

D. WILLIAM "SPEEDY BILL" SMITH

by Bob Mays; Nebraska Auto Racing Hall of Fame



Bill Smith *Ken Coles Photos*

D. William "Bill" Smith was born on June 22, 1929, in Lincoln, Nebraska, and grew up in his hometown where he became interested in racing. Bill completed his formal education with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in education at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln. While in college, he met his future wife, Joyce Uphoff, from North Platte. The year 1952 was very eventful for Smith, with graduation from Wesleyan, marriage to Joyce, and the founding of his dream company, Speedway Motors. This was also the beginning of building and owning many different race cars. The color purple and car number 4X became legendary for Smith's Speedway Motors racers. His wife started calling him "Speedy Bill" in the early 1950s because of his racing exploits and he has been known as "Speedy Bill" to the racing world ever since.

His interest in racing started at an early age when he watched midgets with outboard motorboat engines running at the old Landis Field race track in Lincoln; it was in the early 1940s when he talked his father into taking him to see these cars race. As far as Bill was concerned, this was the greatest thing he had ever seen and that interest became involvement when he started racing motorcycles at age 16. In 1948, at age 19, he moved into the "safer" sport of auto racing when he built his first race car, a roadster made from a 1930 Model A Ford and a Ford V-8 engine. During those early years, he towed his racer to the various tracks behind a 1932 Packard - with a rope!

Bill's mother was adamantly opposed to his racing and she convinced him to quit driving. During his college years he became a car owner and began a long career of campaigning jalopies, roadsters, go carts, dragsters, supermodifieds, various forms of stock cars, sprint cars, Indy cars, champ dirt, Pikes Peak and Bonneville cars. All of Bill's cars have carried the number 4X and the Royal Triton bright purple color.

Bill started out 1979 with Shane Carson doing the driving and they won National Speedways Contest Association (NSCA) races at Sedalia twice and Burlington, Iowa, twice, as well as picking up wins at Davenport, Iowa, and Doniphan, Nebraska. At mid-season, Doug Wolfgang came back to Bill's car and won at Sedalia, Eagle, Knoxville, Des Moines and Spencer. The Spencer race locked up the 1979 NSCA owners point title for Bill Smith. WoO races that Wolfgang won in 1979 were at Eldora, Doniphan (the first-ever WoO race in Nebraska) and San Jose, California.

In 1980, Wolfgang piloted Smith's car to wins in the Southern Sprint Nationals at Easy Bay and at Tampa to start the season. He also won the Spring Nationals at the Devil's Bowl Speedway, which was shown on a tape-delayed basis on NBC's "Sportsworld".

Through the years, Bill's racing knowledge and hard work with his hobby, allowed Speedway Motors to continue grow. Today, Speedway is the country's largest supplier of hard-core racing products.

The Smiths enjoyed family life with four sons; Carson, Craig, Clay and Jason. As the boys grew up, they worked in every facet of the company as needed. It wasn't planned and not in the parent's wildest dreams, but after college and work elsewhere, all four sons returned to Lincoln and joined forces with mom and dad, to make Speedway Motors a real "family business" and a driving force in the racing industry. All four sons, with their interests and talents, have their own

Being proud of his roots there was always a reference to the state of Nebraska on his cars when he raced beyond Nebraska borders.

Bill raced with the Nebraska Hot Rod Racing Association (NHRRRA) in the 1940s and early 1950s and then built the stock car that Duane "Tiny" Lund drove in the mid-1950s. They were the first team to enter a Pontiac in NASCAR races in 1956.

Bill owned cars that ran at the Capital Beach Speedway in Lincoln throughout the 1950s. It was at Capital Beach that Bill's cars really started winning on a regular basis.

In 1960, Bill built a 1932 Ford sedan modified and with Lloyd Beckman driving and they proceeded to totally dominate the local racing scene. Starting on July 4, 1960, they won 16 features in a row at Capital Beach with the string not ending until June of 1961! They also won the Tri-State Championship at Spencer, Iowa, in September of 1960.

