



Bob Burman

Robert R. "Bob" Burman was born April 23, 1884, on a farm near Imlay City, Michigan, to parents William and Frances Pickreign Burman.

Not too excited about being a farmer, Bob left home at age seventeen. A young mechanically inclined Michigan man looking to make his way in the world had options. Bob chose Jackson, Michigan, where he took a job in the small Buick plant. Initially he worked painting and testing engines, but eventually moved to the Jackson Automobile Company as its chief road tester.

In 1906, at the age of 22, Bob would get his first big break. He talked his employer into entering a stock Jackson automobile in a highly publicized 50-mile race at the Grosse Point racetrack. Among the entrants that day was Henry Ford and Barney Oldfield. Bob beat them all. Oldfield commented that Bob "took awful chances on the turns, but he won the contest beating Ford and me."

Shortly after that, Bob won a 24-hour endurance race in St. Louis teaming up with Ernest Kelly. Burman not only won, but beat the competition by 82 miles, driving 22.5 hours himself. It was during this race that he acquired the title "Wild Bob."

Taking notice of Bob's exploits was William C. "Billy" Durant, who had recently purchased the struggling Buick company and was in the process of creating General Motors. Durant made an offer Bob found too lucrative to turn down. Burman would be a member of the race team Durant was putting together at Buick. The Buick squad remains one of the greatest factory teams ever assembled. In addition to Burman, the team included the Chevrolet brothers, Louis and Arthur, and Lewis Strang. Bob won the first race in which he was entered under the Buick colors, the 187-mile Garden City Sweepstakes on Long Island. February of 1909 found him winning the 100-mile Mardi Gras Festival event in New Orleans with a record time of 1:42:39.4. In July at Columbus, Ohio, Bob bettered the mark with a 1:41:00 clocking for the 100 miles. In August of 1909, before being paved with bricks, Burman won the first major race at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The event was the 250-mile Prest-O-Lite Trophy race. Between 1908 and '11, the team won more than 90 percent of the events in which they competed.

Bob was all business when it came to racing. Early in his career, he would race wearing a suit and tie. Eventually, his manager convinced him that business attire wasn't necessary to win races. With this, he began to wear dark trousers, a silk shirt, and a bow tie under his coveralls. Like many drivers, Bob had a good luck charm. He always wore a

diamond stickpin. When not racing, Bob enjoyed the role of family man and spending time with his wife, Lue, and their two daughters, Lugene and Florence.

February of 1911 saw the Buick team disbanded. After Barney Oldfield was suspended due to staging a match race with heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, Burman was given the opportunity to drive Oldfield's "Blitzen Benz" at Ormond Beach in Florida. Over two days in April, Bob made good use of the opportunity. On April 23, Bob's 27th birthday, he crushed Oldfield's records for the fastest kilometer and mile. He then went for the two-mile record. The run took less than a minute. Bob covered two miles in 51.28 seconds, moving down the beach at better than 141 mph. A few weeks after the record runs, Harvey Firestone ceremoniously placed a crown embedded with pearls and gems on Burman's head. It was modeled after the one King George V had worn at his recent coronation, and was valued at a reported \$10,000. With all this, Firestone declared Burman the "Speed King of the World." His record would stand until 1919.

The year 1912 was very good for Bob Burman. After a crash put him in the hospital for a week, Burman returned to the track with a new resolve. He would go on to win 43 of 53 races entered and finish second eight times. The majority of these wins were on dirt tracks.

By 1915, Bob was riding high. Now driving a Peugeot, he was still winning. One of these wins was the first American Automobile Association (AAA) sanctioned championship event held on a half-mile dirt track. On July 9, Burman won the 200-lap, 100-mile race at the Tri-State Fairgrounds in Burlington, Iowa. The win was especially satisfying because he was able to hold off the three-car Duesenberg team. In 1915, when the average annual salary of American workers was \$687 and a new house could be bought for \$3,000, Burman pulled down \$18,000 in winnings. Other money came in from sponsorships, equipment testimonials and such. It was a good life, but it was going to come to a crashing end soon.

Early in 1916, Bob made his way to California. He won a road race in San Diego then finished second twice at the original Ascot in Los Angeles. On April 8, 1916, Bob was racing in the Corona Grand Prize race at Corona, California. On the 97th lap, Burman was in second trying to make up time

on leader Eddie O'Donnell in a Duesenberg. Without warning, while traveling in excess of 100 mph, Burman's Peugeot blew a tire. The car skidded upon a culvert and crashed past two telephone poles into a group of spectators, several of whom were seriously injured. Bob's mechanic, Eric Schrader, and a track policeman were killed instantly. Bob was taken to Riverside Emergency Hospital with a severe head injury, which proved fatal. His wife was at his side. A rumor has always circulated that Bob's wife wanted to make sure he had his lucky stickpin when she arrived at the hospital. Upon inspection, it was discovered that the area of Bob's shirt where the pin had been was cut away. Apparently, it had been removed by somebody riding in the ambulance. Sadly, when he most needed it, he didn't have his good luck charm.

Although he raced on multiple surfaces, Burman's dirt track prowess is undeniable. At the time of his death, he held six dirt track world's records: 10 miles, 15 miles, 20 miles, 25 miles, 50 miles, and 75 miles. Bob ran eight AAA sanctioned championship races held on dirt ovals. Of the eight, he won three and finished second in two. In addition, Bob won countless races on fairgrounds dirt tracks across the county.

As result of Bob's death, his close friend and competitor, Barney Oldfield, teamed up with Harry Miller to build a car that incorporated an enclosed roll cage to protect the driver. The car would become known as the Golden Submarine. Even today, Bob's tragic death is used to promote auto safety. For a seatbelt education program, the Wyoming Department of Transportation ran a print ad with a photo of Bob which read, "Without seatbelts, Bob Burman didn't stand a chance." Bob was laid to rest in Imlay cemetery. A memorial at his grave site reads, "A Buick race driver without peer. On the track he knew no fear."

Bob and Lulu Horton Burman had two daughters, Lugene and Florence. Lugene and her husband Hans Larson had one daughter, Cody Laura Larson. Cody and her husband Francis Ringlein had one daughter, Laura. Bob Burman's great-granddaughter, Laura Ringlein, is married to Ben Wright, and they live in Clio, Michigan, today.

By Larry L. Ball, Jr.

Photo credit: Library of Congress Collection

Hewitt's Service Center, LTD.

Tires • Parts • Service
24 Hr. Towing & Recovery
Monroe, IA
641-259-2097

RICK'S AMOCO

24 Hr. Fuel
Pay At The Pump
321 1st Ave. East • Newton
792-8080

Congratulations 2011 Inductees!

PLEASANTVILLE STATE BANK

515-848-5741

www.pleasantvillestatebank.com

Member FDIC