

TRULY A GRAND JOURNEY

by Bill Thiele

The term “Car People” is thrown around loosely. However, “those who are, know those who are, immediately”. Why do we do what we do? Is it a hobby, is it a business? After my first trip to an AACA Grand National Meet, my family and I have a bit of a clue.

The journey with my 1969 Camaro SS started in 1989 when my wife and I were expecting our first child. I had been searching for a muscle car on a budget and my wife Rosemarie, was supportive, yet apprehensive. We found the one owner car, complete with documentation and the odyssey was on. It took incredible friends, personal time, research, 20 years and two body shops, but the car made its debut in 2009. That was when



the goal of making it to a national event was the motivator. Up until that time, our family (now with two boys) had been immersed in baseball at the highest levels. There was also a distraction into NHRA sportsman drag racing. Nevertheless, the passion kept us moving (sometimes slowly) towards the goal. Along the way, Dad, with his own collection, was a big motivator. He had encouraged me to join the AACA South Florida Region Club. What a great group of people, these “car people”. People like Maurice and Jean Hawa continued to stoke the National Event fire.



I took the Camaro to its first National Event in Homestead, FL. Thankfully it was close by and hosted by our club. After the 1st Junior award in 2010 and the 1st Senior in 2011, the class and quality of AACA’s National network was evident. But it was the Grand National event (held only once a year) that I had been hearing so much about. There are so few of these grill designations out there, it had to be special! When an east coast event was announced for June 4, 2016, it was yet

another goal and deadline to set. It was a deadline because, despite the initial quality of the Camaro, time can be a challenge for any restoration.

Once again, I dove in to inspect and evaluate for the standards that our AACA expects. I found a few areas needing attention, but thankfully, nothing major. Nevertheless, it took some special connections and friends (car people) to complete the task. Encouragement from friends, family and fellow club members was once again key.



As the date approached to load up for the drive to Williamsport, PA (home of Little League Baseball), there

were obstacles, some typical and some just cruel. I did not want to make the investment only to be unsuccessful, but I guess that is what competition is all about. If it was easy, the achievement would not be



so valuable. Along the way, there were problems with an item that needed to be re-plated, delivery of inferior items from “big box” restoration suppliers and just plain time constraints. I had blocked off the time and thought I had assembled my entourage, but that too changed. Ultimately, my wife, who had been my backstop along the journey, was the one who stepped up. She now knows how to hook up and load a trailer.

The day we were leaving, all was in jeopardy. The trailer brakes were malfunctioning and the trip through the mountains would be impossible without them. We tried our best to diagnose at the house, even installing a new brake controller. That was not the problem. We made arrangements to stop by two local trailer and restoration shops. Both said it was not the trailer, but something inside the tow vehicle. We scrambled to make it to the GM dealership before the 3 PM deadline for new work. We made it in time, and they were gracious enough to work on the vehicle in the parking lot (the trailer was already loaded and attached). As it turned out, the problem was a combination between a faulty trailer connection and a reset of a relay on the truck. We were finally on our way, our car loaded, but still in need of final detailing. We pushed through the drive and rested as necessary. We saw incredible countryside, incredible farm land and mountains in the Shenandoah Valley. We even had a short time to visit the New Market, VA facility where one of our sons played summer baseball after his appearance in the College World Series.

We pulled into the Pennsylvania College of Technology facility on Friday night with 10 minutes to spare. We parked, disconnected the trailer and headed to the hotel to collapse.

The next morning we woke at 6 AM, quickly ate, and then headed back to the show field to pick up our registration packet, unload the car, detail the car and take our place on the show field among the 800+ cars there to be judged. This is a judging feat that should make any AACA member proud.



The campus was beautiful, and the local Susquehannock Region Club had it all so well organized. We took our place within the confines of our own class, some 35 strong. As the final touches were put on our beloved '69 Camaro, the judges approached. There was a Chief Judge and a team of at least three others. There may have been four, but sometimes, nerves make you less observant. The team was professional and cordial. They meant business, serious business. They were also joined by another gentleman sporting the customary yellow shirt and credentials. The credentials read “National Award Judge”. After examination and some consultation, they proclaimed they had completed their evaluation. Nothing more, nothing less. By 10:30 AM, the exam was completed. There should have been some relief, right? Well, not so much.

I then had a chance to visit some of the other cars. Naturally, I wanted most to see those in my class (36B). Quickly, the recently reduced knot in my stomach reappeared. These cars were all “best of the best”. This was a term we heard over and over during the event.



My wife and I knew we could now only wait until the awards banquet at 7:30PM. We tried to distract ourselves by making friends with other participants and doing some shopping at the AACA trailer. We bought some great shirts, hats and decals. Up until that point, the weather had been “Chamber of Commerce Weather”. But apparently, the club member in charge of that was not as talented as those usually in charge from the South Florida Region Club. As I felt that “ominous” cool breeze, I began

my quick walk to the tow vehicle to retrieve my car cover. About 50 yards from returning to the car, there it was, liquid sunshine. My helper, my partner, my friend was there to carefully cover the car. We then realized that we were wetter than the car. After the showers passed, we re-loaded the car, and headed back to the hotel to collapse again.

As we changed into more presentable evening attire, the magnitude of the evening began to mount. We entered the large hall to see two elegant 20's vintage vehicles on the stage flanked by dignitaries and coveted shimmering hardware.



With some 800 cars, there were nearly as many people and a lengthy event was ahead, right? But then again, this was the AACA, and they were all on task, organized and efficient. As each class was announced, it was painfully evident that this was not a “recognition for participation” event. There would be some who were disappointed. As our class approached, that knot in my stomach became a basketball. Finally, 1st Grand National names were read, and the “Thrill of Victory” was ours to share. We made our way to the grand stage and collected the grill badge and significant “shimmering hardware”.

After all the years, all the hard work and anxiety, was it all “worthwhile”? You bet, and Oh, heck yah! In a flash, you remember all the family, friends, craftsmen, good times and great “Car People” along the journey. It is ironic that a car can bring it all together, even the baseball connections. What a “Truly Grand Journey”.

AACA President Bob Parrish and Bill.