

## Phil Panciera Interview, January 10, 2019

### Long time member of Westerly Pawcatuck Region AAACA



Phil Panciera did not start out as an old car hobbyist. He began by repairing cars at the age of 14. He worked as a mechanic in his dad's dealership that was located on Granite Street in Westerly. Cars were a means to an end rather than a hobby at that time. In 1939 Phil's dad was asked to take on the Studebaker Dealership. It is significant that this was a Studebaker dealership because it helped Phil develop a lifelong appreciation for Studebaker cars. By the time Phil was 17 he had taken his second position as a mechanic at a nearby Ford dealership, John Ahr Ford, on Main Street in Westerly where he worked until he entered the army. His dad also relocated to Main Street when he moved his Studebaker dealership there along the Pawcatuck River. That business remained under his dad's care until his untimely death in 1955, only 5 years after opening at the new location. Phil was discharged from the army in 1957 at which point he returned to Westerly.

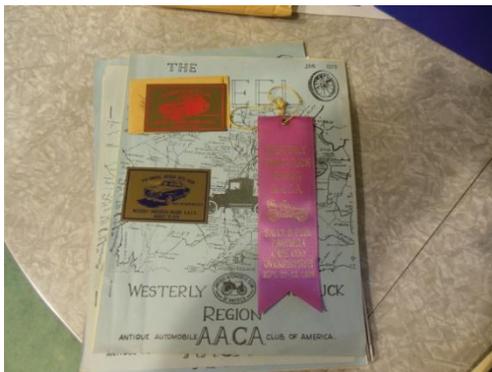
The time spent working for his dad gave Phil a deep appreciation for Studebakers. He recalls one car in particular, a brand new 1951 Starlight coupe. It was a leftover that Phil had his eye on. He was all prepared to buy it himself when it finally went to a regular customer. Phil had missed his chance. Luckily the same customer returned a few years later when he traded the car in for a new Studebaker Land

Cruiser. Now it was Phil's chance! He purchased the now slightly used '51 Studebaker Starlight coupe and held on to it. That car was cherished by Phil until only recently when he sold it a mere 3 years ago. The lucky man who bought that car drove it all the way home to Massachusetts without a single problem. Phil's current 'old car' is a 1966 Mustang that his wife Sally can drive much more easily than the Studebaker which did not have power steering.



**Former site of Phil's dad's Studebaker dealership at 179 Main Street in Westerly**

Phil's introduction to the Westerly-Pawcatuck Region AACA (WPRAACA) was around the late '60's when a customer of his dad's suggested that Phil get interested in antique cars. That customer was the well-known John Drew. John also invited Phil to join the WPRAACA. One thing led to another and Phil soon found himself building a dune buggy out of a Corvair. The entire car was created in his basement with the help of his father-in-law who lived next door.



**Event plaques, ribbon, and 1979 newsletter**

Now Phil was getting into the swing of the old car hobby. He says that when he joined the WPRAACA there were about 20-25 members plus spouses. The women were very involved in the 5-year old club. They insisted on helping with events and planning. That tradition continues to this day. After being a member for only 2 months Phil accepted an invitation to be the vice president of the club. Phil was already busy at this time since he was chief engineer with the Misquamicut Fire Department.

*(Note: He served in that position for 61 years and on August 8, 2017 a bronze plaque was attached to the side of "202". It reads "2017 Custom Ferrara Pumper dedicated to 60 Year Life Member PHIL PANCIERA, Chief Engineer". )*

Later in the 1970's Phil became president of the club, a position he held for 11 years. Phil wasn't the only one in his family to serve the WPRAACA. His wife Sally was elected secretary twice during this same time. She also wrote the Classy Chassis newsletter (her position at Harris Graphics was convenient when it came to running off new editions, color photographs and all). She even stood in for the absent president (Phil was in Arizona) at a meeting once when the then vice president Tom Link deferred to her temporarily filling the position.

