



ED ISKENDERIAN

BUILDER/MANUFACTURER

by Pat Sullivan

While we all might aspire to live a full and rich life, Ed "Isky" Iskenderian established a standard that is unattainable for most mere mortals. His story is a true American success tale that combines elements of struggle, industriousness, ingenuity, and a flair for promotion. His parents Dickran (Dick) and Armine escaped their native Turkey after World War I. It was a time where Armenians were being systematically rounded up and exterminated and time was of the essence. Dick was a blacksmith by trade while Armine was sent to a German Christian convent to protect her from atrocities. California seemed like a good place to land.

Ed was born in Cutler, California on July 10, 1921, and at the time his parents worked in agriculture. Then when an untimely frost wiped out their grape crop they picked up and moved to Los Angeles. His father found work as a shoe repairman, while Ed attended Polytechnic High School although he would later graduate from Dorsey. His first job was repairing vacuum tube radios and by then he had already displayed a fascination with all things mechanical. An uncle had given him a Model T truck when he was 13 or 14 years old and he immediately began to tinker with it. Then in 1939 he built a T-bodied Ford roadster with a V-8 under the hood. Then came a fortuitous meeting. Ed purchased a camshaft from racing pioneer Ed Winfield who ultimately became a valuable mentor.

Like many of his peers Isky became enamored with hot rods, and soon he headed to the Muroc Dry Lakes and the gatherings organized by the

Southern California Timing Association. Ed was ready to go fast, but then life changed as the nation became entwined in World War II. He joined the Army Air Corp and was assigned to Ground School, at Santa Ana Air Base. From there Isky flew supply missions where trips included jaunts from San Francisco to Australia, and then from Australia to New Guinea and the Philippines.

When he returned stateside he got right down to business. First, on the personal front he married the former Alice Garbooshian on May 17, 1947. Then there was the speed game. So much had been learned in the burgeoning Los Angeles air industry during WWII and many of the top mechanics were ready to put new principles to work. Encouraged by people like Ed Winfield he purchased a cam grinding machine and was ready to give the business a whirl. He set up at 5977 Washington Boulevard in Culver City, a small shop behind Mercury Tool and Die owned by John Athan. John and Ed worked together and were inseparable throughout their lives.

Then Isky made one of the wisest investments in his life. He worked with Hot Rod Magazine's Leon Cook and placed an advertisement in the second issue ever printed. His profile was elevated further when his own car would be named Hot Rod of the Month and graced the cover of the May 1948 edition. In 1949, Wally Parks organized the first Bonneville Speed Trials at the famous salt flats, and Iskenderian was prescient enough to provide support to two competitors who came attired with Isky Cams tee shirts. The logo became well known in racing circles and displaying a decal or owning a shirt was nearly a status symbol. He was a forerunner in popularizing California car culture.

Then he went to work. Breakthroughs included the ISKY 5 cycle cam that Chris Karamesine used in 1960 to post a speed of 204.54 in his famed Chizler and even more high profile success came with Don Garlits. Soon Isky cams were everywhere in fast vehicles of every stripe. Ed

once said that his "ambition was to make \$100 a day which would be five cams at \$20 apiece. By golly in about a year, we were doing five cams a day. Then it got bigger than I expected." Indeed, it did. By 1966 the company plant covered half a city block at Alondra and Broadway in Gardena, California.

The business exploded because Isky was an innovator. Among the accomplishments include creating the industry's first hard-face overlay camshafts, the first high-density chilled-iron lifters for drag racing, he offered the industry's first coordinated cam and valve-spring assembly kits, and the firm designed and manufactured the small block Chevy anti-cam walk kit.

Beyond the hardware he made another enduring contribution to the industry that impacts all of motorsports. In 1963, with the help of people like Vic Edlebrock, Roy Richter, and Dean Moon, he created the Speed Equipment Manufacturers Association (SEMA) and served as its first president in 1963-1964. The SEMA Show is held annually in Las Vegas and is a gathering spot for movers and shakers from all corners of the automotive and high-performance world.

Among all of these accomplishments was the man himself. He was deemed the Camfather by Don Garlits and became a true larger than life figure. He was intelligent, street smart, and savvy. In terms of promotion and branding he was well ahead of his time. There was the legendary desk that was piled by mountains of clutter. Some claimed one could only tell he was there when a plume of cigar smoke was detected or he began making his way to Fabulous Burger for lunch.

Ed passed on February 4, 2026, at the age of 104. He was active to near the end of his long life. He and wife Alice, who passed in 2024 were the parents of Richard, Timothy, and Amy. As a youth he rubbed shoulders with giants and by the time of his death few had made a greater impact on the sport.



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