

Bill Steil: Steeped in Fords, Nature and History

Words by Larry Lange, June 2014.



Figure 1. Bill standing amongst his Fords; photo by Guy Generaux.

There was more to Bill Steil than met some peoples' eyes.

A quiet, reserved man, he could be hard for some to read, seeming a bit mysterious or eccentric. To others closer to him, however, he was a friendly man with broad knowledge, a near-photographic memory and an eagerness to teach others what he knew.

Bill led the founding of the V-8 Club's Puget Sound Regional Group 45 years ago and his April 15, 2014 death leaves a profound legacy that includes a big car and parts collection

and a near-indispensable memory for Things Early Ford. He helped create the regional group, served as its first president and became a sage and teacher, a true treasure among enthusiasts.

Among club members "I'd put him at the top," said Mike Dermond, a club member and friend of Bill's for more than 40 years. "I really miss talking to him about stuff. The breadth of his knowledge was very wide."

Lee William Steil Jr. was born in Seattle Feb. 10, 1936, to Lee William Steil Sr. and Gertrude Lewis Steil. He attended Montlake and Magnolia Elementary Schools and graduated in 1954 from Queen Anne High School. His father ran a clothing store, Steil and King at the Northgate Mall, and the family later developed a chain of Squire Shop clothing outlets and invested in land. His maternal grandfather logged and operated a sawmill near Clear Lake in Skagit County.

As a youth Bill seemed to have two interests: old Fords and plants. He began collecting Ford parts as a teenager, gathering them up in one corner of the family basement. Brother Bob Steil remembers tripping over Bill's Ford collectibles as he walked past.

"I didn't know what he was going to do with that kind of stuff," Bob said.

It took some years before anyone found out, and Bill's life could have taken a different turn. For a while Bill appeared headed for a career in the plant world. From an early age he'd shown his other great love, for flowers and growing things. As boys the two brothers worked with their mother in the family garden

and Bill continued planting and studying as he grew older. After obtaining a Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Washington he moved to Pullman and obtained a master's degree in botany at Washington State University. He was a member of Kappa Sigma fraternity at both universities.

"He had a love of Nature," said longtime friend Carl Winter, and Bill's sense for plants seemed to equal his sense for cars and antiques. "He could smell the air and tell what was around him," his brother said.

After college Bill was offered a Boeing job doing plant research but turned it down because it would have meant leaving Seattle. He went to work for Malmo Nursery in North Seattle and became a foreman. But after the nursery was sold, he switched careers and went to work for local boat builders. He spent much of that part of his life in the tool room of Marine Power & Equipment Co. and at Pacific Fishermen Shipyard. He remained in shipyard work until he retired.



Figure 2. Grinning Bill riding into a hot-rod event in Puyallup in friend Carl Winter's '32 hot-rod coupe in July 28th 2012.



Figure 3. Bill's 1932 Victoria.

As an adult Bill had begun collecting cars as well as parts – in earnest. In 1966 he bid \$706 on a 1934 Ford Victoria in a court-supervised estate sale, outbidding a rival by \$6. When the judge asked him why he'd bid such an odd amount, Bill replied, "Because it was my whole paycheck." He had also begun his focus on 1932 Fords. His first '32 purchase was a blue Tudor, which remained in his collection until his death and was the car he drove to the 2006 Western National V-8 Club Meet in Tacoma. His collection became big enough that he gave the cars names: the '34 Vicky became "Della," for the original owner; a '32 coupe with a tired engine was dubbed "Old Smoky."

In the '60s he joined the then-young national V-8 Club and thought a local chapter was needed on Puget Sound. In 1968 he contacted Seattle-area national club members and had them sign a petition for a local regional chapter. The national club chartered PSRG on March 31, 1969, and a short time later Bill got seven others to join him at the first local meeting, held at Joe Minnick's home in Juanita. The group, which included current member Ken Petersen, became the local's charter members. Bill posted a note about the new club on the bulletin board at Vintage Auto Parts, then located in North Seattle, and membership grew.

