

Beachcomber Chrysler: The Story of the 300-F that Scorched Daytona's Sands

by Andy Mikonis

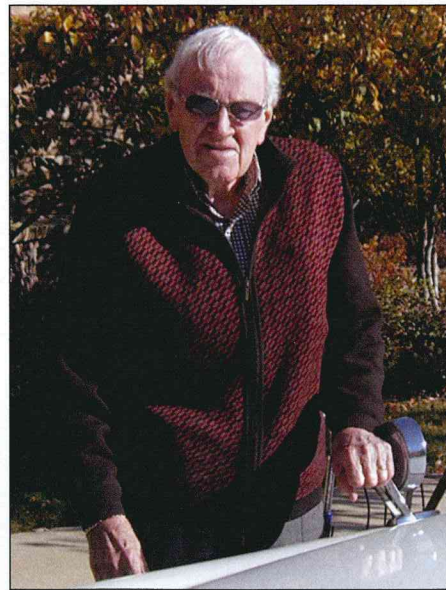
When Gregg Ziegler's black Chrysler 300-F went full throttle through the timing traps on Daytona Beach on February 7, 1960, it was the fastest of seven 300-Fs that took the top seven places in the "flying mile" at that year's NASCAR International Performance and Safety Trials. Run on hard-packed sands of Florida's Atlantic coast, the flying-mile competition clocked the time it took to cover a measured mile in a car that was already up to speed. For whatever else it accomplished, the event did serve to answer the question of who made the fastest production car in America in the years that it was held, and it was arguably the centerpiece of the famous Daytona Speed Weeks—at least until activity shifted to Bill France's new Daytona International Speedway built nearby.

The unlikely hero at the wheel that day was not a well-known racer, but a hardware store owner from Elgin, Illinois. What Ziegler accomplished was destined to stand as an "unbreakable" Daytona record. The very car he used survives as a cherished artifact from the history of Chrysler's legendary "letter cars."

Four years earlier, on his first trip to the beach, Ziegler had been a witness to a high point in Chrysler racing history. Thanks to their abundantly powerful hemispherical-head V-8s, the new high-performance Chryslers had hit the scene in a big way, with Carl Kiekhaefer's 300s dominating NASCAR and AAA stock car racing in the 1955 and 1956 seasons. Kiekhaefer prepared a '56 Chrysler 300-B for the flying mile, piloted by star driver Tim Flock. It ran 139.373 mph, shattering the year-old record of 127.580 set by a 1955 Chrysler 300. Ziegler was so impressed he went home to Illinois and traded in the 1956 Buick Century he had just bought for a 300-B.

However, the next few years at Daytona Beach were not so kind to "America's

When engineering professionals from Chrysler teamed up with a determined amateur driver from Illinois, they blazed a trail into the record books at the legendary Daytona Speed Weeks.



most powerful car." The all-new 1957 Chrysler 300-Cs bowed with an engine upped to 392 cid and a minimum of 375 bhp. A 300-C captured first place in the Class 7 flying mile for factory-stock 1957 cars over 350 cid at 134.128 mph, but was bested for overall honors by a Pontiac from Class 6.

"To say that faces were red would be to understate the case," reported Kenneth Rudeen in *Sports Illustrated*, "for the 300-C with maximum speed equipment is advertised to have 390 hp, the highest in the industry." Rudeen reported the Pontiac was disqualified, but Burt Bouwkamp, engineering manager for Chrysler Division at the time, still sees this as a defeat. Additionally, Bouwkamp recounted that a much-hyped 300-C prepared for the Experimental Class that he said would have exceeded 150 mph suffered a clutch failure and did not finish.

Chryslers fared even worse the following year. "Nineteen fifty-eight was an all-Pontiac show," recalled Bouwkamp. "They swept the first six places."

Meanwhile, Ziegler was getting his feet wet at the beach, so to speak. In '57, he competed with his 300-B in the Century Club, a class for vehicles that were modified or not of the current model year. The next year, a friend, Dick Dice, asked Ziegler to drive his 1958 300-D in the Speed Weeks standing-mile competition, which recorded the average speed over a mile beginning from a dead stop. He placed 10th.

