

WARBIRDS WINGS AND WHEELS 3

OPEN HOUSE

features celebrity guest Blackie Gejeian

Estrella Warbirds Museum and Woodland Auto Display have announced Blackie Gejeian will be the celebrity guest (see sidebar) at the upcoming Warbirds Wings and Wheels 3 featuring a Classic and Vintage Car Show, on Saturday, May 14, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. There is no cost to en-

joy the day's very special line up of activities. Warbirds Wings and Wheels 3 plans on having a large collection of Vintage and Classic Vehicles including both civilian and military showcased on the taxiway and among the aircraft and in the newly expanded

building of the Woodland Auto Display. "Blackie," as all Fresno diehard car fans know, is also known as Mr. Autorama because of his 50+ year involvement with the Fresno



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A Conversation with Car Show Legend Blackie Gejeian

By Bob Chute

Blackie Gejeian (ga-gee-an), born in 1926, started driving his father's Model A at the age of 12. In 1944 he built his legendary roadster and would always wear solid black leathers. He painted 'Blackie' in gold letters on the side of his car, "Nobody knew my name was Mike ... I mean nobody. The only one who called me Mike was my mother."

Blackie, as all diehard car fans know, is also known as Mr. Autorama because of his 51 year involvement with the Fresno Autorama. Blackie toured the country seeking exhibits and just being asked to display at the Fresno Autorama each March was prized by custom car/car show owners everywhere. And, he kept it simple; just two primary coveted awards are personally handed out by Blackie: Best Rod and Best Custom.

Gejeian was an excellent race car driver in the 1950's; race promoter at the Clovis Speedway (which he

owned) and instigator of the four side-by-side quarter-mile dragster races at Fresno Dragway.

Blackie was the first person to win the Oakland Roadster Show two years in succession and he will be displaying one of his winning cars, the Shish Kabob Special, as well as meeting, greeting and signing autographs.

I had the pleasure of talking to Blackie for about an hour one Saturday afternoon in April. What an amazing person! I borrow a phrase from a 2009 story on Blackie in *Rod and Custom Magazine*: "When Blackie speaks, listen carefully, because his words come at you at the speed of a Fueller. Age be damned, his passion and enthusiasm are as intense now as they were when he built his roadster after the war. There is no way to do justice to this incredible hot rod-der's accomplishments in the limited space of this story, but here goes..."

Paso Robles Magazine: I've been checking the internet, there's an incredible amount of

The WWW3 car show on May 14 will present 1st Place Class Awards & Special Awards for 25 classes with space limited to 300 vehicles. All registrations must be received by May 5, 2011, 8 p.m. Vehicle parking begins at 7 a.m. and ends at 9:30 a.m. Judging is 10 a.m. to 12 noon. The Awards ceremony begins at 2 p.m. All vehicles are to remain in the display area until the Awards Ceremony has ended.

The Woodland Auto Display at Estrella Warbirds Museum has been called one of the best displays of automobiles and racing history and opened to the public on July 19, 2009. They doubled its display area with the opening of a new addition last fall, featuring a rotating series of automobiles. Vintage and classic cars are now ready for viewing along with previously showcased race cars.

The initial display concentrated on NASCAR Sprint, Modified, Super Modified and Midget race cars. This is a unique collection in



that you can see, up close and personal, cars which were well known on the various racing circuits.

Estrella Warbirds Museum, is a non-profit 501 (c) 3 museum, dedicated to the restoration and preservation of military aircraft and memorabilia of those who flew and worked on them. Their approach is not to glorify conflict but rather to make a future generation aware of the fact our way of life does not come without sacrifice. The museum is located by the Paso Robles Airport at 4251-A Dry Creek Road, normal hours, it is open Friday and Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sundays 12 noon to 4 p.m.

For additional information www.ewarbirds.org.

information about you...you've had a very cool, very amazing life. I built models as a kid and one was your Ala Kart. I'm 63 years old and I now have the pleasure of talking to the one who created it... very cool.

Blackie Gejeian: Ha, I've been doing this a long time, I built my roadster in 1944 when I got out



Blackie Gejeian and best buddy Amos Torsian

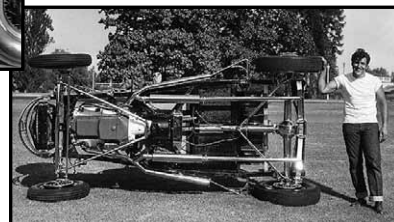
of the service. In 1945 we just ran it all over the place...we was me and my best buddy, Amos Torsian. I just lost him after 64 years of close friendship. We had some wonderful days, there were no two buddies that ran roadsters like we did. He was as tough as a bull but the Lord took him. Those were days of real hot rodding.

