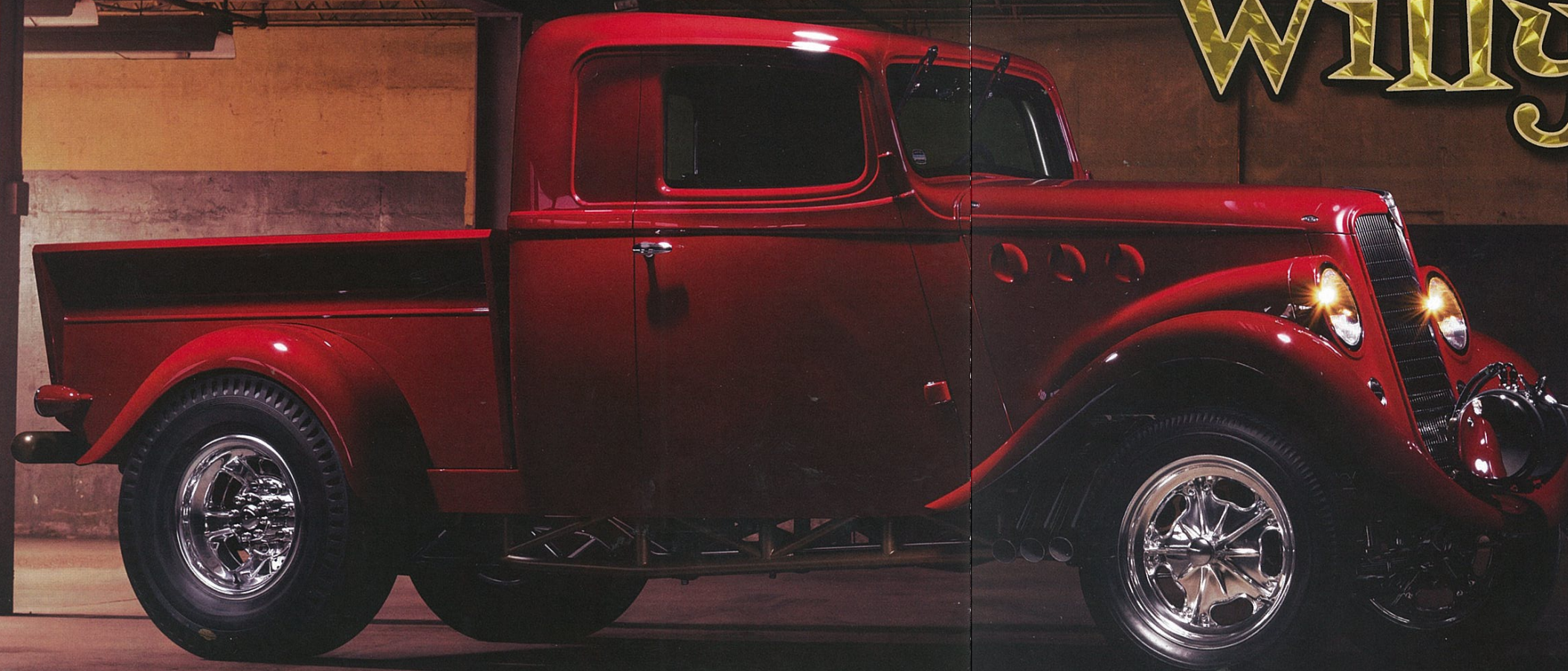


Slick Willy





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Completed Photography by: **Jeremy Cliff**

If drag racers ran the joint, this COVID thing would have been solved a long time ago. Think way back to the '50s—long before Funnycars and Pro Mod—when the NHRA was still in its infancy. Without the luxury of modern tire compounds, four-link suspension, adjustable shocks, driveshaft sensors and traction control systems, maximizing weight transfer was one of the most effective tools in getting the tires to hook coming out of the hole. What racers lacked in technology they made up for in spades with creativity by jacking up the front suspension way up high, and lightening the front end with straight axles, zoomies, extreme engine set back, and deleted bumpers and front brakes.

This unrelenting, singular focus on speed spawned machines that did the impossible, running single-digit e.t.'s despite the rudimentary tools of the era. Whether the gasser formula was applied to a Willys, Austin, Anglia or Tri-Five Chevy, the irreverent spirit and unbridled ingenuity they represented left an indelible mark on hot rodding that continues to this day. The growing popularity of present-day nostalgia drag racing classes prove the point. Long story short, gassers were cool then and they're even cooler now. With the once impervious line between race cars and show cars starting to crumble, what would a gasser look like if built to today's exacting standards?