Ziegler's first try at the flying mile came in 1959, when he bought one of the new 300-Es. Bouwkamp recalled that he earned a fourth place finish, though he says the results are up for debate as not only were the top five Pontiac drivers disqualified for unsportsmanlike conduct, but NASCAR published a second set of results based on a later date.

Chrysler had a serious image problem to contend with in 1959. Having ditched the hemi-head engine, it switched the 300 to a 413-cid mill with a head design featuring wedge-shaped combustion chambers that was less expensive to produce than the complex hemi. It was rated at the same 380 bhp as the naturally aspirated 392 hemi in the 300-D and Chrysler claimed—with some verification borne



2

out in press road tests—that low-end acceleration was better. But there was a sense that the wedge-head 300-E wasn't quite as strong at the limit. Whether or not the new engine was solely to blame, model-year production slipped to a new low of 550 two-door hardtops and 140 convertibles, prompting *Car and Driver's* Bill Carroll to later quip, "Bob Rodger, father of the 300, nearly killed off his creation with the low-suds 300E."

With calm determination Rodger, chief engineer and product director of the Chrysler-Imperial Division, hatched a plan. In spring 1959, he called on Bouwkamp to select and lead a team to develop a serious contender for the 1960 Speed Weeks in the form of a limited-production high-performance package for the 300-F. The project was internally named the Gran Turismo Program.

The 300 they had to work with for 1960 would already be a completely new car. That year, Chrysler switched from body-on-frame to unitized construction for all its products save the luxury Imperial. The '60 Chrysler-brand cars featured fresh styling with flaring, canted tailfins and trapezoidal grilles. At least torsion-bar front suspension and wheelbases—126 inches in the case of the 300-F—were retained from recent years.

While the limited-production cars Rodger wanted looked exactly like any other 300-F on the outside, the first clue that they were something special was a manual transmission shifter. Chrysler did not offer a heavy-duty manual transmission in 1960, so it bought a fully synchronized four-speed from a French company, Pont-a-Mousson, which had developed it for the Chrysler-powered Facel Vega.

Under the hood was a reworked 400-bhp version of the 413-cid wedge V-8 with ram induction. Dubbed "short" ram, this referred to the internal division of the manifold—it had the same 30-inch external length of the "long"-ram design of the standard 375-bhp engine.

The inner passage was divided all the

1. Gregg Ziegler (in a 2007 photo) was one of the many car enthusiasts who once flocked to the sands of Daytona Beach, Florida, for the flying-mile competition at the annual "Speed Weeks" but he became one of the rare few to set a record there. 2. The Chrysler 300-F that he drove to a two-way average of 144.927 mph at Daytona survives as a shining example of the make's new styling and engineering for 1960. (Owner: Larry Tarantolo)

way through in a long-ram manifold, which was tuned to produce midrange torque. Engineers discovered they could get more top-end performance by opening up the tube halfway through. The short ram was visibly different as the top surface was flat, whereas the long ram had a groove down the center where the division was.

Twin Carter AFB carburetors—perched atop the ends of the manifold rams out beyond the valve covers—were unique to the package. The air cleaners had longer studs to accommodate larger air-filter elements.

Special elaborate cast-iron headers provided no carburetor heat via exhaust, so manually operated chokes were installed and engine coolant was piped through the carburetor bases (though, Bouwkamp said, the latter wasn't hooked up for the group of cars that was prepared for Speed Weeks). Since the right exhaust manifold of the "standard" 300-F served as a mounting point for the generator, an alternator was installed instead on the high-perf jobs. (The alternator made its debut on select Chrysler Corporation models in 1960, but wouldn't be used across the board until 1961.) Dual exhaust pipes were 2.5 inches all the way back and ran through special mufflers.

A more aggressive camshaft with solid lifters and larger exhaust valves were employed. Additionally, the engines were carefully built for low friction with low-tension piston rings. "Normal bearing clearances range from .0005-inch to .0025-inch," recalled Bouwkamp. "These 400-horsepower engines were built to .0015-inch to .002-inch bearing clearances. I don't remember the piston clearances but they were optimized as well.

