

## A Tribute to Ray Rairdon

One of the most accomplished and popular drivers of the late 1950s was Seattle's Ray Rairdon. Ray passed away recently and as a tribute to this legendary racer we are reprinting the profile Ray contributed to the February, 2003 issue of *Vintage Drift*.

### From roadsters to Sebring--the way it was in the 50s

By Ray Rairdon

If you read *Vintage Drift*, you are interested – vitally interested -- in vintage race cars. I hope that you are also interested in the history of our sport, especially from a local perspective. With that in mind, come back with me now to “those thrilling days of yesteryear.”



My race driving career actually began at a Mt. Baker ski hut. Several of us had rented a ski cabin called the “Stone Hut” (it is still there, by the way.) One evening one of the gang, Scott, announced that he had bought a race car; the problem being that he was 18 years old and had a heart condition to boot. In those days you had to be 21 to drive. So there was the car, but would drive it? Now I must tell you that our eating habits were fairly simple, we had on the stove a pot of beef stew and a pot of clam chowder. When either got low, we would add some new ingredients. With the stew we added a liberal dose of bourbon, and with the clam chowder an equal or larger dose of “jug” white wine! Thus fortified, I said I was the man to drive the car!

The car in question was a hot rod, or track roadster, that had been bought from Bob Ramstad in Everett. At that time Everett was a hot bed of racing, with people like Bob Onker, Phil Fobert, fearless Fred Dickey, and Chuck Cookson.

All this was taking place in the winter of 1947–48. The first race was to be at Playland (Aurora Speedway) in March of 1948. We showed up at the track with the race car being towed behind Scotty's 1940 black Buick convertible. We were ready to race!

We had a problem, however. It seems as though Scotty and the mechanic had used all the allowable practice time on the track, so when the time trials started I strapped the car on and away I went. The mechanic and Scotty had forgotten to tell me that the steering was tightening up, so the car was indeed a handful. I put my foot down and tried to turn left, with little result. I hit the wall at enough of an angle to launch us high into the air upside down. Remember in those days we had no roll bars, so when we hit and started to slide I was all curled up in the basement! The car was well bent, but I was relatively undamaged. So much for my introduction to motor racing. We ran the car on and off for the rest of the year, and then it was sold.

I began crewing, and occasionally driving, for a chap named Gordon (Suds) Sutherland. He was a locomotive engineer for the Great Northern Railroad. One Sunday, he was working so I took the race car down to a race at half-mile dirt horse track called Borscht Park, near Centralia. We timed in well, but with a reverse start I was near the back. When the dust started to rise the course was obscured, so we had a “shut off marker” to guide us into the corner. I missed the marker—a weathervane on the horse barn – so guess what? I was late turning so the fence boards flew; and a post came into the car after me. We rolled down the bank and landed upside down in a small creek. The immediate question seemed to be: would I drown in the creek, or get burned to death from the gas that was running onto the hot exhaust manifold? Neither happened and while I was waiting the race finished. No one had seen me leave the area because of the dust, and the race had gone on. I realized that a person could

get hurt doing these things; indeed, Suds' earlier driver had been killed the year before at the Yakima Mile.

One Friday evening at Aurora Speedway the promoter asked Frank Hearn and I if we would put on a little show. It seems as though there was a Movietone News man filing from the roof of the grandstand and he wanted a little action. We agreed, since there was money involved. We started the "race" with and Frank and I the only ones in the on the track. I had a Hudson Terraplane with a steel top, so I was going to do the flipping. But I looked over my shoulder and Frank was on his head in the north turn off-camera. It was up to me. As we entered the south turn I started the "show." I was later told I did four full rolls coming to rest on my wheels. I got around to the backstretch, before I got sick! We made five dollars for our efforts, and I think I gave Frank one dollar since he did not fulfill his obligations.

