



# Johnnie Parsons

by Doug Kennedy

Johnnie Parsons was born on July 4, 1918, to parents Harmon and Belle Parsons. They were performers on the Orpheum Vaudeville circuit and Johnnie actually performed with his parents' act, "The Dancing Parsons," at the tender young age of three. His parents separated in the mid-1920's and Johnnie went to Los Angeles to live with his uncle Jack Bridges.

It was there that he first became introduced to the world of racing as his uncle rented garage space to a number of

drivers and mechanics, including the winners of the 1915 and 1926 Indy 500's, Ralph DePalma and Frank Lockhart, respectively.

Johnnie saw his first race at the Legion Ascot Speedway in the late 1920's, and he was hooked. He also worked on Hugh Shuck's 'big car' while going to junior high school, as it was housed in the garages near his uncle's apartment. In 1933, Johnnie saw his first midget car races at the Loyola Stadium.

Before being old enough to 'stooge' on the race cars at the tracks, Johnnie could be seen selling the *Bergen Herald*, predecessor to Chris Economaki's *National Speed Sport News*, for promoters O.D. and Ray Lavelly.

While going to high school at Polytech, Parsons worked on some famous cars built by Louis "Curly" Wetteroth, including the 'big cars' of Emory Collins and Gus Schrader, and the Indianapolis cars of Kelly Petillo and Floyd Roberts.

Following high school, Johnnie went to work for Pacific Engineering in Glendale where he welded and did design layout. In 1940, at the age of 22, Johnnie Parsons made his driving debut at the Atlantic Boulevard Speedway in Los Angeles aboard Bill Rice's Class 'C' midget car. One year later, he won his first feature race in Don Farmer's midget at Colton, California.

Parsons also got a ride in the four-port Riley sprint car owned by his friends Mel Leighton and Bill Sheffler. He and friend Joe Hunt, later of Hunt Magnetos fame, even took a Dodge-powered sprinter to Oakland for a 500-miler at Charlie Curryer's high-banked track in 1941.

In 1942, Parsons won the United Midget Association (UMA) championship, which was a Class 'B' circuit, for car owner Ernie Casale. It was around this time that he married Arza, with whom he had one son (Johnny) and one daughter (Joan).

During World War II, Johnnie worked in the Douglas aircraft factory. Following the war, he helped E.A. "Roscoe" Turner organize the 'outlaw' United Racing Association. And he became a professional full-time race car driver, running five nights a week and twice on Sunday throughout California.

In 1947, he ventured out of the Golden State to race for his very first time, choosing the American Automobile Association (AAA) Mississippi Valley/Chicago circuit. Following the break-up of his marriage to Arza, Johnny married Lila and they had one daughter (Patricia).

In 1948, Johnnie had won the AAA Midwest midget car championship, racing just about every night of the week. He and John Tolan and "Chick" Barbo represented the St. Louis team on the circuit. Parsons won the third feature of the 'Night Before the 500' at the 16th Street Speedway. It was also the year that he took his rookie test at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway for the Granatelli brothers.

In '56, he won the seven-race United States Auto Club (USAC) Pacific Coast midget car title in that sanction's first year. According to Parsons, a 1984 inductee into the National Midget Auto Racing Hall of Fame, "It was the heyday of midget racing."

In late '48, Parsons got the nod in the Frank Kurtis-built, Ed Walsh-owned championship car for races at Springfield (twice), Milwaukee, and DuQuoin (twice). Johnnie he wound up finishing eleventh that year in AAA National Championship points. Sadly, the second DuQuoin race was the same in which the great Ted Horn lost his life.

In 1949, in his first full champ car season, Johnnie Parsons won the AAA National Championship title ahead of Myron Fohr and Bill Holland. Sadly, in the final race at Del Mar, the great Rex Mays lost his life.

Traveling to New York in 1949 to receive his AAA National Championship award, Parsons was approached by Clarence Brown of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to serve as a technical advisor with Elbert "Babe" Stapp on a film MGM was about to shoot entitled "To Please A Lady." During that process, Parsons got to know Clark Gable and Barbara Stanwyck.

