

Anatomy of a Car Nut: Bob "Lil Axle" Stewart

Like Father like Son: Racer, Builder, Fabricator

By Randy Johnson

BOB STEWART is a big, tall, slender fellow, with a bushy gray beard. Some people say that with that beard he resembles fellow gear head Billy F. Gibbons of ZZ Top, whom he knows. Stewart talks slowly, but every word is worth listening to. He's 74, a senior hot rodder. Although he's over 6' 3", the customers of his father's speed shop named him "Lil Axle" back in the 1940s after his father whose nickname was Axle.

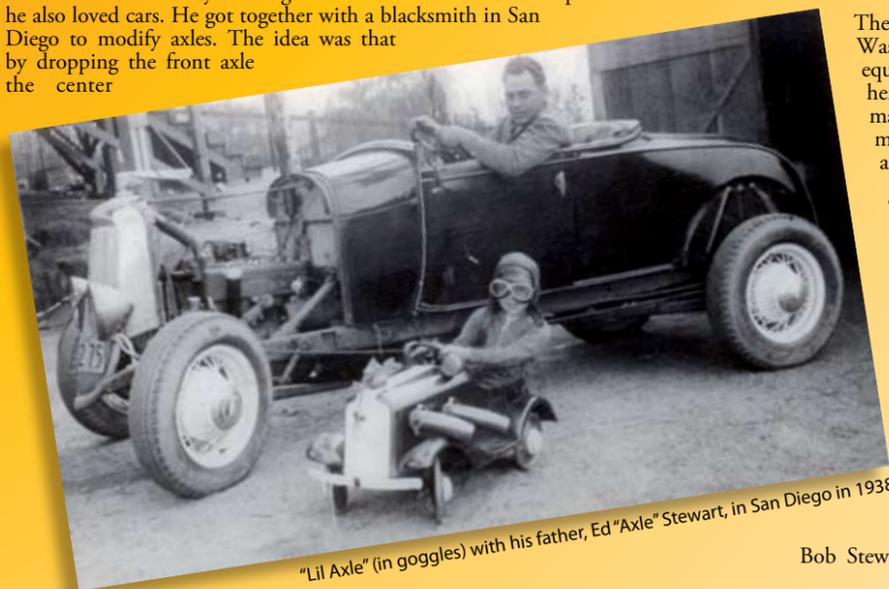
"Bob Stewart's a kind guy who would help anybody, and has helped me with sample parts and his vast knowledge of old Fords. He's a Ford guy like me," said Bob Drake. "I first met Bob in the early 1960s when he came up from San Diego and stopped by my dad's house in Culver City, California. I remember he had on a suit and tie. (At the time, he worked for Vendo, selling candy machines.) Somehow he heard that I had a '32 Phaeton. During the 1960s, there weren't a lot of these cars around and he wanted to see one. I didn't know then that his dad was one of the original hot rodders who had gotten into fabricating dropped axles, along with racing out on the salt flats."

"We soon became friends and met at weekend swap meets. It seemed like there was a swap meet every weekend in the LA area. It was like a cult and everyone became friends: We were all into the same thing, enjoying each other's company and looking for the ultimate Ford goody. We probably collected parts more than we collected cars. I even had parts underneath my bed," said Drake.

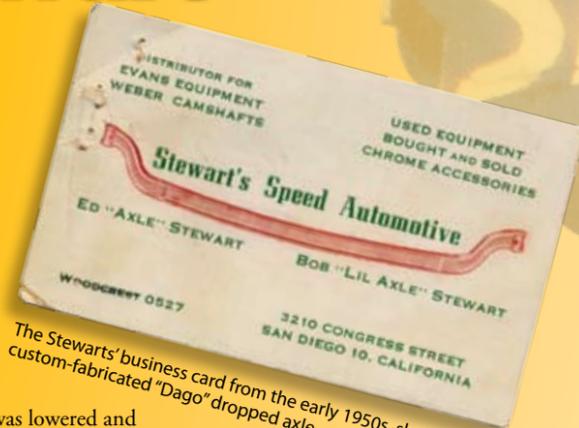
As far as Drake knew, Bob Stewart kind of disappeared from the swap meet scene in the early 1970s. About 10 years ago, seemingly out of the clear blue sky, Stewart walked in the door of Bob Drake Reproductions in Grants Pass. Drake immediately recognized him and the two Bobs rekindled their friendship. Since the 1970s, Stewart had grown tired of Los Angeles, moved to Idlewild, California, up in the mountains, and had owned and run a big bakery. But like Drake, he had visited and fallen in love with the Grants Pass area. "It's beautiful here; a small valley surrounded by mountains with the Rogue River running right through it—with only about 60,000 folks," Drake said. Drake's wife Pat and Kathi Stewart, Stewart's wife, became good friends. Stewart now lives only a few blocks away from Drake's shop.

