

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## FRANK KURTIS

Frank Peter Kurtis was born January 25, 1908 in Crested Butte (Colorado), to parents Frank and Apalonia Kurtis. The elder Kurtis was a blacksmith by trade and was forced to move his family a number of times in the early 1900's looking for work. However, by 1922, the Kurtis family had settled in the Los Angeles area for good.

One of two sons and four daughters, young Frank inherited his father's skills in craftsmanship as by age 14 he was busy metal- and wood-working at the Don Lee Coach & Body Works shop. He was also busy buying, fixing, selling and trading cars on the side. By 1928, the talented Kurtis, who was now head body service man at Don Lee Cadillac, had married his girlfriend Arlene Miller.

It was during this time, before The Great Depression, that Frank Kurtis had seen Ralph DePalma rocketing around the Beverly Hills board track in a Fiat and he thought, "Someday I'm gonna build a car like that, or better!"

During 1933 and 1934, Kurtis did custom auto body work at home and it wasn't long before he completed his first race car project: crafting a new body shell and hood for one of Southern California's many 'hot rod' track roadsters. Kurtis also built the complete body and tanks on the Atlas Chrome Special number 57 'big car,' which competed at Legion Ascot with such drivers as Ted Horn, Frank Wearne and Kelly Petillo.

During the mid- to late 1930's, Frank Kurtis concentrated on building and repairing midget race cars, which were extremely popular in America. Kurtis-Kraft, Inc., was a virtual 'pro-

duction line' for midget assemblies, although each car still received his personal care and craftsmanship. Over the years, it is estimated that Kurtis produced over 550 complete midgets and over (another) 550 midget kits.

Although he visited the Indianapolis Motor Speedway for the first time in 1939 and built Ed Walsh's car for driver Sam Hanks in 1941, he didn't really concentrate his efforts there until after World War II. However, he kept busy during the war years by manufacturing aircraft equipment, movie studio props and children's toys (junior midgets, wooden scooters, plastic models).

In 1946, the Kurtis-Kraft shop in suburban Glendale was 'hopping' with a backlog of midget orders, some sprint car work and three of Frank's cars in the Indy 500. That number of Indy starters would grow each year, climaxing

driver Johnnie Parsons), Frank Kurtis' cars with Offy engines dominated Indy fields through the mid-1950's. During this time he sold his midget business to Johnny Pawl, started building custom sports cars, and introduced the radical 'Indy roadster.'

The simple and effective Kurtis midget led many builders around the country to modify (stretch) a Kurtis midget or duplicate the design on a slightly larger scale to create their own champ dirt car or, more often, a sprint car. Fans can often spot them by the distinctive Kurtis-style one-piece hood and cowl panel of aluminum or fiberglass with a grooved recess for the windshield or windshield base, the cast alloy grille and the typical KK horizontal half-round radius rod brackets.

The late Fifties and early Sixties were transitional years for Frank Kurtis. Although he continued to build and campaign cars at Indy, Frank refocused his energies on many other technical challenges. These included roadster midgets, quarter-midgets, go-carts, military vehicles and custom sports/performance cars.

In 1962, Frank sold his quarter-midget business to Ralph Potter (Sr.) and one year later entered into a long-term military contract with Lockheed. In 1965, Arlene passed away, and two years later, Frank married Edith Clemons.

In 1968 he retired to Parker (Arizona), with Edy, leaving son Arlen to manage the Kurtis plant in Glendale. Over the years the military work, combined with building "Kurtis 500" speed boats and restoring/replicating Kurtis-

Kraft midgets, have kept the Frank Kurtis Company busy.

Frank Kurtis passed away in February of 1987.



Frank Kurtis (Bruce Craig Collection)

in 1953 with 24 of the field of 33 in K-K cars! By this time, the Kurtises had a son, Arlen, and a daughter, Ellona.

From the first win at the Brickyard in 1950 (with