

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

BERNA ELI "BARNEY" OLDFIELD

Born Berna Eli Oldfield in a log cabin in Wauseon, Ohio on January 29, 1878, "Barney" did more to popularize auto racing in the formative years than anyone else. Following a successful stint in bicycle racing, Oldfield joined Carl Fisher, Louis Chevrolet, Tom Cooper (a wealthy bicycle racer and partner of Henry Ford in the fledgling Ford Motor Company), Walter Winchester and Earl Kizer in late 1902 and initiated a series of exhibition auto races on half-mile and one-mile dirt tracks in the midwest. This was popularly known as "barnstorming", and these races were not sanctioned by the new American Automobile Association (AAA) contest board.

Oldfield, the 1903 national driving champion, was also the first man to lap a mile track in less than one minute. He accomplished this feat at the Indianapolis Fairgrounds on June 20, 1903 in the gas-powered Ford "house car" #999. In July, Barney teamed up with Alexander Winton and his "Bullet" racing team for more barnstorming. Beginning in 1904, Oldfield campaigned a new car, the Peerless "Green Dragon". Together, the Peerless and Oldfield were nearly unbeatable until he was involved in a horrendous crash at the World's Fair in St. Louis (footage of



Berna Eli "Barney" Oldfield
Bruce Craig Collection

the accident was later used to hype his upcoming fair racing appearances). After that crash, Oldfield and the "Green Dragon" team were joined by tour promoter Bill Pickens. The cigar-chomping Oldfield drove his "Green Dragon" Peerless to many victories on the fair circuit, including a \$1,000-to-win main event in Des Moines (IA) on August 14, 1907. It is gen-

erally acknowledged that Barney's famous barnstorming races, like those in 1909-10 with the Blitzen Benz, gave rise to the popularity of dirt track racing in America.

This pioneer was also the first man to travel 131 miles per hour, doing so on March 16, 1909 on Daytona Beach, Florida. During the second decade of the century, Barney Oldfield continued his barnstorming antics, often racing against an airplane to determine the fastest form of transportation. And by 1914, a legitimate rivalry with fellow driver Ralph DePalma entertained the nation's motorsports fans. In 1916, the Los Angeles-based Oldfield teamed with carburetor specialist and engine builder Harry A. Miller to build a new car...the "Golden Egg". The Ohio native used this car to beat both DePalma and Louis Chevrolet (in his Frontenac) in repeated match races. On October 13, 1918, Oldfield drove his last official race in Independence, Missouri. Later in life, Barney had a leading role in the movie "The Blonde Comet", which was filmed in 1941. Berna Eli "Barney" Oldfield, veteran barnstormer and 'Master Driver of the World' (according to press releases put out by J. Alex Sloan and William Pickens), died on October 4, 1946. Barney's relative Carter "Robin" Oldfield today lives in Waterloo, Illinois, and runs the Barney Oldfield Ford-Mercury dealership.