

C. Henry Meyer

by Bob Moore

Charles Henry Meyer was born on January 18, 1908 on the family farm just east of Greenville, Ohio. Henry was the eldest of five children born to Fredrick and Mary Jane (nee Ryan) Meyer. He attended the Sugar Grove District and Greenville High schools and graduated one year early with the class of 1926, cutting short a promising career on the Green Wave football team as a 130-pound guard.

Henry's introduction to the world of motorsports occurred at the age of thirteen. He drove his pony cart some six or seven miles from the farm down to the Darke County Fairgrounds in Greenville to watch an automobile race. Not content to sit in the grandstand, he was soon wandering the pits talking to mechanics and drivers. During the ride home after the races, Henry vowed to himself to become a champion race driver.

Following high school graduation and his first trip to Indianapolis for the 1926 Indy 500, Henry was off to Chicago and then Denver to take flying lessons. He returned home from Denver in the early summer of 1927 and resumed his quest to find a "big car" ride; he was a common fixture in the pit area at the midwest tracks on the weekends, lending a hand where it was needed and hustling the car owners all the while.

Henry Meyer and Forrest Scheffler of Dayton, Ohio finally partnered and bought a wrecked 1927 S.R. Fronty Ford; it was a total to everyone else but Henry, who had more ambition and drive than money. The '28 season was a modest success as racing goes; no broken bones and the car still in one piece.

Henry raced the big cars hard from 1928 to '36; he was a "hard charger" who had the reputation of being a "lead foot". This led to his downfall more than once in his career as a driver. He wrecked hard at New Bremen, Ohio, causing a life-long limp; flipped over the fourth turn fence at Winchester, Indiana, and survived; crashed hard at Toledo, Ohio; and was "pronounced dead on the scene" after a crash at Columbus, Ohio. When Henry was mending, he put others in his cockpit.

At Canfield, Ohio, he won a hundred-miler by fifteen minutes over second place. At Fort Wayne, Indiana, the American Automobile Association (AAA) referee tried to set him down, because he was making the Indy drivers look inept while driving a five-year-old outdated car.

The 1934 season was a pivotal year in Henry's career as he was still healing from the previous year's wreck at Beulah Park in Columbus. He went back to the cockpit for the first race at the new Dayton Speedway and competed against Ted Horn, but he hurt so bad that he couldn't last the 20-mile feature race. Meanwhile, the pit area was abuzz with rumors of a new, low-cost, smaller racing machine to be run on short tracks. Shortly thereafter, Henry acquired a wrecked 1917 Saxon and proceeded to build his first midget car from scratch, using John and Howard "Spike" Iddings' wrecking yard as a parts source.

The first race was indoors at the Indianapolis Coliseum in March of 1935. When the outdoor season began, Henry was regularly running the Butler Bowl in Indy on Tuesday evenings; Fairfield, Ohio, on Thursday nights; Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on Friday nights; the University of Detroit stadium on Saturday nights; and the Coney Island track at Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday afternoons.

1936 saw Henry building a Hal-powered Winfield-Ford Model A to drive in between midget shows, with Paul Zimmers of Dayton running the big car when scheduling conflicts arose. In 1936, Henry took his last ride in the "big car" in competition as the midget cars were keeping him busy

running five days a week and he was making good money. He soon sold the Saxon and built a Harley Davidson-powered car over the winter of 1937-38. Crashes at places like the Nutley Velodrome in New Jersey and the Hershey Stadium in Pennsylvania eventually ended Henry's driving career in 1939. He continued building and campaigning midget cars through the 1940s, '50s and '60s.

John Iddings of Iddings Auto Parts in Greenville bought into the racing game and for the 1935 season with the purchase of a Ford V-8-powered car. By the start of the '37 season, he had hired Henry Meyer to wrench his car.

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John wanted to win the Central States Racing Association (CSRA) title, so he had Meyer construct a new car over the winter of 1937-38. Morris Musick of Dallas, Texas, drove the new Iddings Hal to a third place finish in the 1938 CSRA point standings. "Buddy" Rusch then drove it to the CSRA Winter Championship on the southern circuit. Rusch drove most of the 1939 season, but was replaced by Carlisle "Duke" Dinsmore. Other drivers included Eugene C. "Woody" Woodford, Bob Garringer, and Elbert "Pappy" Booker.

In 1941, Tony Bettenhausen piloted the Henry Meyer-wrenched Iddings Hal to second behind Dennis "Duke" Nalon in the AAA Midwest point standings. The 1942 season picked up where the '41 season left off with Bettenhausen winning every race he finished and he was leading the points chase by a wide margin when the government stopped all racing for the duration of World War II.

When racing resumed in 1945, Eddie Zalucki occupied the cockpit until Johnny Shackleford took over the driving chores for the Iddings brothers. At the end of the '47 season, "Shack" had won the AAA Midwest championship and the Iddings Hal finished third in owner points.

Over the winter of 1947-48, Henry converted the car into a dual-purpose sprint/champ car, with a new 220-cubic-inch Offenhauser engine for the sprint races. Lee Wallard finished seventh in it at the 1948 Indy 500, but Shackleford was killed in it two weeks later trying to beat Ted Horn in a sprint car at Dayton. Others behind the wheel included Johnny McDowell, Mel Hansen, Manny Ayulo, Jackie Holmes, Dick Frazier, Mark Light, Jimmy Daywalt, Bill Mackey and Jim Rigsby.

