

# George Bentel

*George Roy Bentel was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on July 2, 1876 to Frank A. and Mary (Wolf) Bentel. After graduation from high school in 1892 he entered the Pittsburgh brokerage house of Henry Sproul & Company.*

Bentel married the former Harriet Chaney in 1897, and in 1900 the young couple moved to Los Angeles, California, where George established a brokerage house in the style of George R. Bentel & Company, Stocks & Bonds.

In 1907, Bentel entered the automobile business as the West Coast distributor of the Rainier and American Mercedes. Success in the field brought him the Pacific Coast distributorships for the Simplex and Mercer automobiles in 1910. His exclusive territory for Mercers soon encompassed the entire United States west of Denver, from the Canadian to the Mexican border.

Coleman & Bentel Company, another Bentel-controlled firm, became the official Los Angeles Michelin tire distributor in 1912, the same year that Charles A. Mackey joined the Bentel organization as a partner.

In 1916, Bentel was appointed the West Coast distributor of the Jordan Motor Car Company, but sales were short-lived as domestic automobile manufacturers began experiencing material shortages due to the ramp up to the World War.

Bentel responded by purchasing used chassis and re-fitting them with updated coachwork and accessories. Many of these vehicles were represented as being new, and Bentel was taken to court on more than one occasion after the owners of the vehicles discovered they had been duped. Regardless, Bentel's creations proved popular with the stars of the silver screen, who were now flocking to Hollywood in large numbers.

In 1915, Bentel fielded a trio of Mercer-chassis racecars on the West Coast, often entering a fourth "Californian"-badged Mercer that skirted a rule limiting a team's entry to three vehicles. A number of famous racers drove for Bentel in the mid to late teens, including Berna Eli "Barney" Oldfield, Guy E. Ruckstell, Eddie Pullen, and World War I flying ace Eddie Rickenbacher. Mercers were manufactured in Trenton, New Jersey, the birthplace of employee Pullen.

Encouraged by the corresponding increase in sales of Mercer automobiles at his Los Angeles showroom, later that year Bentel formed a corporation to take over the management of the flat one-mile Ascot speedway, a horse racing track that had opened in 1904 and occasionally served as an early automobile speedway. In mid-1916, a complete surface oiling helped improve traction, reduce dust, and provide a safer racing environment.

The Speedway was featured in a small item published in the July 16, 1916, *New York Times*: "The Ascot speedway is the only one of its kind in the world, having been converted from the old horse race course of that name. This was done by eight weeks of rushed construction work last winter. The turns were banked to a height of eleven feet, and then the entire course

was paved. Because of the 'greenness' of this paving last winter, speed ate up tires. But George R. Bentel, Chairman of the Contest Committee at Ascot, will resurface the track this fall. In addition to the smoothing of the track surfacing, large bleachers are to be erected because of the immense popularity with which the racing has been received in this section. Ascot is the widest course of its kind, also the fastest, and its popularity has been heightened by the fact that the cars are in sight all the time."

A June 1917 issue of *Motor Age* included a picture of an attractive Bentel-built Mercer speedster body similar to those found on his racecars that was designed for both on- and off-track motoring. Bentel's promotional efforts continued at the pavement-like Ascot from 1916 through '19, with Joe Boyer winning the last auto race there on November 27, 1919. The facility, located at Central and Florence Avenues, is now the site of a Goodyear Tire & Rubber plant.

In the early 1920's, with the Los Angeles Speedway board track going strong, Bentel devoted most of his efforts into building the new high-banked 5/8-mile Ascot Motor Speedway. He again teamed with talented publicist William H. "Bill" Pickens, with whom he had worked during the famous Barney Oldfield/Ralph DePalma feud at the first Ascot track. In January of 1924, Bentel organized a new firm, the Ascot Speedway Association, to oversee the business activities of the new Ascot track. Together, Bentel and Pickens built the ultra-fast, ultra-dangerous track into one of the premier dirt race tracks in the country, expertly prepared and maintained by C.D. "Pop" Evans. They even created a Leon Duray/Ralph DePalma rivalry and media frenzy at the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) track.

Apparently Ascot was profitable with its Jack Prince-built, 12,500-seat grandstands. So profitable, in fact, that Bentel allegedly made off with the \$40,000 Thanksgiving Day purse in 1924. On December 7, 1924, the Los Angeles District Attorney threatened legal action against Bentel as follows: "Ascot Speedway Board Is Accused - Los Angeles. Dec. 6 - Officials of the Ascot Speedway Association must produce \$40,000 prize money by Monday or face a felony charge of obtaining money under false pretenses. This was the ultimatum handed President George Bentel today by Deputy District Attorney Clark, following complaint of eight drivers in the Thanksgiving Day race that they were not paid amounts promised them."

With the Los Angeles Speedway replacement board track, Culver City Speedway, successful nearby with American Automobile Association (AAA) sanction,

Bentel sold out at Ascot in 1927. Promoters named Ward Wing, Pierrepont Milliken, Harry Lutz, R.G. "Bon" McDougall and Harlan Fengler all tried their hands at promoting Ascot in 1927 and '28, but they all failed. It became known as the Legion Ascot Speedway in 1928 after management of it was turned over to Dr. Fred W. Loring and the American Legion Post 127 of Glendale. It remained successful, albeit deadly, until its closure in 1936.

The misunderstanding over the purse monies was not the smooth-talking Bentel's first brush with the law. He had been in court many times during his brokerage career, and was sued numerous times while

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he was in the automobile sales business. However, in late 1924, he was indicted of mail fraud following an investment scheme with Oliver Morosco, a Los Angeles-based theater chain and motion picture company owner. The pair formed the Morosco Productions Company, and in 1921 formed a real estate development company called the Morosco Holding Company. Morosco Holdings had grand plans for a 100-acre Disneyland-style entertainment park. During late 1924 it became apparent that the scheme was a giant stock swindle and the partners were indicted for mail fraud. It is not readily apparent if George Bentel spent much time, if any, incarcerated following that 1926 conviction for using the mail system to defraud investors.

Despite a decades-long career that was highlighted by his scandalous business dealings, Bentel remained in Los Angeles and continued to dabble in the motion picture business, serving as an outside production company for Columbia Pictures and others during the late Twenties. Bentel survived the Depression, forming George R. Bentel Associates and maintaining a listing in the Motion Picture Almanac into the 1940s.

George R. Bentel, founder of the George R. Bentel Company (1912-1919), owner of the U.S. patent for an auxiliary windshield (1920), and manager of the first two Ascot dirt tracks (1915-1919, 1924-27), died on February 27, 1952, in Los Angeles. He and Harriet had one daughter, Margaret, who was born near the turn of the century.

By Mark Theobald