

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

DICK WALLEN

by Dave Argabright

For the thirty years that Dick Wallen has stood behind the camera filming open wheel events throughout America, he has been amassing a treasure. He didn't realize it at the time, but all of those countless hours produced an incredible library of some of the most unforgettable moments in open wheel racing. Fortunately for Wallen, his hand was steady, and the images he and his crew recorded are crisp and clear. Fortunately for the heritage of Champ and Sprint car racing, he's now prepared to share his library with the rest of us.

The irrepressible Wallen began his film career in 1958, when he bought a new 16mm camera for \$300 and traveled east from his Los Angeles home to film the Riverside Grand Prix. He made \$50 and earned the respect of Fred Bailey of Race Film Productions, one of the leaders of the motorsports film industry. He gave Wallen a chance to work with his film crew for the 1959 Indy 500, and Wallen was hooked. Within two years he had quit his grocery store job, packed up his young family, and headed to Indianapolis and a career in filmmaking.

He survived a meager start through the early '60's, living with the legendary open wheel crowd of Foyt, Hurtubise, Jones, Unser, McElreath, and Marshman, who were the untouchable world of USAC Champ and Sprint car racing. He survived the all night rides from Langhorne and Kansas City with Foyt or Jones behind the wheel, rocketing down two-lane highways toward home. His apartment on Georgetown Road hosted the social event of the week each Wednesday night, when most of the drivers, car owners, crew members and fans would gather for the viewing of the film from the past weekend's USAC events.

"It was different then, from a social standpoint," Wallen admits today. "There was a fellowship that you don't see today. It was a family deal. Guys fought sometimes, but after the races nobody stayed mad for long. That was what I loved, that everybody was so close. I filmed tons of other types of racing, but the Sprint and Champ cars were my love. They still are."

The key to survival for Wallen, from the professional standpoint, was not Sprint car racing. While he made a few bucks selling film to car owners and fans, he found the big money was in Hollywood. He sold his first piece of film to Universal Studios in 1961, scenes of a major crash that they wanted to build an entire movie plot around. Wallen, a shrewd and tough negotiator, threw out all standards in pricing for the 10-foot section of film, earning himself \$5,000 and a reputation as expensive - but high quality - among major Hollywood filmmakers. He would ultimately provide footage for over 500 movies, and many contemporary TV shows.

"People back then thought I was the bum that carried my camera to all of the Sprint car races, and that it was my living. God, I would hate to think about making a living back then on just open wheel films. The Hollywood stuff kept me in business, and I started filming everything I could that I thought I could sell to movies. But I never let up on the open wheel stuff."

During this pre-video era, Wallen did all his work on 16mm "psotitive image" film, called Commercial Ektachrome. It is a professional quality not unlike the widely used 8mm film of yesterday. By the mid-seventies he had established himself not just in Hollywood, but as the premier producer of commercial films catering to many aftermarket manufacturers that were heavily involved in auto racing. He became a legend in the business in 1973, when he produced "Hard Driving Man" for Champion, and in 1980 followed that with "Close to the Edge." Both are now classics in the commercial film world, and "Man" has sold over 1,000 copies in 8mm and 16mm.

"A lot of big companies like Champion, Wynns, Firestone, Ford, and GM would buy film and use them for promotions, meetings, and sales pitches. That was a big market for me until it dried up around 1980 with the advent of video."

If there is a dirty word in Wallen's vocabulary. It surely is

"video." He makes no bones about his distaste for the advent of the technology, and what it did to his business, from the filming point of view.

"Video ruined the filmmaking business, it's as simple as that. It's not unlike the technology that has changed Indy car racing so dramatically. It allowed a guy with no talent to just pick up a camera and start filming and people became willing to settle for the poor quality films because they could be made so cheaply. I wasn't willing to sacrifice the quality."

By 1983, Wallen was ready to sell his library and quit. The market for commercial films was gone, and he was selling very few 8mm Sprint car highlight tapes. His wife Lou Ann suggested that he convert some of his open wheel film to video, and sell copies to the huge base of racing fans that are equipped with VCR's. Since the original was 16mm, crisp, colorful, and clear, it would result in a video far more attractive than one filmed originally in video.

"I told her she didn't know what she was talking about," he now admits. "But I figured, what the hell, I'll give it a try. I put out some ads, and got a pretty good response, and by 1986 I had about eight highlight tapes out."

"Then, one day a light came on. I realized that I had, in my library, all of these races from the sixties and seventies that nobody had ever seen before. Look at all this historic stuff! I figured that I could produce these in volumes, so that people that want to learn about racing in the early days can buy the specific chapters that they're most interested in."

Now, the fire is back in Dick Wallen's eyes. Surprisingly, he insists that he has filmed his very last race, and he will no longer be recording any new racing competition. In fact, Kodak discontinued manufacturing Commercial Ektachrome three years ago, and Wallen is nearly out of the one-of-a-kind film anyway. He is now focusing his entire effort on a library on historic open wheel racing, sifting through his incredible three million feet of film, of which only approximately 1% has been sold to the public.

