



Hal Robson

Harold "Hal" Robson was born August 16, 1911, in Mount Dennis, Ontario, Canada. In 1923, George and Elizabeth Robson relocated their family to Huntington Park in Southern California.

George, a machinist by trade, set up Robson Engineering; each of his four sons, George, Harold, James and Albert, eventually joined the firm when they became adults. George and Elizabeth Robson also had a daughter Amy.

Throughout Hal's life, he worked as a machinist when not racing. Hal and his older brother, George, began their racing careers in 1930; Hal requiring his mother to sign for him, because he was still a minor. Hal started in roadsters and, as a rookie, competed against the likes of "Shorty" Ellison, Bill Zaring, Mel Rances, Bill Slauson, Pete Naccarato, Frenchy La Hague, George Connor and Swede Lindskog. This was a very tough group, racing at tracks like Huntington Beach, Chowchilla, Riverside, Ed Grazer Speedway in San Diego, Silvergate Speedway, Oakland and Burbank. Most of these tracks were larger than today's standard half-mile.

After three years in roadsters, Robson progressed into sprint cars, running on the Southern Ascot half-mile for a few famous owners like Bromme, Morales (Tamale Wagon) and Agajanian. From 1936 to '39, it is estimated Hal won over fifty features, sometimes sweeping the show with quick time, dash win, heat and feature victories. Many of these features were 200 laps, and nearly all were at least fifty laps. Notable drivers he raced against were Rex Mays, Ted Horn, "Tex" Petersen, and Wally Schock.

The 1938 track records for Southern Ascot included: "Tex" Petersen, 1 lap; Hal Robson, 3 laps; Hal Robson, 5 laps; Hal Robson, 10 laps; Travis "Spider" Webb, 30 laps; George Robson, 40 laps; Hal Robson, 50 laps; Hal Robson, 60 laps; Hal Robson, 100 laps; and Harry Eisele (a.k.a. "Bud" Rose), 200 laps.

In 1939, Hal went back East and began to run the American Automobile Association (AAA) circuit. Keeping his car at Kepler's Garage on 16th Street in Indianapolis, he bought Chet Gardner's sprinter after Chet's death and he ran the mile tracks to earn his Indy test. Between 1946 and '50, Hal campaigned with AAA running the famed tracks at Winchester, Salem, Milwaukee, Dayton, Kansas City, Danville, Syracuse, Columbus, St. Louis, Atlanta, Roanoke, Des Moines, DuQuoin and Springfield. During the post-War years,

Hal often traveled to the Midwest with Rex Mays, a pilot that flew his own plane and who liked to secretly shut off the engine and then declare, "Oh, no," with new passengers on board. After enjoying the faces of his passengers preparing to meet their maker, Rex would switch the engine back on and continue the flight.

Robson also raced midget cars, as his schedule would allow, and championship cars. But, if a midget car show conflicted with another show, his backup driver was usually Tony Bettenhausen. Hal claimed that if he was broke, he'd put Tony in a midget and make some money. Gilmore Stadium, with its large crowds, became a regular midget car track after Hal went racing with AAA.

Robson passed his Indy rookie test in 1946 and drove the Phillips Miller car in the race, won by his brother George. Hal moved his family to Indianapolis in 1947 and worked for Pete DePaolo, maintaining a three-car team and driving one of the cars. He was an excellent Offy mechanic.

Hal returned to the Speedway in 1947 and '48 at the controls of the Palmer Special. While he gave each of the cars a good ride advancing forward, his three 500 entries all suffered mechanical failures.

After George Robson's 1946 Indy victory, George was scheduled to race the "Poison Lil" car for Paul Weirick in a race at Dayton later in the year. Prior to the Dayton show was a race at Lakeside Speedway in Atlanta, where George would be appearing as the reigning Indy 500 champion. Hal also had a ride lined up driving for good friend, George Barringer. But, after some last minute shuffling, Barringer decided to drive himself, leaving Hal on the sidelines. During the race, a crash occurred and both George Robson and George Barringer perished. Shortly afterward, Paul Weirick contacted Hal and asked if he would like to run "Poison Lil" in George's honor. Hal nearly lapped the field and won the Midwest regional event at Dayton. Hal always liked the high speed of "The Hills."

At Salem in 1947, Travis "Spider" Webb was on the pole and Hal started right behind him. Hal's good friend, "Duke" Dinsmoor, was positioned on the outside front row. Spider told Hal, "I am going to bring them down fast, so tuck right in behind me and we'll hang Duke on the outside." When Duke turned down, he hit Hal, who began flipping into turn one. Robson was seriously injured and not expected to live. But, after months of healing, he returned to racing.

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Hal's younger brother, Jimmie, also took up racing, but a crash with severe injuries at Oakland ended his driving career. In 1955, Hal finished third at Pomona, parked the car and finally said, "Enough is enough." Robson spoke of the many friends he lost in racing and that he respected anyone who drove a sprint car. A diminutive man, Hal was just 5'4", weighed 145 lbs, and was able to fit into any car. At the age of 80, Robson was subjected to a battery of x-rays. When asked if there was any bones that he hadn't broken, Hal responded, "Probably not!"

Hal and his wife Kay were married for 56 years and resided in the Lake Havasu area for 30 years. Hal passed away in Needles, California, at the age of 84 on July 2, 1996, and Kay lived to age 93. They had two sons, Dee and Lee, along with three grandsons, Brian, Chris and Chase. In retirement, Robson would frequently visit with Sam Hanks, George Connor, "Spider" Webb and Howard Keplar. He valued his friends as much as his memories, and often said he had a great life and had been very lucky.

*By Norm Bogan
Photo Credit: Lee Robson Collection*