### Sports car enter the scene

A year or so passed and one night Frank and I were at a drive-in, frequented by the race car gang, and in drives no other than Pete Lovely in a black Jag XK120. I must tell you that Pete had been in oval track racing and had done a great job with Minor Pelly's #55 car. We did not run together much because he was in the Main and I was usually in the B Main, if I made the card at all. Anyway Frank and I gave Pete a hard time about sporty cars. Pete took it in his usual good humor and suggested we go to Gray Field on Sunday because there was supposed to be a sports car race and we might find it interesting. The only people I remember there were Pete and Pat Piggot, both in Jag 120s. The thing that impressed us most was that they allowed women in the pits. This was never done in oval track racing! And there was little or no dust. I think this would have been in 1952 because I bought a MG Mark II in October of that year.

Soon there was a race at Shelton Airport, so I had to give it a try. There was no tech inspection and I remember looking over at Pete and saying, "Hey buddy, what do I do, I have no seat belt?" Pete thought a moment and said with a straight face, "Well, Ramie, hang on tight and don't fall out!" Incidentally in those days we ran the course in the opposite direction, and did not use the back runway, but instead used the road behind the pits to make the route. Later when I drove the Allard it seemed to me that at about 100 MPH that road was about 6' wide with steep drop-offs on either side!

A year or so later they came out with the MGTF 1250. By this time I am selling cars for the old British Car Sales dealership on Pike Street, so I got the first one in the Northwest. I think I ran the TF for most of 1954 and sold it in the fall.

At British Car Sales, in the backroom, we had two cars of special interest. One was a 1932 Duesenberg dual cowl phaeton, and the other was a Cad-Allard. As the company race driver, I got to drive both. The "Dusey" going up Pike Street reminded me of the time I got to ride in the cab of Sutherland's locomotive (the same feel). The Allard was something else; I don't remember the history but I talked Tom Henderson (Joe's brother) into letting me race it. We had some wonderful times with that car. It became the centerpiece of a drinking and chowder society, known as "Scuderia Snakepit." The car itself was nicknamed "the tractor." If it would not go fast enough on Sunday I threatened to use it to pull stumps on Monday. About this time I went to work selling cars for another dealership, Seattle Sports Cars, and sold a Porsche to Ed Barney. Ed entered the car in a national race at the Bremerton Airport. I have nothing against Porsches, but every time I raced one it seemed to me that the back end wanted to go through the corner first; maybe it was because I came from the "stab it and steer it" school of driving. More about that later.

Next up, was a Triumph TR 2. The company had taken on the franchise and I was using mine as a demo and racing it as well. They were very forgiving little two-liter cars, and I guess my most

memorable moment came at a race at the Bellingham Airport. I was sailing along the backstretch, admiring the view of Mt. Baker, when I felt a lurch, and my left rear wheel went on by me. I was just a tad busy for a few moments and did not see where the wheel went. Soon I heard fire sirens and saw smoke; the wheel had left the area, gone across Highway 99 (now I-5) and started a brush fire. I don't recall if we got the wheel back or not. Somewhere, about this time, we repossessed an Austin Healey. I went down to Wyoming and towed it back, and raced it in several races with reasonable success. I recall we let a charming young lady drive it in a Powder Puff race, and it took me about 15 minutes to get the safety belt fastened. I guess about the only car I did not race was a Jag. It always seemed to me that you sat on those cars and not in them!

## 1956 and the famous Gullwing

1956 was the year I began driving Franklin Eddy's Mercedes Benz 300SL. I had been sailing on Franklin's beautiful 52' yacht DORADE, for several years, and had sold him a Jag 120M convertible. I had declined his very generous offer to race it. The 300SL was another story. I went into People's National Bank one day, where he was Vice President and one of the owners. After taking a deep breath, I said "Franklin, I would like to race the car, and I'll make you a deal. I'll give you all the trophies and all the bills, and I'll have all the fun!" He thought about it for a moment, and said, "Well it's Wednesday and the next race is Sunday at Shelton, so you had better get it ready."

I know with today's car pricing, it is hard to relate to what people paid in the mid 50's. For comparison's sake, let's try. A MG cost about \$2200, and an Austin Healey was \$3000; Porsche about \$3500 to \$4000; a Jag was \$4000 and a 300SL was \$8000.

