

# national sprint car hall of fame

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## Garnant

by Larry L. Ball, Jr.

Oscar Dwain "Red" Garnant was born May 12, 1904. The youngest of four brothers, he was raised on a farm near Ely, Iowa. Of the four boys born to J.P. and Addie Garnant, three would leave Iowa and make their way to California. Of those three, two would make their way into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame. The eldest son, 1999 inductee Russ Garnant, was the first to head for California. In the early 1920s, the youngest, Oscar, known as "Red" due to his red hair as a child, would also head west. Unlike Russ however, Red didn't head for California. He would spend a few years in Portland, Oregon, working in a bank before heading to southern California in 1926 to join his brother. Upon his arrival in southern California, Red began to learn the mechanics of the Big Cars owned by his brother.

In 1929, Russ acquired what became known as the Simplex Piston Ring Special. Suddenly, Red was wrenching one of the top rides at Legion Ascot. In 1929 alone, he worked with some of the top drivers of the era. The drivers that year were W.H. "Stubby" Stubblefield, Mel McKee, and eventual AAA Pacific Coast Southwest champion Mel Kenealy. The Garnants' mechanical abilities became very apparent when 1929 saw the "Fronty" or Cragar powered car reel off 13 wins at Legion Ascot. Even more impressive, of the 13 wins, Kenealy won seven in a row!

In 1930, the "Simplex Piston Ring Special" was no more. The car was now the "Gabhart Special" with "Stubby" Stubblefield in the seat. By May 11, however, a change was made. Jimmy Sharp was behind the wheel, and eventually reeled off eight straight race wins before breaking his arm in a crash at Bakersfield. With Sharp out of the car, Stubblefield and H.W. "Speed" Hinkley both spent time in the car. Eventually, Hall of Famer Francis Quinn took over the ride. Jimmy Sharp attempted to return to the car, but many thought it was too soon. He crashed to his death in the 'Sparks & Weirick Special' at his next race at Oakland. Quinn had started the season in his own "Dayton Thorobred Special" but ended it in the "Gabhart Special". With Sharp's death, Quinn was named the permanent driver. In the Cragar powered "Gabhart Special", Quinn would become the "Speed King" at the most famous dirt track in the country. By the end of the season, Quinn was AAA Pacific Southwest champion, and Red was a Pacific Southwest championship mechanic. To give this accomplishment some perspective, consider what three-time Indy 500 winner Wilbur Shaw once said, "To win the Pacific Southwest championship is tougher

than the National title because the competition is so fierce. Never in my racing days had I seen anything like this."

In 1931, Quinn returned to the Russ and Red Garnant wrenched "Gabhart Special." This car had originally been Johnny Vance's "Red Pete Special." Still using Cragar power, Quinn agreed to drive until his own Miller powered "Francis Quinn Special" was ready. Mel McKee and Carl Ryder also saw time in the car. Russ Garnant was one of the last owners to give up on the Cragar and go with the more powerful Millers. In 1930 and 1931, the Garnants found that they could compete with the Millers by making use of the Cragar's power without over-revving the engine. They did, however, replace the crank and rods after almost every race. Red was kept busy. They would win eight features at Legion Ascot in 1931. Quinn would grab six wins and McKee and Ryder each picked up one.

The next two seasons would be a lean time for the Garnants. Although they were still making money, they weren't winning races like before. The fact of the matter was that the Cragar was no match for the Millers. During this time, however, Red was still working with quality drivers. He wrenching for Carl Ryder, Herb Balmer, Floyd Roberts, and Harris Insinger.

In late 1932, Russ bought the "Bill White Miller", which had been driven by Ernie Triplett. The Garnants campaigned this car in 1933 as the #10 Miller with Carl Ryder and Herb Balmer both seeing time in the car. It doesn't seem that this car was raced much. It appears that the Garnants were still campaigning the Cragar in the events of the new "Class B" Championship for production derived engines. In fact, when AAA introduced the 205 c.i. capacity limit for "Class A" cars in 1934, they ran the Cragar as the primary car. By the end of the 1934 Pacific Coast championship season, the Garnant car had won a second owner's championship. Rex Mays won the driver's title in another Ford.

By 1935, the old Vance car was sold, and Harris Insinger drove the Miller as the #12 "Garnant". Red and Russ seemed to figure out the difficult-to-maintain Miller and the problems experienced in 1933 were not repeated. During a Pacific Coast Championship that was dominated by Rex Mays in the Sparks-Weirick car, Insinger was able to pick up three wins at Legion Ascot. Unfortunately, Harris Insinger would crash to his death at Oakland in September.

Red and Russ had the Miller ready again for 1936 with Floyd Roberts behind the wheel. On January 5, 1936, in a preview for what would turn out to be the last "big car" race at Legion Ascot, the Los Angeles Times reported, "Floyd Roberts will defy a jinx when he rides today in the cockpit of Russ Garnant's Glendare creation. The car is the one which Harris Insinger met death at Oakland." Roberts did defy the jinx, and picked up the win. Approximately three weeks later, racing at Legion Ascot would cease.

With the closing of Ascot, Red could have called it a career, but he decided to leave his big brother, and go on the road with Joel Thorne and his multi-car team. Red would wrench for both Thorne and George Connor during this time. As a result of this new opportunity, Red became a mechanic on the National Championship trail. During this time, he would also become an Indy 500 riding mechanic. In 1936, riding with George Connor, he started in the middle of the second row. In 1937, he made a trip back to his boyhood home. The AAA had scheduled a race at Frontier Park (later known as Hawkeye Downs) in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. In qualifying, George Connor would drive the Red Garnant wrenched Miller to a new track record. Connor would run third in the feature.

In 1941, Red wrenching a car for Thorne in what ended up being a very competitive run at Pike's Peak. Red would continue wrenching race cars for Thorne until the war would bring an end to racing in 1942. During the war, Red worked for Thorne Engineering. After the war, Red didn't go back to racing. He would later get into plastics as a design machinist. In the 1950s, he made molds for a company called Wham-O. In fact, Red would go on to build the original molds for both the Hula-Hoop and the Frisbee.

Red's racing career had ended by the time he married his wife Grace in 1950. He would become a father at 49 (Jonathon), and again at 50 (Julie). Oscar Dwain "Red" Garnant died on January 25, 1991. He is buried in Cedar Memorial Park, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



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