Mel Gross

by Tom Endy

A giant in the Model A hobby, Mel Gross, passed away Sunday January 12, 2014. A great many Model A hobbyist knew Mel, especially those residing in Southern California. For many years Mel operated a cottage industry offering quality rebuilt Model A parts. His specialty was F-100 steering box conversions and cast iron brake drums.

Mel worked his whole adult life for the Pep Boys organization and was personally acquainted with Manny, Moe, and Jack. Among his various assignments, which included sales, store management, and property acquisition, he also learned how to go about locating businesses that could produce machined parts for his cottage industry.

The Model A hobby was very personal to Mel. He was a member of the Santa Anita A's in Arcadia, California for many years. Mel was also a recipient of the coveted MAFCA Bill Reeder award for the best technical article of the year to appear in the Restorer magazine.

Mel was also a very generous man. Each year he would make a very generous donation of Model A parts for the raffle at the annual Pancake Breakfast hosted by the Orange County Model A Ford Club.

For a number of years I was tasked with negotiating the purchase of items for raffle prizes from Mel. There really wasn't any negotiation to it. I would call Mel and tell him I had a check from the club for $500, made out to him, and would he put together a package of parts for that amount. Sometime later he would call and tell me he had the package ready. I would drive over to his house in Montebello and find Mel sitting on his favorite stool in his garage that always seemed to be open for business.

Sitting by the door was a stack of boxed Model A parts with an easy retail value of about $1,000. This is what he had made ready in exchange for the $500 check I had. Sitting next to the boxes was another stack of boxes of about the same value that he was personally donating to the club for the raffle.

Hangin' With Pep Boys: For Mel Gross, Love is a Manny (Moe and Jack)-Splendored Thing

Exerps quoted from an article by Antonio Oliva| L.A. Times Staff Writter, November 24,1995

"Since the days he raced fellow high school students in a 1946 Plymouth up and down Whittier Boulevard through his East L.A. neighborhood, Mel Gross has lived and breathed Southland's car culture. At 17, Mel cleaned the bathrooms of an Eastside Pep Boys store. He became a salesman, then a store manager, and then at 34 began a 16-year stint as personal assistant to the late Moe Strauss, the mustachioed Pep Boys co-founder caricatured in the company's "Manny, Moe and Jack" logo with a dandy's smile and seashell ears. Today, Gross oversees a whole network of maintenance operations on this side of the country for the Philadelphia-based auto parts chain.

"I've seen it all," Mel says. "Fender skirts, curb scrapers, spinner hubcaps, dice on the rearview mirror. A lot of this stuff comes and goes. One guy gets a wolf whistle [which emulates a wolf call to pretty pedestrians] and, before you know it, everyone else wants one."

"I've always had an arrangement with the folks who run this company," he says. "If you don't like what I'm doing, I'll leave."' Mel grew close to Moe Strauss during countless hours on the road with him and watched Moe die slowly of lung cancer in 1982. Showcases of rare Pep Boys ads, signs, banners and miniature statues of Manny, Moe, and Jack are hung in several rooms of Gross' house. "They wanted to throw a lot of this stuff away, so I just took it all home. My wife thinks I'm crazy," he says. "There are only two of those in existence," he says, zealously motioning to a gold-leaf Pep Boys sign from the 1930s hanging near his pool table."

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Mel's Model A cottage industry will be carried on by his son Randy, who lives in Huntington Beach, California 714-292-8660.