

# *Swanks News Special Edition*

*March 2025*

## *Gene Winfield*

*June 16, 1927 - March 4 2025*



Gene Winfield and Gary Johnson at the Detroit Autorama 2020

# Gene Winfield and the Swanks Car Club

Jerrey Quam

Ron; one of the original "Swanks;" and a president; Gary Hofsommer and I took Gene Winfield to the "Back to the Fifties" when Gary worked for the Mn. "Vo tech" schools in Staples, Mn; (Teaching heavy equipment classes); the St. Paul "Vo tech" school decided that they wanted to teach youngsters going to two years of free schools to get into car customizing; and body work; I knew Gene in the 70s; and we hired him to put a body shop/ top shop class at "Back to the fifties" I lived in Santa Barbara; Gene in Mohave; and Gary in Portland; we promised Gene \$5000- to do a seminar with students from St. Paul; we met Gene at the airport; flew to Denver; then to Mpls/ St. Paul Gene; he was hitting on 20 year plus girls at the airport; and they were going for it! This was 20 plus years back. We got to "the fifties" the ass holes from St. Paul Vo tech" where not set up; the "chop top" car ended up being the guy that Gary was dealing with; we spent three days with gene; (But I bought stuff from him when he was in the San Fernando Valley) (Across from B & M Hydromatics) (I was in Santa Barbara) Gene had a way with the ladies; Gene never drank any alcohol; or coffee; but could work 18 hour days; I knew his bus driver; and shop guy; he told me how amazing Gene was about work ethics.! Another "Swank" member; Lanny Ericksen, had Gene build the "violet Fatisey ("First fade Job") a chopped 56 Chevy; (Famous!); 57 Front clip; 50 Merc rear glass; car was in Fargo in the 1958-1959 era; kinda fell apart; in primer; cut springs; bad ride; but that was a REAL connect to F/M and the "Swanks" (Lanny was a "Swank") Saw Gene many times after the fiasco in Mn; "Back to the fifties" because we got STIFFED! Gary and myself paid Gene out of our pockets; and I contributed to get Gene back from Finland? when he needed a mercy flight; home; Billy gibbons; (Who I know) (another story) Billy sent \$100K; so did "Meguiars" sent \$100k; so we got gene home; later; he was a the "Race of gentlemen" in Santa Barbara; I had a Severely chopped 1934 Ford Tudor" the "Tijuana taxi" dual steering; a hi boy; blown flathead; Gene was there; told him he owed me a paint job;! Got a picture on my wall with gene; me at the G R N S in Pomona; Steve Olson; (A Swank) (youngest member) still in Fgo;) was with us; probably 15? years ago? My recall tends to shorten things up; maybe 20 years ago? But Steve Olson took the picture; was impressed when Gene called out to me! Small world stuff! Glad you guys appreciate who Gene was, bigger than life! A hard-working person: no B.S. like some of the current shops! stay safe!

GOD BLESS GENE!! Jerry Quam.

Steve Olson tells the story of when Jerry Quam and Steve were at The Grand National Roadster Show. The two were walking Around admiring the cars when they heard someone call out "Jerry, Jerry" it was Gene Winfield! And he was calling Jerry Quam. Steve said I can't tell you how impressed I was that Gene Winfield knows Jerry Quam well enough to call out his name. Gene greeted Jerry warmly and Jerry introduced Steve To Gene and after a great visit Steve insisted on getting a Picture of these two good friends.



Photo: Steve Olson 2012





Dear Kustomrama Family,

kustomrama

Just as I was getting ready to send out our latest newsletter, some sad news came in that stopped me in my tracks. We've lost Gene Winfield, the King of Cool. It felt right to rewrite this note to honor a man who's been such a big part of our world.

#### The King of Cool: Remembering Gene Winfield

The day we all dreaded has sadly come. Gene Winfield, a true pioneer whose hands shaped more than just metal, has passed away. He was one of the original greats, a man whose work touched everything from hot rods to Hollywood.

Gene started out in a chicken coop in Modesto, California, turning sheets of metal into dreams. Over the years, he became famous not just for his incredible custom cars like the Jade Idol but also for his signature paint techniques. His work even made it to the big screen, crafting cars for movies like Blade Runner and Back to the Future.

