

A. Earl Padgett

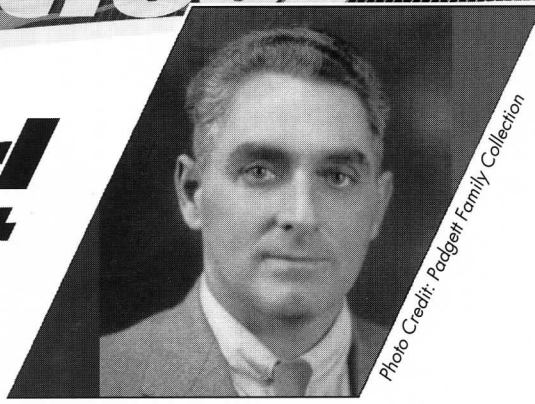


Photo Credit: Padgett Family Collection

by Tom Williams

Albert Earl Padgett, the builder and owner of Jungle Park Speedway, was born June 12, 1889, on a farm in Boone, about ten miles east of Lebanon, Indiana. He was the son of Columbus and Sarah Padgett, and the youngest of six children (Shelby, Pearl, Anson, Elsie, Joel and Albert Earl). Early in life Earl found that he was not fond of the farm routine; preferring instead to design and build things that improved the lives of his fellow citizens. This remained the theme of his long and very productive life.

Married to Anna Katherine Burns at age eighteen on October 17, 1908, he became a father and widower at nineteen. Earl's young wife died on January 5, 1910, from complications soon after the birth of son, Charles Keith, on December 22, 1909. On November 3, 1912, Earl Padgett married Bertha Martin.

As a young man, Earl was in tune with the coming of the transportation age. He manufactured and sold automobile headlamps, as many cars weren't factory equipped with lights. He invented a device to pull tank treads back together so they could be connected while serving in the U.S. Army in World War I. He also served as an airplane mechanic during wartime. Sadly, a hunting accident while he was on leave cost him his left leg, below the knee.

Following the war he gave farming another try; then became a train conductor on the Lebanon-to-Indianapolis interurban line. He opened an auto repair garage in Lebanon at the same time. Earl spent several years during the twenties building and operating independent electrical power distribution systems for Whitestown and Fillmore. After moving to Parke County he did the same for Bloomingdale, Bellmore, Hollandsburg, Neysville, and for Turkey Run State Park. He ran telephone lines to several of these towns during the same period. Partnering with son Keith, he built and operated electrical distribution facilities in several other southern Indiana communities.

Padgett was 36 when he built Jungle Park, with assistance from Frank Funk. His son described the 72 acres of land just west of Turkey Run State Park as "a jungle". Earl had long dreamed of building a park; hence the name Jungle Park. He constructed the speedway and a small gas station on a dusty, back-country Indiana road, eight miles north of Rockville, Indiana. Terre Haute, the closest town of any size, was over thirty miles away. One

former employee said, "Earl had a lot of nerve to do what he did. He put in a lot of time and spent a lot of money before he ever made a dime."

Coincident with the 1926 construction of Jungle Park, the U.S. government started numbering roads systematically for the first time. The Jungle Park complex on the lonely dirt road became an early occupant of the newly numbered U.S. 41; one of the first concrete roads in the state of Indiana. Earl knew the new highway would bring fans from Chicago and Evansville to fill his 3500 seat grandstand. Because the speedway was sandwiched between a sweeping bend in Sugar Creek, a large shale hill and the new highway, the track took on some unusual characteristics. The backstretch where cars could reach nearly 100 miles per hour was carved out just fifty-five feet from the creek. The third and fourth turns were just twenty-five feet from the edge of U.S. 41. Large trees grew close enough to the track to cast shadows on the racing surface. There were no guardrails. The home-stretch included an elevation drop of twelve feet from the grandstand to the first turn. The five-section wooden grandstand stepped down the declining front stretch and formed the most recognizable bleachers racing has ever known.

Padgett built up his Jungle Park complex to include a hotel, several guest cabins, a restaurant and a home for his family. For several years he operated a silver fox ranch on the property.

His considerable experience in electrical construction led him to install lights in 1930; making Jungle Park the first track in the Midwest to offer night racing. He felt that lights would put his track in a position not easily copied by other tracks in the vicinity. Padgett typically turned over the day-to-day operations and racing promotion to race professionals. Jungle Park promoters like Earl Parker, Lige Bolin, John Griffith, Frank Funk and Dan Sheek all spent time at Padgett's track. Sanctioning organizations included the Wabash Valley Racing Association, the Indianapolis Racing Association, the Central States Racing Association (CSRA), the American Automobile Association (AAA), Funk's Midwest Circuit and the Midwest Dirt Track Racing Association (MDTRA), also known as "the Kerosene Circuit."

Starting with the first race on July 5, 1926, Jungle Park offered good competition with generous purses and attracted the best of the best. During the '20s, '30s, and '40s, Jungle Park races included Ira Hall, Billy McCoy, John Gerber, Sherman "Red" Campbell, Mark Billman, Howard Samuel "Howdy" Wilcox, Bob Carey, Harry McQuinn, Mauri Rose, "Wild Bill" Cummings, Cavino "Kelly" Petillo, Charles "Dutch" Baumann, Louis Schneider, Emil Andres, Rex Mays, Everett Saylor, Morris Musick, Joie Chitwood, Jimmy Wilburn and many other drivers known throughout the speed world.

On September 8, 1931, tragedy struck the Padgetts as Earl and Bertha were involved in a serious auto accident. Earl suffered permanent hip injuries in the highway accident; shortly thereafter, Bertha filed for divorce. In 1935, Albert Earl Padgett married Georgia Ellen Coverdale and that union produced two more sons, George Earl and Spencer.

In 1942, the Federal government decreed that racing had to stop because it interfered with the conduct of World War II. Padgett leased the Jungle Park complex to Dan Sheek of Greenwood, Indiana. Through the end of the war, both the Padgett and Sheek families lived on the Jungle Park property. They managed to keep the track in good enough repair that racing resumed within three weeks of the war's end - one of the few tracks to do so.

Earl Padgett sold Jungle Park in 1946. The family relocated to Pompano Beach, Florida, for the health of oldest son Keith. Once there, Earl purchased a half-city-block, where he built a small hospital and offices for several doctors. Sometime later, the ever entrepreneurial Padgett bought and operated an orange grove on the road that would eventually lead to Disney World.

A. Earl Padgett died in Saint Cloud, Florida, on February 12, 1971.

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