



# Lee Elkins

by Dick Lee

Born on June 14, 1912, Lee Elkins built his McNamara Motor Express commercial freight business in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He bought it in 1944 and continued running it until his passing in July of 1979, with the long-haul trade between Michigan and a dozen other Great Lakes and Midwestern states being his specialty. At one point, under Elkins' direction, McNamara

Motor Express owned seven hundred tractors, twelve hundred trailers, thirteen freight terminals and seven cargo airplanes. Elkins maintained residences in California, Florida and Michigan.

Elkins fathered five children, one of whom was the late Brian Lee Elkins. Brian worked with his father's race teams and himself drove a midget car for several years. Lee's first race car, a (Frank) Kurtis-Kraft midget that he purchased in 1951, was the first of a long succession of midget, sprint, championship dirt, and roadster and rear-engine Indy cars to carry the maroon-and-gold colors of McNamara Motor Freight.

Self-made millionaire Lee Elkins owned and sponsored sprint cars in the 1950's and again in the mid-'70s. In the early 1950's, his main driver was Mike Nazaruk and together they won many American Automobile Association (AAA) 'big car' races with mechanic Clarence "Mutt" Anderson. Nazaruk, a burly ex-marine, was probably Elkins' favorite driver over the years as he shared Lee's fondness for whiskey and his propensity for violent barroom disagreements.

Nazaruk enjoyed a reputation as a brave, tough-driving, heavy-drinking street fighter who considered an evening on the town wasted if he didn't get the opportunity to clean out at least one bar. Elkins was frequently on hand when the trouble started, and on those occasions when he wasn't, usually arrived on the scene quickly to mop up and pay the damages.

Nazaruk's tragic death in a sprint car at his beloved Langhorne, Pennsylvania track on May 1, 1955, completely devastated Elkins and he spent the rest of his career as a car owner trying to replace him. The six-foot-and-190-pound Elkins tried some two-fisted characters, Andy Linden and Ed Elisian among them, but he never found another driver who could fill his friend Nazaruk's role.

After the United States Auto Club (USAC) was formed, Elkins finished seventh in the 1956 sprint car owner standings in the Midwest Division with Andy Linden piloting his number 73 car.

The following season, 1957, was a banner year for Lee Elkins' McNamara Trucking team with third and fourth place finishes in the USAC Midwest Division owner point standings for his number 83 and 73 sprint cars, respectively. That season, Andy Linden won at Dayton, Ohio, on March 24 and Ed Elisian won at Terre Haute, Indiana, on June 16, in the number 83 car. Linden also piloted the number 73 car to wins at Winchester, Indiana, on May 5 and at Terre Haute on August 18.

Elkins followed car owner champion Mari Hulman George and runner-up Clyde Dillon in 1957, and finished ahead of Bob Estes (fifth), Gus Hoffman (sixth) and Sam Traylor (seventh). Ironically, had Andy Linden finished ahead of his McNamara teammate Ed Elisian in the season's 50-mile, 100-lap final race at Salem, Indiana, Linden would have been point champion and Elmer George would have been runner-up.

Following a nearly two decade hiatus from USAC sprint car racing, after the near complete collapse of McNamara Motor Freight, the happy-go-lucky, high-stakes gambling Elkins came back in 1973, '74 and '75 with Bill Puterbaugh driving his number 73 car (numbered after his lucky dice numbers of 7 and 3). In 1973, Lee was 24th in USAC sprint car owner points. Elkins was sixth in '74 car owner points following three wins for Puterbaugh at Reading, Pennsylvania, on March 24, at New Bremen, Ohio, on August 11, and at Cincinnati, Ohio, on September 1. In 1975, Elkins was credited with a 49th place finish in USAC sprint car owner points.

Lee Elkins ran his Indy car teams from 1951 to '59, before returning in 1975 for three more seasons. At the Indy 500, his finishes included an 18th in 1951 with Carl Scarborough and a 26th in '52 with Bob Sweikert. 1953 saw Lee Elkins enter two cars in the Indianapolis 500, with Carl Scarborough finishing in 12th spot in the McNamara Special and Mike Nazaruk finishing in 21st position in the Kalamazoo Special wrenched by "Mutt" Anderson.

Mike Nazaruk finished 5th for Elkins in 1954 at Indy. The following year, Eddie Johnson finished 13th in the '500' in Elkins' Floyd Trevis-built car entered by Kalamazoo Sports, Inc. Dick Rathmann finished 5th in 1956 at Indy for owner Lee Elkins. In 1957, Andy Linden scored another 5th place finish in the McNamara-Veedol Special, while teammate Ed Elisian wound up 29th.

By 1958, after seven years as a championship car owner, Elkins had enjoyed almost no success on the Championship Trail, in spite of having been through an enormous number of drivers including Bob Sweikert, Bill Holland, Johnnie Parsons, Allen Heath, Joe James, Gordon Reid, Eddie Johnson, Ed Elisian, Andy Linden and, of course, Mike Nazaruk. In May of '58, when he saw the opportunity to put together a truly first-class team for the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Lee Elkins jumped at the chance.

In 1958, Elkins went to the Speedway with one car, a four-year-old Kurtis, with Clark "Shorty" Templeman at the wheel (who would eventually finish 19th). However, chief mechanic Floyd Trevis and driver Dick Rathmann separately both became available during the month of May, and Elkins seized the opportunity to utilize his past employees by purchasing A.J. Watson's hastily-prepared spare car as his second McNamara Motor Freight entry.

Rathmann and Trevis did not disappoint Elkins as they captured the pole position in '58 in track-record time after just seventeen laps of practice. The White Front bar was hoppin' that day. Dick took the lead in the '500' from his pole position at the drop of the green and led through turns one and two. Going down the backstretch, Ed Elisian dropped low under Rathmann as they approached turn three and everyone waited to see who would back off first. The problem is that neither driver backed off and both cars lost traction and slid around while the rest of the field bunched up. One-quarter of the field never made one lap. Sadly, former '500' winner Pat O'Connor lost his life in the mad scramble.

One year later, Dick Rathmann was back behind the wheel of the McNamara-(Bert Sabourin) Chiropractic Special, although a fire in the pits relegated him to a 20th place finish. It was almost twenty years before Lee Elkins entered a car for the Indy 500 again. In 1975, Bill Puterbaugh claimed Rookie of the Year honors by finishing in the 7th position. In '76, Puterbaugh finished in 22nd position. Finally, in 1977, Puterbaugh finished 12th for the last Indy 500 for Lee Elkins.

Bill Puterbaugh drove Lee Elkins' McNamara Motor Express USAC championship dirt car in 1974. In the early to mid-1970's, Lee Elkins enjoyed some midget car racing success with drivers Jack Calabrese, John Batts and Rick Davidson.

In 1977, Lee Elkins had sold all of his racing equipment and was living in virtual seclusion. He died of cancer and complications of alcoholism in 1979.

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