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BY DAMON LEE

LAIDBACK & LOW-KEY

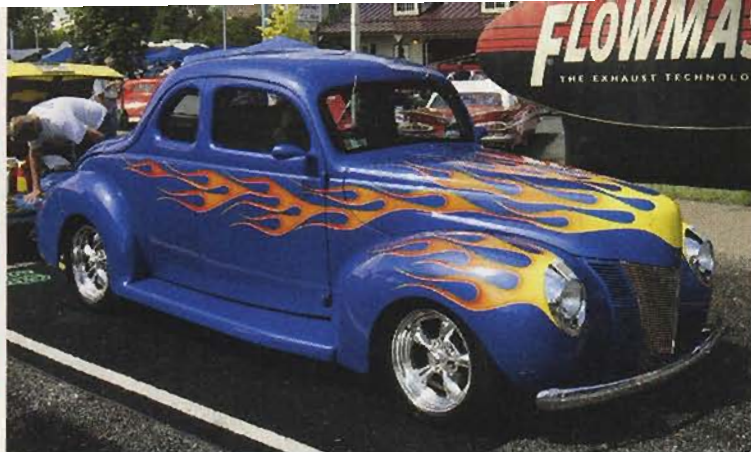
takin' it easy at back to the '50s in st. paul

Size has long been the hallmark of the huge Back to the '50s event held every summer in St. Paul, Minnesota. With more than 11,000 vehicles registered for this year's 33rd annual happening June 23-25, it was again one of the largest rod and custom shows in the country. But something beyond sheer numbers resonated at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds this year: a totally casual atmosphere. Simply put, this is probably the most laidback show of such magnitude anywhere.

In an era where street rod builders are television celebrities and car owners fret about where to "debut" their six-figure, pro-built rides, Back to the '50s is an unpretentious, bring-what-ya-got

gathering. The informal vibe is probably rooted in the way the Minnesota Street Rod Association runs the event. There are no awards or trophies, which takes away the air competition and makes things comfortable for those who own less-than-perfect machines. And by opening the door to all '64-and-earlier vehicles long ago, the MSRA has ensured a good mix of rods, customs, classics, trucks, and even a few vintage imports, most of which are (*gasp*) actually driven to the show!

Some participants camp in their cars overnight in order to claim particular parking spaces, but the vast fairgrounds are so inviting it's hard to pinpoint a true "power parking" area. Those who do find the "perfect" spot miss out on one of the event's



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Slick is the only way to describe Ray Maruska's '40 Ford convertible from Duluth. Mini Cooper headlights and a custom grille lead the way, with handmade side trim and 17-Inch Billet Specialties wheels adding sparkle to the silver and black exterior.



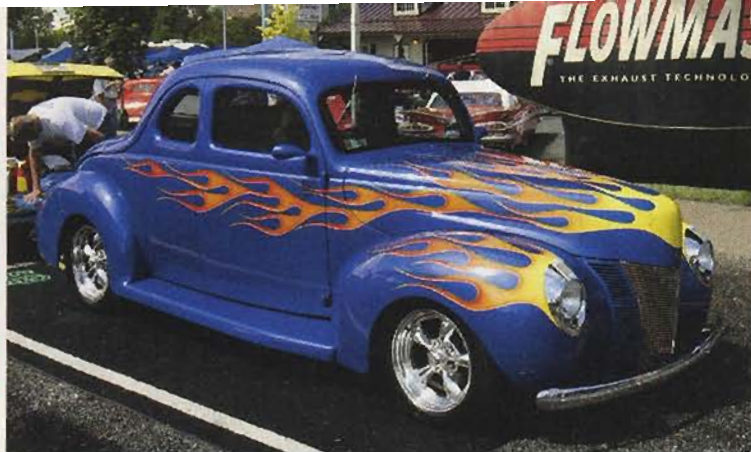
Norm Fey's '34 Dodge coupe is one badass Mopar, with a blown and injected 392 sending power through a Torqueflite to a narrowed Dana 60 rear. Realistic flames over black cherry paint and 16- and 18-inch Budnik rollers will keep you looking if you can pry your eyes from the mill.



Rick Moe's '36 Ford roadster just oozes tradition, from its 4-inch chop and maroon paint, to the vintage 283 Chevy V-8, '39 Merc trans, and '40 Ford rear with a Hallbrand quick-change center. The rubber rake comes courtesy of 6.00-16 and 7.50-16 bias-plies.



It doesn't take a ton of body mods to make a '46 Ford sedan look cool. Jim Gavrilescu's is simply dressed with bright yellow paint and flames. A right-on stance with red wheels, wide whites, and later Ford caps help the look.



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We love lakes-modified roadsters, especially when they look as cool and as fun as Steven Blake's '27 Ford with four-cylinder Ford power.



Vescio's Customizing and Restoration was showing off one of its latest creations—Steve Andersen's hot Deuce five-window. The chopped, sectioned, channeled, and stretched coupe rides on a Deuce Steel frame with SO-CAL suspension parts, and sports a 575hp small-block Chevy with wild Mike Cooper headers. Chip Foosse did the flames.

PowerCrate 350

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It's been around for a few years, but we still think Dick Quimby's '39 Studebaker sedan is a great example of dare-to-be-different rodding.

primary pastimes: cruising. Hopping in your car and parading around the grounds is a great way to check out iron without killing your feet, all while showing off your ride in motion.

Of course, Back to the '50s has all the other attractions you'd expect from a big summer event—hundreds of parts vendors, craft booths, and food stands offering some of the yummiest fairground vittles around. Chip Foosse was on hand signing autographs on Saturday, and there was live music and regular prize drawings throughout the weekend. Saturday's Mecum auction and Sunday's swap meet let rodders hunt for new projects, or parts to finish current ones.

If you yearn for the laidback, carefree days when rods were built to drive and events were merely a means for fun and fellowship with like-minded rodders, you should consider checking out Back to the '50s. The 2007 show is already scheduled for June 22-24, and you can get all the details by visiting www.msra.com. **SR**