A few weeks after filming at Arlington Downs in Texas, Johnnie went on to win the rain-shortened 1950 Indianapolis 500, with wife Lila and new celebrity friends Clark and Barbara all in attendance. Johnnie was aboard the 270-cubic-inch Wynn's Friction Kurtis-Kraft number 1, and the winner's purse was \$57,458.

The win couldn't have been any more special for Parsons. According to Johnnie, he had promised his father, who he deeply admired, that if he won the '500' he would retire from racing. Living up to his promise, Johnnie called him following the race and asked his father if he should retire.

His father's response was fairly simple and to the point. Said Johnnie, "Since I was the National Champion and had just won the biggest race in the world and if I still liked what I was doing, that it would be fine with him if I would keep on doing it. I thanked him. That was as important to me as winning the 500."

Winner of the 1949 AAA National Championship and the '50 Indianapolis 500, Johnnie Parsons was truly a racing legend. Through the years between 1948 and '52, Parsons won 11 national championship events. From post-World War II days through early 1955, Johnnie had more championship points than any other driver.

According to Parsons, "After I won the National AAA title in '49, Sam Nunis, the big-time East Coast promoter contracted me to run the Fair Circuit in front of the huge grandstands and all the carnival stuff. I ran Ted Nyquist's sprinter and then bought it with some of my Speedway winnings. We hauled it all the way from Essex Junction, Vermont, in the Northeast to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in the West, to as far South as Savannah, Georgia."

Johnnie Parsons raced against such greats as Bill Schindler, Tommy Hinnershitz, Bill Vukovich, Duane "Pappy" Carter, Fred Agabashian and others in the late Forties and early Fifties. And Johnnie acquitted himself quite well with wins at Allentown, PA, Pomona, CA, and elsewhere against the best-of-the-best of that era with his red and gold Barney Christensen-wrenched Autobrite sprinter.

Johnnie Parsons also suffered the worst accident of his career at a J.C. Agajanian-promoted sprint car event at the Carrell Speedway in southern California in late February of 1954.

On November 26th, 1959, while racing at the same Carrell Speedway in the Turkey Night Midget Grand Prix, the prestigious race in which he had won in '55, Johnnie Parsons retired. Besides midget cars, sprint cars, and champ cars, Johnnie Parsons also drove USAC stock cars. He also worked with the Joie Chitwood Thrill Show, the Champion Spark Plug Highway Safety Program, the National Car Rental/Pontiac U.S. Bicentennial Global Record Run, and the USAC Midget Division on the West Coast as Chief Steward.

Johnnie Parsons passed away after a massive heart attack on September 8, 1984. He was survived by his second wife Lila, son Johnny Parsons, Jr., and daughters Joan (Voyles) and Patricia (Vigants). In 1950, his first wife Arza married another driver, Duane "Pappy" Carter, in 1950, and together they had Duane "Pancho," Dana, and Tony.

"Gentleman John" as he was called because of the way he dressed and his personality, believed there was nothing better than the '40s and '50s for racing.

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In an interview done with him, Johnnie said, "The competition was pure, and there were many outstanding drivers, and the big bucks had not yet appeared. The camaraderie among the entire racing fraternity was so strong."

There are many other memories that Johnnie Parsons' children have of him. Said Joan, "It was an interesting life. I adored my father, and he adored me. He never had any brothers or sisters so he loved his family. He was a true gentleman, friendly, and pretty handsome. He always had time for the public."

Added Patty, "I thought he was the best dad a child could have. People loved to be around him. The press really enjoyed him, because he always made himself available to them. He would always go to the races early to make public appearances and stay late to sign autographs when the fans came down to the pits after the race."

Son Johnny had this to say, "As a person, he was real genuine and kind, not just to his family, but to others. As a father, he tried real hard. Even though it was a broken family, he did what he could. After I got out of high school and moved to California to pursue my racing interests I got to live with him for a few months, and I really got to know him a lot better when I was in my late teens and early twenties. And he helped me as a coach."

Besides the National Midget Auto Racing Hall of Fame (1984), Johnnie has been posthumously inducted into the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame (1986) and the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America (2004).

Perhaps the life and racing career of Johnnie Parsons can best be summed up in a quote he had made some years before. "My stage was the racetrack, and I like to entertain and put on a show."