

Bayliss Levrett

by Don Radbruch

Bayliss Levrett was a racer in the days when race car drivers were independent souls who wandered around the country doing their job. There were no ties to corporate America, no fancy contracts and a deal (when they existed) would be sealed with a handshake. A racer had to do a lot of traveling and race with a lot of different



organizations -- Bayliss Levrett did just that. It was a tough way to make a living.

Bayliss D. Levrett was born in Jacksonville, Florida, on February 14, 1913, to parents A.E. and Ruth Levrett. The Levrett family moved to Van Nuys, California, in 1926, where Bayliss married Virginia Scharf in 1933.

Bayliss' career went from the early Model 'T'-powered track roadsters on obscure dirt tracks in southern California (i.e. - Jeffries Ranch in Burbank) in late 1933 to Indy. From the roadsters the next step was the 'big cars', as sprint cars were known then. Levrett began driving these cars in 1934 at the Silvergate Speedway in San Diego. For the remainder of the 1930s, and up to World War II, he raced at west coast tracks like San Jose, Oakland, El Centro, Colton, San Bernardino and even went north to the Gresham Speedbowl in Portland, Oregon. In mid-summer during the Midwest fair season, Levrett ran with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) and a couple of other groups. This was all 'outlaw' racing in the eyes of the mighty American Automobile Association (AAA) but the money wasn't bad and Levrett did okay.

After WWII, Bayliss acquired the ex-Frank Markler Hisso-powered #404 (from the widow of bombardier Tommy Kristin) that would be the Levrett trademark for the next several years. The Hisso engine was half of a World War I Hispano Suiza V8 aircraft engine. This 358-cubic-inch monster had the power to compete with the Offenhausers and, tossing in Levrett's skill, could beat them fairly regularly. Racing boomed right after the war and, on the West Coast, the high-banked Oakland Stadium track was the place with the big payoffs. Levrett was at his best at Oakland and could be counted on to run up front in the weekly races. Winning at Oakland Stadium in 1946 or '47 could pay around \$800 - big money back then. Bayliss was Charlie Curryer's American Racing Association (ARA) champion in 1946, besting Bud Rose (Harry Eisele) and his Miller by 31 points.

It is a bit of a mystery but, despite the big Oakland payoffs, in both 1946 and '47, Levrett took time off during the middle of the summer to go east and race with the IMCA. In addition to decent purses at the state fairs, the IMCA paid 'deal' money for racers at the smaller county fairs. Bayliss' deal money must have been very good -- and there were obligations to the IMCA promoters that he honored.

Another bit of a mystery about Bayliss Levrett is that the late 1940s were the heyday of midget car racing and most sprint car and Indy drivers would drive the little machines at every opportunity and pick up some winnings. Bayliss Levrett never drove a midget!

In 1947, at a race at Carrell Speedway, Bayliss crashed his Hisso and was severely burned on the back of both legs. Friend Lenny Low of San Leandro, California, repaired the heavily damaged car and even drove it some for the recuperating Levrett.

By 1949, the crowds at Oakland Stadium had dwindled along with the purses and Bayliss felt it was time to move on. 'Moving on' meant selling the Hisso (to Fry's Auto Wreckers, with Lenny Low continuing to drive the car), joining the AAA and shooting for Indy. Even though Levrett had been an outlaw for a dozen years, he apparently had no problems getting a Triple-A license.

His first start in the AAA was at a championship car race in Arlington, Texas, in May of 1949. An impressive performance there earned him a shot at Indy later that month and he made the field as a rookie in a Frank Kurtis-built machine. Levrett wound up hitting some debris on the track that knocked the oil drain plug out of the pan and handed him a 24th place finish. In 1949 and '50, Levrett campaigned the 'Championship Trail' on the mile dirt tracks, with his best finish being a fourth at Milwaukee.

At Indy there were mechanical problems again (low oil pressure) in 1950, resulting in a 27th place finish in his Offy-powered Clyde Adams-built machine. He missed the show at Indy in 1951 aboard a Joe Silnes-built car, but was back in '52 with a really good ride on the Brown Motor Company team. His high hopes were dashed by a crash in practice that resulted in severe injuries and Bayliss decided to hang up his helmet. With a career like Levrett's there had been other crashes and other injuries, but this one was a wake up call.

After retiring from racing, Levrett opened a transmission repair shop in Los Angeles in 1955. Bayliss and Virginia had two children, Jim and John. In 1974, following his wife Virginia's passing, he moved his business to Reno, Nevada, where he met and later married Hazel McCargar.

Today, Levrett Transmission is owned and operated by John Levrett, whose three children are off-road racer Mark, transmission shop businesswoman Cari, and manicurist Jeanine. Bayliss Levrett died on March 13, 2002, following a nine-year battle with Alzheimer's disease.