Bill's collection grew, too. He gathered so many cars and parts that he started storing them at several locations around Seattle; he decided to buy property and concentrate the collection. When an aggressive real estate agent promoted the refurbished kitchen at one house, Bill ignored the advice and said, "I want to see the garage," Winter said. Bill bought the property and added car-storage space. In the end, he had cars and parts stored at three locations, including the family home in Magnolia where he spent most of his childhood years. He inherited the house after his parents' deaths.

To slake his appetite collecting Bill prowled Ford dealerships for vintage parts, adding them to his collection. One memorable purchase was buying out the entire new old-stock flathead era parts collection at the long-time Wilson Ford dealership in Ballard in 1970. "It was upwards of 15,000 parts and it took most of the summer to get them home," he chuckled to an interviewer. He kept adding more. "I mostly enjoy the challenge of the hunt," he said.

In the end, his collection included 16 – 1932 Fords.

It's not clear what drove Bill to collect parts and cars – '32 Fords in particular.

Those closest to him said he was drawn to old things as part of a general fascination with the past.

He loved '32 Fords because they came with the first Ford V-8s, "which intrigued him more than the 4-cylinder model," Bob Steil said. Winter said Bill liked '32s because "he just thought they were good-looking cars." Winter said Bill, with an interest in science, also seemed to appreciate the 1930s as a period of great technological innovation, when automobiles underwent great change.

His collections and knowledge made him a major go-to guy for parts, expertise and help. A number of club members' cars are running on parts Bill had found in his searches and then supplied to club members. He sold L.D. Charf a flywheel for the engine in Charf's '40 Ford coupe, as well as a hard-to-find ignition switch for Charf's '53 Ford. Sometimes he wouldn't sell parts to people he didn't know, but for some others he'd help find a part he didn't have handy. When club mechanic Gary Duff approached him for a u-joint for this writer's 36 Ford, Bill didn't produce one from among his own parts but tracked one down on eBay that was still in the original box.

For entertainment at club meetings, Bill helped club member and former president Guy Generaux devise questions for the well-known Ford trivia contest. "You could show Bill a part and he would identify it and rattle off the part number," Generaux said. "Or you could give him a part number and he'd know what it was...the guy was just amazing." He memorized the ID numbers on all his cars.

The casual onlooker could be dumbfounded seeing his stash of parts, which was spread between his home and two other buildings. Duff remembers seeing "stacks of flywheels up to your chest" at one garage and dozens of Ford-specialty K.R. Wilson tools at Bill's house. Once Duff agreed to test some coils for Bill and "here he comes with 50 or 60...in the original boxes." He once told Duff he had "four- or five-bushel baskets" full of flathead exhaust valves.

"He knew where everything was, where it would be (just) a jumble to someone else," Generaux said. In a 1985 article about Bill in the national V-8 Times, Generaux wrote that "other regional groups may have a library of literature to refer to when questions arise about cars and parts. We just ask Bill. And he is probably more reliable." The club honored him some years ago by granting him one of its nine life

memberships. It is now considering naming its annual President's Award in his honor, given his service as first local president and his numerous other contributions. As he collected things, Bill also became a teacher to other car owners.

"He showed me how to properly rebuild the '39 transmission in my roadster, how to rebuild the steering boxes.... how to disassemble and rebuild a steering column drop that has the locking mechanism and ignition on/off switch," Dermond said. "He had very good mechanical work habits and methods," although "speed...wasn't his priority! Bill taught me how to read the Ford part numbers and, using the Ford manuals, tell what parts fit which bodies and which years. He was a wealth of information we will all miss."

Winter, too, learned greatly from Bill, who spent many days at Winter's home helping him build his '32 Ford hotrod.

Several club members noticed that Bill sometimes hoarded more parts than he sold. At times he seemed to love the collection enough to be reluctant to part with some of it. Bill knew what was involved in Ford restorations. "If he thought he was going to need it, you weren't going to get it," Duff said.

Sometimes he even disliked dipping into his parts shelves for his own projects. Once, he had to be talked into using one of his new bearings on his own axle because, he told Duff, "I just hate to use those."

