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## Undertakers Car Club Memories Revive the 50s

They were a bunch of Perris High School guys who liked to tinker with cars and cruise the streets of the City and surrounding communities after class and on weekends.

The year was 1953; Eisenhower was president; the economy was booming; Elvis was finding his musical voice; and the Undertakers Car Club was born.

On June 13, the Perris Historical and Museum Association honored the surviving members of the Undertakers in a ceremony during the annual Rods & Rails Festival.

Several addressed the audience that included their wives and children as well as onlookers interested in learning about life in a small farming town six decades ago.

"The Undertakers were the finest group of young men who ever drove and raced the streets of Perris," said Gary Raymond, 80, a 1955 graduate of Perris High School and one of the original members.

Raymond grew up in a Perris of about 2,000 people, an area surrounded by potato and alfalfa farms. Lots of teenaged boys acquired mechanical skills from working the crops. So tinkering with cars came naturally, as Raymond did on the 1946 blue two-door Plymouth he tooled around in during his days as a Perris Panther.

Raymond lowered the frame, built an engine that included two carburetors on an inline six-cylinder engine.

"Did a lot of self-manufacturing from scrounged parts," Raymond said.



The Undertakers Car Club was celebrated during the annual Rods & Rails Festival in the City of Perris. In the photo, Undertakers members Tom Parker (left) with his wife, Midgie, and fellow Undertaker Gary Raymond. The group formed in 1953 at Perris High School.

Raymond and the other Undertakers said the club's name wasn't meant to glorify fast or dangerous driving. Rather it was meant to signify group members' commitment to "undertaking" good deeds while on the road, including changing flat tires, providing gasoline for stranded motorists or calling for a wrecker. The club's motto: "To create and maintain courtesy on the highway." Raymond even praised local Perris cops like Banta Beatty, who more often than not would dispense advice about life after pulling an Undertaker over for speeding or driving with an ear-shattering engine.

"Local police helped us grow up without killing ourselves," he said.

Another original undertaker, Lyle Christensen, 80, said 1950s hot rodders suffered from a negative Hollywood stereotype that depicted them as deranged drivers causing mayhem on the highways and Main Street. A false impression, he said.

Many Undertakers worked in the agriculture business, packing and sorting potatoes, harvesting barley and alfalfa or holding other after-school and weekend jobs. Texaco station owner Roland Sanders mentored several club members, providing tools and the hydraulic lift so they could work on their rides.

When not cruising, the guys would stop for breakfast at the Y-Not Restaurant (pancakes were the house specialty) or lunch at Jackie's Frostee (two burgers, fries and soda for a buck) take in a show at the open-air Perris Theatre (35 cent admission) or hunt for spare parts at Albright's Auto Parts.

"The 50s were great," Christensen recalled. "The economy was good and there was always old cars and parts lying around the ranch!"

Christensen used his talents to customize his 1941 dark green Ford coupe with dual exhaust pipes and spotlights similar to those on police cars.

"You could get a ticket for showing those!" he said.

Another Undertaker, Tom Parker, 76, tooled around in a yellow 1956 two-door Ford Ranch Wagon with mag wheels, three two-barrel carburetors and an all-black interior.

"Freedom, total freedom," Parker said of life in the 50s and 60s. "You could get a driver's license at 13 or 14-years old. Good times."

While the majority of Undertakers attended Perris High School, the club wasn't restricted to the teenage set. The school's driving instructor, Bob Wilson, also rolled with the Undertakers.

Those former members attending the recognition ceremony remembered with affection the small town closeness that impacted their youth. With such a small population and shared experiences from working in the agricultural community, Perris was a town where everyone literally knew each other. That closeness at times proved disconcerting for some of the Undertakers.

"When you got in trouble," Parker recalled. "Your parents knew it by the time you came home."

### Media Contact

Joe Vargo  
Public Information Officer  
951-943-6100  
[jvargo@cityofperris.org](mailto:jvargo@cityofperris.org)



Perris City Hall  
101 N. D Street  
Perris, CA 92570

Hours: Mon. - Fri. 8 am - 6pm

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