

BY STEVE STATHAM / PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE STATHAM

PEAK PERF

FRANK PETERSON DROVE THIS 1969 OLDSMOBILE TORONADO TO VICTORY AT THE 1970 PIKES PEAK HILLCLIMB, AND HE OWNS THE CAR STILL



PERFORMANCE

TROPHY TIME: Frank Peterson, holding the hardware after winning the Stock Car class at the 1970 Hillclimb. Photo courtesy of Frank Peterson



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TAKE A METAPHORICAL DRILLBIT AND BORE A HOLE THROUGH THE HARD SHELL OF WORK-A-DAY DRUDGERY AND INTO THE SOFT INNER DAYDREAMS OF THE AVERAGE GEARHEAD, AND YOU'LL PROBABLY UNCOVER A PIKES PEAK HILLCLIMB FANTASY.

You know, the one where you're muscling a 500-horsepower beast around gravel-covered curves, up and up the mountain, no guardrails, always at the limits of control, with a trophy waiting at the top with your name on it.

For most gearheads, to experience that even once in the real world would be the butt-puckering thrill of a lifetime. Now imagine doing it annually for 31 years, and you have an insight into Frank Peterson's life.

In one of his best years on the mountain, Peterson, of Morrison, Colorado, drove the 1969 Oldsmobile Toronado shown here to first place in the Stock Car class at the 1970 Hillclimb; but that's just one chapter in the life of a man who first raced Colorado's famous mountain in 1959, and every year thereafter through 1989. In fact, he's been a regular at Pikes Peak long before and



long after those dates. "We went to high school together," said Frank's wife Kaye. "And about our first or second date I went with him and his folks up to Pikes Peak, and that was in 1955."

"We've been to every Pikes Peak together since 1955," Frank said. "We've never missed a race."

One of America's great original races, the first Pikes Peak Hillclimb was flagged in 1916. Although the course and road surface have undergone the occasional

update, the basics of the "Race to the Clouds" remain unchanged. The course begins at slightly over 9,000 feet, and the winding path up the mountain finishes at the 14,110-foot summit, an altitude that leaves both engines and humans gasping for breath.

Pikes Peak is a natural destination for Frank, who has deep family roots in Colorado, and deep roots in the Colorado racing community. Frank's paternal grandfather first arrived in Colorado in 1891 to work in the gold and silver mines. The rest of the clan shortly followed.

For Frank, the itch to tinker with machinery began as a teenager, when his father bought him an electric welder, acetylene torch and drill press so he could build and repair equipment around the family farm. He later used those skills to open his own shop in 1958, specializing in custom machine work,





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welding and crafting items such as roll bars for race cars.

He also started racing, and in 1958 built his first sports car using a 1954 Jaguar chassis, a Corvette engine and a Bocar fiberglass body. He raced at Lookout Mountain near Golden, at SCCA races at Lowry Air Base in Denver, and at Continental Divide Raceway near Castle Rock. Frank began his three-decade run at Pikes Peak in 1959, and that hand-built sports car finished second in class in 1962.

At his shop, he also constructed cars for other competitors, including some very high profile ones. In 1961 Frank helped John Bandimere build a 1961 409 Chevy Stock Car that raced at Pikes Peak, and later helped with the build of a 1964 426 Hemi Plymouth Belvedere, which Nick Sanborn drove to victory on the mountain in 1965, with Frank Peterson and Frank Sanborn as crew chiefs. Starting in 1969, Peterson drove one of the 50 AMX SS drag cars, owned by Bandimere and labeled as "The Frog," at drag strips throughout the Mountain West.

It was in the mid-1960s that Frank and Kaye began a long and fruitful partnership with Oldsmobile. The Toronado looked like a natural for the mountain, with its grippy front-wheel-drive layout and monster motor. "When Oldsmobile started the Toronado in '65 they were doing the pilot cars and everything for it, and they got Bobby Unser to drive one at Pikes Peak in the fall of the year," Frank



said. "They thought at that time maybe they could break the record, but it didn't turn out that way. Of course, Bobby was really busy at that time with his Indy cars and everything, so he recommended that they have Frank and Nick Sanborn and I take that over."

For Frank, it was a pipeline into the factory that boosted him into the top tier of competitors. Frank built two Toronados for Pikes Peak in 1966, and Nick Sanborn won the class that year in one of them. In 1967 Frank built a Toronado for himself to drive, and finished second after sputtering out of gas in the last mile. In 1968, Frank had a hand in three Toronados, and they finished 1-2-3, with Nick Sanborn first, Frank second and Bob Fling third. And then there was our feature car, a '69, that ran in the 1969, '70 and '71 Hillclimbs, including Frank's win in 1970. "I think we had 10 different cars over that period of time," he said.

"I had Oldsmobile sponsorship for 26 years. They used to help us a lot with engineering. Like this car (the '69), they

built the motor and Hydra-Matic built the transmission for it," he said. "They built a final drive for this with 5.12:1 gearing. They had to make those gears, which was quite a process. I think at the time they cost about \$20,000 apiece to make those gears, because I think they only made five sets of them, something like that."