Duff learned to get parts from Bill through diplomacy, by first showing him a problem he was working on and asking for advice. Duff then would wait for Bill to return on his own to Duff's shop with the needed parts.

"You had to go about it the right way or you weren't going to get to first base," Duff said. "I think he didn't want to be inundated by people calling him and saying 'I need this, I need that,' and that was the way he protected himself." To those he trusted, he was helpful and "the price was always, in my mind, about half what the market was," Charf said.

As a lifelong bachelor, living in his old family home, Bill apparently didn't need to charge outlandish prices. As a result of his work, expertise and help to others, he is one of the Puget Sound club's honorary life members.

At times the massive collection seemed too much for Bill. He stopped driving one car because its old window fogged over; he permanently sidelined others after their hydraulic brake systems failed. He avoided regular maintenance. He never installed or sold two 1936 Ford radios Duff rebuilt for him. "He just became overwhelmed by it," Duff said of Bill's collection.

And Bill's collecting extended beyond cars and parts. He had a small library of books about Ford Motor Co. He also kept his childhood Lionel trains, adding to it over the years, as well as the two brothers' metal school-lunch boxes from their childhoods. He kept scrapbooks and documented his family's history. He held onto his grandfather's radio and kept it near his bed. A true child of the 1930s, Winter said, "Bill was not the type to throw anything away."

But he was fascinated by, and rooted in, the past. During a trip through Eastern Washington with Winter, he enjoyed seeing abandoned rail stations, hallmarks of bygone eras; he loved trains and steam engines. He pored over printed newspapers – especially the Sunday editions with the “Now and Then” local history column. Bill sometimes questioned what others regarded as progress. He liked the old Fords the way they were originally made; even when restoring them he’d leave them partially unfinished so “they’d look like genuine cars,” Winter said. Bill didn’t want the Alaskan Way Viaduct torn down. He complained about changing TVs to digital signals and continued using dial-up internet access long after others had switched to faster broadband. Over the years he gave two of his cats the same name: Snoopy.



Figure 4. Bill at one of his favorite Railroad tracks.

“He didn’t like to see old buildings torn down,” Winter said. “That kind of bummed him out.” Dermond said simply, “He didn’t like change.” His habits were conservative, as well. Plagued by bad vision in his left eye, his car speeds would lag behind others on a tour; generally, Duff recalled, Bill avoided driving at all, an irony for a man wedded to vintage automobiles. His first airplane flight was a few years ago when he flew to the Hershey swap meet with Dermond.

He was quiet, even shy, around those he didn’t know well; it could take years before he’d address another club member’s spouse. “He was always quiet, and you had to ask him questions,” Petersen said. For a man who could blow a paycheck on an old car, he could be extremely tight with money. After he lost his nursery job, he rejected his brother’s suggestion that he buy property and start his own plant business; he preferred working for others. He was skeptical about investing, constantly demanding proof that something would work before spending on it.

At one rental house, he balked at neighborhood requests that he trim a troublesome tree and Duff, a neighbor, often mowed the lawn because Bill didn’t tend to it. At home, Bill stood at his washing machine manually putting it through the laundry cycles, not wanting to spend to replace a broken timer. Bill never seemed to wash any of his cars, and he never seemed to spring for new clothes. But he joined in successful family real-estate investments once he was convinced, they’d pay off, and did “very well,” his brother said.

Bill did not smoke or drink. His eating palette was “tame,” Winter said; one experience with a spicy dish had sworn him off Chinese food.

But he showed enthusiasm for some things besides vintage cars. In food, he loved deserts. At club meetings he was known as “the Cookie Monster” for that particular indulgence. At one recent hot-rod barbecue he binged on cubed Jell-O, another favorite treat, and became uncharacteristically tipsy, not realizing the dish had been spiked in advance with alcohol.

“He was a bit happy and giggly, friendlier than he usually was,” Winter said. “His brush with booze was totally accidental.”

Dermond, a computer-technology professional, trained him in how to use an older-model computer. Bill didn't take to Dermond's suggestion for creating a parts data base "but he did want to learn how to use eBay," Dermond said. "It was very hard for him, because he was very old-school in everything," but "once he got the hang of it he really took off. He sold 1,000 things..."

