

THE FILTER QUEEN SPECIAL

The story of a race car that launched a career that led to a pair of Indy 500 wins and which is now in the hands of a currently active sprint car driver.

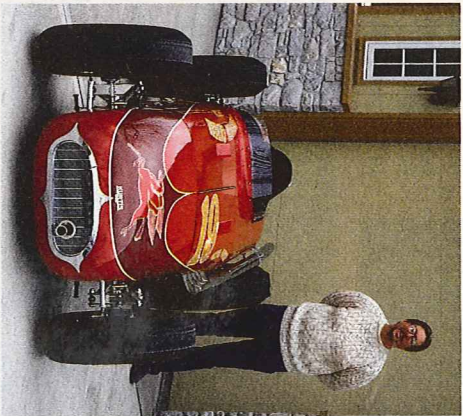
by Donald Davidson
color photography by Jack Gladback



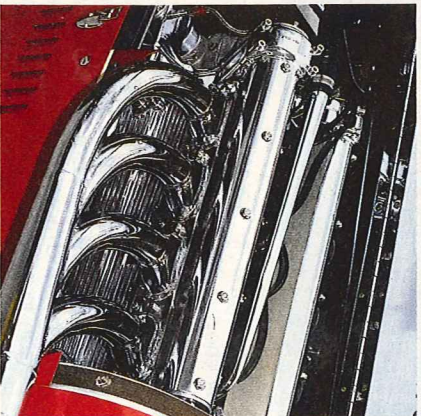
ON A BLEAK, overcast day in Indianapolis just before Christmas of 1987, former USAC Midget driver Chris Cumberworth proudly rolled out his latest handiwork from the confines of his garage.

At long last, the Filter Queen Special was done.

The sturdy Kurtis Kraft roadster had been through the mill during its 33 years of existence, but now, finally, after undergoing a restoration that had begun something like five years earlier, it appeared virtually as it had when eager Rodger Ward had climbed into it on the morning of the 1956 Indianapolis 500.



Restore Chris Cumberworth with the beautiful Kurtis-Kraft.



Ward went on to finish 8th in that race, hardly earth-shattering by some standards, but for him a pivotal point in a remarkable career punctuated up to that point by controversy. Skillful though he may have been, Ward's reputation for free-spirited, off-track couraging during the early 1950s had done little to endear him to the owners of the first-rate equipment.

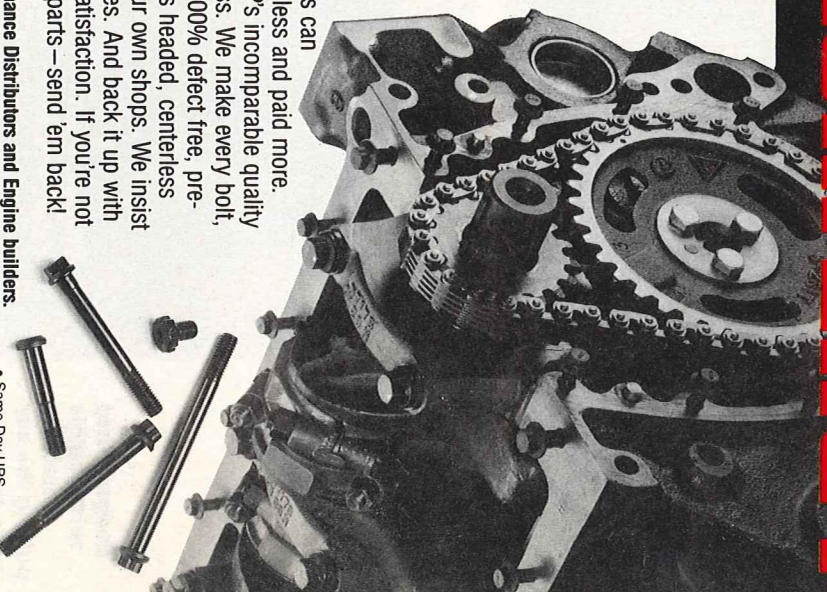
It got worse.

