

DAVE WILKES  
TRANSMISSIONS. 2005

## With ATRA from the Beginning

Over the years we've met dozens of transmission shop owners who've been ATRA Members for years; some who can trace their relationship with the Association nearly to its inception back in 1954.

While several have been ATRA Members longer than Dave Wilkes, owner of Dave Wilkes Transmissions in Ventura, California, none have ever had a tighter relationship with it since the very beginning. In fact, you might remember Dave from our look back at ATRA on its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary; he was a valuable asset in helping us delve into ATRA's past.

But Dave opened his shop in 1993, so how can he have such a storied history with ATRA? That's because he got his start in the transmission business in 1980, when he went to work as a shop manager for Mike King, owner of Trans-King Transmissions.

"At that time Mike had just opened his fourth store," explains Dave. "Mike was active with ATRA since about 1965. He was a Chapter president and was instrumental in developing the Golden Rule Warranty program."

But that's only part of the story: "At that time, Mike's partner was Gene Lewis." Yes, *that* Gene Lewis — ATRA's executive director until he retired in 1992. In fact, when Dave came to run Trans-King's Ventura shop, ATRA's business office was on the second floor.

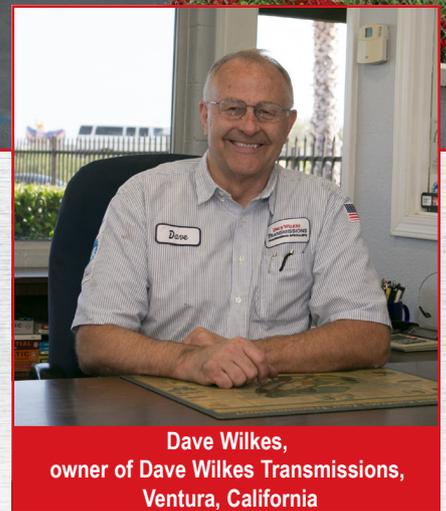
Other luminaries who were part of the Trans-King family included Mike Lee and Steve Gray, and even *GEARS* Managing Editor Rodger Bland was a shop manager from this group of ATRA employees.

And earlier this year, Dave began serving on ATRA's international board of directors, representing the Southern California region.

No doubt about it: Maybe others have been Members longer, but no one's had a career that's been more closely intertwined with ATRA.

### A Familiar Beginning

Dave got his start in auto repair when he was still a boy, working on neighbors' cars with his dad and some older friends in the neighborhood. He began working at a gas station when