Of course, given the times, it was a quiet kind of sponsorship. "That was at the time GM was supposed to be completely out of racing, but this was kind of all done through (Oldsmobile) Engineering," Frank said. "We didn't really get much money in those days from them, but we'd get a lot of parts, we'd get the cars and a lot of things like that. And then the good thing about having them as a sponsor, all of the tire companies wanted to help, be involved — AC, all the other divisions wanted to be in it. We ended up getting a lot of support that way."

The 455ci V-8 in the '69 Toronado was built with the standard bore and stroke,



but was bolstered with titanium valves, Carrillo rods and Venolia pistons. Hooker custom-built a set of headers for the car. Joe Mondello worked over the heads for the engine, which delivered a pot-boiling 14.5:1 compression ratio, "Pikes Peak, you need all the compression you can get because the air is so thin," Frank said.

There were other factory goodies. "Oldsmobile had some experimental aluminum drums," he said. "We used those in there with sintered metallic linings. That also has a giant radiator. It's really hard to cool cars at Pikes Peak because the air is so thin."

Frank says that in that winning year, the Stock Car class was well populated with factory-favored entrants, and that he was running against 427ci Fords, 454 Chevys and 426 Hemi Plymouths. As Frank recalls it, his winning time was in the 14.56 range — "Which wasn't a real good time for that particular year," he said. "On the way up, about five miles up the road — Pikes Peak is 12½ miles — I hit a big rock and broke the shifter

on the transmission and it was stuck in second gear. So I couldn't really go as fast on the straightaways as you would have liked to. Then it was kind of sluggish coming off the turns, not being able to use low gear. But Pikes Peak, being like it is, everybody else had as much trouble, or more trouble, than I did, I guess."

To take advantage of the Toronado's strengths required a change in driving style. "They were really a neat car to drive," Frank said. "It was quite a bit different than a rear-wheel-drive car, because a rear-wheel-drive car on dirt, normally if you get in trouble, you can just let off, and the car will straighten out. But with these, if you started getting in trouble you had to stand on it to keep the front wheels spinning. If you ever let them start to slide, then you're gonna go off the road for sure. So it took a little while to change your way of driving. When you get in trouble, you immediately want to let off the throttle, and with these you have to just stand on it."

After the Toronado was retired in 1971, it sat in storage for decades. Frank, of course, continued racing other Oldsmobiles. A 1971 4-4-2 followed the Toronado, after which came a 1973 Olds Omega, which Frank raced until 1977. The Omega died a spectacular death that year at the Fall Teller Country Hillclimb at Cripple Creek, when a busted tie rod sent the car flipping end-over-end at 120 mph, right at the finish line. In 1978 Frank switched to the Cutlass bodystyle, running several different cars well into the '80s. His cars arrived at the Peak

WALL OF FAME: Frank Peterson today, at his Lakewood Manufacturing Company shop, surrounded by photos documenting decades of racing. Frank and wife Kaye were inducted into the Colorado Motorsports Hall of Fame in 2008. Their two sons, Brett and Rob, also raced at Pikes Peak, starting in the late 1980s. In 1988, the family became the first to have a father and two sons race at Pikes Peak at the same time, and the sons continued driving after Frank retired from the driver's seat. Frank calculates that the family and shop had a total of 54 cars and trucks entered in the Pikes Peak Hillclimb from 1969 to 1996.

show-ready, and he won several "Best-Appearing Car and Crew" awards. By this time, Frank and Kaye's two sons, Brett and Rob, were heavily involved in the construction of the cars, as pretty much all the engine building, chassis construction, paint and bodywork was done in-house.

The family's operation became even more ambitious in 1986, when Frank decided to build an all-wheel-drive Olds for the Pro Rally Class. Oldsmobile was heavily involved in the build of this car. Saginaw Division built the drive axles, drive shafts, and some inboard-mounted brake parts. McLaren built an Indy-style GM V-6 for the car, which was mounted in the rear, and Frank incorporated magnesium "quick change" differential housings, as used on Indycars. The car used a Kevlar body shell. That Olds was raced through the 1989 season, and was featured in several national magazines, as well as being displayed at the General Motors proving ground, and the SEMA show. Today the Petersons still own it, and it will sit next to the Toronado in the new garage the couple is building.

And as for the Toronado? It sat largely unmoved since the 1970s, until being given fresh paint and stripes in 2009. Gary Riley and Marvin Galbraith from Level One Restoration painted the car, with the lettering handled by Joe Broxterman of Speedway Graphics in Denver. It was put on display at the 2009 Oldsmobile Nationals, where it was the talk of the show.

Remarkably, Frank says that after all that time, the engine started and ran with no drama, the transmission worked fine, and the power steering operated as if no time had passed. Hey, if a car can conquer the mountain, it can surely handle a few decades of slumber. ■