

MAYNARD "HUNGRY" CLARK

by Pat Sullivan



Maynard "Hungry" Clark

Larry Sullivan Photo

When Maynard "Hungry" Clark toured America, engaging in what we now refer to as sprint car racing, he did not travel in a motor home pulling an enclosed trailer. There were no interstate highways between Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Hamburg, New York, and there was not a fully stocked parts truck waiting at each venue. No, Clark was not a 21st century outlaw. He and others of his generation were the real deal.

Clark was a part of a group of outstanding racers who hailed from Milan, Illinois, including 1932 Eastern sprint car champion Bryan Saulpaugh. Like so many of his cohorts, Clark first competed on motorcycles before moving to four wheels with the purchase of a bobtailed sprinter in 1926. Touring the rough-and-tumble fairgrounds circuit, Clark began to find success after purchasing a 16-valve Fronty-powered car from Floyd W. Bobzien of Van Horn, Iowa. With that machine, he began to taste success in the Midwest, notably with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA), and gained notoriety with a splendid second-place finish to Emory Collins during the 1931 Iowa State Fair.

During this period, one of his chief competitors was John Gerber, whose skill as a driver in his famed bobtailed cars was only rivaled by his mechanical genius. In 1932, Gerber made the decision to offer

the Kansas State Fair at Hutchinson.

Yet, the legend of Gerber and Clark spread across the nation in the 1933 season. Joining the American Automobile Association (AAA), Clark and Gerber regularly competed against established front-runners and future champions like Chet Gardner, Bob Sall, Johnny Hannon, George "Doc" MacKenzie and Al Thiesen. It wasn't long, however, before Gerber and Clark became crowd favorites. In their traveling years, this team traveled from race to race and survived by pitching tents and living in the great outdoors. Upon arriving in Woodbridge, New Jersey, the pit area tent-dwellers drew great attention, as well as smirks from their racing peers and were hailed as the racing farmers from Iowa, or "the racing rubes." On August 6, Gerber shocked those assembled by setting fast time and winning the main event, while Clark finished in the third spot. All the smirking stopped.

Not one to miss a real opportunity, promoter Jack Curley secured a pig, named Miss Fannie Porker, built a pen for the animal to roam, and got Gerber and Clark to play along. Soon fans delighted as the Midwesterners, sometimes playing to the image by donning bib overalls, set up camp in the infield about which their pig hustled. The down-home image was played to a hilt. Time and time again, the competition learned that this was not simple sideshow. When the dust had settled,

Clark a seat in a more conventional up-right chassis car that he was constructing. In his autobiography, Gerber noted that Clark was "a sensible, honest, sober fellow who always managed to keep out of trouble on the track." The duo first tasted victory at Lexington, Nebraska, on August 25, 1932, won later that summer at the fairgrounds at Topeka, Kansas, and broke the track record at

the 1933 Eastern swing was a clear success.

When Gerber's wife, Rose, became pregnant, he fulfilled a promise to retire from driving. Using the off-season to prepare, the talented Gerber built a 220-cubic-inch engine, and once the bugs were ironed out, Clark was headed for two seasons of glory. Victories piled up across the land as Dayton, Cook County, Illinois, and others fell into the win column. He beat the great Ted Horn at the Erie County Fair in Hamburg, New York. It was clear by now that Gerber had the touch with the wrench, and Clark the Midas touch with the wheel.

In 1935, Clark scored two huge wins in 100-mile affairs. He set fast time and bested a field that included Chet Gardner, "Shorty" Cantlon and Billy DeVore at Randall Park Speedway, a horse track in Cleveland. He posted a win on Labor Day at Atlanta's lethal Lakewood in front of 20,000 fans. The 1935 season did provide one disappointment. Clark was able to persuade millionaire owner/driver Joel Thorne to give him a shot at Indianapolis. Taking a practice run in a Studebaker, Clark spun in front of eventual three-time winner and Speedway president Wilbur Shaw, ending any chance he had to make the Memorial Day field.

In an era where success and survival often did not go hand-in-hand, Clark's racing career ended prematurely. Back at Lakewood in May of 1936, Clark was blinded by the dust of another driver, struck the guardrail and broke his legs and both kneecaps, ending his career. Far from bitter, Clark kept very close tabs on the sport after his career behind the wheel came to a close.

Every modern day sprint car driver owes a debt of gratitude to drivers like Maynard Clark. So, next time you're on the road, stray from the interstate and travel down the two lane by-ways of America. When you pass a small county fairground oval, think of John Gerber, Maynard Clark and those trailblazers who were true outlaws.

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