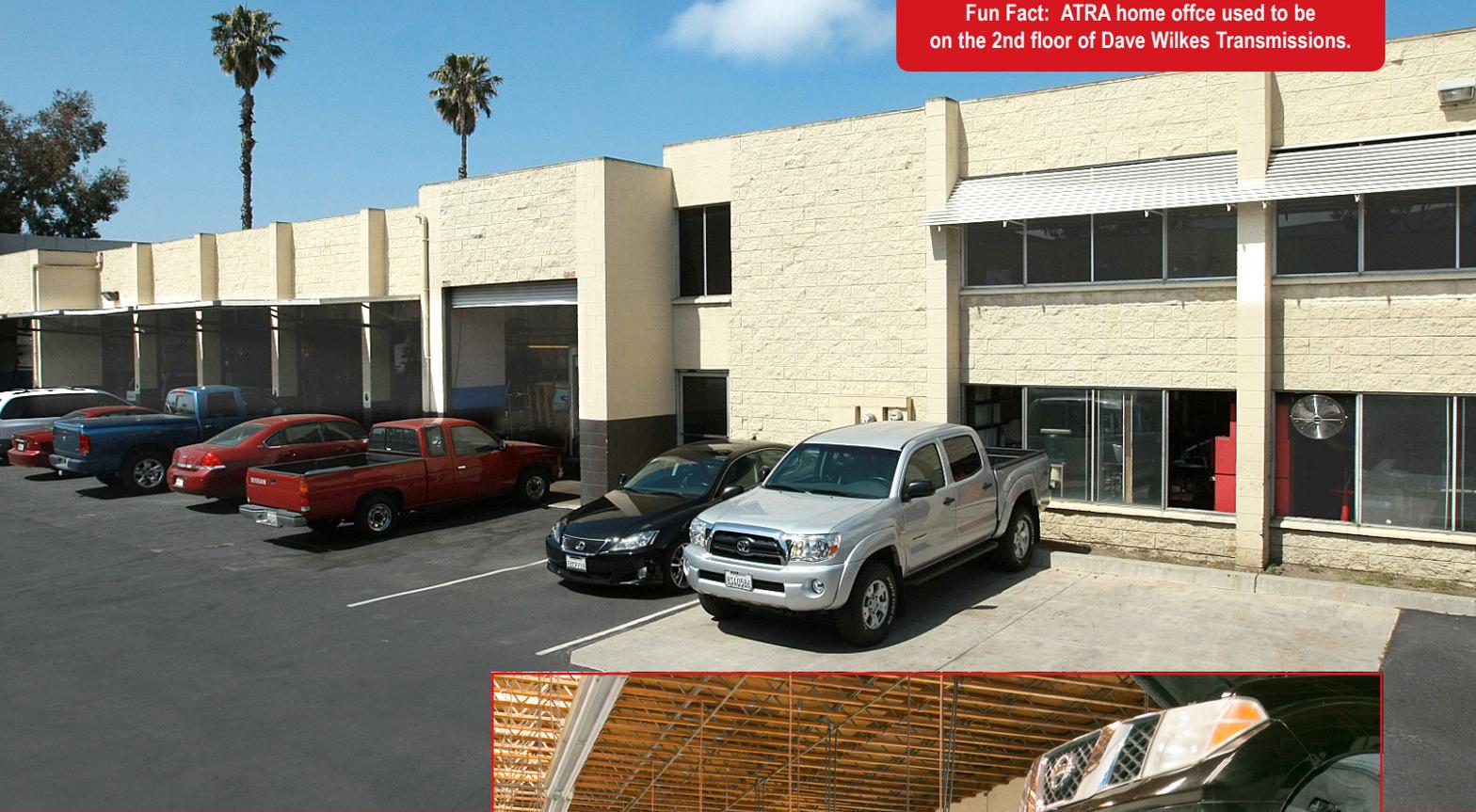
Dave Wilkes,  
owner of Dave Wilkes Transmissions,  
Ventura, California

he was about 15 "for a dollar an hour," pumping gas and doing lube jobs after school and on weekends.

"I moved to Santa Barbara from Solvang in 1971 and took a job at another gas station, working as a tow truck driver and mechanic. Then I took a job at a tire store, changing tires and learning how to do brakes and alignments." It wasn't long before he became their lead front end and brake technician. "At the same time I drove a tow truck nights and weekends."

From there he moved to a general repair shop where he honed his craft for several years. "Then I came back to the tire store as an assistant manager. That's when I met Mike King.

Fun Fact: ATRA home office used to be on the 2nd floor of Dave Wilkes Transmissions.



“Mike was building another store, and he bugged me for about six months to come to work for him. Finally I took him up on it.

“I started as an installer, but I was on a fast track to something bigger. After a while as an installer, I spent some time rebuilding transmissions, and then moved up to shop foreman. Then, in about '82, one of the managers quit, so suddenly I became the store manager.”

Mike began selling off some of his stores in the '90s, and Dave bought the Ventura shop in 1993, changing its name from Trans-King to Dave Wilkes Transmissions.



Dave Wilkes Transmissions outstanding team of professionals.

## Adapting to Change

When asked how he handled the changes the industry has faced over the years, Dave laughed: “I’m still changing. The one thing that never changes is that nothing stays the same.

