

# LIFE AT 400 MPH

With Rare Photos From the HOT ROD Archives, We Revisit the Story of the **Greatest Hot Rodder Who Ever Lived: Mickey Thompson.**

By Bill McGuire

Photography: the HOT ROD archives

Once there were giants. Our sport was conceived and wrestled into existence by men who thought bigger thoughts and dreamed bigger dreams than ordinary people. The pioneers, men such as Wally Parks, who founded the National Hot Rod Association, or Robert E. Petersen, the creator of this magazine, not only excelled in this industry—they had to invent it from scratch as they went. Their extraordinary vision made them bigger than life, legends in their own time. But for sheer imagination and energy, none of them ever quite topped Mickey Thompson. He operated on his own grand scale.

It is said that in the first 20 years of HOT ROD's existence, nobody got as much ink in the magazine as Mickey, which he accomplished by being perpetually and irresistibly newsworthy. He was always up to something, and it was always big: four-engine streamliners, multicar

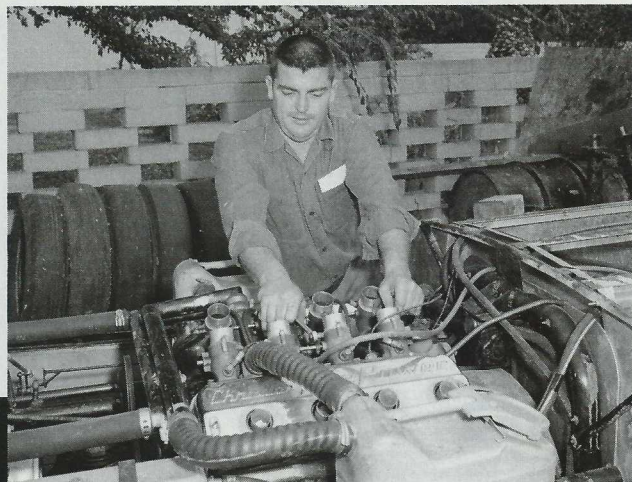
Indy teams, compressed-air engines, and monocoque Funny Cars. A walking, talking advertisement for himself and for hot rodding, he was the sport's greatest idea man—engineering innovator, ferocious competitor, and marketing and promotion savant, wrapped up in one unique package.

Two books have been written about M/T: his autobiography, *Challenger*, coauthored by the great automotive journalist Griff Borgeson and covering his life up to 1964, and *Mickey Thompson: The Fast Life and Tragic Death of a Racing Legend* by Erik Arneson, which should be in bookstores by the time you read this. Both books are wonderful reads and indispensable if you want to know more about Mickey Thompson. (For this story, we drew from both sources, among others.)

So there is certainly no shortage of material about Mickey, but still: If you took every story ever written about the man, the



> Above: Bonneville, 1953: A boyish Mickey Thompson (kneeling) pulls one of the engines from his Bantam coupe. The Bantam was twin-engined, with a flathead Merc in front coupled to a Chrysler Hemi. > Below: Mickey with one of the two Hilborn-injected Hemis in his four-wheel drive '58 streamliner at the shop behind his home in El Monte, California.





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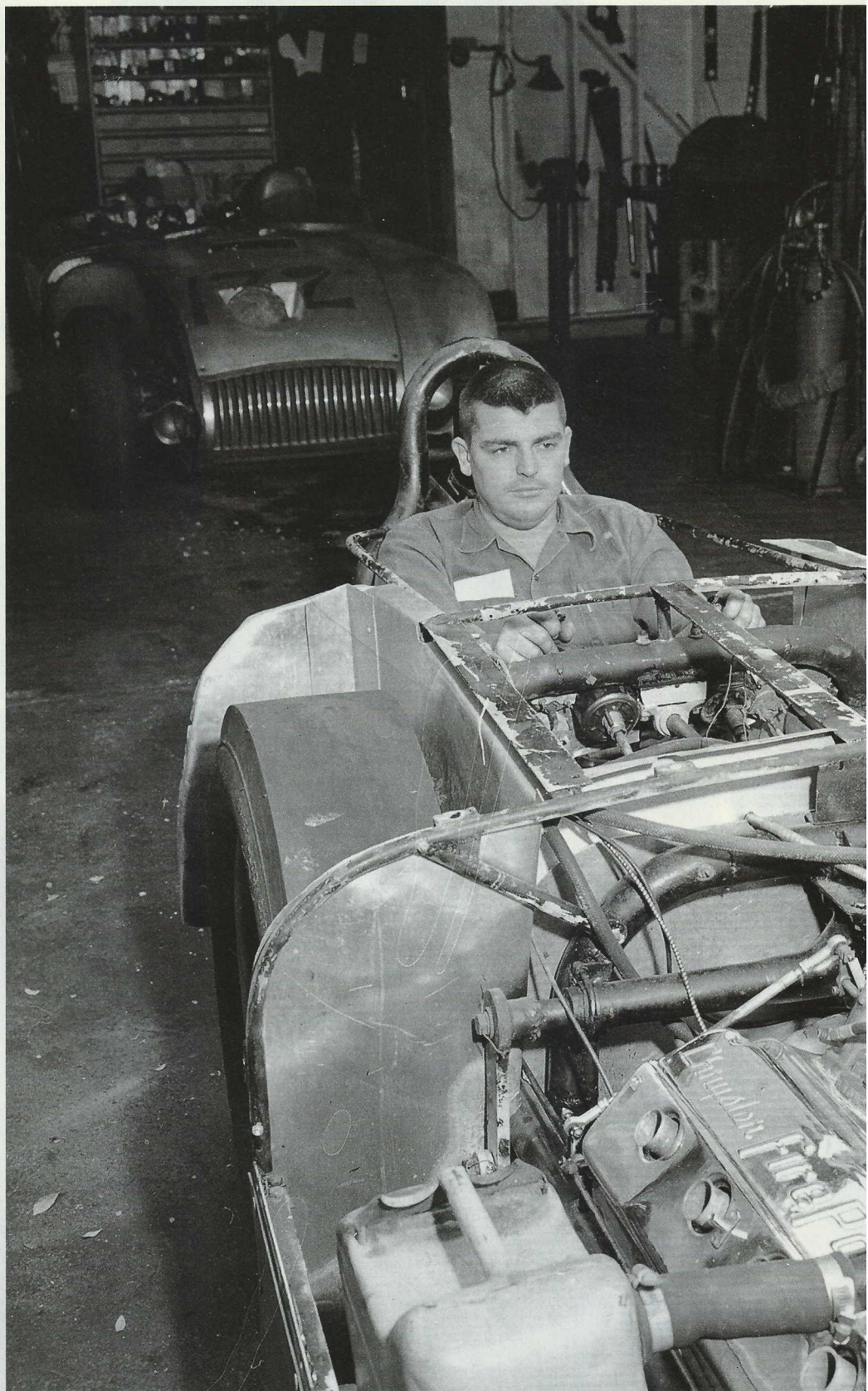
*Mikey Thompson*

whole towering stack of it would barely scratch the surface of a life lived at 400 mph.

