



Where Are They Now? "Speedy" Bill Smith, Speedway Motors

by Dick Wells

(Editor's Note: Dick Wells, a recent Where Are They Now? subject himself, authored this one on his long-time friend and mentor, "Speedy" Bill Smith)

Where are "they" now; the true pioneers of the performance industry? At least one is right here, right now: He's Bill Smith, otherwise known as "Speedy Bill," the unchallenged frontrunner in an industry that prides itself on innovation, creativity and marketing savvy. Few can come close to the achievements of Speedy Bill, the proprietor of Speedway Motors in Lincoln, Nebraska. Yeah, Lincoln, Nebraska, since, as Bill repeatedly explains, "It's the center of the country. What better location for a company that's doing the bulk of its business as a specialty WD and in mail order?"

Bill can be seen these days at various functions, oval track racing-his favorite-among them, in addition to trade shows, street rod events...in a few words, he remains active as the head man at Speedway. Bill is immediately recognizable by the high-dollar black Stetson he wears; it has become a trademark. He also wears what appears to be a perpetual grin; it seems to be saying, "I know what you're thinking and I'm several steps ahead of you. Don't even try."

All of today's successes for Bill came out of humble beginnings. His first store, opened in the mid 1950s, offered the Goerlich line, Dynatone mufflers and dual kits for Ford flatheads. "It was a big deal for me at the time," Bill says. "But my office in our current facility is larger than my first store!" It wasn't long before Speedway relocated to a much larger location, in the late 1950s, one to include a substantially larger inventory and a shop in which racecars and engines were built. And raced, under the Speedway trademark, the number 4X to identify them and all of the cars painted a bold purple. And, of course, applying Bill's knowledge and strategy, the Speedway entries were driven by name drivers of the era. It follows that there were far more winners than also-rans out of the Speedway stable.

Bill's wife, Joyce, had joined him in marriage and has been a lifetime pal and partner. She's always been at his side, and he is quick to credit Joyce with a lot of his success. "She has a good business head on her, and I listen to her." But she's one of few he listens to. His dear Mother also used to visit Speedway and helped out behind the counter. It was she who would repeatedly ask Bill, "When are you going to get a real job?" Bill just buried his head in his hands and sat at his desk,

the same position he took when Mom was behind the counter helping a customer. He often heard her say, "Did you come in here just to hold it or do you want to buy it?"

Let's leapfrog other elements of Speedway history and move ahead many years to the current Speedway complex, an expansive multipurpose establishment in Lincoln. The compound embraces manufacturing, warehousing, a state-of-the-art mail-order operation, a retail store, and one of the most impressive automotive museums in the world! The Speedway Motors warehouse itself spans 500,000 sq. ft; there are 45 freight doors and each day-at least one, perhaps more than one-a UPS 18-wheeler rolls out with filled mail-order shipments. That's understandable: At last count, Bill revealed that Speedway mails out about a million catalogs with each new edition.

There's a better way to summarize the scope of the Speedway operation. A few years ago, the late Bob Petersen of Petersen Publishing, Ray Brock, once of Hot Rod magazine and Carroll Shelby flew into Lincoln to tour the Speedway establishment. Mr. Petersen observed: "I thought we were going to see a speed shop. This is a full-blown manufacturing and distribution center; it's a tribute to the specialty aftermarket." Carroll Shelby, looking over an assortment of nearly 300 antique racing engines, meticulously and accurately restored: "I'd like to spend several months here just studying these engines. Remember, there were no machine shops in those days. These engines epitomize the meaning of craftsmanship!"

Speedy Bill has been collecting automotive memorabilia for decades, and the museum, known as The Smith Collection Museum of American Speed, reflects not only his unwavering determination, but also an acute understanding of the value of the pieces. Examples of the collection are too numerous to review here, but here are a few outstanding examples: The prototype Ford flathead – Ford doesn't even have it; a spanking-new Duesenberg racing engine, still in the box; a full collection (said to be the only one) of every accessory water pump made for the Model T; And the topper has to be Speedy Bill's extensive collection of restored antique pedal cars, the largest of its kind in the world.

And Joyce Smith has her corner of the museum, too. Joyce has an impressive collection of Checker cab memorabilia, again, likely the only one in the world. Toys (cars in particular) are a big part of the Speedway collection. Explained Bill about the toy car collection: "The boxes were usually thrown out and the toy car became just that, a toy. Today, if you find a car in a box, the box is likely worth more to collectors than the toy itself."

The museum spans some 135,000 square feet of

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