

Tom Arnold: And then there was one...

Story & photos from Larry Lange, November 2019.



For Tom Arnold, the last surviving original Puget Sound Regional Group member, the idea for the club really started with conversations at swap meets.

A few years before, some people in California who drove early Ford V-8s began sharing stories and picking each other's brains about how to restore the old rigs and keep them running. They started what became the Early Ford V-8 Club of America, a national group designed to preserve the old cars.

The word filtered north. Some V-8 owners in Portland organized the new club's Columbia River Regional Group, which in later years gained national prominence by staging several regional meetings at Oregon resorts. The late Jim Davis, a well-known V-8 parts dealer in Portland, had been calling Seattle acquaintances to suggest they form a chapter.

At Seattle swap meets, Arnold, a 1932 Ford enthusiast, began hearing about this

new group from the late Bill Steil, another '32 devotee, and others were drawn into the conversation.

Steil talked up the idea. We need a group of our own up here, he kept telling the others. There were benefits to an organization, through exchanging of information and parts. He slowly gathered enough signatures from his acquaintances to persuade the national club to charter the Puget Sound Regional Group. That happened on March 31, 1969.

The initial PSRG group included Steil, Arnold, and six others: Wayne Hexum, Jerry Leonard, Joe Minnick, Ken Peterson, Jerry Stefano and Bill Taylor. They met for the first time in Minnick's big house in Kirkland, but later moved the monthly sessions to the national-guard armory in Seattle's Interbay neighborhood.

After years of an old-Ford hobby dominated by Model A's, interest in early V-8s grew, and PSRG reflected it. As the group developed it began holding events at parks and, at one point, in a Ford garage in Everett. Initially, meetings might draw 15 or 20 people, Arnold recalled; by the mid-1970s membership was over 70. Years later it reached 190. Membership and meeting attendance "grew quite rapidly," Arnold said. "I didn't think it was going to be anything to the level it is now."

Time changed his circumstances. He stayed in PSRG until 1974. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Washington, but by the mid-70s was aiming for a career in physical therapy. He left Seattle and PSRG and moved to the Chicago area to complete studies for a career in physical therapy, obtaining a BSPT degree at the Northwestern University School of Medicine.

He began his career in clinics on the East Coast and returned to Washington state in 1981 to continue the work. In 1983 he opened his own clinic in Mill Creek. He married his wife, Virginia, who had three children, and busied himself with his new family and his professional practice. Time devoted to work and home life kept him from rejoining PSRG. From about 1976 on, "I didn't have time to do much on cars," he said. His children grew, married, and produced nine grandchildren. But throughout his career development and cross-country moves, he never lost his passion for the cars and the history that made the club what it is.

Today part of his Mukilteo home has become a shrine to early V-8 technology and history, in his extensive collection of early V-8 memorabilia: two rooms and his garage are filled with stacks of books, original early V-8 service bulletins, models of early Fords and Lincolns and outsized photos of some of Ford's early V-8 prototypes ("I just love looking at it," he said of one). On one wall is a rendering of a '34 phaeton restored by Arnold's father, painted by artist and former PSRG member Randy Giovenale.



In another corner stands a rack of vintage highway maps – printed ones – and a display of the very earliest editions of Hot Rod Magazine, from its initial year of 1948. The walls of one room are covered with a collection of 1932 license plates, from every U.S. state and all but one Canadian province. It's fitting for a man with an appreciation for history.

In his garage are two assembled 1932 flathead V-8 engines, one of them with a very early flange bell housing casting. Both are equipped with Detroit Lubricator carburetors, one with an early "elbow" inlet

(Arnold has collected nearly two dozen spare ones). The other engine has a rare, experimental version of a distributor with four mounting holes and a breaker-point plate on the back side. The engines aren't set up to run but could be, and they're conversation pieces at minimum.

"Whimsy," Arnold explains. "Everyone has to have whimsy."

His first car was a 1932 Ford 5-window coupe. He later he restored a '32 3-window couple in the 1960s with parts he obtained from Steil, and ended up selling both cars. But he was determined to eventually have another 5-window. So, in 2012, months away from retiring, he bought another one, a black beauty equipped with a 59-A flathead and '39 gearbox. He still keeps the car in his garage and drives it over the side roads of Snohomish County.

Over the years Arnold (who is not related to current PSRG member Dean Arnold) kept up his friendship with Steil, exchanging car parts and spending hours talking with him about the eccentricities of Ford V-8 technology. Years later, as Steil was dying of cancer, Arnold visited him at Steil's home, and he still speaks of Steil with reverence.

Caring for his wife has limited Arnold's time for his hobby and kept him away from PSRG. But he's unlikely to abandon his devotion to old V-8s. Besides driving the '32 coupe, one of his ideas of relaxation is pouring a cup of coffee and reading – even re-reading – old Ford literature. He's probably done restoring cars but keeps his hand in by building more displays to go with the engines. One, under way, will be a rebuilt '32 firewall, complete with fuel linkage, dashboard and instruments; another, still planned, will be a '32 frame crossmember attached to a transmission with early clutch linkage...more conversation pieces for '32 aficionados who visit his home.



Since those early PSRG formation days Hexum, Leonard, Minnick, Stefano, Steil, Peterson and Taylor have died. Arnold is the last surviving member of the small group that 50 years organized the chapter that grew from a handful to number nearly in the hundreds. In the end, Arnold said, "it all came together because of Bill Steil," but he remains hopeful that interest in V-8s, the restoration culture and his own mini-museum of artifacts will live on. "Am I re-living my youth? In some ways I never left it," he said. "I still hope I can find someone...that will find it interesting. Some people say it's a disease. To me it's a fun hobby."