

GENE SCHAFER: 1931-2011

END OF AN ERA FOR MONTICELLO, UTAH

Gene Schafer was not like anybody else you ever met; he contained multitudes. He was born in Texas in 1931, but soon moved to southern Utah when his dad saw an ad for free homestead land near Monticello. He knew practically nothing but hard work for most of his youth, but still found time to appreciate the joys of swing dancing, pretty girls, a taste for good whiskey and a well-tuned fast car. He walked and hunted and rode a horse over much of San Juan County, but also ran southeast Utah's only ski resort for 20 years.

He was the ultimate master mechanic—he could fix anything. From cars to toasters, Gene had the gift. He may have been SE Utah's greatest recycler because he hardly ever threw anything away. If he couldn't fix it, he'd often burn it in his giant shop wood stove. He slaughtered his own beef each spring, but claimed his good health could be attributed to the two or three cloves of garlic he ate whole every day (he kept a jar of them --pickled with hot jalapenos--in the fridge in his shop). He appreciated good Scotch and preferred Glenlivet, but would settle for cheap brandy in a pinch.

Gene liked to help people. Some of us like to do good deeds so we can tell our friends. With Gene, it just came natural to him. He never sought recognition for his generosity; in fact, he didn't think he was doing anything extraordinary. It's simply the way he was. He'd stop whatever he was doing to help friends and strangers alike. What Monticello's citizens will do without Gene to help them out is a mystery. One thing is certain—Gene Schafer probably had no idea how many lives he touched.

He was, more than anything, an honest man; Gene's candor caused both chuckles and frowns and a squirm or two from a broad range of strangers, friends and family. He grew up a Gentile in a community that is 90% Mormon; yet he earned the respect and affection of everyone, regardless of religion, because in the end, Gene Schafer was a straight-shooter. He never tried to be anyone but himself. No one could ever call Gene a phony. Some people work hard at being a character; with Gene it just came naturally.

He told the story of his remarkable life in a most unremarkable way—as if everyone has shared in the same kind of adventure...

"My mother's brother, my Uncle Aaron had worked in the hayfields near Montrose and Delta, and he brought back a little government booklet about homestead land in Utah and Colorado. So Dad got a hold of a little money...this was during the Depression...and he and Aaron came up here and found this country. There was a piece of ground out here that talked to him so he got it. Someone had settled on it back in the early 1900s and abandoned it. But they left a little cabin and Dad wanted it. Then he brought us all out to live."

His dad needed work and started to sign up with the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) but when word got around that his dad was a whiz with engines, the lumber company that ran a mill up on the Saddle in the Blue Mountains hired him as a mechanic. But everyone in the family worked.

Almost from the time he could remember, Gene loved cars. He had his father's gift for fixing things, especially cars and trucks, and by the time he was in the 9th Grade, Schafer was already working at a service station.

"I was just hanging around the co-op washing windshields and I thought I was pretty smart...One night I was there and Raymond Compton, the fella that worked there full-time, took off and went to Grand Junction and told me to watch the place. But that night the boss showed up and pretty soon he offered me the job. So I was working eight hours a day at the station and going to school six... This was in the mid-40s. Me and the teachers were the only ones that had cars at school. I had an old '27 Chevrolet. In fact, I used to work on all the teachers' cars or else they wouldn't have graduated me."

But a year later Gene joined the Army. Did he volunteer?

"No...I was sort of asked to join because I was bootlegging wine. Well, I was at the station and this guy named Bob got thrown out of a car. I was just standing there and it was late at night. So Bob says, 'Is that your car?' and I said it was. He said, 'I'll give you \$20 to run me to Dove Creek.' So I thought, Man that's ok. We drove there and loaded up with nine cases of wine and then when we got back,

he said, 'I'll give you another \$20 to drive me to Bluff. I thought, it'll be sunup before we get back. But I was only making \$75 every two weeks at the garage. Then he said, 'How about \$30,' and I said, OK.' So I started doing that every two weeks.

