



Episode 9, '32 Ford Roadster, California

Tukufu Zuberi: Our next story goes flat out to uncover the true identity of this Ford Roadster. It's 1932, and America is in the depths of the Great Depression. Henry Ford has been slipping in sales, so he makes a gamble, offering his new models with a revolutionary engine, a V8 made from a single piece of steel. At first, the depression keeps sales low. But the powerful V8 eventually becomes the engine of choice for a generation of young men racing America's first hot rods in the California dry lakes in the 1930's and 40's. A man in Benicia, California thinks his car may have been one of these first hot rods.

Gary Felsing: I bought the car sight unseen. It was a car that I thought was a Model A. It was delivered a couple of weeks later and it turned out to be a 1932 Ford Roadster. It was absolutely spectacular.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I'm meeting Gary Felsing to take a look at his car.

Gary: I bought this when I was a senior in college and that was 1964.

Tukufu: So you believe this used to be a race car?

Gary: Well, I think at one time somebody went very fast in this car. It had a very special engine in it when I bought it. And, it was a little too fast. In fact, very fast for normal driving on the street. And so I took that engine out and put this other engine in.

Tukufu: Now who did you buy it from?

Gary: I bought it from a guy by the name of Don Roberts. And he was about 28 years old.

Tukufu: Now, was Don Roberts a car racer?

Gary: Not that I'm aware of. I just don't know. I just met him briefly when he delivered the car. This is the engine, as it is when it came out of the car in 1964.

Tukufu: Alright. So what do you want me to find out for you?

Gary: I want you to find out if this engine/car combination was a dry lakes racer in the 1940's.

Tukufu: Alright. I just want to take a few photographs.

Gary: Sure.



Tukufu: Do you have anything else in here? Any other numbers or anything?

Gary: I've got the original license plate that was on the car when I bought it.

Tukufu: Oh, okay. It looks like an eight-cylinder engine. But that's where my expertise ends. I may need to send the engine out. Is that okay with you?

Gary: Oh, absolutely.

Tukufu: Gary gives me the frame number, body number and old VIN number off of the car.

Tukufu: Okay. Do you mind if I take her for a ride?

Gary: You're very welcome to. Here's the keys.

Tukufu: Thank you very much.

Gary: You're welcome.

Tukufu: Now I'm going to go find an answer to your questions and get back to you as speedily as I can.

Gary: Well, this car will help you do that.

Tukufu: Yes, I'm sure it will. [Laughs] After a quick driving lesson from Gary, I'm on my way. I've got a hunch the engine Gary pulled from the car may be crucial to the investigation. But my first task is to get up to speed on dry lakes racing. The alkaline dry lakes of California's Mohave Desert were the perfect place to go flat out. It was here in the 30s and 40s where the hot rodding culture began. Long before NASCAR or drag strips existed, this is where young men with a need for speed raced their souped-up cars. "The course was typically one and a half miles long with a quarter-mile timed area known as The Traps. A time of nine seconds equaled a speed of 100 miles per hour. Roadsters were the preferred race care for competing at the lakes. And Ford Roadsters made up the largest contingent of these racers." So it's possible Gary's car could have been raced at the dry lakes. World War II brings the dry lake races to a screeching halt. But after the war, many of the same guys are back in action with new mechanical skills they'd learned in service and a little cash to spend on parts. Street racing, or drag racing, comes later. But in the late 40s, dry lake racing takes off. Maybe I can get a hold of Don Roberts to figure out if this car ever raced at the dry lakes. I'm trying the California DMV. They might be able to help me track him down, based on the old VIN number and license plate number. Yes. He sold the car in 1964 and I have the VIN number, I have the old license plate number. I beg your pardon? You have



expunged all of your records before 1976? That's a dead end. And I don't have any luck finding Don Roberts by other means. The name is just too common. Perhaps early Ford historian, Lorin Sorenson can tell me something about the engine in Gary's car. What's so special about the '32 Ford?

Lorin Sorenson: It was the first low priced car that came with a V8 engine. Suddenly the average buyer could have the power at his fingertips. Before they only had four cylinder engines. Now you doubled the horsepower.