“Whenever I was faced with something new, the first thing I did was concentrate on the fundamentals. I wanted to learn the basics: How it

worked... the principles of operation down to the laws of physics that made it work. I read the Hydramatic books from cover to cover. I figured, if someone else could learn it, I could too.

“Once I understood a transmission, every time a new one came along, I’d see what was the same and what had changed. So even today, with the very complex transmissions we’re facing, I

can relate their operation to the ones I studied back in the beginning.”

That’s not to suggest that learning the basics makes today’s transmissions easy. “It’s still overwhelming at times; today’s transmissions are very complex devices. But you’re much better off if you know the history of the transmission and apply that knowledge to today’s cars.”



Dan Mendez, Lead Technician, Rebuilder, Diagnostician, Foreman, & Shop Manager



Cliff McCormick, Rebuilder and Diagnostician



Pedro Cerda, Installer

## Transmission Detective

Today it's virtually impossible to run a business without some form of online presence. Dave Wilkes Transmissions has a beautiful web site at [www.DaveWilkesTransmissions.com](http://www.DaveWilkesTransmissions.com). But that's only one part of his advertising strategy.

"Mike began advertising Trans-King on the radio," says Dave. "But over time, radio marketing became diluted from neighboring stations from the L.A. market so he added TV advertising. He found that to be more effective, so when I bought the shop, I went with TV and Yellow Pages advertising."

TV advertising worked out well for Dave, but, to catch people's attention, he came up with an idea for a new character:

"One day I was looking at four or five cars, thinking about new ads while I was looking for leaks and performing visual inspections. I had my mirror and a flashlight, looking here and there and the word that came to mind was 'investigation.' Each car was an investigation and I was the detective.

"I presented that to my marketing agency. They found me the hat and coat (the familiar herringbone deerstalker and overcoat), and I dressed up like Sherlock Holmes and became 'the transmission detective.' I close each ad with my tag line: 'Customer satisfaction is elementary.'

"I've been the Transmission Detective for over 15 years. I try to make my ads visually interesting so people remember them. Some spots are about services and how important they are to get the most out of your transmission.

"I market us as specialists. There are a lot of general repair shops and dealerships, but today there are fewer and fewer specialists. We're transmissions only; I don't market as a general repair shop at all.

"There are a lot of shops that sell transmissions the way they'd sell a starter or an alternator: It's bad, just replace it. But many times what seems to be a major problem turns out to be a minor repair.

"A lot of shops just sell a new transmission when it could be repaired. But if you aren't a specialist who actually repairs transmissions, your only choice is to replace them. We get a lot of cars where another shop tried to sell a new transmission and we fix it. Not patched; it's repaired properly. It just didn't need a new transmission. And because we're specialists, we can offer those repairs.

"Of course, no matter how you advertise, you have to be able to back it up. The most important thing is you have to fix the car. That's where ATRA has been helpful."



Henry Villanueva, Installer



The Transmission Detective

## Honoring Promises

One thing Dave's adamant about is that agreements need to be hashed out up front, before the job begins. "That way it's possible for either party to say no," he explains. Once the job has begun, it's important to honor your agreement. That's how he does business, and it's been working well for him and his customers.

And most rebuilds that go through Dave Wilkes Transmissions receive a 3-year, 100,000-mile warranty. "Because, if you rebuilt it right, it should last three years without any problem. If it doesn't last three years, you should be disappointed.

"The bottom line is you have to fix the car. Nothing works if you don't fix the car. That's why customers bring their cars to us."

## Continued Ties

Dave was thrust into the Association through his business path with Trans-King, but why did he remain so closely tied to ATRA afterward?

"Well, the technical support, naturally, but that's just a small part of it. There's also the camaraderie with other ATRA Members... other shop owners... people I've interacted with over the years at Expo and seminars. And of course there's the technical and management information that's only available to ATRA Members."

