

Clyde Adams

Clyde Adams was a skilled sheet metal worker who began building and repairing racing cars on the side in the 1920s.

At the age of 20, he migrated to Los Angeles from his native Texas and went to work for a shop that did subcontracting work for Harry A. Miller, then the leading race car builder in the United States. Clyde told an interviewer in 1988, "That's where I got my first taste of racing." Miller's staff included Myron Stevens, the most talented metal shaper in the business, and under Stevens' influence, Adams developed into a first class metalworker.

In 1929 Miller sold his racing business to the Schofield Company, and started the decline that, in the Depression, led to his own bankruptcy. Stevens and many of the body and chassis builders who had worked for Miller were on their own after Miller's collapse, and Adams set up his own shop for what business he could find.

The first chassis of note that Adams worked on in his own shop was a Miller-powered Indianapolis car for Bill White, which he and Stevens built in 1930 for Ernie Triplett to drive. Next was a streamlined car for Art Sparks and Paul Weirick in 1931. Because Sparks and Weirick had lots of ideas but little money, the frame and body had to be revolutionary and cheap. The car, later dubbed the Catfish, because of its shape, was vintage Sparks, applying technological innovation in place of dollars. It was built to the design specifications of a pair of Stanford University aerodynamicists, who used the car as a class project for their students. Adams, as instructed, put the Catfish together out of a mix of junkyard Ford, Chrysler, and Miller parts, and it never handled well.

Adams also built a conventional car for Sparks and Weirick that was much more successful, in part because Rex Mays was its usual driver. Known as Poison Lil, the car soldiered on for 16 years, finishing at Indianapolis (25th) as late as 1949. In fact, for most

of his 22-year career, Clyde built cars for Sparks, plus one-off for a variety of other owners.

Clyde built Charlie Allen's first midget; a beautifully polished and chromed creation powered at first by a 4-60 Elto outboard engine, carrying Number 32, and a second midget for Allen, Number 24, powered by an Offenhauser. Adams built Ronny Householder's Number 2 Offy midget and Dominic "Pee Wee" Distarce's Number 4 Offy, all with what historian Jack Fox described as "classic, Miller-inspired lines." He built a few Ascot dirt track and Indianapolis cars that competed from 1934 through 1951, though the only Indy win for an Adams-built car was the 1946 victory of the Thorne-Sparks Little Six. Adams himself was not an innovator; he built to his customers' designs. His cars were well-built, if the customer could afford the time and effort and, aside from the Catfish and the Thorne cars, had generally conventional lines.

Adams built owner Joe Marks the Miller-powered car with a heart-shaped grill that Cavino Michele "Kelly" Petillo drove at Indianapolis in 1934 and that Marks campaigned at Indy through 1941. Its best finish was George Connor's ninth in 1937. Petillo's 1935 Indianapolis-winning Offenhauser was essentially a copy of the Marks car, built by Petillo himself with Louis "Curly" Wetteroth's help. Adams also put together a car for Richard L. Palmer that was entered at Indianapolis from 1947 through 1950.

Race car building in the 1930s and 1940s was a cottage industry dominated by highly skilled craftsmen, many of whom, like Adams, had learned their trade with Miller in the 1920s. Though Miller set up shop again in 1931, he never again had the turn-key,

one-stop operation of his 1920s factory. Myron Stevens worked on as a freelancer, producing beautifully crafted one-of-a-kind racing cars that ran at Indianapolis through 1955. His cars won that race twice as Stevens chassis, although three other winners entered as "Millers," and one entered as a "Shaw" were, in fact, built by Stevens.

Herman Rigling, a former Duesenberg employee, built a number of cars to the "junk formula" of 1930-1937, though none won the race. Joe Silnes of Indianapolis shows up in the Indy builders' lists beginning in 1940,

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but like Rigling, he built cars for owners of relatively modest aims. "Curly" Wetteroth, however, was one of the most successful Los Angeles area builders of the pre-World War II years, putting together the 1932, 1938, and 1941 Indianapolis winners.

Kurtis brought out his own design for an Indianapolis car in 1948 and, in his heyday changed race car building from a cottage industry to a small manufacturing business. The guard among the independents began to change when, in 1949, the first Lujie Lesovsky chassis qualified at Indianapolis. It was followed by A. J. Watson and Wayne Ewing in 1950, Eddie Kuzma in 1951, and Quinn Epperly in 1955.

Clyde Adams has rightly earned his place among the top "big car" and championship car builders in dirt track racing history.

by Gordon Eliot White