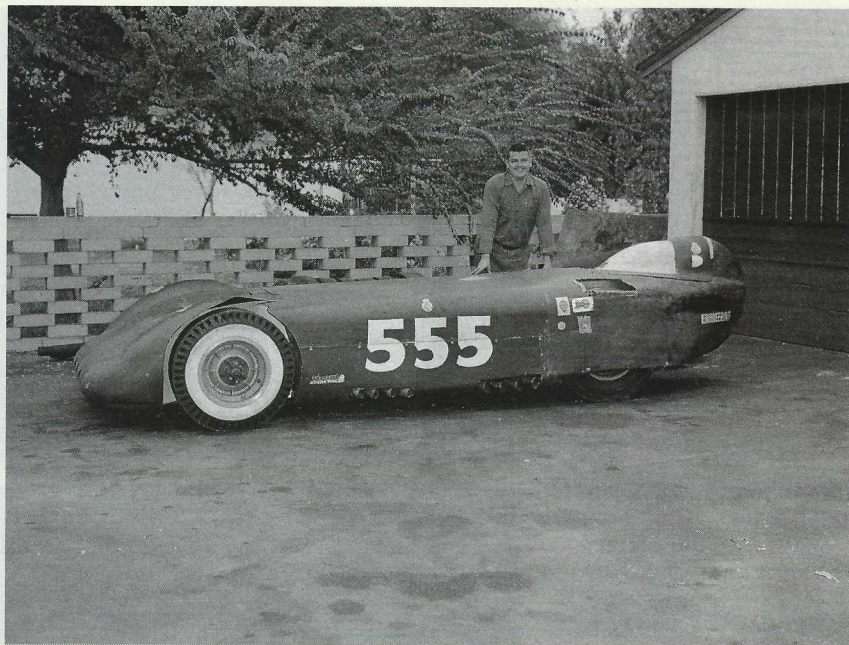
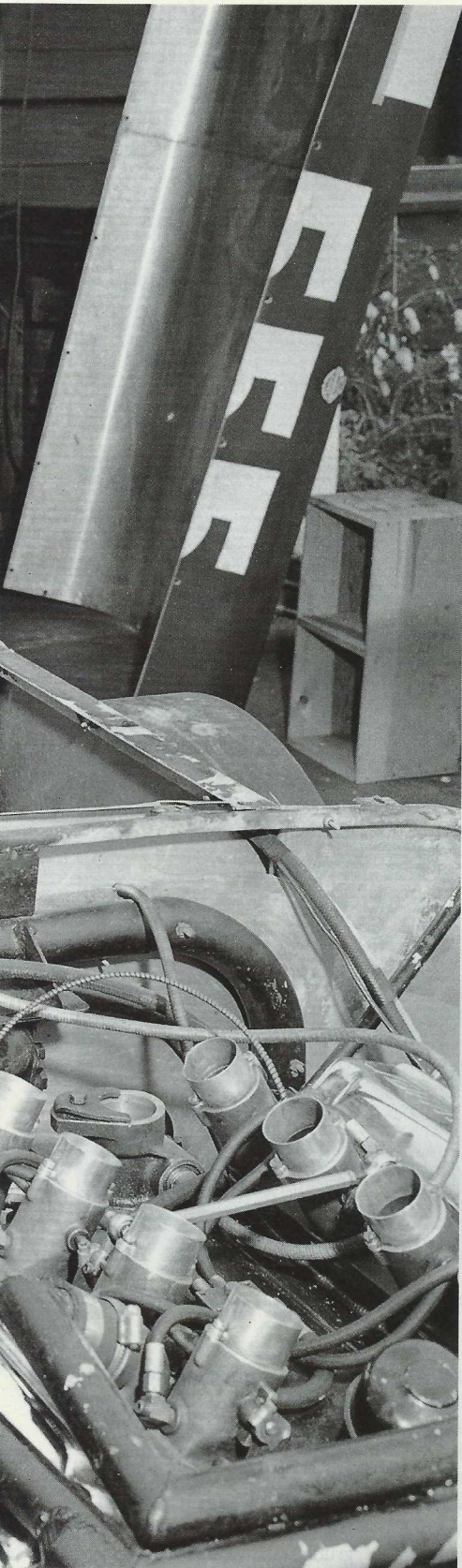
His friend Smokey Yunick, never short on opinions about his fellow man, had to struggle for words in describing Mickey. In his autobiography, *Best Damn Garage in Town* (published posthumously so he could tell it as he saw it), Smokey writes, "There ain't no way I can tell you really what this cat was all about. This was a very, very special human. He had the balls of a dinosaur and the persistence of a hungry tiger. His mode of operation was 'bout like a 95,000-pound, 600hp diesel tractor and trailer coming at you running 80. That man did not know what 'It can't be done' meant."

So what do we know, really, about Mickey Thompson? If Smokey could only look on in amazement at Mickey's life and accomplishments, what can we sort out about him? What do we make of a guy who worked 20 hours a day, invented the slingshot dragster and the Christmas Tree, drove 400 mph, and kept a lion as a pet?

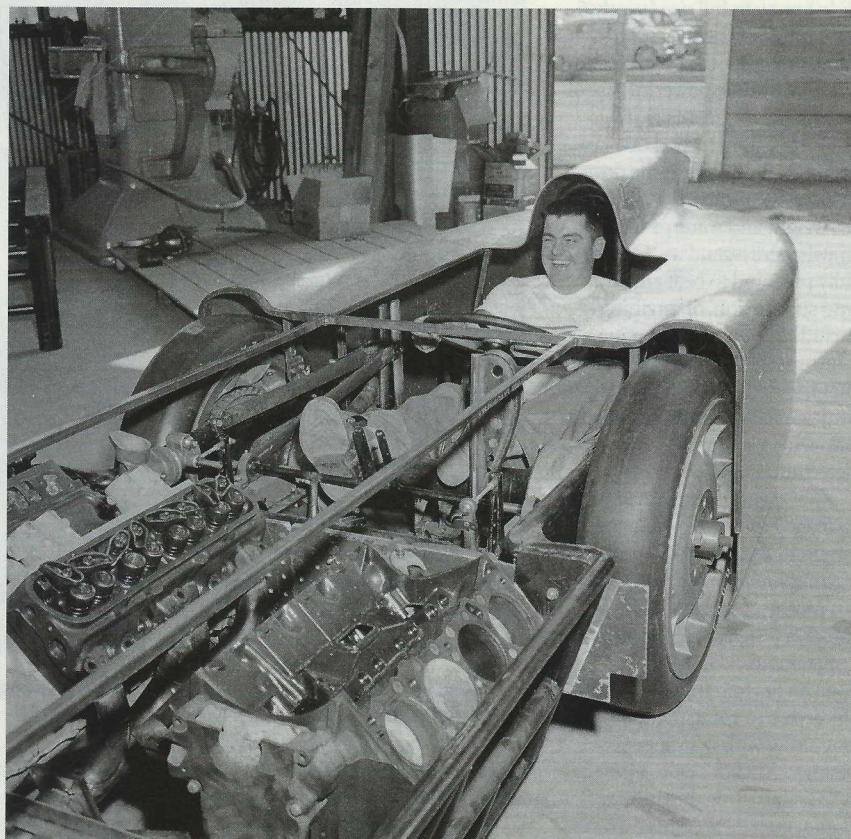
For one thing, we know Thompson was a gambler. Not just on the racetrack and in the business world, though his appetite for risk in those venues is well documented. No, he was literally a gambler. According to Mickey's autobiography, he and his first wife won the grubstake to start Mickey Thompson Enterprises, his speed equipment company, on the gaming tables in Las Vegas. On a one-hour layover on a flight back from Bonneville to Los Angeles, Mickey and Judy headed to the casino, where they laid down \$500 and then made 10 straight rolls. So as M/T told the story, a speed equipment empire that manufactured everything from valve covers to racing tires secured its seed funding in a red-hot game of craps. He claimed he had a knack for gambling, a kind of second sight. How much money Thompson won at the tables over the years is not recorded, nor how much he lost. But let it



> Mickey behind the wheel of the twin-Chrysler streamliner. Note the slingshot driving position. Also note his Kurtis sports car in the background. It appears to be getting some bodywork done—imagine that.