More than his builds, Gene was known for his spirit. Into his 90s, he was still traveling, chopping, painting, and inspiring everyone lucky enough to meet him. He was a mentor and a friend to many, living out his passion every day.

Every time we visited California, we tried to pop by his shop to catch up with Gene, check out his latest projects, and just spend time soaking in his stories. Trips out there won't be the same without him. Gene, you'll be missed more than words can say.

Gene's passing is a reminder of why we do what we do here at Kustomrama – to keep the stories and spirits of legends like him alive. As we step into this new year, let's hold onto the legacy of creativity and passion that Gene represented.

Thanks for being on this ride with us, and here's to remembering the greats and keeping our wheels spinning. Stay safe, keep creating, and let's all carry a bit of Gene's cool in whatever we do.

# Gene Winfield

Wikipedia

Roger Eugene Winfield (June 16, 1927 – March 4, 2025) was an American automotive customizer and fabricator. In the mid-1960s, his designs caught the attention of the film community, resulting in a large body of his work appearing on screen, including in the iconic 1982 film *Blade Runner*.

## Early life

Winfield was born in Springfield, Missouri, in 1927. His family moved to Modesto, California, in 1929, where he grew up. He was first exposed to cars when his older brother, Glenn, opened a wrecking yard. In 1942, he bought his first car for \$75, a 1928 Ford coupé, and promptly added a radio antenna with foxtail, despite it having no radio. Later that year, the brothers opened Winfield Used Cars in Modesto.

His second car was a 1930 Ford, powered by a 1937 flathead.

## Career

In 1951, Winfield became interested in auto racing, driving 135 mph in a Ford Model T ("The Thing") at Bonneville Speedway. He soon opened Winfield's Custom Shop in Modesto, with an early innovation in custom painting, carefully fading two candy colors together, called "The Winfield Fade".

In 1962, building on his experience, Winfield joined Aluminum Model Toys (AMT) as a consultant style designer for their model kits.

Winfield also worked with Detroit automakers who turned to craftsmen to add their custom touches to factory cars. As part of the "Ford Custom Car Caravan", Winfield developed the Pacifica Ford Econoline van, the Mercury Comet Cyclone Sportster, and the Strip Star, an aluminum bodied sports car with a powerful 427 V8 engine.

## The Reactor

(1964) was Winfield's next aluminum-bodied project, and was even more ambitious. It was a mid-engined front wheel drive two seater, with a very low profile due to the Corvair Chevrolet Turbo-Air 6 engine flat six. It showcased a light aluminum body, like the Strip Star, but the technology went far beyond its novel bodywork. Winfield took the 180 hp (130 kW) turbocharged engine from a Corvair Corsa and mated it to the drivetrain from a Citroën DS, and retained the height adjustable Hydropneumatic suspension of the DS

A January 1967 episode of *Bewitched* was written around The Reactor and its unique abilities. In 2017, The Reactor was shown at Pebble Beach.

AMT hired him in 1966 to manage the new Phoenix, Arizona based Speed and Custom Division Shop, which built full scale cars as promotional vehicles, including for *Star Trek: The Original Series*.

Winfield also used the Corvair Chevrolet Turbo-Air 6 engine in a more conventional Rear-engine, rear-wheel-drive layout, The Piranha, a car originally meant to show the usability of ABS plastic in automotive materials.[9] Winfield began producing this car as a kit, and made it a television star as well, first appearing in March 1967 on *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*

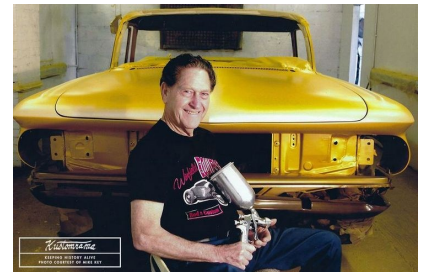
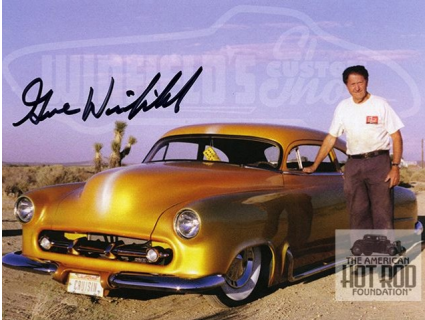
After AMT closed this division in 1971, Winfield continued work in the custom auto body field in Southern California and appears as an honored guest at auto related events in the US.

