

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

SHERMAN "RED" CAMPBELL

by Justin Zoch

The 1930s was a strange time in the history of short-track open-wheel racing. The on-track action was perhaps the wildest, and most treacherous, of any era. But off the track, there was still a dignified air surrounding the sport. It was essentially a big-time entertainment racket, not yet marginalized by decades of dominance by stick-and-ball sports. Perhaps no driver symbolized the professionalism and true heroism of the era better than Sherman "Red" Campbell.

It was June 7, 1900, the dawn of a new century, that Campbell entered the world in Benton, Illinois, a tiny town just to the south of the Windy City. It was in his teens that Sherman discovered automobiles and he soon became a garage rat, hanging out and working at a local shop. When he turned sixteen, Campbell pulled onto a dusty grid for the first time in Sesser, Illinois, in a car owned by a local coal maven. He won.



Campbell Family Collection

Throughout the next decade, Campbell refined his penchant for pushing the envelope and by the time he was in his mid-20s, he was a professional racer in Southern Illinois with a broad and passionate fan base. His legion of fans followed him to places like Breese, Mt. Vernon, Marion and DuQuoin to see him wheel cars like the number 19 Frontenac Ford or the famous Davis D.O. "Fronty" number 7 that he drove to victory at Jungle Park in Rockville, Ind., in 1928. It was this car that Campbell drove to prominent victories at Creve Coeur, MO., Huntington, IN, Neligh, NE, as well as Jungle Park and his hometrack in Benton, IL. It was also during this period, 1928 through '31, that Campbell cheated death for the first time when he rolled his racer without injury.

Throughout his career, Campbell carried a signature red camel on the hoods of his racers and always raced wearing a white shirt and white pants, or white coveralls, and, at times, a necktie. The snappy dresser continued to work his way through the ranks and landed in the Whittaker Brothers' number 29 for the 1932 season. To celebrate Independence Day that summer, he swept Benton in the afternoon before towing to DuQuoin, IL, and winning the feature that evening. Campbell was one of the hottest drivers in the Midwest and he earned additional respect by winning the Northern Indiana Championship that season.

In January of 1933, Campbell, car owner Ralph Morgan, racer Tony Willman and Bill Campbell, Red's only son, made the long trek to California to purchase a new Miller powerplant. While there, Campbell raced at Legion Ascot and San Diego. They also raced their way home, with Campbell scoring in Houston in February.

By 1934, his traveling and winning drew the eye of Floyd "Pop" Dreyer. He and his Tydol Gasoline-sponsored Morgan D.O. Dreyer Special had wins that year at Dayton, OH, Des Moines, IA, and South Bend, IN, at Playland Park. His competition included contemporaries "Doc" Shanebrook, "Windy" Jennings, Charlie Engle, Johnny Wohlfeil, and Sig Haugdahl.

For the 1935 season, Campbell was seated in a gold emblazoned Morgan Miller Special number 34. Wearing a matching gold helmet, Campbell dominated the year with wins in Sharon, OH, Winchester, IN, Belleville, KS, and a tally in Detroit in October. The new Central States Racing Association (CSRA) organization began that year and Campbell finished second in the point standings to "Bud" Henderson.

The next season, CSRA stepped up their prize money to \$650 for each feature win and promised a trophy and two-carat diamond ring to the season's point champion. Campbell dedicated himself to winning the CSRA championship while also running a handful of International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) shows when time permitted. However, the season did not start off well. A late April event at Dayton saw Campbell smash through the fence, somehow avoiding injury again. The team pressed on and won twice at Jungle Park to compliment wins at Greenville and Dayton in Ohio.

On June 21, Campbell again cheated death. While racing at Greenville, Campbell went over the fence in hot laps. He destroyed the car but, again, Campbell emerged unscathed. The team rebuilt the car and swept South Bend two weeks later. Following strong finishes at Jungle Park and Dayton, the team headed to DuQuoin, where he failed miserably in time trials. He started dead last and, using his prowess at a familiar haunt, took the lead on the first lap. He followed up his DuQuoin dominance with another win at Fort Wayne. Campbell was on top of the world and he clinched the CSRA title over Everett Saylor, the trophy and the diamond ring in early September at Greenville. He finished his season at Sharon, winning a race while wearing a raccoon coat to stay warm in his racer.

At age 36, Campbell had cheated death at least three times and had produced a long, by 1930s standards, and successful career in open-wheel racing. But, the lure of Indy brought Campbell back for another season. The defending champion won the season opener at Dayton and finished in the runner-up position at Jungle Park and Greenville in subsequent weeks. Campbell still had the magic touch and was the man to beat when Winchester opened its doors on May 30, 1937. Proudly sporting the number one on his gold racer, and friend Joie Chitwood in his pit crew, Campbell headed out onto the grid for the event. He found his fourth starting spot and readied for the green flag. The flag never flew but several drivers were expecting it. Confusion boiled into tragedy as Campbell locked wheels with another competitor and flipped high into the air. Campbell could not cheat death this time and one of racing's most daring, dapper drivers lost his life as a reigning champion.