

GREEN-EYED

THE BITTER DISCORD THAT DROVE



A

THE FASTEST BROTHERS ON THE PLANET. BY BRIAN LOHNES

MONSTERS



B

PHOTOGRAPHS: A: PHOTO BY ICON AND IMAGE/GETTY IMAGES; B: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES

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WALT ARFONS NEVER SMILED. Art Arfons had a big toothy grin. Walt was gaunt and quiet. Art was excitable, almost squeaky. Walt used Goodyear rubber. Art was a Firestone man. They went years without speaking to each other, which isn't so strange for two highly competitive racers during the height of America's land speed-record wars in the Sixties. But Walt and Art worked side by side in shops on a shared property and had huge success as a record-setting drag-racing duo in the Fifties. Nobody—not even the Arfons brothers themselves—knew how they went from friends to enemies.

Family rivalries often begin in childhood, and many a psychologist might point to Art's role as the baby from a second marriage in the Arfons family, but by all accounts, the siblings got on well as kids. Walter, the oldest, was born in 1916; Arthur in 1926. Art followed Walt and another brother, Dale, into the military in the Forties. When the war was over, all three of them were back in their hometown of Akron, Ohio, working at the family feed-and-grain mill and exercising their recently learned mechanical skills in the burgeoning sport of drag racing.

