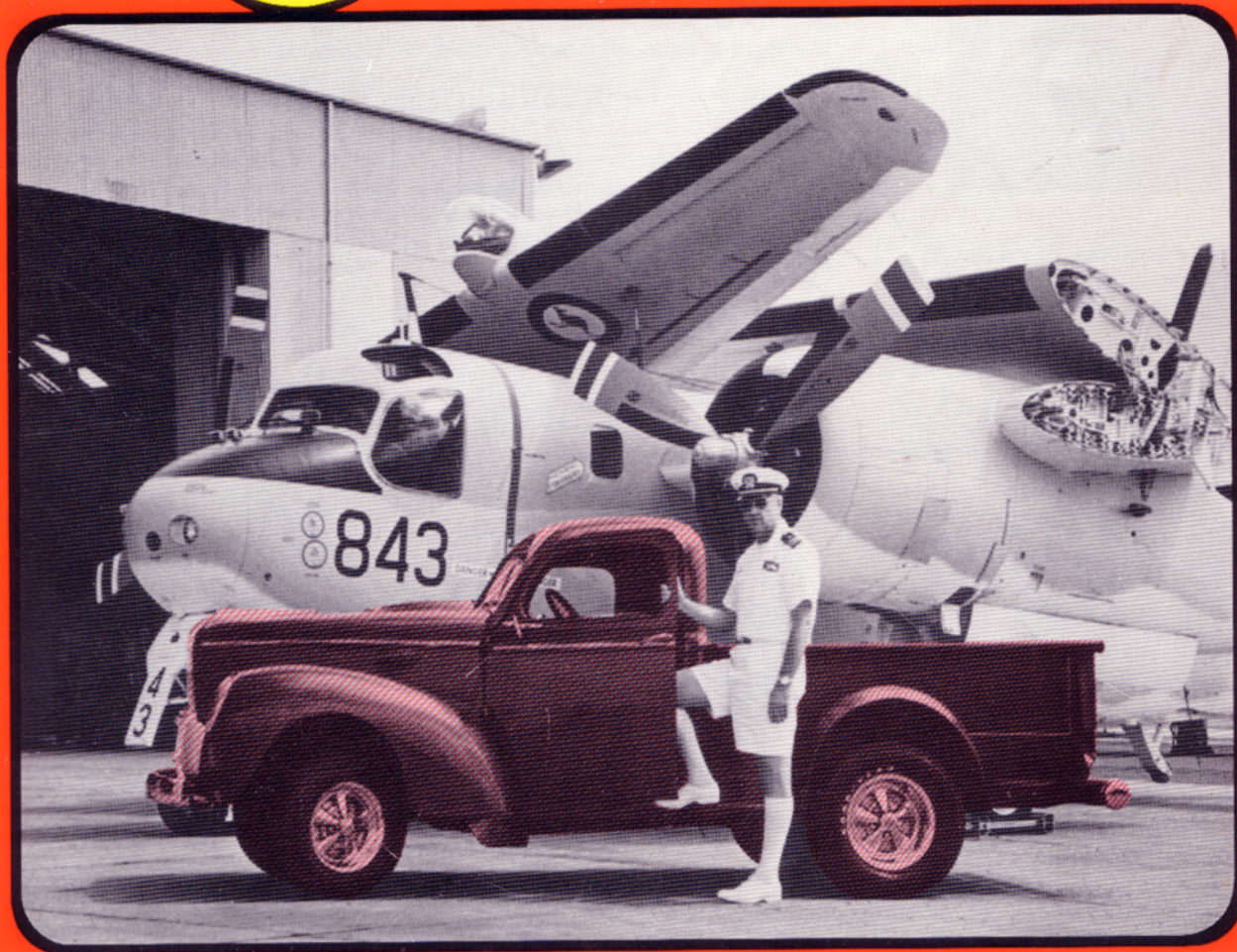


OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE
MID-AMERICA WILLYS CLUB

\$2⁰⁰

GASPER GOSHIP



The Original Darkhorse

By Chuck Finders

As told to Joe Andulics

(Continued from last issue)

The "Darkhorse"

The "Darkhorse" is the real story, a car which was barely campaigned for an entire season before being retired and forgotten after the dust had settled on one of drag racing's most celebrated battles between "Pebble/Pulp/Chef" and "Big John".

