

# National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum

## BILL PICKENS

William H. "Bill" Pickens, a rotund Alabaman who had been on the fringes of racing most of his life, teamed up with barnstorming racer/showman Barney Oldfield in 1904 when Oldfield was recovering from an accident with his open-wheel "Green Dragon" race car. It was a chance meeting in Salt Lake City, where Pickens was being held hostage by an angry inn-keeper. Oldfield immediately took a liking to the charming Pickens, paid his motel bill, and gave him a job as his 'advance man'.

Pickens was a natural for the new role with Oldfield. His specialty was to move into a location (usually a county seat town with a fairgrounds), quickly promote an embellished competition starring the cigar-chomping Oldfield against mediocre local competition, then move out as soon as receipts were counted. The grandstands were usually packed with curious local farmers and townspeople, although no attendance figures were ever announced by the roving promoter of 'spectaculars and motorized competition'.

Needless to say, the events were not always on the 'up-and-up', so Pickens was usually on the 'outs' with the American Automobile Association (AAA). Thus, in 1905, Bill joined forces with 'outlaw' fair circuit promoter J. Alex Sloan. Besides Oldfield, their drivers included such names as Webb Jay, Louis Chevrolet and Earl

Kizer. They continued together through the end of the decade, promoting such events as the Daytona Beach (FL) land speed record runs, one-on-one, match races, and the unique Barney Oldfield/Lincoln Beachey car versus airplane exhibitions.

In fact, it was in 1910, just about the time that the Indianapolis Motor Speedway was coming into its own and AAA was clearly the nation's premier racing sanction, Pickens staged a match race at the Sheepshead Bay (N.Y.) dirt track between black heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson and 'Master Driver of the World' Barney Oldfield. The hippodrome show was a fiasco and AAA was forced to suspend both Oldfield and Pickens indefinitely.

During the suspension, Pickens continued promoting events such as motorcycle races at the Brighton Beach Bowl near New York City, in addition to his activities with Oldfield. The Oldfield/Pickens team was now sponsored by "My Only Life Insurance...Firestone Tires."

It was during the mid- to latter part of the decade that the Barney Oldfield/Ralph DePalma feud raged at the George Bentel-built original Ascot mile-track in Los Angeles (CA). The track also featured such drivers as Bob Burman and Louis Chevrolet. Oldfield finally retired in late 1918, but not after being deported from Cuba during a Pickens-promoted series of races there. The original Ascot dirt track closed in 1919.

In 1924, when Bentel created the 5/8-mile Ascot Motor Speedway, the AAA-turned-IMCA track publicist Pickens soon started touting such heroes as 'the great French champion' Leon Duray, Elbert "Babe" Stapp, Sig Haugdahl, Frank Lockhart and Ira Vail. The DePalma/Duray rivalry was even equivalent to his earlier publicity stunts involving Oldfield and DePalma.

Pickens enjoyed the challenge of creating media excitement in star-studded Southern California so much that he returned to Ascot shortly after he and Bentel abruptly left in '27. However, attendance continued to decline there under the guidance of successive promoters Bon McDougall & Harry Lutz and Harlan Fengler.

Art Pillsbury of the AAA Western Regional office took over Ascot in 1928 and was joined late in the year by the local American Legion Post. The talented front office included Pickens as publicist, Oldfield as referee, Pillsbury as sanctioning official and Fred "Pop" Wagner as starter. It was at this time that Legion Ascot's fortunes turned around and Pickens was clearly a major piece of the now-complete Ascot puzzle.

Pickens left Legion Ascot in 1929, yet his protegee Norman J. Hartford continued to carry on in his absence, creating the famous Francis Quinn/Ernie Triplett feud of 1931.