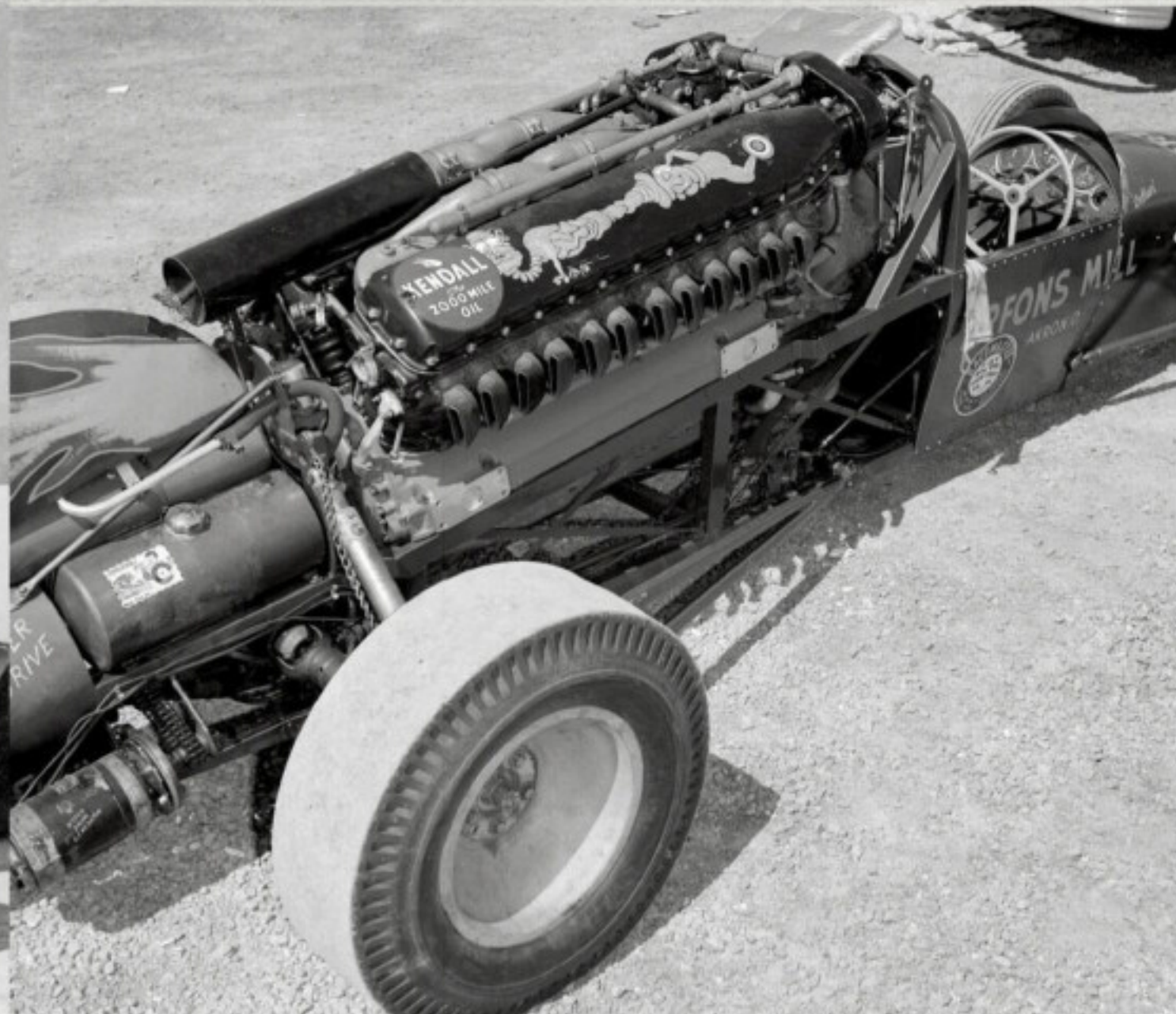
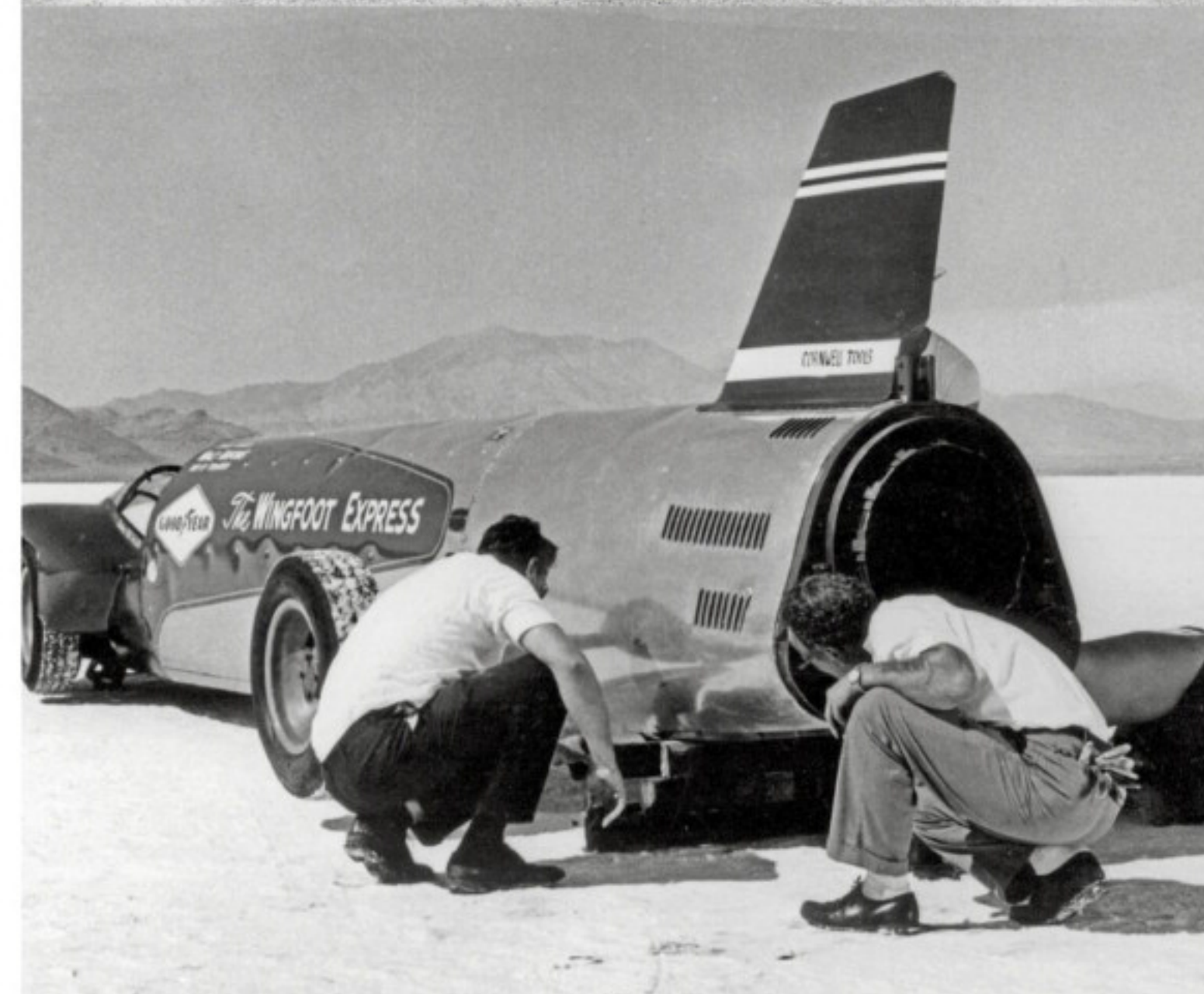
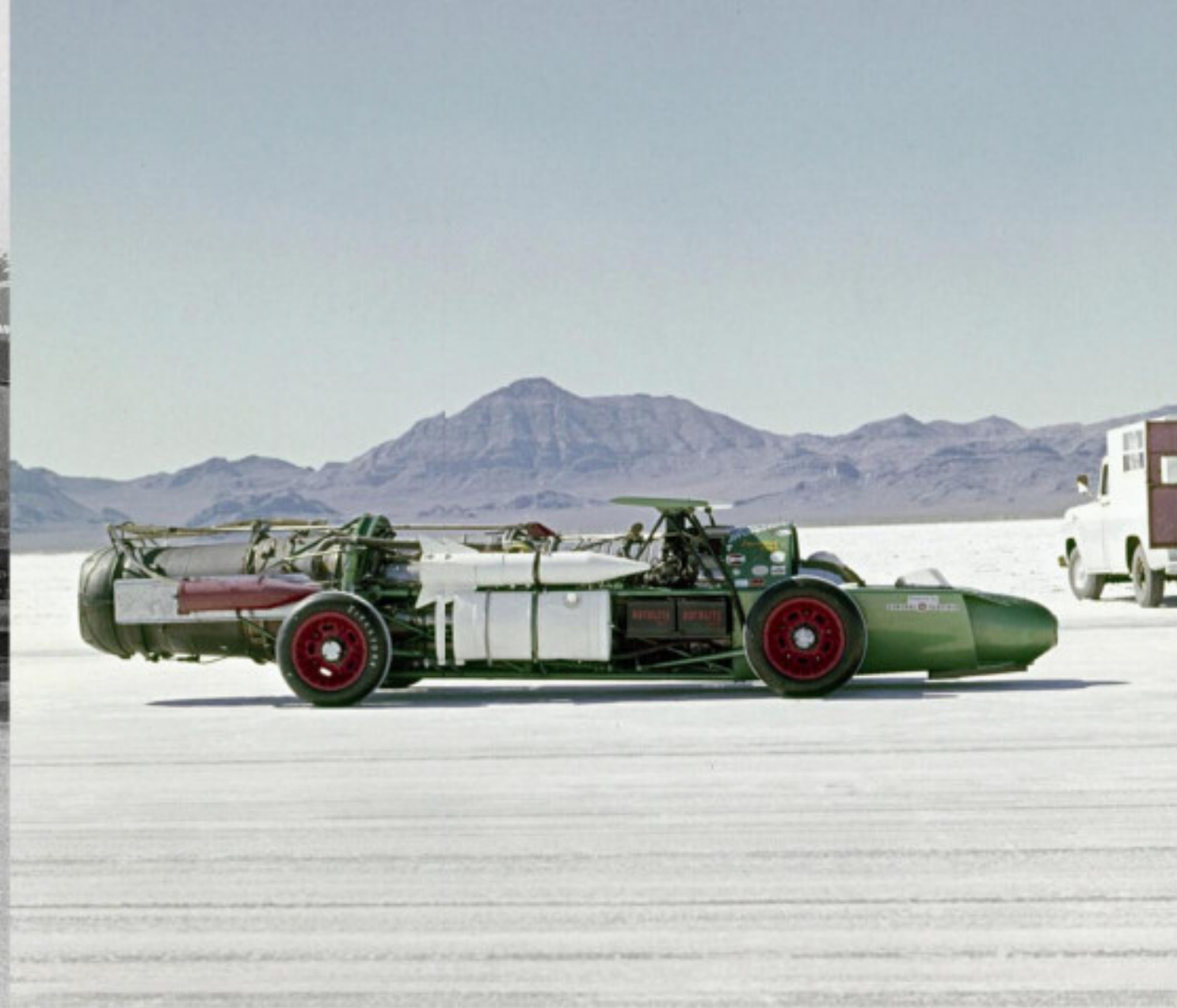
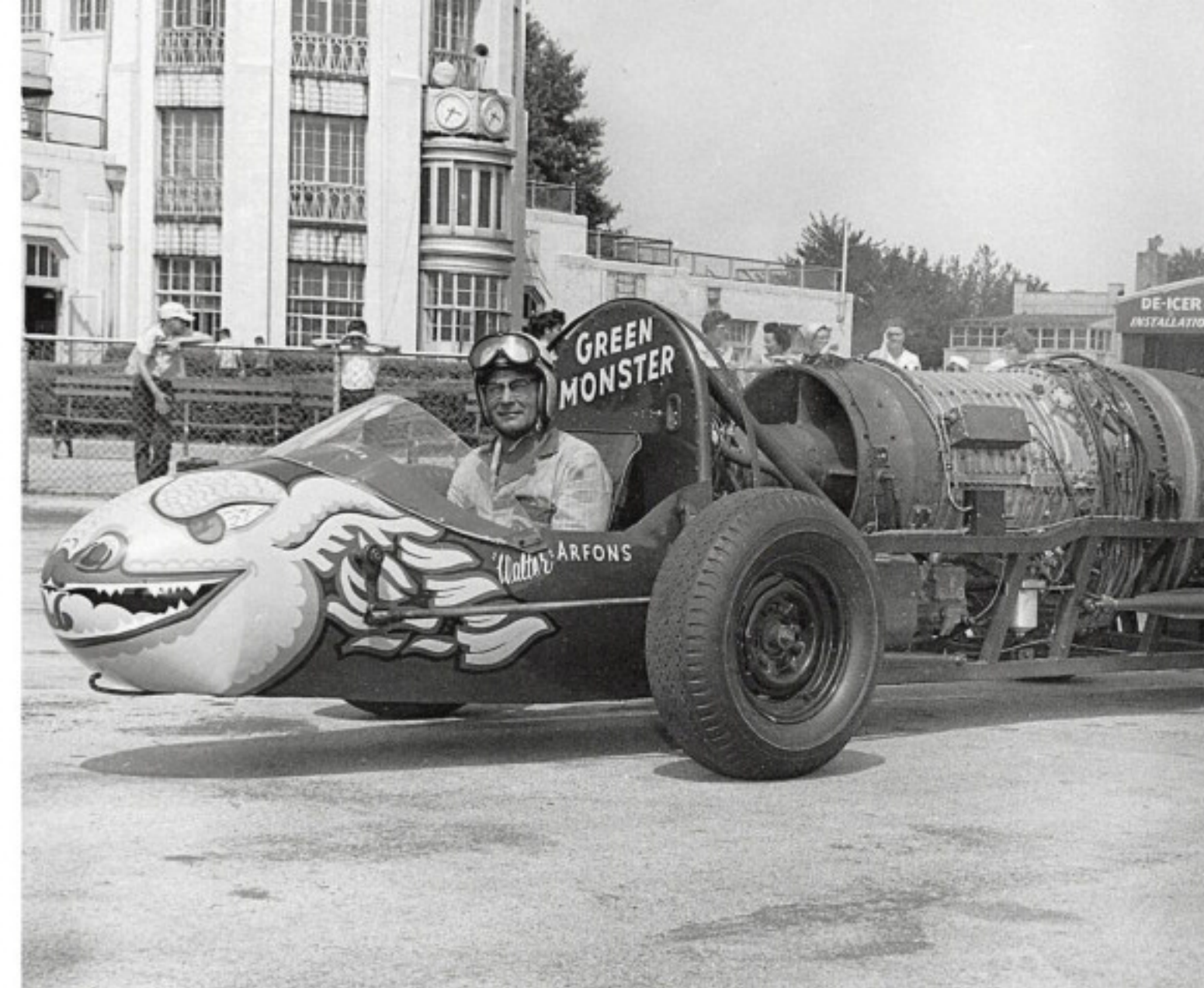
Using World War II surplus aircraft engines—supercharged Allison V-12s, Fairchild Rangers, and Rolls-Royce Merlins—jammed in homemade chassis, the brothers shot to national stardom by winning the first-ever Automobile Timing Association of America World Series of Drag Racing in 1954 with a series of dragsters named Green Monster. The Green Monster lineage set track records across the nation and top speeds at the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) Nationals in 1957, 1958, and 1959. The Arfons brothers were rock stars making piles of money. But following the 1959 Nationals, the head of NHRA, Wally Parks, banned aircraft engines from competition. Relegation to exhibition-act status did not sit well with Art. He wanted victories, not applause, and began to look to the Bonneville Salt Flats, where land speed racing was capturing media attention and sponsorship dollars.

