

HARRY "BARNEY" WIMMER

By Dave Argabright

Here's a quick quiz: who has put a wrench on the most Indy-winning cars? George Bignotti? Clint Brawner? A.J. Watson?

Nope, it's Barney Wimmer.

How about this one: what post-war "outlaw" mechanic saw his driver win an incredible 43 of 44 starts? Karl Kinser? "Speedy" Bill Smith? Davey Brown? Nope, it's Barney Wimmer.

Unless you're old enough to remember President Eisenhower, you probably have no idea who Barney Wimmer is. But quietly working in the Indianapolis Motor Speedway museum maintenance shop on the southeast corner of the 500 track complex is one of the most talented, controversial, and colorful men that have ever been involved in racing. He is one of the few men that actually does justice to the old cliché: an American original.

The Indy victories? Well, Barney didn't actually win Indy. But since 1963, he and sidekick Bill Spoerle have been responsible for 100 percent of the work that is done on all of the vintage IMS museum racing machines. Today, at 76 years old, he goes to work every morning and puts in a full day in the relative solitude of the museum, using the knowledge he has gained in 55 years of wrenching race cars. The hair is short and silver now, the steps are slower, and living on the road has been replaced with a home in a trailer park across Georgetown Road from the Speedway.

His story? Let him tell you.

"I grew up around my dad's garage in Altoona, PA. Worked there every day after school. In the early 30s Joe Ventre (he was a school buddy of mine) and I got together on a sprint car. He furnished the parts and the money, and I did the work. We ran Lebanon, Landisville, Kutztown in Pa. Joe got killed in the car at Jennerstown when he got together with another guy and flipped 'er. Wasn't his fault. I was sure as hell sad, but it didn't sour me on racin'.

"I kept foolin' around with racin' till the war. I got shipped to Middletown (Pa.) with the Army Air Force at the air depot. I was the chief inspector for the government on the aircraft engines that were rebuilt



Harry "Barney" Wimmer (Bruce Craig Photos)

there. I met Deb Snyder and Emory Collins when I was workin' there, they were technicians with Packard, who rebuilt some of the engines. They knew Jimmy Wilburn pretty well, and when the war was over in '45 Wilburn came out east to start racin' again.

"Snyder and Collins knew me pretty well by then, and they told Wilburn that I'd be a good man to work on his car when I finished up my commitment with the government. We hooked up and went racin'.

"Jimmy won the first American Automobile Association (AAA) race after the war at Lakewood Speedway in Atlanta in '45. Sam Nunis promoted the race, and Jimmy lapped everybody but Ted Horn. We went to Indy in '46 and there were only two new cars in the whole damn field. Jimmy drove an old Alfa Romeo, busted the block and didn't finish.

"Early that winter he bought a new sprint car that a guy named Ernie Blum built, at least the frame and body. Only paid \$400 or \$500 for it.

"We went outlaw in '46 because AAA cut its engine size to 220 cubic inches. We only had stuff for either 240 or 270, so we figured we'd have to run someplace else. We ran the midwest fair circuit for John Sloan, ran places like Lincoln, Des Moines, Kansas City, St. Paul. We also ran Central States Racing Association (CSRA) in Ohio and Indiana.

"Just because we were outlaws, people didn't look down on us at all. Jimmy got a second car going, and we put Ben Musick in it. In '47, we ran 44 races, Jimmy won 43 of them and finished second in the other. Ben had lots of seconds and thirds too. You might say we were goin' pretty good. Wilburn only weighed 135 pounds, just a little guy, but I'd put him in the same class drivin' as Hinnershitz, Jud Larson, Jimmy Bryan, Gus Schrader, Deb Snyder, Ted Horn and Emory Collins. At the time they called Jimmy "King of the Outlaws." We painted the cars gold with black trim and people called them "The Golden Bullets."

"We were always known for havin' the biggest Offy engine, but that wasn't so. We had the stuff to make anything from 240" to 297. There were some 318's out there, but we didn't have one. Jimmy drove a car in '40 for Ralph Morgan and he had a 318, but Jimmy broke a piston in their fourth race and ruined the block.

"All that talk started when we went to Hamburg, N.Y. in '47 and Jimmy won big. Everybody started screamin', 'big motor! big motor!' I put my money down on a protest, but nobody covered it, and they didn't tear us down.

"We put a 5" crank in a 270 block, and by God, that makes a 297-inch no matter how you figure it. I was damned confident every time they screamed about it, but nobody ever covered my money. Not once. They swore and be-damned that we had the big motor, but nobody would put up the money.

"Jimmy quit in '50, went to work at Chrysler in Kokomo (Indiana). I went to work for Joe Baker, who made some parts for racing people. Another guy and I took some parts to Darlington, S.C. to deliver and some were for a guy named Pat Clancy, who had Indy Cars. Pat took one look at me and said, 'sonny boy, I just hired you.' I told him I was workin' for Joe. He said, 'you was.' I didn't resist too much.

"We ran the AAA circuit with drivers like Duane Carter, Bill Cantrell, Jimmy Davies, Al Herman, Jack Turner, and Al Keller. Sponsor was Bardahl. Carter did real well, and when Davies was drivin' we finished third at the Speedway in '55.

"I stayed with Clancy till after the Speedway in '57, I was always looking for greener pastures, I guess. Went to work for Mari Hulman and Elmer George on the HOW cars. We used to tell everybody that the HOW stood for "Hell On Wheels", but it really meant Hulman and (Roger) Wolcott. Wolcott gave Mari a Kurtis-Kraft and she had her first sprinter. We did real well, won the (USAC) Midwest sprint title that first year. Elmer was a hell of a race driver on the banks. Never scared him a bit. He was a good guy.

"They sold the cars in '63, and I went to work for the Speedway at the museum. I like workin' on the old cars. On the modern cars, they're way out of my line. We've restored some newer ones, like Donohue's '72 winner, and that was a challenge, too, but when we got done (former car owner) Roger Penske made it a point to come by and tell us we did a good job on the car. That was damned nice. We do about one car a year. We get some real basket cases out there.

About the last racing I did was in '63, just after I went to work for the Speedway. Foyt brought one of Elmer's sprint cars and I went along with him to help out. We got along real well. We went to Williams Grove and he got into an argument with Johnny White after their heat. There was some fighting, but Foyt didn't do any of it, he just argued with White. The story went around that Foyt decked White and USAC called him on the carpet. They asked me what happened and I told them that they had the wrong guy. Foyt was exonerated.

"When I set up a car for my drivers all those years, I did exactly what they wanted. I never argued with them, even if I figured their idea wouldn't work. Hell, I figured they knew they wanted. I was that way with every driver.

"I still go to the races a lot, sprint cars and things. Today's racing is more modern, but you have to change with the times. There are a lot of things today that I don't approve of, but it makes things safer and better. I think that the old racing, in my day was for rugged people. I know that we sure had some fast livin' back then. Guys like Jimmy Bryan and I, and a bunch of the other fellows, we were always out havin' a good time. We liked to drink a little bit and dance with the ladies, you know.

"I'll be 77 in September, and I still go to work every morning. I figure you can't just lay around and dry-up. People ask me my secret to livin' so long, and I tell them 'good booze and good girls -- no bad ones!' Lots of people don't know, but my real name is Harry. I started wearin' glasses in my dad's garage and everybody called me "Barney Google" after the old cartoon character.

"I've seen lots of tough times and lots of good racin'. I never wanted to do anything else. If you look at the old pictures of Jimmy (Wilburn) on the dirt with those old knobies kickin' up a rooster tail clear over the fence, you know why it gets in your blood. I never could get it out of mine."

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