Tukufu: Lorin says Ford closed all production down for months, secretly designing the new engine for the '32 models. Until that moment, only expensive cars had V8's. But by casting his new engine in a single block, Ford had created a revolutionary and powerful engine for the masses.

Lorin: When the hot rodders discovered it they had a piece of art to work with. It became the quintessential racing engine for the average American for the next 22 years.

Tukufu: So what makes a hot rod a hot rod?

Lorin: This is what you bought from the used car lot or inherited from your father, or whoever. Then you would lighten up the car, take all the stuff off of it, then you would go to work on the engine. And you turned it into this.

Tukufu: Okay.

Lorin: And this is what you would take and build for the street, or you might build it to go out and race it.

Tukufu: Here are the numbers that I found associated with this car. Any of those numbers look familiar to you?

Lorin: Well, right away. AB stands for four cylinder.

Tukufu: Okay.

Lorin: This was a four cylinder car.

Tukufu: So Gary's car originally had a four cylinder engine in it? Not a V8?

Lorin: That's right. And then...sometime through the years, which is very common, they swapped in a V8 engine in there. It could fit in the same space. And it made more sense, because they had more power, twice the power.



Tukufu: This is the one that came in it from the previous owner.

Lorin: Well, it's a V8 engine, that's for sure. Ford V8 engine.

Tukufu: Lorin explains that swapping out a four cylinder engine was the first job of any hot rodder.

Lorin: So that was typical. They would buy or purchase the best, most powerful engine they could and then they would hot rod it. And get more speed out of it and then take it to the dry lakes.

Tukufu: Had our engine been hot rodded? How do you think I can find out more about this engine?

Lorin: Well, the best way would be to take that engine to a speed shop and then they could tell you whether it's been hot rodded for something like the dry lakes.

Tukufu: Well, I need to have an engine shipped. I would like it delivered to Vern Tardel's Early Ford Part and Repair Shop. While the engine is being shipped to a specialist, I'm meeting Gene "Windy" Winfield, who raced on the dry lakes in the late 40s. He doesn't live far from El Mirage, the only dry lake where they still race.

Tukufu: How you doing? I'm Tukufu.

Gene: I'm Gene Winfield. How are you?

Tukufu: I'm fine. And yourself?

Gene: Come on over and let's take a look.

Tukufu: Were you out there in the 40s and the 50s?

Gene: Yes. My first time at El Mirage was in May '49. And I'm still running El Mirage.

Tukufu: You're still running?

Gene: I'm still running it today.

Tukufu: You're still racing?

Gene: Oh, yes. Okay. Here's my '27 T Coupe. It's a duplicate of a care that I built in 1948/49 and I raced it off and on till '53. Follow me out to El Mirage and we'll unload this and we'll actually run it at El Mirage.



Tukufu: Hey, man, I'm down for it.

Gene: Right now today, okay?

Tukufu: Let's do it. [Laughs]

Tukufu: This is one cool ride. I hope I can fit in it.

Gene: There you go. Here we are at El Mirage. And this is where it all started, you know, clear back in the 40s and late 30s.

Tukufu: I just don't think I'm going to be able to fit in here.

Gene: No. No. We're going to have to put you in the Strip Star, which is all aluminum car. That's a '46 Ford frame and it has a 427 Ford engine in it. It's very fast. That's a 200 mile an hour car.

Tukufu: Alright, let's do it, man.

Gene: Okay.

Tukufu: What a feeling of freedom. I can see what drove the early dry lake racers. And I'm having a lot of fun but, you know, I've got to get back to my investigation. I'm investigating a 1932 Ford Roadster.

Gene: Probably half the cars out there were '32's, probably.

Tukufu: I'm trying to see if it actually raced on the dry lakes.

Gene: Well, it's hard to tell, because...you see, back in the day, they built them like this. This is a street roadster. I mean, it's full fenders, it's got headlights and windshield and top, and everything. And it has a dropped axle, which was very common. Gene points out another modification on Gary's car. A series of cuts made in the hood.

Gene: Now, a louvered hood was to let heat out. And quite often these flat heads were known to get warm. You know, they would run a little bit hot, so we louvered the hoods.

Tukufu: Now, is that the kind of thing you would do for a race car?