"I wouldn't take a million bucks for everything I've done over the years, but I wouldn't give you five cents for what's left in racing today. There's so much isolation and jealousy, nobody gets along like the past. I'm not cynical, I'm just all used up. I came into racing with guys like Vukovich, and I want to go out with guys like Wolfgang. When you live with these guys, you form a tight circle of friends. The circle changes as people come and go, and I've gone through about five groups of people in my career. I just can't do it anymore."

In 1986, Wallen filmed Indy for what he says is the last time. Politics, among other things, hastened what would have been an inevitable decision, and Wallen is philosophical. He was losing interest, anyway.

"When I started out in racing, Indy was the golden ring that everybody strived for, but you didn't get your chance until you busted your ass a time or two in other racing. I just don't relate to how you get to Indy now. How do you follow a guy? Where did Bobby Rahal come from? Where did Michael (Andretti) come from?"

Now Wallen is content to work in his Hollywood studio, looking at hours of footage showing Offy-powered, sleek racers throwing dirt around Sacramento or the Indy Fairgrounds. Part of the action will be footage that he has become known for, the many grinding, spectacular crashes that he's captured in living color.

"When I started filming, I refused to sell any film of a guy getting busted up or killed. I figured I didn't want to take advantage of their misfortune. But when I started putting this historic series together, I decided that the crashes were a part of it, a part that people remember. I figure if I use good taste, it will come out all right."

"I feel a strong obligation to tell the story as accurately and as well as possible, just like I saw it. I want to get away from a commercial film, and try to make my films for the home viewer's entertainment pleasure."

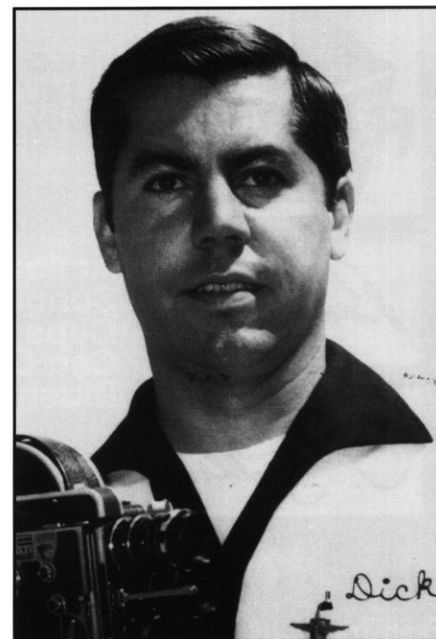
Wallen hopes to hold on to his library for four or five more years, when he will have his historic task completed. His next film will present highlights of the '62 and '63 USAC Sprint season, plus some CRA action from that period. It also contains IMCA Sprint footage from the then-dirt St. Paul Fairgrounds, in which Johnny Rutherford made his rookie debut. Finally, in an IMCA race at Topeka, we can see Jud Larson in his first comeback race. Historic stuff.

Next will follow volumes of other Sprint car and Champ car action, culminating eventually with competition from the early 1980's. Wallen will continue his Racing Classics segments on ESPN's "SpeedWeek," which has created great interest in nostalgic footage. He hopes to someday produce a show on ESPN, which would feature an event from yesterday complete with play by play and color provided by the race winner such as Foyt, Jones, or Hurtubise. Wallen is excited, and business is good. The good old days, he says, are back.

"Sometimes it takes us a week to keep up with our orders. We feel that what we're producing is the best on the market, and we hope our viewers agree. In filmmaking, you can't get too worked up about what the critics might say about this or that, I figure that if you give people what they want, they'll be happy."

Since the above interview was published in May of 1989 (and reprinted with permission of "Open Wheel" magazine), Dick Wallen's Racing Classics business, now based in Glendale (Ariz.), has become the premier source for high-quality books, prints and videos relating to open-wheel motorsports. Among Dick's books are "Board Track: Guts, Gold & Glory" and "Fabulous Fifties: American Championship Racing", both printed by Kutztown (Penna.) Publishing Company. His prints include works by noted artists Ralph Steele, Joe Henning, Bob McCoy and Michael Wright. And his video productions cover everything from midgets, 'big cars', sprint cars and championship cars to formula cars, sports cars and stock cars.

The man who, with a nucleus of dedicated cameramen like Joe Creek, Dave Pratt, and Carl Lockwood, proved he was 'ahead of his time' is clearly a competitive businessman. But the man who saw his first midget race at San Bernardino's Orange Show Stadium in 1947 and never missed a race there until 1955, is still a race fan. And the man who married his sweetheart, at age eighteen, is still a devoted family man to wife Lou Ann, son Rick and daughter Sherrie.



Dick Wallen

(John W. Posey Photo)