"Bob [Phillips] and Lee [Bowman,

respectively superintendent and chief inspector of the Jefferson Engine Plant] made sure that engine balance was as good as their equipment could make it. They also hand selected high-limit valve springs to assure good valve action—no false motion—at high engine speeds. As I look back at it, I am amazed over the high degree of support that we got from all levels of Chrysler Division personnel."

The Daytona-bound cars started life as completed regular-production 300-Fs, which were then taken to the engineering garage at the Jefferson Assembly Plant to be fitted with their special parts. The Pont-a-Mousson transmission did not fit under the floor, nor was there a hole for the shifter, so the team removed the seats and console, cut the floor, and modified a body cross member for clearance. A new cover was fabricated for the tunnel, and a clutch- and brake-pedal assembly from a Dodge or Plymouth was swapped in. The shift pattern was hand-stamped in the bezel around the shifter.

"Goodyear supplied special Blue Streak tires that absorbed less power than normal Blue Streaks," said Bouwkamp. Other modifications for high speed included an oversized alternator pulley and modified brackets to keep the horns from blocking air flow to the radiator.

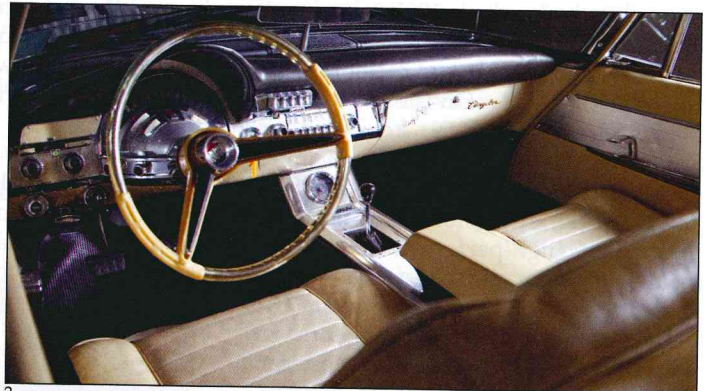
Because the cars were born as standard 300-Fs, it raises a quandary. There is no option code for the 400-horsepower package to verify a car's authenticity, only circumstantial evidence. Clearly the rarity of the parts would make it difficult to fake one, but a major clue is the correlation between the scheduled build date found on the body, which can also be approximated by the serial number sequence, and the shipping date recorded by the factory.



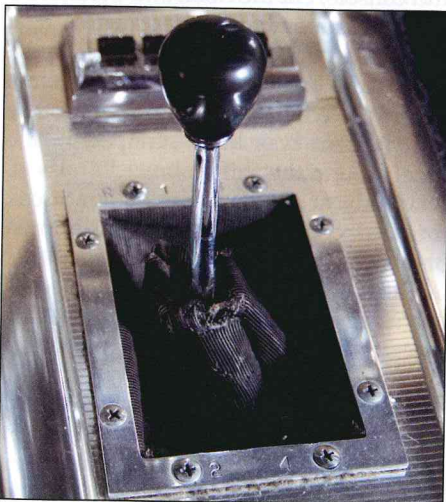
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1. Before collector Larry Tarantolo bought the specially prepared 300-F hardtop in 2008, it had been owned by the man to whom Ziegler had sold it in 1960. 2, 3. The 300 became a four-seat car in 1960 with the addition of a full-length floor console. 4. Ziegler's car was one of a handful built with a Pont-a-Mousson four-speed gearbox. 5. The factory tachometer might have been helpful had it not been located in the console, out of the driver's line of sight. 6. Swiveling front seats covered in perforated leather were standard. 7. A period decal recognizes the organizer of Speed Weeks. 8. The 300's tricolors appeared on 1212 cars in '60. 9. The dummy-spare "Flight-Sweep" decklid was a one-year feature on 300s.

On the lesser Chrysler models, the dates can be the same or very close. For a 300-F, the gap can be several days since the elaborate new interiors were hand fitted off the assembly line. In the case of a 400-horsepower car, the gap is months. The Ziegler car shows a schedule date of November 2, 1959, while factory records show a shipping date of January 29, 1960. Fortunately, the whereabouts of the Ziegler car have been known since then, so its provenance is not in question.

