

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## JOHN B. GERBER

by Emmett Carpenter

John B. Gerber was born in Meriden, Kansas on November 20, 1896, and passed away on April 11, 1979 in Davenport, Iowa. During his 82-1/2 years, he accomplished more than most men have in the auto racing field.

Mr. Gerber built a road speedster from a model 490 Chevrolet 4-cylinder and drove it for the first time at St. Joseph, Missouri, taking second place on May 30, 1921. He was hooked and by 1923 he designed his first bob-tail, a Chevy with an Oldsmobile head and no tail. He was helped by blacksmith Swede Palmberg, who incidentally lived to 106 years of age. The car was an instant success and, with John at the wheel, outran everyone from Cedar Rapids to Houston. Much of this was from John's ability to outfigure his opponents, and the lightness and speed of the car.

In 1932 Mr. Gerber built a new car with his own chassis and a body by Fred Bokorney. He now had a down-draft head of his own design, with a single overhead cam and only eight valves. He hired Maynard "Hungry" Clark of Milan, Illinois, to drive this car and Clark won features at Lincoln, Lexington (Nebr.), Topeka, and Hutchinson (Ks.) in a period of one month. John continued to drive the bob-tail.

In 1933 Gerber built another car identical to the one built in 1932 and it was also Chevy powered. Gerber and Clark took the two cars east to run with the American Automobile Association (AAA). Promoter Jack Curley billed them as the "Iowa Farm Boys"; they wore bib overalls and straw hats, smoked corncob pipes and slept in a tent in the infield. Curley even arranged for a baby pig to be led around on a leash.

John had married his wife Rose on March 15, 1928, and moved to Iowa. They agreed he would quit driving if



**John B. Gerber**  
Bruce Craig Collection

they had children, so he drove and won his last race on October 14, 1933 at Bel Aire (Md.). They had two sons, Jim and John R. Gerber.

In 1934 John built new 220-inch, 8-valve, single overhead cam (S.O.H.C.) engines from his own drawings and patterns. The first race on the new engine was a second place finish in a 100-mile race at Langhorne. Then Clark set new records and won features at Dayton, Chicago, Hamburg (N.Y.), Cleveland and Atlanta. In 1936 Clark was seriously injured in a race at Atlanta and he retired from driving.

Now the Gerber cars went through a succession of drivers. In 1936 Bob Sall drove for the first time, setting a new track record and winning the feature at Hamburg, near Buffalo. Jimmy Snyder won at Mineola (N.Y.) the first time he drove the car and then took second in a 100-mile AAA Championship race at Syracuse. Billy Winn won the feature at Reading, Flemington (N.J.) and again at Reading, setting new track records each time. The car lowered the track record at Reading three times in three years. Rex Mays drove the car once, but a bad batch of fuel sidelined him. Paul Russo also drove a new 250 cubic inch engine at Milwaukee.

One of the cars was sold to Cecil Burrough and ran awhile in California. Joe Gemsa later owned the car and ran it at antique meets across the country.

Gerber also manufactured parts. His forged connecting rod was used in many of the fast engines with Ford 'A' and 'B' blocks. He reworked cylinder heads and made many other racing parts.

When World War II was over, John and Rose started promoting races. They ran stocks and midgets, running as often as eight times a week. They bought the Mississippi Valley Fairgrounds in Davenport with the help of several investors and ran it for several years before selling it back to the county.

John's final endeavor was writing a book. He and Rose kept a scrapbook of results and records where his cars ran through the years and he started putting it all in book form. His son John is now editing the material and getting it ready for publication. His widow Rose remains in Davenport today, while John R. lives in Miami (Fla.) and Jim lives (and races/wins with an I.M.C.A. modified) in Long Grove, Iowa.