He bumped wheels with another car near the end of the annual 100-mile AAA National Championship dirt track race at DuQuoin, Illinois, in 1954, spinning around into the pits and snuffing out the life of the beloved Clay Smith, ▶

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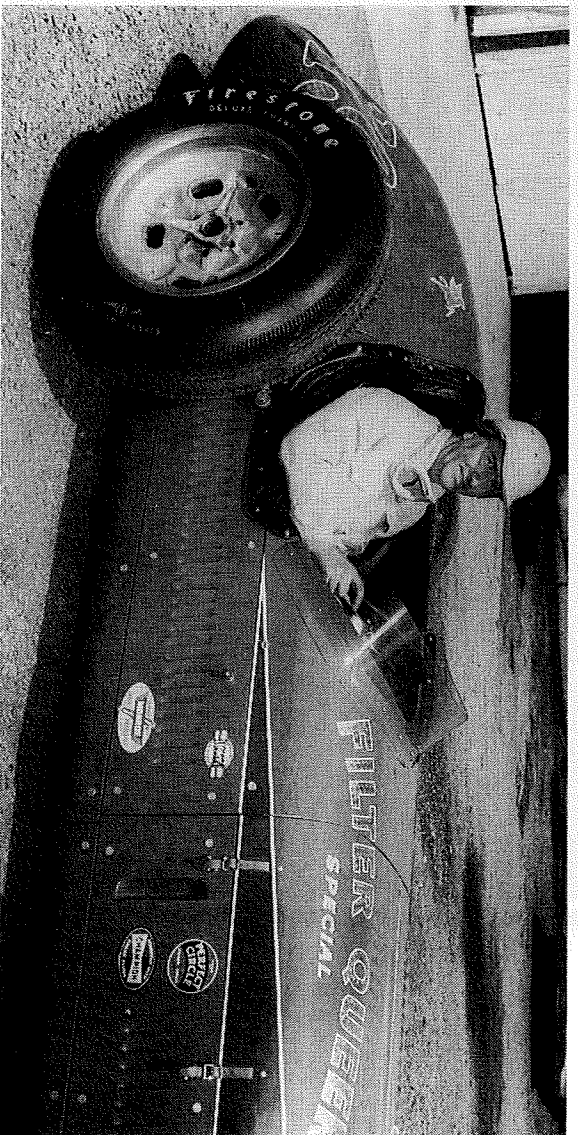
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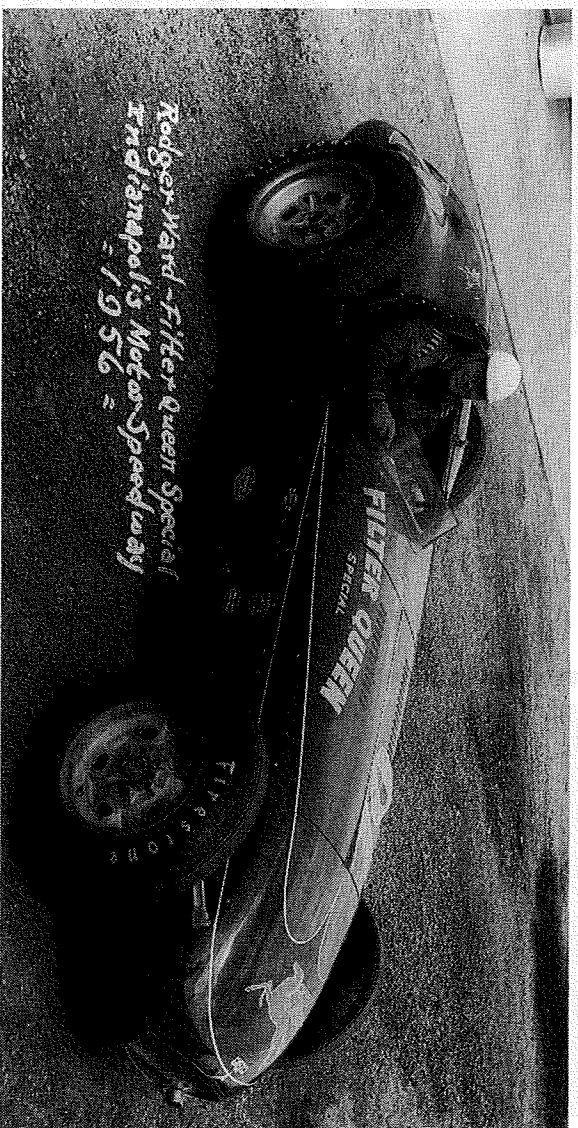
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In 1956, Nino Farina, a Ferrari factory Grand Prix driver, tried the Filter Queen car but failed to qualify at Indianapolis.



