

Double

Text and photos by Punk

Imagine building a hot rod or custom with the assistance of individuals with names like Winfield, Barris, Iskendarian, or Hines; true pioneers of the culture. The resulting car would probably be a nearly perfect representation of how these machines used to be constructed, and would likely be the envy of enthusiasts everywhere.

Followers of the religion known as gassers have a similar wish list from which to dream; it includes names such as Hill, Thompson, and Shores, just to name a few. These gentlemen stormed down the strips in predecessors to the "flopers" of the 1970s with reckless abandon. Fortunately for us, many of these steel-nerved men are still with us, and many of the tools of their trade survive to this day in barns and garages all over the country.

Ken Kull is a certified gasser nut. He missed out on the heyday of the species (he was born the same year the Hill Brothers Gasser he ultimately restored and campaigned was originally built), but decided early on to embrace the culture for all it was worth. Ken built his first gasser at the age of 18; a 1942 Ford Business coupe packing a 283 and backed by a 4-speed. Up next was a 1937 Ford Coupe with a 426 Wedge, followed by a 1936 Ford Coupe which he still owns. While these cars looked the part, and would certainly get out of their own way, they did not possess the fire-breathing brutality of a blown, injected AA/GS gasser. In true hot



Trouble

rodder form, Ken started a collection of gasser parts with the goal of someday creating the real thing. A magnesium wheel was found here, some 426 Hemi parts there, and so on. Unfortunately, he was missing a rather large part of the equation – the car itself.

Ken's quest for a Willys body led him and his father to a barn in Wisconsin. There sat the original record-holding 1933 Willys gasser known as the Red Baron, which was campaigned by the Hill Brothers in the 1960s. Ken had come face to face with an absolute legend in the industry. Armed with a pile of Willys gasser parts, and a sense of moral obligation, Ken and his father brought home this warrior. With the help of good friend Chuck Sago, Ken completely restored the Hill Brothers car to 1967 specifications in approximately 11 weeks!

Ken then spent the next two seasons racing the vintage gasser, meeting and gaining the admiration of many of the veteran drivers of these beasts along the way. The significance of the car was very apparent to Ken. Not one to feather the throttle under any circumstances, the thought of piling this historic machine into a guardrail was very unpleasant. He decided the best way to carry on the legacy of the car would be to build a sister car, the Red Baron II, one first of the two remarkable gassers seen in these pages.

Ken located a 1933 Willys with a steel cab and doors along with the prerequisite fiberglass one-piece nose. He then chopped the top 3 ½ inches, and fabricated a custom steel bed with fiberglass Model A fenders. Striving for a period correct gasser, Ken had his friend Chuck Finders drive in from Ohio to help him set up



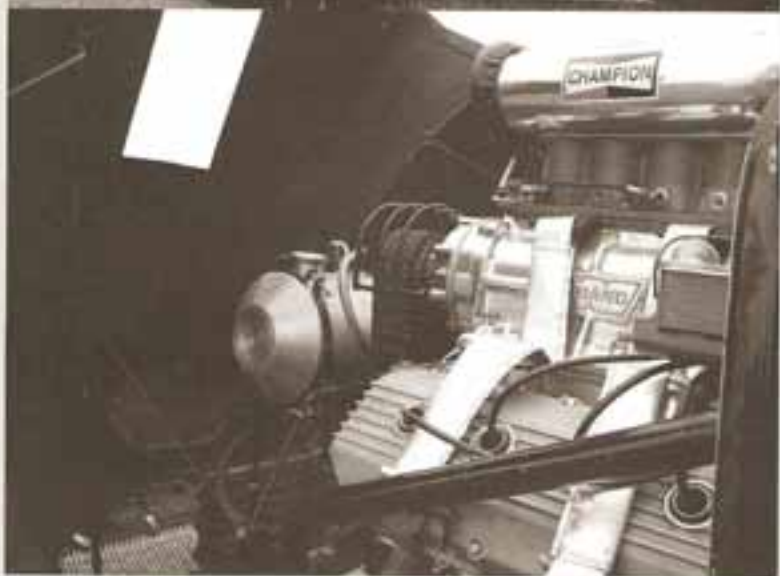
the suspension and box the original Willys rails. Chuck, a chassis builder and former gasser warrior himself, originally built the Hill Brothers Red Baron in 1966, and Ken wanted the Red Baron II to be as authentic as possible. Once the suspension was as is should be (circa 1967 specs), Ken got to work on the rest of the build. Nothing but a Hemi would do for this machine, naturally. A cast iron 426 was chosen, sporting 8.7:1 compression, aluminum rods, and magnesium pulleys. A Schneider Racing flat tappet custom ground cam tries to keep the valvetrain in some semblance of order. This task is made much more difficult by the amount of volume the Hilborn 4 port injectors sitting atop the polished 6:71 GMC blower can deliver to the combustion chambers. Hidden under all of this hardware is a vintage Cragar magnesium intake. A 3 1/2 amp Vertex magneto, which was tweaked by Pat Mason at MRI, lights off the volatile mixture, the byproducts of which are expelled by custom 2" headers constructed precisely like the original Red Baron's. The transmission is a B & M automatic, equipped with an authentic B & M Series 65 shifter, straight from the 1960s. Front suspension consists of a vintage Don Long dragster axle with Willys spindles, a monoleaf buggy spring, an aluminum



Corvaire steering box (reversed), and no brakes (As Ken says: "The parachute stops the car!"). Rear suspension includes ladder bars, Corvaire coilovers, and a Watts link for sway control. All of this hardware supports a 1957 Oldsmobile rear with gears ranging from 4.10, 4.30, or 4.56 depending on track conditions. This end of the car is equipped with 11" drums which were factory issue on the aforementioned '57 Olds rear.

