

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

TONY WILLMAN

by Al Krause

During his career, which ran from 1926 to 1941, Tony Willman of South Milwaukee, Wisconsin, won one 100-mile Speedway Car race, 44 sprint car main events and 85 midget features. Another seven sprint and 13 midget feature wins were credited to him, but information is incomplete.

Willman was fatally injured in a midget heat race at Thompson, Connecticut on October 12, 1941, when his car hit the outer retaining wall and flipped, dumping Willman onto the track where he was struck by the last of a 20-car starting field after he had passed 16 cars in the first two laps. He was 37 years old.

Through his career, Willman was labelled a charger who would go all-out, usually using the outer groove in his quest for the lead. Once a race started, Willman was relentless. A week before his death, he won a 100-lap midget race at Williams Grove (PA) Speedway, lapping every one of the other 32 starters.

Quiet and soft-spoken, almost deferential when talking about his own racing accomplishments, Willman was held in high regard by his peers. The ultimate compliment was by seven-time Eastern American Automobile Association (AAA) sprint car champ Tommy Hinnershitz, who said Willman was the toughest driver he had ever competed against.

It was Willman's misfortune that the best years of his career covered the Great Depression when only 31 National Championship events were held in eight years.

Willman competed in four Indianapolis 500's between 1937 and 1941, running well up in the field each time before his car gave in to the demands of his heavy throttle foot. In 1941 a broken connecting rod put him out when he was running fourth at the 285-mile mark. Three years

earlier, after his own car quit, Willman relieved Harry McQuinn, who finished seventh. In 1936 Willman won the Hankinson Speedway Circuit championship which covered some 30 tracks in 17 states.

Willman's greatest successes came in midget autos. He won the 1934-35 indoor midget circuit championship, covering events at Milwaukee, Chicago, St. Louis and Detroit. During the 1935 outdoor season, Willman was credited with 145 race wins at tracks across the Midwest.

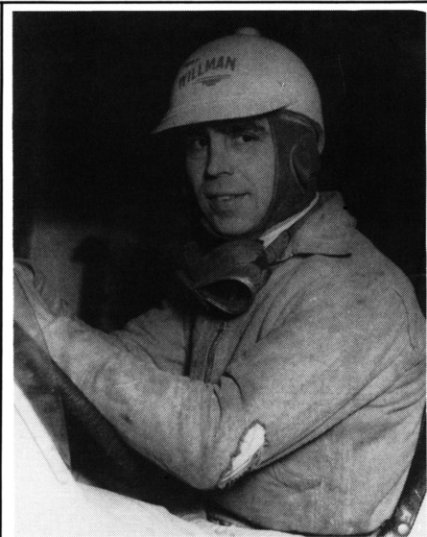
Willman won nearly a dozen season championships, including those at the quarter-mile Wisconsin State Fair Park Speedway (West Allis) in 1939

and 1941. His run for the 1939 Fair Park title was capped by his being named honorary mayor of South Milwaukee, an honor which included a 200-car escort to the track after which Willman responded by winning the day's main event.

The 1941 season was perhaps Willman's best, as he won 33 midget features and was the AAA national short track champ.

Willman's widow, Mrs. Lorraine Wild, lives in North Fort Myers, Florida. A son, Eugene, who had a distinguished career as a midget car builder and owner in the 1960s and 1970s, lives with his wife Shirley in Muskego, Wisconsin.

Tony Willman, "the Milwaukee Dutchman", was recently inducted into the National Auto Racing Hall of Fame, which is owned and operated by the National Old Timers Auto Racing Club in Flemington, New Jersey.



Tony Willman
Bruce Craig Collection