

Doing Salt

-Jeff Thurmond

in 2015

It is hard to get off. You can't get it all off. The salt gets into crevices, cracks, seams, nooks and behind every impossible to see and reach spot on the vehicle. It goes where you would never expect and hides where you cannot clean it out. But back in the early through late 1960's, most young guys only cared about the speed runs, not the salt gremlins. Back then, guys cared about cars and girls. Since girls were impossible to understand and resisted being played with, we played with cars which were the easier choice. In Utah this was the era when what started as Kearns Army Air Field was then used as the SCCA race track, long before it was turned into Airport #2 in South Valley. So we had the SCCA road racing and the Bonneville Land Speed Records.

To me those were the golden days of both SCCA racing, real motorcycling on bikes with carburetors and ignition points and no faring, and the Bonneville salt flat speed trials. My first trip to see the cars on the salt was in 1960. There were four of us and we took Jim's 1953 Chevy Bel Air with the Edelbrock heads and Holley 4-barrel carb. I remember that evening trying to clean the car, and after draining the city water supply of water to wash the salt off, all the next trips we would get a ride from the State Line motel in Wendover or just park at the entrance to where the Bonneville runs were held and hitch-hiked in. We would always drive out to State Line, the "big" casino in Wendover, and buy ice and soda pop which we stored in back-packs. It was easy then to hitch rides and most often we could pile into the back of a pickup or the back seat of a car headed to the speed runs. Let someone else drive over the salt.

When I started to go watch the Bonneville land speed runs, I did not have a motorcycle (didn't get first bike 'till 1963) and the motorcycle runs just didn't excite me like the hot rods and custom build streamliners. The 1960's were very special years of land speed record trials. I got to see Mickey Thompson in his 4 engine Challenger my first year there. And there were some of the V-12 Rolls and Merlin engine monsters in streamlined 4-wheeled bodies that made enough noise you could hear them all the way down the 8 mile run. I saw the transition from piston engines to jets, and the first runs of Craig Breedlove and Art Afton's jet engine streamliners. Merlin engine monsters in streamlined 4-wheeled bodies that made enough noise you could hear them all the way down the 8 mile run. I saw the transition from piston engines to jets, and the first runs of Craig Breedlove and Art Afton's jet engine streamliners.

This year marks the 101th year of the Bonneville Salt Flats speed events. It all started in 1907 when Bill Rishel drove his Pierce Arrow across the flats. Gee, if it started in 1907 that was 108 years ago. ⇨

Oh yeah. Events were suspended for a few years during WWI and again in the 1940's while gas rationing was in effect and vehicle production was suspended for WWII.

The first speed record set at Bonneville was 141.73 mph, set in 1914 with a Blitzen-Benz piloted by Teddy Tetzlaff. The next big star was Ab Jenkins. Ab got his first shot at the salt when the highway salt flats built to run parallel Union Pacific tracks that had been finished in 1910. He was challenged to race the Union Pacific train across the flats and he won racing his Studebaker truck by about 5 minutes. Seems he was now addicted with the speed and in 1932 he started racing a 1930 Pierce Arrow 12 cylinder. Jenkin's international fame really peaked when he raced his Mormon Meteor which was a Duesenberg, smashing 26 world records in 1950. Malcolm Campbell from England was first to break the 300 mark by running 301.129 in 1935 in his Blue Bird. The Blue Bird is credited with being the first streamliner on the salt. Well, if one big engine will get you down the salt, then 2 ought to be better. George Eyston of the UK put two Rolls Royce V-12 aircraft engines putting out 4,500 horse power into his Thunderbolt and managed 357.50 in 1938. Running 25 liter Rolls, Merlin and Allison V-12's from WWII fighter aircraft was a common way to get the horsepower needed to get those large vehicles quickly down the salt. John Cobb beat Eyston's mark by posting a 369.74 in his Railton Special in 1939, a record that stood until he broke it himself in 1947.

The course was shut down in late 1939 when Germany invaded Poland and America pledged to support the UK by providing fuel, steel and other war materials. After WWII, the competition for top honors in those days was between John Cobb, Craig Breedlove, Art Arfons, Andy Granatelli, and Mickey Thompson. Cobb turned 394.19 mph in 1947. Mickey Thompson in his Challenger with 4 Pontiac V8's coupled to 4 Cadillac transmissions ran 363.48 in 1959 and was the first to topple the 400 mark when he piloted the Challenger to 406.60 in 1960. And the fastest open cockpit record of Art Arfons, set in 1962 at 330.113 still stands. That same year, Andy Granatelli set a



new record for stock production in a Studebaker Avanti at 170.78.

The jet age on the salt began in 1962 when Art Arfons ran his J-47 powered streamliner. I still remember the excitement and the enormous sound when Craig Breedlove was the first to smash the 500 mark by going 526.28 in 1963 in a vehicle powered by an F86 fighter jet engine. Craig Breedlove turned 600.601 in 1965 in his Spirit of America Sonic 1. In 1970 Gary Gabelich set a new record in his Blue Flame at 630.478. When you think about these speeds, you can really appreciate the Burt Munro record set in 1967 at 183.59 on his normally aspirated under 1,000 cc, non-fairing twin cylinder Indian Scout. Or the 102.281 mph of Brandon Miller on a unfaired electric motorcycle in 2012. Dusty Schaller holds the blown-fuel 650 cc record set in 2013 on a Honda CBR 600 at 170.032. In the 1650 class a new record was set last year by Paul Thede on a Kawasaki ZX14 at 196.604. Andy Sills ran non-streamlined at 218.736 on his BMW S1000RR. And holding the top motorcycle speed record is Chris Carr in a streamliner turning 367.382 with an exit speed of 372.534 in 2009.



Bonneville Salt Flats are not the only place the land speed records are attempted. There is the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, Daytona Beach in Florida, Lake Eyre in Australia and Hakskeen Pan in the NW corner of South Africa. The fastest speed run was not set at Bonneville but at Black Rock by Andy Green in 1997 piloting the Thrust, a twin rocket powered streamliner that looks a bit like the SR-71 Blackbird aircraft. Green posted 763.035 mph, the first land based vehicle to break the sound barrier. That record still stands.

The land speed record runs are governed by rules laid down by the FIA and measure the speed over a 1 mile course. At Bonneville there are three tracks or runs. The long track is on a 10 mile straight with 8 miles used for the course. The first 5 miles are for the speed run with the fifth mile as the last timed ⇨

mile and the last three as slow-down area. The long course is for fast vehicles and the two short courses are for slower runs and also as the qualifier to get onto the long course. A vehicle first must run 175 mph in 2.25 miles on one of the short courses before it can

abundance of mud, Speed Week has been cancelled for the second year in a row. If things dry up, "World of Speed" is scheduled for September 12-15. "Cook's Landspeed Events" (sanctioned by FIA-FIM) are September 17-21. The "World Finals" are September

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Speed Week was scheduled for August 6-11 with inspections August 6-7. Due to a lack of salt and an