Whether he intended to or not, that's precisely the question Ron Ernsberger wound up answering with his 1936 Willys Model 77. As a kid who grew up in Ohio during drag racing's golden years, he naturally did his own share of straight-line racing in his youth, both at the dragstrip and at Bonneville. A lifetime of hard work and success in his business ventures afforded Ron the opportunity to amass an impressive collection of gassers over the years. After Brian Limberg at The Tinman's Garage whet Ron's appetite with a '41 Willys truck the two collaborated on several years ago, he suddenly had an itch to build the ultimate gasser to take the throne as the crown jewel of his collection.

Interestingly, the starting point for the build was the least likely of candidates. "Ron brought us a '36 Willys Model 77 that was sitting on a right-hand drive postal truck chassis. It was so badly cobbled together that we threw away the frame," Brian remembers. "The overall design of the truck looked like an

Tinman replaced the factory center-hinged hood with a custom one-piece lid that attaches with Dzus fasteners. Although the original hood sides had four portholes (per side), Brian removed one of them to better match the three throttle stocks and header primaries on each side of the truck. The reverse curve on the hood side has been reshaped and extended rearward for additional engine clearance.



afterthought and was very rudimentary. There wasn't much left on the car that was actually usable. No one put much care into it at all and the build just wasn't executed very well."

That's where Brian stepped in to transform the pile into a pile of gold. Anyone unfamiliar with Brian's work needs to check out @tin_mans_garage on Instagram. The metal-shaping ability Brian and his crew put on display is simply phenomenal, running the gamut from scratch-built aluminum drag bike fenders to spare tire wells for an Auburn to a custom GT40 front end. But why stop there? When The Tinman's Garage decides to build a complete car, all bets are off.

The unicorn under the hood set the direction for the entire build. From afar, it looks like a Arias hemi V-8. Look closer, and you'll notice just six throttle stacks and header primaries. So what gives? There seem to be more questions than answers surrounding these motors, and rumors and old wives tales abound, but two things are certain: They're extremely rare and extremely potent. "Rumor has it that Arias was experimenting with ways to get as much power out of a V-6 as with a V-8 to find some kind of loophole in a rulebook. He cut the back two cylinders off one of his V-8s to make a 498 cubic inch hemi V-6," says Brian. "Ron said all along that he had a very special engine set aside for this build. Only five of these engines were ever built. They have aluminum blocks and hemi heads, and make over 700 horsepower and torque."

With that much grunt channeled through such a small chassis, the Willys needed some serious fortification. "Knowing the size of the engine and the kind of power and torque it put out, we built custom zoomies with 2.5-inch primaries. That's the same size as the exhaust system on most hot rods," Brian quips. "Everything had to be oversized and enlarged. That's why we went with a





Words on paper simply cannot adequately describe the level of stunning fabrication and detail in the Willys' chassis. It's a shame that only bits and pieces of it are visible with the body attached. Tinman custom built the entire suspension as well. Wehrli Custom Fabrication provided the powdercoating.

Dana 70 rearend and eight-lug axles along with custom backing plates and hubs. Everything was designed from scratch around the engine."

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Before Brian turned his attention to reinforcing the driveline, he had to address the chassis. No pedestrian framersails here. The custom frame is built entirely from thin wall .083-inch chrome-moly tubing. "To keep the frame looking well-proportioned and aesthetically correct, we made it taller. Everything's been double notched," Brian reports. The endless web of bracing looks more like something destined for interplanetary travel than a dragstrip. "We have over 2,000 hours into just the frame and chassis. The frame looks very beefy but is very light at just 270 pounds. We custom built the front tube axle, springs and ladder bars. Many of the parts were manually machined."

