

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

PETER DE PAOLO

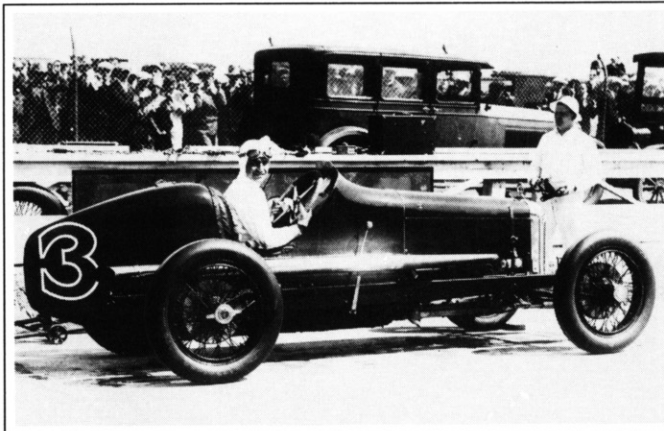
Peter DePaolo was born in Roseland (New Jersey), the nephew of racing legend Ralph DePalma. From 1908 until 1914, young Peter had heard great stories about the driving skills of his Uncle Ralph, but he never had the opportunity to witness them himself until September of that year at the nearby Brighton Beach course. From that day on, Peter knew he was to follow in those famous footsteps.

During the mid- to late teens, DePaolo began his employment, first as a tire company worker and then as a rental car driver/chauffeur. Following a stateside stint during World War I, he hired on as his Uncle Ralph's riding mechanic aboard the French-built Ballot machine in 1920. They finished fifth that year in the Indianapolis 500 and received worldwide attention when the Ballot caught fire and young DePaolo crawled out over the hood, stood on the front axle and, at racing speed, extinguished the blaze. They also competed in such international events that year as the French and Italian Grand Prix.

The family affair ended in February of 1922, though, when DePaolo quit DePalma as Peter was frustrated over their tire problems (DePalma refused to race on Firestones because that was the tire of choice for rival Barney Oldfield). One month later DePaolo received an offer from Louis Chevrolet to drive one of his cars at the Beverly Hills board track... a dream come true for the engineer, mechanic and now driver!

At Indianapolis that May, Peter DePaolo qualified well and even led the 500-mile race, only to smack the wall and record a 'Did Not Finish' aboard the

Frontenac machine of Chevrolet. In June, he married Evelyn Alice Lewis, or 'Sally' as she was known. The young Italian-American continued chasing his dream that year, competing at such venues as San Carlos (Calif.), Tacoma, Kansas City, and Paris, France. DePaolo crashed hard at the Art Pillsbury-designed Kansas City board track that September, although he fared better than his riding mechanic Harry "Cotton" Henning who was hospitalized for months with severe injuries. It was the same crash that killed Roscoe Sarles.



Peter DePaolo (Bruce Craig Collection)

In the Fall of '22, it appeared that DePaolo was done with racing, so he initiated ownership of an automobile service station in Los Angeles with his brother-in-law Lancelot "Jack" Lewis. Business prospered in 1923, Peter stayed out of the driver's seat, and his son Tommy (named after Peter's father Tomasso) was born.

However, the urge to drive again struck Peter early in '24 and he ventured to Indianapolis that May seeking a new single-seater ride with Fred

Duesenberg. The car owner's initial reaction was, "Well, kiddo, you've wrecked a hell of a lot of cars and it don't seem like good business to let you have another car to pile up". Fred relented, though, and Peter rewarded him with a fine sixth place finish at the brickyard. The rest of the year was spent racing on the board and dirt tracks in Altoona (Penna.), Kansas City, Readville (Mass.), Syracuse, Fresno, Charlotte and Culver City (Calif.). A twelfth place finish in the national championship was the net result.