> In this car Mickey went 294 mph in 1958, beating the previous record in his class by 30 mph.



> The four-engine Pontiac streamliner known as Challenger I begins to take shape at California Metal Shaping, where the body panels were fabricated.

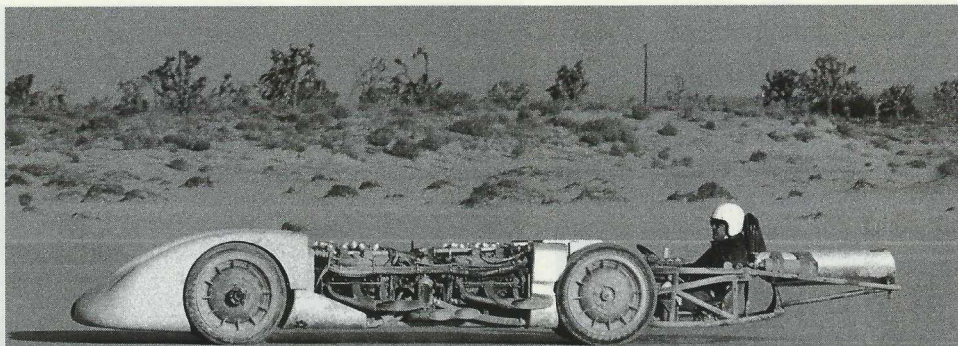
**“He constantly stayed in trouble. That should have been his name: Mickey Trouble Thompson.”  
—Smokey Yunick**

never be said that he was afraid to roll the dice.

And we know this: Mickey Thompson was a fighter. A terrible childhood injury—a shattered left arm in an auto accident when he was 8—had stunted his physical development, and he didn't grow to full size (nearly 6 feet) until well into adulthood. By all accounts, the physical setback gave him a powerful case of little man's syndrome that persisted long after he had outgrown it. He'd fight at the drop of a hat. He punched well above his weight and some of the brawls were legendary. He was fully prepared to beat anyone into submission, or anything—including personal adversity: The same childhood experiences that molded Mickey into a bare-knuckle scrapper also supplied him with a bottomless well of determination.

After the accident, Mickey's damaged arm had developed gangrene and the doctors sought permission to amputate it, but his mother, a nurse, and his father, a tough-as-bullets Irish cop, refused. Mickey's dad, Marion Sr., told them, “If I bury the arm, I'm going to bury the boy along with it.” Marion restored Mickey's circulation by manipulating the broken bones, then devised his own system of physical therapy, strapping a sack of ammunition to the boy's arm to force him to regain his strength. It worked; Mickey kept the arm.

Almost 25 years later, Mickey broke his back while testing a racing boat. This time the doc-



> M/T testing Challenger I at El Mirage in 1959 before its first trip to Bonneville.



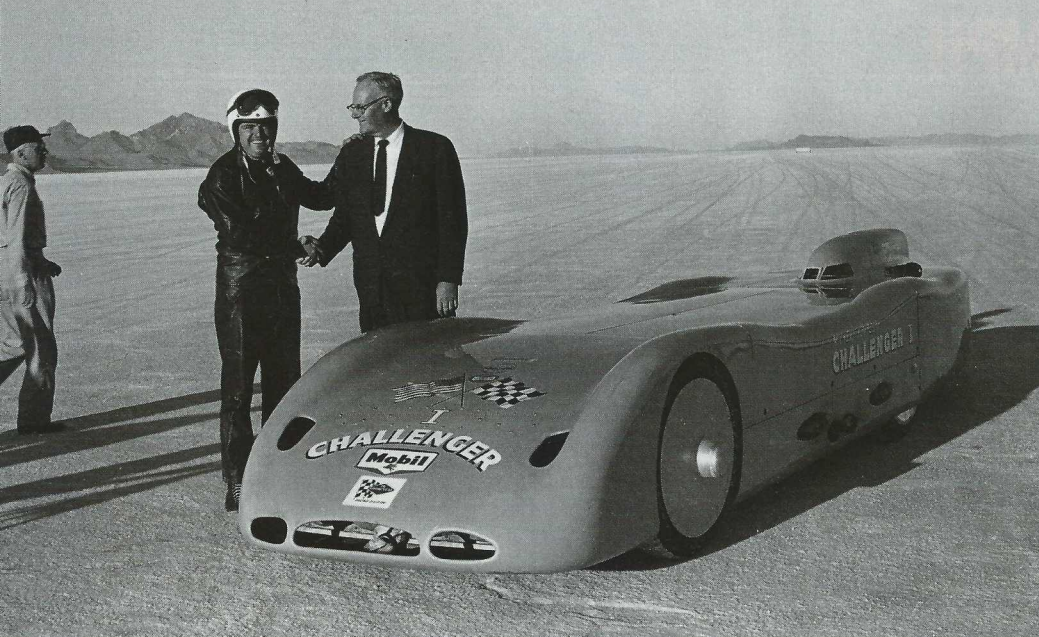
> For Challenger's first year on the Salt, the four Pontiac engines were run normally aspirated. For the record runs in 1960, all four engines received GMC 6-71 blowers.

tors told him not to plan on walking again. He told them he would walk out of the hospital under his own power in a month. And he did, although back problems would plague him for the rest of his life. He drove the Baja 1000 every year in a trapeze-like device he designed that suspended him in the roll-cage more or less like a side of

beef. Think of it: He strapped himself into this rig just to pursue his idea of fun. Mickey was a new and different kind of tough. Pain did not impress him and he gobbled up challenges like candy. He was an irresistible force in search of the next immovable object.