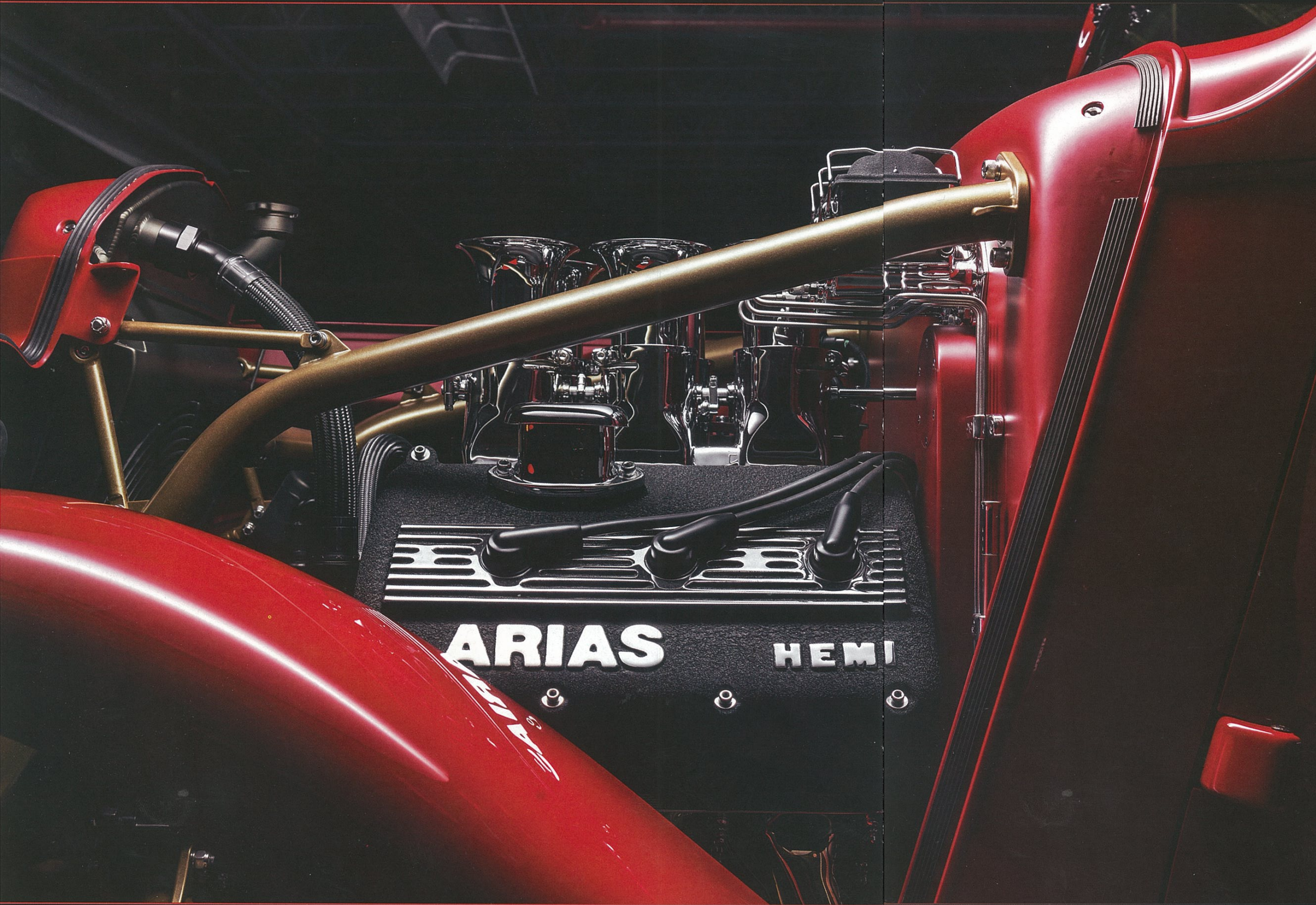
With the primary mechanical items complete, it was time to reshape the raggedy body. "We redesigned the cab completely from the windshield rearward. The doors and cowl were retained but that's it," explains Brian. "We shaped the back of the cab from foam and sanded it down to get the radius right, making it look like how the factory should have done it originally. We then recreated the shape of the foam in metal by hammering out panels from scratch. When we got to the bed, it was in such poor condition that we couldn't reuse any of it. We used the original bed specs to remake it with a more contemporary vibe by adding double bead details that go down the side of the bed and into the back."

From the factory, the Model 77 is one happy little dude. The



Freshening up an ultra-rare unicorn of a motor can be intimidating, but Steve Lanius at Missile Engineered Racing Components was up to the challenge. The Hilborn mechanical injection system has been converted to EFI. Modern coil-on-plug ignition provides spark to the hemi chambers, but 3D-printed covers mimic the look of the original spark plug boots. Advanced Plated performed all the chrome work.





