



Harry Hosterman

by Larry Ball, Jr.

Harry Leo "Hal" Hosterman was born in Haines, in the mountains of Centre County, Pennsylvania, on January 23, 1894. Hal was the first of two sons of lumberman Theodore Hosterman and his wife Hermina Young. When Hal was seven, his father moved the family to a promising lumber site in Pocahontas County, West Virginia.

There wasn't a lot for a young boy to do in this wooded wilderness. Hal, however, wasn't like most boys. He spent his time wondering and tinkering. Mostly tinkering. Mostly with steam power. As a boy he would build everything from a steam "cannon" made by sealing water-filled lengths of pipe and throwing them into a fire to a workable steam engine with a cast babbitt-metal cylinder and a broom handle piston.

Formal schooling didn't hold much interest for Hal. He and friends had gotten into the habit of wandering off from school every time there was a test. By the second year of high school, his schooling ended. Around this time, 15 year-old Hal and his family moved to Leadsville, just north of Elkins, West Virginia. There, he set up and ran the projector in the town's new nickelodeon because he was the only person who could figure out how to make it work.

Shortly thereafter, he took a job repairing motorcycle engines. This began his fascination with the gasoline engine. His skill as a mechanic grew, and it eventually resulted in an opportunity to earn \$40.00 a month as a chauffeur. There was only one problem; he had no idea how to drive a car. He decided to hide this fact from his employer, and spent the first few hours of employment under the car pretending to grease and adjust things. Actually, he was figuring out how to make it go. He spent some time rolling in and out of the garage before practicing in a nearby field. On his way back, he picked up his employer who was impressed with his driving ability. His employer would never learn the truth that it was Hal's first day behind the wheel.

In 1913, he took another chauffeur job in Parkersburg. The main reason he took this job was so he could court Maude Beck, a girl he had met in Elkins. They were married on December 31, 1914, and ultimately would have four children (Harry Jr., Earl, Barbara and Betty). In March of 1915, he made application for a patent for

what he called a "Tire Holding Rim for Wheels." Basically, it was a primitive bead-lock. He received his patent in December of 1915.

He would work a series of jobs until meeting a recruiter with the B.F. Goodrich Company. By 1916, he was headed to Akron. He worked at B.F. Goodrich for two weeks at 35 cents an hour before deciding he couldn't make ends meet. From there, he found a machinist job at Wellman-Sever-Morgan. Then he took a job repairing trucks and plant equipment for Universal Cleaning.

By 1921, Hal and his brother Stuart (or Stewart) had opened a garage in Akron. The plan was that they would take part in a joint venture with another company to produce his higher-compression Model T overhead cam heads. The venture lasted through most of 1922. Unfortunately, in error, Hal was committed in one huge contract to deliver more heads in thirty days than he could produce in a year. The business folded. Even worse, he lost control of his patent.

Not one to be discouraged, Hal designed a new head for the Model T that would use ball bearings in tubes instead of rocker arms. Known as the Akron F-head, he obtained a new patent, and produced a

few thousand of the new type heads. They soon found their way onto T-powered racers.

By 1928, the Model A had arrived. Hal began tinkering. He almost blew up his garage trying to use liquid oxygen to supercharge one in spurts. He continued to tinker. Eventually, he developed the dual overhead cam head that would become a common sight on dirt tracks all over the country. With the advent of the V-8, Hal began building his own block, connecting rods, cast aluminum oil pan, and 5-main bearing crankshaft. This later endeavor was necessary because the power output exceeded the Ford lower-end capabilities. One thing that made the Hal appealing was cost. The D.O. Hal could be purchased at a quarter the cost of Miller and Offenhauser equipment.

Deb Snyder drove his first "big car" race in 1932 driving a D.O. Hal. In 1941, Tony Bettenhausen wheeled the Hal-powered Iddings Special to second place in the Midwest American Automobile Association (AAA) stand-



Photo Credit: Hosterman Family Collection

ings. In 1946, Carl Scarborough drove the "Jewel Hal" to the Central States Racing Association (CSRA) championship. Frank Luptow drove the Ioviti D.O. Hal to his first International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) "big car" victory on August 18, 1946, at Davenport, Iowa. In 1948, Luptow drove a Hal-powered "big car" to IMCA victories at Lebanon (Ohio), Eldon (Iowa), Danville (Illinois), Nashville, Tampa (both Plant Field and Speedway Park), and Birmingham. Ultimately, Luptow would end the 1948 season fifth in IMCA points behind Emory Collins, Deb Snyder, Jimmy Wilburn, and Wally Stokes. In 1953, Nick Valenta drove a Hal two-cammer to the California Racing Association (CRA) championship, quite late considering they were competing against large flathead V8s and Offies. This was on a Model B block with new Model C crankshafts being installed after every race over 100 miles.

Hal-powered "big cars" won countless races all over the country well into the 1950s. One of the last Hal-powered cars to compete successfully against the more expensive Offenhausers was a Hillegass car owned by Charlie Sacks. Eddie Sachs built his reputation in this car. Len Duncan was a consistent top-five finisher on the eastern sprint car circuit when he occupied the seat. The success of the car was such that it became known as the "Offy Killer" to the fans of eastern racing.

Back in Akron, Hal never stopped tinkering. In the late 1950s, he worked on developing a single-valve cylinder for better valve cooling. He even played with an idea for a small steam engine intended to be a low-noise, easy-to-operate power plant for lawnmowers. Into the 1960s, semi-retirement didn't slow him down. He spent half his nights at the shop working out ideas.

Harry Leo "Hal" Hosterman passed away on May 31, 1962, in Akron, Ohio.



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