The 300SL was a true sports racer. We would drive it to the track, pull off the hubcaps and front bumper and go racing. The car took some getting used to; it was very heavy steering until it got up to speed, then it was delightful. It had a 12-quart oil reserve on the left side. Unless it was half empty it would smoke something fierce in hard right turns. Also the wheels were steel rims with magnesium centers and at short tracks, with little chance to cool the centers, they would expand and allow the lugs to work loose.

The only modification we made at first was to put in a so called "sports cam," which raised the horsepower from 220 to 240. I know there are a lot of stories about that 300SL. The tube frame was designed to work, and work it did. Some people racing other 300SLs took the exhaust system off, but the factory people told us that it was tuned and not to remove it. Besides, Franklin wanted to be able to drive it to work on Monday morning. He was able to do that with two exceptions, which is not bad for four years of racing.

More good years with Myron Doxon; Corvettes; Allards; the HWM; and the Goldendale Hill Climbs

1958 began three of my best years of motor racing. At the fall 1957 Seattle car show, Myron Doxon introduced himself to Franklin and me, and said he understood that we ran a Gullwing, and did we need a mechanic . . . and as luck would have it . . . we did. So began a friendship that has lasted down through the years.

It seems that Doxon Motors, Auburn, had just taken on the Mercedes Benz dealership. This was a result of Mercedes Benz marketing arrangements with Studebaker (Doxon Motors had been a "Studey" dealer for many years).

In March of 1958 we drove the SL to Shelton. In 1956 and 1957 Corvettes had come on the scene and were improving all the time. When Tad Davies' car hauler rolled in with six or seven Corvettes

ready to race, Myron thought we were in trouble. I didn't say so at the time, but I thought so too! However, our luck held and we won the race. I should say here that the two best things the SL had going for it were reliability and brakes. I never saw over 5500 RPM through the gears. As the race wore on the competition would slowly drift back to us, and in the latter stages we would usually run them out of brakes.

When Myron saw how much fun we were having, he really got into it. He contacted the factory and their "testing department" and as a result I could not help but note the car went faster and cornered better. It sounded slightly different since these were production cars in production races; there was a limit. Myron did not tell me what he was doing, and I certainly didn't ask!

We ran the car at a number of tracks from Abbotsford and Westwood in British Columbia, to Vacaville and Laguna Seca in California. I remember one year when we won all the races in B.C. so of course we went up for the year-end banquet. I had my modest acceptance speech, as champion, all ready. It is not hard to win when your car is 50 MPH faster than your competition! They came to announce the winner and, instead of me, the prize went to Arleigh Pilkey who drove a rather ratty MG. My gang was very upset, but I said, "there is more to this than meets the eye." Sure enough, their Club officers came over to our table and explained that everyone knew we had won all the races, but Arly was going to be 60 or 70 and had worked hard for the Club, and they knew I would not mind!

Thinking back to our northern cousins reminds me of an early trip to Abbotsford. Tom Henderson and his wife Charlotte were going up with his Jag. George Cummins and (yes, Cummins Diesel) I were going up in my MG. Tom called the Abbotsford Hotel to reserve a couple of rooms. When we arrived the lady at the desk was a bit perplexed; it seems the Abbotsford Hotel was a house of ill repute, and they weren't sure what we had in mind! Charlotte was not amused, but George and I thought it had definite possibilities! Speaking of George, one day I was complaining about being out of tires for the SL, and George asked what size and asked to use my phone. The conversation went something like this . . . "Hello, Uncle Don? (President of Cummins Diesel) Would you call Harvey and have him send us tires by air freight?" (Harvey, as in Harvey Firestone) In about two days I got a call from SeaTac Airport and the guy said, "I don't know who you are, but please come and get these tires before I get fired for holding them too long!"

I guess we should talk a bit about "hill climbs." I am sure everyone is familiar with Goldendale and the Maryhill Loops course, but we ran a couple of times at Fort Lawton from the lighthouse to the top of the hill. One year I borrowed the first MGA in town to race there, and later I ran the Gullwing. I don't remember anything exciting except that at the top was a rather sharp right hand turn, and if you did not make the corner there was a huge fir tree just waiting to bite you. (*Actually, someone didn't, and it did, but that's another story—ed.*)

Now to Goldendale; I ran it several years. First, I believe, in the Allard, the "tractor." That was the year that Dick Hahn asked me to run his Chrysler Allard. That day I took second in his Allard, third in the "tractor" and last in someone's VW Bug. The climb was won by Tom Carstens in the Chev-HWM.