Over the winter of 1950-51, Henry designed and built an Indy car for the '51 Memorial Day classic. It featured a 270-cubic-inch Offy engine and Jimmy Daywalt behind the wheel. Unfortunately a brush with the wall ended their qualifying chances. Over the Independence Day weekend that year, the Iddings crew slit up with Henry Meyer and driver Bill Mackey taking third at Darlington in the champ car race while Bob Meyer and driver Jim Rigsby destroyed the 1938 Iddings Hal-turned-Offy sprint car at Winchester.

While still campaigning the midget and champ cars, Henry Meyer and his all-volunteer crew built a new boxed-frame, short-wheelbase, lower-center-of-gravity, light-weight sprint car. In 1952, Frank Armi and Gene Force won the AAA Midwest car owner's championship for the Iddings brothers team. One year later, Marlin "Red" Renner and Bob Sweikert helped the Iddings to third in AAA points, with Bob Sweikert breaking Duane "Pappy" Carter's lap record at Winchester with a time of 18.696 seconds.

Henry Meyer remained loyal to the Iddings brothers as the crew chief on their race car from 1937 until 1973. However, when the Iddings turned their backs on the Indy 500 after the 1952 race, Henry felt free to accept others' offers for the 500-mile classic.

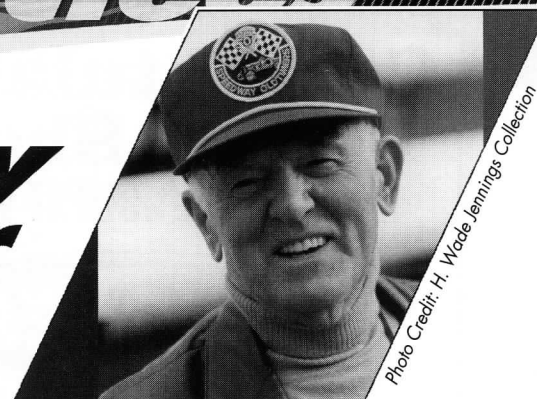


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Henry was on the pit crew of the John Zink team, at the insistence of the driver, in 1955 when Bob Sweikert won.

Over the winter of 1954-55, Henry Meyer worked on a new Chevrolet Special Vehicles and Research Department engine with Mauri Rose that Chevy wanted out on the outlaw dirt and pavement tracks. Henry readied the first one for Sherm Allen's rail-framed sprint car with driver Pete Allen (no relation). Pete Allen, Tom McClellan, Leon Clum, "Bud" Tinglestad and many others wheeled the Chevy-powered Allen Special for years to come.

In the late '50s, Meyer worked on the George Walther crew of the Dayton Steel Foundry Special at Indy and the Bob and Gene Shannon champ and midget car operation.

All the while Henry worked on these racing projects, he continued in his day job as shop foreman at the Delphos Machine and Tool Works in Dayton, Ohio. In the fall of 1959 Henry Meyer finished his dream car, a dual-purpose champ/sprint car that would weigh less than 1450 pounds. The United States Auto Club (USAC) outlawed dual-purpose cars for the 1962 season.

As a sprint car, the Iddings Auto Glass Special number 93 had a number of different drivers from 1960 through '73, including Jim Hemmings, Hugh Randall, Don Branson, Chuck Engle, Harold Smith, Allen Crowe, Bob Harkey, Chuck Booth, Al "Cotton" Farmer, Richard "Red" Amick, Bobby Unser, Al Unser, Steve "Buzz" Gregory, Sammy Sessions, Leland "Bud" Randall, Bruce Jacoby, Norm Brown, Richard "Butch" Wilkerson, Don Thomas, Russ Congdon, Gary Byers, Charles "Sonny" Ates, Ralph Liguori, Charlie Masters, Johnny Parsons, Jr., Curt Waters, Jerry Poland, Dennis "Duke" Cook, and Benny Rapp.

Tragically, Crowe lost his life in the Dayton hospital on June 5, 1963 following a horrible crash in the car at the New Bremen Speedway in Ohio.

On the other end of the spectrum, ex-motorcycle racer Sonny Ates from Louisiana enjoyed much success in the cockpit of the car that was known as "Ole Refrigerator" in the late '60s. In 1967, they finished fifth together in USAC points. On May 5, 1968 Sonny Ates powered the Henry Meyer-wrenched Iddings Auto Glass Special to a new half-mile record at Winchester with a time of 16.98 seconds. And on July 7, '68, at Earl Baltes' Dayton track, Sonny set another record with a time of 16.85 seconds. He topped it on August 3 of that year with another record time of 16.81 seconds.

Over the winter of 1974-75, Henry reorganized his shop at his home in Clayton, Ohio, to where he could take on a design and fabrication project for Brainard Industries of Dayton. As one successful project led to another, Henry soon retired from his full-time duties at Delphos Machine and Tool. He kept busy throughout the '80s restoring engines and complete race cars.

Since 1990 the Henry Meyer-built and -wrenched Iddings Auto Glass sprint car number 93 has been housed in the Garst Museum in Greenville, Ohio. Charles Henry Meyer, ever the gentle and moral man who loved classical music, passed away on March 10, 1994, after a bout with bone cancer. Sadly, his beloved widow Edna May Hartzell Meyer passed away just two years later. Daughter Jane Gerhard lives today in Rhode Island.