



Alex Xydias - SO-CAL Speed Shop Founder

In the October 1991 issue of American Rodder, the subject of writer Mike Griffin's "Where Are They Now" column was Alex Xydias. In the second-to-last paragraph, Mike said, "Xydias now lives with his wife, Helen, in quiet retirement," With no disrespect to Mike, nothing could be further from the truth.

Born March 22, 1922, in Los Angeles. Alex's first hot rod, a '29 roadster, which he drove to Fairfax High School, was paid for with part-time earnings. By the time he went into the Army Air Corps in 1942, he owned a '34 coupe and a beautifully customized '34 cabriolet which he found in the lower basement garage at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. According to Alex, "During the war, all we talked about was cars and once, when on furlough, a friend took me to a street race out in the San Fernando Valley. I was really surprised at how fast the cars ran and I got the idea to open a speed shop."

On the day of his discharge, March 3, 1946, using some borrowed money, Alex opened the first So-Cal Speed Shop on Olive Avenue in Burbank. "I really struggled to keep it going," says Alex. "Sometimes I made less than \$100 a month but the hard work paid off, and when my one-year lease was up, I moved shop to 1104 South Victory Boulevard in Burbank where I placed a Sears Roebuck prefab two-car garage." The hot rods that bore the So-Cal logo ran in pretty fast company. For example, a V8-60-powered lakester clocked 136-mph in 1948 and So-Cal cars were the first hot rods to go 160, 170, 180 and 190 mph. Mechanix Illustrated magazine voted the So-Cal gang the Number One Racing Team. This early success was quickly ratified when Alex teamed up with legendary auto enthusiast and author Dean Batchelor to develop a purpose-built streamliner. Powered by an Edelbrock-equipped Mercury V8, the liner ran 210 mph in 1950.

While fast cars continued to run under the So-Cal banner, Alex embarked upon another endeavor: documenting auto racing events. He filmed everything from Bonneville to NASCAR, including Pikes Peak, Indy and the 24 Hours of Sebring. "It was hard work," says Alex. "I'd spend hours behind the wheel getting to an event which I'd then have to film, before spending hours printing and editing the film." Meanwhile, the speed equipment business was undergoing many changes. The flathead Ford, in which the So-Cal Speed Shop specialized, was no longer the hot rodder's favorite, and small firms like Alex' were under increasing pressure from the "big boys." The final straw came when Alex' right-hand man at the shop, Keith Baldwin, left. Alex closed the doors in 1961.

Although Alex' film making was doing well, he accepted a position as editor of Petersen Publishing's Car Craft magazine in 1963. He stayed with Petersen 12 1/2 years transferring to Hot Rod Industry News, where he later became publisher. While there, he also served as director of the annual Petersen Trade Show, which eventually became the SEMA (Specialty Equipment Market Association) Show—now the tenth largest trade show in the U.S. After leaving Petersen, Alex went on to work with partner Mickey Thompson organizing the SCORE off-road equipment trade show. They were friends and partners in that hugely successful event for 10 years until Mickey's untimely death. Alex was inducted into the SEMA Hall of Fame in 1982. He was also inducted into the Dry Lakes Hall of Fame and has been honored with lifetime memberships in the SCTA and his old car club the Sidewinders.

In 1996, in his early seventies, he once again climbed behind the wheel of a race car and followed that long black line at Bonneville. Driving John Wolf's Modified Roadster he earned his Competition License at 176 mph. The following year was another banner year. He was selected as one of the Top 100 Most Influential People within the high-performance industry and thus inducted into the Hot Rod Magazine Hall of Fame. Meanwhile, he had been approached by Pete Chapouris who had recently restored Alex'

original belly tank for custodian Bruce Meyer. "Pete was looking for a direction for his new hot rod company and wondered if we could come to some agreement on the use of the So-Cal name," remembers Alex. Canny Alex who had been wise enough to not only retain the rights to his legendary name and logo but also produce a commemorative catalog, hit it off with his fellow Greek and struck a deal. The new SO-CAL Speed Shop (the SO-CAL was now in upper case to differentiate it from the old business) was announced on November 21, 1997, at the NHRA Hot Rod Reunion in Bakersfield, California. Our story doesn't end there though. Alex is continually involved with SO-CAL on a consulting basis. He attends many events where his autograph is always in demand and he has given slide shows of his story from England to Phoenix, Arizona. Not only that but he was recently appointed to the board of the NHRA Museum alongside his friend of 60 years Wally Parks. And, as if that is not enough he's working diligently on transferring all his old motorsports films to video tape so that we can all enjoy them in the comfort of our arm chairs.

Makes you tired just thinking about him, doesn't it.



The West Coast automotive journalist's group, the Motor Press Guild, honors SO-CAL founder Alex Xydias with the Dean Batchelor Award.



Alex Xydias and GM Driver Jim Meneker stand aside the SO-CAL/GM HHR at Bonneville 2005



Article and photos courtesy of SO-CAL HQ