

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## RALPH "SPEEDY" HELM

by Justin Zoch



Ralph "Speedy" Helm

R a l p h " S p e e d y " Helm devoted nearly his entire adult life to the sport of sprint car racing and opened the doors for many young hellions who would proceed to rewrite the history of our sport.

Born on February 6, 1905, in Sidney, Illinois, Ralph Ochsner Helm got involved in racing in 1922 at the age of 17. He ran a race at the Champaign-Urbana Fairgrounds with a four-cylinder Chevy engine bolted into a Model T that he and his younger brother Robert had put together. Helm's driving career was short lived, however, after he ventured to Chattanooga, Tennessee, for a Fourth of July special. There, Helm had a wire wheel collapse and he flipped his ride upside down, suffering a concussion that took the sight from his right eye. His driving career was over before it started, but he was not finished with racing.

In 1926, Ray Fulton, Billy Walsh and Helm organized the Tri-State Racing Association and worked to promote 'big car' races in the Illinois, Indiana and Kentucky corridor for some ten years.

In 1936, Louie Brown of Illinois teamed with the Helm brothers, having them wrench his race car. In an almost unimaginable tragedy, Brown towed down to Savannah, Georgia, on his honeymoon and "was killed in an accident while racing that car."

The Helm brothers went down to Georgia and retrieved the Floyd "Pop" Dreyer chassis. They worked on that car while working across the street at the Duesenberg plant.

Besides the Brown Dreyer, Ralph and Robert wrenched on the O'Day Marine Miller and the Johnson Miller through the mid-to late Thirties with the Midwest Dirt Track Racing Association (MDTRA), which Ralph and driver Cliff Griffith dryly called 'the Kerosene Circuit'.

In the first year of the new decade, Speedy purchased a four-cylinder engine for his recently-bought Joe Silnes hand-crafted Dreyer number 5 sprinter. Robert's son Roby, Ralph's nephew, explained, "It was half of a V-8 (Hispano-Suiza) airplane engine, overhead cam, 366 cubic inches and he bought it for around \$850 from 'Buddy' Rusch."

World War II prompted Ralph to hold a 9-to-5 job, but when the war ended, the Helm brothers returned to racing with the "Helm Hisso", now numbered 3, winning

several races in Indiana and Ohio with the MDTRA and the Central States Racing Association (CSRA). In fact, Helm and the accordion-playing Griffith were the 1946 and '47 MDTRA champions.

In 1950, Speedy added a six-cylinder Ranger aircraft engine-powered sprinter to his stable. In '52, Helm purchased two Indy 500-winning Blue Crown Spark Plug Special Offenhauser engines from the estate of Lou Moore. With a strong Offy in his Dreyer chassis, and with driver Don Carr, he won a lot of CSRA and International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) races from St. Paul, Minnesota, to Tampa Bay, Florida.

For 1957, Helm purchased the last car ever produced by Hiram Hillegass and campaigned the Offy-powered number 3 machine for years with several drivers. In 1963, Tony Hulman purchased the Offy from Helm for the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum's Blue Crown Special restoration project, which prompted Speed to drop a 327-cubic-inch Chevrolet into the chassis.

Speedy continued on this way until 1974, when he sold his famous number 3 car and retired from the racing industry after 52 years of involvement. Helm devoted all those years to sprint cars, never getting involved in midget or Indy cars. As for why he retired, the owner in white pants, satin racing jacket and cock-eyed cap replied, "Too many 'herkimers' wearin' helmets these days! And what there are, well, all those sonsabitches wanta be "Wheatie Boys!"

Helm's influence on the sport was great, as he gave many drivers their first rides behind the wheel of a sprint car. In fact, many drivers piloted Speedy's sprinters over the years, including Richard "Red" Amick, Tom Bigelow, Jerry Blundy, Walter "Curly" Boyd, Bill Cantrell, Don Carr, Joie Chitwood, Dick Gaines, Paul Goldsmith, "Buzz" Gregory, Cliff Griffith, Bobby Grim, Darl Harrison, Jackie Holmes, Leon Hubble, Jim Hurtubise, Casey Jones, Arnie Knepper, Tommie Kristin, Jud Larson, Harold Leep, Jim Packard, Bill Puterbaugh, Everett Rice, Johnny Rutherford, Harold Shaw, Leon "Jigger" Sirois, Deb Snyder, Travis "Spider" Webb, Jerry Weld, Dave Wier, Edward "Bus" Wilbert (a.k.a. "Speedy Malone"), Jimmy Wilburn, and Jay Woodside. Helm always had an eye out for the underdog and a helping hand to those who needed it. And he was proud that no one ever lost his life driving a sprint car either owned, or taken care of, by himself.

"As a person, he had a gruff personality and a needling sense of humor," said Roby. "He was an easy guy to take the wrong way, but that was just his way of having fun with people. He had such a big heart. If a guy would come up and give him a sob story about how they were broke and needed a ride, my uncle would always put those kind of guys in his race car. He gave a lot of drivers their earliest sprint car rides."

One of the long-time owner's proudest moments came when helping a driver in need at the Minnesota State Fair in 1969. "My uncle would go to a race without a driver and the first guy that walked up and dropped his helmet in the seat was driving it that day," Roby said. "Darl Harrison blew an engine in the heat race and he was racing for the championship. He started in the back of the field in a 50-lapper and went right to the front and won the race. This was in 1969 and the car was 12 years old at the time. That was something he was really proud of."

Helm was also very proud of his equipment and kept it very well maintained. "He was very meticulous about the appearance of his car," Roby said. "Today, they pound them out or duct tape them, but he wouldn't do that. He'd take it home, take it apart and make it look good. He might miss two or three races, just getting the car repaired, but he was always proud of the way his equipment looked."

Although Helm's desire for clean-looking racers would play well in today's sprint car climate, his choice of tow vehicles would stand out like a sore thumb in pit areas. "My uncle raced his entire career, towing his race car with a passenger car with a toolbox in the trunk and single axle open trailer with a tire rack on the front. He wouldn't take more than three or four tires at a time."

Ralph Helm married Hazel Baker in the early Fifties after several years of dating, but they never had any children. Roby and his sister, Donna, were almost like adopted children to Ralph and Hazel and the family remained close until Helm's death from cancer on January 30, 1993. Ralph "Speedy" Helm, the owner of the famed Helm Hisso, Helm Ranger, Helm Offy and Helm Chevy, is interred at the Mount Hope Cemetery in Urbana, Illinois.

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Larry Sullivan Photo