"My dad was a racer," says Art's son Tim Arfons. "He craved competition. Being a sideshow was the last thing he ever cared about doing."

Walt seemed happy on the drag strip, but seeing Art take to the salt may have triggered some long-simmering resentment about playing second fiddle to his younger brother. During the drag-racing days, when Walt ran well, Art would not stop until he was a tick faster. When Walt managed a rare headline, Art would dominate the next 10. "Dad always beat Walter," Tim says. "He'd never let Walter get

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- A.** (Previous pages) Walt Arfons, always the devoted Goodyear man, standing on the salt in 1965.
- B.** Art Arfons in 1964 on the Bonneville Salt Flats, where he set a land speed record of 536.71 mph.
- C.** Walt's Green Monster 16 was the first jet-powered dragster.
- D.** The first of many counterpunches, Art's Cyclops beat Walt's drag-strip records before taking to the salt flats.
- E.** In the Wingfoot Express, Walt set a land speed record that stood for all of three days in 1964.
- F.** Art's Allison-powered Green Monster led the NHRA to ban aircraft engines.



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- A. The Allison-powered Anteater burned out the clutch before Art could achieve his 400-mph goal.
- B. A side-mounted cockpit on the Green Monster land speed-record car placed Art inches from the jet turbine's blades.



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B



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A. This photo of the Arfons brothers in friendlier times was used for the shop's annual calendar.

B. The Wingfoot Express 2 proved too heavy to take advantage of JATO rocket power.

C. Art with the Green Monster in 1966, which set the land speed record three separate times.

the better of him if he could help it. The guy didn't lose often, and that was doubly true when Walter was his competition."

With his eyes on 400 mph, Art built a wild machine called the Anteater, replete with an Allison engine. He also had a goal to beat Mickey Thompson to a land speed record. Thompson had run over 400 mph in 1960 but only in one direction. The official number to beat was still 394.19 mph as set on the mandatory two-way average by England's John Cobb in 1947.

While Art was figuring out the salt, Walt built the Green Monster 16, the world's first jet-powered dragster. Propelled by a Westinghouse J46 turbine, it became an immediate sensation in the press. Walt's phone practically melted off the wall as every drag strip in the country called to book him.

The 1961 season was again dominated by Walt and the Green Monster 16. While Walt soared, Art's attempts at the record failed. The brothers hadn't spoken in over a year. Their wives stopped speaking. Their kids didn't even acknowledge the uncle across the yard.

"I spoke to Walter twice in my life," Tim says. "Once when I was about 28 years old and the second time at my mother's funeral. I'd see him basically every day at the workshop, but we never spoke. I didn't use his name in front of my father. We just called him Brand X."

If Art had come back to drag racing, or if Walt had joined him on the same land speed-racing team, perhaps the hurt feelings could have been salvaged. But Art was about to widen the breach. Both men had excellent junkyard connections for military surplus, but Art scored a turbine engine from a scrapper in Florida. It was a General Electric J79, the most powerful American military

turbine ever made at that point. It also happened to be classified equipment. Innocently calling for a repair manual brought the FBI to Art's front door. Showcasing the stubbornness that kept him estranged from his brother, Art refused to give up the powerplant. Sans repair manual, he fixed it on his own.

With multiple times the power of Walt's little jet dragster, the Cyclops that Art built roamed the land in 1962, upending the Green Monster's records on the drag strip. Then Art headed back to the salt, where he drove 342.88 mph—still the fastest open-cockpit blitz in Bonneville history.

