

national sprint car hall of fame



EDD SHEPPARD

BY BILL BLUMER JR.

Edward David "Edd" Sheppard was born on April 29, 1909, in Worthington, Indiana, to William and Elizabeth Sheppard. His siblings included Ethel and Thursa.

When Sheppard was about 16, he traveled by horseback to check out his first automobile race. It was at Jungle Park in Rockville, Indiana. From that day on, he was hooked on the sport. In the coming years, he was known to hitchhike to a race if his steed was not available.

Four years later, on June 7, 1930, Sheppard married L. Belle Stierwalt. They had three children, Kenneth Eugene (Gene), Phyllis Rose and Edward Leo (Eddie). They were later blessed with eight grandchildren.

Sheppard regularly attended events put on by Shag Burroughs, who had once advised him there was money to be made in promoting auto racing. The wheels in Sheppard's mind started to turn but it took his youngest son, Eddie, to really put the plan in motion. In 1952, while doing chores on the farm the family had, Eddie suggested a plot of land the family was working would be a great place to start a racetrack. Two years later, the gates opened to Paragon Speedway and in the coming seasons it became a 3/8-mile clay oval to be envied.

The track was nestled in a natural bowl, where fans enjoyed the action from a neatly trimmed grassy hillside, with wooden planks for seating. How that grass and the vegetation was kept trim is part of Paragon's mystique and Sheppard's resourcefulness. As the family was still working their adjacent farm, they had an abundance natural lawn mowers and during the week their cows would graze the parking areas, while the goats would get the tighter quarters around poles and between the bleachers. A couple of days before the crowds came, the herd would be shooed across the road to another pasture.

As for the structures, the control tower was considered state-of-the-art for its day. Fans, and at least one female editor, spoke with no hint of sarcasm about the speedway's indoor plumbing and the cleanliness of its facilities.

For many years, while the speedway was in operation, Edd Sheppard still maintained his day job as a steam fitter at Camp Atterbury. Along with those duties, plus the farm, he still took on more. When the track needed a wrecker, he

bought one, but also started a tow business. He did likewise with a dump truck. Family lore has it that Edd would drive the dump truck to the local quarry where, for a fifth of Old Grand-Dad whiskey, they would load him up with all the goopy clay he needed to keep his track in top shape.

As a promoter, Sheppard was not afraid to take chances or 'go big.' In 1962, he started the Midwest National Championship race. He offered \$1,000 to win the 125-lap race. It was a big enough deal to draw the top drivers, as Sheppard expected it would. In the end, it was Kansas City's Greg Weld that took home the cash. The event has been a staple on the sprint car trail for years and was actually lengthened to 150 laps in 1966 in honor of Indiana's 150th year of statehood.

Sheppard teamed with Tony Hulman to promote high-dollar, "run what you brung" races at Terre Haute, Indiana. Huge crowds and a great field were the norm. With national television coverage on hand, he once had Eddie fly drivers into the infield with a small plane for interviews. At Paragon in the 1960's, a local article mentioned that fans were entertained at intermission with a subject Sheppard employed to parachute into the infield.

Believing in the power of the media, Sheppard knew the value of 'stirring the drink.' After an evening when a driver such as Bob Kinser was spun out and jumped from his car to get the attention of the offending driver, Sheppard was on the phone telling the media what happened and ending the conversation with, "Folks better get out here next week. Who knows what's going to happen between those two?!"

Sheppard was instrumental for many years with the South Central Indiana Racing Association (SCIRA). In 1968, that changed when the group wanted Paragon to switch from Saturdays to Fridays to accommodate another track. Seeing no financial gain in the switch, Sheppard held pat and both suffered initially with low car counts. Sheppard then started to lure drivers from Illinois with tow money. Soon he had his numbers back where he wanted them and won the Saturday night battle between tracks.

"The Boss," is what Sheppard's drivers called him. He was loved and respected by them and enjoyed their camaraderie. On race nights during the month of May, he could be found holding court on top of the hill, Camel cigarette

dangling from his mouth, with the likes of Jim Hurtubise and Jim McElreath in audience. He was also known to slip a driver \$20 beyond their normal payout as a token of his appreciation.

After the races, Sheppard threw a fish fry. In conducting such an event, he would net a bunch of fish earlier in the week from the local river. They were then kept fresh in the farm's horse troughs until they could be cleaned and cooked on race day. Everyone in the pit area was welcome to partake.

As the years went on, Sheppard's family all seemed to have a hand in the track. If Edd was the captain, then Belle was his first mate. Eddie was heavily involved and is the reason for the extra "d" in the elder Sheppard's name. To end any confusion with the mail they received, the extra letter was added to differentiate the two.

Paragon is the place where the Kinser's and Dick Gaines cut their teeth. Some have said that if it were not for Sheppard, the entire landscape of sprint car racing might look different today.

With his health failing, he passed on some wisdom to his family, as they prepared to carry on the Paragon tradition without him, "Whatever you do, take care of Bob Kinser and Larry Miller. Those two alone are worth 400 tickets."

Edd Sheppard passed away on December 8, 1971, in Indianapolis and he is buried today in his beloved Paragon, Indiana. His family ran Paragon Speedway through Easter Sunday of 1977. As a credit to what he meant to sprint car racing and a foretaste of things to come, Edd Sheppard's pallbearers were Sheldon Kinser, Bob Kinser, Dick Gaines, Rex Mitchell, Gene Henson and Frank Hollingsworth.



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