

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

GRANVEL "HANK" HENRY



Granvel "Hank" Henry *Bruce Craig Photos*

Granvel "Hank" Henry is being inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame in 1999 in honor of his outstanding achievements as a sprint car builder.

Granvel L. Henry was born in Oklahoma on August 17, 1925. As a child, his family moved to California.

Hank, as he was known, moved from Porterville (Calif.), where he was a body-and-fender man at a local Ford dealership, to Tucson (Ariz.) in the 1950's. In '56, Henry was called to the greater Los Angeles area by Henry Higuchi and James Yoshida, who put him up in a motel down the block from their gas station on Western Avenue, then set him to work shaping an aluminum sprint car body. The resulting Henry and James Special, with its Hank Henry body, Lujie Lesovsky chassis and James Yoshida's six-cylinder engine, is still remembered by California Racing Association (CRA) veterans.

In 1959, Henry moved from Arizona back to California again, and he never left. He settled in the San Diego area, 120 miles south of Los Angeles, where summer temperatures were such that he often worked at night. Henry used a disc grinder and bent his tubing with a torch. He had primitive tools, but he was a master craftsman. He fabricated noses, tails, hoods, seats, exhaust

pipe headers and fuel tanks of incredibly high quality. His aluminum tanks were so flawless that, after inspecting one of them, Eddie Kuzma had immediately offered him a job building Indianapolis cars. Henry, whose work brought him more creative satisfaction than great financial reward, and who was extremely independent, politely declined.

Though only in his 30's, Henry, because of his skill and knowledge, was something of a guru for West Coast car constructors. Steve Stapp, Leonard Surdam and others would drive from Los Angeles to Henry's Ramona and Escondido shops to view the personable master at work shaping aluminum, working with sheetmetal, and welding. Henry loved to talk, laugh and play practical jokes on people. He also loved to ride his self-constructed unicycle.

Through the course of his car-building career, which was tragically cut short in a racing accident in 1968, Hank Henry probably finished no more than twenty super-modified and sprint cars. He was meticulous, slow-working, and selective. He refused to build cars for those with a reputation for crashing and he wouldn't accept customers who didn't want a heavy, rigid chassis, which he felt was superior to the lighter, more flexible ones.

Since he preferred quality to quantity, the cars he did build were fast and they were generally regarded as works of art. Besides the body work on the Henry & James Special, other legendary Hank Henry-crafted sprinters are Dick Fries' Tipton & Wright Chevy, Hal Minyard's 1966 CRA championship-winning Lehotsky & Singh Chevy sprinter, Jimmy Oskie's 1969 CRA championship-winning J-RAM Chevy nicknamed "Ol' Paint", and Parnelli Jones' 1961 United States Auto Club (USAC) championship-winning Harlan Fike Plumbing Specials. Oskie's four-bar car was built in 1966 and '67 by Henry and it was debuted in early '68 by Oskie, who had just returned from naval aircraft duty off Vietnam.

Surprisingly, building race cars wasn't Hank Henry's passion, racing them was. He raced midgets in Arizona and with the United Racing Association in California, super-modifieds in Arizona, New Mexico and with the San Diego Racing Association at El Cajon Speedway and Balboa Stadium, and sprint cars with the CRA and USAC.

Although he wasn't as talented a driver as he was a builder, Hank Henry did have his moments, especially in CRA competition in the early 1960's. He won his first CRA main at Ascot Park in Gardena (Calif.) in 1962, driving the Shinohara/Osborn/West sprinter.

In 1963, at the old Arizona State Fairgrounds in Phoenix, Henry crashed the Ken Worth sprinter while leading a CRA main. The accident inflicted serious burns over much of his body, especially to his face and the tips of his fingers. Afterwards, his fingers (inside padded gloves) lacked the dexterity needed to shape aluminum tails, although he still raced and worked as hard as ever. While building Oskie's car in 1966 and '67, Henry wheeled the Vern Williamson Chevy, which was a car he had built himself in his shop with the help of assistant Carl Adams. Henry claimed three more Ascot CRA wins aboard the Williamson Chevy, two in 1966 and another on opening night of 1967.

One year later, however, at the same Ascot Park, the 42-year old lost his life on April 13. Henry was driving the Leonard Surdam Special, the Frank Kurtis-built 1964 CRA championship-winning car that started life in the early Fifties as an Indy car. The car later ran the American Automobile Association (AAA) Midwest "big car" circuit and the Pacific Northwest super-modified scene before finding its way to Southern California and CRA. The reason Henry wasn't driving the Williamson Chevy that night was that he always gave his customers' cars higher priority in his shop than his own.

During the early laps of the night's semi-main on April 13, 1968, Henry locked wheels with fellow driver Robin Powell as they neared the second turn of the half-mile oval. Henry's car catapulted into the air and landed upside down, sliding into the retaining wall. At that point it began a series of end-over-end flips over the wall and out of the speedway. Powell received multiple back and neck injuries. Jan Opperman was also involved in the accident but he was unhurt.

Hank Henry, who received the inaugural Jimmy Miller Memorial Award at the 1967 CRA banquet for outstanding contribution to the sport, was buried in the Oak Hill Cemetery in Escondido (Calif.). He was survived by his wife Kathleen F. "Kay" Henry and his daughter Charlotte Henry McAllen.