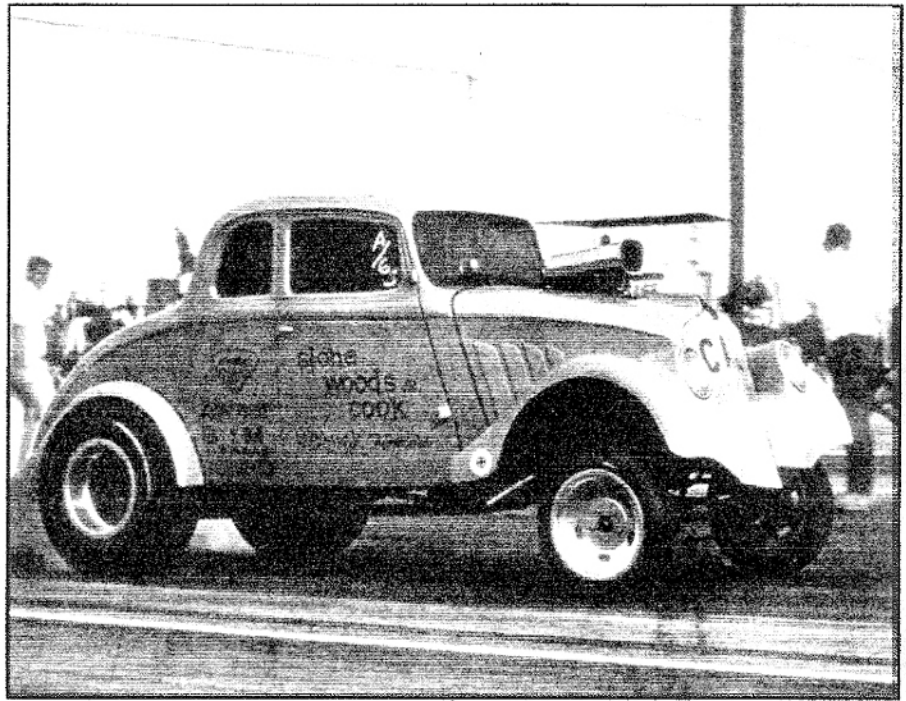
Chuck would befriend Stone-Woods-Cook while building the Finders/Casper/Watson '40 Willys pick-up in the same garage complex on Park Street. Later he would go on to drive the "B" car for the team, consistently beating Doug in the "A" car off the line and up to half track.

Later in Chuck's shop in Artesia, Tim Woods would see the '33 Willys body and chassis from the Finders/Thompson car. Intrigued, he suggests they install the Olds motor from the "Swindler B" into the smaller Willys coupe and "see what would happen". The switch is at first kept secret from Doug Cook, further widening the rift between the "greasy twins", Chuck and Doug.

As it would happen on the maiden trip down the quarter mile at Pomona with Chuck driving, the car would rip a 9.88 e.t., quicker than the then big gun "Swindler A" coupe. The car immediately gets the label "The Darkhorse" for its unexpected strong performance.

Still wearing the scars from past races, the body is straightened and painted the familiar bird shell blue with dark blue lettering and a fresh Olds motor is built.

Late January at Inyokern, would be the much publicized show down between the two big coupes since the Pomona non-race. For reasons unclear, Tim keeps the "Swindler A" home and instead sends the "Darkhorse". Watching "Bones" set a new track record, the 400 inch Olds of the "Darkhorse" would come apart and the two cars would never meet that weekend.



Later in February at the Winternationals in Pomona, the "Swindler A" would get its' chance to run along side the Mazmanian coupe, but not before Bones would hit a 9.99, 149.00 the fastest by an A/G supercharged ever in NHRA competition and the first 9 second run.

