

Bob Burdick Interview, June 1, 2018

Long time member of Westerly Pawcatuck Region AAACA



The interview of Bob Burdick took place at his dining room table where he was surrounded by numerous club documents. He was in the process of organizing these before and during our visit. Bob showed us numerous newsletters from decades ago. Most of them had black and white photographs of club members and events that the club organized. Anyone with even a passing interest in our club history could easily be entertained for hours by these windows to the past.

We quickly moved to the topic of bylaws. Did we have any official bylaws? “Yes we do” was the quick response by Mr. Burdick. We have both AACA bylaws and our own bylaws. And he was quick to suggest an addition to them. Bob has been adamant about documenting our current policy of honoring those who have 25 years of continuous membership with lifetime status. We presently have six individuals who qualify for that distinction.

Bob first joined our club back in the 1970’s. “Uncle Horace” brought him in. That is Horace Drufee. Bob remembers those first meetings he attended. One of the first he attended was at the Dunn’s Corners School which is now the Dunn’s Corners Fire Station. That was likely in 1976. The club was 10 years old at that time. After ’76 many of the meetings were held in the homes of various members. As many as 25-30 people would fill all available seats during those intimate get-togethers. Bob was a member during the time when Sergio Franchi was also part of the WPRAACA. He first met Sergio at Uncle Horace’s place. Sergio had a 1929 Packard Roadster that was painted powder blue. Bob recalls seeing it on display at Foxwoods Casino. Sergio’s wife is still with us. She often has concerts at her home.

Bob recalls that the club held car shows before becoming a touring club. Unfortunately the club could not get enough help to run the shows so in the 1980's members decided to become a cruising club. A group of members would take off every month during the car show season. They would follow all the back roads to their destination and have a great time. The pace was slow enough for all kinds of cars to participate.

We asked Bob to explain how our association with the AACA came about. It seems that there was originally a club in Mystic, Connecticut. Our present club was an offshoot of that one. They applied for membership in the AACA and were accepted two months after filing the paperwork. At that time the WPRAACA and the Connecticut Valley club were the only AACA regions in Connecticut. We were, and still are, the only region in Rhode Island. Bob continued "We are both a Region and a Chapter" since our territory spans two different states. In the past many of our members were from the Warwick and Providence areas in Rhode Island. Today our membership is mostly limited to Southern Rhode Island and South Eastern Connecticut. Bob speculated that folks are less inclined to travel a distance to attend a meeting.

Years ago many of the members went to national events. Morris Brown won AACA Junior and Senior awards for his Cadillac. Henry Barber was another old car nut who frequently attended distant events. His wife became the first female president of the Westerly-Pawcatuck. Another active member was Fred Crandall. He owned a junk yard on Klondike road in Charlestown. Bob expressed his regret that we no longer send groups of people to large AACA national events to show their cars. He said that we now tend to go to the same select group of closer shows and rarely make changes.

Road trips in the old days were fun and sometimes they even got a little out of hand. Bob remembers visiting the home of the owner of the New Hampshire Speedway where they were able to observe a very large collection of antique vehicles. One of our guys got drunk on gin and tonics and ended up falling into a bathtub. Things got even more raucous after that.

John Drew, Nancy and Bob Burdick, and Nancy's girlfriend once went to an auction in Atlantic City. They ate in Saybrook at the Griswold Inn on the way back. John was doing lots of martinis at the inn, so many that eventually he announced "I can't feel my legs". Folks then ordered him coffee with brandy. Eventually Bob asked a waiter to help him out to the kitchen from whence he was placed in a Suburban and taken home to North Stonington. John was retired and he knew how to have fun. He also always had nice cars! By the way, by the time Bob had got John home he had sobered up pretty well!

According to Jim Varas the 90's was characterized by a low point in membership numbers. Although there were several likely contributing factors, Bob thinks that one was a dispute between Peter Pitcher and John Drew. John promised to sell a car to Paul Murray. Instead he sold it to Peter Pitcher. The fallout was that Peter Pitcher and 15 of his friends all left the club en masse. Shortly after this incident Bob Burdick became president and people began to return to the club. The meeting place was moved to the North Stonington Grange and later to the Fire Department and after many years it was finally settled in at the North Stonington Senior Center.

Bob thinks that the late '80's were a high point in club activity. The club put on a number of car shows. The first ones were at The Circus Field at Dunn's Corners where the Subaru dealer is now. There were also shows at Davis Standard, a machine shop in North Stonington. They also held car shows at Highland Orchard. That was the end of car shows put on by our club. Another nice show they attended was the one held in Preston, Connecticut. Bob also recalls a fun show held at Harkness Memorial Park in Waterford, CT. At that one some kid was seen sliding off of the fender of a moving '35 Ford phaeton. Folks attended flea markets together too. We used to go as groups to Southbury, Norton (MA), Rocky Hill, Belltown, and Norwich. That happens less often today.

The 1990's saw the last show at Highland Orchards at the intersection of routes 2 and 49 in North Stonington (near the KOA). These shows were often attended by the likes of Dick Whittaker, a man who seemed to know something about every car he saw. He actually had intentions of opening a museum some day. Then there were Donald Gouvin (he had an Olds with a rounded glass rear window) and Morris Browning, a couple more outstanding members at this time. They and others all contributed to a lively experience.

When asked Bob confirmed that we did have the Sunshine Committee and the Gas Lighters back in the days. We also always had a newsletter. He thinks the name Classy Chassis may have originated from a contest they held. He thinks that his own daughter may have come up with the name.

When asked about the future of our car club Bob thinks that many of the young adults of today seem to be less interested in charitable organizations like the Grange, Knights of Columbus, and others. This reduction in community participation seems to be chipping away at similar social groups such as car clubs like ours. It is difficult to attract young people and they of course are our only hope for the future. Bob believes that one way to attract young people is to find a young person and let him drive your car. That's how he learned to drive a model T. When John Drew was getting up in age Bob chauffeured him around for some 5 years.