Rodger Ward salvaged his career by putting the car in the Indy 500 in '56 and going on to finish 6th.

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who was perhaps racing's best known mechanic at that time.

The blame fell almost universally on Ward's shoulders, and he feels to this day that it was his off-track reputation and general attitude that caused him to be targeted so freely. In fact, the Smith fatality played a lot more heavily on Ward than his outward demeanor revealed, and he was still dealing with it when a second, even more devastating blow occurred.

Driving the very car with which Troy Ruttman had won the Indianapolis 500 three years earlier, Ward had the front axle break as he was leaving turn two on his 54th lap of the 1955 race. He sideswiped the outer wall, climbed it with his right wheels and then continued on down the track, turning side over side while still torpedoling nose

forward through the air. Al Keller, taking evasive action, veered off into the grass only to come back onto the track and gouge into the side of Johnny Boyd, who flipped upside down. Next on the scene came the race leader and two-time defending winner, Bill Vukovich, who tried to go around the outside of Boyd's inverted, still-sliding car. Vukovich unavoidably clipped Boyd and was launched into a series of cartwheels, tumbling over the outer fence and ending up next to a row of parked cars and trucks. The car came to rest upside down with the great Vukovich still inside, a basal skull fracture being the cause of one of racing's most publicized and lamented fatalities.

That almost did it for Ward. A broken axle could have happened to anybody but the adversity brought on first by the Clay Smith accident and now the Bill Vukovich disaster just about led him to leaving auto racing completely. He knew he was good. He'd won the Championship races at Springfield

and Detroit in 1953, but he hadn't finished a 500 in five starts. And now this.

Observers noticed a marked change during the summer of '55, the result of a concentrated effort on his part to improve his hampered image. A somber and more controlled Rodger began to emerge, and this transition did not go unnoticed by the team of car owner Ed Walsh and his veteran crew chief, Harry Stephens. They decided to entrust their Kurtis roadster to Rodger for the 1955 500.

Thus, the 8th-place finish carries a little more significance than at first realized. Ward had finally completed the distance and he recalls — and several people have confirmed — that he was just as happy as if he had won. The tide was turned.

Three years later, Rodger would soar to the very top of his profession, signing with Leader Card Racers and going on to compile a phenomenal record which included two 500 wins and National Championship rankings of 1st,

2nd, 3rd, 1st, 2nd and 2nd in the six consecutive seasons between 1959 and 1964.

But what about the Filter Queen Special and the rest of its history?

Well, the car was in its third 500 when Ward drove it, but while most historians believe it to have been new in 1954, the possibility does exist that it may have been at the Speedway during practice a year earlier.

Ed Walsh, whose car ownership tenure lasted between 1938 and 1957 prior to his being appointed to head the Board of Police Commissioners for the city of St. Louis, entered two cars for the 1953 500, one of which was a dirt car shared by Sam Hanks and Duane Carter to 3rd place while the other was a brand-new roadster assigned to Cliff Griffith. No sooner had the track opened than Griffith, dressed only in stacks and a short-sleeved shirt, crashed heavily in turn one, sustaining burns from a subsequent fire.

The damaged chassis was returned to the Kurts-Kraft shop in Glendale, California during the summer of '53 with a view to seeing what could be salvaged, but no one seems sure exactly what may have happened to it! Was the frame used for Walsh's 1954 car? Did it become another 1954 car, or was it scrapped entirely? The mystery continues to this day.

One way or another Walsh expanded to a three-car stable for 1954. Hanks, now AAA National Champion, elected to stay with his third-place-finishing dirt car of 1953, with Eastern Sprint car champ Joe Sostilio coming on board to drive a second Bardahl-sponsored Walsh dirt car. A roadster, whether it be brand-new or the Griffith car rebuilt, was assigned to 1949 500 winner and three-time runner-up Bill Holland, who had returned to the AAA folds in 1953 after serving a two-year suspension.

