

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## LOUIS VERMEIL

Jean Louis Vermeil was born to Albert and Cotilda Iaacheri Vermeil on January 11, 1906, in San Francisco (Calif.), a descendant of French instrument makers. Early in life his family moved to San Mateo where he lived and attended school. It was during his youth when he developed his interest in 'big car' racing after he was taken to the San Carlos board track in 1921-22, where drivers such as Jimmy Murphy, Tommy Milton, Ralph DePalma and Peter DePaolo were turning laps in excess of 100 miles per hour. It wasn't long before Louis quit school to pursue a career as an auto mechanic.

At age twenty, Louis moved to Calistoga where his grandfather Iaacheri lived in the former home of writer Robert Louis Stevenson. On August 4, 1932, Lou married the beautiful Alice Wilson. In 1937, the same year that he opened the Owl Garage, he bought his first 'big car'. He was a participant the following year, with Jack Pacheteau as driver, in the first races held at his hometown Calistoga Speedway at the Napa Valley Fairgrounds. It is said that the race track was a "dust bowl" with just twelve cars present. For years Vermeil's 'big cars' raced up and down and across the Golden State.

Later, in 1950, Louis claimed the American Racing Association (ARA) car owners championship, with Mike Riley driving the "Black Beauty" special. In '55, Louis was drafted into the position of ARA official. In 1960, Vermeil helped pick up the pieces of Northern California's defunct ARA and, in doing so, he became one of the founding fathers of the Northern Auto Racing Club. It has been one of the premier regional sprint car race sanctioning bodies in this country since the mid-1970's. Louis's work in the early days of NARC was described as everything from referee to business manager. For many years during his

tenure he served as both president and chief steward of NARC.

Louis served as president of that club from 1965 to 1985, spending countless hours and dollars (from his own pocket) to ensure the long-term success of his dream. "The people are the greatest. I wouldn't trade a moment of the time I have spent in this sport."



*Louis Vermeil (& Alice)*

He also owned sprint cars, including the number 65 Offenhauser-powered "Vermeil Offy" car, which were driven by hotshoes such as Johnny Anderson and Mike Andreetta up through 1977.

Lou and his wife of over 50 years, Alice, who passed away just this past March, were famous for their hospitality and generosity at their 115-year-old home, known as "The Vermeil Nest", on tree-lined Washington Street in Calistoga. In back leaned Louie's Owl Garage, which came by its

name when he ran a 24-hour towing service, and it was open at all hours for the racers to work on their machines. It was on those many occasions that Alice provided a seemingly endless stream of food and fine Napa Valley wines for the hungry crews as they worked.

The Owl Garage also housed Louis' collection of unrestored midgets, 'big cars' and sprint cars. Among the mini-museum were vehicles that had been driven by such veterans as Jack Pacheteau, Hal Cole, "Tex" Peterson, Rajo Jack, Mike Riley, Clay Walsh, Don Branson, Bob Veith and Jim Hurtubise. Louis and Alice also raised four children, Laura, Dick, Stan (named after Louis' brother who now lives in Peoria, Ill.) and Al. Laura and her husband Frank Giamonna reside in Middletown, while former Calistoga Speedway racer Stan and his wife Carole now live in Santa Rosa. Former Philadelphia Eagles head coach Dick and his wife Carol live in Coatesville (Penna.), and ex-San Francisco 49's conditioning coach Al and his wife Dianne live in Lincolnshire (Ill.). Current 360 sprint car racers Troy and Chad, and wrench Mike, are grandsons of Louis and Alice. It should be noted that Louis Vermeil was a semi-pro football player in the years when "Red" Grange wore leather helmets.

Louis Vermeil passed away on March 19, 1987, following a long battle with cancer. Louis was named "Motorsportsman of the Year" in 1982 and inducted into their Hall of Fame in 1987 by Northern California's Motoring Press Association (MPA). According to Walter T. Ross, who succeeded Louis as NARC president, "It was always fun working with Louis Vermeil because he was the old-time chief . . . president for all those years and everyone respected him. He really had Calistoga, NARC and sprint car racing in his heart."