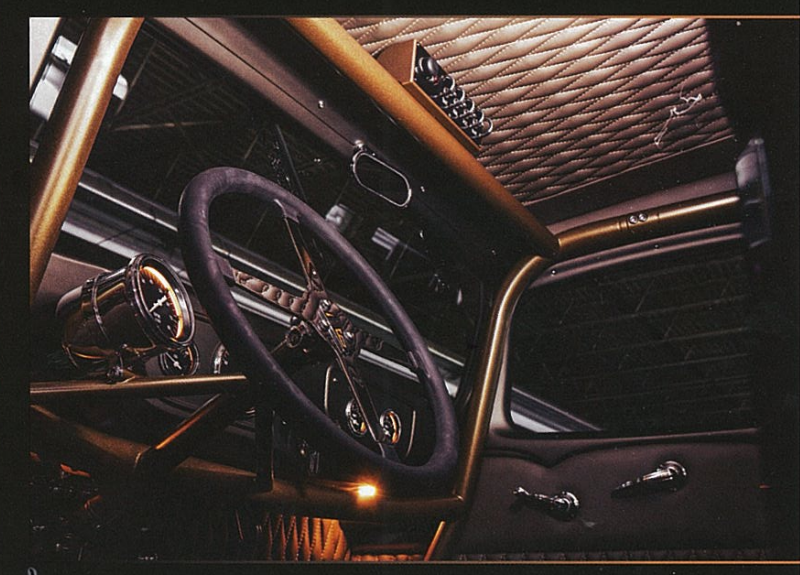
The chrome lettering and raised ribs contrast sharply against the signature Arias black wrinkle finish on the valve covers. To achieve this affect, Tinman first chromed the valve covers, masked off the letters and ribs, then heated it in an oven to cure the wrinkle finish. The tricky bit was setting the heat at a relatively low temperature to prevent the chrome from discoloring. The process took 60-80 hours.

broad, sweeping radius of its fenders and chin give it a distinct smile. That's fine for a production car, but it doesn't exactly look the part of a gasser that means business. Fortunately, cosmetic surgery is Tinman's specialty. "We sliced and diced the front end every which way imaginable. There's only 30 percent of the original sheetmetal remaining," he reports. "We modified the front of the fenders and the chin section beneath the grille to create a smoother radius. The fenders were also narrowed to move them one inch closer to the body. We also tilted the trailing edge of the fenders upward 2-3 inches and blended it into the cowl."

Instead of smiling at onlookers, the Willys' now smirks confidently at its peers, as if it's daring them to line up against it at a stoplight. Nevertheless, its first forum of competition was at the 2020 Grand National Roadster Show, where it beat all challengers to win the recently revamped Al Slonker Memorial Award. And there you have it, folks, a machine that captures the essence of the fabled gasser era and drag racing's glory years built to the same exacting standards as today's finest show cars. Who wants a piece? **wh**

