

For \$135,000 You Can Bring History Home

by Lynne Belluscio

A week ago, my son was in China and I guess he was killing time, so he sent me a link to "Hemmings Find of the Day" with a note to take a look at the markings on the car. The "Find of the Day" was a 1966 Chevy Biscayne. On the front fender in bright red letters was "Knickerbocker Hotel, LeRoy, N.Y." The car is known as the BONANZA and it has a lot of history. That's why the asking price is \$135,000.

In 1966, Karl Bill Jr. was the service manager at LeRoy Motors and he liked racing cars. On February 24 he ordered a very special car equipped with a lot of options. Karl still has the original bill of sale framed on the wall of his office at West End Motors. The L72 425horse power 427 cubic inch V8 engine was built for speed. Karl added a 4-speed transmission, a transistorized ignition, a posi-traction axle, metallic brakes, special transmission and tinted glass. He paid \$3,399.48 for the custom Chevy. He did some further modifications. The front wheels were narrowed to 4 inches and the tires inflated to 80 pounds. He did anything that he could do to reduce the weight without sacrificing strength. He removed nuts and bolts, had the back windows propped up so he could remove the rear window regulators, and took off the fender braces. The car was first raced with the name "White Lightning" and on the door was a B/S and three billiard balls with 427 (denoting the size of the engine). Wayne Dorfelt did the custom painting, and Karl says "he was a real artist. The best in the field."

Karl took the car to Reading, Pennsylvania for its first race at Maple Grove and quickly beat the track champion. At the time, Karl thought he would be racing in the B Stock class, but discovered he would be competing in the A Stock class. Much to his chagrin there were two other cars racing under the name of "White Lightning" so after three races, Karl decided to change the name to Bonanza. At the time, one of the most popular television



shows was a western about a family who lived on a huge ranch, known as the Bonanza. The show was sponsored by Chevy, so Karl thought it was a good choice, especially when he discovered that Bonanza meant sudden good luck or wealth.

Karl won a lot of A Stock and Top Stock eliminator awards. In 1967 he beat the National Record holder at Niagara International Speedway. In 1968 he beat Eddie Miller's Hemi that had won the World Finals. Karl raced the Bonanza for several years and his best time was 11.73 seconds on the quarter mile. Eventually he sold the car and it was painted blue and it continued on the race circuit.

It passed through three more owners, but by that time, the history of the car had been lost and eventually it was put in storage. Then John DeRue from Hamlin bought it and started putting the story of the car back together. He located Karl Bill and when he walked into Karl's office, there were all the old pictures and the bill of sale on the wall. DeRue decided to restore it to its original condition. Everything on the body is original except the rear deck which was replaced because it had been damaged in a fight at a race track. The interior was completely restored. The steering wheel and dash knobs are original. All

the glass is original except the front windshield. And the trunk still has the two original M&M mounted slicks. The original undercarriage is described as one of the best that anyone has ever seen.

The original engine had long ago been removed after many years on the race track. Karl told me that they blew the engine at least twice when he was racing it. But the new engine, like the original, is a 427 with the original date coded heads, intake and carburetor. The paint and lettering matches the original pretty closely. There are the horseshoes on the roof, and the sponsors names on the fenders. The racing team was "Bill & Hamler." Daryl Hamler was the mechanic and traveled to all the races with Karl. Sponsors for the car included Stafford Signs, Sam's Ashland Garage, Larry's Rotary Station (on East Main Road, most recently G's), LeRoy Motors, and the Knickerbocker Hotel on the Gulf Road.

Karl said that Bill Nickelson, who managed LeRoy Motors, really encouraged him to race the car. Said it was good promotion

for the Chevy business. There was quite a following from folks in LeRoy. Karl said that nine bus loads of folks from LeRoy followed him to Pennsylvania for one of the races.

The restored Bonanza made a few appearances around here. It was at a cruise night at Pizza Land. Karl Bill even got a chance to drive it down Main Street. Bob Adams remembered seeing it at a cruise night in Brockport not so long ago, but John DeRue sold the Bonanza to a dealer in Seakonk, Massachusetts and it's up for sale for \$135,000. It was written up by Matt Letwin in the May 2011 issue of *Hemmings Muscle Machines*. It also won an Antique Automobile Club of America restoration award. I read some of the comments that were posted about the car, and one guy wrote "These are the kinds of cars dreams are made of. A guy works at a Chevy dealer and sits down and specs out a bare-bones, all b----s 2 dr. Biscayne. How many got the chance to do that back then? Oh to have been a fly in that showroom on delivery day." Karl Bill, remembers that day as if it were yesterday.

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