Any 300-F is a rare animal to begin with, having a total production of only 964 hardtops and 248 convertibles. It is unclear exactly how many were built with the high-performance package. Bouwkamp recalls prepping five cars for Daytona, plus an engineering prototype, or "mule" car. Some confusion has persisted over the years as to the nature of the top seven 300-Fs in the '60 flying-mile competition. Bouwkamp confirms that the mule was entered and that the seventh finisher was a 375-bhp/automatic car. "We built more 400-horsepower models after Daytona because we couldn't shut it off," said Bouwkamp. "A dozen total is

a good guess. I think we even built some with automatic transmissions." Whatever the total, one other Daytona car and two built after Daytona survive today.

Chrysler needed private owners to enter the cars. "Burt Bouwkamp . . . called me and said how would you like to have a Chrysler 300 with a four-speed box?," recalled Ziegler. "I said, gee, that'd be wonderful."

Ziegler remembered bundling up for the trip to Detroit to pick up the car in a friend's Jaguar convertible in the dead of winter. "I met with Bob [Rodger] and Burt and they took me to the executive dining room for lunch . . . then presented the car. I paid full dealer price for that car—they should have given it to me—I think five thousand and some dollars. It had no heat on the carburetors. It was a beast. Forty-pound clutch. But it was quite a car. Or I thought it was. I enjoyed it."

With Daytona just days away, Ziegler drove back to Elgin, his new black Chrysler the buzz among local car guys. "I remember in the store, we were in the retail hardware business, and the kids used to come in with their Chevs and

Pontiacs, and they'd want to run me," recounted Ziegler. "Well, I couldn't do that. My name was worth more than that in the community as a merchant."

But Ziegler still needed to shake down the "F," so he enticed the challengers out to the new tollway, where he said speed limits were not yet enforced. "I'd go 60 in low, 90 in second, 120 in third, lay it into fourth gear and go right off the end of the speedometer," he said. "So, it was a potent car, but in cold weather it was a miserable thing to drive."

Since Saturdays were the busiest day of the week at the hardware store, Ziegler worked all day before setting off for Daytona Beach at 10 P.M. "I was all alone," said Ziegler. "I didn't have a brother or a buddy who was a mechanic to go along. The nearest I had was Carl Pruehs."

Pruehs was the ace engineering mechanic with hands-on knowledge gained from having executed the modifications to the 300-Fs, and he was tasked with tuning and prepping them for the runs. The Chrysler engineering team in Daytona Beach, including Bouwkamp, had set up shop at San Juan Motors, the local Chrysler agency owned by fellow competitor Brewster Shaw, to support the Chrysler entrants. Ziegler said there was camaraderie with the other 300-F drivers, some of whom he already knew. "I never felt any rivalry," he said.

When it came time for the record run, Ziegler had his method down. Crediting his good eyesight in retrospect, he was able to pick the perfect line down the sand, near the water where it was packed and smooth, but not too close where the wet sand could pull him in. "I'd put my foot on the accelerator—of course we wore a helmet and a [seat] belt, but



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not like NASCAR nowadays . . . and I'd wedge myself between the ceiling and the floor, and I wouldn't give up. I wouldn't release it. I just went. And that's all it was. It was just a straight run, of course."

Ziegler's two-way average of 144.927 mph finally broke Flock's 1956 record. Bouwkamp and Ziegler both pointed to the next day's *Daytona Beach Morning Journal* headline—"Class 7 Beach Record Falls"—as the most meaningful symbol of their achievement. When Ziegler died in his sleep on June 22 of this year at age 89, a framed copy still hung in his home.

A curious post-run anecdote was that when the 300-F went through the required technical inspection, it was discovered that there were two different brands of spark plugs in the engine. Pruehs and Ziegler had been working across from each other and inadvertently mixed them up. "Champion advertised on television that they had won again with Champion plugs," said Ziegler. "I had to emphasize that either Carl or I put in Autolites." Luckily this was not specifically against the rules.

Chrysler heavily publicized the victory to restore the 300's suspect image. Since the 400-bhp four-speed package was presented under the guise of an option anyone could buy, many enthusiasts tried to do just that.

