

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

EARL BALTES

Earl Baltes was born in the early 1920s in rural western Ohio as one of six children. Earl's grandfather had formed a family musical band and it was handed down to Earl's father. At that time, Earl was the guitar-turned-saxophone player and his brother, Jimmy, the drummer. Eventually Earl took control of the eight-piece dance band, calling it "Earl and his Melody Makers."

He saw his first auto race while passing through New Bremen (Ohio) on his way to a musical engagement. After stopping to check it out, Earl was impressed by the excitement and the crowd. However, he was busy building the Crystal Ballroom in Frenchtown (Ohio), so he didn't act immediately on what he saw in New Bremen, other than to start attending races more regularly.

In 1942, Early opened another ballroom, this one just north of another small Ohio town, Rossburg. The El Dora Ballroom was the place to be on Saturday nights. After World War II, in 1952, Earl started building a race track out behind the ballroom. Eldora Speedway opened as a quarter-mile dirt track within two years. In 1956 it was enlarged to a 3/8-mile track and two years later it became a full half-mile facility, just as it stands today.

During the late 1950s, Earl invited United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint car supervisor Russ Clendenen out to his track and apparently he liked what he saw in Eldora's super-modified races. USAC arrived at Eldora in 1962 and it continues to be active at Eldora today, although there was a time in 1978 that they wanted to reduce their sanctioning involvement at Eldora and Earl did just that. He reduced it to none. Earl had a similar disagreement with Ted Johnson and his World of Outlaws (WoO) in the mid-1980s and, like with USAC, it was resolved before too long.

Although known for his independence as a track owner/promoter, Earl has never been above doing the hard work himself. The Eldora track is a scary-fast, high-banked facility and for the past 40 years, Earl has always person-

ally manicured the track (usually with muddy boots on and the bill of his cap turned up) and taken full responsibility for its condition.

In fact, personal responsibility has been one of Earl's strongest traits. Due to his style of management, he alone has been responsible for the success/failure of various promotions. And he has had some big winners over the years:

- since 1971, the World 100 has



Earl Baltes (Larry Reese Photo)

been the nation's most prestigious dirt late model event until, possibly ...

- this year's tribute to the late J. W. Hunt, a \$100,000-to-win event entitled "The Dream" for dirt late models;
- since 1984, the Kings Royal sprint car championship has traditionally been the highest-paying race to win (\$50,000) until ...
- last year's \$100,000-to-win event entitled "The Historical Big One," featuring preliminary events sanctioned by USAC, the All-Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) and the World of Outlaws (WoO);
- Since 1981, USAC's "Four Crown Nationals" has always been one of that sanctioning body's premier

events for its sprint car, midget, late model and dirt championship car (Silver Crown) divisions;

- since 1983, the All Star Circuit's Ohio Sprint Speedweek (during the week of July 4th) has traditionally held its finale at Eldora

Among the promotions at Eldora that are no longer around are the 500-lap sprint car race (which was run for three years) and the WoO-sanctioned "Eldora Nationals."

Besides his musical ability, his independence and his sense of responsibility, Earl is also known for his humor. To this day, after all of his ultra-successful promotions, Earl, with a straight face, will tell a stranger, "My brothers and sisters retired. They always kid me. They say if I'd saved my money when I was younger..."

While Earl waters the track, mans the grader and generally calls the shots, his wife Berneice runs the concessions. His sister Starr sells the tickets and her husband Joe Schmitmeyer runs the pit/press sign-in window. Earl's son Terry was once the announcer there, too.

Although Eldora has always been Earl's gem, he has owned and promoted other

tracks in Ohio: Mansfield, Limaland (Lima), Dayton, Millstream (Findlay), and the same track where it all started for him, New Bremen. And he has even been known to promote shows at other people's tracks in Ohio and elsewhere, like he did this February in Florida.

In 1982, Earl was quoted as saying, "These are my slowdown years that are coming up." That was before the Ohio Sprint Speedweek, the King's Royal, the Historical Big One, and the Dream were even conceived. It was also before the National Sprint Car Poll ever bestowed its "Promoter of the Year" (1986, 1988 and 1993) and "Outstanding Contribution to the Sport" (1990) awards on him. And it was way before Earl Baltes received the prestigious Racing Promotions Monthly (RPM) "Promoter of the Year" award from Stew Reamer just this past winter!