We know Mickey was a tireless businessman—what we would

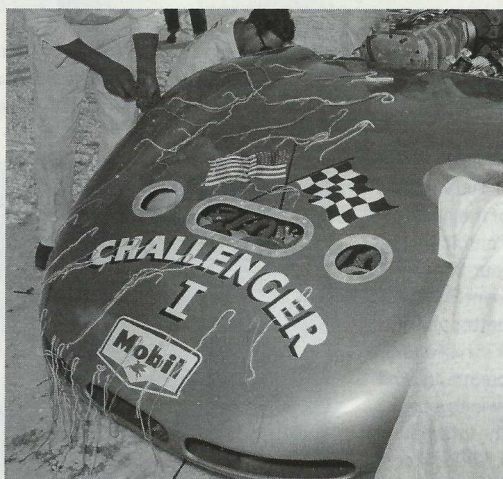
call today a true entrepreneur. In 1955 he bulldozed his way into the position of manager at the brand-new Lions Associated Drag Strip in Long Beach, California. There he experimented with innovations like night races, grudge racing, and a Christmas Tree starting system (that idea was a little ahead of its time and didn't really catch on until the



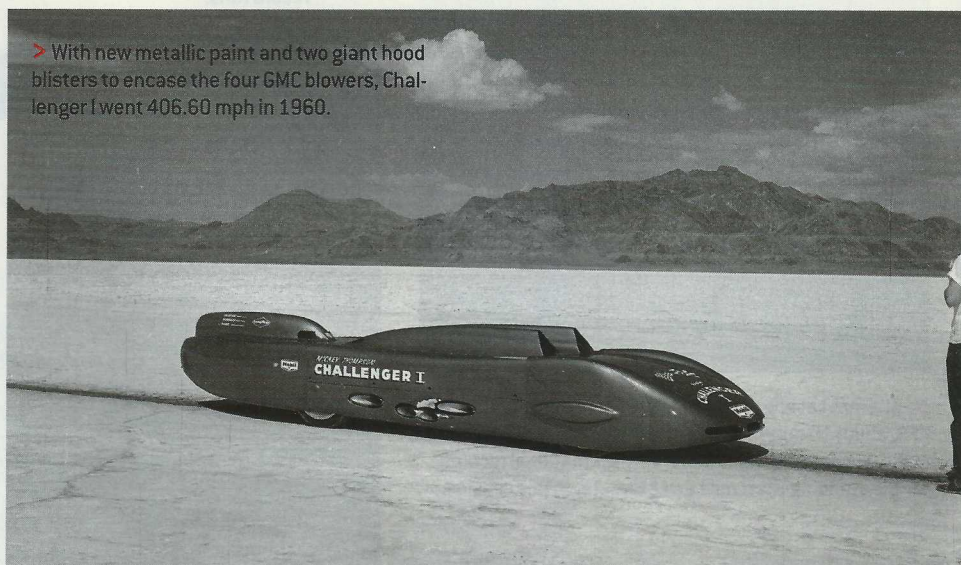
> The Mick at Bonneville in 1959 with Challenger I in its original configuration, just after setting an FIA kilometer record.



> Mickey's streamlined dragster, Assault, in May 1960. The blower setup he and Fritz Voigt devised for Assault's Pontiac V-8 helped them science out the four GMC superchargers on Challenger I.



> Years before they had access to advanced tools like wind tunnels and CFD, sharp racers like Mickey used wool tufts attached to the bodywork to research aerodynamics.



> With new metallic paint and two giant hood blisters to encase the four GMC blowers, Challenger I went 406.60 mph in 1960.

'60s). Under Mickey's management, Lions became one of America's premier dragstrips.

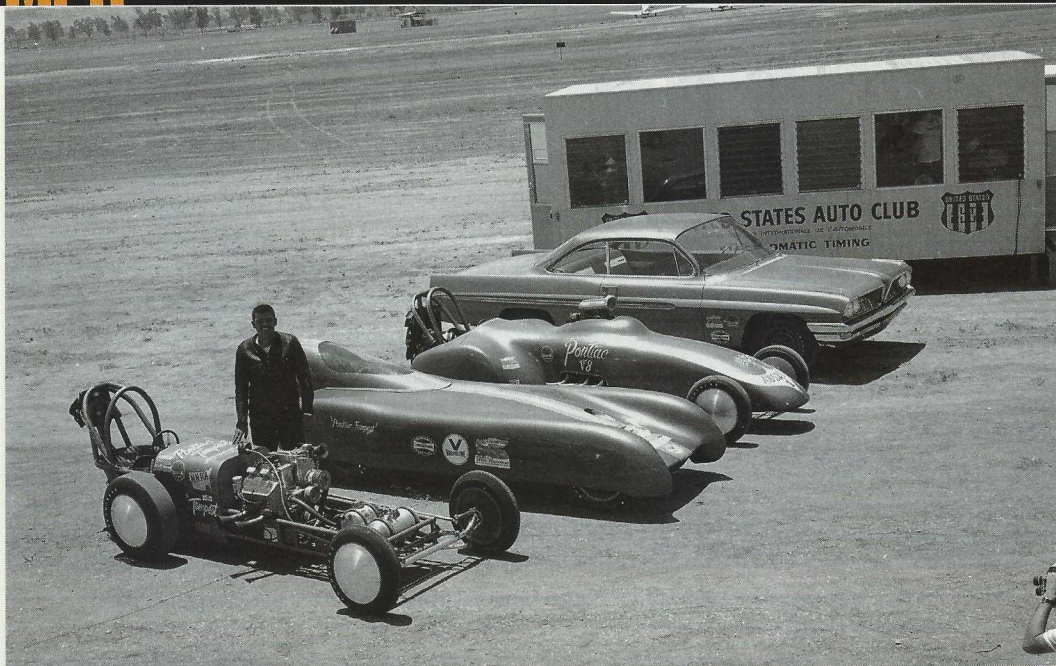
Mickey managed Lions until 1964, while also running his muffler shop in El Monte, California, and holding down a job as a pressman on the graveyard shift at the *Los Angeles Times*—and while building and campaigning all his grand and glorious race car projects, let's not forget. Most humans would count all that up as four full-time jobs, but Mickey was a one-man army. Not until 1959 did he give up his civilian job at the newspaper so he could devote more time to Challenger I, his land speed record project, and to the speed parts manufacturing business he had just started, the Mickey Thompson Equipment Co.

We've all seen those iconic M/T valve covers, even though they haven't been manufactured in years. Pressure-cast, they were quality pieces. But in fact, M/T made every kind of speed equipment, from exhaust headers and mufflers to aluminum intake manifolds and third members. Custom wheels and aluminum rods and pistons were also featured in the catalog. There were aluminum replacement heads for the Chrysler Hemi and conversion Hemi heads for the Pontiac and Ford FE engines, which are highly prized collector's items today. In 1964, M/T even went into the high-performance tire business. The M/T brand remains popular today as a division of Cooper Tires, supplying quality rubber to drag racers and off-roaders.

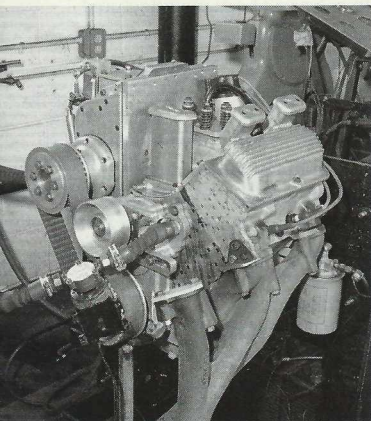
And we know this for sure: Above all else, Mickey Thompson was a racer—with a fierce sense of competition and a relentless curiosity about all things mechanical. At 14 he rebuilt his first car, a '27 Chevy he bought for \$7.50 and sold for \$125. He soon moved up to Model A Ford hot rods, running 79 mph at El Mirage while he was still in high school. At 16 he met his first wife, Judy, street racing near Balboa. Together they scrounged the junk pile behind the local Ford dealer for usable

parts for Mickey's race cars. Growing up just as fast as they raced, they secretly got married in Tijuana, not telling their families until they had a formal church wedding in 1949.

