ANOTHER MUSTANG LEGEND IS LOST

By John M. Clor

The Ford Mustang isn't just a car—it's an American automotive icon. But a car company doesn't sell 9 million copies of the same nameplate over five different design generations for 46 consecutive years by accident. It takes passionate people—or, more precisely, passionate car people—to make such an ongoing success happen.

For a company as large and as enduring as Ford, literally thousands of people have had a hand in making the Mustang a legend over the years. The vast majority of them, from mid-managers to marketers all the way down to the assembly line workers, have toiled their entire careers in anonymity; but some have been permanently cast into the spotlight of Mustang history.

Ask just about anyone who claims to know anything about the Mustang to name the one person most closely associated with Ford's famed ponycar, and the answer most often given would be Lee Iacocca. Indeed, thanks to Iacocca's position, influence, and reputation at Ford during that time, his support of the Mustang was the key to taking the program from the idea stage to production.

A little-known truth about automotive product development is that, no matter how good a product idea you come up with, it will never see the light of day without the backing of upper management—and more often than not, those in the executive ranks are labeled as much more "business" people than they are "car" people. It's also true that this kind of high-level corporate support (my former boss at SVT, John Coletti, used to call it "air cover") is difficult to win with people who don't have the same kind of emotional connection with cars as we do. But it all means nothing unless the product itself wins the support and a "connection" with customers. And for that, you need people with true product vision.

Don Frey was one of those people. I'm sure that by now you have heard that Donald N. Frey (pronounced "fry"), the Ford engineer-turned-chief product planner who spearheaded the design and development of the original Mustang, suffered a stroke and died on March 5, 2010, in Evanston, Illinois, where he lived. He was 86.

Donald Frey was the Executive Engineer for Ford's car programs during the time the original Mustang was created. He is credited with conceiving the first mid-engine two-seat roadster prototype, the 1962 "Mustang I" concept. As a key member of Iacocca's Fairlane Committee, Frey headed up all engineering aspects of the first Mustang as Product Manager. He was eventually promoted to Vice President of North American Product Development, and oversaw the development of all Mustangs up until completion of the 1973 model year.

Frey understood the kind of driving dynamics and styling that would be needed for a successful sports car. While in the Army he had driven an Allard on the twisty European roads, and became convinced that the first order of business for the Fairlane Committee was to change the company's marketing and product planning to focus on the "Total Performance" of the Ford brand. The car that would lead the performance charge, of course, was the all-new Mustang. Frey's group pushed the idea that there was a strong youth market clamoring for a fun car from Ford. The charge was given to take the compact Falcon, re-body it, re-trim it, and re-introduce it as sports car.

Donald Nelson Frey was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 13, 1923, and grew up in Waterloo, Iowa, where his father was chief metallurgist for a John Deere plant before moving to Michigan. Frey attended Detroit's Redford High School and went on to Michigan State University until leaving after his sophomore year to serve as an officer in the U.S. Army during World War II.

He joined Ford in 1951 from the University of Michigan where he was an assistant professor of chemical and metallurgical engineering. He received his bachelor's degree in metallurgical engineering at Michigan in 1947, a master's degree in engineering in 1949, and a Ph.D. in metallurgical engineering in 1950. Frey started at Ford as a supervisor of the metallurgical department in the company's Scientific Laboratory and became associate director of the Laboratory in 1955. He was appointed director of the Engineering Research Office in 1957 and later that year was designated executive engineer, Ford Division. In November 1959, Frey was appointed assistant chief engineer, Ford and Mercury Product Engineering Office. In 1967, he received an honorary doctorate in Engineering from the University of Michigan, the same year that *Time* magazine had called him "Detroit's sharpest idea man" after Ford had promoted him to VP of North American Vehicle Product Development.

He resigned from Ford in 1968 to become president of General Cable. He soon became focused on environmental issues, leading him to establish new copper recycling methods. In 1971, he was appointed chairman and CEO of Bell & Howell and was later made a board member of 20th Century Fox, as he helped bring about the first high-volume integrated manufacture of video cassettes for the VCR home-video movie industry. He was also instrumental in promoting the first successful CD-ROM based information system, designed for General Motors dealer service, before retiring from industry in 1988.

He later worked as a researcher and served as an engineering professor at Northwestern University for 20 years, until 2008. Although he had also won the National Medal of Technology and had even been a member of the World Bank's executive board, developing the Ford Mustang was his defining accomplishment. He once said that he was most proud of his work helping to introduce safety improvements, such as radial tires and disc brakes, to the Ford car line.

Frey was known as a gifted engineer who was also a great communicator. With his PhD in metallurgy, he was said to have a real flair for bending metal that could deliver on unique styling concepts.

Frey's dogged persistence on getting Iacocca and fellow Ford product guru Hal Sperlich to help him push Henry Ford II

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on approval to build the Mustang is one of the more amazing tales in Mustang lore. While I'd recounted the epic words that Henry II had unloaded on Frey in my "Mustang Dynasty" book (when he basically told him he'd be fired if Mustang flopped), I later learned of other cool exchanges that Frey had revealed over the years.

