Jim Raper

by Andrew Kunas

James H. "Jim" Raper was born in Bellingham, Washington, on January 7, 1929. Jim lived most of his life in Deming, a small town east of Bellingham in the Cascade Mountains. According to his widow, Alida Francisco, Raper put his family above all else, but Skagit Speedway in nearby Alger was not far behind. It was the dirt track that he managed and promoted until his death on June 7, 1984.

Jim Raper loved Skagit Speedway and his dirt track racing so much that Francisco said that if he were alive today, he'd likely still be running the track if he could.

Raper was one of the original fourteen stockholders of the historic 3/10-mile clay oval when it opened in 1954. Raper proceeded to win super-modified titles in 1955, '56, and '57. He earned one more championship in 1963 aboard his green and gold number 13 machine before he took over as track manager after the death of Elbert Lemley in 1966. Raper would continue to race until 1968.

Skagit Speedway Collection

In the early years of Skagit Speedway, Raper used his own equipment to help contribute to the track like many of the other stockholders did. Wood used for the original bleachers and poles were from trees cut down on Jim and Alida's own property.

As a promoter, Raper also realized that racing wasn't just for a few, but that it could provide good family entertainment if managed correctly. He made it his business to learn what types of racing the fans wanted to see. During his time as manager, he brought in a wide variety of cars. The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) Western Grand National Series and the United States Auto Club (USAC) midget cars even made visits to Skagit during the early 1970's. During this time, it was the open-wheel division that eventually became 'top dog' at Skagit Speedway.

Raper's biggest event and greatest legacy as a promoter started in 1972. The Northwest Dirt Cup Series was a three-day, three-track point championship that started at Sky Valley Speedway in Monroe, ran Skagit the next night, and then finished at the old Elma half-mile. Despite being in the isolated northwest corner of the country, the event over the next several years attracted names such as Gary Patterson, Jimmy Sills, Jimmy Boyd, Rick Ferkel, Sammy Swindell, and Jan Opperman. Sills has won the event an unprecedented six times.

By 1978, Sky Valley and Elma had dropped out, and the Dirt Cup became a Skagit-only event. From there, the event took off and grew to become one of the most prestigious open-competition sprint car events in the country. Between 1978 and '84, the Dirt Cup under Raper's guidance drew names such as Doug Wolfgang, Steve Kinser, Jack Hewitt, Ron Shuman, Tim Green, and Lealand McSpadden.

After Raper's untimely death, new management quickly renamed the Skagit Dirt Cup, and it became the "Jim Raper Memorial Dirt Cup" in honor of the event's founder. The name has remained unchanged ever since, and rightfully so.
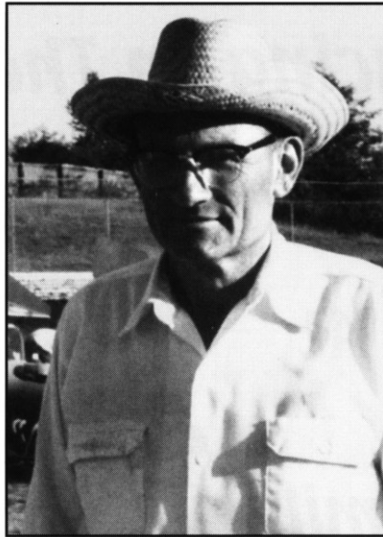
Raper was well respected by everyone, including the racers, the fans and fellow promoters. It is said that whether it was at just a driver's meeting at Skagit's infield blockhouse or at a national racing convention, whenever Jim Raper spoke, everyone listened.

According to Steve Beitler, the current owner of Skagit Speedway, Raper always said "Christmas comes once a year," and that was his dream for Dirt Cup. It set a standard that many tracks followed when it came to promoting larger events. Beitler had known Raper for about 15 years before Jim's death.

Francisco remembers her late husband as a good, honest person. In racing, his rules were the same for everyone. Beitler had similar feelings, saying that what Raper said was law and he would not accept any trouble from anyone. He would also make an example of a local racer sometimes to show out-of-town racers that he wouldn't play favorites.

As firm as Raper was, he was also a very nice man according to Beitler. While he wasn't afraid to chew someone out if they had it coming, he would always congratulate someone for a job well done. Raper also wanted what was best for racers and fans alike. He didn't believe in paying sanctioning fees to racing groups, but instead wanted to put money in the racers' pockets.

Jim Raper could come across as a rough-and-tough type of person, but inside he was a gentle man. As stated by a special plaque on display at the Skagit Speedway, his voice will forever echo, "take it easy, now."