One year we had a winning time in our first run. Franklin asked me if it would be okay to let a friend do the second run. Of course, I said no problem. The guy asked me how fast to take the first left-hand bend; I thought for a moment, and guessed I was entering at about 90. So I told him about 75. As he entered the turn I saw the brake lights come on, and knew we had a problem. Then the course radio came on and said there was a car upside down in the air. Sure enough, the Gullwing had hit the bank to start the slow roll. The top had never touched to the ground, that was the good news. The bad news was that the car hit so hard on all four wheels that they were all spraddle-legged. Actually the car didn't handle all that differently afterwards.

Back to road racing. We went to Laguna Seca three times before we won. Once a Corvette, right in front of me, blew up and I knocked the oil radiator off trying to dodge him. I cannot recall what happened the second time, but we won the third time. Laguna Seca was my favorite short road course. It was a great place to race against the southern California folks, including a big L.A. dealer who sent up his 300SL roadster; but we lucked out and won!

One of the problems we had against the Corvettes was their acceleration off the starting line. I would usually be several rows back at a standing start. The Vettes with their low torque would outdrag me, forcing us to play catch up.

I guess it was about the middle of 1959 when the Mercedes Benz people brought up a 300SL roadster and asked me to test it. Franklin had said he would buy any car to race that I wanted (as long as he could drive it to the bank on Monday morning). This somewhat limited our options. We reserved the Shelton track and took our Gullwing and the new roadster down. I went out with the Gullwing and ran ten laps or so to set a baseline. And then took out the roadster. It was not really a fair test because the roadster was stock and the Gullwing was, shall we say, "race ready."

I took a couple of extra laps to figure a way to tell the Mercedes Benz people that I much preferred our four-year-old Gullwing. Now, in fairness to the 300SL roadster, Myron Doxon went to work on it and by the middle of 1960 had made it a very competitive race car.

By the end of 1959, it was obvious that the best days of 300SL Gullwings were behind us, and it was time to move on. I don't know of any other car that could be driven on the streets and still go out and win highly competitive races for four straight years. As for maintenance, we never had the head off. One thing most people used to comment on was how quiet it was; that was because the factory told us not to mess with the exhaust system. It was definitely not quiet inside! I used to turn up the radio on the cool-off lap just to drive Franklin crazy when I would come into the pits. Looking back, I had the extreme pleasure of driving four different Gullwings and we won races with all four. Franklin Eddy's "Gray Ghost" was the one that we used over the four years from 1956 to 1959; it always numbered "45."

### Corvette Days – chasing the championship

1959 is over, and I am out of a ride. In February of 1960 Tad Davies called and said, "could we talk?" We met and he said he would like to have the national championship and would I be interested in running his Corvette. I thought about it for at least a half second, and said, "Sure, let's go for it!"

The championship in those days consisted of 12 to 15 races from Pensacola, FL, to the Pacific Northwest to Southern California and Texas. Races were every two weeks or so. The series started in Pensacola in March; so away we went! I took Tad's Corvette that he had raced in 1959. The deal was that while the factory was not directly involved in racing, we had specified dealers around the country to "assist" us. I had no pit crew as such but always had great people that would help along the way. The first race was at Pensacola, and the Chevrolet dealer was the "Pensacola Buggyworks!" About this time I got lucky because Boeing had assigned Ed Barney and Herb Williams to the Bomark project at Fort Walton Beach; they both had crewed for me for years up here. Also Ross Stone was there, and he had been the race announcer in the northwest. When Ross Stone got through telling the crowd about our northwest racing, you would have thought that a combination of A. J. Foyt and Dan Gurney had come to town. We won and that started the season. Then it was on to Upper Marlborough, Maryland, for one of the strangest road courses I had ever seen. It seemed to me that it was mostly built inside a quarter mile midget track. Then on to Virginia International Raceway, then next to Cumberland, Maryland. Cumberland was a very interesting race because it consisted of 22 Corvettes and four Ferrari GTs. We beat all the Corvettes and two of the Ferraris which I thought was

a fair day's work. However they found a way to disqualify the other two Ferraris so we won the race! This was to come back to haunt me because the next race was at Bridgehampton, Long Island. I was not aware of the politics involved, but it seemed that Cumberland was Corvette country and Long Island was Ferrari country.

