

Louis Senter

by Norm Bogan

Louis Senter arrived on earth nearly nine decades ago and at an early age he and his younger brother, Bobby, were introduced to auto racing at Gilmore Stadium in Hollywood, California, to witness the mighty midget cars.

The inaugural Soap Box Derby was held at this historic venue in the early thirties. It was staged by the Gilmore Oil Company and

conducted on the racing oval, with a driver in the car and a pusher to complete the team. Louis and Bobby, as pre-teens, were the victors. The format changed and soon relocated to Akron, Ohio, where the race course was on a downhill incline and gravity replaced the pusher.

This early experience triggered an life-long love affair with racing and performance for Louis. Senter exhibited a natural talent as a machinist during his high school years, leading to an apprenticeship with the Byron Jackson Oil Tool Company in 1939. When WWII broke out, Louie enlisted in the U.S. Navy as a machinist mate and served for nearly four years. Returning to civilian life, Louis joined Eddie Meyer Engineering and made performance parts for Flathead Ford engines. In 1946, Louie and older brother Sol opened their own machine shop and performed all the machining on the Casale Rear Ends. They used their tube-bending machine to fabricate radius rods, nerf bars, etc., for Frank Kurtis, and they performed custom machining for the local hot rodders.

In 1947, engine builder Jack Andrews joined the Senters and created Ansen Automotive. They produced a small catalog and a mail-order business as one of the first speed shops in the country and a market for used racing equipment.

Louis Senter gained notoriety when he fashioned the Ansen Aluminum Sprint Wheel, which offered a variety of widths and offsets in a two-piece configuration. At his peak, he was producing over 20,000 of these splined and slotted wheels per month. Ansen Automotive also developed the first aluminum wheel for Indy cars and adapted the Sprint wheel for street vehicles. Other Ansen Automotive products included forged pistons, forged-steel rods, aluminum connecting rods and steel safety bell housings, eventually required by the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA). Louie also invented one of the early fire suits – to demonstrate its worth, Senter set himself on fire! Ansen Automotive was an early provider of sprint car kits with Eagle Electric from Seattle purchasing the first one and winning the Northwest Championship.

During the late forties, there was a broad range of motorsports disciplines including dry lakes race cars and land speed record cars, unlimited hydroplane boats, midget cars, championship cars, sprint cars and track roadsters. Robert Morton and Ansen Automotive built a dry lakes roadster that ran 151 mph at Muroc Dry Lake. Louie owned a track roadster with promising pilot Jimmy Murphy at the controls. Senter built a V8-60 Midget and challenged the Offies at the Los Angeles Coliseum board track and the Rose Bowl, in competition with Dennis "Duke" Nalon, Sam Hanks, Bob Swanson and Ronny Householder. Louie also piloted dragsters, sprint cars, midgets and boats, plus he attempted land speed records at the dry lakes and Bonneville Salt Flats. As a sponsor and owner of a number of sprint cars, Senter selected Ray Douglas and Don Hawley as his drivers.

Louie Bromme built an Indy car at the Ansen shop in the late forties for driver Travis "Spider" Webb. Senter took a rear-engine Offy to Indy in 1966 and Bill Chesebourg, Dempsey Wilson and Ralph Ligouri made qualifying attempts but missed the show. In 1992 and 1993, Senter entered a car with Johnny Parsons, Jr., driving. He has been to every Indy 500 since 1946 and is a member of their Old-Timer's Club.

In the early fifties, Louie operated the Saugus Drag Strip, where contestants vied for either a trophy or a \$25 savings bond. Louie owned the Ansen Special Dragster, which was driven by Rod Stuckey. The car was sold to Tom Greer, who mounted a body on it, to become the famed Greer-Black-Prudhomme car.

In 1963, Senter was one of the founding members of the Speed Equipment Manufacturers Association (SEMA), which has now been rebranded the Specialty Equipment Market Association.

Standing alongside throughout most of Louie's adult life has been Betty, his wife of 65 years, who was also active in the operations of Ansen Automotive. The Senters were blessed with one daughter, Marsha, who became an architect and designed the Senter homestead above the San Fernando Valley.

By the late sixties, Senter began to divest himself of many products and eventually sold the business to Whittaker Corporation. He served as a consultant with W.R. Grace and then devoted time to launch his grandson Shane Scully's racing career. Shane competed on the United States Auto Club (USAC) National Midget and Silver Crown series, before retiring from racing.

Aside from his innovations, Senter provided sponsorship to a number of racers and offered rides to young drivers looking for success. Senter has also stressed integrity in the profession through SEMA. Most of all, Louie maintains that fervor for auto racing competition that first blossomed at Gilmore Stadium nearly eighty years ago.

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