Walt took it personally and took his anger to the salt. Working with engineer Tom Green and sponsored by Goodyear (Art, you'll remember, was on Firestones), Walt built his own land speed car, the Wingfoot Express. The first trip to Bonneville in 1963 was a failure. The engine swallowed salt, and the Wingfoot Express never came near a record.

Meanwhile, Art reclaimed the Green Monster name for his newest car. With the J79, the younger Arfons brother headed to Utah in the fall of 1964. Whereas his previous jets had a front-mounted driver compartment, now Art sat in a pod next to components that were whirling around at tens of thousands of rpm.

By the time Art had arrived on the salt in '64, Walt and Green had been struggling for days. The Wingfoot was on its second engine, had shown no more promise than the year before, and was likely going to leave a failure for a second time. In those days, you rented the salt flats for a stretch of time, then turned the time over to the next competitor when you left. If you weren't running, you'd forfeit your slot. Walt's time was running out.

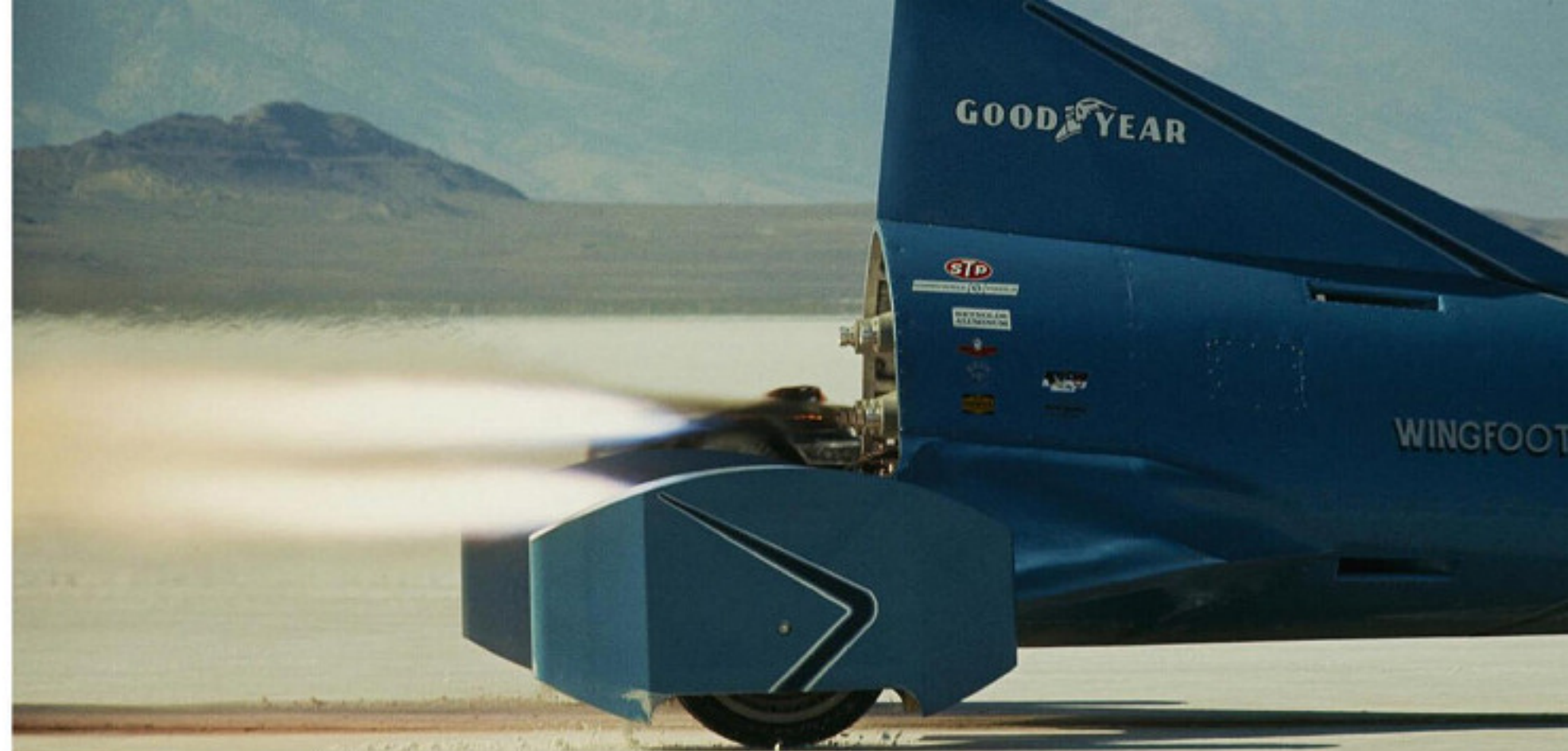
In one of the few breaks in the brothers' silent rivalry, Art looked over the Wingfoot and advised opening the clamshell-like cone at the back of the engine and making a small fuel-system adjustment. With the suggestions implemented, Green reset the world's land speed record at 413.20 mph. The brothers shook hands and embraced. Walt called their mother to say it was all in the past.

