

RALPH MORGAN

by "Buzz" Rose & Justin Zoch

Ralph Enoch Morgan was born on September 26, 1898, to Clarence and Minnie Morgan.

In the early part of the Twentieth Century, Ralph Morgan opened an automotive garage in Indianapolis, a great brick structure that became quite prominent in racing circles. In the middle part of the 1920s, when auto racing was challenging the imagination of the American public, Morgan purchased a race car. He outfitted it with a Frontenac, or Fronty Ford, and hired driver Ray Tellas.



Ed Hiltz Photo

Seated in Morgan's Fronty-powered racer, Tellas became famous for wearing a black uniform and black scarf. When the decade of the 1930s rolled in, racing remained a prominent pastime, despite the hardships presented by the Depression. At that time, Morgan hired Norwegian Joe Silnes, a noted builder and employee of Floyd "Pop" Dreyer, to construct two new racers for his team.

Morgan, hoping to build a strong team with his two new cars, put in an order for two new Miller Marine engines, the latest rage in powerplants at the time. The marine engines had won the Indy 500 in previous years and Morgan readied his Morgan/Miller race cars for the 1934 season. Coincidentally, the man who Morgan saddled up for that campaign was Sherman "Red" Campbell. The team took victories in Des Moines, Iowa, Dayton, Ohio, and South Bend, Indiana. Campbell and Morgan were an astounding combination and could rival the best in competition with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) and the American Automobile Association (AAA).

When 1935 rolled around, the duo remained hot, winning at least five times with the brand new Central States Racing Association (CSRA), who had an alliance with IMCA and allowed drivers to switch back and forth. Morgan and Campbell finished second in points that year in the Morgan number 34 car and they were the team on the rise as the 1936 season approached.

Morgan brought Campbell to that season with a powerful racer and all the support he could muster. Morgan was not extremely wealthy, but sacrificed all he could from his garage

to give his drivers the best chance to succeed. And succeed they did in 1936. Campbell and Morgan dominated the CSRA campaign and won at least seven races en route to the title. Unfortunately, the good times ended early the next year.

Sherman "Red" Campbell pulled into Winchester on May 30, 1937, at the top of the open wheel world but his life ended that day, in a tragic first lap mishap. Morgan was devastated and considered getting out of racing.

However, Joie Chitwood was helping out Morgan and Campbell that dark day and soon afterwards Morgan put Chitwood into the very same Morgan/Miller special for a few races. Chitwood and Morgan never really clicked as a team and soon Morgan hired Detroit hot-shoe Iggy Katona to drive the car. The two had steady runs together but could not replicate the success of Morgan and Campbell.

The CSRA was looking for a new young talent to fill the enormous publicity void left by Campbell's death. Jimmy Wilburn was a native of the Pacific Northwest who made his way to the sunny circuits of Southern California. Wilburn was the perfect star for the CSRA and a deal was arranged to get Wilburn and Morgan together to run not just the CSRA events, but also the IMCA fair shows.

Together with Emory Collins and Gus Schrader, the IMCA hoped to add Wilburn to feature a strong triple-threat. Morgan and Wilburn found instant magic and won their first show together at Jungle Park in Rockville, Indiana, in 1938. The duo went on to win the 1938 CSRA title and finish in the top five in IMCA points as well, with Harry "Barney" Wimmer performing the engine duties.

About halfway through the 1939 season, Morgan decided it was time to get out of racing and concentrate on his business. Wilburn purchased the team, kept Wimmer as his mechanic, and continued on to win the several more CSRA championships. As for Ralph Morgan, he quickly and quietly resigned from the sport that had dominated his life through the 1930's. For nearly a decade, Morgan's race cars could race with any in the country.

Ralph Morgan died in December of 1978, less than eight months after the death of his wife Lena B. Griffith, whom he had married on November 29, 1919.