

RICK KOPEC

*He has been interviewing everyone else for 47 years.
It's time he was put on the hot seat and interviewed.*

– Peter Brock and Marty Beaulieu

Carroll Shelby once said of Rick Kopec, “*He is the heart and soul of the Shelby American Automobile Club.*” Maybe so. He was there on Day One and he’s still here today so he has staying-power. That, or he has acquired a bad habit he can’t seem to shake. “*I guess I’m doing what I love. It’s not like work, although it does have some moments I’d like to fast-forward through. But I still find it a challenge; it’s gratifying and rewarding.*”

So, what’s the story behind the story? Kopec can’t remember a time when he wasn’t interested in cars. His family lived in Connecticut where his father was a machinist. Like most people who work to a thousandth of an inch, he was a perfectionist. He saw a car only as a means of transportation and although he religiously maintained each one he owned, he was scornful of anyone who did anything to their car beyond maintaining or cleaning it. “*If it wasn’t on the car when it was built, it isn’t needed,*” he was fond of saying. For someone like young Kopec, who reveled in hot rods, customs and race cars, there was no middle ground. The two worlds collided. Often. When he recalls his father, he remembers never being able to do any-

thing that would satisfy him.

Fortunately, there was Uncle Russ. He was a bona fide car guy. Two small daughters left him without a son who could appreciate his automotive endeavors. But he was a savior for a young man whose love of cars was

long-running Austin Healey Sprite. And they all had things that seemed to thumb their nose at Old Man Kopec: an aoga-horn, a spotlight, a wolf whistle, a Bermuda bell, glass-pack mufflers, a police scanner.

Uncle Russ found an eager companion to accompany him to car shows, gymkhanas and to visit various friends and acquaintances who had interesting vehicles and/or businesses. He always had two or three motorcycles and a boat or two and was always chasing parts for something. There were endless trips to junkyards, repair shops and marinas. Along the way they played a game: identifying the other cars on the road. Eventually Kopec could name every different one, domestic and foreign, built between 1947 and the current year. Every September they went to new car dealerships to see the introductions of the latest models, and once a year they made the pilgrimage to New York City to the International Automobile Show, each returning with a shopping bag full of new car brochures, colorful literature and assorted give-aways.

From the age of twelve on, Kopec was gainfully employed cutting grass in the neighborhood, raking leaves,



often thwarted by an authoritative and controlling father. Uncle Russ was a mechanical genius; he could fix absolutely anything. It seemed he had a different car every time he showed up at the Kopec residence. Never a new one but always something interesting: a Studebaker Hawk, a Crosley Wagon, a DKW, a Mini Cooper, and finally a



doing odd jobs and shoveling snow in the winter. As soon as he turned sixteen he got a part-time job in a local gas station – afternoons, nights and weekends, whatever hours he could get – where his hands-on automotive education continued. One of the regular customers was an older woman with a turquoise and white 1958 Chevy convertible, powered by a 348 cubic-inch engine backed by a three-speed on the column. It became the car he lusted after but it never came up for sale. Instead Uncle Russ convinced him to get a 1959 Volkswagen, a car that probably saved his life. Had he bought the Chevy he almost certainly would have wrapped it around a tree.

As with most first cars, the VW became the center of his life. Russ built a twin-carburetor intake manifold for it. Soon the car sported a pair of Lucas pencil-beam lights and a Sun tachometer. Fights with the Old Man over those were legendary but he was eventually worn down. The rear seat-back was removed and Russ fabricated a single-loop roll bar from two-and-a-half inch-diameter conduit with a rearward brace. The shift lever was shortened by eight inches and a large chrome ball was installed; it made the shifts much snappier. A set of Porsche hubcaps, basically baby moons with-

out the VW logo, were subtle and Pirelli tires added the finishing touch. He envisioned the car as almost-a-Porsche and a 356 Coupe replaced the '58 Chevy as the “someday” car.

When it came time for college, Kopec was accepted at Oklahoma State University and enrolled in its School of Architecture. It was recognized as an excellent program and was about a quarter of the cost of schools like the Rhode Island School of Design, Rensselaer Polytechnical or Brown. The Old Man had read somewhere that less than half of all college students actually graduated with a degree so he offered to pay half – the second half. Young Kopec was on the hook for the first two years. That meant work and save. A good life lesson.

Had he known what being an architect actually entailed he probably would have chosen to study design or graphic arts. OSU turned out to be a miserable experience. Looking back, he was just not ready for college. Not everybody is at that age, but they are prodded along by peer group pressure and optimistic parents. His first semester yielded a .08 grade point average: a complete shut-out was only averted by a weak D in a freehand drawing elective, and that class had been chosen only because it had nude models. As it turned out, it didn't. After weeks of drawing cones, spheres, flowers and bowls of fruit with charcoal on newsprint, Kopec finally summoned up the courage to ask when they would get to the nude models. “Oh, that's Freehand Drawing 102. This is 101,” the professor said, blandly.

He had no aptitude for math, but

the study of architecture was heavy in mathematics. At registration, by the time freshmen were allowed to choose their courses, the only trigonometry class available was a Tuesday/Wednesday/Thursday from 7 to 9 p.m. The first night of class the professor said she knew it was the worst time slot there was, but if anyone maintained perfect attendance they would get the next higher grade. Kopec was buoyed – he couldn't fail. Three weeks into the course he was over his head, scoring three or four points on 25-point quizzes. But he didn't miss a class, even though it might as well have been taught in Greek. When grades came out he was rewarded with an “F.” He questioned the teacher, reminding her that he had not missed a class all semester and should have been given a “D.” She said that she gave him ten points, but added to a 32, a 42 was still an “F.” “If I would have known that,” said Kopec, “I would have stopped coming after the third week.” “Well, to be honest,” the teacher responded, “I didn't know why you continued to come.”

He headed home at Christmas on academic probation to lick his wounds, with plans to return the following September, fired up with a new dose of enthusiasm and fervor. In the intervening eight months he worked three jobs – the 11-7 shift at the manufacturing plant where Uncle Russ worked, repetitively operating punch presses; as a grille-man at a hamburger restaurant during the day; and working at a gas station on weekends. As the oldest of twelve grandchildren and the first one to go to college, it was hardly the return of the prodigal son.



But the music had to be faced; there was no one else to blame.

During the penance he was doing by working like a rented mule, he met Mel Wentzel, the owner of a 289 competition Cobra, naturally, through Uncle Russ. Already a big Cobra fan, Kopec followed them as they raced in the U.S. along with the new GT350s. He could not believe Wentzel actually owned a real Cobra and when he complained that he couldn't get anyone to accompany him to the weekend races to help him, Kopec literally jumped at the chance. He was able to go to races at Bridgehampton, New York; Connellyville, Pennsylvania; Lime Rock, Connecticut; Watkins Glen, New York; Bryar, New Hampshire and Thompson, Connecticut before heading back to Oklahoma in the fall. By that time Wentzel had accumulated enough points to place fourth in the SCCA standings for his division and was invited to the American Road Race of Champions as an alternate – due the fact that third-place finisher Bob Grossman had wrecked his 427 Cobra and would not be competing.

When everyone at OSU was packing up to go home for Thanksgiving recess, Kopec headed west to Los Angeles where he met up with Wentzel and the Cobra. The week at Riverside Raceway at the ARRC included Wentzel's renting a black and gold GT350H onto which Kopec installed a trailer hitch so it could be used as a tow car for the week. He also fashioned a plug for the transmission after he pulled out the speedometer cable. Wentzel was racing on a shoe-string (he was a draftsman, making \$100 a week and living with his parents) and every dollar went into the Cobra. The rental was returned to Hertz a week later with only 76 miles on it. The trip had included a visit to Shelby American where Lew Spencer gave them a tour of the facility. "I wish now that I would have paid more attention and taken more pictures," recalls Kopec wistfully.

The second round at OSU was quicker and less painful. After only a few weeks it became evident that college was not for him so Kopec decided to join the Army at the end of the sec-

ond semester. Room, board and meals were already paid for – there were no refunds – so he fell in with a bunch of other reprobates who had also decided to leave college and go into the military. They were all just marking time. Thus the endless poker games, shooting pool, BS sessions, going to movies and prowling the bars as the clock gradually ticked down.

Kopec saw the military as a way to turn around the shambles he had made of his life, and there was something else: a small war in a far away country called Vietnam was bubbling up. Males in almost every generation have the opportunity to take their measure by participating in combat; to go through a crucible to discover what they are made out of. The draft helped some determine that, but rather than wait to see where the winds of chance blew him, Kopec decided to enlist and chart his own course. He would volunteer for infantry duty in Vietnam – wherever that was. It sounded like an exciting adventure and something like men of the previous generation experienced in World War II.