The 1925 season opened at Culver City, with DePaolo's Duesey trailing winner Tommy Milton at the checkered. It was Peter's best finish as a driver! Two races later, further up the coast at Fresno, he won his first-ever American Automobile Association (AAA) national championship victory in the annual Raisin Day Classic. He defeated Milton, Leon Duray, Bennett Hill, Earl Cooper, Harry Hartz, Fred Comer, Frank Elliott, Bob McDonough and Jerry Wonderlich for the win.

Peter DePaolo's big day would come, though, on May 30, 1925, when he would place his number twelve 122-cubic-inch Duesenberg in victory lane at the thirteenth annual Indianapolis 500-mile Classic! Despite his record speed defeating the likes of Dave Lewis, Phil "Red" Shafer, Hartz, Milton, Duray and 'Uncle Ralph'. The winner's share of the \$87,750 total purse was officially \$28,800, although the victor pocketed nearly \$40,000 when all was said and done. Pete received his monies from track general manager T.E. "Pop" Myers at the annual banquet. Indy was followed by wins at Altoona, Laurel (Md.) and Salem (N.H.), and other 'top five' finishes at Salem, Altoona and the Italian Grand Prix. Peter DePaolo was the 1925 AAA National Driving Champion!

(Peter De Paolo Bio Continued Below)

Despite starting off 1926 with what Peter later described as "my greatest race", a win at Fulford (Fla.) near Miami, the following season never lived up to his expectations. He finished the year third in points following champion Harry Hartz and runner-up Frank Lockhart. At Indy, he recorded a fine fifth place finish after starting 27th, aboard the only non-Harry A. Miller chassis machine in the top thirteen finishers. He also recorded a lone win at Salem in July.

Although Indy in 1927 was another disappointment (26th place) in his Perfect Circle-sponsored Miller machine, DePaolo's switch from Duesenberg cars paid off with victories at Altoona, Salem and Charlotte and another National Championship title from the AAA Contest Board! Although he was not a great dirt track lover, he more than excelled on the unique board tracks of America which usually ran under the flags of Fred J. "Pop" Wagner.

As was so often the case during his roller-coaster career, a good year was soon followed by a dismal one. 1928 was no exception. Having earned enough money in racing from 1923 through 1927, Peter (and Sally) figured the '28 Indy race would be his 'last hurrah' and that he would resume a

business career near their new home in Southern California. However, a hard crash during qualifications, resulting in a fractured elbow, kept him out of the field altogether. Combined with his loss of investments in the Bank of Italy crash in June and a severe case of appendicitis, DePaolo's luck was souring fast. One bright spot, though, was the August, 1928, birth of daughter Nancy Alice. Later in the year he found employment with the Reo Motor Car Company of Lansing (Mich.), although it required alot of travel time away from his home and family.

Not surprisingly, Peter DePaolo 'unretired' for the 1929 Indy 500-mile race, this time driving for Mike Boyle in the Boyle Valve 90 c.i. Miller. Another DNF at Indy, and yet another in '30. During the late twenties and early thirties, times were tough for most Americans, including Chrysler Corporation representative Peter DePaolo and his family. In 1934, he ventured overseas to race, trying to earn more money while continuing to pursue his lifelong passion. Races in Libya (Grand Prix of Tripoli) and Germany (Avus Grand Prix) were fun and profitable in the four-wheel-drive Miller, but his finale at Spain resulted in more injuries and disappointment.

The next year at Indy, DePaolo finally got out of

the driver's seat for good and instead turned to the role of pit manager for his protege and fellow Italian-American Kelly Petillo. A win resulted for the Gilmore Speedway-sponsored, 260 c.i. Offenhauser-powered Louis "Curly" Wetteroth machine!

In addition to managing race teams in the 500, Peter DePaolo enjoyed his retirement from driving by writing his autobiography, entitled "Wall Smacker", writing newspaper columns, making public speaking appearances and being an all-around good-will ambassador for the sport. Peter DePaolo is now deceased.