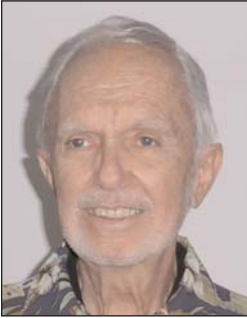


Where Are They Now?

by William Groak



John Simmons

To go fast, John Simmons needed racing parts fast. That's why the Birmingham, Ala. drag racer got into the performance parts business. That also began Simmons' long and distinguished career in the aftermarket, one that spanned four decades and tireless years of dedicated service to the PWA and SEMA.

After high school, Simmons worked at his father's small appliance repair business. He then started a repair parts mail-order business and called it SECO. Stymied because he couldn't get the needed parts to race, Simmons started his own warehouse distribution business for performance parts in 1962. Like many in the "old days," he began selling parts from a trailer that he hauled to racetracks on weekends. He closed the electrical business in '69 to focus all his efforts on the performance.

Along the way, Simmons was also owner and operator of two tracks: Helena Dragstrip and Lassiter Mountain Speedway. But it was his sharp business acumen which helped grow SECO into a thriving wholesale and retail business. Today, SECO is run by his daughter Anne Graves, who is also the PWA president.

"My wife Marie and I are proud of Anne," Simmons said. "She was voted in by her peers and has held the same PWA positions I was lucky enough to hold. She did it on her own. We are happy the industry is letting a woman serve. Do I give Anne any advice? If you knew her, you'd know the answer. If asked, I give advice, but too many times I have given it when not asked to."

Not surprisingly, Simmons got involved in the industry, joining SEMA in 1969, and then the PWA...or at least tried to. "It took me two-plus years to become a member of PWA," he said. "We sent in an application and waited and waited. No one would give me the time of day or an answer, so I called Don Raleigh, the national director. He checked and called back, saying 'it was handled, you are now a member.' Turns out the problem was due to my area director. He was a competitor and sat on our app."

Simmons then got recruited by Don Smith. "He called me and said there was an area director election coming up and asked me who from my area should have the position? Naturally I said me. I ran and was elected. I vowed I would hunt for members. I recruited and was the No. 1 area director to hold area meetings."

All told, Simmons was a PWA area director for 17 years, as well as treasurer and national director, both for two terms. He also served three times on the SEMA

board of directors. In his many years of service, Simmons said he never missed a PWA or SEMA Board meeting.

That kind of dedication earned him several industry honors including, SEMA Person of the Year (1980), PWA Pioneer Award (1993) and being inducted into the SEMA Hall of Fame (2004). "I cherish those awards," he said. "I am proud of every board member I worked with. Just look at the PWA today."

Simmons looks at the PWA from yesteryear with fond memories. "I worked on getting our PWA meetings to places the whole family would go to, not just the 'guys.' We had one in Daytona in 1987. Me and David Nelms with Speed Distributors - rest in peace - got Joe Hrudka of Mr. Gasket to furnish Daytona 500 tickets to all of us and provide a great food spread. That was the best. Bobby Allison was first, Davey Allison second. I was kidding about this as Marie and I drew them to win in the blind draw pool.

"Some of the best memories were Don Smith's board dinners at the Sands. Ask Russ Deane, Dick Wells or Ralph Hansen of Accel about them. Don blew a year's account funny money on each one."

Simmons said he has a lot of SEMA memories. "One that I always will remember is a PWA Conference program in Arizona. SEMA sponsored the cocktail deal at night. After the first night, Els Lohn said we can't keep letting the hotel furnish the booze because SEMA couldn't afford it. Yes, at one time SEMA was on a budget. So Els and I went out and fronted the money to buy the booze, snuck it in the hotel and refilled all the half-full and empty bottles for the final two nights. We didn't get caught but the manager said 'you guys drank a ton the first night and zilch the last two.' Els told him we were on the wagon to go home.

"Another fond SEMA memory was going to Indy for the final day of qualifying after a SEMA board meeting. A lot of us went to place called The Red Dog Tavern in North Salem, a small town north of Indy. I remember Russ Deane, Els and Butch Lahmann, who had his father-in-law with him. The poor guy was stunned. The drunken owner cut Russ' tie off, much to our enjoyment."

Simmons remembers the fun, but also the hard work and accomplishments. "I remember the PWA conference programs in tents at the SEMA Show. It was tough in the early days, but look at it now. The manufacturers always wanted to hold all the cards, but PWA became a powerful force in our market. The manufacturers, I feel, now look up to PWA. Catalogs were needed back in the 'Stone Age,' but few were around - the same for price sheets. Discounts to WDs? What was that? PWA had to help pioneer this. All said and done, I feel the early PWA pioneers built what we have today. I was not there at the start, but those guys blazed the way.

"The best of service with SEMA was getting the

Continued on page 11