

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

ELBERT "BABE" STAPP

Elbert Achilles Stapp was born in San Antonio (Texas) in 1904, the fourth of four children (the "Babe"), but his family moved to southern California in the mid-1910s.

His first race was in 1923 at the half-mile "out-law" track in San Luis Obispo (Calif.). He was aboard the George Sherman Special.

He achieved notable success driving Harry Hooker's bobtailed Fronty number 99 using the Leo Goossen-designed, Harry A. Miller DOHC Model T Ford Conversion head. At the time (1924-25), Babe was racing at the new Ascot (publicized by Bill Pickens) and then with the Western Racing Association (WRA) and was competing against such drivers as (former Hooker 99 driver) Fred Frame, Ed Winfield, Fred Horey, Sig Haugdahl, Ralph DePalma and Gus Schrader. It should be noted that Babe was followed in the Col. Hooker 99 car by such friends/rivals as Mel Kenealy (1926 and 1930), Bill Spence (1927) and Francis Quinn (1929). In 1926, Babe drove the number 3 machine, which was financed by his friend Art Pillsbury, on the WRA circuit.

Also around this time Babe was a member of the "13 Black Cats," who would perform aerial and automotive stunts for thrill shows and movies. Other members included R.G. "Bon" McDougall, Frank Lockhart and Jack Frye (later head of TWA).

Stapp's success led him to Indy, competing there for the first time in 1927 (the same year he won his only board track event at Charlotte). According to Babe, "In 1927, when I came back to Indianapolis, I paid a guy twenty-five dollars to let me ride in the rumble seat of his Chrysler from L.A. to the Speedway. It took us seven days, and it rained on me four days out of the seven. Four days! I wanted to drive that Speedway beyond anything else."

Babe competed in 13 Indianapolis 500 races between 1927 and 1940, with his best finishes being fifth in 1939 (Alfa Romeo) and sixth in 1928 (Miller). As much as he loved the brickyard each May, Babe Stapp never stopped

competing on the dirt, boards and asphalt during the rest of the year, using "Babe's Pit Stop" as his home base. He even teamed with Al Gordon and Wilbur Shaw for a stock car record assault in a Hudson on the Muroc Dry Lake (now Edwards Air Force Base).

Although it was a good life for the witty and affable "Black Cat," it wasn't without its tragedies. According to Babe, "I quit racing for a time after Bill Spence got killed (at Indy) in 1929. He and I were very close."

In 1930, Babe travelled to Monza, Italy, and competed in the Grand Premio de Italia in a Duesenberg, even winning a preliminary event.

Babe competed in the Charley Bobby Special (as did Jack Buxton) in the late Twenties and

Legion Ascot stars left for greener (more dollars) pastures. Wilbur Shaw and Bill Cummings led the assault on Ralph A. "Pappy" Hankinson's midwestern and eastern circuits, but they were soon followed by Ted Horn and Babe Stapp.

In fact, in 1935, Stapp captured the American Automobile Association (AAA) Midwest point championship, the same year that George "Doc" MacKenzie and Rex Mays claimed the East and West Coast crowns, respectively.

The following year Mays made the trek and captured the Midwest title, while AAA stopped sanctioning West Coast races. In '36, Babe married Mary Louise and four years later, when she became pregnant, he retired from driving. Shortly after his retirement, back in L.A., he

was burned while testing a midget on a back alley.

At the same time, in August of 1940, Babe's wife Lou gave birth to their only child, Stephen Owen. During the war, Babe worked at the Glendale (Calif.) air base, and afterwards he opened up an auto repair and machine shop there.



Elbert "Babe" Stapp (Bruce Craig Collection)

early Thirties, before breaking his arm at Ascot in 1932 in a serious crash while driving for Art Sparks and Paul Weirick. It forced Babe to miss Indy that year. Still, he finished seventh in the 1932 AAA Pacific Coast title race.

In 1933, Stapp bought Chad McClurg's Cragar (which Mel Kenealy had been driving) and secured sponsorship from Earl Gilmore. He put a potent Miller 255-c.i. motor in the Gilmore Speedway Special and was resplendent in his black and white attire. In late '33, Babe had an appendectomy, followed by a crash (and broken leg) in his first race back at Oakland. However, he still wound up tenth in AAA points.

Stapp served as driver (doubling for Frank McHugh) and technical director for the movie "The Crowd Roars" which was filmed at Ascot, starring James Cagney and Joan Blondell. Babe also served as a pallbearer at Ernie Triplett's much-publicized funeral following Ernie's death in March, 1934 at El Centro.

In the mid-Thirties, though, more and more

During the late Forties, Stapp moved to Texas and promoted racing at Arlington Downs. It was there that he was again technical director on a major motion picture, this time being "To Please A Lady" with Clark Gable and Barbara Stanwyck. In 1949 Babe promoted one race at Del Mar (Calif.), sadly it was the one in which Rex Mays lost his life.

Back in Southern California, Babe opened an automotive air conditioning shop in Burbank, then Hollywood, and ran it until his heart attack in 1970. During the late Fifties, Stapp also served as a USAC official. In 1962, Babe's Stapp Special is listed in 32nd place in the USAC sprint car points, with son Steve as driver. The following year they moved up to eleventh in points.

In 1972, Babe moved to Brownsburg (Ind.) where he owned and managed the car wash, and could keep an eye on Steve's family: wife Rosemary and their children (sprint car racer) Andy and Susannah. Elbert "Babe" Stapp passed away in 1980.