

# CHESTER "CHET" GARDNER

Chester Leroy "Chet" Gardner was born on March 2, 1898, in Bethany, Missouri, the son of Charles and Rozella Gardner. His siblings included Ivah, Charles, Ray, George, Paul, Willis, and Dean. In the early years of the new century, the Gardner family moved to Colorado.

Ray Gardner started building and driving race cars there in 1922, before he was signed by promoter J. Alex Sloan to a contract with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA). Younger brother Chet also started racing in the Denver area in 1924, until he got a ride in American Automobile Association (AAA) competition at the American Legion Speedway in southern California. Brother Paul was a veteran pit mechanic. And, by the time youngest brother Dean turned 21 years old and could race, Legion Ascot had already closed. However, Dean did race a midget in AAA and United Racing Association (URA) events; though, shortly after the war in 1946, he was fatally injured in a midget race in Phoenix, Arizona.

38th for James Booth after crashing on the opening lap due to his inexperience with a full fuel load.

During that period, 1929-30, Chet Gardner also made four board-track starts across the nation.

In 1931, Chet got his big break when he became one of the first to drive a Miller-powered machine for car owner G. Doug Harrison. The 8-cylinder number 47 Miller Special was the ex-Bill White car. Gardner capitalized on the opportunity by finishing second in points, albeit by a wide margin of 300 points, to AAA Pacific Southwest champion Ernie Triplett. Rounding out the series points were Stubblefield, Quinn, Brummier, Les Spangler, Elbert "Babe" Stapp, Bill Cummings, Mel Kenealy, Kelly Petillo, "Shorty" Cantlon, Phil Pardee, Wilbur Shaw, B.W. "Speed" Hinkley and Herman Schurch. Newcomers Rex Mays and Ted Horn finished 30th and 34th, respectively, that year.

One year later, Gardner drove G. Doug

Stapp, Stubblefield, and Spangler. Chet was known as a 'money driver', one whom you could find amongst the leaders at the finish of most races. His older brother Ray was still racing his own Winfield Special number 56, but he didn't have the resources nor skills that Chet could command.

Chet started 15th and finished fourth in the Alden Sampson Radio Special at Indy, where he was one of the first to use radio communications with his team. Chet was also beginning to taste success in other parts of the country, as he claimed the 1933 AAA Midwestern championship.

In 1934, Gardner continued his efforts which saw him start and end the season on the west coast in his number 5 Miller Special, while traveling to the east and mid-west in the heat of the summer. He started 5th in the Indianapolis 500 and finished 21st, again aboard the Alden Sampson Radio machine.

Again dividing his time between both coasts, Chet Gardner competed at Bill White's Ascot Motor Speedway in his own number 17 Miller. He also won a 100-mile race at Toledo, Ohio, that summer. At Indy, he started ninth and finished seventh for owner Alden Sampson. White, struggling with an Ascot track that was losing popularity, promoted two-man Indy car races there in late 1935 and early '36. Gardner participated with Bob Biggs in the number 10 Miller, which was the last car built by the Duesenberg brothers. Brother Ray Gardner even helped in the pit. However, on January 25, 1936, Ascot closed forever.

Gardner continued racing nationally that summer and the next, running the Vanderbilt Cup races and the Indy 500's with his own Burd Piston Ring Special. At Indy, he finished 29th and 11th, respectively, in 1936 and '37.

In 1938, he started 18th and finished 5th for Burd Piston Ring Special car owner Joe Lencki, and he won the 100-mile race at Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Sadly, on September 3, the gentleman racer died in qualifying at Flemington, New Jersey, when he chose to strike the fence to avoid a small child who got away from the grasp of his parents and ran out onto the track. Gardner crashed through the fence and was killed instantly, while the toddler was returned unharmed to his hysterical parents.

Chet, a World War I veteran, was buried in Long Beach, California. He was survived by his wife Fannie Mae and step-son Harry Rogers.

Following Chet's death, Ray Gardner cut back his racing activities, although he won in 1939 on the Oakland mile in Charlie Curryer's American Racing Association (ARA) competition. Ray had four children - Dortha, Raymond, Howard, Jack and Mary. Both Howard and Jack continued the Gardner family tradition by driving jalopies, roadsters and sprint cars; in fact, Jack Gardner, Sr., won the 1954 California Racing Association (CRA) point championship. Jack Gardner, Jr., is a current car owner with the Sprint Car Racing Association (SCRA) and the United States Auto Club (USAC).



Chet Gardner

Bruce Craig Photos

Early in his career at the American Legion Speedway, Chet was involved in a nasty spill when his car went over the rail, under a portion of the grandstand and killed a spectator. When Chet recovered, he quickly became a star of AAA- sanctioned Pacific Southwest championship tour.

In 1929, Gardner made his debut at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Although his original Boyle Valve Miller entry had bearing problems in qualifying, Chet was able to drive in relief of William H. "Speed" Gardner (no relation) in the actual '500'.

Back at the American Legion Speedway in 1930, Gardner, with his Fronty number 12, was seriously under-financed in comparison to those teams of Ernie Triplett, Francis Quinn, Walt May, Jimmy Sharp, Arvol Brummier, and W. H. "Stubby" Stubblefield. Quinn went on to win the point championship that year, although Gardner was gaining recognition for his daring on-track skills and his professional off-track image with white pants and shirt and black bowtie. At Indy, he started fifth and finished

Harrison's number 2 Miller Special, which was the ex-Charles Haase car. One Wednesday night at the southern California speedplant, Gardner crashed on the opening lap of the night's 75-lap finale, and he was forced to watch the entire race while sitting on the track fence as AAA official Fred "Pop" Wagner deemed that his crashed car was not an obstacle to the competition. The "Blonde Terror" Triplett earned the 1932 point championship, followed by Spangler, Shaw, Gardner, Cummings, Bob Carey, Stapp, Petillo, Sam Palmer, Brummier, Al Gordon, Cantlon, and Stubblefield. Mays was 21st.

Several administrative changes were made in 1933, with Dr. Loring giving the American Legion track its Legion Ascot name and the AAA dropping the 'Southwest' moniker from its Pacific Coast championship title. However, one thing that remained constant was Chet Gardner's consistency, as he again finished in the top five in season-ending points aboard his own number 4 Miller Special. Al Gordon claimed the title, followed by Mays, Triplett, Petillo, Gardner, Kenealy, Herb Balmer, Carl Ryder, Shaw,