In the finals though, the big red coupe was unable to hook up and saw the S-W-C car win with a run of 10.03, 142.85 mph. The last big race of 1964 would be the U.S. Fuel and Gas Championships held at Famoso Drag Strip near Bakersfield, providing a last chance under championship conditions for a rematch. Going into the race the "Darkhorse" would still be the quickest car with its' initial 9.88 run, "Swindler A" at 10.02 and the Inglewood coupe at 9.99.

The showdown wouldn't happen, as again the big blue car isn't present but in its' place the "Darkhorse". As if by providence the same occurs. The Mazmanian coupe runs a fine single 9.84, 144.92, the "Darkhorse" a 10.50, 138.22 but like at Inyokern blows the motor, ending the hopes of a meeting at Bakersfield.

Two weeks later, it was announced that at the Half Moon Bay Drag Strip that a two out of three match was to be held to end the "B.S." Again, the big car doesn't show and the "Darkhorse" is there in its' place. It didn't matter as the race gets rained out and neither car makes a run.

May 2nd at Lions Drag Strip the two big cars eventually meet. The "Darkhorse" would be present and ini-

tially have the quickest run with a 10.04. Bones would win the first round and red light in the second, leaving the third run for all the marbles. It would see the S-W-C car coming out ahead with a 9.93, 144.92, ending one of the most popular drag wars then and today.

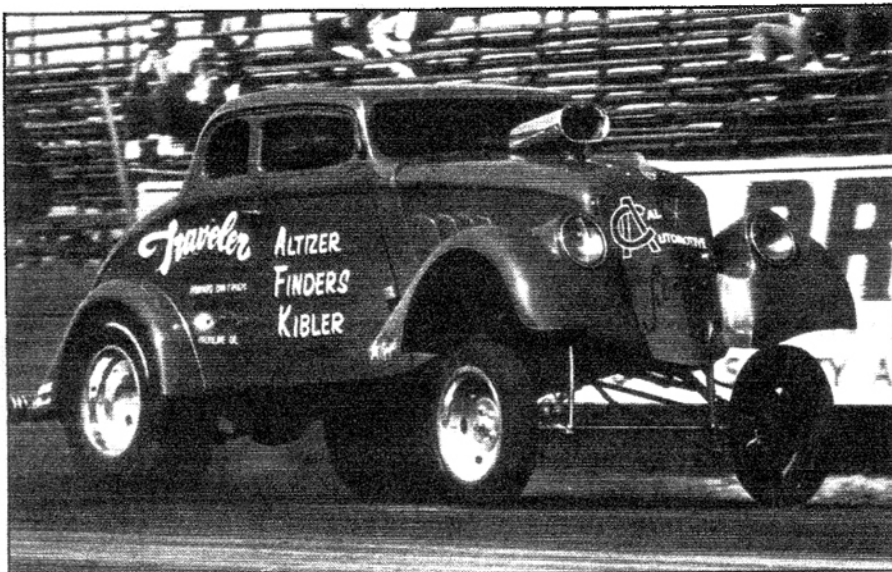
Chuck would never get his rematch with "Big John" with the "Darkhorse", Tim eventually got tired of the "third" car and he and Chuck would go their separate ways.

He would go on to drive and build cars for John Mazmanian, but the question will always remain why did the "Darkhorse" meet "Big John" at Inyokern, Bakersfield and at Half Moon, rather than the "Swindler A"? Was Chuck giving the S-W-C team the time it needed to shake down the big Mickey Thompson Chrysler hemi that replaced the Olds necessary to beat "Big John?", or were they just worried about the possible final outcome of the race for the Worlds' Fastest Street Machine. The questions will never be answered to everyone's satisfaction.

The one sure thing is that the role of Chuck Finders and the "Darkhorse" will again soon be forgotten.

After the Darkhorse

Leaving the S-W-C camp with his '33 Willys he immediately teamed up with old friends Neal Kibbler and Bill Altizer. With a chopped top, new red paint, Bill's 7/8" stroked Chevy engine, the "Darkhorse" now wears a new name the "Traveler".



On Saturday, October 24th, appearing at Fontana, the car came off the line at 143.50 mph in 10.04. His second and Third run were 143.76 in 9.99 and 145.16 in 9.86 setting the first leg of a new 13.20 record.

