

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## GENE VAN WINKLE

Gene Van Winkle was born on December 6, 1916 in Omaha (Nebr.) to Ona and Bryan "Rip" Van Winkle. Gene's father owned a used car lot known as Rip Van Winkle Auto Exchange in Lincoln (Nebr.), which was a gathering place for racers of the day.

It was no surprise, then, that Gene's own life would revolve around used cars and race cars. It would also revolve around his sweetheart, Lucille Gross, and they married in 1934 and lived in Lincoln. Two years later, their only child, Connie, was born.

Gene's own business, Van Winkle Motors at 17th and 'O' Streets, became the Gasoline Alley of the state capital. In 1940, Gene and his brother Lloyd purchased a V-8 powered midget and campaigned it on the tracks of western Nebraska.

Following World War II, Al Sweeney's National Speedways, Inc. (NSI) of Chicago (Ill.) received its International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) license and made its first appearance at the Nebraska State Fairgrounds track in 1946. Naturally, the much respected Gene Van Winkle was appointed pit steward, while his wife Lucille worked the pit gate.

One year later, Van Winkle broke in as the nattily-attired race starter for NSI under the direction of Sweeney's partner Gaylord White.

By the mid-1950's, Gene was the official NSI starter and Lucille was the promoting group's chief time-keeper. At the time, Sweeney, Van Winkle and company were promoting approximately 60 county and



**Gene Van Winkle** (Fraser & Fletcher)

state fair race dates per year, with roughly 35 for the big cars or sprint cars, 20 for the late model stock cars, and 5 for the midgets.

Although Al Sweeney's National Speedways, Inc. and Frank Winkley's Auto Racing, Inc. (ARI) both promoted races sanctioned by IMCA during this time, they were fierce competitors in the racing promotion business on America's fairgrounds.

In 1961, Gene Van Winkle, former car owner and mechanic, was named vice-president of NSI by Al Sweeney and just two years later, he added the title of general manager. National Speedways presented shows at the state fairs in Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, and Tennessee, as well as the following major fairs: Ozark Empire Fair, Kansas Free Fair, Wisconsin Valley Fair and the Mid-America Fair. The Hawkeye Futurity, Missouri Futurity, and the Little 500 were all premier races run under the NSI banner. The duties of race starter for the organization were handed over from Van Winkle to his friend Woodrow "Woody" Brinkman.

Lucille was named secretary-treasurer of National Speedways in 1970, however she passed away on September 19, 1971 following surgery in Lincoln.

Following the 1972 season, Al Sweeney formally retired and Gene Van Winkle was named president of National Speedways, Inc.

Following the demise of the original International Motor Contest Association in 1975 and the subsequent sale of National Speedways, Inc., Gene married June Wing in 1976. He also began working part-time again at the Omaha Auto Auction, buying into the growing business by 1980. Gene grew the Omaha Auto Auction until his death on December 15, 1996. His widow, June, survives as does his daughter, Connie. Gene will also be posthumously inducted into the Nebraska Auto Racing Hall of Fame on September 2, 1998, in Lincoln.