"So then my dad and the sheriff spotted me going down the road and I got caught. This was during the Korean Conflict and they sort of gave me a choice of the Army or reform school or something. Hell, I was old enough to go in the service anyway, but I had more fun in the service than anywhere else. By the time I got in there, the Korean thing was winding down, so I ended up going to Germany. You see, when I signed up, they asked me if I could speak a foreign language and I said German, because my father's dad had come over here to get away from the Kaiser. But I didn't really speak German, except I knew some cuss words. But hey, after I got over there. I started to pick it up pretty good.

"I think that was the most interesting time in my life. Whenever I had some time off, I'd travel. I didn't smoke so I saved a lot of money. I'd sell my cigarette rations and would use that money to take off. I went all over, even skied all over the Alps."

Schafer got out of the service in '53 and worked in the uranium mill for a while. In '55 he was the first man to drive a dual-axle ore truck up the old Comb Ridge Dugway. "It was sort of sweaty and hot on that hillside. The truck would vapor-lock a couple of times but I'd figure it out and go on... it was a hundred feet or more over the side of that dugway. There's a bunch of cars still at the bottom of that gulch."

Like so many others who lived in southeast Utah in the '50s, Gene worked for and knew the "Uranium King," Charlie Steen. "I used to go up to his parties and I dated Charlie's partner, Mitch Melich's daughter for a while...she liked me because she loved a good dancer. And I had a '56 Lincoln too. I was the best dancer in high school. Clear up to a few years ago, people would ask me to teach them to dance.

"When my kids were in high school, up in Price, I used to go to the college dances, and pretty quick I'd be dancing. And then another girl would come up to dance and they'd meet me on the dance floor. One girl came up to me and said, 'Hey wild man, can I sit here?' Finally my son, Stan, came up to me and he said, 'My hell, Dad, has it been like this all the time?' And I said, 'Hey all you gotta do is dance good, son. If you're a good dancer you can flat do anything.'

Gene left Monticello twice, first in the late 50s, to work as a Diesel mechanic in Fresno, and then again, in the mid-60s. He came back from Fresno in the early 60s and ran the tractor on the family farm when his dad became ill. Gene returned to California in 1965 for a few years and worked in Balboa, Van Nuys and a few other places, working on condos, but never could really take to the place. "Too many people. I tried to think of something I liked about it, but I can't...it was just different. Too many people. Hell, people have more respect for each other on a stock car track than they do on a freeway."

When Gene came back to Monticello, he worked at the Chevrolet garage for a decade and he also did the stock car circuit in towns around the Four Corners and he ran the farm and he started his own shop and towing service and he got married—it's always hard to trace Schafer's chronology because he was always doing seven things at the same time...

"...and I had a couple of brats. Two kids...most people say they had kids, but I always say I had Superstars, you know. They're good workers but they thought they were playin'. When I went on a wrecker call in the middle of the night, they'd come with me. I'd take out 30% and I'd give them half of what was left. They'd come along and sweep the glass off the roads and everything. Rigby Wright, the sheriff, would say, 'Gene, you're breaking your crew in early,' and I did. They had little brooms and they worked hard.

"When I decided to start my own business, I bought that land on Third East and tore down the old cabin and built my home. Owen Severance helped me build the shop. He said he didn't want anything for helping me build it, except to be able to use the shop to work on his own car. So here it is, all these years later



and he's still coming in...I figured somebody'd have killed him by now, but he still stops by a couple times a week. He's college-educated but I can't hold that against him."

It was also during the '70s that Schafer got involved with the Blue Mountain ski area. Of course, he'd always been a skier, and he had really honed his skills while he was in the army in Europe. But in the late '50s, a group of Monticello citizens developed a ski area in the Blues.

"Anyway...they came to me and wanted me to be on their board of directors. I had all this other stuff going on with the farm and the shop and didn't really want to be on the board, and finally they just came to me and said, 'Here, it's all yours.' and I ended up with my name in all the ski magazines.' You talk about neat. You could feel that in your legs. And all the guys from Moab, the river rats, I called them, I'd let 'em in for nothing. Of course, the kids were up there working with me all the time. Hell, they'd go up the towers to fix shorts. We did ok."

