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Guys Talking Cars

BY JAY LENO

■ I love Gale Banks's semiannual picnic, better known as the Gearhead Bash. I always tell my wife it's the social event of the internal-combustion season. In Hollywood,

cars you're not even interested in, or didn't think you were interested in.

The theme is simple: If it rolls, explodes and makes noise, it's at Banks's bash. There was a guy there

Magazine 30 years ago. You're walking along and you go, "That guy kinda looks like old so-and-so. No, wait a minute, that *is* so-and-so. It's him." That's kind of funny, too. It's great to see what are literally old men exhibiting such great enthusiasm. I mean, these guys are in their 70s and 80s.

Y'know, usually when you talk to old men, you have this kind of conversation: "How are you, sir? Good? Good." You have these generic conversations. But when you talk to the old guys at Banks's party, the years drop away, and you're talking to another hot rodder who just happens to be an old guy. That's what's really exciting. They see your car and they ask, "How fast will it go?" Or they immediately start talking about how to make it go even faster. When's the last time you talked to a 70-year-old juvenile delinquent?

Banks says he started doing this party every other year so there would be a noncommercial event where a variety of enthusiasts could come and see one another's stuff. He also wanted a place where a lot of older guys could gather to see what's going on today. "Now I'm one of the old guys," he says. Give me a break. He's only 60. All right, 60 going on 19.

Among my favorite things this year were these little stationary engines brought by a guy named Larry Evans, his brother Ken and a Los Angeles County sheriff named Mike Jones. They own a bunch of single-cylinder, hit-and-miss engines, and they had a great display set up. These little old engines have big flywheels attached, and they can run pumps and generators. They go *pop, pop, pop* and can just sit there, firing a few times a minute, for hours on



Jay and his host, Gale Banks, discuss the finer points of building very fast vehicles.

there might be bigger events, like the Emmys or the Oscars, but there are none more fun than this—especially for gearheads. For those of you who don't recognize the name, Gale Banks is a longtime hot rodder and land speed racer who owns Gale Banks Engineering, a California-based company that

this year with a purple hot-rod belly tank that looked like an old dry-lakes racer. No fenders, dinky little lights, powered by an old Ford flathead and, get this, it's street legal. There was an innocent-looking Corvair—with a Yenko Stage IV-spec, 230-hp engine. Take that, Ralph Nader.

And everyone is there—Hollywood car guys like Tim Allen, racers like Rodger Ward and Danny Sullivan, and old hot rodders like Alex Xydias, Jack Stewart and Ed Iskenderian. It's a great chance for older guys to pass on knowledge to the younger guys. It's like a council of elders. Plus, you meet people from all walks of life.

A particularly cool thing about Banks's setup is that you see old versions of guys you saw in *Hot Rod*

JAY LENO'S GARAGE

specializes in components to make cars and trucks go faster. He's got a beautiful 12-acre spread in Bradbury, Calif., at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains, and on the big day it's packed wall to wall with motorcycles, race cars, vintage vehicles, trucks, customs and hot rods. It's a chance to get interested in

Automotive

end. They're essentially maintenance-free, once they get running. Single-cylinder engines like these essentially go back to the dawn of the Automotive Age. Some of them are 100 years old. They're immensely overbuilt, so they can run for eons. They're simple, reliable and they don't wear out. One of them drives a water pump that uses water pressure to pump water up a hill. There were even a few Stirling cycle engines. If you ever wanted to explain to a friend how an engine works, this is the easiest way to do it.

I just got a couple of these engines myself. The parts are so big, they're not very hard to work on. And there's immense satisfaction in taking them apart, cleaning them, putting them back together and getting them to work. You feel like you've overhauled an entire engine in one afternoon.

There were a bunch of brass cars again this year. My favorite was the Jackson. I think it was a 1911 Model 51 touring car with an overhead-cam engine, exposed valvetrain and hemispherical combustion chambers. Y'know, there's really not much new on cars that hasn't been done already, except for electronics. The Jacksons were made in Jackson, Mich., from 1903 to 1923, and they're a perfect example of something that really was ahead of its time, something that people appreciated but didn't really want. I mean, when you don't even know what an engine is—overhead-cam or flat-head—who cares? It doesn't really matter. The Jackson slogan was, "No hill too steep, no sand too deep."

I saw a Thomas Flyer and a Pope Hartford. A Thomas won the epic New York to Paris 'round-the-world race in 1908. It got a lot of publicity at the time and it was Thomas's big claim to fame. That race would be tough even today. Despite that success, the Thomas, which was built in Buffalo, N.Y., was gone by 1918. The Pope was built in Hartford, Conn., from 1904 to 1914. Founder

Col. Albert A. Pope built his well-engineered cars in a number of cities, including Toledo, Ohio, and Hyde Park, Mass. And, of course, there was a Model T Ford, the car that put America on wheels. I love brass-era cars.

There was a lot of great stuff to see at the bash. Banks is building a Dodge Dakota extended cab pickup truck with a turbocharged 5.9-liter 24-valve Cummins diesel engine. In true racer fashion, he plans to

shift for? Ya gotta shift all the time. Get the automatic." And he'd insist, "Get the 6-cylinder. Whadaya want a gas hog for?" Who wouldn't kill to have their dad build 'em a 1600-hp Camaro? And it's a street car. Back in 1984, Banks developed a 700-hp, 200-mph street-legal Firebird and built 70 copies. A special 1100-hp version went 239 mph. I'd like to have that one today. He also joined forces with POPULAR MECHANICS in '86



Even Leno had never before seen a street-legal belly tank.

drive to the Bonneville Salt Flats in October, run over 200 mph in it, and then drive it home. He calls it the World's First Diesel Sport Truck, and he says it puts out some 714 hp and 1160 ft.-lb. of torque. A few years ago, Banks went over 200 at Bonneville in a modified GMC Cyclone truck. Naturally, he expects to do over 210 mph in this one. Not many guys can do that.

He also has a Camaro under construction with a modified Chevy V8 and two turbochargers. The engine develops 1600 hp. He's building it for his 21-year-old son, Colin. How cool is that? I couldn't get my dad to do anything like that. Ever. My dad and I would argue about cars all the time. He'd say, "Whadaya want a stick

and built a 1500-hp Trans Am that set a land speed record of better than 260 mph at Bonneville.

If you get the feeling Banks never stops, you're right. He's working on patenting a new exhaust brake for diesel engines that's more efficient than those noisy "Jake Brakes," yet doesn't restrict an engine's power output. He's certain that diesels are the powerplants of the future. He knows the U.S. Navy won't use gasoline engines in boats after 2010, so he's developing a diesel for the SEALs that'll idle for hours, then scream up to top revs in an instant when a covert-action patrol boat needs to make waves fast. Wonder if I could buy one of those? I don't have a fast boat yet.

PM