The wheels are Radir units which were pulled from the 1960s Fenton molds. Skinny race tires are up front, while 12" M&H Racemaster slicks sit out back. Since 12" slicks were the widest available in the 1960s, this is what Ken runs.

The interior is as one would expect: Fiberglass bucket seat, starter button, kill switch, and only one gauge – an oil pressure unit sourced from a 1960s Ford pickup truck. There is also one more very important feature; a parachute handle, referred to by Ken as the *Oh ***** lever.



Once Ken had everything just the right way, the Red Baron II was painted by John Foust of John's Pro-Street and Custom in Leesburg, Pennsylvania.

Ken wasted little time throwing down the gauntlet in his new "old" gasser. The Red Baron II '33 Willys AA/GS pickup has run a best of 8.23 @ 167, obliterating the AA/GS ET and MPH records from the sixties to date, earning the title World's Quickest and Fastest True Nostalgia Gasser. Ken has put out many challenges in the spirit of the gasser wars of long ago; few if any have accepted.

As you may have guessed, this is not the end of the story. There is still the matter of the rather aggressive-looking 1941 Willys BB/GS pickup shown on these pages. Ken owns this machine along with a gentleman by the name of Carl Bills, who operates a company specializing in early Hemi aftermarket parts called Black Mountain Hemi – hence the lettering on the door. Carl is a drag racing enthusiast, and wanted something truly original and unique to use as a test bed for his shop's Hemi engine modifications. This line of thinking put him on a collision course with Ken Kull, who immediately set out to find the right car. This '41 Willys gasser is an authentic street and strip burner right out of the early 1960s. The original builder of this Willys, Werner Hall of California, was inspired by Chuck Finder's chopped black 1941 Willys

pickup truck and proceeded to drag one out of a junkyard in 1963 with the goal of recreating it. It sat around for many years incomplete, was sold in the mid 1960s, and was then made into a gasser with an injected small block Chevy. The Willys had a minor crash, after which it was bought back by Hall. Hall then ran it on the street, adding the roll up glass windows, speedometer, and working headlights. He sold it once more, and then bought it back a third time. Hall sold it a final time to Tom Glenn, who replaced the Chevy with a Hemi and returned the truck back to race status. When Ken and Carl ended up with the truck in 2007, it was ready to be refurbished, and received a new rear suspension, transmission, and engine, as well as new lettering and other modifications. Since this gasser is used as an engine development mule for Black Mountain, it literally needs to be ready for anything. As such, Ken and Carl have fortified it to accomplish this task. The current power-



Original Red Baron



plant is a stock stroke Iron 392 Hemi with a solid roller cam and 354 heads. Ken considers this to be a "very basic engine". Of course, this is Ken Kull we are talking about here – the man who runs a vintage gasser all the way out the back door at dragstrips all over the country, often tripping the beams at over 160 miles per hour nearly sideways. This "basic" engine sports a Hilborn 4 port Injector and a polished 6:71 GMC blower, a Vertex magneto (also built by Pat Mason at MRI), and custom 2" headers. The transmission is a modified Turbo 400. Front suspension consists of an early Bell dropped solid axle with Willys spindles and disc brakes. Parallel leaf springs and aluminum Corvair (reversed) steering box round out the highlights. Rear suspension consists of ladder bars with adjustable coils suspending a 1957 Oldsmobile rear end dressed with the stock 11" drums. Wheels are early Anson aluminum slots up front with race tires and ET wheels out back with 12 inch wide M&H Racemaster slicks; as mentioned earlier, the widest size available in the 1960s. The interior is a bit plusher than the Red Baron II given its brief foray onto the streets in the 1960s; besides the aforementioned roll-up windows, it also sports a host of early Stewart Warner gauges, along with the prerequisite 1960s fiberglass seat.

This Willys retains a significant amount of vintage hardware, but does include some modern concessions to accommodate the extreme horsepower and torque today's technology extracts from engines. However, this little gasser is no slouch as is. The initial shake down passes have seen it break into the 8s at over 150 mph. With the current 392 engine configuration this truck would fall under the weight and cubic inch requirements of the NHRA BB/GS class of the sixties.

What is in store for the Black Mountain gasser, you ask? Lurking in the shadows is a Schneider Cams-equipped 467 Chrysler Hemi, as well as other combinations under research and development. The owners have also discussed a low deck 331 to see what kind of power they can pull from that combination. It would seem tall 8s are only the beginning for this machine, if Carl and Ken have their way.

For a guy who seems to enjoy blazing down a narrow strip of pavement at ridiculously high speeds in a vehicle suspended with 60 plus year-old suspension technology, Ken is very laid back and humble. He has been drag racing nearly two-thirds of his life, and sums it up in the following manner:

With the ups and downs of racing, broken parts, trips to rained-out events, deceitful promoters, and being perpetually broke, God has made it possible for me to do something that I really enjoy but can't financially afford to do. For this I'm very grateful, and I am positive that "all things are possible with God". I would also like to thank God for my supportive family, and putting knowledgeable, helpful people such as Pete Hill, Junior Thompson, and Jim Shores in my path.

Look for these two extraordinary gassers at a vintage drag event near you. I can tell you from firsthand experience you will definitely hear them before you see them!