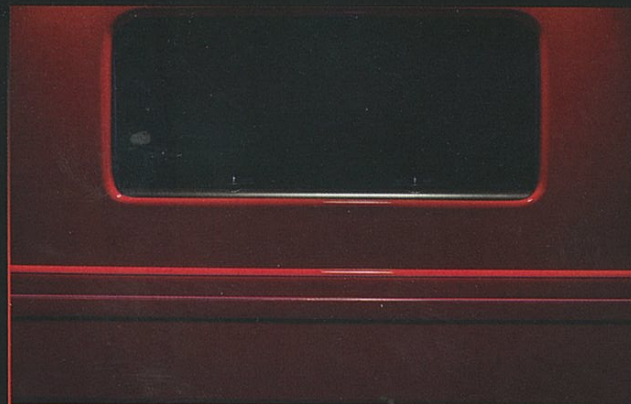
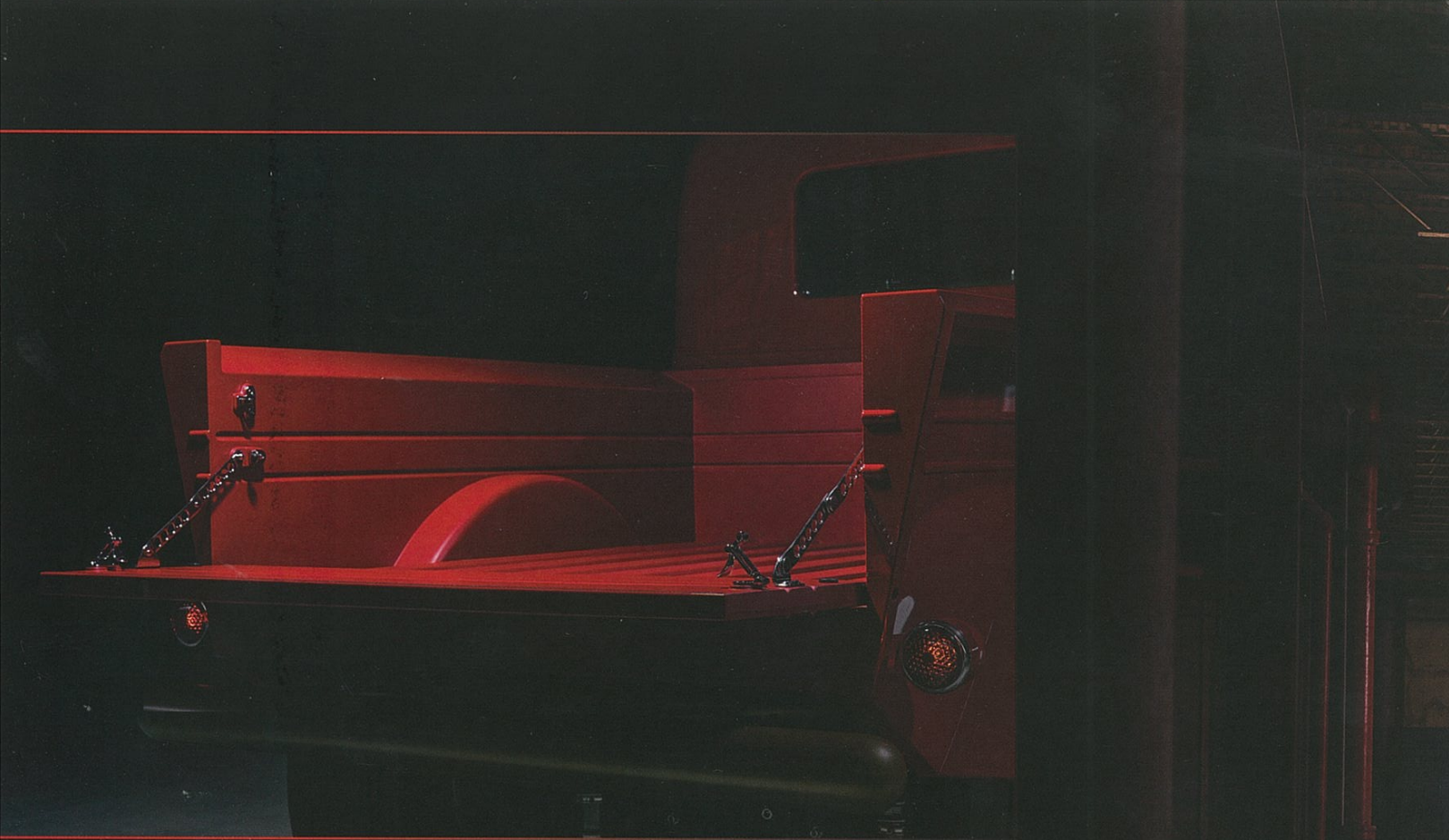
Fine tuning a lot of small details makes a big difference. The hood has been de-crowned and reworked near the grille to improve fit and finish. The streamlined Willys emblem is now recessed into the hood. The custom, waterjet-cut grille (by Kirco Precision Tool) has rectangular openings like the original but features slots to accommodate the Moon tank. The headlight rings are custom machined pieces.





Schober's Custom Hot Rod Interiors laid out a beautiful cabin that pays tribute to the original but is finished out to show car quality. The reworked stock dash houses Classic Instruments gauges and one-off knobs for the turn signals and wipers. The overhead switch panel looks vintage but is a custom machined piece. Datum Tool and Manufacturing performed the CNC work.

As with the frame, the custom roll cage is drool-worthy in execution. The tubing is index bent and rotated just right to fit very tightly against the A-pillar, roof and along the bottom of the dash. Supports for the Schroeder sprint car steering wheel are built into the roll cage and eliminate the need for a traditional steering column. The custom brake pedals were made in-house.