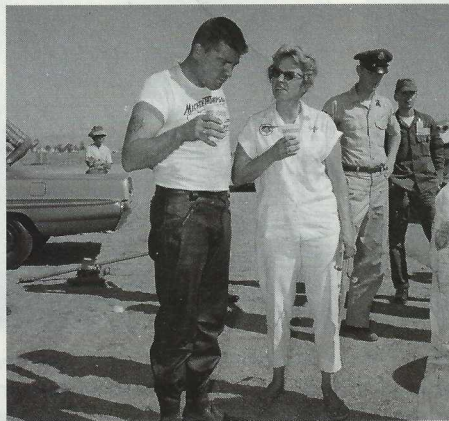
Mickey ran at the first organized drag races at Santa Ana in 1950, and by 1952, he had his twin-engined Bantam coupe running nearly 200 mph at Bonneville. In 1953 he ran in the Mexican Road Race, La Carrera Panamericana, supplied with a new Ford sedan by the same dealer where he and Judy had once rummaged for junk parts. M/T had perfected another gift: his talent for attracting major sponsors. (At various times in his career, Mickey was backed by Ford, Buick, Chevrolet, Pontiac, Goodyear, Firestone, and Sears, Roebuck and Co., to name just a few.) Five spectators were killed



> In July 1961, Mickey launched a four-car attack on a slew of national and international land speed records at March Air Force Base in California. From left to right: the bare-boned Tempest dragster nicknamed the Little Car, the envelope-bodied Attempt I, the blown Pontiac V-8-powered Assault I, and a '61 348hp Catalina.

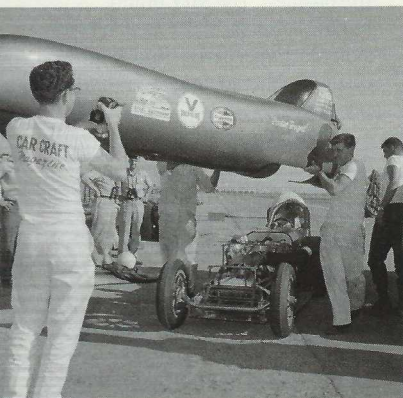


> You've heard of the half-a-V-8 Pontiac Tempest four-banger? M/T went Pontiac one better and cut it in half again, creating a 90ci twin to attack the International 1,500cc records. With a 2-71 GMC blower the little rattler produced 257 hp.

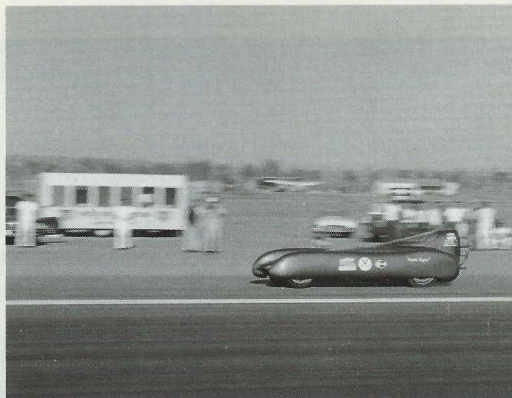


> Judy Thompson with Mickey at March AFB in 1961. Mickey's first wife and mother of their two children, Danny and Lyndy, Judy was an active partner in all the M/T racing adventures until they divorced in 1968. They met while street racing on the Pacific Coast Highway in the '40s when they were high-schoolers.

> Mickey's uncanny ability to align himself with top Detroit executives like Bunky Knudsen, then with Pontiac, provided the backing for many of his ambitious schemes, including the March AFB record runs.



> Powered by a supercharged Tempest four, the Attempt I streamliner was a Dragmaster chassis with a one-piece, lift-off, fiberglass body.



> Attempt I at speed on the 14,000-foot runway at March AFB, about 10 miles southeast of Riverside, California. M/T's four cars set 16 national and international records for the standing-start mile and kilometer in this session.



when he crashed out of La Carrera, but undeterred by the horrible crowd control and nonexistent safety standards, he returned in 1954 with another Ford.

In 1955 came one of many M/T innovations in hot rodding: the slingshot dragster. Like many firsts in auto racing, there is room for question as to who did what and when, but hot rodding historian Dean Batchelor was unequivocal in crediting Mickey for this one. The slingshot was actually two innovations: First, Mickey placed the seat behind

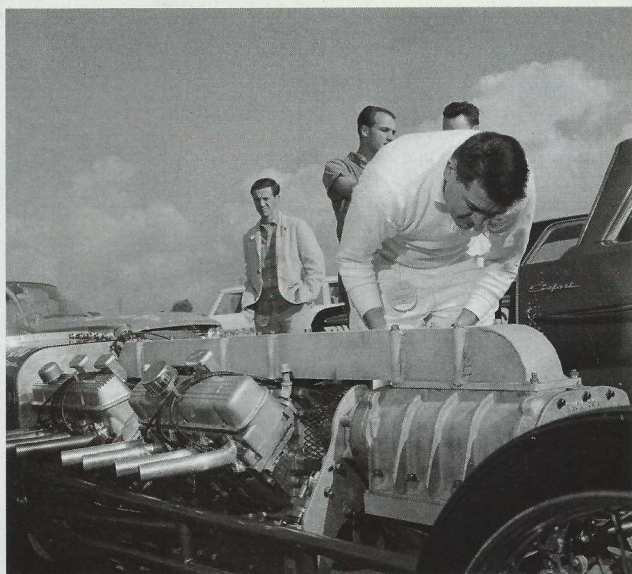
the rear axle where the driver could sense traction, and next, the rear track width was radically narrowed to reduce the torque couple between the two spinning tires, making the car track straighter. The slingshot configuration would rule drag racing for years, until Don Garlits changed the game in 1971.

For 1962, Mickey went after the biggest challenge in American motorsports, the Indy 500. Designed by John Crosthwaite, his three Buick-powered cars followed then-current F1 practice with mid-engined chassis and

independent suspension, but a full year before Colin Chapman came to the Speedway. In 1963 M/T returned with an even wilder combination that featured 11-inch-wide tires on tiny 12-inch wheels. Working with Firestone, in effect Mickey had invented the wide-profile, low-aspect-ratio tire, which revolutionized the industry. But curiously, he has never been truly recognized for that achievement. Meanwhile, the United States Auto Club quickly banned the tire configuration, for it would have made every car in

the field instantly obsolete.

Mickey returned to Indy in 1964 with his cars modified to accept more conventional 15-inch rubber, but tragedy struck when his friend and driver Dave MacDonald was killed in a Lap 2 crash that also took the life of the popular Eddie Sachs. Vilified in the press for the accident ("His cars were ill-conceived and ill-prepared and have permanently marred the escutcheon of America's hot rodders," wrote David E. Davis Jr. in *Car and Driver*), Mickey was made a virtual pariah at the



> Not all of Mickey's ideas were successful, but they were always fascinating. At the '62 NHRA Winternationals he ran this twin-engine dragster. A pair of Pontiac V-8s were fed compressed air by a single enormous blower from a GMC industrial diesel.