"Walter never acknowledged this in public," Tim says. "Tom Green was the only guy who ever told this story."

Three days later, Art destroyed his brother's hard-won land speed record, blasting the number up to 434.02 mph. Walt was halfway to Akron when he heard the news on the radio.

By now, the animosity between the brothers was notable enough that *Sports Illustrated's* Jack Olsen devoted two articles to the feud. In "My Brother, My Enemy, in Speedland," Olsen leads with the mystery of the rift: "Each professes to be profoundly disturbed by this state of affairs, and each insists that it was not he who engineered the events that sundered them, and each seems to be busily widening and deepening the chasm."

In the articles, Art complains that Walt is nice to him only when the cameras are on them. Walt



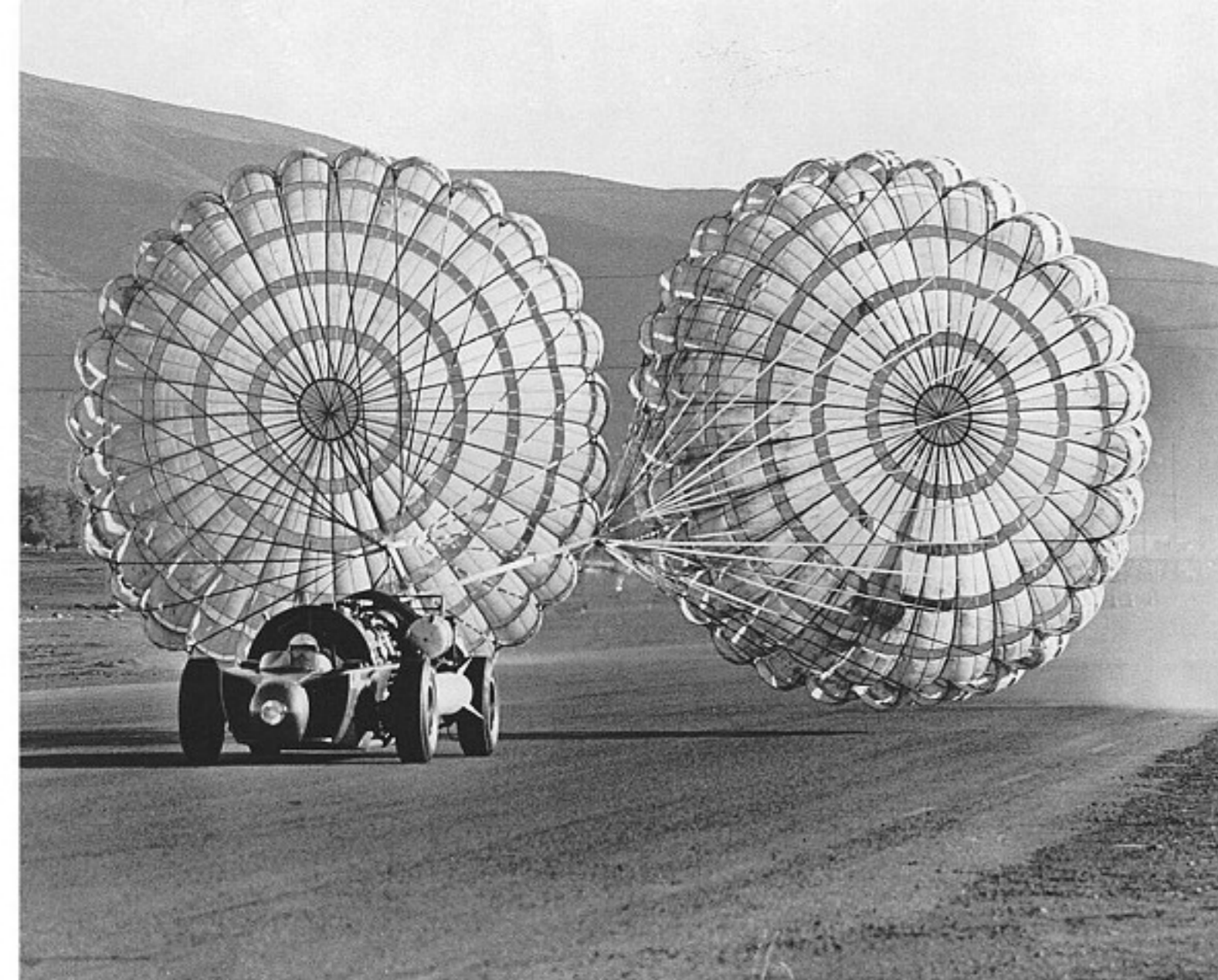
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PHOTOGRAPHS: A: COURTESY OF TIM ARFONS; B, C: ERIC RICKMAN/THE ENTHUSIAST NETWORK/GETTY IMAGES