To make a long story short, in basic training he was offered the opportunity to attend Officer Candidate School. After six months at Ft. Benning, Georgia and graduation he would be commissioned an Infantry Second Lieutenant. And that's exactly what happened. His first assignment was to Ft. Ord, California, on the Monterey Peninsula. "It remains one of the best times of my life," he recalls. On a 30-day leave before heading to Ft. Ord in February of 1968, he bought a new Torino GT fastback, a 302 automatic. He drove it across the country and settled into the life of a young Army lieutenant on his first assignment: footloose, fancy free with money to burn. It was the best of times.

After a night of bar-hopping in Carmel, he and a fellow lieutenant were driving back to the base when he outran the road on a curve and flipped the Torino, end-over-end, totaling it. Fully-lubricated and unbelted, they bounced around the car's interior accumulating only minor scrapes and bruises. God, it is said, takes care of small children and drunks and he was



on duty that night.

A couple of other infantry lieutenants stopped to see if they could help. They took Kopec's passenger, who was totally wasted and out of control, away before the California Highway Patrol arrived. Kopec chewed an entire pack of Blackjack gum in an attempt to conceal the alcohol on his breath. He offered a weak explanation of being cut off by a kid in a 1955 Chevy. The CHP officer bought it and after the car was towed away, gave him a ride to the base hospital to be examined. In the month he owned the car he had put more than 8,000 miles on it and had yet to make the first payment. It was fairly common for junior infantry officers on orders to Vietnam to have a sense of indestructibility and to act accordingly.

After eleven months at Ft. Ord and a month on leave he was soon on his way to Southeast Asia, with a side trip to Ft. Stewart in the Panama Canal Zone to spend two-weeks at the Jungle Operations Training Center – jungle school. He had requested assignment to the 1st Air Cavalry Division, the unit with a reputation for being in the center of the most intense action. He would not be disappointed.

A normal tour for junior lieutenants was six months in the field followed by six months in a staff position in a rear area. Kopec took to his job as a platoon leader so well that they kept him in the field for nine months. It was a dubious acknowledgement of his abilities because the law of averages turns against you after only a few months in combat. In OCS it was drummed into everyone that in a firefight, the average life expectancy of an infantry platoon leader is 30 seconds. The longer you stay in the field, the greater your chances of being in a firefight, so the odds turn against you very quickly.



Call it luck or call it fate, but he survived the twelve months, receiving relatively light wounds on four occasions. The 1st Cav had a policy they called “3 Strikes and You’re Out”: anyone who received three Purple Hearts was automatically reassigned to a job in the rear, out of the line of fire. Like most platoon leaders, Kopec experienced a strong bond with the men in his platoon so when he was wounded a third time in as many months, he instructed his medic not to submit the paperwork so he wouldn’t get a third Purple Heart and could remain with his platoon. There was also a fourth time, a few months after that.

During the time he spent with his infantry company operating in the jungle northwest of Saigon near the Cambodian border, he received two Silver Stars (the nation’s third highest award for gallantry - behind the Medal of Honor and Distinguished Service Cross), two Bronze Stars for valor, two Purple Hearts for wounds received in action, the Air Medal (for 25 helicopter assaults into enemy territory) the Army Commendation medal, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry and what he considers his most prized award, the Combat Infantryman’s Badge. As he says, “*It was an interesting year. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone but I wouldn’t trade it for anything, either.*” He never considered himself a hero; he was just a good combat leader. As his friend Col. David Hackworth said, “*Bravery is being the only one who knows you’re afraid.*”



While Kopec was in the Army, Wentzel sold the Cobra and bought a 1966 GT350. While on leave at Christmas in 1967, he visited Wentzel who gave him a short ride in the Shelby. It was a life-changing experience. He remembers the tightness of the solid-lifter engine and the overwhelming sound of the exhaust; the responsiveness of the car. “*If you ever want to sell this car, let me know,*” he told Wentzel.

The proffer was quickly forgotten when he got back to OCS and then moved on to Fort Ord and finally Vietnam. Two years later, out of the blue a telegram arrived in the jungle. Wentzel was selling the car in order to buy a Ferrari 275 GTB, and was Kopec still interested in the GT350? Of course he was. But how to respond? You couldn’t exactly send a telegram out in the jungle. One of his men was leaving the field to go on R&R in Australia. Kopec gave him his family’s phone number and instructed him to call the Old Man and tell him to with-

draw \$2,000 from his savings account and buy the car from Wentzel. In the field he only needed about \$25 a month for incidentals; the rest of the almost \$600 a month was sent home and deposited. After getting out of the Army and returning to Connecticut, the GT350 was parked on the side of the garage under a car cover, waiting.

A civilian again, with the GT350 as a daily driver, Kopec briefly took a job running the gas station end of a repair garage. The owner happened to have been a race mechanic at Shelby American in the 1960s. Then he got a better-paying job, driving a large truck delivering cement blocks. That September he did two things: he got married and he started college on the GI Bill. He had met Colleen in Monterey while he was at Ford Ord. For their honeymoon they went to Lime Rock on Labor Day for the Formula 5000 race. It was a good indicator of what the next 50 years would be like.

While in school studying Special Education, Kopec worked part-time, then eventually full-time at a factory in the evenings. When he graduated and got a teaching job he actually took a cut in pay. He found a position as a shop teacher in a school for “school-alienated youths.” Think “Welcome Back Kotter” with real guns, knives and drugs. He became something of a legend in the rough and tumble institution. He didn’t take any crap from anyone and no one messed with him.

While in college, he and Colleen lived in a new apartment, owned their own furniture, had two new cars and the Shelby. They took real vacations while his classmates struggled to come up with the money for beer and pizza



When the Shelby/Cragar rims began rusting in 1970, there was no one around who could restore them, so Kopec bead-blasted them and painted them white. The Datsun pick-up was Colleen’s every-day driver.

on weekends. By the time he graduated he had become one of the first members of the fledgling Shelby Owners Association and had begun collecting Cobra and Shelby literature and memorabilia. He wasn't able to attend the first SOA convention because he was transferring to a different college and was moving that weekend. One lease ended and another began on the same day and he wasn't able to postpone the move. But he made the second convention a year later, and the third a year after that. He was hooked.

Along with a handful of other SOA members, he became dissatisfied with the way that club was being managed. Rather than fight the powers that be, they opted to start an entirely new club. If they did a good job, they reasoned, it would be a success; if they didn't, it would deserve to flounder. Enough other SOA members had also become disenchanted so the new Shelby American Automobile Club got off to a strong start. It continued to grow and the SOA shrank proportionally. Within a year it was little more than a regional organization while SAAC was pushing 2,000 members.

During SAAC's first two years Kopec had authored a number of articles for the club magazine and discovered that he enjoyed writing. He realized that while Shelby American's history had been recorded as it was happening, little had been written about that history ten years later. No

one had put it into any kind of a context. He had collected what was considered at the time to be a large amount of written documentation and photos regarding the cars and those who built and raced them. He began researching and in 1978 authored "The Shelby American Guide" which updated the Shelby American story. It was well received. In fact, the first printing sold out and was followed by two additional printings. More photos and more information gathered since the first edition resulted in a second, revised edition four years later.

1979 was a memorable year. Kopec took over the editorship of the club publication "The Marque," retitling it "The Shelby American" and moving it from being a small club magazine towards a more professional journal. He still maintains the helm today. He also took part in the fifth (and what turned out to be the final) running of Brock Yates' infamous Cannonball Baker Sea-to-Shining Sea Memorial Trophy Dash. He co-drove a 1965 GT350, owned by fellow SAAC member Bob Key from Laguna Hills, California, also a Vietnam veteran. They drove from Darien, Connecticut to Redondo Beach. Kopec distinguishing himself in the process by becoming the only Cannonball participant to ever be arrested for a felony – impersonating a police officer in New Jersey. After some nimble explaining it was plea-bargained down to a 75 mph speeding

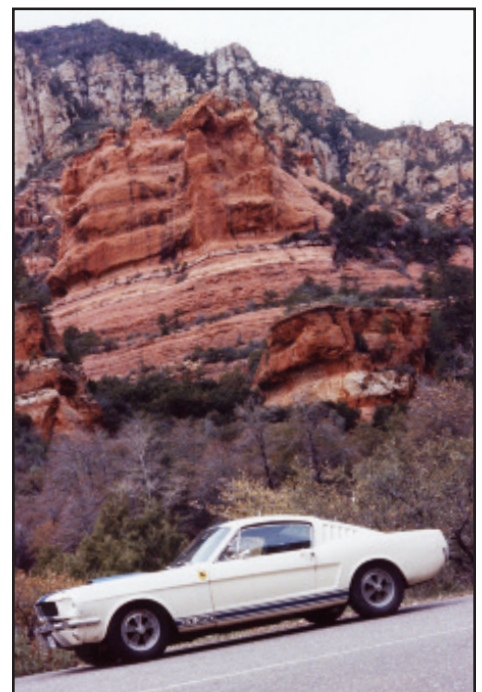
ticket. The escapade cost the pair three hours. Losing a rear wheel cylinder in Albuquerque, New Mexico resulted in more lost time in a truckstop at 4 a.m. They eventually finished in 48 hours and 53 minutes; not bad for driving non-stop coast-to-coast, but nowhere near the winner's time of 32 hours and 51 minutes.