We won the race and, while having a beer someone came up and told me I was disqualified. The Stewards Committee confirmed this when they condescended to talk to me. I asked, politely of course, the cause for disqualification and was informed that the engine did not have a crossover pipe, whatever that was! It appeared to us that no Corvette was going to win after Cumberland.

Before we had left Seattle I told the crew at Tad Davies to be absolutely sure that no tech crew was going to find anything that would have me thrown out; I guess they figured that a crossover pipe was so inconsequential that it would not be missed.

Next came Elkhart Lake, which by the way is my favorite long course. Bob Johnson, who was running second to me in points, and I were on the front line of the grid, with a local lad between us. Just before the start Bob hollered over at me and said, "Hey Ray, which is the first turn, left or right?" I hollered back, "Hell, Johnson, I thought you knew!" The lad's eyes in the center car got very large and when the flag dropped we let him lead the way. Of course we knew the "course" but it was fun. We let him hold onto first place for a lap or so, and then went on our way.

#### The famous Shelton fight

After Elkhart Lake I brought the car home to Seattle. Pacific Raceways was next up with a national race and again we were in luck and won. I had a great race with Dave Trofer, which ended when he stuffed the now-tuned and very fast 300SL roadster into the haybales. Then on to Shelton for what was to turn out to be my last race of the championship circuit.

Now, let me digress for a moment. In those days we used to "party hearty," and Saturday night at Ritner's Broiler in Shelton the party was going strong, and at about 1:00 a.m., Dave Trofer said, "hey Ray, if we finish anywhere close together tomorrow, let's fake a fight." I responded with an okay, but thought we should talk about it tomorrow to be sure that it still sounded like a good idea. The next morning I forgot about it and we went racing. It turned out to be one of my all-time favorites (*and mine, too-ed*). Myron Doxon had used a lot of the set-up we had developed on the Gullwing and applied it to the SL roadster. We were never more than 50 feet apart the entire race; in fact we touched paint a couple of times just for giggles. However, it soon became apparent that the Corvette could out accelerate the Mercedes coming off the last turn, and I took the checkered flag. As I slowed down, Dave pulled up alongside with a big grin and began shaking his fist at me! I remembered and shook my head "yes" and pointed to the first turn. We slid in sideways throwing off our seat belts, and we started wrestling around. You could hear people hollering, "They're fighting, they're fighting!" Before anyone got to us, we broke up laughing. But people still ask me if that was a real fight!

#### The quest fails

Now, the plot thickens. It seems that Tad Davies was canceling his Chevrolet dealership, and was taking on . . . guess what . . . Mercedes Benz. That was the end of our campaign with the Corvette. The remaining races were in southern California and as far away as Texas, and Tad had no reason to foot the bill. One of two more races and we could have clinched the title, but it was not to be. My last race in the Corvette was an endurance race at Westwood, B.C. where with Don Campbell we finished second to who else . . . Pete Lovely in a 3-liter Ferrari.

In 1960 when I was home from the circuit, I drove a couple of Allards and the HWM. I had reasonable success with these cars winning in class and running well up overall. The HWM was my last ride, but first I must tell you about Sebring.

In January of 1961 I received a phone call from a gentleman who identified himself as Grady Davis, a vice president of Gulf Oil Corporation. They were putting a two car team together to go to Sebring and would I be interested in driving. After I became convinced he was real, I said yes, and asked how he had come to call me. He indicated he had been watching my performance on the circuit and Don Yenko, who was a big Chevrolet dealer in the Cumberland area and had been one of the 21 Corvettes I had beaten, wanted me on the team. For some reason my week at Sebring did not go well. I just never seemed to go as fast as I should have, plus on the last night practice, my co-driver over-revved and never told anyone so I started the race with a sick engine and we were out in a few hours.

