

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

RALPH A. "PAPPY" HANKINSON

Ralph A. Hankinson, known as "Pappy", first began in automobile event promotion in 1911 when he originated 'Auto Polo' and used it to gain experience in promotion on an international level. In March of 1915, he became one of the original promoters of the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA), along with J. Alex Sloan, Verne Soules and the Freidman brothers. Despite some setbacks when his bookings of fair attractions had greatly declined, Hankinson continued putting on a show that was prearranged to please the fans ('hippodroming'). His contracted drivers, including Sam Nunis, were paid by the week and not from prize money.

By 1926, the portly, free-spirited and high-powered Hankinson was in control of the big car fair and exposition circuit for the American Automobile Association (AAA), which was the stepping-stone to their Indianapolis 500-mile race. Pappy was popular and honest, his races paid well, his deal money was good and he had some excellent dates. These included the Springfield (IL) and Milwaukee (WI) state fairs, which were about as far west as AAA operated after Legion Ascot closed. Hankinson's promotional efforts, though, were concentrated on the East



Ralph A. "Pappy" Hankinson
Bruce Craig Collection

Coast. In the early 1930's, Pappy was able to purchase the Altoona (PA) and Woodbridge (NJ) board tracks, as both tracks had suffered during the Great Depression.

Hankinson is best known for turning around the fortunes of the legendary Langhorne (PA) Speedway. In the late Twenties, Langhorne was poorly promoted and had turned into a colossal dust bowl. Hankinson and partner George Hamid, Jr. made a deal with the track's creditors and their first race in 1930 drew 20,000 fans. In the following years, Pappy drew stead-

ily larger crowds and on October 13, 1935, his 100-miler was run before 42,634 fans. His success at Langhorne and other tracks isn't hard to understand, though, when one considers the type of talent that was loyal to his shows: Eyland "Ted" Horn, Emil Andres, Egbert "Babe" Stapp, Tony Willman, Joie Chitwood, Bob Sall and George "Doc" Mackenzie.

Sometime in 1940, Hankinson somehow became associated with an unsanctioned event, probably at a smaller fair, and AAA attempted to discipline their foremost promoter. In response, Pappy sold his interest in Langhorne Speedway in late 1940 and severed his ties with AAA. He went so far as to join the Central States Racing Association (CSRA) in an effort to consolidate the big car racing fair circuits of the East and Midwest. His first race after his break with AAA was at Reading, Pennsylvania, and Jimmy Wilburn won the CSRA-sanctioned event. Ted Horn was in the grandstands that day unwilling to break with AAA until after the 1941 Indy "500". Unfortunately, racing in this country suffered two severe setbacks within the next year. On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was attacked, officially plunging this country into war and a period of racing inactivity. Also, on August 19, 1942, Ralph Hankinson died suddenly in his sleep from a probable heart attack in his hotel in Orange City, Florida.