

# Where have all the Car Clubs Gone?

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The first recorded car club event was in approximately 1487 B.C. when Pharaoh Thutmose the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Rameses to most of us) got together with some of the Boys and cruised out to the Red Sea to see some ex-relatives off on a trip into the wilderness. Most modern clubs began to appear around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the availability of “horseless carriages” to the common working man and women. Probably the oldest and longest lasting is the American Automobile Association or AAA [www.aaa.com](http://www.aaa.com) which was created when several smaller clubs banded together in 1902 and started the promotion of local track events. It still exists today and has entities throughout the country with the Automobile Club of Southern California being our own local chapter. The AAA has changed with time and is now more of a promotional and support company providing a variety of services to automobile owners and even though it’s somewhat removed from what most of us would think of as a “car club,” it’s impact and influence on our industry and hobby can be felt where ever we go, from the maps we use to plan out vacations, insurance and various supporting of auto events and venues like our own Wally Parks NHRA Museum.

Most modern day car clubs began to appear on the scene after the end of World War II. The Historic Car Club of Pennsylvania began in 1947 with five friends sharing the love of automobiles and a car club was born. Most clubs typically start up with a group of friends wanting to put some structure around their love of cars and the desire to create some activity they could share as a group and possibly with other like minded people. Our own Association of Handcrafted Automobiles [www.replicarclub.com](http://www.replicarclub.com) started in a very similar way in 1979 with Ed Russell and George Evans bringing together like interests in kit cars and their own love of replica Bugatti’s and Sterling automobiles. Our Fun Under the Sun car show started out as the A.H.A. Club picnic, which happened to be at Mrs Knott’s picnic area, and it grew as more people with kit cars found out about it and wanted to enjoy the fun.

Clubs start up around many different interests. Some are started around a group of friends with common interests such as our own Road Kings of Burbank [www.roadkingsburbank.com](http://www.roadkingsburbank.com) – 1952, which began as a racing club and slowly grew with members hot rods. The L.A. Roadsters [www.laroadsters.com](http://www.laroadsters.com) – 1957, started as a club focused on pre-1936 roadsters and puts on one of the better Roadster shows every year on Fathers Day. Then you can mix in clubs that celebrate the origin of their cars and you get Corvette clubs, GTO clubs, British Car Clubs, Porsche, Corvair, Meyers Manx, and name the car and it’s out there. There are literally thousands of clubs in existence at any point in time and even more informal gatherings. Unfortunately a lot of car clubs cease to exist every year now and the ones that have been around forever are reporting a decline in membership and participation – themselves being threatened with extinction.

So since automobiles have made their way into our lives, and Car Clubs have been a staple of the automotive culture for so long, why are so many Car Clubs dying off? The most common answer from people tends to be either money (for dues) or time, but like everything else around us today it’s much more complicated.

The first thing you have to do is ask yourself why you joined. For myself I joined the A.H.A in 1986 for two reasons... First, I was building my first kit – an NAF Cobra – and needed all kinds of questions answered like, how to register it when I was done? Secondly was to be involved with other people who had cars like mine, as back in 1986 there weren’t as many Cobra’s running around as there are today, and enjoy events that were Kit Car specific. Along the way I met a great bunch of people, both in the club and through the yearly Fun Under the Sun Car Show the club puts on, and I’ve had a lot of fun with my car! These are probably the most common reasons as to why we all joined car clubs, so let’s go with this as a basic premise for right now and see what has changed.

Since Al Gore invented the Internet, information and communication has become much easier to come by. We used to wait with great anticipation for our monthly magazines, praying that the technical problem we wanted to solve was in that particular months edition – usually not – and we had two or three industry magazines to help us out. Today we

log on and “Google” our question and get more info then we honestly know what to do with. With that wide open information highway came social networking... email gave us quick, easy communication with friends and potential vendors. A myriad of “forum” websites have sprung up catering to not only specific manufacturers, but also to specific Marques, which really opened up the flow of information and the ability to now ask, and receive answers to our questions. Yes there are downsides to forums as any time you open up an unlimited ability to express your opinion, you get one too many opinion - occasionally. Manufacturers have also taken advantage of this medium to present their products with beautiful images and lots of technical details about their wares providing the ability for customers to purchase items online without leaving their easy chair.

