

FRED LORING

Dr. Fred W. Loring is being inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame in 1999 in honor of his outstanding achievements as a promoter of the Legion Ascot Speedway from 1928 through '34.

The Ascot Speedway operated from 1924 to '36 on Los Angeles' northeastern edge. At 5/8-mile with high banking and an oiled surface expertly maintained by C.D. "Pop" Evans, the track was fast and its events action-packed. The venue was one of the first in the nation to offer regular weekly events, live radio broadcast reports of its racing, and an atmosphere which allowed professional race drivers and wealthy car owners to mix socially with the elite of southern California's growing entertainment industry.

Track owner/developer George R. Bentel promoted 'big car' events in the facility's early years. Bentel hired master publicist William Pickens to handle the public/media relations functions. The grandstands were built by Jack Prince, of board track fame, to seat 12,500 people. The American Automobile Association (AAA) sanctioned the first races at Legion Ascot, before Bentel switched to the rival International Motor Contest Association (IMCA). Early driving stars Sig Haugdahl, Ralph DePalma, Elbert "Babe" Stapp, Leon Duray and Frank Lockhart all found success and fame at Ascot.

However, at the same time, the Culver City (Calif.) board track and its AAA-sanctioned races began drawing drivers and fans away from Ascot Speedway and Bentel sold out. Promoters named Ward Wing, Pierrepont Milliken, Harry Lutz, R.G. "Bon" McDougall and Harlan Fengler all tried their hands at promoting Ascot in the mid-1920's, but they all failed. Fengler even reinstated the AAA sanction, but it was not enough to turn the track's fortunes around and he vacated the promotional post in late 1928.

The Glendale (Calif.) American Legion Post 127 then took over the operation of the track, renaming it the American Legion Speedway. According to Dr. Fred W. Loring, "Kenny Paine, our commander of Post 127, had requested that I assume chairmanship of a Boy Scout committee. Seems the Legion wanted to participate in a community program, but the Boy Scout program was not my forte. We had also been advised that Ascot was having financial and promotional difficulties and Post 127 had been asked by the AAA to assist in promoting the track under AAA sanction, of course.

"I was told that other promoters had lost money, that Fengler also had departed as promoter, leaving the opportunity open to the Legion. The Post contacted Mr. Pillsbury, regional director of the AAA, and arrangements were made to have Post 127 assume the promotions. The venture excited me and I decided to give the challenge my best effort. We just got in there and gambled." Thus, the war veterans, under the leadership of mild-mannered Glendale surgeon Loring, spruced up the facility and rebuilt the stands. Although he had no previous racing experience, his insistence on good purses (a straight 29% of the gross gate, including concessions) and heavy advertising drew back both competitors and fans. Pickens was brought back as publicist, Evans continued handling the track preparation, and Fred J. "Pop" Wagner was the official starter. Despite the Depression, American Legion Speedway (renamed Legion Ascot Speedway in 1933) prospered, with Loring and AAA Contest Board western region director Art Pillsbury getting much of the credit.

Western drivers vied with the best from the east, particularly during the winter months, and the track earned a reputation as being 'the road to Indianapolis'. Oilman Earl Gilmore had as many as six cars carrying his cream and red Gilmore Red Lion colors. Harry A. Miller had many of his Miller Specials racing at Ascot in the 100- and 150-lap main events. Loring hired Hollywood lighting specialist Otto Olesen to come in and install lights, and soon the Wednesday night racing programs were the mid-week social events for southern Californians. Loring and the uniformed Legionnaires had organized food drives (canned food donations as admissions) and other promotions to help the area's needy people.

Legion Ascot was also the home of 'best appearing' car and crew cash awards, free admission for practice, regularly-scheduled helmet (trophy) dashes and match races (with Loretta Young and other starlets making the presentations), and point systems for both the 'A' and 'B' classes. Harrald Harper developed the first use of the photo cell timer at Ascot, and Wilbur Shaw wore the first crash helmet there in 1932.

According to Loring, "The track lost money under previous promoters. Under the Legion, the track made money immediately and our financial gains increased season by season. We did pretty well. We made more than \$60,000 clear profit one year. Our objective was to bring a good racing attraction to the fans, by the best

drivers, the best racing cars. This was the Post's first venture into auto racing and it was thrilling."

The stars of the day at Legion Ascot included Jack Buxton, Mel Kenealy, Francis Quinn, Ernie Triplett, Al Gordon and Rex Mays amongst others. Loring once said, "Racing drivers are a great bunch, a strange breed. They are very sincere, all on the up-and-up. There's nothing phoney about the racing driver; it's a gutty business. It can't be phoney if he's going to be out there risking his life."

In 1933, Gordon made \$36,000 for himself and the Art Sparks/Paul Weirick team. However, the purses and the level of competition put great pressure on mechanics and drivers to get more out of their cars. Because of the track's configuration and its uneven banking (the north turn was banked more than the south turn), the track was never an easy one to drive. Thus, Legion Ascot had its share of fatalities; it is reported that at least 25 fatalities were recorded in its 13-year history.

With increasing pressure from William Randolph Hearst and his media empire to make the sport safer, Loring and his race committee began imposing cubic inch displacement and compression restrictions on the cars in 1933 and '34. The deaths of Ernie Triplett, Swede Smith and mechanic C.L. "Hap" Hafferly at the Imperial Fairgrounds in El Centro (Calif.) in 1934, and the ensuing media circus, caused Dr. Fred Loring to announce his retirement as chairman of the Legion Ascot contest board effective October 1 of that year.

On June 21, 1935, the Glendale American Legion Post abandoned their charitable fundraising efforts at the Legion Ascot Speedway. In their absence, promoter Bill White stepped in and built a flat half-mile oval on the inside of the big track. For the most part, though, crowds and cars stayed away from the newly-renamed Ascot Motor Speedway. Sadly, in February of 1936, Al Gordon and "Spider" Matlock lost their lives (driving White's two-man Indy car) in an accident during a AAA championship race at the track. The facility was padlocked that day and was never reopened.