Meanwhile the S-W-C Chrysler powered A/GS turned 145.39 mph in 9.78. This would be the first time a Chevy powered coupe would run within 5 mph of S-W-C on the same day at the same strip.

On Sunday, October 25th at San Fernando, Chuck came off the trailer at 145.39 mph in 10.09. Then attempting his backup run, he bettered it with 146.51 mph in 10.05. On November 7th at Fontana he ups the 13.20 B/GS record to 146.57 mph in 9.76.

The car would never see its' share of trophies on the mantle though, with its' only other highlight being a series of exhibition races on the Hawaiian Islands.

A pending divorce forces him to sell Bill the car for \$1.00 to quickly get it out of his name. Deals like this are always doomed to fail, and he finds himself on the outside with Roger Garten now driving the car.

Chuck would pack up and head East, where you would find him driving the S-W-C A/GS car on their Eastern tour, racing and winning against "Big John", K.S. Pittman and "Ohio" George in a single day. He would build the AA/GS big block Chevy Austin for Cottrell and Reichard, freshen up Barb Hamilton's C/G coupe, build the "Fire Brewed" A/GS Anglia with a body given him by Dave Anderson of A & I Fiberglass, and establishing a long standing relationship with the Hrudka brothers of Mr. Gasket.

In eleven days from start to finish he

would build Pete and Bill Hill's '33 Willys coupe. The body being a gift from Tom Hrudka after the brothers tired of running "Big John's" old '40 Willys, from which they had sectioned four inches from the body rather than chop the top. The '33 coupe is still running today and only recently left the Cleveland area where it was originally built.

The "Traveler" would get a new owner and a fashionable psychedelic paint job, but after too many scrapes with the guard rail the car is unceremoniously scrapped.

Chuck's career after the supercharged coupes, also has its ups and downs. With better earning power in the funny car ranks, drivers like himself, S-W-C, John Mazmanian and Junior Thompson would move up in the professional ranks. This move would almost end Chuck Finders racing career and his life.

In the late '70's he teams up with Ken Thornberg, a successful contractor and land developer, they build the "High Speed Monza" funny car. The car would find itself losing in the finals of the Winston Series at Edgewater Raceway Park against Dale Pulde and bowing out in the semi-finals at Beech Bend International against Billy Meyer. The end of 1977 would see Chuck ranked 26th in total points immediately behind Ed McCulloch and finishing third in division 3 of the Winston World Championship Series. He isn't given the opportunity to improve his standing in 1978.

August 27, 1977, Chuck now 37 years old, hits the guard rail at Great Lakes Dragway in Union Grove and demolishes the Monza funny car. Present at the track that day, Don Garlits witnesses the accident "...it went off the track and crashed into the guard rail. He hit the guard rail three times, the last time a section of the guard rail came through the cockpit, slicing through his right leg, leaving it hanging on by only a small piece of flesh and sliced right across the top of his left leg."

Don ran back to the track announcer John Lundberg, and said "this man is going to lose his legs. The only thing we can do is get all these people out here praying for him to save his legs. Now, you get on the PA and ask these people to pray."

A year later, Chuck has his leg amputated by choice, "the docs argued with me, I told them I wanted it done. I told them I couldn't go racing with a stiff leg."

His comeback to racing went unheralded. With his new AA/Altered that he designed and built in his "dreams" during his hospital stay, he fails to qualify at the Gainesville, Florida Nationals, at Indianapolis he qualifies 17th, the top 16 go into the finals and at the 16th Springnationals he's faced with riding out an oil fire in the altered that fatally injures his only Donovan engine.

The '80's find him bowing out of full time facing and concentrating on building race cars, street rods and selling Willys components, and that's where he can be found today.

After experiencing the exhilaration of driving down the quarter mile in speeds in excess of 200 mph, Chuck's heart still remains with the cars that were his beginning, the "ground pounding, mesmerizing" supercharged coupes, especially the '33 Willys.

His shop phone number even reflects that passion for the little coupe that started it all, 323-1933.