How did a guy like Bob Stewart become a car nut? "When you're small, you look up to your parents. I grew up in hot rodding. I'm in it 110%," said Stewart. One picture says it all. Look at the photo of Bob with his father, taken in 1938 when little Bob was just four-years-old. There's father Ed Stewart in his original '29 four-banger, and little Bob in his hot rod racing helmet and goggles.

Bob's father Ed was by training a machinist and a heat-treat specialist. But he also loved cars. He got together with a blacksmith in San Diego to modify axles. The idea was that by dropping the front axle the center



"Lil Axle" (in goggles) with his father, Ed "Axle" Stewart, in San Diego in 1938



The Stewart's business card from the early 1950s, showing the custom-fabricated "Dago" dropped axle

of gravity was lowered and that decreased wind resistance. Removing the fenders made a roadster lighter and faster, and a larger wheel and tire on the rear had the effect of giving the car a higher gear ratio for a higher top speed. Abe Kobeck at Rogers Auto Carriage in San Diego taught Ed how to drop '32 axles by the drop-hammer method, which made them tougher than the more common taffy-pull method. Well before WWII, the elder Stewart was known for his axles, nicknamed "Dago axles" after the locale of San Diego.

In 1935 and 1936, guys started racing at Muroc (now Edwards Air Force Base). By the late 1930s there were hundreds of hot rodders from Southern California, Ed among them, who caravanned out to the Mojave Desert to run through the time traps on the salt flats.

"In 1937, Dad got involved in SCTA (Southern California Timing Association)," said Bob Stewart. In 1941, Ed became one of the founders of the San Diego Roadster Club: It was necessary to have an affiliation with such a club to make the timed runs out on the desert. The San Diego club predated the LA Roadsters, which wasn't formed until 1957.

The Stewart Speed Automotive shop began in Suncrest, about 30 miles from San Diego, in the Stewart family garage. "There was no bathroom, just an outhouse. The shower was a big pan above the garage that was filled by rain-water. My grandfather was a carpenter, and he built a bedroom, a back porch, and a bathroom. During the war, Mom made homemade meals for the sailors—homemade meals were a real treat for them—and in return they dug a septic tank and lines. The sailors brought soda, beer and ice cream, and steaks and chops. Mom would send them back to their base with another treat they couldn't get in the Navy: peanut butter sandwiches," said Stewart.

The Stewarts then moved into San Diego proper, to 320 W. Washington Street. The father-son team sold and installed speed equipment, and became well known for the Dago Axle, featured here on their business card from the early 1950s. Bob would make pickups and deliveries, as far away as LA, and also did most of the machining in the shop, including boring, honing, and port-and-polish work.

"I was probably a little luckier than most people," said Stewart, "My dad was involved in the speed equipment industry as well as the sport as it was being born. But, back then, there was no glamour in hot rodding. It was a lot of scrimping and working. The goal for the young gear heads was to attract girls ... but after building the hot rods ... we never had any money or time to take them out," he said laughing.

After WWII, Ed Stewart made a gesture to his wife: He sold his beloved '29 A V-8. But unknown to her, he had plans to build a special '32 hiboy. Bob Drake said, "It was an original steel hiboy, and of course had the low stance due to the Stewart Dago front dropped axle."

The deuce roadster first ran at the lakes in 1945 when Bob Stewart turned 98 mph in it—when he was only 11-years-old!



"It's all in the iron."

—Bob Stewart



"Lil Axle" Bob Stewart with his '50 Merc at the RatRod-O-Rama in Grants Pass, Oregon 2008
—Photo courtesy of Shannon Fain

In 1949, his dad, "Big Axle" Ed Stewart, hit 138.46 mph at El Mirage in a C-class roadster (one of the fastest times in those years when everyone was looking to eventually break the 150 mph barrier). Ed retired the car because of a blown transmission, and the car lay dormant in parts.

