

National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum

RUSS CLENDENEN

by Leal Beattie

Russ Clendenen was born in Chesterfield (IN), near Muncie, in 1908. Clendenen played basketball in high school, but didn't have a keen interest in cars. He knew, though, when the Indianapolis 500 was running because the traffic going into and out of Indy on race weekend went by his house.

After graduation from high school, Clendenen and a friend drove a Model T Ford to California in 1927 and stayed a year. He returned to the Midwest and arrived in Dayton (OH) in 1929.

A machinist and tool-maker by trade, Clendenen took a job with General Motors (GM) in 1930 after a year with National Cash Register (NCR). He stayed with GM's Frigidaire Division until he retired in 1969.

After he moved to Dayton, Russ became friends with race driver Everett Saylor in the mid-1930s and worked on Saylor's 'big cars'. He was the mechanic for Saylor when Everett won the 1937 Central States Racing Association (CSRA) point championship. He also helped wrench on Saylor's Indianapolis 500 car in '41. But when Saylor was killed aboard Floyd "Pop" Dreyer's car in a race at Cape Girardeau (MO) on May 31, 1942, Clendenen said he would give up the sport. According to Russ, "I decided I wasn't going to work on cars anymore. I got too close to the drivers."

When racing resumed after the war, Russ reconsidered and joined the American Automobile Association (AAA) as a technical inspector. He worked with Bob Martindale, supervisor of AAA sprint car races. He also worked at CSRA events during the late 1940s. Russ became a supervisor himself in 1959, shortly after the United States Auto Club (USAC) was formed in 1956 following the withdrawal from motorsports by AAA.

During this time Russ continued to work as a mechanic. He said, "I'd work eight hours at Frigidaire, then four-to-five hours at night in the Johnny Vance (Sr.) shop building crankshafts."

Clendenen was a supervisor for the USAC sprint and dirt championship car divisions, and also was chief steward of the championship (Indy) car division for a time, until his retirement in 1988. Said the then Kettering (Ohio) resident, "Being an official, you don't get as close to the drivers."

Also, Russ has admitted, "I had my ups and downs with car owners. But I'm not mad at anybody and I hope no one's mad at me. Decisions have to be made. Over the years that I've officiated, I don't think there's any one that I had to reprimand that I can't still go back to and talk with them."

Now living in Brookville (Ohio) with his wife Geneva, Russ is healthy, except for his failing eyesight, and he continues to belong to the USAC safety committee, rules committee and oldtimers' committee. He has commented, "The thing that impresses me most is the safety of the thing now. We'd lose three-to-four drivers a year and think we had a pretty good year. Now, we've advanced in speed, but also in equipment and uniforms and everything."



Russ Clendenen

(Bruce Craig Collection)

Throughout his career, Russ Clendenen was a stickler when it came to safety -- demanding proper magnaflux papers and pushing for mandatory roll cages and arm restraints among other things.

Several years ago, Russ ran into the late Bobby Black at Winchester (IN) and said to his racer friend, "I don't see very well."

Clendenen loves to repeat Black's reply, "I noticed that fifteen years ago."

Russ Clendenen was named recipient of the Eddie Edburn Trophy, recognizing a lifetime of outstanding contribution to USAC racing, in 1982. According to Clendenen, "It's been a pleasure to be able to work with drivers and car owners and people like that over so many years. It hasn't all been a bed of roses. When you make decisions, you don't necessarily please everybody... but I'd like to be remembered as a fair, firm official."