

Honoring Mickey Thompson, First American to 400 M.P.H.



Dave Wallace Jr. for The New York Times The Challenger I, the streamliner that Mickey Thompson piloted to 406.60 miles per hour at the Bonneville Salt Flats in 1960.

Mickey Thompson, the great racing superstar, did not limit himself to one motorsports arena. He built cars for the Indianapolis 500 and funny cars for drag racing, and he put together trucks for off-road competition. But he may be best known for his many land-speed achievements.

Thompson set more speed and endurance records than anyone before or since, some 295 at the Bonneville Salt Flats alone. Greg Sharp, curator of the Wally Parks National Hot Rod Association museum, has compiled evidence of nearly 500 significant records set by Thompson while participating in more than 10,000 events. In 1960, he piloted his four-engine Challenger I streamliner to a speed of 406.60 miles per hour at Bonneville, [earning the title Fastest Man on Earth](#).

Now, nearly 50 years after that feat, the N.H.R.A. museum has opened [“Mickey Thompson: First American to 400 M.P.H.”](#), an exhibition honoring the milestone and Thompson’s career and life, which were cut short by his murder in 1988. He and his wife, Trudy, [were shot](#) at their home in Bradbury, Calif., outside of Los Angeles. Thompson’s former business partner, Michael Goodwin, [was convicted of hiring the killers](#) in 2007.

At a preview for the press last Thursday, more than 300 friends, family members and rival racers turned up for an emotional tribute to the man many regarded as America’s speed king.



Dave Wallace Jr. for The New York Times Thompson built cars for the Indianapolis 500. This Indy racer was driven by Dan Gurney in 1962.

Thompson's son, Danny, and Gale Banks, a land-speed racer whose company Gale Banks Engineering is the exhibition's sponsor, were in attendance. In separate turns at the podium, both men dropped hints about returning a low-mileage 1968-model Mickey Thompson streamliner to Bonneville in a quest to retake the piston-powered land-speed record.

Thompson was denied a record certificate in 1960 because the Challenger I broke its drivetrain, and he was not able to back up the run as required by the rules. Thompson never stopped plotting ways to claim the one prize that eluded him.



Dave Wallace Jr. for The New York Times The Assault I was built by Thompson in 1959 to compete at

Bonneville.

Luckily for museum visitors, Thompson had a hard time parting with old iron. At the entrance, the restored Challenger I is set against a white backdrop accompanied by old grainy Bonneville movies. Farther inside, there are seven significant Thompson racecars and an off-road Chevy LUV truck (with a big-block Chevy V-8 stuffed into the bed). Black-and-white photographs line the walls behind the hardware.

The museum's director, Tony Thacker, also acquired four complete engines that survived the racing abuse, the years and a wildfire that spread to Thompson's house. These range from a supercharged Pontiac in-line twin (created by cutting a Tempest 4-cylinder in half) to an experimental Chevy 427 Mystery Motor that once resided in the engine compartment of Thompson's '63 Corvette Sting Ray, another of the cars displayed.

"Mickey Thompson: First American to 400 M.P.H." runs through October at the Wally Parks N.H.R.A. Motorsports Museum at the Los Angeles County Fairplex, 1101 W. McKinley Avenue., Pomona, Calif.; (909) 622-2133; museum.nhra.com.