If you haven't taken part in ATRA's events, the point about camaraderie between the shop owners and technicians is probably a difficult concept to grasp. But it's something that Dave and so many other ATRA Members would never want to live without.

"One of the difficulties with the transmission business is that you generally don't have a lot of peers to talk to or run things by," says Dave. "I have friends all across the country who I met through my connections with ATRA.

"It gives us a chance to learn from people we'd never have



The crew at Dave Wilkes Transmissions L to R: Natalie Wald, Cliff McCormick, Pedro Cerda, Dave Wilkes, Henry Villanueva, Dan Mendez and Barbie Wolf



The Peg Board: This is where the clip boards for each job are organized



Waiting Room and Office



Dan Mendez and Dave Wilkes at Customer Service Desks



Barbie Wolf, Bookkeeper and Administrative Manager

met without ATRA. People who are there to help you and provide a real smorgasbord of ideas and a chance to see them in action. Expo's the best time to do that.

"It's not just about the seminars. There's so much more to be learned, just bouncing ideas off each other. If you're trying to do it yourself, you're missing out on a lot."

This year, Dave took another step in his long-standing relationship with ATRA when he was elected to the board of directors, representing Area 1, California, Nevada and Hawaii. "It's a chance for me to give back to the industry and share some of what I've learned over the years," he said.

One thing he'd like to accomplish as a board member is to help create a program where experienced and retired shop owners can provide assistance and guidance to help new shop owners get their footing and become successful. "I'd like to see us pass the torch from the old timers to the new guys coming up in the industry."

It's a tall order, but one that has the potential to pay off in a big way.

## Where Credit Is Due

One thing Dave is adamant about: His success wouldn't be possible without his outstanding team of professionals, two of whom have been with him since the shop was still part of Trans-King.

Dan Mendez wears many hats, as lead technician, rebuilder, diagnostician, foreman, and shop manager. He's been with Dave since 1987, after graduating from Arizona Tech Institute. "Dan really cares and takes pride in his trade."

Henry Villanueva is another Trans-King alumnus. He came back to work for Dave in 1998 as an installer. "Henry's work is detailed and meticulous; you usually can't tell the transmission was ever removed."

Cliff McCormick is no stranger to *GEARS* readers, having been a longtime ATRA tech advisor, seminar presenter, author, and instructor at a local college. Cliff came to work for Dave in 2006 as a rebuilder and diagnostician. "Cliff's in-depth knowledge of transmissions is amazing."

Pedro Cerda joined Dave in 2015 as an installer. He had several years experience in general repairs and worked as a transmission installer; today he's working hard learning diagnostics.

Barbie Wolf is the bookkeeper and administrative manager. She joined the company in 2006. "Barbie is a full-charge bookkeeper and I'd be lost without her."

Natalie Wald is Barbara's assistant. "She frees up Barbie's time by keeping things organized in the office, and she's learning bookkeeping." Natalie has been with the company since 2013.

Together these people make Dave Wilkes Transmissions a viable, profitable business... a place where consumers are happy to bring their cars when they have transmission problems and are likely to recommend to their friends.

Like many of us, Dave is getting older and he's begun to think about what comes next. He's currently looking for someone to join his team with an eye toward taking the reins and steering the company into the future. For some



Natalie Wald, Administrative Assistant

special individual, this could be a great opportunity.

## What the Future Holds

When asked about the future of our industry, Dave spoke of the value of continuing education, "To survive and flourish in the transmission business will depend on the ability to satisfy our customers and fix their cars. The difficulty to do this is continuing to get harder with the many new high tech transmissions and increasing cost of repairs.

"The way to keep up with that change is through sharing experiences and continuing education or the 'school of hard knocks'. The Automatic Transmission Rebuilders Association provides education. Expo and seminars introduce you to the many great people in the transmission industry to share experiences with. Then there's the 'school of hard knocks'. This is where you're always learning, but it's one school no one ever graduates from. I hope I get the chance to hang out with you at EXPO and tell war stories."