Robert McAtee of Bloomington, Illinois, was one of those who unsuccessfully tried to check the box, and took his case straight to the top. He received a personal reply from none other than Bob Rodger, who politely said in so many words that it was never Chrysler's intention to allow the average motorist to buy the car. Indeed, besides the Daytona boys, the only ones known to get their hands on a car from the Gran Turismo Program were a friend of Carl Kiekhaefer, a wealthy highway-construction magnate, Andy Granatelli, and possibly Briggs Cunningham.

McAtee's Plan "B" was simple: He tracked down Ziegler and purchased his car. In retrospect, Ziegler wished he had kept it, but he needed the money to buy the 400-bhp 300-G that won him the 1961 flying-mile honors. In what would prove to be the last Daytona Beach flying mile competition, two other 300-Gs actually outran his—one of them would have broken the 1960 record—but were disqualified for losing their windshield-header moldings during the runs. Thus, Ziegler's record in Class 7, where the strongest of the strong factory stocks ran, still stands.

Ziegler returned to Speed Weeks with

1960 Chrysler 300-F Powerteam Specifications: Standard vs. Optional

	Standard	Optional
Engine		
Horsepower @ rpm	375 @ 5000	400 @ 5200
Torque (lb-ft) @ rpm	495 @ 2800	465 @ 3600
Lifter type	hydraulic	mechanical
Valve lift, intake/exhaust (in.)	.430/.430	.449/.454
Valve duration (degrees)	268	284
Valve overlap (degrees)	48	55
Intake opens (degrees ¹)	20	25
Exhaust closes (degrees ²)	28	30
Valve diameter, intake (in.)	2.08	2.08
Valve diameter, exhaust (in.)	1.60	1.74
Carburetors	2×Carter AFB 2903S	2×Carter AFB 3084S
Air filters, effective area (sq in.)	500	925
Chokes	automatic	manual
Intake manifold type	ram-induction	ram-induction
Intake runner length (in.)	30	15
Intake manifold heat source	exhaust	water
Exhaust type	dual with crossover	dual
Exhaust manifold type	cast-iron log	cast-iron header
Exhaust pipe, diameter (in.)	2.25	2.5
Tailpipe, diameter (in.)	2.0	2.5
Electrical system	Autolite generator	Chrysler alternator
Timing (degrees ¹)	5	10
Spark plugs	Autolite A-32	Autolite A-201, Champion J-79
Conductor	resistance	stainless steel, nonresistance
Insulation	synth. rubber/neoprene	silicone/glass inner braid
Transmission		
Type	Chrysler TorqueFlite auto.	Pont-a-Mousson manual
Speeds	3	4
Activation	instrument-panel push buttons	floor lever
Ratios		
1st gear	2.45:1	3.35:1
2nd gear	1.45:1	1.96:1
3rd gear	1.00:1	1.36:1
4th gear	—	1.00:1
reverse	2.20:1	3.11:1

Both horsepower ratings were attained by the basic 300-F engine, a 413-cid 90-degree ohv V-8 with wedge-shape combustion chambers, 4.18-inch bore, 3.75-inch stroke, and 10.1:1 compression ratio.
¹Before top dead center. ²After top dead center.



a 1962 Chrysler, but found the beach closed to automotive activity, eclipsed by racing events scheduled at the speedway and by encroaching seaside development. So ended his competitive career.

"I went to Road America and horsed around a little bit," he told me. "But no racing as such." Ever the car enthusiast, Ziegler was sitting on a fleet of four Mercedes-Benz AMGs when I met with him in 2007, rattling off the torque and horsepower figures of each one.

Meanwhile, McAtee kept the 300-F for decades, clocking an indicated total of just more than 11,000 miles. As his health failed, the car sat in dry storage for several years until his death in 2007.

In 2008, Illinois collector Larry Tarantolo purchased the ex-Gregg Ziegler 300-F. He had been stalking it since the Eighties. "Bob did a wonderful job of preserving, caring for, and archiving the car," said Tarantolo. Even the original tires were still on it.

Some typical mechanical massaging was required to get it roadworthy again. The brakes were stuck and, upon inspection, "there was still sand in the grease in the hubs from racing on the beach 50 years ago," said Tarantolo. "The brakes were never touched, the hubs had never been off."