Nowadays, if you want to put a hot rod together you have to buy a

part here and a part there and just bolt it together. We built a car and made sure it would perform and do what we wanted it to do.

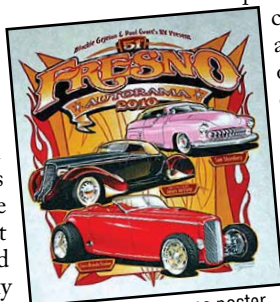
PRM: So, you built what you wanted instead of what a manufacturer thought it should be, right?

BG: Ha, yeah that's right... build something that no one else had, one of a kind. Just like when I built that modified roadster everyone looked at it and asked, 'What is that?' I just told them, 'That's a real hot rod.' They were strange lookin' but at least not the same as others.



Shish-ka-Bob roadster flipped on side to show chrome undercarriage

Today there are so many '32 highboys...there are thousands of them. I love 'em, don't get me wrong, but I like to have something different... like the Ala Kart was different than anything anyone ever had. Then we



The 51st Autorama poster

built the Emperor and won the world's best with that. Different. It's something you create, an idea of what you can do.

Today they talk about unibody, when the frame and body are together. My roadster was the first unibody ever made because I lead-
ed the whole entire body to the frame...it was all one piece...instead of a body on a frame.

PRM: I read an interview about you in Rod & Custom from '09 and you've had a lot of firsts in the automotive and car show industry.

BG: Ha, yes I have.

In the early days, nobody paid any attention to the undercarriage. The Shish-kabob-Special had the first chrome undercarriage. That's why at first we didn't know how to show it at the Oakland Roadster Show. So every hour on the hour, we'd pick it up and turn it on its side so people could walk by and look at it.

That's like the Ala Kart, George Barris built the body. George never did anything to his undercarriages. Me and Richard Peters and George designed the body, shortened the bed on it, rolled the body and pegged the fenders. The Ala Kart was the first one to come out of his shop with everything plated underneath, we did everything you could think of under that car...just to present it, to make it a different car. I put the first mirror under a car to show it off.

PRM: You've had that rod of yours for many years now.

It's been an enjoyable life, in another month I'll be 85 years old...I've still got the ambition to keep going. A person came over to the house recently when I got home from the hospital and I asked him to open the garage door and look inside. He came back with his eyeballs bulging, he said, 'I've never seen anything like that in my life!' There were 11 cars in there and nine roadsters that were the World's Most Beautiful Roadsters from the early '50s and '60s.

PRM: One was the car you're bringing to Paso Robles?

BG: Yeah, the Shish-kabob-Special, first built in 1944, and I won the World's title in 1955 with it. I used it strictly for street drag racing. There wasn't a car anywhere that could beat it, from Southern or Northern California!

PRM: You've been loyal to that

car for a long time. How many cars do you think you built or owned over the years?

BG: Ha! I don't know but I have 21 of 'em right now. It's just something you try to keep for the public to see. A guy asked me the other



Ala Kart won the World's Most Beautiful Roadster 2 years running



The Ala Kart also won over 200 car show trophies



The Emperor, another World's Best Winner

day, 'Well Blackie, if something happens to you what's going to happen to your collection?'

I've told my grandsons, there won't be one car sold...the cars all go together and try to get them into a museum so people can appreciate them from the years back when cars were hand-built. When I did my 50th show I put all my roadsters together for the first time...they had never been in the show, even as my own cars. People have always asked me 'When are you gonna bring this one or that one?' I always told them when the day comes I'll bring them all.

So I did that at the 50th, the two rows next to them were the latest Grand National Winners, 16 of them, double rows of cars that people could compare...cars from the '40s, '50s, '60s...against the '70s, '80s, '90s and 2000s...it gave them a lot of impressions of how they were built years ago and how they are being done today. It was a good demonstration.

PRM: So, you did the show for 51 years but not this year...

BG: I've had so many operations. I've had a reputation that if I tell you something, I'll be there. I've had 19 major operations, three pacemakers, a broken back and so much more...but I won't give up...keeping the pedal to the metal!

PRM: Were these the results of accidents or just breakin' down?

BG: The thing is, if you don't have faith, number one, that you can make it...you'll never make it. No matter what it was, I got through it.

That's been a big part of my life...even when I was a race car driver. I challenged hard, no matter what...if you want to win you have to have the guts to take chances. If

your mind is made up about what you want to do, go for it. If not, if you have guesses about it, don't do it.

