

Walter William “W. W.” Bowen

Walter William “W. W.” Bowen was born September 27, 1895 at What Cheer, Iowa, the youngest of three sons born to a blacksmith named William Walter Bowen, and his wife, Mary C. “Mollie” (Dixon) Bowen.

In 1917, W. W. Bowen was residing at Bureau, Illinois where he was working as a night cashier for the *J. J. Grier Hotel Company*. By the early 1920s, he had a job assisting I.M.C.A. promoters at some of the smaller Midwestern state fair auto races. By 1926, he and a brother, who was then going by the name “Don C. Onley” of Los Angeles, California, formed the new company named *Bowen & Onley* and set up its headquarters in “Mrs. Johnson’s Rooming House” which was a boarding house near an auto parts store in San Antonio, Texas. “Don C. Onley” was the primary on-site



representative of the company while W. W. Bowen mostly took care of the paperwork and kept the books. “Don C. Onley” was an alias being used by an older brother of W. W. Bowen but his real name was Floyd Matthew Bowen. Onley had been in California working at the new *Legion Ascot Speedway* as an official with I.M.C.A. before he and his brother formed their own race promotion company.

By 1926, *Bowen & Onley* was promoting non-sanctioned "outlaw" auto races mostly at county fairs in Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas although their schedule also included some larger venues such as the *Tulsa, Oklahoma fairgrounds* and the two-mile *Pleasanton Road Speedway* at San Antonio. Their popularity among contestants and fair boards alike appears to stem from assurances that *Bowen & Onley* races would not be hippodromes and that any local driver would be allowed to compete on an equal footing if they could come up with a car. The group promoted a lot of dates, sometimes several per week, and a number of mostly lesser known drivers followed the *Bowen & Onley* circuit.

John B. Gerber of Topeka, Kansas was one of the regular owner / drivers on that circuit in 1926 and, although there was no formal championship, Gerber won more features at *Bowen & Onley* races than any other driver that year. Gerber is quoted as saying of the experience, "The purses were not great but neither was the

competition... We made enough for road money and didn't disappoint the paying customers." The traveling group developed a lasting camaraderie and appear to have enjoyed the time they spent racing for *Bowen & Onley*.

By 1927, the operation had grown so large that the company split into two sections, both still headquartered in the San Antonio boarding house. *Bowen & Onley* promoted races from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and from Oklahoma to the Canadian border. A new division of the company promoted races in Texas under the name the *Texas Speedway Alliance* which listed its officers as being W. W. Bowen, President; J. F. "Jack" Hatton, Vice-President; and Don C. Onley, Secretary-Treasurer. This was also the first year that the organization, then going by the name *Bowen Auto Races*, promoted races sanctioned by A.A.A. at the Texas Cotton Palace in Waco, Texas.

The two sections continued to promote races in their respective areas through 1928 with *Bowen & Onley* adding dates at the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson.

In 1929, *Bowen & Onley* became *The Bowen Company of Auto Races* and Onley remained with the company although his name was removed from its title.

W. W. Bowen was married in 1930 in Kansas City, Missouri to Miss Zelma Irene White. One son, Walter Arlen "Bud" Bowen, was born to that union.

1931 found the company as one division again and known as the *Bowen Auto Racing Association*.

The Great Depression took its toll on the Bowens' promotional company. It did not survive and W. W. Bowen retired to Dallas, Texas. He did come out of retirement early in the 1940s and moved to California where he served as a publicity agent for his brother's *Onley Amusements & Sports Promotion*, writing newspaper copy about Onley promoted races and the people who participated in them. By 1947, W. W. Bowen was working as a projectionist in a movie theater in Springview, Nebraska.

W. W. Bowen suffered a heart attack in 1962 and he was seriously injured in an automobile accident at an intersection four miles south of Doniphan in Hall County, Nebraska on May 22, 1965. He was taken to a hospital in Hastings, Nebraska where he passed away. He is buried beside his wife and son in Parkview Cemetery at Hastings, Nebraska.

Don C. Onley continued to promote an occasional auto race as well as a few boxing matches and musical shows from Indiana to California under the name *Onley Amusements & Sports Promotion* until 1947 when he, too, stepped away from the sport and settled in Los Angeles. He eventually moved to Dallas, Texas where he passed away in 1960.