

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

TOMMY HINNERSHITZ

Thomas Paul Hinnershitz was born April 6, 1912, on a small farm near Oley, Pennsylvania. He saw his first race at the Reading (PA) Fairgrounds track, which has remained as one of Tommy's favorites. In 1931, Tommy drove his first race at Reading in a 1914 Model "T" race car which he bought from a neighbor for \$25. In 1932, he joined the American Automobile Association (AAA). In 1935, while racing under the AAA banner, Park Culp gave Tommy his chance at driving a first-class race car. Also that same year, Tommy met and married Betty Selman in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Their first daughter Jean was born in 1939 and their second daughter Carol arrived four years later. A big break came his way when the famous Ted Horn asked him to join his racing team.

The "Flying Dutchman" (as he was known) passed his driver's test at Indy in 1939. Although Tommy did compete in the Indy 500 on three occasions (1940-41-48), his first love was driving sprint cars on a half-mile dirt track. It was during the era of the '50's that Tommy's years of experience peaked and he excelled over all others for a decade. The quiet, gentle man was a farmer Monday through Friday, but on weekends, he was a professional racer (who did most of his own mechanical work, too). The charger's style was high, wide and handsome. He



Tommy Hinnershitz
R.N. Masser, Jr. Collection

would plant the right rear tire on the cushion in the corners, and make it all look so easy. In fact, Jud Larson once commented, "Boy, I was riding that close to the outside fence, I didn't think a motorcycle could get by me. And I look over, and there goes Tom".

When Tommy retired in 1960 at a United States Auto Club (USAC) event at the Allentown (PA) Fairgrounds, he was the holder of 103 feature wins under the AAA and USAC sanctions. Competing with the old 3A, he compiled more total points in sprint car racing than anyone else in that prestigious organization's history. When the Dutchman retired, he still held 39 track records, and had won the Eastern sprint car championship a total of seven times...a feat never before ac-

complished in his time, nor since he hung up his helmet. He captured the AAA East Coast sprint car championship in 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, and 1955, and the USAC East Coast title in 1956 and 1959. He was second in 1936, 1938, 1948 and 1953, third in 1947, fourth in 1939 and fifth in 1946.

Tommy's best-remembered rides were his own "Bluebird" (actually four cars carried that name, including two built by Hiram Hillegass), John Pfrommer's Offy, Tommy's Miracle Power Specials, John Gerber's big car, Mark Light's Miller, Sex Perriman's Miller, Ted Horn's big car, "Buster" Warke's Offy, Gus Strupp's Miller and Dr. Sabourin's Offy.

Asked about his most special fond memories from his days as a driver, Tommy replied, "Well, I guess the two main things are that we got to know so many swell people all over the country, and winning the sprint car championships. Plus the day in 1948 when I beat Ted Horn, up at Williams Grove Speedway. I'll never forget that...it was one of the few times I did beat Ted Horn." In his autobiography simply entitled "A.J.", Foyt remarks, "Of all the drivers on dirt Tommy Hinnershitz stands out in my mind as the best. Man, he had that sprint car up on two wheels, one wheel, up on its side, whatever it took. And he almost never turned it over."

Tommy and Betty are now living in retirement on their 63-acre farm near Oley. He finally has a chance to catch up on his hobbies of fishing, hunting and trailing.