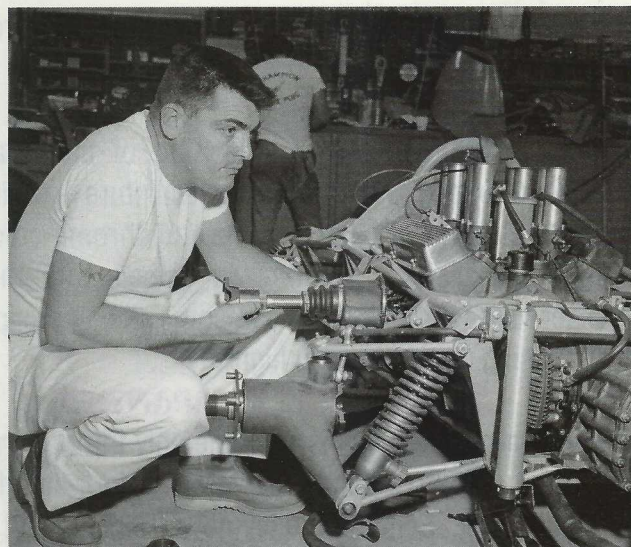


> In 1962 Thompson went after the holy grail of American motorsports, the Indy 500. Beating Colin Chapman by a year, he shocked Gasoline Alley with three mid-engined cars powered by Buick aluminum V-8s. Dan Gurney, a rookie at Indy in 1962, finished Eighth driving one of the Thompson specials.

**“Although he did very well for his family, money didn't mean anything to my dad. It was just a tool to finance his next project.”**

**—Lyndy Thompson**

> As with all of his personal projects, Mickey dug in up to his elbows to prepare and sort out the IndyCars. This is one of the few shots from Indy in those years showing him in a clean uniform.





Speedway, and he was crushed by the loss of MacDonald. "It just devastated him," his son, Danny, remembers. "I know he never got over it." He returned to the Indy 500 a few more times but never with anything approaching the maximum effort of his early campaigns.

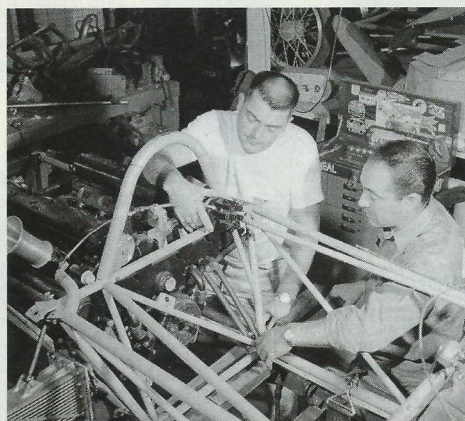
Of course, M/T's most famous race car was Challenger I, the four-engine streamliner that went 406.6 mph at Bonneville in 1960 and established him as a hot rod superstar. "That's the car that put him on the map," Danny says. "You know, it didn't actually set the record because he was unable to make a return run. But that didn't matter because he was so effective at promoting the achievement itself." Under the heading of "now it can be told," it wasn't a broken driveshaft that prevented a return run. Mickey concocted that oft-reported story. In truth, one of the engines had been over-revved and Mickey did not want the failure to reflect poorly on Pontiac, his engine supplier. M/T knew how to look after his sponsors even then.

It would take a book, probably a shelf of books, to describe all of Mickey's racing exploits and the colorful and often complicated stories behind them. That was the scale and speed at which M/T lived his life: WFO. He worked 20 hours per day, creating even while he was sleeping. "My mom slept with a pad and paper on her stomach because Dad was always waking up with ideas and writing them down," recalls his daughter, Lyndy Thompson. "There was a telephone on each side of the bed. He never stopped." Most of the people drawn into his circle couldn't keep up with him; they were quickly worn out and used up. Only a few, like his longtime technical chief Fritz Voigt, could handle Mickey's breakneck pace.

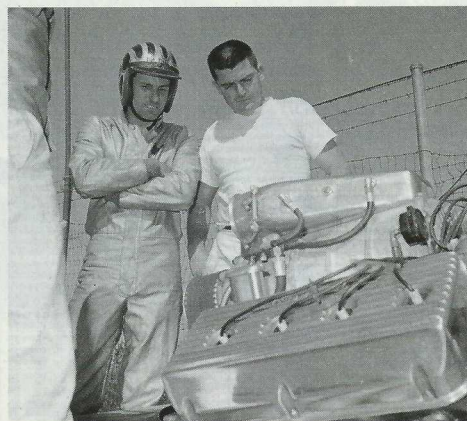
"It's absolutely true. He slept only two or three hours a night. By the time the rest of us got up in the morning, he already had 10 or 15 ideas written down for us to try," Danny says. "It's a good thing we didn't have fax  
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> M/T's Indy 500 effort for 1963 was even more revolutionary. Only 33 inches tall and rolling on 12-inch wheels, his '63 cars were quickly nicknamed the "roller skates." And just as quickly, USAC banned their short, wide tires.



> For 1964 the M/T roller skates, previously powered by aluminum small-block Chevrolets, received DOHC Indy Ford engines and full-envelope bodywork. However, the '64 Indy campaign would end in disaster with the deaths of Dave McDonald and Eddie Sachs.



> Don Garlits and Mickey look over the blown Chrysler Hemi in the latest Swamp Rat at the '64 Winternationals.



> One of Mickey's many successful gimmicks as a drag racing promoter—a cardboard box full of cash for the Top Eliminator winner.



> November 1965: An extremely youthful-looking Connie Kalitta walks the bleach box with Mickey.

## MICKEY THOMPSON: A BRIEF RÉSUMÉ

**1943** At 14 he rebuilds his first car, a '27 Chevrolet. He sells it for \$125 and gets a Model A.

**1944** At 16 he is street racing and running on the dry lakes, turning 79 mph at El Mirage with a four-cylinder Model A.

**1950** He drag races at Santa Ana, turning 90 mph.

**1951** He races at Bonneville for the first time, running a best one-way speed of 141 mph in a flathead-powered '36 Ford coupe.

**1952** With a twin-engined Bantam racer, Mickey sets the E Competition Coupe record at Bonneville with a two-way average of 194.34 mph.

**1953** He enters La Carrera Panamericana, the Mexican road race, where he crashes out in the first stage. He returns in 1954, but crashes again due to a tie-rod failure that sends him into a stone wall at 90 mph.

**1955** Introducing the slingshot dragster to the sport, he is the first drag racer to exceed 150 mph when he runs 151.26 mph at San Fernando Raceway.

**1955** He becomes the first general manager of Lions Drag Strip in Long Beach—first documented use of a Christmas Tree-type starting system.

**1957** He creates the first drag racing under the lights with his Saturday night shows at Lions.

**1958** He runs 294 mph in a twin-Hemi, four-wheel-drive streamliner at Bonneville, beating the existing record by 30 mph.