PHOTOGRAPHS (FOLLOWING PAGES): A: ISC ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; B, D: STEVE REYES; C: BOB D'OLIVO/THE ENTHUSIAST NETWORK/GETTY IMAGES



tells Olsen that Art mouthed him to a metal supplier, ruining his sponsorship chances. Art says Walt won't even give him dirt. "I'll tell you one little dirty thing he done," Art says in the article "Duel on the Salt." "I'd been buying fill dirt to build up a low spot by my garage, and when I come home from the salt I discovered he'd been having a basement dug for his new house and he had dumped about 50 loads of dirt across the street from me. And I would have paid him, paid him for the dirt and the hauling! Yet he hates me that much, that he would take and haul it over to a neighbor. And I tell you, it's something small, but it's the principle of the thing, and it just burnt me no end." Walt's explanation is simple: "I didn't even know he wanted dirt."

Hate didn't distract them from their high-speed goals. Art spent early 1965 working on a new Green Monster. Walt's plan was the world's first rocket-powered contender. Goodyear was back as a sponsor, but safety-conscious Walt overbuilt his massive Wingfoot Express 2. Even packing two dozen JATO rockets, it could not accelerate quickly enough, or for a sustained-enough period through the timed mile, to threaten the record Art had set at 536.71 mph at the end of the 1964 season.

The Wingfoot 2's rockets misfired and melted chunks of its body. The car became an embarrassing sideshow. Meanwhile, Art had a new rival, Craig Breedlove, in the jet-powered Spirit of America. During November 1965 alone, the two moved the land speed record from 536.71 mph to 555.13 mph, then to 576.55 mph (Art) and 600.60 (Breedlove). And they would have kept going if Art hadn't crashed at around 600 mph and taken himself out of contention.

Walt visited Art in the hospital. There is no record of the conversation.

"It didn't change anything," Tim says.

Walt never returned to the Bonneville Salt Flats. Art didn't for decades. Separately, both went into the business of exhibition jet drag racing, the very activity they refused to do together at the end of '59. Walt built some of the first jet-powered Funny Cars. Art showcased jets on the drag strip as well before moving into tractor pulling, where he won a championship.

Arthur Arfons died in 2007 at age 81; Walter Arfons died in 2013 at age 96. Nothing was ever resolved between them. It's possible that with their competitive nature, they pushed each other to greater heights than they would have reached as a team, but it is equally possible that they and their families suffered from living between such hardened egos. Had they joined forces, would it be the Arfons name rather than Breedlove's that we associate with ultimate success in land speed racing? It's perhaps no coincidence that the name of the Arfons brothers' cars harks back to a line from *Othello*: "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on." 🍷

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- Art's Cyclops using parachutes to slow after a drag-strip run.
- After retiring from land speed-record attempts, Art used his jet-turbine expertise in tractor pulls.
- When Chrysler wanted a few of its cars converted into jet-powered dragsters, Walt was the natural choice.
- First raced in 1971, Green Monster 19 was the first car Tim Arfons worked on with his father, Art.