

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

BILLY WILKERSON

by Norm Bogan

Billy Wilkerson was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on June 23, 1927. Two years later, his family migrated to California and settled in the San Gabriel Valley east of downtown Los Angeles. That stop suited young Billy well. He grew up, attended school, worked and has lived in the same general area his entire life.

The thirst for speed came early. At age eleven, Billy purchased a 1925 Model T pickup truck for eight dollars and groomed his skills by running fast, much to the chagrin of the local constabulary. When he as sixteen, Billy emulated his two older brothers by enlisting in the United States Navy at the end of 1942 and serving until '48.

Returning to California, Wilkerson secured a position at the General Motors plant in nearby South Gate and worked evenings at an Alhambra auto repair facility. It just so happened that the shop owner, Dick Elliott, had a jalopy race car at the shop. Soon, Wilkerson was fussing over it. Eventually, Billy caught the bug to drive, bought Elliott's racer and entered his first show at Lakeland Stadium in El Monte, CA, in 1949. He won a heat race and the feature.

While Billy didn't come from a racing family, he and his brother Jay co-owned a jalopy and, later, a modified. Wilkerson captured the California Jalopy Association (CJA) championship in the mid-1950's and began running with the CJA modified division and the San Diego Racing Association modifieds, where he finished in the top ten in points on three occasions. The Wilkerson brothers built a sportsman car to run at Balboa Stadium and later purchased one of the Peat Brothers modifieds previously driven by Don Edmunds. This put Billy in a first-class car where he enjoyed much success running at tracks like Ascot, 605 Speedway, Balboa, Manzanita and Tucson. In the early Sixties, Billy and Ernie Duncan took this modified to Knoxville for the Nationals. The track had gone dry slick from qualifying over one hundred entrants. Wilkerson was next-to-last to qualify. A master of dry slick tracks, Wilkerson clocked second quick time.

CRA champion car owner Kenny Worth first approached Wilkerson in 1964 to drive his sprint car and Billy ran the final three races of the year. The following year, Wilkerson became a full time sprint racer as a thirty-eight year old rookie and won his first CRA feature on September 5, 1965, at Clovis, California. Always willing to help his fellow racers, Billy was named CRA Sportsman of the Year in '65.

Always one of the fastest, Wilkerson set a number of track records, listing him among the top in fast times and trophy dash

wins. Scoring twenty-one main event wins with CRA places Billy thirteenth on the CRA all-time feature win list, a fete that was accomplished in only eight years of competition. And it should be pointed out that five of those main event wins were 100-lap races.

Billy never raced as a vocation and was always employed during his racing career. Operating A-1 Tire Company for many years, he provided tires with racing caps to his competitors.

Later, Wilkerson worked for Adco Equipment Rentals as manager of equipment maintenance until his retirement in 1997.

Since Billy maintained full time employment, travel to the Midwest was held to a minimum. However, he did make one journey east to race with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) in 1963, and he ran with the United States Auto Club (USAC) when they headed west each fall. He was entered once at Indianapolis in 1966, for owner Ollie Prather. Their dream of running the Indy 500 came to an end when their only engine suffered problems. Billy had one more opportunity to race with the Indy cars at Phoenix in 1968, driving for J.C. Agajanian and Parnelli Jones in a Halibrand Shrike, a back-up for Jim McElreath. After McElreath crashed the primary car, Billy was bumped out of his ride, ending any further Indy car efforts.

During his CRA years, Billy garnered the 1967 point championship driving for Ernie Duncan, whom he credits for much of his success, and the 1970 title driving for Don Peabody. In addition to those two prestigious championships during his eight years racing with CRA, Wilkerson also had five top-five point seasons and seven top-ten point finishes.

Wilkerson also saddled up in the Al Bartz sprinter during his CRA career. When time allowed, he drove a Kurtis-Offy midget for car owner Bob Hanson. His greatest success was finishing second to Larry Dickson at a Manzanita midget show. The team ran several Turkey Night races and other midget shows on the West Coast.

Wilkerson did confess that during his racing career, a 302-cubic-inch engine normally powered his car. Crewman Bob Feltham, a former drag racer, was adept at mixing nitro into the fuel, which was legal with CRA at that time. Maybe one of the reasons that Wilkerson qualified so well was the 35% nitro load in the fuel.

Since his retirement, Billy has been a car owner with CRA and it's successor, the Sprint Car Racing Association (SCRA), with drivers like Rip Williams, Ron Shuman, Damion Gardner and Brad Noffsinger. Long-time friend Richard Woodland has



Wilkerson Family Collection

BILLY WILKERSON, continued

been a major influence and sponsor, in the success of the Wilkerson number 11 sprint car team. He's also pursued the restoration of several vintage race cars and has worked closely with buddies Gale Forester and "Buzz" Shoemaker on these projects. Billy also served the racing fraternity as a CRA board member and official, as Competition Director for the Ascot Park midget series and as sprint car Competition Director for the Copper World Classic.

Billy and his wife, Anne, have been fixtures at the southern California racing scene for many years. Between them they had four children, Randy and Janie Wilkerson and Danny and Jimmy Lewis. Randy tried his hand briefly at sprint car racing and Danny ran for several years, running both winged and non-winged, claiming one CRA victory.

Wilkerson is a real gentleman and is respected in the racing community for sharing his knowledge and helping others. Anne and he have been active over the years raising

funds for rewards beyond the normal purses for special races. Billy was awarded the Jimmy Miller Memorial Award in 1970 and the Jeff Bagley Award in 1991, both of which were bestowed for outstanding contributions and dedication to the sport of sprint car racing.

For the past fifty-five years, Billy Wilkerson has been an asset to racing in the West. Although his driving career was short, he built an impressive resume and has remained involved in the sport in many capacities since stepping from behind the wheel.