

A Hot Rod Icon: The McGee Roadster

For many, a 1932 Ford roadster is the quintessential hot rod. Take a look back at the original—the trendsetting car that became the benchmark of style for so many hot rods that came after it and remained an icon even as hot rod tastes changed throughout the decades.

There's something about Southern California that seems to bring out the best in car enthusiasts looking to create impressive, self-stylized cars. Although the trend began long before World War II, an explosion occurred in the post-war years. As a number of young men began returning to civilian life with money in their pockets and an appetite for excitement, they started experimenting with the readily available Fords in an attempt at not only greater speed, but enhanced style as well. Perhaps the most iconic of these cars soon to be known as “hot rods” was Bob McGee's 1932 Ford Roadster.



McGee, like many of his contemporaries, went off to serve his country during WWII. When he shipped off for the Philippines, he left behind his first 1932 Ford V-8

Roadster. The roadster wasn't stock, as McGee was part of the early contingent of speed obsessed young Californians. He was even a member of an early club known as the Gear Grinders. The Roadster was a "gow-job" as they were called before the term "hot rod" entered the vernacular and had been raced by McGee at the dry lakes in 1941.

By the time McGee returned from his time in the Pacific Theater he was ready to jump right back into souping up V-8 Fords. Unfortunately, while at war, his friend Bob Binyon had wrecked McGee's first roadster. Binyon set out to collect parts so that upon his return McGee would be able to build a suitable replacement. This set the stage for McGee to create what would become an iconic post-war "hot rod."

When modified cars were still considered gow-jobs, the majority of souped up cars were roadsters and *the* car to have was the 1932 Ford as it afforded the strongest frame and components, most powerful engine for the money and the best overall style. As car manufacturers resumed production following the end of WWII, a surplus of used cars made these already affordable and powerful cars that much more so. Compared to modern cars of the late 1940s, a 1932 Ford Roadster was diminutive and nimble. When modified it felt like a racecar. Its light weight combined with a powerful engine and strong frame made it ideal for speed hungry drivers and racers. In fact, the term hot rod is often credited as being derived from "Hot-Roadster," a term often used to refer to the modified topless cars becoming increasingly present on Southern California streets.



The appeal of a 1932 Ford Roadster was not lost on Bob McGee when he was discharged in 1946. He wasted little time in locating a new 1932 Ford and creating his ideal of a hot rod. By September of 1947, the little roadster was totally transformed. The suspension – front and rear – was lowered considerably; wheels from a 1940 Ford were fitted up front and Lincoln-Zephyr wheels were placed at the rear; and the grille shell was smoothed with the radiator cap being removed. The hood was modified into a three-piece unit featuring custom louvers, while the fenders were removed, the decklid modified, the door hinges hidden within the door frames, and the door handles removed. To top it all off, the car was treated to custom paint and upholstery work among a number of other modifications.

Beauty wasn't just skin deep for this hot rod as it featured a worked over, 1934 Ford V-8 engine with speed equipment like a Burn's dual carburetor intake manifold, Federal Mogul finned copper cylinder heads, Spalding ignition and filcoolater oil filter. Even though this car would become McGee's daily driver, parts that didn't improve speed or appearance were discarded (notice again the lack of door handles) and the car was operated without a generator or water pumps.

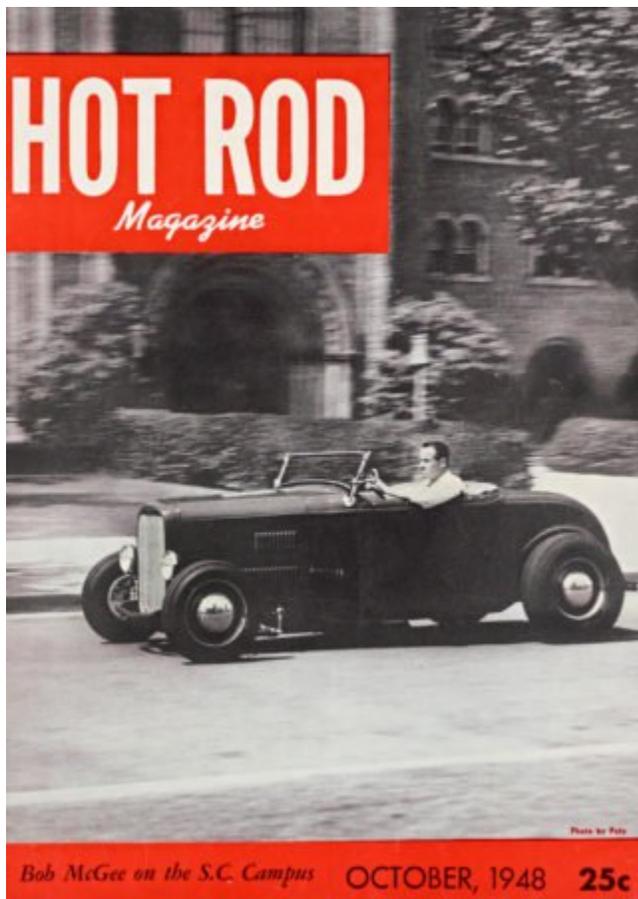
In between commuting to the University of Southern California where McGee was attending on the GI Bill and serving as a "tackle" on the football team, the car could be found in the thick of the burgeoning hot rod scene at the dry lakebeds surrounding

Los Angeles. At Harper's Dry Lake, the car achieved a speed of 112.21 mph in 1947. The original Southern California Timing Association (SCTA) timing tag confirming as such can still be seen riveted to the dash today.