So how about events? Things to do with your car... There are still car shows – although even those are suffering decline now – to go and show off your baby. We no longer have the Drive-Ins – either the food or movie kind – but we have many other opportunities to hang out with our cars thru cruise-ins or semi formal gatherings by non-clubs. Whoa.. non clubs? Non clubs are gatherings of people and their cars that don’t have the formality of a Club Charter, bylaws, dues and newsletters. They are just a group of like minded people who decide to get together occasionally and enjoy their rides. The A.H.A. shares the Kit Cars on the Colorado event with the Arizona Cobra’s, which is one of those “non clubs.” No Dues, no Newsletter’s, no rules, but they are still well organized and they meet as often as they feel like it. They attend shows, races, cruise for fun, and hang around together because they like each others company, even down to a group Holiday party. Sounds like it’s a club in function if not by the definition we’ve always held. I also hang out with a similar group in Ventura call the Tri-County Cobra’s [www.site.tricountycobras.net](http://www.site.tricountycobras.net) . One guy sends out an email every other month and we all meet up at a Bar-B-Que shack in Ventura for lunch and a run somewhere afterwards. Sometimes as many as 30 Cobra’s show up and go thundering down the coast for an afternoon run. Why not make it a real club? Because they don’t want to deal with the rules! Donut Derelicks [www.donutderelicks.com](http://www.donutderelicks.com) in Huntington Beach are another great example.

Organized cruise ins also offer an opportunity for enjoying the car culture of the area and meeting up with friends. Some of the larger ones in the Los Angeles area are Super Car Sunday [www.supercarsunday.com](http://www.supercarsunday.com) in Woodland Hills that typically draw over 200 cars every single Sunday morning, and for the Holidays does a Toy Run that nets local charities over 6000 toys, or the Twilight Cruise sponsored by the Wally Parks NHRA Museum and Prolong Super Lubricants [www.museum.nhra.com](http://www.museum.nhra.com) . Make no mistake it’s a lot of effort to organize and manage these events but they tend to be a labor of love, not a requirement due to bylaws and votes by a Board of Directors.

So what about car clubs? To coin a phrase... “Why pay for the cow if you can get the milk free?” If you can get all the benefits of a car club without shelling out a single cent of hard earned money, or listen to a Board Member explain that “we do it that way because we’ve always done it that way!” why would you join? A sense of belonging maybe?

Traditional Hot Rod Clubs continue to weather the storm, mostly because of their family friendly nature, which is tougher to promote when you’re dealing with two seat Cobra’s, but they are not immune. As the Baby Boomers who make up the mainstay of these clubs age and they selloff their retirement investments (the cars), they will continue to have a difficult time in maintaining their membership numbers. We have an expensive hobby and younger people are more inclined to more modern daily driver cars with “tuning” capability thru a computer, as opposed to weekend cars where we listen to the engine and tweak the timing by ear. So as members leave, new ones are not replacing them and that is the problem killing organized clubs today. Our membership is less than 50% of what it was 10 years ago.

So what’s the answer? Why does there have to be a one size fits all? Everything grows and evolves and I think the car clubs of 50 years ago are being replaced by the “non-clubs” of people who get together for the fun of it today and the wide use of the internet. Sure I think these loose associations, due to their very nature of not being organized, won’t make it in the long term because they tend to hang on one dynamic individual but again, do they need to. I like the club structure, although I could do with less Board arguments, but then I’m not 25 looking for my first car... I’m closer to cashing in my retirement fund! What do you think?