The Kopecs had been attending the Monterey Historics at Laguna Seca since 1976. The event afforded the opportunity to see Cobras, GT350s and GT40s in competition (something not available anywhere else at that time) as well as to revisit the Monterey Peninsula where they had originally met. Kopec developed an interest in vintage racing and had a strong desire to own and race an R-Model, but the cars had become both rare and valuable – two attributes that put them out of reach of the average enthusiast. Then he heard about one that had surfaced in Canada.

Kopec had witnessed numerous instances where someone, upon hearing about an available car, dithered while someone else moved in and grabbed it. Determined not to let that happen to him, he immediately followed up with a phone call to Quebec and arranged for a deposit to hold the car while he could investigate it more thoroughly. The serial number turned out to be legit and the asking price of \$5,000



The start of the Cannonball in April, 1979. The car was 5S176 owned by Bob Key [right].



was not negotiable. The car was quickly purchased and arrangements were made for a Canadian SAAC member to deliver it to Connecticut on a roll-back for \$500 – before the seller came to his senses.

The car was 5R098 and was eventually determined to be the former Essex Wire car owned and raced by Pennsylvanian Ned Owen. Necessary parts were collected and a long-term restoration was begun; the car needed virtually everything. By the time Chris Liebenberg was finished eight years later, it looked exactly like it did when it was raced in 1965. The engine was entrusted to the legendary Gus Zuidema, former performance service manager for Harr Ford. It's unveiling was at SAAC-14 at Pocono in 1989.

Kopec had taken the Skip Barber school at Lime Rock and was ready for his first vintage race there. He and Colleen had recently bought a piece of property and built a house a mile and three-quarters from the track. He entered the car in the VSCCA's exhibition class (passing allowed only on the straights) and finished third behind a GT40 and Doug Richmond's '67 GT350. The GT40 ran away from everyone but Kopec had run in second place for the entire race. After the last corner, with the finish line in sight, he was so relieved to have completed the race without making any dumb mistakes that as soon as he saw the checkered flag he relaxed and took his foot off the gas – whereby Richmond



shot past him to cross the finish line ahead of him. That would never happen again.

Vintage racing the R-Model was a perfect fit. So much so that he continued racing it for the next eighteen consecutive years, doing six or more races a season, plus the conventions and a few miscellaneous demonstration sessions at Lime Rock. He raced the car in over 100 vintage events during that time without acquiring so much as a dent or a scratch and only one DNF. As the value of R-Models increased and fewer of them were brought out to race, Kopec thought it was important to show race fans what an original GT350 factory race car looked and sounded like. For the last few years he competed, it was the only genuine R-Model being vintage raced.

In 1982 he undertook what became

a massive project: a registry of all Cobras and Shelbys, containing the serial number of each car and as much information about each one as could be determined at that time. SAAC's registrars contributed all of their files and the result was a 480-page book that was like nothing else had ever seen before. But it was only the beginning.

As soon as the book was published, Kopec began working on an updated version. This in addition to continuing to put together the club's magazine and helping to plan and orchestrate a national convention every summer. He gave up teaching to work full-time with SAAC. And full-time meant 12 to 16 hours a day, seven days a week. But it caused time to fly by.

The registry established a baseline for information and when owners saw what it contained – and what it did not – they began contributing details on the cars they owned or had owned. Registrars' files expanded accordingly. By 1987 another edition of the World Registry was completed. This time it was printed in hardcover and was 580 pages. It contained not only serial numbers and individual histories of cars but detailed production figures and separate chapters on competition cars and as many other facts about the cars as Kopec could assemble.

Putting together a new registry became an on-going job and ten years later, in 1997, another edition was printed. Again published in hardcover, this one filled 1,335 pages. Any reg-



istry is only a snapshot in time. Cars continue to be discovered, bought and sold, restored, raced or prepared for concours competition. Their history continues to evolve and the registrars keep track of it.

It became obvious that a registry of Cobras and Shelys had to become an on-going project in the club. It also became a good part of what SAAC became known for. It was responsible for the continuing escalation in values of the cars as well as the ability to authenticate originals and unmask fakes. Cobras and Shelys became blue-chip automotive investments because of the SAAC registry.

It took almost ten years to gather information for each new registry. By the time another one was due, Kopec made the decision that it would be broken down into three separate books. Three times the work, but who's keeping track? The first one would be dedicated to Cobras and GT40s. In addition to the original cars, the current crop of aluminum replicas (for lack of a better word) were included: the AC MK IVs, the Kirkham cars, the Shelby-built CSX4000s, 6000s, 7000s, 8000s and 1000s, McCluskey Daytona Coupes and Superformance/Brock Coupes. The purpose of including these cars was not to give them any credibility (which their owners were quick to claim) but to delineate the differences between the original Cobras and anything else. Without identifying these distinctions, in twenty-five or fifty years no one would know the difference and the bloodlines of the genuine Cobras would be diluted to the point where they would become meaningless.

Original GT40s were included in the book, as were continuations of those cars such as Safir MK Vs, Holman MK IIs, Kar Kraft MK IVs and Superformance GT40s. Also included were Ford's 2005-2006 GTs. This volume turned out to be 1,618 pages and was printed in 2008.

A registry of 1965, 1966 and 1967 Shelys was completed in 2011. It was 1,348 pages. It was followed in 2014 by the 1968-1969-1970 Shelby registry which was 1,473 pages. With that,

Kopec retired from the registry business – except that he didn't.

Five years later, in 2019, there was a demand for a new edition of the registry. Even though Kopec had stated that with the publication of the 2014 Registry he had no desire or energy to put together another book, the registrars continued to gather new information. Cars continued to change hands, be restored and continue their histories. The registrars simply did not know how to stop. Against his better judgement he relented and agreed to do just one more.

The newest registries would be downsized and simplified. They would carry only serial number grids and individual histories. A new, updated text was included and color photos were used for the first time. The books would all be separate: the leaf spring chassis Cobras, the coil spring chassis Cobras, and each individual year Shelby. Each book would be completed one at a time, as quickly as possible, so the information in them would be fresh. The first one, 1965 Shelys, was completed at the beginning of 2019 and took only three months. Leaf spring Cobras were next, completed in five months. The 1966 Shelby book took about seven months and was also published in 2019. The coil spring Cobra registry came out in 2020 and was followed by the 1968 Shelby registry.

Along the way, Kopec designed the "Shelby Decade" poster, relying on the artistic talents of Lawrence Gardinier. The large-format poster showed every

Shelby vehicle in chronological order, in side view – 72 cars in all. The club sold more than 2,500 of them. He also designed t-shirts for every convention and teamed up with Gardinier for a series of twelve "Hollywood Movie" posters. He's put together every newsletter the club has ever published, and has also found time to continually lambaste the hapless Howard Pardee.

In 1984 Shelby teamed up with Chrysler and started building four-cylinder, FWD pocket-rockets. Shelby wondered how these new cars would be received by SAAC members and if there was room for them in the club. After careful consideration, Kopec told him it would be a bad idea. Members joined SAAC because they were enthusiastic about Fords. Adding Chryslers into the mix would only dilute SAAC and its publication. Shelby was intent on doing something for the owners of these new cars, so Kopec agreed to start the Shelby Dodge Automobile Club and began publishing *The Shelby Times*. This new club operated for about three years and followed the progress of the Shelby-Chrysler connection, but it lacked the intensity of SAAC. When he started it, Kopec imagined he would get the new club up and running and then another Rick Kopec would emerge from its ranks and take it over. One never did, and when it became impossible to publish two magazines and maintain the same level of quality, Kopec advised Shelby, who agreed to have his public relations people



keep the Shelby Dodge club and magazine going until they could find someone to run it. They were unsuccessful in doing this by the time Shelby Automobiles folded. Kopec entered Shelby-Dodge vehicles in the Brock Yates' "One Lap of America" in 1984, 1985 and 1986.