But the Roadster's racing achievements were not what solidified its place in hot rod history. Hot rodding had become a dangerous epidemic according to the mainstream media, and those that drove modified cars were constantly vilified. "Hot rodder" became a pejorative term. However, in September of 1948 the leading hot rod organization, the SCTA, gathered up 37 clubs, 300 hot rodders, police captains, and a municipal judge at a meeting in Maywood, California, to denounce unsafe driving and take the National Safety Council's "Green Cross for Safety" pledge. Of the multitudes of modified cars in attendance, the McGee Roadster was chosen as the signature car and was featured in the *Los Angeles Times* receiving its Green Cross safety sticker.

Only a month later, McGee and his increasingly famous roadster appeared on the cover of the flourishing *Hot Rod* magazine in its inaugural year. Photographed by *Hot Rod* founder Robert (Pete) Petersen in front of the U.S.C. Campus, the feature ensured the car a special place in history.



Dick Scritchfield, a young hot rodder in the Navy stationed in Washington DC in 1948, was one of many around the country who saw the roadster in that October issue as hot rodding spread across the nation courtesy of Petersen's publication. Little did he know he would one day own the famous roadster and add greatly to its story.

Bob McGee sold the car in the mid-1950s after driving it as his primary means of transportation for a number of years. From there it went to Dick Hirschberg of Hollywood, California. Hirschberg updated the car's appearance and drivetrain with a bright yellow paint job, pin striping and a newly released overhead valve, small-block Chevrolet V-8 equipped with custom-made exhaust headers poking through the three-piece hood.

Hirschberg didn't own the roadster long however. Dick Scritchfield, an employee of the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) who had moved from Kansas City to Los

Angeles, spotted the yellow roadster at a service station and soon traded his Cadillac-powered 1948 Lincoln Continental to Hirschberg for the car.

Now a genuine Roadster owner, Scritchfield went on to help found the L.A. Roadsters Club – a group that became a notable force within the hot rod community. At first, Scritchfield left the car largely as it was. After crossing paths with Hollywood stuntman George Dockstader, he began loaning the car out for movies and TV shows looking to capitalize on the hot rod trend. Its first appearance was in the movie *Hot Rod Gang* (1958). Ironically, the car that was first chosen as the representation of safety among hot rodders in 1948 became the star of a movie chalked full of reckless driving, exploiting the “hot rodder” stereotype.

Throughout the remainder of the decade and in to the 1960s, the car was called on time and again to be an extra in television and film. During this period, Dick began to change the car to suit the fluctuating hot rod styles. In 1960, it received one of the first true metalflake paint jobs as a test canvas for the Dobeckmun Company that was soon to release the novel paint type on the market. By the end of the ‘60s the roadster’s original steel wheels were eventually swapped out for slotted mag wheels, further updating its appearance.

By 1970 the roadster’s competitive prowess was once again tested. Scritchfield took the car to the Bonneville Salt Flats, where he achieved 165 mph in the Street Roadster Class. The following year the Roadster captured the “World’s fastest Roadster,” title which it held for almost a decade. Utilizing a rather mild but updated 350 ci inch small block, the roadster set the record at 167.212 mph, which stood until 1979.



Throughout the 1970s, Scritchfield's roadster continued to appear on TV shows and in the movies such as *Happy Days*, *Fantasy Island* and *Van Nuys Boulevard*, always acting the quintessential hot rod. The car had received a new paint job after the headers put on by Hirschberg had charred the metalflake paint on the car's first run at Bonneville. By the time it was back on screen, the Roadster sported black paint and yellow pin striping.

In 1989, Scritchfield and his wife moved to Hawaii, a state that required fenders, and he and the roadster parted ways. The car passed through a couple of owners before being acquired by its current caretaker, Bruce Meyer. With the help of So-Cal Speed Shop and working directly with Bob McGee and his personal scrapbook, Meyer had the car returned almost exactly to its original appearance and specifications. Despite varying cosmetic modifications and changing powerplants, the car remained in remarkably original condition for a hot rod as the body and frame had never been significantly modified. The car's restoration was completed in 1999 and attended both the 50th annual Grand National Roadster Show and the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance that year.

And if that wasn't enough, when the U.S. Post Office decided to put a hot rod on a stamp in 2014, the iconic McGee Roadster was one of just two 1932 Fords to make

the cut.



Although it started out life as one of the most distinctive hot rods, it followed the tradition of hot rodding and morphed throughout the decades, always on the forefront of the stylish trends thanks to its owners. Like Gypsy Rose in the lowrider community, this instantly recognizable automotive icon has since served as the gold standard for many subsequent hot rods. Indeed, it's now hard to conjure an image of a period-correct hot rod without the image of the McGee Roadster coming immediately to mind.

*Come see this trailblazing hot rod for yourself at this year's **Cars at the Capital** in Washington, D.C. The McGee Roadster will be on display for the second of the event's three weeks, running April 20-26.*