

Pan Draggers of Fresno

Est. 1948

During the most iconic era America has ever experienced, the cool cats of the 50's and 60's were chopping tops, channeling bodies, flaming, shaving, and doing things to cars that would make their fathers cry. "Gentlemen" feared leaving their own car in the garage nervous that their hoodlum, hot rodding son may lay some long licks down the quarter panel or cut the springs to get that rebellious stance. These youngsters successfully built and promoted drag strips, held cruises until the wee hours of the night, fought, and hung together.

Though Southern California is labeled the hot rod mecca, many Central Valley enthusiasts would like to debate that fact. The Valley is home to many pioneers that have contributed and helped shape the very culture of customizing cars. Some of these icons can be found in the Pan Draggers history books. The Pan Draggers of Fresno Car Club was conceived back in the summer of 1949 by three young men from Coalinga, California and three youngsters from Fresno, California. The club soon started acquiring additional members predominantly from Fresno, the club soon exploded to about twenty-five members when it was incorporated on March 21, 1953. The boys needed a place to chill out so a clubhouse was constructed on private property in east Central Fresno and was later torn down when the property was sold around 1956. A shop was then quickly rented in Southeast Fresno where meetings were held twice a month. Members' cars in the early 50's ranged from 1932 & 1934 Fords, Shoebox Fords, 50 Mercs, 40 & 41 Fords, middle 30's Chevy's and a lone 1940 Olds.

The by-Laws were changed in the middle 50's to allow the tri five Chevy's as they became very popular with the 265 -283 V8 and the over the counter speed equipment. The lads of the Pan Draggers were mostly in their late teens and early twenties and only a couple were married, so weekends meant a trip somewhere for some epic event. In those days the cars that were hot rods were their everyday drivers. Very few guys had two cars, as they were lucky to buy gas for one car. Trips on weekends had great participation regardless the distance. Events that were part of that era were the NASCAR races at Riverside, Ca. and the drags at Irwindale and Long Beach. Nobody in the club would ever forget the trip to the very first March Meet at Bakersfield. Since most of the hot rods had modified engines, the drags were very popular. They raced at Bakersfield, Visalia, The Hanford Tri-oval, Madera, Kingdon, Fremont, Halfmoon Bay and Cotati. The Club was very instrumental in the developing of the new drag strip in Fresno called Fresno Dragways. In 1960 the Club along with two other clubs formed the Fresno Drag Racing Syndicate to hold a very large indoor car show at the Fresno County Fairgrounds. The proceeds were used to purchase the timing equipment, which at that time was state of the art. The old strip is still in place and used for an airstrip, but in its day there were hundreds of

world records set there. It was 100 feet wide and dead flat for half a mile, plus an additional dirt shut down.

About this time the Club decided they had the funds, time, and skill to build their own racecar. They purchased a 1940 Willys set up for a flathead engine. They bought an engine that held the quarter mile round track record for hardtops at that time and started setting records on the straight line. The Club set records at Bakersfield, Fresno, Madera and Fremont. They held the National record for about a month and then decided they needed to go faster and traded the Willys for a dragster set up for a flathead. That venture only lasted three outings when they lost a flywheel at halftrack and cut the car basically in half. The engine was gone as was the chassis. It was decided to not build another as the members became more interested in their own hot rods and many were now starting to raise a family. They still went to the Oakland Roadster Show and events in other towns. As they moved into the middle 60's, the members were starting to include fad tees, roadsters and coupes as a play car along with their daily drivers. This went on until about the summer of 1968 when it was decided that membership attendance was down and they would shut down the meetings and sell off the assets until a time where members wanted to start meeting and functioning as a Club again. They took all the money and threw a New Year's Eve party that is still talked about to this day.

It was early 1973 when some of the old members decided to start meeting again and dusting off their hot rods and going on tours. It started out as a small group and within no time swelled back up to thirty members. The Club started holding its own events twice a year. There was a "Pasta Feed" and big raffle at the end of February and a "Start of Summer Rod Run" the day before Mother's Day at the Kingsburg Gun Club on the Kings River. The Pasta Feed was stopped a few years back as the cost became excessive with nothing left for charity; however they still have their spring rod run and the club has every intention to bring back the "Pasta Feed". Mark your calendars for May 12th as the Pan Draggers bring you their annual "Start'n Summer Rod Run", you won't be disappointed. The venue is gorgeous with shady trees everywhere, the Kings River serves as the backdrop, and the green grass for miles will accommodate hundreds of rides.

The club has started sister clubs in other cities in California, however they didn't last long. The endurance of the Pan Draggers lies with the old mystic thoughts of how it was. It really wasn't thought of as "We're meaner or better than any other Club", however it was found out recently that guys from other towns around the Valley were told to not ever park their car in the Pan Draggers parking lot up on the main in the 50's. During that period of time the boys had no idea

that they were thought of in that manner. They were just a bunch of guys that loved cars and loved working on them. They are really no different today.

In the last decade the club has lost some instrumental members to the big car club in the sky, however club participation is at an all time high. Pushing upwards to forty members the Pan Draggers look towards the future. Many longtime members are now seeing their sons taking an interest in the lifestyle and committing themselves to preserving the pride and mystic of the club. To everybody's surprise, old members from the good ol' days are coming out of the woodwork. Many are dusting off their old rides, some building their dream cars, and a couple has hot rods and topnotch Bonneville racers. The club is seeing some of their most colorful members of the past come back and reenlist in the club. With such a rich history, the mystic of the patch is as strong as ever. Look for the Pan Dragger gang at a show near you and go sit and listen to some of their wild tall tales.

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