Ed and Bob's mother Tilly Stewart divorced in 1947, in part because of the races and cars. Back then there was a term among hot rodders for disgruntled girlfriends and wives who were bitter about the time and money being spent on the cars. The term was Gripping Girdies. Bob's mother moved to LA, and he spent time with her there as well as with his dad.

Ten years later, in 1957, 23-year-old Bob lost both his father Ed and his step-mother when they were accidentally asphyxiated in their sleep: The cause was the heater in their closed-up camper.

That year, 1957, was also when Bob made up part of the Heise Special team that fielded a car at the Indy 500. The other members were Bruce Crower, Darce Snyder, and Dwight Osborn.

Bob Stewart has three kids: Cindy Lou (50), Bob Jr. (49), and Ed (42). "Bob Jr. is into cars. He did all the work and paint on my '50 Merc. He helped me finish up the Stewart Roadster in '89, the car that had been in Stewart family custody since '43. Bob Drake's always accused me of copying his roadster (the deuce that Drake and Dick Magoo built in '76) because our 'twin' cars are both black with red interior. Mine's more traditional, though; it's got a flathead while his has a Ford overhead," said Stewart.

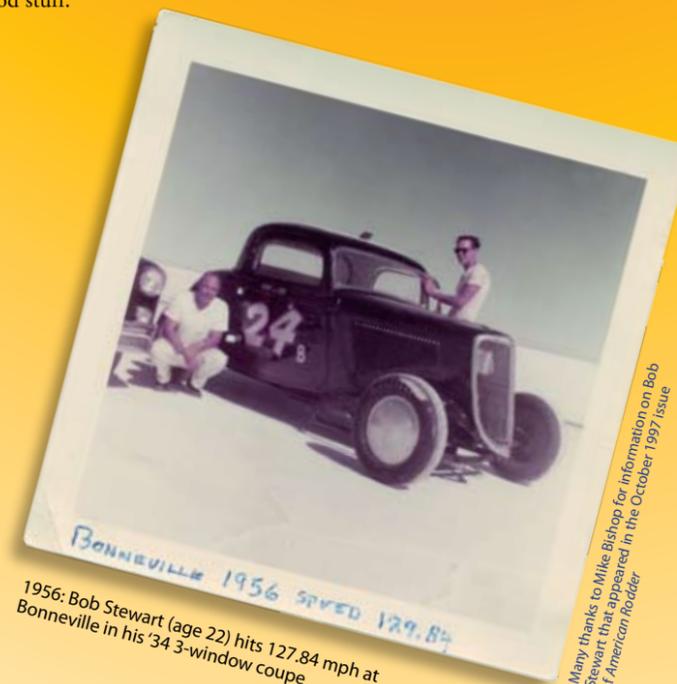
Indeed, after lying dormant for over 30 years, Bob and Bob Jr. finished the Stewart Roadster in 1989. They painted it Deltron black, fabricated hidden door handles and hinges, and finished the interior in Oxblood Naugahyde upholstery. Underneath and inside, it's a unique car with a Ford/Mercury/59A, bored and stroked to 296 cubic inches, Fordgedtrue pistons, a Porvin 3/8 camshaft, three Stromberg 48 carbs, and rare Evans heads. Other adaptations include a Halibrand quick-change rear end, a '41 Lincoln overdrive transmission, and '40 Lincoln/Bendix brakes. Bob said, "I'd put them up against any disc brakes made."

In 2006 the Stewart Roadster was sold to a private museum in South San Francisco. The special car is in good company: It's in a collection that includes 17 Dearborn cars and some Barris customs.

Bob Stewart, like Drake said, is a Ford guy. But he's been into other machines too. During the late 1950s, he went through his Porche phase, collecting and

working on 356s and one 911. But by the 1970s, he had as many as 12 Fords, with a special garage built to house them.

Looking back, what's important to Bob Stewart? "There are the gold chain guys," he said, "who don't really have their hands in it. Then there are the rat rod guys who are into chopped/channeled/sectioned ugly cars who just hang stuff on them like old faucets out of their grandfather's garage. I'm into hot rods. I grew up in it. My dad was one of the pioneers and I was fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time. It's all in the iron. I sure am glad that Bob Drake's around making real parts that guys can use to build the good stuff."



1956: Bob Stewart (age 22) hits 127.84 mph at Bonneville in his '34 3-window coupe

Many thanks to Mike Bishop for information on Bob Stewart that appeared in the October 1997 issue of American Rodder