Gene: Oh, yeah. Definitely.

Tukufu: Gene suggests a hot rodding expert, Phil Linhares, of the American Hot Rod Archives Foundation. I'm meeting him at Vern Tardel's Early Ford Shop, where I had the engine shipped.

Tukufu: How you doing, Phil? This is one cool car, man.

Phil: Well, thank you. This is the car, huh?

Tukufu: This is it. This is it.

Phil: Well, let's pull it into the garage and take a look.

Tukufu: Excellent.

Tukufu: Phil, I'm trying to find out if this beautiful Ford was ever involved in dry lake racing.

Phil: Well, one bit of evidence is this. I brought along a timing plaque.

Tukufu: Phil explains that the Southern California Timing Association, which ran the dry lakes races, issued plaques to document racers fastest times.

Phil: It would say you actually went 134 miles an hour on the dry lakes. This plaque would most likely be installed right here. I don't see any evidence of holes being drilled...

Tukufu: Phil doesn't find any drill holes in our car where a plaque would have been mounted.

Tukufu: Couldn't our guy have raced it on the dry lake and just decided he didn't want to put a plaque on his car?

Phil: That's a possibility, but most guys would like to show the world that they did turn 134 miles an hour on the dry lakes.

Tukufu: Phil tells me that the Southern California Timing Association also instituted safety regulations, including mandatory roll bars.

Phil: A roll bar would have been welded or bolted to the frame. And if that was the case, you would see some evidence of a roll bar having been placed here. And I do not see any evidence.



Tukufu: What about the engine I had sent over?

Phil: Well, I'm not an engine expert, but you've come to the right place. I want you to talk to Vern about this.

Tukufu: How you doing? I'm Tukufu Zuberi.

Vern: Oh, my pleasure. Glad to meet you.

Tukufu: Yeah. I sent the engine over? I'm trying to figure out if this engine was used in dry lake racing.

Vern: Well...I can give you a little bit of information on the motor. The block that you brought is a 1941/'42 Mercury block. This block was very desirable for dry lakes racing in the 40s. Machine work on this block is exceptional. So whoever built this block was either professional or had access to some very, very serious equipment. The crankshaft in this motor is a Mercury crank and it's a 1949 Mercury crank. So, that would indicate to me that the block and the motor was probably built past 1949.

Tukufu: Okay. So now, would this have been very expensive to do back then?

Vern: This would be a very, very expensive motor.

Tukufu: Then Vern told me what I needed to go back to Gary with an answer.

Tukufu: This is a fun ride right here, man. You know, not only has the ride of this car been a real pleasure for me, but this investigation has taken me along a road that I've never driven down before. I told Gary his original car came with a four cylinder engine in it. But it was the big V8 that had once been in the car that gave us the most information.

Vern: Well, as far as I can determine, this was a pretty serious racing engine for its time. I would think that this motor would certainly be capable of running dry lakes or racing. It has all the indications of that.

Tukufu: So what you're telling me is that this is a racing engine?

Vern: My estimation this was built for racing.

Tukufu: For dry lake racing?

Vern: Well, dry lakes, maybe drag racing. We can not determine that, but one or the other.



Gary: Well, that's fantastic. That's fantastic!

Tukufu: The '49 crankshaft in the older block meant that whoever had put the engine in Gary's car had hot rodded it for maximum power. We couldn't tell whether your car, your engine, was used for street racing, drag racing or dry lake racing. But, we do know that it was built for going fast. So how fast did this car go?

Vern: Oh, at least over 100 miles an hour.

Tukufu: Over 100 miles.

Vern: Over 100 miles an hour.

Tukufu: 130?

Vern: No, not that...Maybe not that fast, but....

Tukufu: 120?

Vern: 120 and hang on!

Gary: I haven't had it that fast.

Tukufu: Yes, yes, yes. You going to go out and try it now?

Gary: No, no. No, that's for sure.

Tukufu: I tell Gary that in the modifications made to his car, we can see the spirit of innovation and the simple desire to take a stock car fast, both of which drive two of the nations most popular sports – NASCAR and drag racing.

Gary: That's super. Thank you.

Tukufu: Well, it's been a pleasure.