But in the late 70s, two factors conspired to shut down the Blue Mountain ski area—rising insurance premiums and no snow. Even though the ski area was gone, Schafer managed to stay as busy as ever. He was legendary for pulling stranded, stuck or broken down vehicles out of the backcountry with his trusty tow truck. Again, he did the impossible...

"I used to drag cars out of Canyonlands—Beef Basin, Bobby's Hole. I pulled a lot of them out of there. But nobody can go where I go. I used to tell them, 'I can go places you can't even walk.' I remember one guy I pulled out of Bobby's Hole. It was a five or six hour haul out of there and so there was a lot of time to talk. But every time I asked him what he did for a living, the guy would change the subject. Finally when we were almost back, I asked him flat out and he looked at me sort of funny and said, 'Well...to tell you the truth, I work for the Internal Revenue Service. I'm a tax auditor.' I kind of laughed and said, 'I guess it is a good thing you didn't tell me 'til now. If you had I would have left your ass back there in the canyons.'"



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Gene always rose before dawn, heated his home and shop with wood that he cut and hauled to town from his ranch. "I got about 20 cords but I guess I better get some more, just in case." He kept munching on whole garlic cloves as if they were peanuts. Still worked on cars almost every day of the week and never got tired of it either. "I look at every broken down car as a challenge...I love figuring it all out." And he still speaks his mind to just about anyone he feels like speaking his mind to. "Some of them aren't worth talking to at all," he explains.

And in a part of the West where religion plays a major role in daily life, Schafer hasn't much use for any religion. "I never thought about joining any church. You can take a Bible and put your own words into it. And that isn't right. You can quote it, but just quote the words. Don't go trying to change it. One day back in the '40s, a lady here came up to me from the Baptists and asked if I'd get up and lead the service. They didn't have a preacher for that day. And I said, 'Ok, but I've got an idea..I want to ask the congregation some questions about how to solve some people's problems.' And so that's what we did. We all tried to figure out how to help each other. But then the preacher from Dove Creek came over and said, 'I hear you're saying all kinds of things to the congregation and we don't do it like that in this church.' So that was my last preaching job...I figured I could just have Gene's Church from then on.

Gene Schafer, never planned to retire—ever. He was as tough as a ten penny nail. Many of us thought he'd live forever. He once told a man who seemed to be thinking of popping Gene in the nose, "I never seen you fight anybody unless they was twice your age and drunk..and I sure as hell ain't drunk."

If he ever got sick of working on a car he'd walk away from it for a while, but he always came back. "Every broken down car is a challenge, but then again, people are a challenge too. My brother Victor pointed out to me once that when these people who are 2000 miles from home, when they break down and you're working on their car, you bring them in and give them a beer and pretty soon, they're having more fun than if their cars had kept going. People from all over the country come back to see me...just to see if I'm still alive."



The truth is, we were all lucky to be "Schaferized" ourselves. There will never be another Gene Schafer and the memory of his company will make us smile for years to come.

Gene Schafer died after a short illness on June 15, 2011. He leaves behind his family, including his two "Superstars"—his kids Rhonda and Stan—and a close cadre of friends and kindred spirits who have visited Gene's shop almost daily, some for more years than they can remember.

Unknown is the number of friends and strangers Gene met over the years and decades whose lives were touched in a very special way. Gene liked to say, "Well I 'Schaferized' your truck and it's as good as new." The truth is, we were all lucky to be "Schaferized" ourselves. There will never be another Gene Schafer and the memory of his company will make us smile for years to come.

Jim Stiles.



For more photographs of Gene, go to our homepage and click on the WordPress version of this story.

WHY READ THE ZEPHYR?
 "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be...The people cannot be safe without information. Where the press is free and every man able to read, All is safe."
 Thomas Jefferson