

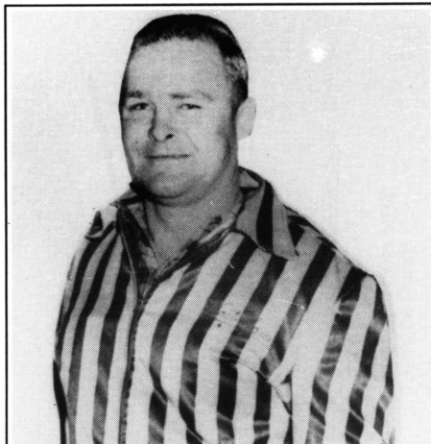
NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

WALT JAMES

Walter P. James (Jr.) was born on May 13, 1923, on a Mississippi farm, the youngest of three children. Following the lean depression years, he migrated to California in 1940 at the age of sixteen and was followed by his brother Joe. The two boys soon rediscovered automobile racing (they had challenged others on the gravel roads of Saucier, near Biloxi) and spent most of their spare time and money on the pre-war version of the hot rods, racing over the dry lakes of the Southern California deserts.

Following a stint as a U.S. Air Corps Captain and flying 26 missions in a B-17 in the European Theatre of Operations during World War II, Walt (and his brother) returned home to California and the hot rods. Besides the lake events, they raced at a

track in San Bernardino, also known as the "Ash Can Derby". Anything could race (roadsters, modifieds,



Walt James (Bruce Craig Photos)

sprint cars, even midgets) and it is where a sixteen-year-old named Troy Ruttman got his start. According to James, "That darn Ruttman was tough to beat." The 'Ashcanners' even ran a 500-lap race

on their half-mile oval in early 1946 and the leader won by over 100 laps!

On Labor Day 1946, the California Roadster Association (CRA) was born at the Carrell Speedway in Gardena. Walt and Joe James were there along with over eighty others and their converted street machines. The CRA hot rods caught on like wildfire and in 1947 the budding association paid out nearly \$200,000 in purse money to such names as the James brothers, Ruttman, Jack McGrath, Manny Ayulo, Andy Linden, Pat Flaherty and Dick and Jim Rathmann. They raced as many as six times a week for purses that averaged over \$2,000. It wasn't long before the cars were built strictly for racing and were known as track roadsters.

Walt won his share of CRA races, and occasionally in the midget, sprint
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and stock cars, usually beating his brother. Joe James would go on to be posthumously awarded the 1952 American Automobile Association (AAA) Midwest sprint car championship following his late-season death at San Jose (Calif.) in a championship car crash. "Joe was better than I was," Walt admits, "but I talked a better race so I usually had the better ride."

The lush years for the CRA lasted midway into 1949 when over-exposure and the jalopies caused race fans to lose interest. The following year was a terrible year for the club and an almost tragic year for Walt James, who was very seriously hurt in a late-season highway crash near Clovis Speedway that claimed the life of W.C. "Bud" Winfield. Walt had both legs crushed at the hips, a crushed chest, punctured lungs and a gash on the head. While laid up in the Fresno (Calif.) hospital, Walt James was elected president of the dying CRA club for 1951 by its membership, none of whom wanted the post themselves. According to Walt, "With two broken legs propped up in traction, I wasn't going anywhere, so what'd I have to lose?"

The sprint cars in southern California had died about the same time as CRA almost did, and for many of the same reasons. Thus, an insightful president James invited the parked sprinters to a CRA roadster event at Corona. The first mixed sprint-road-

ster event in 1952 produced a sprint car winner and all CRA events thereafter were open to both types of cars. In fact, the sprint cars gained such favor that the CRA was renamed the California Racing Association. By 1957, the successful transition from roadsters to sprinters was completed under the leadership of auto recycling businessman Walt James. Said Walt at the time, "I hate to see the roadsters go - they're my first love. But promoters and fans alike seem to want to see the sprint cars, and we have to give 'em what they want."

In the 1950's and '60s, the California Racing Association was one of the premier motorsports sanctioning organizations in the country and had expanded their horizons into Arizona. At the time, it was not uncommon to have nearly one-third of the Indianapolis 500 filled by CRA graduates. Among the top CRA pilots who pitted the new Chevrolet stock block motors against the traditional and powerful Offenhauser powerplants were Parnelli Jones and Jim Hurtubise. Safety was also of vital importance to Walt James and he was responsible for making the use of roll cages the over-the-shoulder harnesses mandatory in CRA competition. According to a late '60s CRA Yearbook, "The rebirth and continuing prosperity of CRA can be credited to the untiring efforts of one man - Walt James."

In 1970, after 21 years at the helm, Walt retired from CRA to build and manage the now-defunct Indian Dunes Motorcycle Park, known worldwide for its uniqueness and also known as a favorite movie setting. In the early 1980's, he and his friends 'reactivated' the Western Racing Association (WRA). Naturally, Walt was the new vintage racing club's first president. Today, racing ambassadors Walt James and his wife Dottie travel the United States and Canada to 'oldtimers' events from their Castaic (Calif.) home.

Walt and Dottie have three children: Lee, Vicki and Wendy. Kenneth Lee James followed his father's footsteps and raced sprint cars, winning the 1975 CRA Rookie of the Year title and finishing fourth in the 1979 World of Outlaws (WoO) point championship and third the following year (behind Steve Kinser and Doug Wolfgang). Both Vicki and Wendy also share their family's love for horsepower, thus the legend of the "James Gang" continues...

