod Association and he is credited with helping build the massive street rod movement and market in the U.S. Heck, he started the Street Rod Nationals!

Wells became an association specialist, serving as executive director of several groups, including PWA, SEMA and Auto International Association. "Recalling the early days prompts mixed emotions," he said. "PWA came about as a result of a need to address specific issues, many of them mundane compared to today's varied situations. In the early days it was pretty much anything goes in the way of systems and retailing. It was a good time: I recall a speech made by Don Raleigh who said, even back then, 'The days of hanging out a shingle that says speed shop are coming to an end.' He was referring to the growing number of chain stores selling specialty/performance equipment, and his concern about the future of PWA.

"At PWA we worked on refinement of the three-step system of distribution. I recall, with a smile, the need for PWA to develop a policy for return goods. A PWA committee came up with a printed label, sold in quantity to WD members and jobbers. It was universally known as the 'NFG' tag. The first word is 'No' and the third word is 'Good.' You fill in the middle!"

As you can tell, Wells has a great memory and lots of stories. "I think the all-timer came soon after I joined the staff. We were having a directors' meeting and Rich Deney, the treasurer, was asked to give a financial report. He did, and told of a recent experience: He mentioned that PWA had a \$10,000 CD in the bank. One day the banker saw Rich in the bank and said, 'Hey, Rich. You guys got a tax i.d. number?' Rich said, 'No. I don't think so.' So the banker said, 'Good. I made one up for you.'

"The PWA attorney at the time went ashen white; he nearly fainted. It turned out that the original organizers of PWA never bothered to file as a nonprofit corporation. It wasn't a corporation at all. Nothing."

Another funny experience Wells related was when Don Smith called him about writing copy for an award. "Don told me he was going to give out a special award to a guy who's done a lot for the industry and needed me to write the copy for the plaque," said Wells. "I wrote the copy, sent it to him and forgot about it. Then during the awards presentation the recipient was me! I looked at that large plaque and began to read the copy. I thought to myself, that copy sure sounds familiar. Then it hit me. I looked over at Smith and he had a big grin on his face. I said, 'You had me write the copy for my own plaque!' I'm told that same copy is still used on the plaques awarded today.

Speaking of industry awards, Wells has racked up almost every one possible, including the prestigious SEMA Person of the Year in 1977; the first PWA honorary award in 1976; being inducted into the SEMA Industry Hall of Fame in 1993; and the NHRA Pioneer's Award in 2001. Wells was inducted into the NHRA Division 5 Hall of Fame this past January.

"Awards are very important to me, as they are to all recipients," he said. "There are many achievements of which I'm proud and helping PWA get off to a good start in the '70s ranks among them. All of the awards have a special meaning. NHRA honored me at Christmas with a surprise 'Wally' to commemorate 30 years on the NHRA Board of Directors. It's difficult to top that one."

Wells still sits on the NHRA Board, as well as the Board of the Wally Parks NHRA Motorsports Museum.

Today he is semi-retired (yeah, right) and resides in Orange, CA; his favorite pastime, outside of cars and auto racing, are dogs (he has two, Morgan and Sophie) and recreational vehicles, motorhomes in particular.

"I can't seem to bring myself to retire. I enjoy doing work for SEMA (proofreader of their marketing materials). I've been with NHRA for nearly 50 years not only serving drag racing, but being a very close friend to Wally Parks, my 'second father.' Over the years he gave me a lot of advice. NHRA has been my life: a career that has no match that I can think of."

Like everyone, Wells is concerned about the industry. "There's no denying the industry is undergoing significant change. PWA shares a role with SEMA in trying to stimulate the market wherever and whenever possible.

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