

This is part 4 of a re-print of a very interesting article about past Club Member Dick Davidson, who passed away earlier this year.

Barbara van Heuckelum, who was the Magazine Editor at that time, wrote the article for Dick, which was printed in three parts, in the December 2013, March and June 2014 magazines. Dick was very reluctant to talk about his life but Barbara finally convinced him by offering to write it for him if he told her his stories. In her view it needed to be shared.

I was grateful that I didn't have too many outstanding debts, but I kept remembering what Les had told me, so I was pretty strong about people paying, and very cautious about my decisions, as you've realised.

After about 10 years on my own in my first garage I took on an older mechanic on contract whenever I needed a hand. This worked for a number of years and I then ended up with several mechanics on pretty much full time contracts I had got so busy.

I didn't get an office girl. I used to do all that and the phone work myself.

I got one weekend off a month, because you see at the end of the month and I'd work all weekend to send out all the handwritten accounts, the middle of the month I'd pay all my accounts ready for the 20th, you know, and on the other weekend I updated the cashbook and all of the rest of the things you do, so yeah I did all that myself for well over 20 years. Once our girls left home Lynn came up and did the 20th's, but I still did everything else.

Handwriting everything and doing it all yourself had its benefits. It takes time but you know everything going on in your business.

A mate of mine, Neil Gamman from Gamman Engineering, who was the first to use computerised lathes and that, said to me, "With your sized business don't whatever you do get involved with computers".

It is the best advice I ever had from anyone, because they are still no good. I was quite happy with my system.

I stayed in my garage for 15-20 years and my client numbers just kept increasing. I had 4 or 5 apprentices over the years. One owns Coastline Marine over at the Mount, - he was with me for 10 or 11 years.

James, I took him from School when he moved up here from Napier. He is still there in the garage as Head Mechanic.

There were another three or so before my son Anthony came back after 10 years in Sydney. He had worked in spare parts but wasn't getting anywhere, so he came into the business as an adult apprentice and flew through his exams.

I taught him everything I knew over the next few years.

Because of his experience in Australia he knew a lot more about conventional business practice than I ever did, so I handed it over to him about 2 years ago.

Anthony and his wife Rose use computers now of course, and that is fine. It is their business now and it is right that they do things the way that suits them.

In the next part of my story I will talk about all the race boats, hot rods and older cars I did the motors for. We had such good times and won many records, one of which still stands today.....

During my whole working life as well as working on whatever jobs came into the garage, I 'looked after' and built the motors for many competitive motorsport teams and specialist cars. This of course involved countless 'after hours' work and also weekends away being part of the support team during races, be they for cars or boats, but it was actually mostly boats.

I just fell into boats really. I could have just as easily become involved in race cars, but I was helping several guys with their pleasure boats then it just evolved from there that I got asked to look after the engines for race boat teams.

It started in Auckland when I was working for Kevin Lamb. I worked on Gold Mist the hydroplane, powered by a 327 Chev Corvette. Kevin was not the owner of it, but he drove it. I rebuilt the engine of the boat before it went to Canada for the world champs. Kevin was the holder of the Masport Cup here in NZ which was the premier event for big hydroplanes, so I gave him a hand and I learnt a lot off him too.

When I first came to Tauranga I did the twin V8 engines for an off shore power boat for a chap. I didn't really know him that well, but I had been recommended to him so I was happy to do the work.

Then I met the two Ward brothers, Tony and Bill, which was the beginning of a long and interesting relationship.

We started with their hot rods, you know, and I was also doing a couple of V8 ski boats round here for different people, and guys must talk and it just slowly grew from there. Once I met Tony and Bill we sort of got on pretty well and I did their cars initially for drag racing and so forth, and then Tony and I ended up forming a team and working together on River Rat. I prepared everything on that boat. We raced in the early marathons and I think got a placing in the world champs.

But the most significant thing was that we were the first jet boat in New Zealand to do circuit racing. We were also the first to bring in an American jet unit.



I'm standing adjusting the motor while testing on the Wairoa River.

We didn't use Hamilton Jet units, so that's why it was the first time anyone saw a jet boat put out a rooster tail like that. No one had seen an American jet unit in action here either. We became quite an influence in the boating scene in New Zealand in the end. The rooster tails made it a great spectator sport. They were actually dangerous, because the following boats started to climb up them and of course flipped or came to grief somehow.