**1959** He founds Mickey Thompson Equipment Co. The first products are aluminum connecting rods and pistons, but M/T soon expands into a full line of speed parts, including wheels and valve covers.

**1960** He drives Challenger I to 406.60 mph at Bonneville, taking the unofficial land speed record and becoming the first American to exceed 400 mph. Mechanical failure prevents a return run for the official record.

**1962** He is the first American to build and field a mid-engined chassis at the Indy 500, one year before Colin Chapman's arrival at the Speedway.

**1962** Mickey and Judy Thompson enter Pontiacs in the Mobil Economy Run, both winning their class.

**1963** He enters four Corvettes in the American Challenge Cup race at Daytona, two powered by 427ci big-block mystery engines; Billy Krause finishes Third.

**1963** He introduces the first wide-profile, low-aspect-ratio tires to a major auto racing series at the Indy 500.

**1964** The Mickey Thompson line of drag slicks and street performance tires is launched.

**1964** He campaigns two Ford Fairlane Thunderbolts in NHRA drag racing, driven by Butch Leal and Jess Tyree. Leal wins S/S class at the '64 U.S. Nationals at Indy.

**1968** At Bonneville with a set of three race-prepared, preproduction '69 Mustangs, Mickey averages 157.663 mph for 24 hours—17 mph faster than the previous record.

**1969** With fabricator Pat Foster, Mickey introduces the modern

style, narrow-gauge Funny Car chassis to the category, dominating the '69 season with drivers Foster and Danny Ongais.

**1969** He races at Baja for the first time.

**1970** He introduces titanium and monocoque chassis to Funny Car racing.

**1973** He founds SCORE (Short Course Off Road Enterprises) with minority partner Sal Fish to sanction and promote off-road racing.

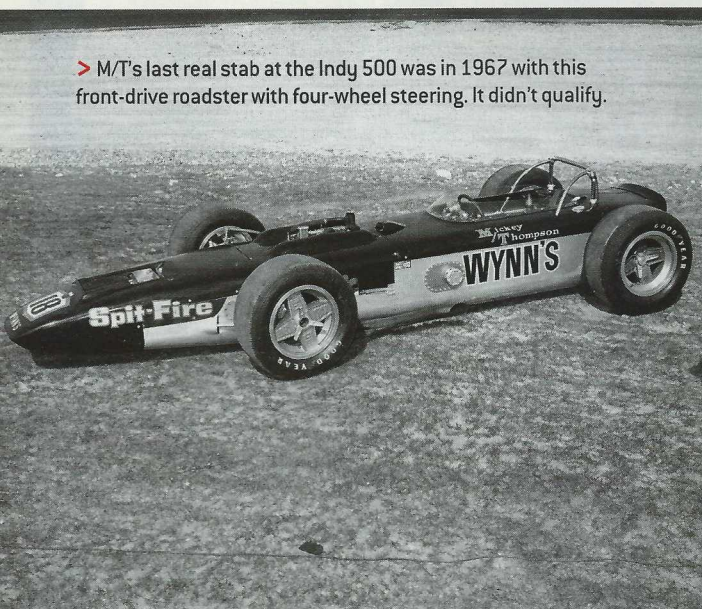
**1975** SCORE takes over sanctioning duties for the Baja 1000.

**1978** MTEG (Mickey Thompson Entertainment Group) is founded to sanction and market stadium off-road racing.

**1982** He wins the Baja 1000 with co-driver Terry Smith in a Raceco-VW.

**1986** The patent application is accepted for his Hydro-barricade, a water-filled highway safety barrier.

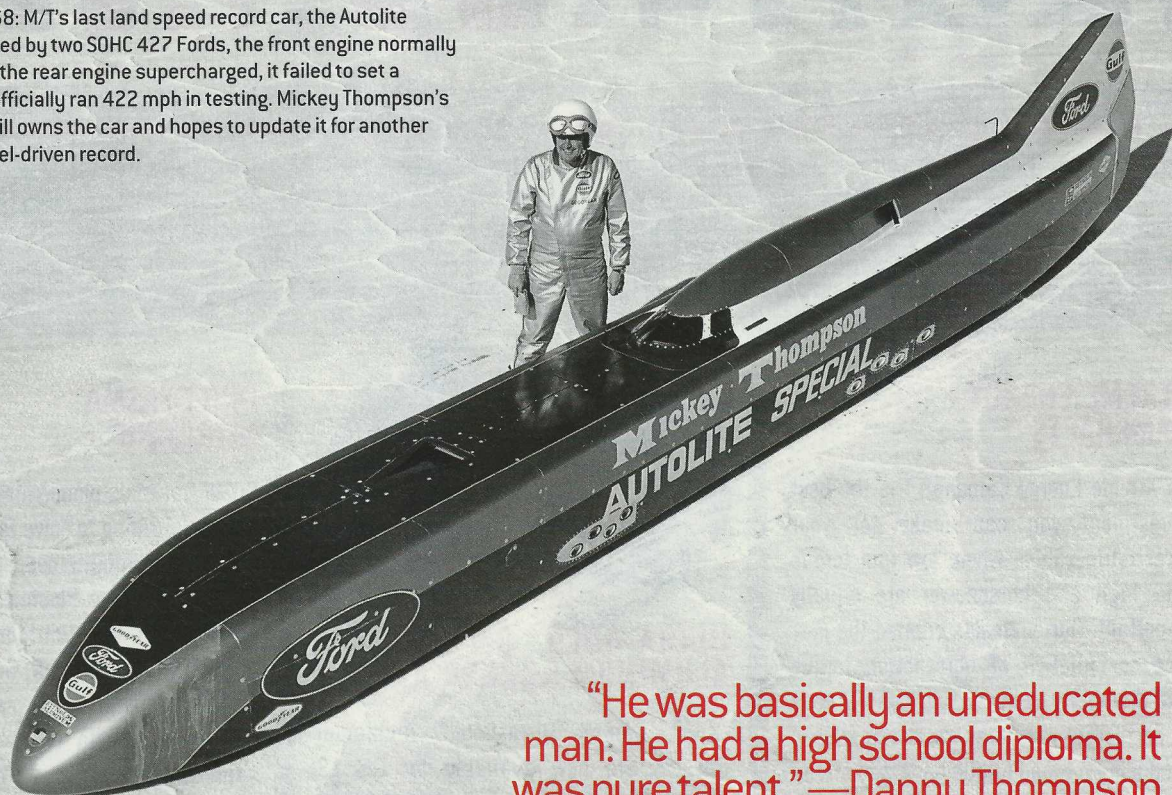
> M/T's last real stab at the Indy 500 was in 1967 with this front-drive roadster with four-wheel steering. It didn't qualify.



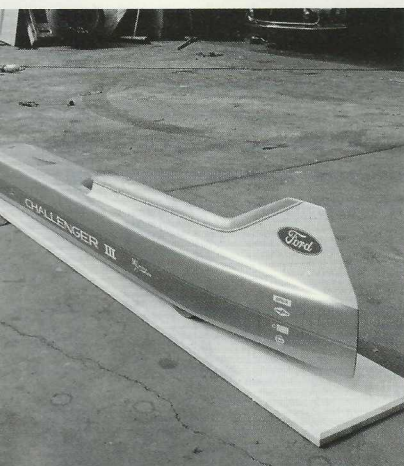
> The '67 IndyCar was powered by this Chevy-based creation with an aluminum block and wild three-valve cylinder heads.