Now you see it, now you don't. Eric Mueller rigged up a custom regulator mechanism that retracts the license plate out of sight. The rear window rolls up and down as well. Glass Guy Chicago gets credit for the glass work.



Like gassers of yesteryear, bobbed rear fenders make room for the big, piecrust slicks. The front fenders have been shaped and contoured to match the rears. Likewise, running boards are non-essential. MirrorLook Refinishing polished up the vintage Halibrand wheels.

SLONAKER AWARD REBOOT

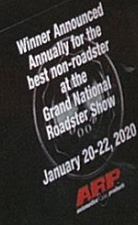
Sometimes, hot rodding's pioneers leave such a big mark on the industry that their own accomplishments overshadow the people behind them. While the Grand National Roadster Show has become the world's premier indoor car show, and the America's Most Beautiful Roadster Award is one of the most prestigious and coveted awards a car builder can win, few remember how it all started. This didn't sit well with ARP's Bob Florine, so he vowed to bring the Al Slonaker Memorial Award to the forefront once again by signing up as the title sponsor and giving it a major revamp. "Prior to this year, all you got for winning the Slonaker Award was \$1,500 and a little plaque. We felt that the Slonaker Award was in no way befitting of Al and Mary's legacy," says Bob. "Al started GNRS as we know it in 1949. Al was a pioneer and Mary took on all the work of running the show once he passed."

After a one-year test run in San Francisco in 1949, the show moved to Oakland for many, many years before relocating to Southern California. Starting in 1974, the Al Slonaker Memorial Award was given to the best non-roadster entry in honor of Al and Mary's work. However, it's always played second-fiddle to the AMBR Award. "Over the years, the AMBR Award took all the air out of the room. We felt that the Slonaker Award should at least be equal to AMBR in both recognition and the size of the prize," Bob reasons.

Furthermore, Bob recognized the opportunity to shape the award to better serve the needs of hot rod builders. "Builders want to show off progress photos of their cars and talk about it in the press. It's hard to present your car to sponsors if you can't show them anything," Bob explains. "We wanted to take the handcuffs off. As long as a builder debuts their finished car at GNRS, why not let them show it off during the build process to generate interest in it? That helps them find sponsors and gets more people coming out to the show since they'll know upfront that certain cars will debut there."

