

# Leonard Kerbs

Leonard E. Kerbs was born on December 22, 1895, in Otis, Kansas, to Russian-born parents Karl Jacob "Charles" Kerbs and Maria Katharina Lebsack.

He had one brother, Fred "Fritz", and five sisters, Leah, Rachel, Lillian, Marie and Violet.

Kerbs was, without a doubt, the dean of Jayhawk dirt track racing. He owned the most prominent business in Otis, Kerbs Garage, which was an authorized dealer for Ford sales and service. It was also a Case tractor agency. Leonard's shop in Otis, which is just 25 miles due northwest of Great Bend, was so well known, people would come from several states away just to purchase parts.

The machine shop also doubled as a race shop and Kerbs turned out his first race car in 1915. By 1917, Leonard and his cousin, Benny Kerbs, built a faster car but crashed it at Great Bend, Kansas, by running it through a fence. Following World War I, Leonard really got going in racing, building two cars with the help of Benny and machinist, John Schroeder. The cars were bob-tails and featured 16-valve Craig-Hunt heads. With Leonard and his brother-in-law Charles Lebsack doing the driving, the Craig-Hunts, which were rocker-arm style heads, had a hard time holding up. Soon, Kerbs designed a double-overhead cam for the heads and with these engines in their bob-tails; they dominated the mid-states for several years.

Leonard, "The Kansas Cyclone," competed throughout the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain regions; there were few race tracks where he did not win. In 1923 alone, Leonard went undefeated, winning every race at every track in which he

competed during the year. Noel Bullock and his Rajo became Kerbs' main competition and this rivalry would last for many years. Bullock, from Madrid, Nebraska, had a very fast bob-tail and it was an intense competition between the two; quite often they would lap the entire field as they battled among themselves for the win. It was only a rivalry on the track, however, as Kerbs and Bullock became the best of friends.

Leonard ran the same basic car through the 1929 season, but he could tell the competition was catching up. For 1930, he built a new more modern car, with a 16-valve DO Fronty head. This car was just as dominant as the first, as Kerbs once more won almost at will. With the birth of his son, Leonard "Buddy" Kerbs, in 1930, Leonard hung up his goggles and became strictly a car owner.

Kerbs may have been one of the first men in the Plains states to build customer cars in the 1920s. He built the very successful B & B number 700 for C.O. Bennett of St. Joseph, Missouri, with the supercharged Fronty, driven by Pat Cunningham to many victories. Earl Hovedon also campaigned a Kerbs-built car to many wins.

Sam Hoffman came on board as Kerbs' driver in 1931 and they had a fine season. They won many races, including one at Aksarben in Omaha, Nebraska, where Hoffman defeated Maynard Clark, Emory Collins, John Gerber, Bryan Saulpaugh and Gus Schrader amongst others. Pat Cunningham

drove for Kerbs from 1932 to '35 and also did very well.

Following the 1935 season, Kerbs sold his racing equipment and became a promoter and official. Kerbs' experience as a driver and mechanic served him well, as he became one of the most respected flagmen in the Midwest. Working tracks such as the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson, the North Central Kansas Free Fair in Belleville and the Valley County Fair in Ord, Nebraska, Kerbs gained a reputation as a fair, no-nonsense official.

Kerbs was already in the planning stages for the 1960 racing season when he suffered a fatal heart attack at his home in Otis on February 21. Few men have had as much of an influence on the racing game as Leonard Kerbs did during his 45 years in the racing game.

Leonard E. Kerbs married his wife Hannah Brack in June of 1915 and together they had five children: Vera, Helen Marie, Betty, Leonard "Buddy" and Larry. Betty Kerbs Abel lives today in Hutchinson, Kansas, near her daughter Ronda Lynn Priem.

By Bob Mays

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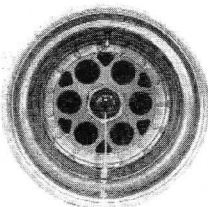
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