In 1991 SAAC responded to a demand voiced by its members for a Shelby-based performance Mustang by creating the SAAC MK I. It was based on a 302 Fox platform Mustang. Building a car like Shelby had in 1965 was an exciting and challenging proposition. The car was originally going to be called the "Shelby Mustang" until the SAAC Car Company was informed by Chrysler's legal department that they held a personal services contract with Shelby which prohibited his name from being used on any other car. Before Chrysler's lawyers could swing into action, the car's name was changed to the SAAC MK I. With Ford's assistance the car passed federal emissions requirements, making the SAAC Car Company the fourth largest car company in the U.S. that year. Saleen, Steeda and Roush were not considered actual manufacturers but "tuners" because they used Ford engine configurations which were already emissionized.

Kopec was part of the three-man team that created the SAAC Mustang. He designed the exterior graphics, logos, interior upholstery, all promotional materials, specification sheets and ads. In the two years it was in operation, the SAAC Car Company produced 65 cars. When Ford unveiled a totally new 1993 Mustang, the tiny company lacked the ability to create an entirely new SAAC model so it ceased operations.



Over the years Kopec has authored numerous articles on Cobras and Shelybs for various automotive publications and served as a fact-checker on others. He has appeared on several video productions as a Shelby and Cobra expert, and has been interviewed on radio talk shows.

Lest anyone get the idea that he is one-dimensional and interested only

in Cobras and Shelybs, he also finds time to go to the pistol range where he is proficient in large-caliber hand guns, preferring the .45 cal. M1911 Colt and the Smith & Wesson Model 29 .44 Magnum. He owns several of each.

He has participated in a number of expeditions searching for Bigfoot, mostly in remote areas of Northern California and upstate New York. While he has yet to actually encounter a Sasquatch, he has seen their footprints and heard their howls at night. He is convinced that they do exist.

For a 50th birthday present to himself in 1997 he bought a Harley-Davidson Sportster and taught himself to ride it. He had wanted a Sportster since high school but there never seemed to be a "right time." Once he pulled the trigger, what followed were a half-dozen trips to the week-long Sturgis rally in South Dakota and



Bike Week in Daytona. When Harley came out with their new V-Rod, after a test ride he could not help himself. He had to have one. It had incredible performance, like 0-60 in 3.5 seconds – not that he ever rode it that fast. His favorite rides were through the picturesque John Ford scenery of the Southwest, from Monument Valley in Utah to the area surrounding the Grand Canyon in Northern Arizona. John Wayne country.

Being involved with Shelby enthusiasm over the past fifty years has been an incredible journey. Kopec says he was dragged along, rather than charting its course. *“I was always so busy that I never had time to look down the road to see where Shelby enthusiasm was headed. But I was usually the first one to get there.”*

Peter Brock and Marty Beaulieu (the current owner of 5R098 and 6S118, the only two Shelybs Kopec has owned) cornered Kopec right after SAAC-46 and conducted this interview via Zoom.

BROCK: How did SAAC evolve?

KOPEC: The Shelby Owners Association was started in 1972. It was the first attempt for any kind of national organization for Shelby owners. The Cobra Club was started at about the same time but it was aimed specifically at Cobra owners and attracted about 200 members. The SOA had about 750 members by its first year. It was something all new and everyone in the club was pretty excited about it – and happy to be a member. But after about a year the SOA’s leadership had demonstrated what a poor job they were doing and dissatisfaction within the ranks began to grow. The leaders of the SOA were not the result of any kind of election. They were owners who had structured the club in such a way that they retained complete control. Going into the third year, a handful of us decided that rather than get involved in a political battle which we probably couldn’t win, we would just break away and start our own club. Four of us got together in a restaurant after the SOA’s third convention in Wichita, Kansas and

laid the groundwork for starting a new Shelby club: Royal Krieger, Austin Craig, Bob Key and myself. (Ken Eber was not at that convention but he played a pivotal role in formulating the new club.) Following this meeting we all went home and began work on the new club. Except Bob Key. He chose not to take an active role, and he never made it clear why. I suspect he was not able or not willing to make the time commitment starting a new organization would entail. If he had, he would have been one of the club’s five founders, but as it worked out there were only four. We rolled up our sleeves and began. We each had specific ideas about how the new club would be run, and we were in agreement on most of them. One thing that was fresh in my mind, and which I felt very strongly about, coming out of the Wichita convention, was that everyone should be invited to attend the convention’s after-dinner program regardless of whether they had purchased a dinner ticket or not. With the SOA, only those who had dinner tickets were allowed to sit through the evening program. Anyone without a ticket was ushered out. I distinctly recall one SOA member, a young man named Rex Meyers, was attending the event on a shoestring and to save money, ate dinner at McDonalds rather than buy a dinner ticket. He was not allowed into the ballroom after dinner and I remember seeing his hand sticking out of the swinging door to the kitchen, holding a small tape recorder, so he could capture Carroll Shelby’s after-dinner comments. I vowed that would never happen in our club. And it never has.

BEAULIEU: How long did you four continue to operate the club?

KOPEC: By 1980 it was down to just Eber and myself. Royal Krieger and Austin Craig were no longer involved due to differences of opinion regarding club policy. By then we were determined not to let politics become involved with the running of the club. The energy that took was better spent in positive directions – to make the club better. With only two of us, politics never entered into anything be-

cause there was always too much to do. We never reached a time where we could just sit back and relax, look around and discuss the long term aspects of the club. There was always more to do that needed to be done – right now. I was always busy. I never had a five-year or ten-year plan for what I wanted SAAC to accomplish. It was just a matter of putting one foot in front of the other to keep going. The more I did, the more I wanted to do, and the more there was to do.

BEAULIEU: When did you decide to stop teaching and work for the club full-time?

KOPEC: I remember that time frame distinctly, because I was attending graduate school at night and had one course left before I got my Masters. But I was beginning to find teaching less and less satisfying (maybe I was getting burned-out because of the difficult students I had).

BROCK: Where were you teaching?

KOPEC: I was at a small vocational school in Norwalk, Connecticut which was described as a program for “school-alienated youths.” We had about 300 kids; most from single-parent homes; a lot were minorities, some could be violent and drug use was frequent. Often they were given the choice by a judge of going there or to reform school. Rhoades Scholars they weren’t. I got my degree in Special Education but by virtue of the fact that I had worked in machine shops full-time while I was in college, I was also cross-certified as an industrial arts instructor. My background was a perfect fit for this job and I actually started the day after I graduated – while my peers were sending out resumes and interviewing for positions.

BEAULIEU: A degree in Special Ed and experience in working with delinquents certainly gave you a lot of experience in running SAAC.

KOPEC: Yes, I would have to say that my experience with mental retardation has given me a lot of insight into dealing with some club members.

BEAULIEU: So, you stopped teaching in about 1982?

KOPEC: Yes, when school was out in June of 1982, so was I. With SAAC, I

no longer needed an advanced degree. I found that writing Shelby articles and operating the club became increasingly more satisfying. I knew I wouldn't make a ton of money with SAAC, but I enjoyed the work so much that it was a good trade-off. I've never regretted it.

BROCK: Over the years you've exhibited a wonderful sense of humor, with the jokes about Howard Pardee and everything. It's been a thing with the club that's followed it all the way, and your personality has shown through. And we've all enjoyed it so much.

KOPEC: I don't think there's any question that I've exposed club members to my sense of humor, and I won't offer any apologies for that. I'm too old to apologize now anyway, even if I was of a mind to. But I've tried never to take myself – or the club – too seriously. I try to keep in mind that, for its members, SAAC is a diversion from everyday life – from jobs and family and other serious aspects. It is meant to provide amusement and enjoyment to accompany an interest in these cars

and their history. If it wasn't fun there wouldn't be too many members, so I try to keep it fun without over-doing it. Despite being the club's leader, I've tried to maintain the perspective of the average member, rather than some VIP who expects special treatment and travels in exclusive circles. But above all, I've tried to make participation in the club enjoyable and fun.

BROCK: Absolutely. That's what I think has kept everybody interested. It's not just the cars, it's sort of a mutual feeling of guys with cars who all enjoy this stuff. And we know about the way you've tormented poor Howard Pardee over the years.

