

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## CHARLIE CURRYER

Charles A. Curryer started racing motorcycles on the road courses of Southern California in the early 1930's, along with Edgar Elder's dad "Sprouts". Charlie soon got into the promotion side of motor-sports, promoting 'big car' races at the 5/8-mile oiled dirt Silvergate Speedway in San Diego in 1935. These 'big car' races were outlaw events, since they were not sanctioned by the ruling American Automobile Association (AAA), which held California races at the Legion Ascot, El Centro (Imperial), San Jose and Oakland speedways.

The Oakland (San Leandro) track was a one-mile, high-banked, oiled dirt oval, with a flat half-mile dirt track on the inside, that went into operation on October 18, 1931. It was promoted by E.L. Mathewson and was where Fred Agabashian started his career that same year. In 1936 and '37, the AAA sanctions were dropped at San Jose, Ascot and finally Oakland. This prompted an enterprising Charlie Curryer to bring the fledgling American Racing Association (ARA) sanction, of which he was the director, to Oakland, San Jose, Southern Ascot (at South Gate) and some smaller fairgrounds tracks. Agabashian was the first-year champion of ARA, which was the predecessor to today's Northern Auto Racing Club (NARC). From then until San Jose's destruction due to fire in 1939 and Oakland's and South Gate's destructions during World War II, Curryer promoted all types of racing, including motorcycles, stock cars, midgets and 'big cars'. Curryer's 'big car' events at Oakland often pitted the best of his Northern California/Pacific Northwest ARA teams against the best of J.C. Agajanian's Southern California-based Western Racing Association (WRA) teams.

Charlie even promoted four pre-war "Little Indianapolis" 500-mile 'big car' races at Oakland. Those Labor Day races were huge media events in the San Francisco Bay area, thanks to the work of Curryer, Oakland track engineer "Pop" Evans and friends Earl Ford, Ray Cook and William E. Linn. The first 500-miler in 1938 was won by Harry Eisele (a.k.a. "Bud" Rose) in Gil Pearson's Miller, who averaged 80-plus miles per hour in front of 8,000-plus

fans! In 1939, Clarence "Tex" Petersen and Rajo Jack (a.k.a. Jack DeSoto) teamed up to win the 500-mile race. Hal Cole won the \$1,500 first prize on September 2, 1940, which was ARA sanction number 207, and "the Silver Fox" Ed Barnett took the fourth and final pre-war '500' checkered in 1941. Unfortunately, driver Rhea Bray lost his life in the '41 affair when his Hisso vaulted the wooden board fence.

During the war, it is said that Curryer, the 'old-time promoter' that he was, toured the country escorting a captured German Messerschmidt aircraft for all to see.

In September of 1945, a new \$300,000 Oakland Stadium was planned by corporation vice-president Charlie Curryer and president Bill Linn on the same location as the old speedway. On January 15, 1946, ground was broken for the 5/8-mile high-banked paved egg-shaped oval, with 35-degree and 62-degree banking for its two distinct turns. It was built for 'big cars' and stock cars and it opened on June 29, 1946. It also featured a 1/4-mile paved oval on the inside for midgets and roadsters and that facility opened on July 2nd of the same year. Sadly, Bill Linn and his family perished in a small plane crash just days before the openings.

Many of the 'big car' racers during the Curryer years were drivers like ARA champions Freddy Agabashian (1936), Art Armstrong (1937), "Bud" Rose (1938), Wally Schock (1939, '40), "Tex" Saunders (1941), Bayliss Levrett (1946), "Bud" Sennett (1947), Howard "Buck" Whitmer (1948), Jack Flaherty (1949, '52, '53), Mike Rielly (1950) and Don Radbruch (1951). Also such talented racers as Cecil Burnaugh, Eddie Haddad, Hal Cole, Leonard Lowe, Clarence "Tex" Petersen, Rajo Jack, Bayard T. "Bill" Sheffler, Joe Gerns, 1932 Indy 500 winner Fred Frame's son Bob, Art Scovell, Adolph Dans and Ed Barnett were ARA and/or Oakland regulars at one point or another during that period.

Oakland managing director Charlie Curryer and others, including Bob Barkhimer, promoted races through the early 1950's at the Stadium, which is

where Bob Sweikert started his career. The 500-miles became 500-lappers after the war, and Eli Vukovich won a 500-lap main at Oakland on the same day as his brother Bill won the 1953 Indianapolis 500. Sadly, Oakland Stadium became the Bayfair Shopping Center, complete with Montgomery Ward and Macy's department stores, in 1955.

From 1946 until the early '50s, Curryer was promoting ARA races at places like Sacramento, Calistoga, Ferndale, Chico, Hanford, King City, Saugus, Quincy, Oroville, Eureka, Yreka, and Stockton, in addition to Oakland. However, by '48, the number of shows at Oakland were greatly diminished as the number of dates on the barnstorming tour of county fairgrounds in California, Arizona (Phoenix) and Nevada (Las Vegas) increased. Track conditions were sometimes deplorable, crowds and car counts were sometimes nearly nonexistent, and the shows themselves were sometimes staged (or "hippodromed"), but Curryer always paid the owners and drivers something. In May of 1949, defending ARA champion Whitmer lost his life at Chico, prompting Curryer and ARA to limit the motor size in future years to 220 cubic inches.

Charlie was a colorful entrepreneur and he had several identical flathead sprinters built and he used them as "corporation cars", or "rent-a-racers" as they would be known today, at Oakland and Calistoga.

Charlie continued promoting throughout the mid-Fifties, at tracks from southern to northern California, and even in Hawaii. Curryer even promoted a 500-mile road race in 1958 at the Riverside Raceway, which "Bud" Rose won while driving "Jiggler Joe" Gerns's offy 'big car'. Towards the end of the decade he moved north to the Redding (Calif.) area, where he eventually succumbed to cancer in 1959. Those that knew Charlie used the following expressions to sum up their feelings about him: "acomodating fellow and a real nice guy", and "fine gentleman with a quiet, efficient manner."

According to *Oakland Tribune* sports writer Alan Ward in 1939, "A good guy, this Charlie Curryer. And a whale of a promoter. For my money there isn't another chap in the business on this Pacific Coast, at least - who would have had the hardhood to launch such an undertaking. Yes, and to have succeeded in the undertaking once it was launched. In newspaper circles we alternately call Charlie 'The Bald Eagle' and 'The Thin Man'. The sobriquets are based on pure affection and respect for his ability and thoughtfulness. There isn't a newsman in the business who wouldn't give Charlie all the best of it in a pinch."

However, his highest compliment may have been this anonymous quote, "I don't know of any race driver who ever left his track broke. He'd ask you how you'd made out, and if you were down on your luck, he'd slip you a five dollar bill and fill your gas tank."



Charles Curryer (center)

(Carmel Sandy Collection)