The American turbine was a different principle to Hamilton's jet unit. We had to learn a lot as it wasn't really built for our conditions but we modified it and got it to work. River Rat got second in the New Zealand champs in the circuit racing much to the disgust of all the prop boys. I don't know how many marathons we did, - probably five or six altogether.

I then met other people in boat racing and I ended up working with Graham Sharp from Wellington on Rare Eagle which won several New Zealand titles and became an Australasian Championship winner. It was my favourite. The hull was built by Frank McLeod here in NZ, and I did all the boat preparation, building the engine, everything.



I also worked with another chap in Wellington, I met him through Graham. With all the good results we were getting I started to get a name. So I've done three lots of boats for three different people in Wellington.

Rare Eagle was powered by a 350 cu inch Chev V 8. It was a real step up all the gear and things we were putting in it. We were starting to get into the realms of the motors that they were

using for sprint cars, but we were putting them into boats. The yanks said their motors were 750 HP which was a load of old cobbles. I was building four motors and we were beating them.

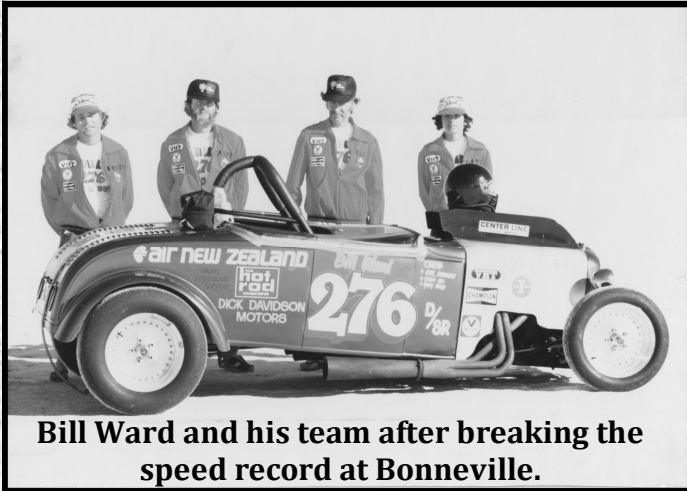
We weren't getting that horsepower, (they always exaggerate anyhow), but we were getting better results. The motors going into these boats were much bigger than they ever imagined they could be. If you took a 327 Corvette engine which produced 210 horsepower, - well we were producing in excess of 600 horsepower towards the end and what we did was quite revolutionary and well ahead of its time. Nowadays they can produce more than that of course.

We were learning all the time and if you've got the inclination, expertise and the drive well you get there in the end. My time and experience with Bruce McLaren helped as while with him I had learned ways of overcoming problems by looking at things differently. He used European expertise to get the best out of a good motor, and I was doing the same.



The Yanks worked on the principle that the bigger the motor the more power you'd get, but we got better results.

During this time I was still doing cars, but not so much circuit racing cars as no one in Tauranga really seemed to be doing it. I didn't know anyone with a car racing team anymore, as I had done in Auckland. I was President of the Power Boat Racing Club and just got involved with boats. But I did help with hot rods and drag cars.



Tony Ward's brother Bill stayed with drag cars and his ambition was, - and he proceeded to do it, -was to emulate Bert Munro, but do it on four wheels. He had hot rod really, it wasn't just a drag car as it was registered for the road. He rebuilt it again once he decided he wanted to go to Bonneville and we helped build it plus I did all the engine of course. We ran it in up and down here on Chadwick Road on Sundays, causing a few problems with the neighbours. But we also ran it at Ohope beach when the tide was out, - we actually held a drag meeting on the beach.

So Bill went over and broke the world record for that class of car. He did 171 mph which slaughtered their record, and it took them five years to take it off him. They gave him a big trophy and all the rest and they did a recording of the presentation and the announcement. The Yanks were absolutely fascinated that Bill was sitting on the wrong side of a 32 Ford roadster. He did really well. So that was something I was very proud of. Not too many people can say they have built an engine that achieved a world record.

(To be continued as Part 5 in February magazine)