KOPEC: And with good reason. I mean that. At first I was just being cute, making up dummy classified ads with Howard's name on them to get a laugh. He wouldn't know about them until he saw them in print. A proper practical joke. But in doing so, I realized that I was creating three types of members: those who knew the ads were spoofs but who thought Howard was responsible; those who knew they

were spoofs and knew I was responsible; and those who didn't know they were jokes and took them seriously. I kept it up and over time the number of people who didn't know they were jokes dwindled until they were primarily new members, who would eventually catch on. It was sort of like an initiation. More and more people realized that Howard was an innocent victim. It provided a minor piece of entertainment within the club that was non-automotive related and it established an insider/outsider perspective. It's important in a club for everyone to feel like an insider; that's what membership is. But it's also essential not to make it too easy for anyone, so that being an insider acquires value. The Pardee jokes serve a useful purpose in making the club just a little different from other clubs.

BROCK: You're lucky Howard is such a good sport.

KOPEC: Actually, Howard is lucky he's such a good sport. If he wasn't I don't think I would treat him any differently. But as I say, "*He takes a lick-*



Kopec began wearing a white cowboy hat in 2007 when Shelby filed a law suit against him. He thought that Shelby's black cowboy hat made a statement – bad guys always wore black – so wearing a white hat sent a pretty clear message.

ing and keeps on ticking.” If it wasn’t him it would be someone else, and nobody else in the club wants to find themselves with a bull’s eye on their back, so they don’t rush to his defense. **BEAULIEU:** There’s a definite difference between SAAC and most other car clubs.

BROCK: If you look at the Ferrari clubs, for example, it’s more of a social thing. They definitely have a pecking order, with some people having more status than others. The real Ferrari guys, the ones who love the old V-12s for what they were, were sort of put off by the new era, gold-chain Ferrari guys who came along more recently and own newer cars. It wasn’t a matter of what they cost; they appreciated the history, who drove what car at what race and how it finished. The Corvette thing is so broad; there is such a difference in the demographics of Corvette owners, whether it’s the country club guys, the racers or the car show guys. You could have four different clubs; I think there are that many now. People have different interests and the clubs reflect that. Our club has always had something special that Rick has infused into it, that has always made it so enjoyable. You open the magazine and see not only the serious stuff, but some fun stuff as well.

BEAULIEU: That’s a good summary. SAAC is a lot more fun than other clubs. Most of the members take the cars seriously but don’t take themselves seriously.

KOPEC: I am very aware that a club should be fun, first and foremost. Every time someone picks up a magazine or a newsletter or they go to a convention, they do it with the intention of having fun. It shouldn’t be too serious. It’s not like they’re reading a treatise or a dryball engineering paper written by some pointy-headed expert. I try to write in a conversational style, like you’re talking with somebody. I receive some articles contributed by members that are very formal. Lots of “nevertheless,” “heretofore,” “thence.” Who talks like that? When someone sends me an article that requires some heavy editing, when it’s finished it goes under the byline “by John Smith,” not “by John Smith and Rick

Kopec.” After I finish with it it always sounds better than when I got it, and no one ever complains. But that’s what I see as the job of an editor. Most of the time, when a member submits an article, they know they are only getting one bite of the apple. They’re not writing something in every issue. They want it to be perfect and it’s not uncommon for me to send them the finished article and they read it over several times, each time suggesting minute changes. And I almost always include them – even when some don’t make much difference to the narrative – because I realize they see this as their big chance to look good. I’ve been editing *The Shelby American* for forty-two years now, and the more writing and editing I’ve done, the better I’ve gotten at it. And the better I feel about what I’ve done. I’m really happy with my work now. When I go back and read some of the things that I wrote twenty or thirty years ago I’m a little uncomfortable with them, because all I see are things that I would now change.

BROCK: We all learn so much over time and especially when you are constantly doing it. I’m absolutely amazed at the amount of material you are able to include in every issue.

KOPEC: Well, there is so much out there, it’s just a matter of finding the right place for it in the magazine. Some stuff just comes to me; it’s sent in by members. And some stuff you have to dig deep for, but it’s there if you know where to look.

BEAULIEU: Ben Franklin once said, in “Poor Richard’s Almanac,” “*If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading, or do things worth writing.*” This is a good question for you guys, since you’ve each done both. Not many people have done even one, but you guys have each done both. What are the best things you’ve written and done?

KOPEC: I guess the thing I’ve written which I think is worth reading are the remembrances about some of the people who have passed away: Dan Gurney, Phil Remington, Brock Yates, Lew Spencer, Alan Bolte, Tom Yeager. I got to know these guys and although they

were all getting on in years, when I heard of their passing it was still something of a shock. I wanted to write something about what they had accomplished and what they meant to me. Once in a while I go back and reread them and I’m happy with what I’ve written. I like to think I’ve given them a proper send-off. As for the one thing I’ve done that’s worth writing about, that’s much more difficult. I raced my R-Model for eighteen consecutive years, and taken as a whole, that’s something that would be hard to duplicate. Fifty years ago I spent a year in Vietnam, and looking back on that experience, it would make a hell of a movie. And the third thing I can think of is having a successful marriage for fifty-one years (and counting). My wife has been incredibly supportive of everything I’ve done; she’s my partner in every sense of the word, my best friend and my muse. I wouldn’t want to have to choose between the three.

BROCK: I’d have to say that my book on the Daytonas, which was really a history of the early days at Shelby American, is worth reading. It was written in 1995 and it still holds up well. It still irks me that George Stauffer, who functioned as the publisher, never allowed me to re-read the manuscript after it was supposedly “edited” by someone who was paid a lot of money and did a really poor job. Race records in the back were screwed up with transposed dates and names. There was never an index, which I wanted, and there should have been more about the guys in the shop who did all of the hard work but that was edited out. My name has become attached to the Daytonas, but in truth it was the crew that was responsible for the cars’ success. Had Shelby not personally screwed up that pit stop that caused the car’s fire in its first race, the Daytona would have won the race easily and scored the vital points to win the World Championship that first year. He was his own worst enemy. As far as having done something worth writing about, I’m most proud of my team’s design of the world’s best foot-launched aircraft and using them to win the World’s Cross

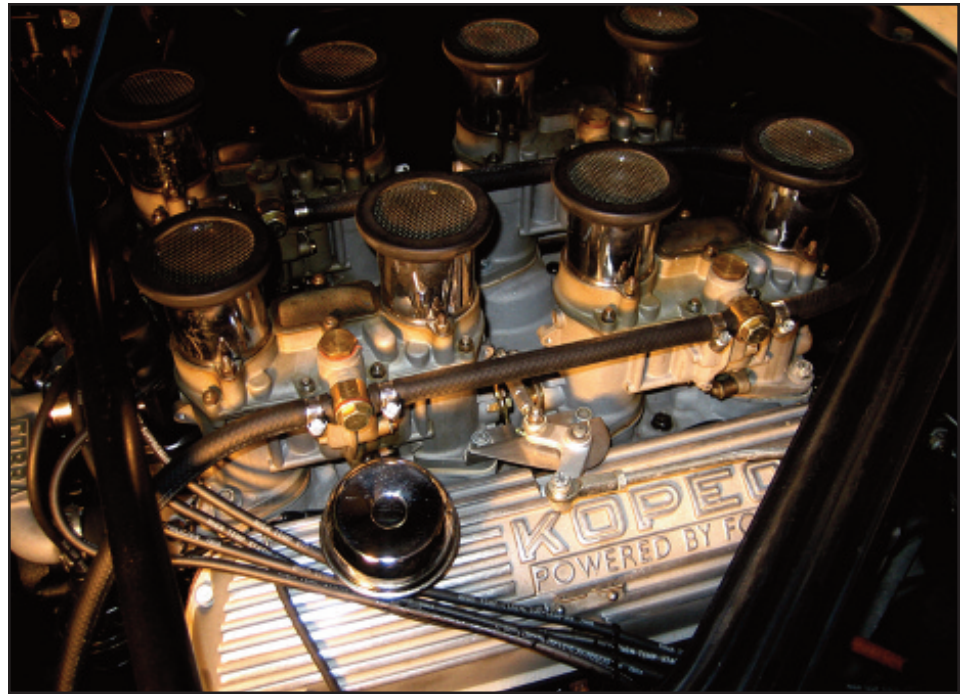
Country Hang-Gliding Championship six years in a row. This is probably the world's most unknown sport as it occurs at thousands of feet in altitude and covers hundreds of miles. It's still the most exhilarating and exciting sport I've ever been involved with.

