

ALVIN "COTTON" FARMER

Alvin "Cotton" Farmer was born to parents Edward and Grace Farmer on July 7, 1928, on Lake Worth in Fort Worth, Texas.

Al was very athletic and got his nickname playing high school football with a head of blond hair.

At age 14, Farmer started bull-riding with the Rodeo Cowboy Association. He would be paid a little something whenever he rode; it would be called 'mounting' or 'grounding' money, depending on which way he wound up. He broke his back for the first time, of three, at age 17 in 1945, as a result of being thrown from a bull.

In 1948, while on the job as a wrecker driver for a local Ford agency, he was assigned to a Sunday jalopy stock car race at the Riverside Drive Speedway, near downtown Fort Worth. He was paid for his efforts, but he was upset as he had plans to attend a rodeo in Mesquite. Even though "Shady" McWhorter and Jim McElreath were in the field, Cotton thought he could do better than any of them. Within a couple of weeks, he was back with his own jalopy and he set third quick time, sat in the trophy dash and got upside down in less than an hour.

Besides Riverside, he also raced and won at the Wichita Falls Speedrome in 1949-50. About that time, he met Jimmy Reece and started stooging for him and the Jack Zink team of midgets. In 1950, Reece talked Farmer into moving to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Cotton won the last race of the Taft Stadium season and earned \$1,100.

During the next five years, he lived in OKC and did extremely well, ending with the 1954 stock title. He also began getting some midget rides and, in 1955, followed Reece to the Indianapolis, Indiana, area in hopes of furthering his open-cockpit career. Tony Bettenhausen, whom Cotton had met at a American Automobile Association (AAA) sprint car event at Arlington Downs in 1949, told Farmer never to give up on his dreams, and he hadn't.

The Indy contacts eventually led him to the west coast, where he worked for Johnny Poulsen of Gardena, California. And that experience got Al a ride on the tough International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) sprint car circuit back in the midwest in 1956 with E.M. "Dizz" Wilson of Mitchell, Indiana.

It also got Cotton his first Offy midget ride,

with Gus Linhares. Johnny was working on the car and had a feeling that Gus was going to ask Cotton if he had ever driven an Offy before. So, Johnny had Cotton drive it a couple of times around the parking lot. Sure enough, the next day Gus asked the question and Cotton said "yes" in all honesty.

1957 was Farmer's best year on the IMCA fair circuit, winning seven times and finishing fourth in points aboard Wilson's Offy. Farmer's IMCA win sites included at Grand Forks and Jamestown, North Dakota; Miles City, Montana; Knoxville, Iowa; Huron, South Dakota; Muskogee, Oklahoma; and Hutchinson, Kansas, while driving for Les Vaughn of Omaha, Nebraska. Bobby Grim won the IMCA point title, followed by Emmett "Buzz" Barton, Don Carr, Farmer and Poulsen.



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One of the funnier stories from this era is the one about Farmer when he and Barton were driving as teammates for crusty car owner Wilson. Legend has it that as Cotton was flipping end-over-end, Dizz was screaming that he was fired. In fact, Farmer was not fired, as Wilson's wife Zel was sick and Cotton was needed back in Mitchell to do the housework.

In 1958, Cotton married Mitchell native Tresa Noe. At that time, Al was busy driving a variety of race cars with the IMCA, the United States Auto Club (USAC) and in open-competition events throughout the country. He drove midgets, sprint cars and stock cars on dirt and pavement. In 1959, Farmer finished eighth in the USAC Eastern sprint car points behind champion Tommy Hinnershitz, Eddie Sachs, Fred "Jiggs" Peters, Jim McWhitney, Chuck Arnold, Elmer George and Gene Hartley. Farmer's second broken back came during an IMCA sprint car race in Saint Paul, Minnesota, in '59. While he was laid up at home, he drove to Oklahoma City for Reece's funeral over his wife's objections.

In 1960, Cotton passed his driver's test at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and, while he had rides the next few years, he never qualified. He thought that he had his best chance in 1963 with Joe Hunt and Wynn's, only to break his back again in a midget crash at Toronto, Ontario, Canada, just prior to the '500'. During the late Fifties and early Sixties, he also raced 24 championship car events, mainly for owner Lee Glessner and chief mechanic Tommy Hinnershitz. It was at the 1961 Indy 500 where Cotton Farmer saw Tony Bettenhausen, who was shaking down his friend Paul Russo's car, tragically lose his life.

In 1962, Cotton Farmer claimed the most prestigious of his sprint car wins, the United States Auto Club (USAC) Ted Horn-Bill Schindler Memorial race at the Williams Grove Speedway in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, aboard Charlie Sacks' Chevy.

That year he finished ninth in USAC's sprint car point standings, behind champion Parnelli Jones, Roger McCluskey, Jim Hurtubise, A.J. Foyt, George, Peters, Don Branson and Chuck Hulse.

Farmer, a winner of several features with Tom Cherry's All American Racing Club (AARC), continued his habit of driving a variety of cars in a variety of classes in the mid-1960's. Besides driving midgets, or 'compact sprint cars' or '110 Offenhausers' as they were called, sprints and champ

Bob Mays Collection

cars, Cotton even made two stock car starts with NASCAR in 1964. In midgets, he won several feature events for owner Scott Hunter, including two USAC midget main event wins in 1966 in Dallas.

In 1967, Cotton entered the championship division at the Pike's Peak Hill Climb. That effort, after he went off the road and flipped into the ditch, resulted in near-fatal injuries and the end of Farmer's racing career. Since that time, Cotton had remained active selling automotive chemicals for Wynn's and Justice Brothers in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. He retired in 1995. He also organizes an annual plane trip to the Indy 500, attends many oldtime events around the country, and enjoys his three daughters, Vickie, Michelle and Carol, and son Tim.

Asked once at an IMCA sprint car race during the Oklahoma City Fair which was the toughest, bulls or race cars, Al "Cotton" Farmer responded, "When you get upside down in a race car you don't have to get out from under it and beat it to the fence."