# LIFE AT 400 MPH

> October 1968: M/T's last land speed record car, the Autolite Special. Powered by two SOHC 427 Fords, the front engine normally aspirated and the rear engine supercharged, it failed to set a record but unofficially ran 422 mph in testing. Mickey Thompson's son, Danny, still owns the car and hopes to update it for another run at the wheel-driven record.



“He was basically an uneducated man. He had a high school diploma. It was pure talent.” —Danny Thompson



> A scale model of the streamliner that eventually became the Mickey Thompson Autolite Special. Here it bears the name Challenger III.

For more photos of Mickey Thompson and his exploits, visit [HOTROD.com](http://HOTROD.com).

> Mickey's technical curiosity and entrepreneurial urge soon led him to the tube-header business. His innovation was the staggered primary-collector design he is holding here, marketed as the Super Scavenger. Who knows how well they actually worked, but he sure sold a ton of them. And they sounded great.



machines and cell phones back then or it would have been a nightmare. He would have burned them up.”

In the early to mid-'70s, the M/T stories in *HOT ROD* started to dry up. Mickey had turned away from Bonneville, drag racing and the more traditional hot rodding forms in favor of a new love: off-road racing. Running the Baja 1000 for the first time in 1969, he was hooked. With former *HOT ROD* Publisher Sal Fish, he formed SCORE to sanction desert-racing events, and a few years later, he started MTEG, the Mickey Thompson Entertainment Group. Deciding that the sport was too exciting to be seen

only by “cactus and jack rabbits,” as he put it, M/T devised a whole new and wildly successful form of motorsports: stadium off-road racing. After helping to invent hot rodding, he had found a new frontier.

By the mid-'80s Mickey and his second wife, Trudy, were ready to ease back a little from their full-throttle lifestyle. “This was going to be their time to relax and enjoy life,” Lyndy says. Looking for someone to take over the stadium racing business, instead they found Michael Goodwin, who unfortunately turned out to be a world-class cheat—and eventually, their convicted murderer. Goodwin is serving a life sentence for the

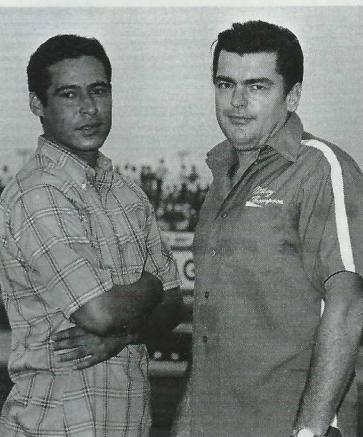
vicious, gangland-style assassination in front of the Thompsons’ Bradbury, California, home, but the two triggermen have yet to be apprehended.

In Mickey’s autobiography, *Challenger*, there is a chapter that describes his first visit to the Bonneville Salt Flats. “If there was ever a place to inspire the saying, ‘Give me men to match my mountains,’ it’s Bonneville,” Mickey writes of the raw and intimidating landscape. Actually, that’s the first line from a poem by Sam Walter Foss (1858-1911) called *The Coming American*. And since we know Mickey was no scholar—by his own admission, he got through high school mainly by fixing the teachers’

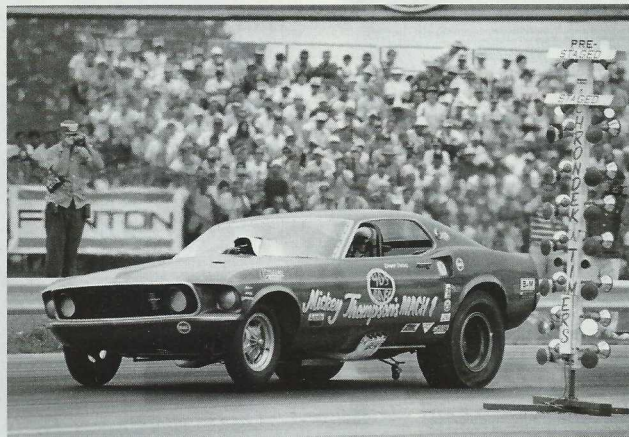
cars—we should probably attribute the reference to his cowriter Griff Borgeson, who was somewhat more erudite. In his poem, written in 1894, Foss was describing the kind of men who would travel the West, across places like Bonneville, to pioneer and conquer America. The first four lines go like this:

Bring me men to match my mountains,  
Bring me men to match my plains,  
Men with empires in their purpose  
And new eras in their brains.

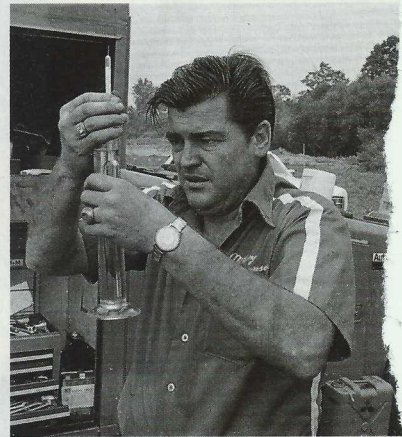
Sam Walter Foss, meet Mickey Thompson.



> Mickey and his Funny Car driver, Danny Ongais, in 1969. Danny On-The-Gas went on to IndyCars and sports car racing, where he proved to be blindingly fast.



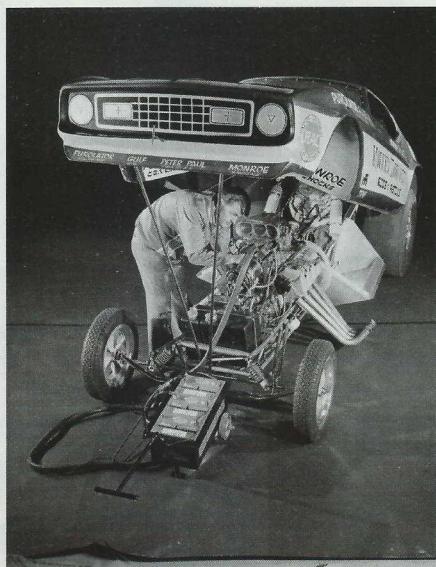
> Quick and consistent, Mickey's Mach 1 Funny Cars were the class of the field in the '69 season, winning the Springnationals and the U.S. Nationals at Indy.



> Mickey mixes up a batch of nitro for the M/T Funny Cars.

> This is one of Mickey's more conventional racers for 1971: a Boss 429-powered Mustang flopper. Other M/T creations from that period include a titanium Pinto, a monocoque Mustang, and a nitro motor that ran on high-pressure bottled air.

“He went through life like a guy escaping a bank robbery.” —Jim Murray, *L.A. Times*



> By the mid-'70s Mickey had all but abandoned Bonneville, drag racing, and traditional hot rodding for off-road racing. Here is his '75 Chevy LUV Baja racer with a 454 big-block and 4WD. **HRM**