BEAULIEU: Over the years you also have acquired something of a reputation for playing April Fools pranks.

KOPEC: I've been pulling pranks since high school; at places where I worked and in the Army. SAAC just provides me with a large captive audience.

BEAULIEU: My all-time favorite was the bogus "New York Times" page with the article about Chuck Schumer wanting to tax all classic and race cars at 10% of their actual value.

KOPEC: Ah yes. The day I learned what "going viral" really meant. I've always liked April Fools Day and most years I included something when the magazine or a newsletter was printed on or around that date. With the advent of the Internet that became almost too easy. E-blasts could be sent out on the precise day and you were guaranteed to catch a few people napping. Back in 2011, I created what turned out to be the mother of all April Fools pranks. I dummied up a front page of the "New York Times" with a fictitious article about liberal Senator Chuck Schumer of New York proposing a bill in the Senate to tax the owners of all collector cars, race cars, special interest cars and hot rods at a rate of 10% of the cars' actual value (not some phoney appraised value), every year. I included in the article every hot-button issue I could think of that would incense these owners. Most race cars (some worth hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars) were unregistered and, therefore, untaxed. Each car would have to be listed on the owner's 1040 tax form (opening the door to tax evasion charges for non-compliance). The IRS would enlist enthusiast clubs and use their records to track down cars and owners through the registries they maintained. Additionally, Schumer was quoted as accusing all owners of being "rich" and not paying their fair share of taxes on their assets. They owned



these fancy cars on the backs of the poor. I fashioned an eblast to SAAC members and decided to lead with the Schumer article because beginning with one of the other fake articles I included would quickly tip everyone off that it was all just a joke. One described an electric-powered '68 Shelby with a large propeller mounted on the roll bar. The forward motion of the car would cause the propeller to spin, generating power to a electric motor which would run the car. It was close to a perpetual-motion machine except that to get it started you had to coast downhill until the propeller produced enough juice to get the motor running. So you had to park at the top of a hill before you shut it off. The recreated page of the "NY Times" was dated March 28, 2011 (April 1st would have been too much of a tip-off) and took up three columns. The fourth column had an article about a scientific study revealing that polka dancers in the

Pittsburgh area had drastically lower rates of colon cancer than non-dancers. This article was so far out that even someone from another planet would have realized it was a joke. And by extension, so was the Schumer article that preceded it. Or so I thought. When I was writing it I envisioned a humorous piece that would essentially stay inside the club. Holy Cow, was I wrong! Many people thought it was true. Some responded by sending me nasty emails, accusing me of potentially providing Schumer with ideas for generating revenue that he would otherwise not have thought of on his own. Or they just cut-and-pasted it and sent it to others on their email list – outside of SAAC. The result was a firestorm which instantaneously spread across the country, thanks to email. It went everywhere. I got nasty email responses from people in clubs I never knew existed. Some were quick to pass on the bad news to others, who, in turn, passed it on to yet others. It spread like a grass fire on a windy day. Once it was taken out of context – once the Schumer article was separated from the rest of the bogus newspaper page and from the rest of the four-page newsletter itself – identifying it as a hoax became much more difficult. Successful hoaxes have some basis of truth – or what people perceive is the truth. On some level, to



"All the News
That's Fit To Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

One hundred years ago today there were 100 horses for every automobile in this country.

Volume XCIV Number 243

Monday March 28, 2011

\$1.50 in the five boroughs; \$2.50 everywhere else

Senator Eyes Collector Cars as Revenue Source

*Auto Enthusiasts who
dodge taxes are
in Schumer's crosshairs*

Washington, D.C. - AP. Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY) held a press conference today in the Capitol's rotunda and stated that he is in the process of drafting a bill that will create a federal tax on all collector, antique, historic, special interest, hot rods and race cars.

"This country is operating at a huge budget deficit," said Senator Schumer, "thanks to the previous administration's failure to seek new sources of revenue. We can no longer continue to just raise the taxes we already have. We are reaching the point of diminishing returns. We must find new sources of revenue."

"There are more than one million collector cars in this country," said Schumer, "and many of them are unregistered and untaxed. These vehicles represent sometimes sizeable assets which often appreciate from sale to sale. Much of these capital gains remain untaxed. It's about time these collectors—all of whom are rich—begin to pay their fair share. I've never heard of a poor person owning a Corvette, Ferrari, Deussenberg or Cobra."

Citing the results of this year's automobile auctions in Scottsdale, Arizona as an example, where reported sales were in the tens of millions of dollars, Schumer said, "We're not talking about rusty old clunkers, here. Some of these cars represent the pinnacle of automotive history. Collectors who buy and sell them often do so privately. Some transactions are in cash and others include trades. All of these are under the Internal Revenue Service's radar. Well, that will soon end."

Each state has different laws



"Collecting classic cars is the province of the haves—not the have nots. Those who own these cars can afford a hefty tax on that ownership," said Senator Charles Schumer. *"It's time they paid their fair share."*

and requirements for collector cars. Those which tax them as personal property often use outdated values. An owner can pay taxes on a car the state determines is worth \$5,000 and then turn around and sell it for \$100,000 or more. Until now, all of this has been the purview of each state. Schumer's law will sidestep all state laws by levying a federal tax in addition to anything the individual states do. This new federal tax will be similar to the present federal tax on gasoline, which is in addition to whatever a state assesses.

Part of the Schumer law includes the IRS opening up a special department to deal with collector cars. Values will be calculated annually and owners will be required to list all cars they own on their 1040 tax form. Because not all vehicles are registered, and thus may not be known to the individual states' motor vehicles departments—especially race cars which are not driven on public roads—the IRS will make use of the existing network of individual collector car enthusiast organizations across the country.

Many of these car clubs maintain accurate registries which detail each car by its vehicle identification number and present or last known owner and their location. Assembling an all-

inclusive federal database in conjunction with these registries will be one of the first steps in implementing the new law. Once the database of owners is cross-referenced with an annual index of current collector car values, every collector or race car in the country can be taxed at a fair rate. Initially, Schumer says, it will be 10% but that would rise depending on the type of car, number produced and condition.

"Collectors are willing to pay more for certain cars," said Schumer, "because of their history or the small number that were produced. These factors increase a vehicle's worth to buyers, so why should these cars not be taxed at a higher rate? It's no different than our current progressive income tax rate."

It is estimated that an annual 10% tax on all collector cars presently owned by American taxpayers—at their prevailing market value—would be more than \$250,000,000. In four years the coffers of the federal government could be fattened by a billion dollars. "That's only a conservative estimate," said Schumer. "Nobody knows exactly how many collector cars are out there. But by this time next year, WE will know. Owners of these cars will finally have to pay up. Their free ride—on the backs of the poor—is over."

Polka Dancers have lower rates of Colon Cancer

*Scientists at a loss
to explain test results*

Pittsburgh, PA - Reuters. Scientists from the University of Pittsburgh recently released the results of a ten-year study conducted on area polka dancers. They found that those who danced as little as once a week, for no more than two hours at a time, had greatly reduced levels of cancer of the colon when compared to a control group made up of a identical number of test subjects with similar genders and ages. Dr. Walter Whittaker, the lead scientist, said they were continuing to review the results but did not, as yet, have an explanation for the large discrepancy. Non-polka dancers had a rate of colon cancer that was 47% higher than those who danced every week. "Some of the results could be explained by diet, and we are centering our investigation on this aspect. Kielbasa, stuffed cabbage and beet soup could be the answer, but before anyone starts recommending them, we need to look a little farther into this."

Not long after the results were released, Rev. Jesse Jackson went before a bank of microphones in Atlanta, GA to question why no African-Americans were included in the Pittsburgh study. "This is blatant discrimination," said Jackson "This is the kind of thing we marched in Selma, Alabama to keep from happening. Why did they purposely leave blacks out of this survey? Were they afraid we would out-dance them?"

