

JIM CULBERT

by Justin Zoch

The son of an accountant, James Culbert grew up in Southern California in the 1920s, a decade driven mad by rampant social progress and tremendous technological advancement. World War I was over and the nation was booming. The automobile industry was taking off and racing these new machines gripped the nation. Impressionable young men like Jim Culbert were aesthetically drawn to the beauty of the sprint cars and magnetically drawn to the thrill created by driving them fast.

"I was crazy about cars ever since I was a little kid," Culbert said. I raced down at Balboa Stadium when I was 15 years old. I started really young. I passed for 21 because I was 6'2" and over 200 pounds. They just thought that I was 21."

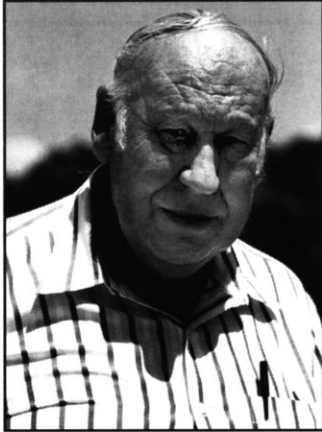
Culbert's expertise, however, rested in his craftsmanship. "I was building my own cars back then because no one else was doing it. If you wanted a car, you had to build it."

Culbert keenly checked over the other chassis running at the time and set out to craft his own. "As time went on, I put some of my own ideas into them. The main thing with the cars back then was to make them handle. To do that, you had to make the frames as rigid as possible."

Culbert used slightly thicker wall tubing from the local steel factory to achieve the most rigidity possible. Working out of his own garage, Culbert welded up the frames for his racers and manufactured all the parts he needed to continue his hobby.

As he neared his twenties, Culbert was getting set to take his business to the next level and begin manufacturing products for other racers on a grander scale. Then the war came calling. "I raced clear up and until I received a penny post card that said, 'Greetings, your friends and neighbors have chosen you to join military service.'

Following a four-year tour of duty in Germany, Culbert returned to San Diego, anxious to get reacquainted to the world of racing. Soon after his return stateside in the mid-1940s, Culbert opened the doors to Culbert Automotive Engineering (CAE), an auto racing superstore that would provide parts and products for the next several decades. And his cars and car kits were some of the first "store bought" super-modifieds and super-sprint cars in existence.



Bill Taylor Photo

"I just loved it. We had a 10,000-square-foot garage and we just made everything you could think of. We made everything. We made rear ends, torsion bars, in-out boxes, bushings and everything you could think of. We even made the race cars," Culbert said.

CAE's innovative quick-change rear-ends and front suspension systems were used on dragsters and sprint cars. Culbert continued to build the business throughout the 1950s and '60s while he continued to race himself. CAE eventually employed up to 30 people at a time and was a million-dollar-a-year business at its peak. He estimates that he produced over 400 race cars in his lifetime, each of which took about a week to produce. He enjoyed the success and traveled throughout the world, including Canada, Australia and South Africa, racing and watching his products make others successful. In fact, he is to South African sprint car racing what Bob Trostle is to the sport in Australia.

One of those products that he manufactured was an in/out box with a clutch drive. "We sold those things by the thousands. I thought there was a necessity for them and there was. We sent them out by the hundreds, all over the world," Culbert said. "They worked good and were good looking, too. It was a very complex setup that allowed it to have a clutch, as well as the in/out."

Over the years that he was involved in racing, Culbert knew almost every significant American open wheel racing driver in the middle part of the Twentieth Century. "I never really ran around with any of those guys, but I certainly knew all of those guys," said Culbert.

Culbert sold his business off in the late 1980s to a handful of employees, who went bankrupt shortly thereafter. "That was the only bad thing that happened to me. I sold it to them and they immediately went broke. It was really disappointing to me," Culbert said.

Culbert continues his love affair with cars and continues to not just restore automobiles, but to manufacture roadsters and other racers in his garage. He lived life his own way, only being employed briefly by an airline, and ran his own business for most of his life.