He once admitted to USA Today that, "The whole [Mustang Project] was bootlegged" from the beginning, with the team never gaining any "official approval of this thing" along the way. And once, when Frey was asked just what had inspired him to design and build a stylish and sporty Ford pony car, he revealed that it was in response to what his kids had once told him about Ford cars at the dinner table: "Dad, your cars stink," he recalled them telling him. "There's no pizzazz." Upon Frey's death, his son, Christopher, revealed that Don had still owned an original Mustang "that he liked to drive fast."

I've since discovered that beyond his work on the Mustang, Frey had also been part of the team that created the first Ford Bronco. What's more, he was a key supporter of Ford Motorsports. After he succeeded Iacocca as the head of Ford Division, Frey had backed Ford's participation in NASCAR as well as international racing at Le Mans.

Most recently, I've had some conversations about Frey with Alan Anderson, a Ford retiree who knew him well after being heavily involved in the initial engineering of the Mustang, plus serving as the chief engineer of the first convertible version. "Mr. Frey's initial claim to fame at Ford was that he had developed austenitic steel, which was a breakthrough in spring material," Anderson had told me. "He did that over at the Scientific Lab, before he joined the Ford Advanced Group over in 'Building #5,' where I worked... His brother, Stu Frey, was my section supervisor. I had just been promoted and was given the job of putting together the base Mustang program, which was codenamed '1963 Special Falcon'."

Anderson revealed that in the very beginning, "Lee Iacocca steered clear of the project because he felt it was too risky. It wasn't until the project looked like it would be a winner that he came on board." Anderson went on to say that, "Don Frey deserves the credit for taking a huge risk in this vehicle, much the same as Jack Telnak did years later with the Taurus... Those were fun times, and I wonder if the engineers today will ever have those opportunities to pioneer. I hope so, because it will be fun for them, as it was for me—and great for Ford."

Well, Alan Anderson would be happy to know that, yes, in the spirit of Don Frey, there are engineers at Ford today who still get to take risks, push the envelope—and most importantly, help make the Mustang as appealing to customers in 2010 as it was back in 1964. For proof, you only need to spend two minutes with a guy like Dave Pericak, Ford's chief engineer of the 2011 Mustang.

Pericak was simply beaming at an interview last week about how the 2011 Mustang is the first production car in history to produce more than 300 horsepower and get more than 30 mpg highway. (Official EPA ratings for new Mustang V-6 coupe models equipped with the 305-hp 3.7-liter V-6 and available six-speed automatic transmission are 31 mpg on the highway and 19 mpg in the city.) "We have to remember that this is a Mustang, so it has to offer performance—first and foremost," Pericak said. "We wanted to find the 'and' solution for our customers—performance and fuel economy.

"We started out with the best powertrains we've ever had for Mustang, including the new 3.7-liter V-6 engine," he explained. "You mate that to a six-speed transmission—we have two new six-speed transmissions—an automatic and a manual. You put the right gearing in there for performance, and then add double overdrive for the automatic transmission and single overdrive for the manual, which aids fuel economy. In addition, we utilized Electric Power Assist Steering—the first ever in a Mustang—and implemented some aerodynamic actions, such as underbody aero shields, tire spats and a decklid that is sealed to the backlight. We really looked at every opportunity. We also used Michelin energy-saver tires, making sure that we didn't compromise performance.

"What I am most proud of is that our customers can go out and get a real sports car... And they can feel smart about their purchase in regard to fuel economy. That's what I think is really important. Mustang has always been a fantastic car. It's loaded with technology and it's got all the features you'd ever want to see. But the fact that customers can feel good about making a responsible purchase, that's what it's all about for me."

So thank you, Don Frey, for the product vision and spirit of innovation that gave us the Mustang—may you rest in peace. And my thanks to Alan Anderson for sharing his insight on Don and some of the history behind our favorite Ford. And lastly, I say thank you, Dave Pericak, for keeping the Mustang flame alive some 46 years later. It's great to know that "car guys" are still making a difference at Ford!

PS: In last month's "Ford Performance Corner" column, I railed against a British auto journalist and his book for writing disparaging words about the Mustang II. In an effort to return the insult, I shot back that to me, the term "British automotive journalist" is somewhat of an oxymoron, considering the lack of a British-owned auto industry. To my friends and associates in the UK, please understand that my quip was simply a JOKE—just a tease in response to a writer's jab at my beloved Mustang. Of course I know there are viable and talented British auto writers, workers, and enthusiasts, as well as a fantastic Mustang club following in Great Britain. I apparently "dropped a clanger"—and offer my apology to those offended. And to prove my now-increased sensitivity to the matter, I promise that from now on, I won't make fun of my British born-and-raised brother-in-law (who also works at Ford) for his preferring to drink a cup of tea over coffee!

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