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This month I would like to tell you about a true legend of hot rodding and salt lake racing, a guy I had the great privilege of knowing, LeRoi Tex Smith. Tex was a proud Cherokee Indian, born in Ohio USA in 1934 and his Indian name was Tracking Wolf.

When Tex recently passed away the world lost one of the best.

I first met Tex on the salt at Lake Gairdner, South Australia in 1999, but I felt like we had met years earlier. Tex was an old friend. I knew Tex from reading Hot Rod magazine, Rod and Custom magazine, Hot Rod Mechanix, Street Rodder magazine and several Tex Smith how-to books. It was about 35 degrees at Lake Gairdner when I met him in person. He had a round black plastic circle cut out about two feet in diameter, placed on the salt, while he sat on a chair with a fishing rod and line, looking like an Eskimo trying to catch his lunch. I wondered who this crazy guy was with the Yankee accent!

I told Tex I had been reading his hot rodding books and magazines for years. He just laughed and apologised. He had a great sense of humour. Back then, I asked Tex what he thought of our event in Australia, he told me that we didn't realise how lucky we were to be involved in “the golden years of salt lake racing” and now I know exactly what he meant. They were our formative years and Tex was able to relate the atmosphere back to the early days of Bonneville.

The next time we met was at Castlemaine Rods monthly meeting. He asked me why I drove all the way to Castlemaine from Melbourne to attend hot rod club meetings. I told Tex it was because the guys in the club raced cars and built cars not just polished them. He replied, “I would drive across the hills surrounding LA to attend meetings with the LA Roadster club for the very same reason.”

Tex Smith has done a lot with his life, including flying fighter jets for Uncle Sam, television productions, magazine promotions, and with Wally Parks, Tex helped set up the NHRA. Tex was on the ground level in the early days of organised drag racing. He drove across



LeRoi 'Tex' Smith
1934 - 2015

the USA in a 1960 Plymouth on the 'Drag Racing Safari', finding suitable locations like old airstrips and organising drag racing events along the way.

Tex and his first wife Peggy, together with Dick Wells formed the NSRA, today's biggest American street rod organisation, and in Peoria Illinois, ran the very first Street Rod Nationals. Wally Parks and his wife treated Tex like a son. Wally was the main man involved in setting up the first Bonneville Speed Trials. Tex said with a grin, “Wally wore the white shirt and tie,” and Tex left it to him to deal with the others that wore white shirts and ties. Tex was at the first

Bonneville Speed Trials in 1949 and attended every Speedweek right up until 2013.

During the 1950's Tex raced a 1932 Ford coupe with a flathead. He told me coupes were not at first accepted as race cars on the salt by the roadster guys... only roadsters are real race cars... but eventually the number of guys wanting to race coupes grew and the cars were included. During all his years spent at Bonneville Speed Trials, Tex was photographing and writing for car magazines. Bonneville Speedweek started to get big after Tex, through his magazine Hot Rod Mechanix, started promoting the event as 'somewhere

to go and do something with your car'. Tex didn't like the lawn chair mentality and always encouraged guys to get active.

On my first trip to Bonneville, we met up with Tex and he showed us around Wendover, telling us stories of how in the early days, racers would tune their cars in the motel car parks then test them on the main drag before taking them on the salt. He told me the now huge Nugget Casino was a flat boarded building fitted with poker machines on the back of the toilet doors - he swore it was true!

When Vicki and I filmed 'Under the Radar' showcasing the 60th anniversary of

Speedweek, I confessed to Tex that we hadn't made a film before, but we were going to give it our best shot. Tex told me if we show the viewers what we liked, it will work. He was right, Vicki and I took the advice and the DVD was a hit with all rodders alike. Tex was always encouraging people to have a go.

One of my proudest moments was adding my name to the others on the bonnet of Tex's favourite roadster. Tex said, “Now you have run 200mph at Bonneville, you have earned the right to sign my bonnet.” Tex's roadster bonnet was left in undercoat and he collected signatures from many very fast legends on the

salt. I was honoured to be considered worthy of adding my signature to the likes of those already on the bonnet.

Tex Smith followed the sun in his later years, sharing time between his homes on the edge of Yellowstone National Park USA, Hawaii, and in Castlemaine where he married his second wife – one amazing lady, Trish. He loved being part of salt lake racing in Australia and just being one of the guys in Castlemaine Rods.

Tex will always be remembered.

See you at the salt,

Norm Hardinge

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