Winfield was honored as the Detroit Autorama "Builder of the Year" in 2008, and since 2013, has been on the International Show Car Series (ISCA) circuit, chopping tops and shaping sheet metal for the crowds in a special section of each show called "The Summit Racing Equipment Chop Shop."



## Gene Winfield photos

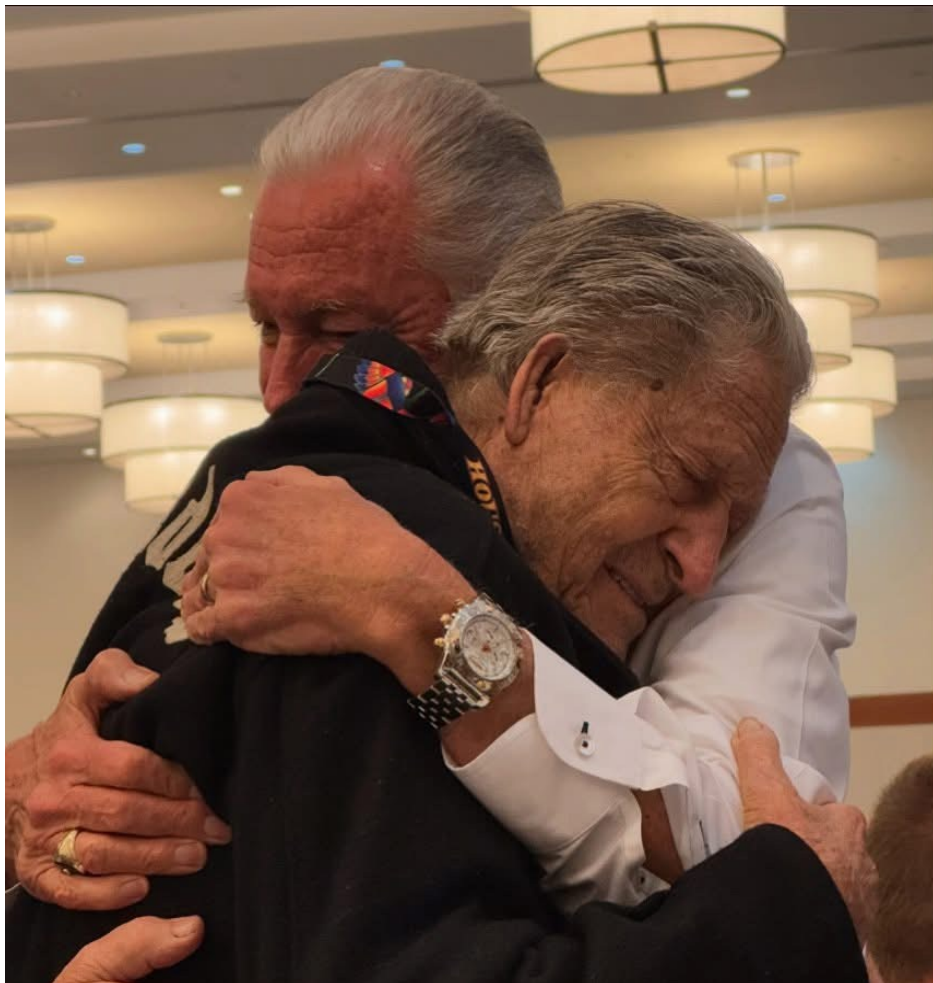
Gene in his long career chopped over 800 49-51 Mercury's! The number of cars he customized and painted must be uncountable. Here is a small sampling of his work over the years.







Gene Winfield's Custom Shop in Mojave, California



Gene Winfield with Barry Meguiar at the 75th Grand National Roadster Show February 2025.