

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

IRA VAIL

Ira Vail was a unique individual - a driver, owner and promoter who successfully bridged the gap between the very early years and the modern era of open wheel dirt track racing.

By 1910, Vail was racing motorcycles for the colorful Bill Pickens at the Brighton Beach Bowl near New York City. However, the following year, he had turned his interest to the four-wheeled vehicles, hooking a ride at Hohokus (N.J.) and winning his first race. It wasn't long before Vail, known as "Cotter Pin" by fellow racers, was competing against the best of the American Automobile Association (AAA) circuit: Barney Oldfield, Ralph DePalma, Ralph Mulford and Louis Chevrolet.

The early years were the golden era for barnstorming the countryside and Ira Vail and Bill Pickens were leading the charge. It's said that while on the road to a race, Vail developed a flat tire and used one of the stiff cuffs on his shirt as a blowout patch! In an event at Bakersfield (Calif.), Vail set an "official" track record for 100 miles, at least according to promoter Pickens. It was set in a race that, due to attrition (mechanical ills, accidents), only one car finished -

the racer of Ira Vail! Another barnstorming story found Vail and Oldfield accompanying Pickens on a racing tour of Cuba, although Barney was forced to return to the states early after imbibing at a banquet and insulting a local official!

It wasn't all fun and games, though, as Vail was a good racer and a good businessman. He was a salaried driver for the Hudson Motor Car Company, finishing third on two occasions in 1916 at the Sheepshead Bay board track; although he did well for himself on the boards and the bricks, Ira was most successful on the dirt. Vail's motorcycling experience on the velodromes did allow him to introduce the concept of "towing" (sling-shotting, slip-streaming, drafting) to the board tracks, though.

Vail was also one of the first drivers to contract with accessory companies for testimonials and he soon made quite a profit at it. When Hudson got out of the racing business in 1917, Ira also profited by taking his racer and reselling it over in Europe.

Vail, ever the enterprising businessman, also made his way into a Tommy Milton-Harry A. Miller engine deal. Ira's thought was that Miller could build two motors at the same time and thereby reduce his costs. Vail proceeded to take his

new motor and win at Fort Worth (\$5,000) and Dallas (\$4,500) in successive days, nearly paying for his complete car! Although he was a winner around the country, Vail was most successful at the Flemington (N.J.) and Mineola (N.Y.) Fairgrounds.

By 1920, a year after finishing eighth in the Indy 500, Vail was a genuine hero in the New York/New Jersey region. He was helping to pack the grandstands year after year at dirt tracks like Middletown and Syracuse (N.Y.), racing against the likes of Earl Cooper, Milton, DePalma, and Jimmy Murphy. Ira also continued to do well at Indy: 7th (1921), 8th (1922), 8th (1924), and 20th (1925).

In 1925, the New York State Fair board in Syracuse asked crowd favorite Vail to take over the promotion of their annual national championship event. He remained as promoter through the 1960s at the mile dirt facility, first with AAA and then with United States Auto Club (USAC) sanction. In addition to Syracuse, he promoted at other East Coast venues, such as Mineola and Rhinebeck (N.Y.) and Essex Junction (Vt.).

Ira Vail died in Florida.