After Sebring I drove the aforementioned Allards and the HWM through 1962. One day we were at Westwood and Pat Piggot had a new Lotus. I do not remember the model but he and I went out to practice together. I was in front and the fun began. We had raced many times before and trusted each other, and I soon had the HWM going as hard as I could to the point that it was rarely going straight on the track. I would look in the mirror and there would be Pat with a cigarette still in his mouth and a grin. I finally waved him by at Deer Leap and pulled into the pits.

A lot of things had been building with me. Years ago, after surviving the jalopy crashes, I had thought that I would retire before I got too old. And, I could see that the days of the cars that I loved to drive, the big front-engine beasts, were passing—the days of the smaller cars with higher-revving engines was upon us.

Bob Clark, the owner of the HWM, wanted to know what was the matter, and I indicated the car was fine . . . “but I don’t want to do this anymore!” And that was it. I never raced again.

Two weeks later Pat was killed in the Lotus at Riverside.

### Some random reflections

#### The cars

I was fortunate to be able to drive a lot of interesting and notable cars over the years—some of which are still around and pop up every now and then in vintage racing. You might be interested in my impressions of the handling characteristics of some of them

MG: Fun to drive, no bad habits, but with a long-stroke engine, top speed was very limited.

Triumph TR II: A very well behaved car, but had a rather nasty habit of shedding wheels. Could hold its own with an Austin Healey on a very tight course.

Austin Healey: A good handling car, but it was very easy to knock off the exhaust system. Could easily handle a Triumph on a long course.

Porsche: Yes, I know, I know, . . . but for me the backend always seemed to want to enter the turn first.

Jaguar: Never drove one, but I always felt, after watching from another race car, that they were better street cars than race cars.

Mercedes Benz SL Gullwing: In my humble opinion they were the best, most reliable sports car ever built. Their handling took a lot of getting used to, but once mastered, they were great. At low speed the steering was very heavy, but at speed they lightened up and were a delight to drive. Because of their tube construction they were noisy inside.

Corvettes: From about 1959 on, they were fine sports racing cars. You could do enough tuning and handling mods plus putting in better brakes to make them competitive with any car in their class. If you kept the revs down through rear end gear ratios they were very reliable. We ran the entire 1960 season with no major problems and won our share of races doing it.

Allard: What can I say . . . I drove four different ones at various times, and no two drove anywhere similar. Sidney Allard must have laughed all the way to the bank when he sold the U.S. on his sports cars. First he took a solid front axle and split and hinged it in the middle that gave the front end a very strange geometry. Then a Didion rear end with equally bad habits. I drove one with a solid front axle that gave you a real thrill going down the front stretch. With the seat way aft you would look over the left front fender and then the right front fender but the front end was steady. With very independent front and rear suspensions the ride was somewhere between a waltz and a mazurka. The only thing they all had in common was a terrible understeer.

HWM: The HWM was not a bad handling car at all if the driver had some experience with big front engine cars. It was designed as a formula II Grand Prix car, I believe. When Tom Carstens put in the Chev engine it became a different car entirely. The only problem we had with it was its propensity to snap rear axles under hard accelerations but it was a fine car for those that came from the "Stab it and Steer it" school of driving.

### Last thoughts

Starters: In the 50's and 60's most starts were standing starts. When we first began we would have two lines of cars bumper to bumper. Later we got a little smarter and went to a staggered start. Usually a 3-2 grid, with a little maneuvering room between cars.