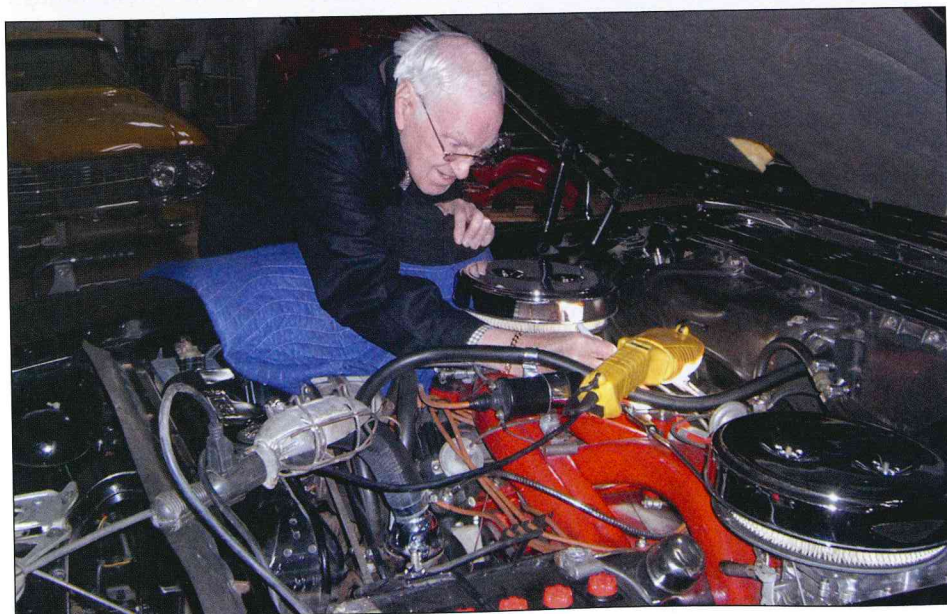
He retained the chrome engine dress-up accessories, long thought to have been

added by McAtee. "We did not install the chrome engine parts," confirmed Bouwkamp. "It never occurred to us."

Tarantolo has collected other autos with racing pedigrees, along with famous-builder hot rods and other low-production vehicles, and likes to connect with the people behind the cars. "I talked to him every week," he said of his friendship with Ziegler. Once the 300-F was ready, Tarantolo invited him and a few enthusiasts to see it. Ziegler ceremoniously signed the ram manifold and the glove box door. Then, with George Riehl, president of the Chrysler 300 Club International, in the passenger seat, he took the wheel of the black "F" for the first time in nearly 50 years and went for a drive through the countryside. **CA**



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Find Out More

To read more about the topics mentioned in this story, please see these issues of *Collectible Automobile*®: May 1985 (Chrysler 300 "letter cars"), November 1985 (Facel Vega), August 1986 and February 1993 (1956 Buick Century), June 1991 (1960 Plymouth), October 1993 (1958 Pontiac), December 1994 (1960 Chrysler), April 1995 (1957 Pontiac), April 1996 (Andy Granatelli), April 1999 (1959 Pontiac), December 1999 (1960 Dodge), June 2005 (1960 Imperial).

Clubs for 1960 Chrysler 300-F Enthusiasts

Chrysler 300 Club, Inc.
1801 Redwine Terrace
Brentwood, CA 94513-6000
Website: www.chrysler300clubinc.com

Chrysler 300 Club International, Inc.
P.O. Box 40
Benson, MD 21018
Website: www.chrysler300club.com

WPC (Walter P. Chrysler) Club, Inc.
P.O. Box 3504
Kalamazoo, MI 49003-3504
Fax: (269) 375-5535
Website: www.chryslerclub.org

1. Dual four-barrel carburetors sit atop the "short-ram" manifolds that helped the 413-cid V-8 engine generate 400 bhp. 2. During a 2008 reunion with the car arranged by Tarantolo, Ziegler once again settled behind the wheel of the 1960 Chrysler 300-F in which he set the Daytona flying-mile record for the big-displacement stock class. 3. The event also gave Ziegler an opportunity to autograph the engine's distinctive ram-induction intakes.