



Photo by: Kem Robertson Collection

# Melvin Slim Rutherford

by Kem Robertson

Melvin "Slim" Rutherford was born January 25, 1901, in Fellowsville, West Virginia. The Rutherford family moved about 15 miles to Grafton, where Melvin grew up. He left high school early and ended up working as a mechanic at a garage owned by Walter Cook. Walter became Slim's mentor and introduced him to automobile racing. Slim completed his first race car in 1922 and won his first race that year with an average speed of 58 miles per hour. Under the guidance of Cook but wielding a small budget, Slim learned to rely on his ingenuity and built a racing rocker arm head for his Model T Ford race car by welding machined steel and plate together. This process of self-reliance and developing racing hardware of his own design defined Slim Rutherford's 40 year racing career.

Slim met and married Bertha "Birdie" Brown in 1926 and the couple moved to Whiting, Indiana, in 1927 where Slim found work at Standard Oil as an electrician. It was not long before Slim began racing at the local tracks around the Chicago area. He drove a few times for Leo Krasek, but he

predominantly raced his own machines. He raced in IMCA, CSRA and competed in small independent promoted races. Rutherford slowly built a small machine shop in his basement to support his racing interest and working as a mechanic at nights after work.

By 1932, Slim owned his primary race car and two cars he used to fill race events to collect appearance money with drivers he could find locally he called "Tourist" drivers. As the race cars aged, he would sell one and replace it with a newer build. The Standard Oil plant in Whiting was the development facility for fuels. Slim maintained his bosses' automobiles and they helped Slim on his cylinder head and engine development allowing him access to the company flow benches and dynos and allowing him a little time off to go racing. While at Standard Oil, Slim took night classes for his high school diploma.

From 1927 to 1933 Slim primarily raced a Model T block, with an adapted a Single Overhead Cam SOHC on RAJO rocker arm head. By 1933, Slim's car had a SOHC and head of his own design with a Rutherford cast iron block that was a replacement for the stock Ford Model A/B blocks. Slim began to advertise his cylinder head locally and nationally around 1935. The head could be purchased as a rocker arm or as a chain drive SOHC.

By 1937, Slim developed a new Rutherford gear drive SOHC engine with a barrel crank case with a separate cast iron cylinder block and a new SOHC cylinder head. This 1937 engine would stay competitive till WWII and was always unique to Slim's race car always carrying the #62. The 1940 season was the height of his racing success with 39 races completed - he had 29 firsts, seven second

places and three third place finishes and won the Kentucky and Indiana Racing Association Championship.

Slim Rutherford enjoyed racing and was a local favorite around the south Chicago area around the Hammond racetrack. For a time prior to WWII, you could get into the Hammond track for free if you had a Slim Rutherford window sticker. Melvin "Slim" Rutherford always referred to himself as a "Hobby Racer" but his inventive engine and cylinder head designs, his car building skills, his ability to "make a few dollars here and there" maintaining other race cars and selling his old race cars as he updated, allowed him to be independently active in the sport of sprint car racing for 40 years without sponsors.

After World War II, Rutherford resumed racing with #62 and by 1947 Slim had an all-new Rutherford designed independent rear suspension with inboard brakes. Also, for the 1947 season, Slim built a new rail frame big car #63, with a modified Miller Marine and later converted the #63 car to a tube frame with a Rutherford SOHC GMC six. Slim built a second SOHC GMC six for Bob Cleberg in the early 1950s. Slim's last race as a driver was 1951 at the Tucson Rodeo Grounds. Slim had moved to Tucson, Arizona in 1950 because he had to retire from Standard Oil on recommendations from his doctor because Slim's lungs had been damaged in a fire at the Standard Oil plant. Slim campaigned the #62 and #63 as a car owner finally retiring himself and his cars from the sport in 1962.

Melvin "Slim" Rutherford passed away after a long illness February 19, 1986.