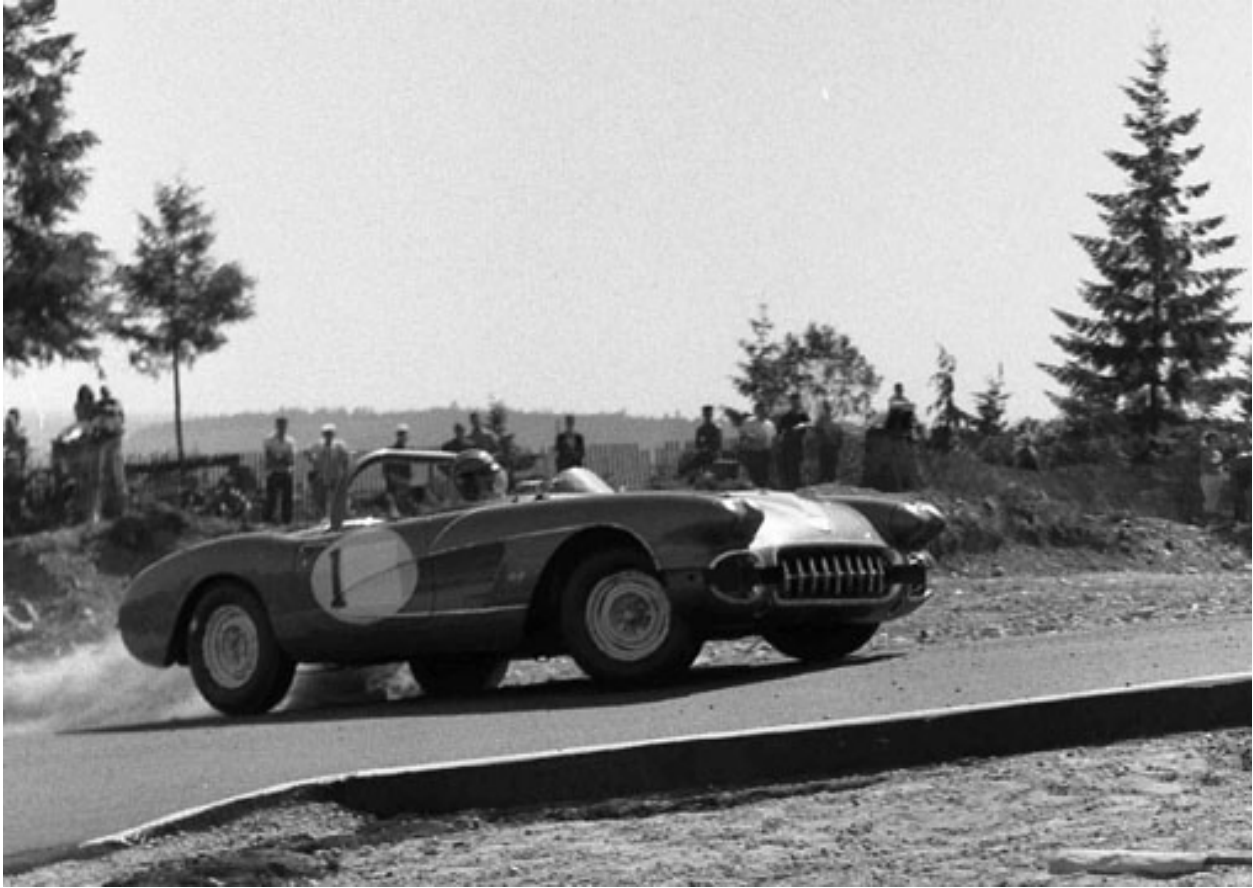
One of the things I learned early was to watch the starter in the races that preceded mine. The reason was that every starter that I knew had a bit of a ham actor in him, and it was the one and only time all eyes were on him. And everyone had a "signature" approach to dropping the flag. By watching, one could sneak a slight head start remembering that all eyes were on the starter. In one race at Laguna Seca I almost had to slow down: it was bad form to pass the starter before the flag dropped.

Turn Crews: One of the first things I used to do at a strange course, or often at local courses, would be to go around slowly and have a word or wave with the turn workers. They had, and still do have, a dangerous and often thankless vital job. And I am not sure that we drivers always give them the credit they deserve. They saved my bacon on several occasions. In their minds they were right in the cockpit with me, helping me through the corners, and if I screwed up they were there to help in any way they could, often at great personal risk.

Conclusion: In looking back over these pages there are a lot of incidences to related, but I am not going to bore you with "war stories." They were great years, with great people, and through racing many doors were opened for me that otherwise would have been closed.

**PHOTOS:**

Ray in action at Westwood in his last year, co-driving with Don Campbell.



Ray and Bob Clark with friends and the famous HWM-Chev

