

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

SAM NUNIS

by Bruce Craig

Floyd Samuel Nunis was one of the old-time racing promoters; part charlatan, part showman, and had there not been a streak of integrity which occasionally overpowered the other forces, automobile racing as we know it might not have been possible. He managed to change and adapt with the times, but was happiest when he remembered the days of his youth on the fair circuit with Ralph Hankinson, a squeaky-voiced giant who controlled much of Eastern U.S. racing. It was fun—not much money, but fun—excitement, showbiz. Sam Nunis had dropped out of the society of Esom Hill, Ala. He ran away at 16 to Birmingham where he played craps with hotel employees, then rode the rails, finally ending in Hamtramck, Mich., where he went to work in a Ford body plant. That was just after World War I and it was in the Detroit area that he first saw Hankinson and his wholly-owned racing show.

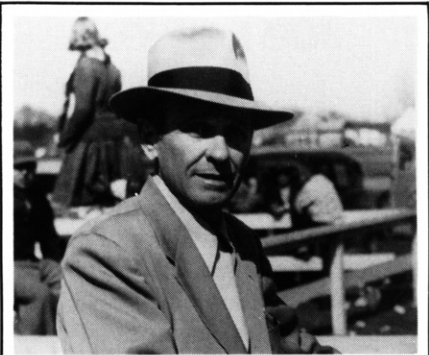
“When I saw them I knew this was for me,” the rail-thin Nunis recalled. “There were 8 or 9 drivers in the troupe, and Hankinson owned the cars. Sometimes they would fill out with locals, but the winner was usually prearranged. Hankinson refused to take me on, so I quit Ford and followed him on my own.” Nunis finally wormed his way into the troupe and stayed for 2 years before Hankinson decided to throw in with the AAA Contest Board and run open competition.

Years later, just after World War II when Sam was promoting in old Lakewood Park in Atlanta, he still referred to his days as a racing driver. He told gullible young reporters about how he wheeled a Frontenac-Ford to victory in places like Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh, and Atlanta. Decades later he laughed about the stories of driving prowess and noted, “I got my ink, didn’t I?” Ink is news-

paper space and Nunis was always a master at generating it. However, the story he told of ending his driving career at Concord, N.C., is true. He went through the fence in 1926, landing on a paved road with the car on top of him. It took him 18 months to recover and Hankinson took him on as an assistant promoter, an apprenticeship that was to last a decade. A metal plate in his hip was a souvenir. Once he had made it as a promoter, he began to drive a succession of Lincoln Continentals with built-in heater-massagers on the driver’s seat.

There was once a time when Sam thought he could make more money outside racing. He accepted an offer to do sales promotion for the Montgomery Ward mail order house sporting goods line. When the war suspended auto racing, he went into the corporate training program and was assigned to a Baltimore store. He lasted 6 months, then came up to Paterson, N.J., where on impulse he bought the famed Gasoline Alley and the tavern that went with it from driver Joie Chitwood. “I thought it was a good business until I found out that booze was rationed,” he recalled. “He took me, fair and square.” Sam remained great friends with Chitwood, he admired a deal like that. His life’s motto was always *caveat emptor*. Even before Nunis unloaded the tavern late in 1944 he booked Joie’s thrill show that—to beat gas rationing—used propane as fuel.

After the war, Nunis went back into race promotion with great gusto. At one time he had race tracks under his wing from Maine to Florida, eventually all AAA Contest Board, and later USAC. He promoted AAA races at Charlotte before the advent of the superspeedway and at Salem, N.H., after the old board track was a memory. It was Nunis who gave an assortment of young men the chance to learn the racing promotion business, but his most successful graduate seems to have been Chris Economaki.



Sam Nunis
Bruce Craig Collection

Nunis finally settled in at the Trenton State Fairgrounds under the aegis of another promoter, George Hamid. Hamid had the Steel Pier in Atlantic City, one of the wonders of the American entertainment world. Slippery Sam had watched NASCAR absorb part of his empire, and now lung trouble began to dog him. Besides, he used to say, the old days had ended even before the demise of the AAA Contest Board. The only way now was to concentrate on one track if you wanted to have major league shows.

New Jersey proved a gracious host for Nunis, and the Trenton oval was improved several times, the last improvement being an extra loop in the track so that the USAC Trail cars faced new challenges for Sam to ballyhoo. There were many stories about Nunis, most of them with only a grain of truth. But his cadaverous figure and his perpetually pained expression invited such stories. One USAC driver, Eddie Sachs, explained. “Sam has that pained expression because he thinks it’s a shame he has to pay us for the fun of racing on his track in 90 degree heat,” Sachs said. “I think he has a bad back from sitting on all the money he makes.” Nunis never refuted quips like that. After all, it helped the gate. He retired from Trenton, but despite emphysema, was still promoting URC races in 1973. Sam died in February 1980, from complications of lung/heart disease. He is survived by his wife Dorothy.