Besides my shows, I've been involved in the

Grand Nationals Shows since 1949. They started calling it the Grand National Roadster Show in 1950 but I was there with the founders, Al and Mary Slonaker, the year before and haven't missed one since. That's going on 63 years and I haven't missed one.

PRM: You've just criss-crossed the United States looking for cars for your shows and brought them all yourself, right?

BG: I go to every car show around the country and out of the country as well. Because I only allow cars to be in my show one time. In all 51 years there was never a repeat.

PRM: Wow, you've had pretty high standards haven't you?

BG: I had several Grand National winners, all my roadsters, many former ISCA champions that had put their cars away and came out for my 50th show. It was unbelievable...it was something you will never see in your lifetime. We had about 250 cars that day...every one was a show stopper.

PRM: How many cars do you think you've displayed in your 51 years?

BG: Ha! At least 150 per show and every winner received 5 foot trophies, nothing like them in the industry. The Sweepstakes would get an 8 footer, Builder of the Year was a 6 footer...huge trophies.

PRM: They don't exactly fit on the mantle do they?

BG: No, but I have one on a mantle I'll be proud of the rest of my life. Bobby Darin's stepfather brought his car to one of my shows and when I gave him my trophy, Bobby took several of his gold records off the mantle and put it in the middle of the shelf. When his stepfather told me that it really made my day!

I also had a special invitation to display my roadster at Pebble Beach, the first time a hot rod was there. I was there for two years, then Detroit had a show like Pebble Beach and they asked 12 cars to exhibit, with six from the

East Coast and six from the West Coast and I was honored to be there.

Another thing I've done that no one else has done. In Reno, Nevada they have the Harrah collection. Bill Harrah was a very good friend of mine. I had entry cars from him for 14 years straight and I brought every car you could think of. One year I told him I'd like to have two of his Bugatti's side-by-side. That was something to see, to show the public something they'd never seen anywhere, there's only a couple others of those in the world! That's what I always tried to provide.

PRM: I read about your involvement in drag racing at Fresno Dragway. I enjoyed the drags in So Cal when I was younger. I read you had that track for 18 years and ran four dragsters side-by-side.

BG: Absolutely, the other day NHRA said they had four dragsters running side-by-side for the first time...I told them baloney and took that film to Wally Parks who has a TV program and he told me he couldn't run it because I was AHRA and this is a first time for NHRA.

That was the craziest show you ever saw. I had four dragsters, I had four funny cars, I even had four jet cars going...that was something watching them, the most brilliant sight at night I have ever seen in my life. I never had to clean the race track for weeks because of those jets blowing everything off it. I'm just a farmer boy, but we set a lot of records. I used a spray rig with a very fine mist spraying track block on the track all the way down. A lot of tracks spray the start block area, but I did the whole thing. A lot of cars have so much horsepower their tires break loose and go up in smoke. But on my track people were able to run the entire length because of the traction.

PRM: Back to the Fresno Autorama. You say you have a son, will he or anyone else be bringing back your show next year?

BG: No, the last three years I've really gone through hell, I lost my son just two weeks before that show.

PRM: Oh, I'm so sorry, I should have done my homework. My sympathies, that had to be horrible.

BG: Yeah. It was a tough decision but I went through with the show after conferring with the family. It was hard but I've never pulled the pin on a show...all the people that were planning on being there, the exhibitors, the pub-

lic, all the businesses affected by those reservations. If ever there was a time to pull the pin that was it, but I had to go through with it. We dedicated the show to my son. The next year I did the show from the hospital. Then it's been operation after operation and after the 51st show my doctor told me the way your heart and lungs are going you aren't going to make it to that 52nd show so you better start gettin' yourself straightened out. So I knew I better get the surgeries to fix all these various problems...

PRM: You're a rollin' wreck aren't you?

BG: Yeah, I'd always think, 'I gotta do a car show, gotta do a car show.' My physical health was slowing me down but I kept going. I had always put things off because people were relying on me.

Just like coming to Paso Robles in May, I didn't want to tell Dick 'Oh yeah, I'll come' and then tell

him I'm hung up in the hospital. That puts him in a bad position, what does he tell the public? But it puts me in a tougher position. I saw the poster he did the other day and it looks great! I'll be there no matter what...even if I have to crawl on my hands and knees, I'm particular, I can't help it. I'll be there!

PRM: Amen to that. Well, I look forward to seeing you in person, Blackie. Thanks so much for your time, hope you don't have to spend any more time in those darn hospitals.

BG: I'll be there.



Mary and Al Slonaker, Founders of the Grand National Roadster Show



Four dragsters running side-by-side at Fresno Dragway



Blackie today with roadster, the Shish ka Bob Special, he first built after World War II