Smith and Beckman ran the sedan up through the 1963 racing season, winning many races around the Midwest. When Lloyd was not available, Bill had Waco, Texas, resident, Gordon Woolley pilot the car and he won on many occasions as well. Smith won the Tri-State Championship for the second consecutive year in 1961 with Woolley driving.

In 1964, the local rules were changed to allow supermodifieds. Bill built a Weld-designed roadster-style supermodified for Beckman to drive. Lloyd won races at Midwest Speedway in Lincoln and Eagle Raceway, including the first 'A' features at each track. He later became the 1964 Nebraska Modified Racing Association (NMRA) champion over Roy McCain, John Wilkinson, George Odvody and "Rocky" Rockvan. In 1965, Beckman was just nosed out for the NMRA title by Wilkinson.

Joe Saldana drove Smith's roadster in 1966 and won several times as well. In 1967, Bill started running a Don Edmunds sprint car with such drivers as Grady Wade and Keith Hightshoe.

Then, in 1969, Bill obtained the services of a young up-and-coming driver by the name of Jan Opperman. Jan had moved to Beaver Crossing, Nebraska, from California the previous year to try and establish himself as a racer (driving for Bob Trostle). Bill bought the 16-year-old Bob Slater sprint car for Jan to drive and they went on to have a very successful season. They won the Hawkeye Futurity in Des Moines, Iowa, for International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) sprint cars on June 8, 1969, as well as winning at Rapid City, South Dakota; Odessa, Missouri; and Topeka, Kansas. Jan won the 1969 Big Car Racing Association (BCRA) point title and Bill won the BCRA owners title, as well as finishing seventh in the IMCA points.

For 1970, Bill bought a brand new Roger Beck sprinter and had Opperman, Ron Perkins, Roy Bryant, Tom Corbin, and Jay East among others driving for him at different times.

In 1971, Lloyd Beckman jumped back in the seat of Bill's newly-built 4X sprinter and won races at

niche in the company.

In 1982, Bill, with his son Carson, had his car back on the local scene with fifty-five-year-old Lloyd Beckman in the car. They won the Midwest Speedway track title, winning seven features along the way. Beckman also ran for Bill and Carson in 1983, winning three more times at Midwest and winning once at David City, Nebraska.

In 1988, Bill became involved in the American Indy-Car Series (AIS) for stock-block Indy Cars. With his sons Carson and Jason as co-crew chiefs, they enlisted Robby Unser, son of three-time Indy 500 winner, Bobby Unser, as their driver. They won at Mountain View Park in Colorado and finished fourth in the championship behind future Indy 500 winner "Buddy" Lazier, Kevin Whitesides and Bill Tempero. In 1989, Robby totally dominated the AIS circuit, winning twelve of the sixteen events and sweeping to the championship over Richard Griffin, Bill Scott, Kenji Momota and Bill Tempero. Speedway Motorsports also easily won the team championship.

In 1990, Robby's cousin Johnny Unser drove for them; he won two races and finished second in points behind Bill Tempero. Robby Unser ran on a limited basis and won at Odessa, Missouri. Bill's son, Jason, also drove on a limited basis in 1990.

This year 1994 saw Robby Unser win the Pike's Peak Hillclimb in record time, driving a radical open-wheel car designed by Carson Smith.

Beatrice, Nebraska; Erie, Colorado; and Eagle. Beckman won the NMRA title over Lonnie Jensen and Denny Oltman, and finished fourth in the BCRA standings behind Jon Backlund, Albert "Buddy" Taylor, and Jensen.

Bill and Lloyd set a record at Eagle in 1972 by winning four features in a row and also won a BCRA main event at Belleville, Kansas. Lloyd finished behind Lonnie Jensen in both NMRA and BCRA points. Eddie Leavitt also set a one-lap track record of 15.07 at Eagle in Bill's car in 1973.

