

History of the Northern Illinois Street Rod Association

Its formation and the early years.

In 1963 four guys pooled their resources together to buy a shop at 8412 Railroad Avenue in Ridgefield, Illinois where they started a business to work on hot rods. The original times they actually worked were Thursday evenings and Sundays since they all had regular jobs and this was an excuse to play with cars.

Until 1968 those four; Charles Richard (Dick) Wirth, Bill Hayes, Bob Keith and Mike Slepcezich built their business, did quite a bit of hot rodding on their own and formed a rather loose knit car club when they decided they should start a club that wasn't thick with the politics of the other clubs of the day. Barring several names around they collectively came up with "The Northern Illinois Street Rod Association".

By 1968 others had joined in the group; Ron "Butch" Kirchner, Dale Anderson, Don Iverson, Gene Lawrence, Roger Dahl and John Brown, all hot rodders at heart and each would contribute to the world of hot rodding in general and in practice.

The first officers of the club were:

- Gene Lawrence-President
- Bob Keith-Vice President
- Mike Slepcevich-Secretary
- Roger Dahl-Treasurer
- Ron "Butch" Kirchner-Member at Large

They added the member at large position so there would never be a situation where a resolution could be kept hanging.

The first car the club built was a 1947 Ford Delivery with a 265 V-8, stick shift and is still roaming the streets today.

In 1970, Dick Wirth bought out the interests of his three partners to create Wirth Fabrication and Machine.

An affiliate group based in Woodstock; The Road Gents, was always part of the activities of the Northern Illinois Street Rod Association going on cruises, hosting events including one of the earliest in the area an annual show and swap meet named; "Street Rod Event", the first ones were in Ridgefield, then they outgrew that and moved to the Crystal Lake shopping center across from Country Donut and then to the fairgrounds in 1970 in Woodstock which was the largest event of its kind in the area long before Skip's and others.

These two were folded into the now defunct "Illinois Street Rod Association" which was a conglomeration of clubs, mainly NILSRA and its' associates.

Others joined the NILSRA, Tom Swinger from Woodstock who owned and drove the first Harley to run in the 8's, Mike Brock from Silver Lake who built a Milner Deuce coupe clone, Bill Schmidt, Al Heinke and Larry Judkins.

In 1970 they decided to caravan to the first annual Rod & Custom Street Rod Nationals being held in Peoria during August 14, 15 and 16. It was during this event that the club decided to become an officially registered non-profit organization with the state of Illinois and on 7 December, 1972 the articles of incorporation were approved by the State of Illinois. The original purpose of the club as presented to the State was:

- To promote interest in various types of street rod activity.
- To create good fellowship and sportsmanship among the members.
- To uphold the principles of good government.
- To conduct club operations and activities in such a manner as to bring about a clearer understanding on the part of the public, press and law enforcement agencies of organized street rod activities.
- To promote safety in automobile maintenance and operation.

It is also when they wrote the clubs constitution and by-laws which remain virtually unchanged to today. They continued these annual treks to the Nationals until the mid-1980's.

Some of the more noteworthy highlights of the members were: Larry Judkins became Bill O'Rourke's (Roadster Shop in Elgin and also a member of NILSRA) first employee as his painter, additionally Larry wrote several articles for hot rod magazines including doing a story on Bob Keith's' famous candy apple red 1939 Ford (while it was still in primer), John Brown created and sold the first commercial fiberglass Deuce roadster in 1971 that was correct down to the iconic reveal that previous versions lacked, Dick Wirth designed and built his own fuel injection system (and still has it today-2013).

Other early members were Phil Kenyon, Mike Stamer and Bill Schmidt. Both Phil and Mike are members today (2013).

One noteworthy tidbit is the fact that most of the early members either still have their original rides or are actively involved in the sport.

Another notable member was Tony Zizzo of Top Alcohol dragster fame, who, after one of the meetings announced he was going racing and asked if anyone wanted to join him and "have some fun", apparently no one accepted his offer and Tony went on to become one of the top alcohol dragster drivers of all time. Tony was the UDRA's top supercharged alcohol dragster champion in 1984, '85, '86 and '89 and was the first supercharged alcohol dragster to run 6:20 at over 220.7 mph.

The club was not without community involvement, from safety inspections for the public at large to charitable contributions to; The Northern Illinois Food Bank, The Special Olympics, Elgin Food Bank, Elgin Animal Shelter and the "Shop with a Cop" program for kids in addition to providing assistance to motorists found in need at the side of the road and cleaning off snow and ice covered traffic control signs in the winter.

The club is not without social activities, over the years there have been rod runs, picnics, roller skating, bowling and attending concerts.

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In 1983 with Tom O'Reilly at the helm as president of the club, NILSRA took over the reins of the Fiesta Days Car Show in McHenry and has successfully run it ever since.

The club has always sought ways to maintain an open approach to the sport of street rodding with respect to those permitted in the club. Early on membership was open only to those who owned cars built prior to 1948 and modified from stock, this migrated into cars of American manufacture and at least 25 years old and modified. Today finds the club accepting vehicles that are powered by an American engine without the restriction of being 25 years old. This change now permits those who own the new breed of pony cars (Mustangs, Camaros, Challengers, et al) to join the club.

Robert A. Stock President NILSRA 2013