He remained a traditionalist when restoring his old cars but gradually accepted the hot-rodders' views that some modifications were okay.

"Some of us opened him up to the idea that we weren't ruining cars, and that we followed some historic basics, keeping them kind of original," Winter said. "We built six-volt cars with mechanical fuel pumps...we weren't putting small block Chevies in them and things like that."

It was Dermond that talked Bill into that first air flight, and Bill used it to see the Smithsonian and other sights in Washington, D.C., and to visit Gettysburg, where some of his ancestors had fought in the Civil War battle. They made additional trips east, and to Gettysburg, in later years.

"He loved it," Dermond said of their travels.

As conservative as he could be, his politics tended toward the progressive. "He was very concerned about the concentration of wealth," Winter said. "He was very concerned about where the country is headed."



Figure 5. Bill in Washington D.C.



Figure 6. Bill Steil and Mike Dermond.

And he never lost his love of plants, or of Nature. Dermond found Bill more talkative than others did, and the two men spent hours, sometimes on trips, chatting about plant life. Dermond learned of Bill's membership in the Rhododendron Species Foundation and gleaned volumes of advice about the plants from Bill, who taught him "you can have them bloom every month of the year," Dermond said. Bill gave Dermond a Frank Galsworthy variety, with purple blossoms and a gold center, the colors of the University of Washington where the plant strain was developed and where both men had been educated.

"That plant now has more significance to me," Dermond said. With Bill, "if you had something in common to talk about, he'd open up."

Bill did volunteer maintenance work on the Iron Goat Trail, a hiking route through the Cascades near Stevens Pass. He also belonged to the Washington Native Plant Society and was a regular attendee at its twice-a-year Botany Washington events, which include lectures and field trips. Bill once gave \$1,000 to a society endowment fund in honor of one of his UW mentors, a well-known botanist. Bill helped conduct a native-plant study of the Kiwanis Ravine, not far from his home. The inventory was used to obtain

grant money to buy part of the ravine and transform it into a nature preserve, and was “an important component of the scientific study of this ravine that enabled it to become protected,” said Catherine Hovanic, (cq) a former society director.

Hovanic and Bill were not well acquainted but “he struck me as a quiet man who maintained a life-long interest in Washington’s native plants,” she said. He kept large numbers of plants in his yard. Near Winter’s Capitol Hill home, he always checked the condition of a manzanita plant growing at a particular corner, and he once picked up fallen Ginkgo tree seeds and tried, without success, to grow one of his own. He could cite the biological names of plants from memory.

Bill’s death came after a two-year battle with prostate cancer. He survived a heart attack 11 years ago and tried to treat the cancer, but that remedy didn’t take. The cancer spread; a tumor grew on his spine and caused back pain; he began a long regimen of chemotherapy, lost and regrew his hair and spoke positively about his condition at times. But the cancer was aggressive and as his outlook grew less certain he began selling some cars and preparing others for sale. He was eventually confined to his home, where care givers and others helped him with chores and medication until the end.

Survivors include a brother, Bob Steil of Bellevue; nephews Jeff Steil of Seattle and Rob Steil of Fall City; four grandnephews and a grandniece.

PSRG President Ron Costello said the club’s board “is recommending that the President’s award be named after Bill. The plan is to ask for member input on this recommendation and then adopt it at a later board meeting.” A memorial service will be held at 2 p.m. Sunday, June 22, at the Graham Visitors Center at the Washington Park Arboretum, 2300 Arboretum Drive E., Seattle, a place Bill visited many times as a boy when his family lived nearby. At least two of Bill’s cars, a ’32 Ford Victoria and a 1934 Ford Phaeton, will be on display, and club members are invited to drive their own V-8s to the service. Food and beverages will be served afterward.



Figure 7. Bill's 1933 Phaeton.

Bill’s remains were cremated, and the ashes will be buried at Acacia Memorial Park in Lake City. There will be other reminders of his life, besides the cars. Years ago, he and his mother planted narcissus bulbs at the Magnolia house. Winter said they’re still there, and “they flowered a few weeks ago.”

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