



Henry “Smokey” Yunick Bio

Smokey Yunick was first and foremost a racer. Many called him a mechanical genius and an inventor, unfettered by formal education. A few knew him as a World War II pilot. Those who met him knew that he was one of the most genuine, interesting characters they had ever met. Smokey Yunick was all of these things and much more. He packed more into 77 years than most people could in 200.

Henry “Smokey” Yunick grew up on a farm in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania and endured a not so pleasant family life. He had to drop out of high school in the tenth grade after his alcoholic father died of a heart attack. It was about this time that his mechanical creativity and lust for speed were just starting to appear. He built a tractor from spare car parts after a run in with the family’s work horse and soon after started racing motorcycles. From there, he joined the Army Air Corps and became a B-17 pilot, flying 50 missions over Europe before transferring to the Pacific theatre.

After the war and getting married for the first time, Smokey moved to Daytona Beach, a place that he had flown over during a training flight. He hated the cold and Florida seemed like the perfect place. Smokey opened his shop and named it Smokey’s Best Damn Garage in Town. His shop on Beach Street was a Daytona Beach landmark for over 50 years and is still a mecca for many racers and fans.

Before long, Smokey started looking for the adrenaline that was missing after the war and racing filled this void. He started off building Hudson Hornet engines for Herb Thomas and ended up as one of the most famous and influential crew chief/mechanics in NASCAR history. His cars won over 50 races and his list of 50 plus drivers reads like a who’s who of racer’s from the past 50 years. Smokey also got the bug to race in the Indianapolis 500 in the late 50’s and that obsession lasted 20 years, with a win as the chief mechanic in 1960.

Smokey never stopped tinkering and improving everything on which he worked. During 1960’s and 70’s, he was a consultant to Chevrolet, Pontiac and Ford, most times working directly for the presidents of those companies. Many of his innovations found their way into consumer cars as enhancements and power improvements.

Smokey quit racing all together in the mid-70’s and continued to work on inventing and energy conservation issues. It was during this time when he started to travel to Ecuador, working with oil companies to try and make the machinery

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function in the harsh environs of the rain forest. He was involved with several of the major oil companies, spent years wildcatting and was even involved in some gold mining operations. Smokey was very stubborn and many times this contributed to his lack of financial reward, but he was driven by doing things right way rather than for money. Smokey loved being the underdog, taking on the big guys and making them eat their words.

Smokey's final career came during those same years. He served as a spokesperson for many racing and automotive companies, including Champion Spark Plugs, Prolong Lubricants and ARP Fasteners. This is where Smokey's ability as a storyteller was really discovered. He spoke to many audiences on many different subjects, but he always kept them rolling in the aisles and begging for more.

It was one of these speaking engagements that gave him the idea to write the real history of racing. He was speaking to a group of kids at Lowe's Motorspeedway and he was supposed to explain stock car racing. It dawned on him that many of the people who knew the real stories from the early days of racing were dying off or were too involved in racing to tell the real story. Smokey spent the last five years of his life writing all the stories down, longhand, in spiral notebooks, while his wife Margie did the transcription and managed the mountains of paper as he changed and rewrote sections. He ended up telling his life story in the process, as the stories just wouldn't have made sense without the background of who he was and how he got there.

Smokey was diagnosed with Myelodysplastic Anemia in 1998, which progressed into Acute Myeloid Leukemia in November of 2001. In January, he started Carbon Press and hired Wade Caldwell to work with his daughter Trish to ensure his autobiography would be published just as he wrote it. Entitled *Best Damn Garage in Town... The World According to Smokey*, his book has met with rave reviews. Unfortunately, Smokey passed away in May of 2001, just 8 weeks before the first books would come back from the printer.

The final chapter in Smokey's life is very fitting. Robert Lipsyte of The New York Times chose his book as one of the top five sports books of 2001 and every other review has raved about his sense of humor and storytelling prowess. His wife Margie had parts of his ashes scattered in every winner's circle where his cars won – a great ending for a legendary racer, mechanic, inventor and American hero.

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