A spokesman for the university attempted, by telephone, to explain to Rev. Jackson that they had not been able to find one single African-American in all of Pittsburgh who knew what a polka was, much less who knew how to dance the polka. Despite this explanation, Jackson still issued a four-page list of demands, which

be successful a hoax has to make sense. Judging from the responses I received, most people believed that Senator Schumer was all too willing to level a hefty tax on the owners of collector cars. In fact, when some people were advised that the whole thing was a hoax, they responded, "Yeah, well, I wouldn't put it past him anyway." Threads on other forums contained a paste-up of the article, followed by a half dozen angry rants. Then someone would post, "Uh guys — check the date... April Fools?" The next post following that would continue the rant, as if they either didn't catch the caveat or didn't care because it just felt good to vent. A large number of people were paranoid and were afraid that the bogus article would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. They imagined it would be seen by Senator Schumer, who would then use it as a blueprint to propose its enactment into law. Schumer's office received dozens and dozens of calls and emails by car-owning hobbyists who expressed outrage that their vehicles would suddenly be subjected to high taxes. Of course Schumer's people knew nothing about it. The story was even carried on the "Drudge Report" for about an hour, until it was discovered to be a hoax and then was dropped. I knew I had really struck a nerve when I got the following email on Monday, April 4th: "Rick: I'm Steve McDonald, SEMA's VP of Government Affairs. First of all, congratulations on a successful April Fool's Day prank. Through your creativity and the power of the Internet, the Schumer article is now being circulated in the halls of Congress. If you have a moment, I'd like to have a quick conversation about how together we might deal with the aftermath of the prank..." I had never considered any aftermath. I was apprehensive but I called Steve, who turned out to be a very affable guy. Which was probably why he had the job. He suggested I promptly send out an e-mail to SAAC members advising them it was all a joke, which I did. When I sent him a copy he immediately forwarded it to 50,000 addresses on his email list. One of the people most incensed by the "NY

Times" article was Don Garlits. Steve said Garlits had called him with his hair on fire. He had a museum full of assets that would be subject to Schumer's annual taxes. After my email explanation, it was almost over. Almost. On April 6th I received an email from a reporter from "The New York Times." "The New York Times would like to write a story about the April Fool's Day spoof article your organization produced, about how Senator Charles Schumer of New York had proposed a tax on collector cars. The article, which resembled a "New York Times" article, was good enough that it convinced many car enthusiasts that it was accurate. Many of those who read it called a major car trade group to complain. (Since then, I know you have sent out an e-mail explaining that the article was fake; I have a copy of it.) Our story about that will be small but fun. Can I speak with you, or somebody else from SAAC for my story today?" I called the number he left and when he answered the phone, the first thing I said was, "How do I know you are really from the New York Times?" He got a good laugh out of that. He began asking questions typical of a reporter and I wondered if this would turn out to be a hit piece, trying to make me look like the villain in a James Bond movie or something at the other end of the spectrum — a prankster on "Jackass" whose stink bomb had exploded in his own kitchen. The finished article was printed in the newspaper's Friday, April 8th edition and turned out to be somewhere in between. The reporting was good-natured and it accurately reflected what had happened, without either malice or hyperbole. With that I retired from creating April Fools pranks. It's nice to quit at a high point.

BEAULIEU: You and the club were associated with Carroll Shelby for over thirty-five years, so you've probably known him as well as anybody. What was your relationship with him like?

KOPEC: Over the years the relationship evolved. I first met him in 1975 at the third SOA convention in Wichita, Kansas. And I was like anyone who meets a celebrity and, dare I say hero, for the first time. I was tongue-tied



Meeting Shelby in August, 1975 at the SOA Wichita convention.

and felt very small in his presence. We shook hands and the obligatory picture was taken but I'm sure I was one of a few hundred of forgettable faces in the crowd that day. As SAAC grew in those early years I occasionally had the opportunity to talk with Shelby, mostly about historical details. I was still a little intimidated by him and could not believe he was calling me, but eventually I got over that. He still seemed a little surprised about being the center of attention to our group, still not understanding the level of appreciation car owners had for him.

BROCK: In the late 1970s Shelby had a rebirth, so to speak. He realized that more and more people were interested in the cars he had produced in the 1960s, and he was more and more popular because of them. And it was because of the attention that the club brought to the cars.

KOPEC: Yes, although we didn't set out, from the beginning, to make the cars more popular or more valuable. And we didn't set out to make Shelby more famous — but as more people became interested in his cars that kept him in the spotlight. It was just a happy coincidence for him. We just liked these cars, gathering information on them and spreading it within the club. Some of it got outside the club and the general automotive public became aware of the cars. While I'd like to say it was all part of a grand plan, the truth is it wasn't. Most of it was coincidence.

BEAULIEU: But it was conscious that you set up a barrier between Shelby and the club, because eventually he saw the club as a mechanism he could benefit from. As opposed to the club being a mechanism merely for

the enjoyment of the cars. People appreciate that now, but only in hindsight. They might not have appreciated it at the time.

BROCK: The interesting thing to me, as an insider, is that Shelby never really valued the Cobras at all. They were just a stepping stone to get to the money at Ford. Those cars were not Shelby's creation. They were the creation of all the guys in the shop that loved what they were doing. He benefitted from all of that but he never took advantage of it. He never really understood what he had and what these guys had all created and what everybody else appreciated. He moved on and got into Ford, then the club started up and everyone began celebrating the Cobras and everything these guys did. And he just didn't understand it. He never really got what he had created by starting this operation; it was really just to get money from Ford. It wasn't about building a better car or anything like that. If you look back, the Scarabs that were created by the same basic team for Lance Reventlow in 1957 were far better cars than any early Cobra. They would blow the doors off any Cobra. But the fact that Lance didn't want to continue and here comes Carroll a bit later and builds this hot rod AC, an antique car

that wasn't ever close to what Lance had built years earlier, in 1957. It wasn't until 1963 that the Cobras really started getting publicity. But it was really what Lance had done and what Phil Remington had done and what Warren Olson had done; all the cool guys that had worked at TRACO and built all that stuff. And Carroll never really appreciated it.

KOPEC: I think the Cobra became a burden, in a sense, for Shelby because everything he did in his life after it was measured against it. Any car that he was associated with or any project he was involved with was always compared to the Cobra. And by then the Cobra had become an icon; it was greater than it ever was in real life. It had a halo over it and Shelby was always measured against that. And he always came up short. No matter what project he did, it was never as good as the Cobra. Everything from the Viper to the CSX4000 to the Series 1. They were never as good. But he kept moving on. He just never had the right people again.

BROCK: He didn't appreciate them when he had them or kept them on. Like Phil Remington. Phil went to work for Dan and stayed there for the rest of his life. Dan was a straight-up guy and treated him really well. Car-

roll never did that with any of his people. He would tell them he would do things for them but never followed through. He really let so many people down. People who did business with him ended up getting hurt. Those who stayed on the periphery and didn't put a lot of money into his projects were able to maintain a good friendship but anyone who was involved with him financially, in the end, always got hurt badly.

BEAULIEU: When did you sense that things were changing in your relationship with Shelby?

KOPEC: In the late 1970s and 1980s I made it a point to visit Southern California once or twice every year and always included visits to Shelby's facility in Gardena. Sometimes he was there and sometimes he wasn't. That's when I got to know Lew Spencer and Al Dowd really well and actually found their company more enjoyable than Shelby's. I could be myself with them. In Shelby's company I always felt that I had to be on my best behavior; that he was always observing me and silently judging me. As the club matured, through the 1990s and into 2000, Shelby began to realize the power of his name (if not his reputation) in our universe and in the automotive world in general. I think he also realized that SAAC had become the repository of the history of these cars. I began getting requests from him (although they were really more like polite commands) to write letters to various magazine editors to explain things Shelby had said or done because he didn't like the way they sounded, or he thought they put him in a less-than-favorable light. Initially I felt complimented that he would ask me to do this, but I later realized Shelby was merely using the stature of the club to justify or vindicate something he had said or done and now had second thoughts. On one such occasion he had me corresponding with Brian Angliss, ostensibly to justify his right to build Cobras with yet-to-be-used "original" serial numbers while Angliss was also building new cars and using these same serial numbers. Our back-and-forth correspondence be-



6S118 on the Texas 1000 Rally in 1999. A thousand miles in Texas is like a hundred miles in Connecticut.

came increasingly disagreeable, to the point where Angliss said I was well-meaning but misguided, much like a simple-minded moron. Angliss and Shelby eventually ended up in a lawsuit and I realized that Shelby had been using me so he could stay in the background, much like someone who makes snowballs and then hands them to someone else to throw. When Shelby became immersed in several copyright and trademark litigations with various replica Cobra manufacturers he asked me to tutor his copyright lawyer – who knew nothing about cars – on the various Shelby brand names, logos and cars. This led to an interesting association with the lawyer which gave me a peek behind Shelby's curtain. During this time I also developed a good friendship with Frank Zizzo, a SAAC member, Shelby and Cobra owner and practicing Southern California psychologist ("The Shelby Doc") who was also able to get to know Shelby. He provided some clinical background which explained some of Shelby's behaviors. For instance, Shelby had grown up during the depression and at one time had gone without shoes. In the closet of the apartment he maintained in his Gardena office, he had over a hundred pairs of shoes of all kinds. Zizzo explained that having gone shoeless at one time, Shelby was subconsciously afraid of not having any shoes again.

