

Mel Taormino Tradition is Everything

Story and photos by Shannon Fain
and Randy Johnson



Mel Taormino's restored Texaco Station in Grants Pass, Oregon, with his '34 Ford Phaeton, built by Roy Brizio

I want to keep the hot rod spirit alive. Tradition is everything.

—Mel Taormino

Mel Taormino comes from a family built on tradition and powered by the opportunities found in America. He has on the wall of his restored Texaco station a certificate of registration from the Statue of Liberty Ellis Island Foundation. He's proud of it. It states that the Taormino family from Sicily "is among those courageous men and women who came to this country in search of personal freedom, economic opportunity and a future of hope for their families."

His private mid-1950s-style Texaco station is one of the most beautiful in the world. (The Sky Chief and Fire Chief pumps are vintage 1939.) It's on his home property in Grants Pass, Oregon. Yes, that's it on the cover of this *Catalog 26*, along with one of his most prized cars: a '34 Ford Phaeton built by famed San Francisco builder Roy Brizio. The gas station and other buildings on his

property actually house a private museum of Fords and Americana. "It's not open to the public, but I want to share it with my old friend Bob Drake and with the early Ford community through this article. In these changing times, it's important that we remember where we came from," said Mel.

Mel's grandparents Philipo and Anna Taormino had 12 children: six in Porticello, Sicily and another six after they arrived in San Jose, California, in 1907. Mel was born on Christmas day in 1939 to Peter and Frances Taormino and raised on Allen Oak Farm near San Jose, an apricot and prune ranch his father bought in 1946. At age 12 (two years before he got a driver's license) he got his first car: the *Bardahl Special*, a '30 Ford Tudor bearing a big number 8 on its door. He and his older brother Phil used it around the ranch.

As a young teen, when his friends were stealing *Playboy* magazines from their older brothers, Mel was "borrowing" his older brother's hot rod magazines. His father was a Ford man who had a '56 Vicky and who wrenched on orchard trucks, tractors, and Caterpillars. Mel had real mechanical aptitude and caught the hot rod bug early. His first inspiration and mentor was family friend Frank Burticchio, a member of the San Jose Ignitors car club, who had a beautiful American-La France red hot rod '29 Ford Roadster Pickup. It appeared in two maga-



The gas station is packed with beautiful memorabilia: Coca Cola drink boxes, books, parts, toy trains and cars.



The Texaco Station is complete with a Ride 'Em Cowboy condoms machine in the bathroom!



Mel was inspired by Frank Burticchio and his '29 Roadster Pickup. It was featured in *Hot Rod Magazine*, July 1953.

zines in 1953: In July it was in *Hot Rod*; in November it appeared in *Hop Up*. Mel started his own project with the same model, completing it in 1960. It won the 1962 NHRA Winter

Nationals. His mother was behind him all the way, always encouraging him. As a result of that project, he got to know local promoter Paul Bender of the San Jose Autorama. Since then, his '29 pickup has been featured in more than 30 magazines. (A photo is at the bottom of this page.)

Yes, Mel **still** has the same '29 pickup he built in 1960. In fact, unlike most of us who talk in dreamy ways about all the hot cars we **used** to have, Mel **still has** most of the cars he built and collected since he was tagged by his cousins with the nickname Snookie. "The cars are like family. I love them too much to sell 'em," said Mel, "They're part of me." His Ford collection includes: Model A 400, '29 Roadster, '29 Coupe, '31 Tudor, '31 Fordor, '31 Phaeton, '31 Model A Tow Truck (to be painted in Texaco colors to go with the gas station), '32 Coupe, '33 Roadster, '34 Phaeton, '34 Tudor, '34 Cabriolet, '57 Ranchero, '68 Shelby GT 500 Convertible, and a '70 Bronco.

