

Bill White

by Thomas J. Schmeh

William S. "Bill" White was the Los Angeles businessman who owned 'big cars' and Indy Cars in the 1920's and '30s, and built and promoted dirt tracks in southern California in the 1940's and '50s.

In the mid-1920's, "Hollywood" Bill White owned "big cars" with

such drivers as Leon Duray (bob-tailed ex-Cliff-Durant car) and Jack Petticord. In 1923, he gave Harlan Fenger, later an Indianapolis Motor Speedway and United States Auto Club (USAC) official, his first ride at Indy. White was also a close personal friend of T.E. "Pop" Myers, another long-time I.M.S. official.

In 1927, White won the Indianapolis 500 with 27-year-old dirt track specialist George Souders in the 90-cubic-inch Duesenberg-powered Duesenberg. In 1928, Purdue University graduate Souders finished third in the Indy 500 for White aboard the State Auto Insurance Special, which was originally Harry Hartz's second Miller-powered Miller. In 1929, William "Shorty" Cantlon began driving for White in the Myron Stevens-rebuilt machine. Elbert "Babe" Stapp drove for White at Indy that year in the Spindler Miller-powered Duesey. Cantlon drove White's new rear disc-wheeled 183-cubic-inch Miller at American Legion Stadium in Alhambra, California, in 1930. He also finished second for White in the Indy 500 that year aboard the Miller-Schofield Stevens machine.

In 1931, with the help of Eddie Meyer, Dale Drake, Eddie Offutt and Clyde Adams, White had a new Miller chassis installed with a new 220-cubic-inch Leo Goossen/Harry A. Miller-built engine (costing \$2750). Francis Quinn debuted the unpainted car, before Ernie Triplett took over the bright red machine (with the white numeral 4) for the remainder of '31. Together White and Triplett easily won the American Automobile Association (AAA) Pacific Southwest point title by competing at tracks like El Centro, San Jose, Bakersfield, Oakland, Phoenix and Dr. Fred Loring's famed American Legion facility. The top four in points were Triplett, Chet Gardner, W.H. "Stubby" Stubblefield, and the late Francis Quinn, respectively. Cantlon finished 27th at Indy in White's 301-cubic-inch Miller-powered Miller that year.

In 1932, White's Miller Special car was re-numbered 1 in honor of the previous season's title, and re-designated the Red Lion Special. White and Triplett again won the AAA point championship, defeating Lester Spangler, Wilbur Shaw and Chet Gardner, respectively. Bryan Saulpaugh finished 32nd at Indy aboard White's Miller/Miller machine. One year later, in '33, Triplett and White finished third in the AAA Pacific Coast points behind titlist Al Gordon and runner-up Rex Mays. Triplett sat out one full month, though, due to injuries after a July 20 spill at Legion Ascot. Ernie also finished 33rd at Indy in White's Floating Power Miller-powered Weil chassis machine.

In 1934, Triplett again wheeled White's Red Lion Special number 3 machine. Sadly, on March 13 at El Centro, he lost his life in a violent accident, which also killed 1933 "class B" champion Swede Smith and his mechanic "Hap" Hafferly. At Indy, Cliff Bergere finished seventh in Bill's Miller/Weil Floating Power Special. Late in the '34 season, Al Gordon drove the rebuilt car, now white with a blue number 1, for Bill White and sponsor Bill Froelich Ford.

Al Gordon and Bill White teamed up for the 1935 season, with Al finishing 30th at Indy in Bill's Miller/Weil Cocktail Hour Special. Interesting, also in '35, the American Legion Glendale Post pulled its support from the famous dirt track bearing its name in southern California on June 21. William S. "Bill" White took over the promotion of the facility, immediately renaming it Ascot Motor Speedway. For the next eighteen months, he promoted single-seat "big cars" and two-man Indy Cars on the high-banked five-eighths-mile dirt track, and a smaller, flatter half-mile that he had built on the inside. Following the fatalities of driver Al Gordon and riding mechanic William E. "Spider" Matlock on January 25, 1936, in his own car, a personally saddened and professionally disappointed Bill White padlocked Ascot for good.

Continuing his involvement at Indy, Shorty Cantlon finished fourteenth in Bill's Miller-powered Weil, known as the Hamilton-Harris Special in 1936. In '37, they teamed up for a sixteenth place finish in the Miller/Weil Bowes Seal Fast Special. In 1938, White had two cars in the Indianapolis 500: Babe Stapp in 26th (McCoy Auto Service Miller/Weil) and Rex Mays in 28th (Alfa-Romeo/Weil). In '39, Babe Stapp (Alfa-Romeo/Weil) and George Barringer (Offenhauser/Weil) finished fifth and sixth, respectively, at Indy in White's cars. In 1940, Harry McQuinn (Alfa-Romeo/Weil) and George Barringer (Offy/Weil) placed eleventh and fourteenth, respectively at Indy in Bill White's Hollywood Special cars. Harry McQuinn finished seventh in '41 (Ziffirin Alfa-Romeo/Weil), before the war, and Jimmy Wilburn finished nineteenth in '46 (Mobil Oil Alfa-Romeo/Weil), after the war, at Indy for Bill White. In 1947, Cy Marshall earned eighth for White in the Alfa-Romeo/Weil Tattersfield Special.

Bill White was associated, as builder and/or promoter, with three different dirt tracks in Gardena, California: Carrell Speedway (1940), Gardena Stadium (a.k.a. Gardena Speedway, Western Speedway; 1954) and Ascot Park (1957). White also promoted ultra-successful AAA and United Racing Association (URA) midget car races at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, site of the 1932 Olympics, after World War II. His first 250-lap midget race on August 17, 1946, at the Coliseum drew 65,000 race fans, while his 500-lapper in '47 caught the attention of "only" 33,715 patrons.

In the 1950's, Bill White owned and operated the Ascot Café at 4416 West Slauson Avenue in Los Angeles.