

## Jim Kerr's Automobile history-Short Version

I went to Drexel University for one year then quit to go to work at Budd Manufacturing. Budd taught me how to weld auto chassis. From there, I started a garage as a part time venture with an old friend to do minor repairs and to work on performance cars. I started to port cylinder heads for local racers and got a job porting a set of new Cadillac heads from a local speed shop. I was asked to deliver the heads to George Hurst Garage in Abington, PA.

When I got there, George told me that he liked the workmanship and asked if I could help him finish the job. This project was installing a new 1956 Cadillac engine into a 1954 Mercury. The engine was to have a three carb manifold, roller cam, and a 1937 Cadillac-LaSalle transmission. George couldn't afford to pay me but offered to give me a key to the garage and a chance to learn how to do engine swaps.

George was astute enough to take photos and write copy for the swaps performed at his facility. He started making and selling the necessary engine mounts to put the new OHV engines into early chassis. I spent a lot of time answering inquiries and I received a commission on selling customers the necessary mounts, engine/transmission adapter, clutch and flywheel assemblies to complete their conversions.

There was a scarcity of quality floor shift transmissions and a growing demand for a quality floor shift conversion for the many good column shift transmissions being used by the OEMs. George was always looking for products that the market was in need of and had tried bumper guards for VW transporters and Karmann Ghias, nerf bar kits for street rods along with his motor mount offerings. Concentrating on a three speed conversion kit for the popular column shift three-speed transmissions, George and Bill Campbell came up with a superior design and quickly grabbed a major portion of the market.

To give you an idea of how quickly this took place, in 1960, George got myself and a few friends a job at the 1960 US nationals at Detroit Dragway helping the safety crew. We had two three-speed shifters mounted on a display stand bolted to a Chevy Cameo tailgate for people to try and see for themselves how superior the Hurst design was. Our daily budget to attend, eat and find a place to sleep was \$7.00. This was for all of us.

The shifters were so well accepted and sold so well that in 1961, we took a tractor trailer to the US Nationals at Indianapolis Raceway Park. The trailer had a machine shop inside and we helped the competitors get through tech inspection. George let me convert our company stake body truck in future years and man the Hurst Performance Clinic at Indy to assist competitors in getting through tech inspection and race, all at no charge to the racers. From roll bars and driveshaft safety loops to fixing trailers, were all done with a smile, some doughnuts and coffee and a wish for a safe race.

There was a crying need for a good four-speed shifter that would hold up to the rigors of racing. The first design that Hurst engineers came up with was better than stock, but not

up to the high standards that the three-speed shifters enjoyed. 2,808 were produced and eventually pulled out of service to make room for a vastly improved model. It was not an easy task to convince the racers that we had solved the problems associated with our first design, but a lucky break occurred when Hubert Platt broke his stock shifter and asked us to replace it between rounds.

He was so impressed with the shifter's performance that he had Dyno Don Nicholson try it and Don asked if we would install one in his car that night. It was dark and with a flashlight, I installed his shifter. The word spread like wildfire and all the top guns were making the switch. The move was on for every serious racer with a standard shift transmission to want and need to have a Hurst shifter.

George was the first performance parts manufacturer, to my knowledge, to employ a public relations director, Jack Duffy, to expand and solidify Hurst's position as the leading manufacturer of shift linkage for three and four-speed manual transmissions. Another brilliant move was the use of beautiful girls and the shifter and platform for their parade laps. It certainly was a coup to hire Linda Vaughn as the Hurst Golden Shifter queen.

Hurst finally had a spokesperson that was recognized the world over and soon to become the "First Lady of Racing". We were fortunate that we formed a relationship with Royal Pontiac and Jim Wangers, advertising manager for the Pontiac account at McManus, John and Adams. Jim encouraged George to send out a very detailed questionnaire asking our customer base to identify what they were looking for in a performance vehicle. My gut feeling is that this info led Jim Wangers to get the GTO project up and running.

In the early '60s, Pure Oil sponsored an economy run and Smokey Yunick prepared several Pontiacs with all of the "Super Duty" parts available along with aluminum fenders, hoods, etc. The vehicles were in Daytona at the same time as the Daytona 500. After working in the garage area all day, we would go out to the Spruce Creek Airport for night drags. Ed Otto, once Bill France's partner, held these drags using two searchlights. One would head down the track, then raise up to let the second light guide the race vehicles back to the pits. Usually Jim Wangers would take one of the Yunick modified Pontiacs there to race.

We had our shifter repair van with us to service any customers needing help. This "Shifty Doctor" repair vehicle was at every major race when needed, subject to schedules set by our public relations department. Let me stress that the success of Hurst was due to the teamwork among the employees. I can't remember ever being turned down when I requested help or needed parts from Jack Duffy's department and vice versa. If Jack needed something, we knew it was to help our image and stature in the industry and we did it.

During this extreme growth period, I quit working at Budd's and came full time to Hurst. I made up the shifter displays for the jobber stores, worked on new motor mount applications, repaired shifters at the races and became the liaison between engineering

and sales. This required determining what production pieces, not coming up to our specs, due to finish, color or dimensional problems, could be rejected or used in production.

Hot Rod Magazine wanted to do a cut-a-way pictorial of Don Garlits' dragster. George gave the OK to use our facility and Ray Brock, Hot Rod editor, came in from California to do the shoot. George, to my joy, asked me to help Don with the disassembly and assembly of the dragster. It was a pleasure to work with Don and little did I know that a few years later I'd have a match race at Atco Dragway with our K&L BB/Fuel Dragster, Connie Swingle driving, against Don's dragster. He won.

The Hemi short block in our dragster had been assembled by none other than Bill "Grumpy" Jenkins. It was probably the only time Bill worked on a Nitro Hemi. I had the privilege of working on Dave Strickler's Dodge at Bill's garage making a "Super Shifter". The mounting position of the shifter on the Mopar transmission was not in an optimum position for reliable shifting under racing conditions. I relocated the shifter mounting position to a more favorable position and also made the shift rods as straight as possible. We eventually put reinforcing sleeves over the rods to eliminate any flex and ensure positive gear engagement.

The Hurst engineering department was always receptive to the ideas brought back from the races and continually made improvements. They made selector pins with a flatter edge to help our racers in making more precise shifts. Production pins had a rounded edge for a nice smooth feel but offered an increased risk in selecting two shift levers at once when attempting rapid shifting. Hurst had a talented engineer, Jim Hobbins, who excelled in doing the impossible. He developed the shift mechanism for the Hurst Smokey Yunick Indy Side Car. The single lever actuated the clutch and then engaged the transmission. He also did the Hemi Under Glass shift linkage as well as the Jaws of Life rescue tool.

George had a 1956 Chevy convertible and the engine was getting tired. A local Buick dealer had a problem with some brand new cars getting totaled and had put the drive trains up for sale. George bought an engine and transmission and installed them into his convertible. Everything went well until the automatic transmission failed. We went through a few until George decided to put a stick shift conversion transmission and one of our new three-speed shifters into his car. We used a Borg-Warner T-85 transmission, one of the strongest available, and completed the swap. It was a fun car to drive, but most people wanted to drive one of the automatic transmission cars we had in our fleet of company cars. George let me have the convertible on weekends to take to Atco Dragway and run it to show off our shifters. Not a bad deal, right?