

TOP-TIER PIONEER MODEL MAKERS

PRICELESS ORIGINALS GATHER IN PHOENIX

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LARRY EDSALL



Like so many other boys of my generation, I saved my pennies and I saved my dimes (“giddy up, giddy up 409”) and when I had enough of them I’d spend them on an AMT or Revell model car kit.

Except for the tires, the pieces in the kits were made of plastic. Those parts included the body shell, dashboard, seats, steering wheel, the various components that formed the engine and transmission, and dozens and dozens more.

Most everything was white in color, though windows and headlights were clear plastic, tail lamps were tinted red, and bumpers had a chrome-like finish.

Also included was a fold-out sheet of instructions, and a sheet of decals so you could customize your car with flames or pinstripes or race car sponsor badges.

The kits were sold in hardware stores or at the local “5-and-Dime” store, where you also could buy small spray cans of paint to make your car and its components look even more realistic.

Provided, of course, you had both patience and skill. I had neither.

It was hard enough just to separate the various plastic pieces from the frames in which they were molded, let alone go back with an X-Acto knife and try to smooth off the little bumps that remained from the connection points.

Then there was the matter of trying not to drip or smear or spill any of the Testors glue onto your car’s finish during assembly—a challenge made more difficult because all the while you were inhaling the intoxicating fumes the glue emitted as soon as you removed the cap from the tube.

Painting presented more frustrations—in part because you were supposed to paint components before they were glued together but always were in such a hurry to assemble your model that there was no way to avoid horrible overspray.

And I don’t think I ever applied a set of decals without bumps and lumps.

Memories of my inability to assemble supposedly easy-to-use model car kits rushed back into mind while I was looking with awe at model cars boys of my generation had created not from a kit but completely on their own, from doing the original design to the construction from wood, plaster, metal and paint. Their cars were designed so creatively and built so

skillfully that these boys won college scholarships, and many went on to careers creating not just model cars but the vehicles we’ve been driving on the roads and highways for several decades.

Those boys built their cars as part of the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild scholarship competition, which General Motors sponsored from 1930-1968. Several dozen Guild alumni and their model cars were in Phoenix recently for a reunion they held in conjunction with the annual Arizona classic car auctions.

For two days, the model makers shared their stories and showed their cars in the lobby of the Arizona Biltmore, the resort where the RM Auctions company was selling full-size classic vehicles at prices ranging well into seven figures.

Several of the Guild alumni told of spending considerable amounts—not in dollars but in time, typically 700-800 hours building each model. But their efforts paid off in scholarships that enabled them to attend college and then enter and enjoy careers as car designers or in other fields, from teaching to engineering.

Many of those stories have been captured in two books—*The Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild: An Illustrated History* and *Inside the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild: Contestants Recall the Great General Motors Talent Search*, both written by John Jacobus, a Guild alumnus and long-time US Department of Transportation auto safety engineer.

For many of the Guildsmen, the contest was a life-changing event, especially for those who won scholarships that allowed them to go to college.

Anthony Joslin said his parents had saved enough money for him to attend college, but that when he won a GM scholarship, his parents used the money they’d saved to buy the only house they ever owned.

Even though he didn’t win a scholarship, Jeff Jones said participating in the model-building contest “was a seminal point in my life.” Building his cars led him to study mechanical engineering and then to a career as an oil-field engineer.

The reunion was another such event, Jones said. “I had never met any of the guys or seen any of these cars before,” he said at the reunion, where he was making new friends and offering to help with planning their next gathering. ■



The 2013 event at the Arizona Biltmore was the third national reunion. The first was held at the GM Design Center in Warren, Michigan in 2004, and the second at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 2008. Several smaller regional Guild reunions have been sponsored by individual Guildsmen. The Smithsonian has a collection of top Guild models, as does the GM Heritage Center in Detroit. Private collectors are snapping up these models at flea markets and on eBay.