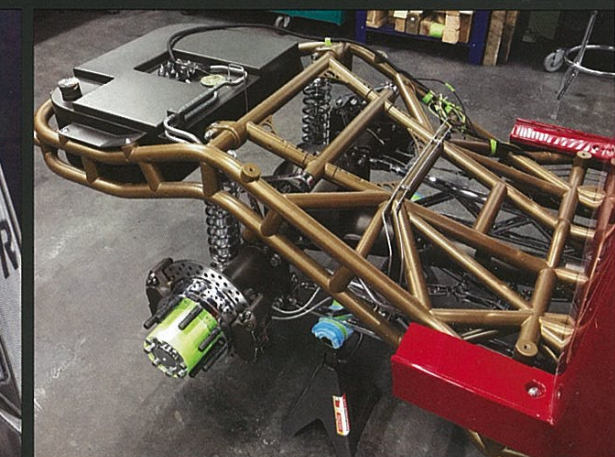
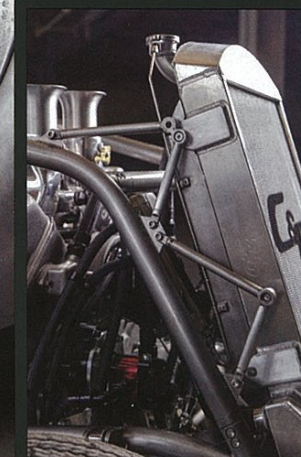
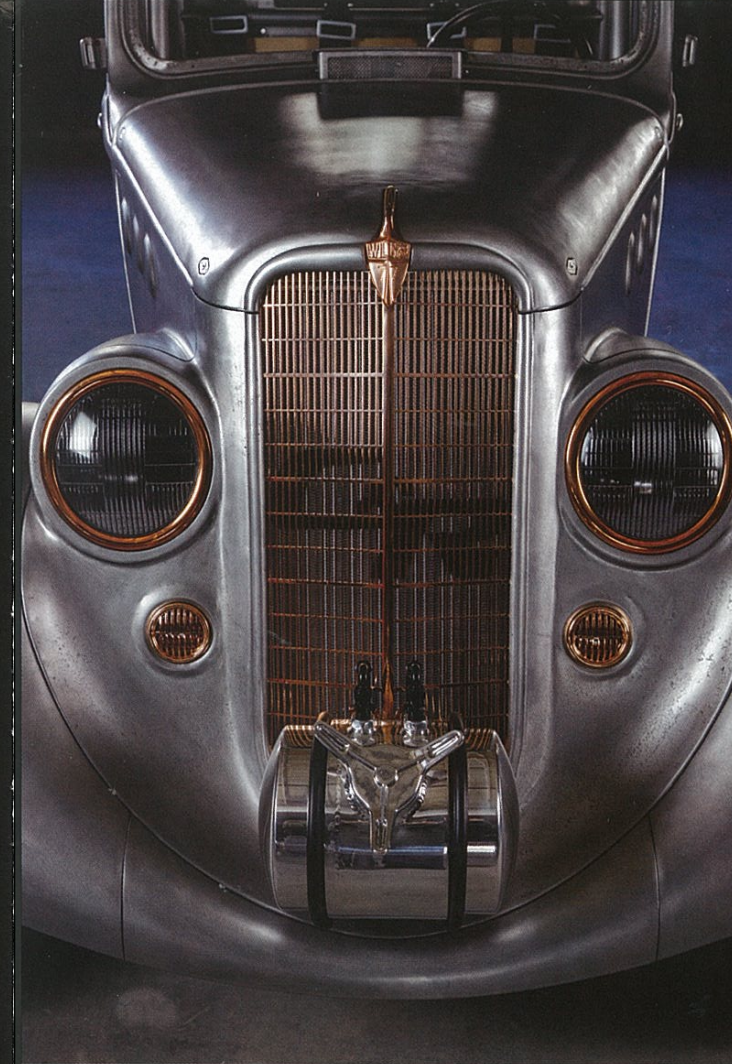
Beyond the rules, Bob went to extreme lengths to show their gratitude to everyone that brings their cars out to the West Coast to compete for the Slonaker Award. "ARP really appreciates car builders and owners hauling their cars out there. We went out of our way to treat them like kings this year by setting up a hospitality booth at the show and taking all the competitors out to dinner," says Bob. "We're also going to give all of them a coffee table book with their car in it to commemorate the event. The winner gets a \$12,500 prize for the Slonaker Award, the same as AMBR, and a very nice billet trophy for the car owner and builder. ARP is in this for the long run. There are 41 spots on the perennial Slonaker trophy. One down and 40 more to go!"

Gotta love that. On behalf of the entire industry, thanks to Bob and everyone at ARP for creating a newly revamped platform to honor and pay tribute to the most talented hot rod builders in the world. Congratulations to Brian Limberg, Ron Ernsberger, everyone at The Tinman's Garage and all the manufacturers and suppliers involved with the Willys build. No matter what, it will always be the first winner of the Al Slonaker Memorial Award after its reboot.



To create the end-all-be-all of perennial trophies, ARP commissioned EVOD to whittle a 2,400-pound block of billet into a stunning 300-pound masterpiece that stands in at nearly six-feet tall. Eric Brockmeyer penned the design and Advanced Plating applied the flawless finish. The builder and car owner trophies are scaled-down clones of the big trophy, but even at half the size there's a good chance that they'll still dwarf any piece of hardware that's already in their trophy case.

ARP
automotive Racing products



1936 WILLYS MODEL 77

Builder: The Tin Man's Garage

Owner: Ron Ernsberger

Engine

Arias 498ci V-6

Aluminum block

Aluminum hemi cylinder heads

Hilborn six-stack induction and EFI

Custom 2.5-inch stainless headers

700-plus hp

Drivetrain

Tremec five-speed manual

Dana 70 rearend with 4.11:1 gears

Chassis

Custom chrome-moly tube frame

Custom front straight axle with leaf springs

Custom rear ladder bars

Bilstein shocks, front

Afco double-adjustable coilovers, rear

Body

Paint by The Refinery

PPG Ferrari Maroon

Pinstriping by Andrew Askeland

Custom fenders, hood, cab and bed

'37 Ford taillights

Wheels

Halibrand

16x3, front

15x12, rear

Tires

Firestone 5.25R16 Deluxe Champion, front

Hurst 31x10.50R15 Cheater slicks, rear

Brakes

Front brake delete

Wilwood discs with dual calipers, rear

Wilwood master cylinder