Two other mentors for young Mel were Dave Sorich, who had a '34 Coupe, and Tut Brown, who had a Deuce Roadster and ran Tut's Speed Shop in Willow Glen, California. Mel and his buddies loved hanging out at Tut's. "Dave and Tut were hot rodders: they traded those two cars with each other, but kept their own engines!" said Mel.

In 1969 Mel won the coveted title of *Street Rod of the Year* in *Rod and Custom Magazine* for his '34 Phaeton. The car had a history: it was owned in the 1960s by the editor of *Hot Rod Magazine*, Tex Smith.

From his father he learned that a man doesn't get anything for nothing; you've got to work for it. "There's no free lunch," Peter Taormino told Mel.

"I worked for a contractor in San Jose and became a foreman and then a supervisor working with heavy equipment laying asphalt, mostly paving highways," said Mel. In 1959 he joined the U.S. Army, becoming an MP, and served in the reserves as an AIT specialist and teacher in unarmed defense.

How did Mel get to Grants Pass, Oregon? He had participated in the Cruise of the Cascades up into Oregon for 20 years. Grants Pass reminded him of what San Jose had been like when he was a kid. "I like the outdoors, and I like a little privacy," said Mel. Bob Drake, an old friend from Los Angeles, showed him around Josephine County. Mel's wife Joyce—a car lover and his biggest supporter—along with their two boys, Jim and Steve, approved the move in 2000. "Grants Pass is everything I hoped for, although I'm still looking for a great steak house," said Mel.

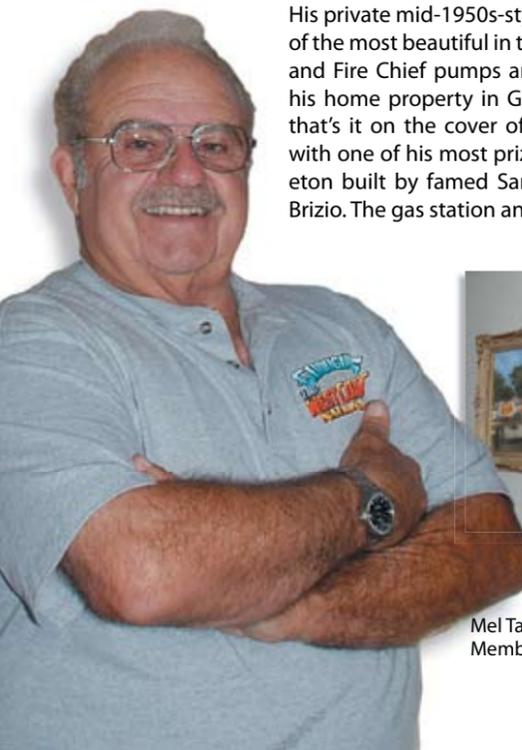
Mel said, "I've always been a Ford guy. My favorites are the '29, the Deuce, the '33-34s, and the '40. Bob Drake's *Steel '40* is important. If it weren't for Bob, where would we be? He's come a long way since I bought one of his first '34 locking gas caps and he's going to do well with the '40 body; it's priced just right. Bob's been instrumental in the early Ford world."

What's left on Mel's "To Do" list? "I want to build a '33 Roadster, the '31 Model A Tow Truck to finish the Texaco station, and maybe I'll get around to that '40 Coupe," said Mel, "I think Bob Drake can help me with that."

Group visits by car clubs to Mel's Texaco station and to see his car collection can be arranged by appointment. "I'm in the phone book," he said.



Shannon finds the girls rest room occupied!



Mel's grandparents, Anna and Philipo

Mel Taormino, Associate Member, LA Roadster Club



Mel with his '55 Ford Victoria



Mel with friend in #8, *The Bardahl Special*



Mel and Shannon swap hot rod stories while checking out the '29 Roadster Pickup



MEL TAORMINO
DEALER

Sign over Mel's door



A nice pair of '29s: a Roadster and a Coupe. At upper right is Mel's '68 Shelby Convertible.