It was all very interesting and enabled me to see Shelby in a different context than anyone else was able to view him. I maintained my distance from his various projects and business dealings – and he always seemed to have several working at any one time – because I didn't want him to use me as a shill to further his interests. He could be manipulative and sometimes I had to pretend to be something of a rube in order to side-step involvement in his schemes. In the end, around 2007, our relationship became unworkable. He wanted SAAC's approval and assistance in a project to build a series of continuation 1967, 1968 and 1969 Shelys and include them in the registry. We balked on the grounds that they weren't original and should not be treated as such. He wasn't used to hearing someone tell him "No." He responded with a lawsuit, made up from whole cloth, based on some infraction of the 21-page trademark agreement we had signed with him in order to keep using his name on the club. He expected SAAC to quickly fold at the threat of a lawsuit and then comply with his wishes. He was surprised and then angry when we fought him. After two unpleasant years of legal wrangling we reached a mutually agreeable understanding (the details of which both parties agreed not to disclose) and we basically each went on our separate ways. I've since said that you

can't really say you know Carroll Shelby until he sues you. If he had a conscience I was unable to detect it.

BEAULIEU: A huge body of work has come out of the club. What do you think will happen to it with the next generation?

KOPEC: I think it's valuable enough that it will be maintained. The registries were originally based on curiosity. When someone had a car, they were surprised when they encountered another one like it. I bought my '66 Shelby in 1969 and I can remember driving to Watkins Glen, in October 1970, to the U.S. Grand Prix. I parked it in an open field next to another '66 Shelby. I remember being really surprised to find another one there. You rarely saw another Shelby on the road. In those days if you were driving a sports car – an MG or Porsche or TR3 – if you saw another one on the road coming at you, you flashed your lights or waved.

BROCK: I remember that very well.

KOPEC: If you saw another Shelby coming at you, not only would you wave but you would turn around, chase them down for three or four miles, pull them over and talk to them. At our first conventions, not much was known about the cars except the one that you had. You rarely saw another one but here there were dozens parked side by side. You could look out your hotel window at 3 a.m. and see groups of people in the parking lot, crawling around under the cars with flashlights, comparing them. That's when the registries really started. Not only putting names with serial numbers but picking out similarities and differences between cars. We learned about running production changes and how a small manufacturer deals with running out of parts and replaces them with ones that were a little different. All of this was unknown back then, and it was fascinating, and guys like Howard Pardee, Jeff Burgy and Ned Scudder were keeping track of this stuff on their own. It started based on curiosity but quickly led to a compulsion. The more information they had, the more they tried to get. The club gave them a means to acquire that information and share it with a large



The Kopecs drove across the country to attend Peter Brock's surprise 80th birthday party at the Galpin Auto Sports museum in North Hills, California. It's been ten years since Kopec was on an airplane, saying he refuses to be treated like a terrorist by his own government. If he can't drive, he won't go. So much for another visit to Hawaii.



“I’ve always been surprised that people who are the most paranoid about their race cars being stolen seem to be the first ones to advertise what’s inside of their enclosed trailers by emblazoning “Shelby GT500” or “427 Cobra” on the side or rear. On my trailer I wanted to repel people rather than attract them. “New England Pit Bull Rehabilitation Center” seemed to do just that. “Keep Back 50 Feet – Unrehabilitated Pit Bulls” and “CAUTION: keep hands and face away from cages” gave people something to think about.

number of people. The registries have turned into one of the major elements of the club. Keeping track of the cars, their owners and their history has become very important. It wasn’t so important back in the very beginning but now it is. It brings a lot of new owners into the club and certainly helps the cars hold their value.

BROCK: Look at the change that occurred when interest in Shelby Mustangs took off. It totally changed the club. You had far more people who wanted be in the club and the focus changed as these people determined what was important.

KOPEC: The club continues to evolve. As the values of Shelbys continue to rise and some people are priced out of the market, they can now buy the new generation of cars, built from 2007 to today. Most people don’t realize it, but there have been more than 60,000 New Generation Shelbys built. That’s why there will never be a registry for those cars. There are just too many to keep track of.

BROCK: There has been such a change from what the club originally started out as almost 50 years ago and what it’s morphed into today.

BEAULIEU: What do you think the club will look like in ten or twenty

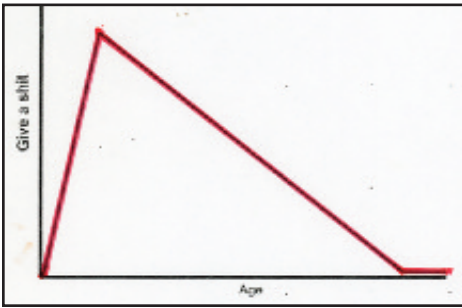
years, as a new generation of owners find the cars.

KOPEC: I can’t see into the future. There will always be the original registries to fall back on. That information won’t change and people will always be able to refer to it. The individual history of the cars keeps growing as the cars age, change owners, are entered in shows, used in certain ways, are restored, their colors changed, etc. Those details are not as important as how the cars were originally built or left the factory or dealership, or how they were used by their first owners. But they are still significant and I’m sure somebody will be of

a mind to continue to keep track of them. A void doesn’t last very long; sooner or later someone will move in to fill it. I only hope that whoever does is as honest as the current registrars. My worst fear, in the back of my mind, is that someone taking over as registrar turns out to be untrustworthy and dishonest. That would destroy all of the hard work and dedication the current registrars have become known for and make the whole concept of a registry meaningless.

BEAULIEU: People who know you well would say that not only are you very genuine, thoughtful and an excellent storyteller, but you are very un-





concerned with the opinions of others. That's certainly helped in all of your interactions with the various personalities that make up the club. I've even seen a graph on the bulletin board in your office that highlights your approach to life. Where did your sense of not caring (too much) what other people think come from?

KOPEC: I guess I've always considered myself a leader as opposed to a follower. I think that may have been cemented in Vietnam. When confronted with a situation where you must make a decision immediately, you do it and then you live with it. You can't wait around to get opinions or build a consensus. I've always remembered Theodore Roosevelt's "The Man in the Arena." speech. *"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who*



One of the five oil paintings Kopec did in the late 1970s, when he had time for such diversions. This one is 36" x 48"

at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat." There were times in my life when I felt Roosevelt was speaking directly to me. Another one of my favorite quotes is from Babe Ruth: *"The loudest boos always come from the cheapest seats."* I've never had much use for critics.

BEAULIEU: You're a very creative guy: writer, painter (not many people know that), graphic designer. You always seem to have a lot of irons in the fire. What are you working on now?

KOPEC: For the last ten years I've been writing a book about my experiences in the Army and in Vietnam. It started from a recommendation by a VA psychologist I was seeing about some PTSD issues I was having. She suggested that I put some of my thoughts on paper as a way of getting them out. I was skeptical when I began. I didn't want to sound like a weak crybaby. But the more I remembered things, the more I was able to write about them. I didn't think anybody else would be interested in it, but I showed some drafts to a few close friends and they encouraged me to continue. I don't know if I'm close to finishing, but I'm happy with what I have so far. A friend has volunteered to edit it when I'm ready and he has some contacts in the publishing business so it may eventually get published. Since returning from Vietnam

I've read almost every book written about that war. Most were written by veterans, for veterans, and they gloss over some terms which most vets know and take for granted. The vast majority of Americans were not in Vietnam or in the military, and they have no idea what some of these things are, beyond hearing them mentioned in movies or on television. My book is a memoir based on details and events I remember but it also contains detailed descriptions of military terms and concepts that will help someone without any experience better understand what went on. It provides context.

BEAULIEU: What's the title of the book?

KOPEC: "Bad Moon Rising." On the night of May 12, 1969 that Creedence Clearwater song was the last thing I heard before I fell asleep. A few hours later I was awakened by incoming rockets and mortars and by about 500 North Vietnamese infantry attacking our firebase. They attempted to overrun it but we beat them back. Every time I hear that song I'm brought back to that night. It's a forever thing.

BEAULIEU: Carroll Shelby never expected the community of Cobra and Shelby Mustang owners and enthusiasts to become what it did. Did you?

KOPEC: Not in my wildest dreams. I had no way of telling where it would go or how it would evolve and I'm as pleasantly surprised as anyone at what it's currently become. I'm just happy to have played a role in it.

