



by L.E. Armstrong & Michigan Motor Sports Hall of Fame

W.H. "Bill" Vandewater



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Willis Henry "Bill" Vandewater was born on May 18, 1904, in Holland, Michigan, to John and Bertha Vandewater. He had two sisters, Geneva Ruth (DeBlaey) and Hermina (Lappinga). As a teenager, the Vandewater family moved to the south side of Chicago.

Bill was a son of a Protestant missionary, and, like most kids, he loved auto racing. Roby Speedway in Indiana was the place to race, with such names as Sonny Talamont, Charles "Dutch" Baumann, Leslie "Bugs" Allen, Harry Nichols, Harry M. Lewis and Billy Rupp. Richard William "Billy" Arnold was his racing idol from the neighborhood and young Vandewater would help "stooge" on his race car. If he was "too young" to legally enter the pits, the youngster would sneak his way in just to see the races.

"Van" or "Vandy," as he was often called, started officiating in 1933 at the Roby Speedway in Indiana and the Chicago Armory in Illinois for the American Automobile Association (AAA), back when Al Fay was the sanctioning body's zone supervisor.

In 1937, he worked the midget car races at the Wisconsin State Fair Park Coliseum in West Allis. Later that year, he worked his first 100-mile championship car races at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Springfield, Illinois. He became AAA zone supervisor for the Chicago-Mississippi Valley Circuit in 1948.

Also, after about six years as an observer at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, he became assistant starter to Seth Klein in '48, working down on the infield side of the track. In 1954, he was appointed official

starter for the Indy 500 event. He was the official starter of the "500" until '61, when he retired.

Vandewater would start three midget programs at the 16th Street Speedway on the night before the "500." The three complete shows were at 2:30, 7:30 and 10:30 p.m., respectively, with the finale ending around 1:30 a.m. Then he would be at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway about 6 a.m. to get ready to serve as starter for the 500-mile race.

As of 1951, Vandewater, the AAA Contest Board's number one starter, had started more than 2,700 race meets. Included in that list were such prestigious events as the Mobilgas Economy Run, AAA Championship Trail, and AAA stock car, sprint car and midget car events. In 1956, the United States Auto Club (USAC) took over for the American Automobile Association (AAA). A partial list of tracks where Vandewater flagged races are: Chicago, IL; Springfield, IL; Milwaukee, WI; St. Louis, MO; Indianapolis, IN; Detroit, MI; Syracuse, NY; Langhorne, PA; Darlington, SC; Cedar Rapids, IA; plus Farmer City, Soldiers Field, Fairbury, Thawville, Peoria, Springfield, Starved Rock and Cahokia in Illinois; Grand Rapids, Lansing, Sister Lakes in Michigan; South Bend, Lafayette, Kokomo, Salem, and Terre Haute in Indiana; Louisville, Kentucky; Cincinnati and Cleveland in Ohio; and even New London-Waterford in Connecticut.

Bill loved to do the 'Ascot cross-over' start with a full field of cars starting the feature event, while standing in the middle of the track. A tall, dark and handsome man, Vandewater was called "the fashion plate starter" by *Speed Age Magazine*. Always dressed in a sport coat and slacks, Bill did a grand job in one of the most important aspects of a racing event and he was truly an asset to the sport of auto racing. And, as was typical back then, a slightly superstitious Vandewater didn't wear green and didn't eat peanuts. In fact, back when he was stooging, he didn't even shave the day of the race.

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Bill Vandewater had cancer surgery in the summer of 1961 and died in Chicago on January 26, 1962, at the age 57. He is buried in the Mount Hope Cemetery in suburban Worth, Illinois. He was predeceased by his wife Gladys. W.H. "Bill" Vandewater was inducted into the Michigan Motor Sports Hall of Fame in 1987 and the National Midget Auto Racing Hall of Fame in 1992.



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