Phil has fond memories of going to Hershey each year. He started going in 1966 or so. After joining the WPRAACA he went each year with other club members. The original club booth was in the name of John Drew. The club used that lot and the one next to it. The location of the club site



changed frequently; one year it would be in Yellow and the next it might be in the Blue field. Phil remembers that they usually took two trucks, 2 men in each vehicle. They stayed at a different place each year. Phil specialized in selling signs, especially some nice porcelain ones. I asked if he got these from his dad's business. He said no. Phil would go to Hershey one year and buy up a bunch of signs. The next year he would come back with the same signs (except some he kept for himself) and resell them. He always made lots of purchases at Hershey. Phil also remembers all the mud in the fields and the rain that sometimes created puddles that reached up to your ankles.

Back in the 1970's and '80's the club members would meet in a variety of places, often the homes (or garages) of other club members. He remembers having meetings at Merrill Moone's home garage (I'm told it is a fascinating place ...I have to do a field trip there someday). One time a meeting that was held at Phil's house consisted of about 40 people all crammed into his garage!

According to Phil the club hosted a number of car shows throughout the years. One annual event that was held before Phil joined was the Davis Standard weekend show. There was also a show at the Congregational Church of Pawcatuck that occurred on three separate years. That one was open to all antique cars, original or modified.

Highland Orchard was the site of many annual shows in the late 1970's and 1980's. It usually took place in July for about 5 years running. Highland Orchard is a campground just off Route 95 in North Stonington, CT. Phil had special dash plaques made for participants of each car show. Each year the plaque would feature a car that was owned by the then current club president.

Road trips, the long distance kind, also figured highly in early club activities. One of Phil's favorites was a 1999 trip to Paris, Maine. The crew visited the Bahre Collection, a private old car museum that was located near a race track. The museum owner would take all of the cars out of the building and bring

them outside for club members to enjoy. As many as 10 people would make the long journey to this destination. Some names that Phil recalls are Burdick, Wilson, and Durfee. This museum later became a public enterprise and began charging an \$8.00 entrance fee.

There were other out of state trips too. The two Cape Cod overnights were most fondly remembered by both Phil and his wife Sally. They organized these (see the photo of the event ribbon).

There were local events too. The club once held an event at the home of Ernie and Carol Cormier. It was the year 2001. Ernie owned a machine shop in Providence but he lived in Hope Valley on Locustville Pond. Ernie had some really nice high end cars such as Packards, Cadillacs, and Pierce Arrows.

The Highland Orchards, North Stonington Car Show was one event I asked Phil about. I had noticed in an old scrapbook a photo of what looked like Bonnie and Clyde posing with machine guns next to a shot-up Ford sedan. Bodies covered with sheets can be seen on the ground. Phil said that the people in the photo were actors he had seen at an earlier car show. He hired them to ride onto the field and be ambushed by other folks, also in old cars, playing the part of local police. It was quite a scene that got everyone's attention!

One accomplishment that Phil is happy with is the Gaslighters program. He began this and it is still active today. Tom Link and his crew, Bob Degoursey and Dave Calabrese, are carrying on in splendid form.



Spare bulbs in special holder, tire gauges, window washer, drop light, and Packard mirror; a truly eclectic collection from a long ago motoring age

What does Phil do these days? He is the custodian of an amazing collection of model cars, wreckers, and various really neat automotive artifacts. Have you ever seen a station attendant's windshield washer? How about a 1920's tire gauge with a leather pouch or a Packard mirror that mounts on the spare tire? Phil's collection room is a time capsule that holds many items that remind him of his automotive hobby and his career. It's the kind of room that most men create so they can have a place to be calm and reflective about a past well lived. Recently Phil and Sally sold off many of the models and toys but you would not notice if you had not visited before. There are still many neat collectibles filling the room.



**A diorama built by Phil. Take special note of the billboard that features the 1951 Studebaker.**

How does Phil feel about the current state of the WPRAACA? He likes all the activity he sees. He is especially encouraged by "all the full chairs" at the meetings. Phil says that this is a good thing; lots of activity bodes well for a healthy future. I asked what he thought about the lack of young people in our club or in the old car hobby in general. He doesn't see this as a great problem since it has always been that way to a certain extent. These days many young people are working hard to support their families and they don't have as much time as we retired folks to dedicate to the old car hobby. He still does notice a number of them at shows with cars that they restore and dote over. That is a good sign for the future!



The site of Phil's dad's original dealership on Granite Street in Westerly. It appears that the building was undergoing some restoration at the time this Google image was taken.