The year 1974 had Jan Opperman back in the 4X car; they had a new Don Maxwell-built car, winning three features in a row at the Tampa, Florida, Winternationals IMCA sprint car races. They also won several other races that year at Midwest Speedway and at Fairmont, Minnesota. They lost the Knoxville Nationals to Dick Gaines by less than six inches.

Ray Lee Goodwin drove for Bill in 1975, winning at Midwest, Knoxville, and Belleville before being hurt in a spill at Knoxville. Opperman took over the remainder of the season and won at Kansas City, in the Jerry Weld Memorial race, and the Jayhawk Nationals in Topeka. He won IMCA races at Eldon, Iowa, and Sedalia, Missouri, as well as winning two in a row at Belleville to nail down the BCRA crown for himself and the owner's crown for Smith for the second time. Jan ended 1975 ranked second in the IMCA point standings.

In 1976, Bill Smith got one of his biggest wins, as Opperman took his car to victory in the prestigious Tony Hulman Classic for United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint cars at Terre Haute, Indiana. With fifty-seven sprinters competing, Opperman was the last to qualify, set fifth-fastest time, started outside on the front row, and led all the way. He beat out Duane "Pancho" Carter, the three-time USAC champion, with his impressive win. This was an ABC nationally-televised auto race for their "Wide World of Sports" program. The following week, National Speed Sport News, Chris Economaki's national racing publication, reported on the race and win by saying 'The outlaws from Nebraska came to Indiana and blew their doors off.' Ron Shuman and Joe Saldana also won races in 1976 for Bill, and Saldana set a one-lap track record at Knoxville of 20.247 in the Speedway Motors 4X. This record stood for several years.

By 1978, Bill had Doug Wolfgang driving for him in a Winners Inc. sprint car designed and built by Bill and Doug. Wolfgang had a tremendous year, winning at Kansas City; Knoxville; North Starr Speedway in Blaine, Minnesota; Oskaloosa, Iowa; Eldora Speedway in Rossburg, Ohio; Midwest Speedway; Hartford, South Dakota; and Erie, Colorado. Some of the big races he won were the Southern Sprint Nationals at East Bay Speedway in Gibsonton, Florida, defeating Dick "Toby" Tobias, Tom Corbin, and Lealand McSpadden; the Spring Nationals at the Devils Bowl Speedway in Mesquite, Texas; the Dirt Cup at Skagit Speedway in Washington, and the biggest win of all, the 1978 Knoxville Nationals where he beat Steve Kinser, Eddie Leavitt, Shane Carson and Danny Smith. The World of Outlaws (WoO) ran their inaugural season in 1978 and Wolfgang finished fourth in the championship behind Steve Kinser, Rick Ferkel and Bobby Allen.

The many awards Bill has received over the years includes induction into the Speed Equipment Marketing Association (SEMA) Hall of Fame, Belleville High Banks Hall of Fame, Nebraska Auto Racing Hall of Fame, Hot Rod Magazine's Hall of Fame, and the Classic Car Hall of Fame.

Bill's hobby became his business with the formation of Speedway Motors after graduation from college. In 1952, his first race car shop was approximately the size of his office now, a few hundred square feet of space. His love for racing, the instrumental role of his wife, Joyce, their dedication to the racing/speed community and visibility in the sport has resulted in one of the most successful and largest speed shop businesses in the world.

The 1990s finds the Smiths still actively involved in racing with IMCA and sprint car sponsorships, the McKichan/Schultz Bonneville Salt Flats Land Speed Car with a 300+ mph Chevy engine and GM Motorsports-sponsored Pike's Peak Corvettes built by Carson Smith.

Today, Bill's collection of antiques consists of one of the largest collections of exotic racing engines, cars, pedal cars, toy race cars and Model "T" accessories in existence. The Smith Collection, a 501(c)(3) non-profit foundation, founded in 1992 by Bill and Joyce Smith, also includes a marvelous collection of automotive and racing memorabilia.