The nattily dressed and ruggedly handsome Holland tended to be somewhat a loner, becoming rather easily miffed and sometimes voicing his opinion to his own undoing. There are those who feel his recently-completed suspension would have been for one year instead of two had he not chosen to defend himself at a hearing and criticize some of AAA's policies in the process.

Two-car teams were quite rare in the early 1950s, and three-car entries were even more so. Perhaps the Harry Stephens-supervised operation was spread a little thin, Hanks was doing OK in practice, but the dirt track-raised Joe Sostilio was having a bit of a tough time reaching a comfortable qualifying speed. Holland, with memories of four years of Lou Moore's "practice briefly, qualify-it-and-drive-it-in-the-race" procedure, began to feel he

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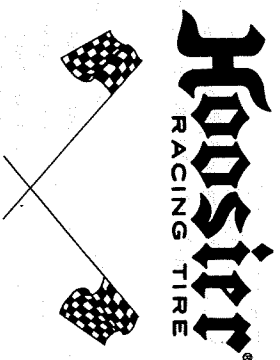
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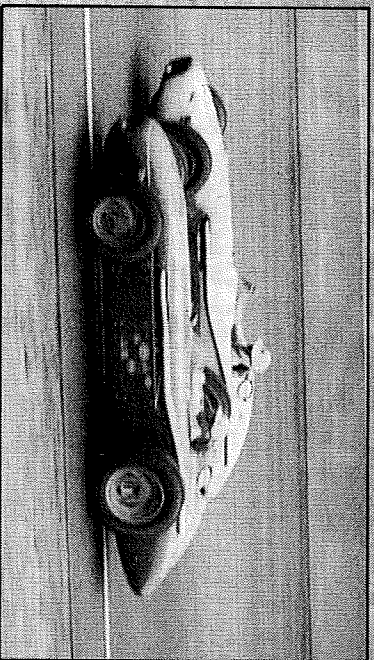


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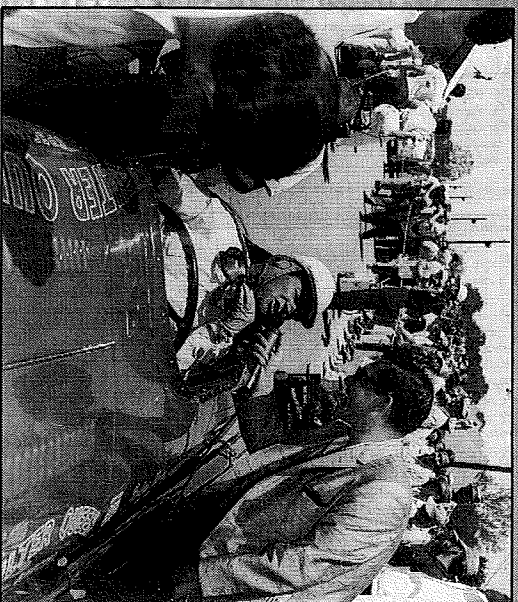
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(Overall) Rodger Ward roars out of his pit following service and returns to the bricks of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. (Above) Ward runs the inside in the Filter Queen car while Pat Flaherty runs the outside. Flaherty won the race. (Right) Ward is interviewed following qualifying for the '56 Indy 500.



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wasn't getting enough attention and there were rumors of disenchantment in the camp. It appeared that the bump speed might be up to 137 or 138, and Bill wasn't quite there.

The first qualifying weekend came to an end and only Hanks was in the race. Holland went to the line for the first time a little after 1:00 pm on day three, but Stephens had to wave him in after a three-lap average of a little better than 135.

Holland quit the team in disgust. The field was already full and "bumping" had begun before Walsh had a second car in the race. Jim Rathmann, knocked out of the lineup in the Granatelli Kurtis, test-hopped the ex-Holland Walsh roadster, found it to his liking and qualified at better than 138. Later in the day, Art Cross suffered the indignation of being bumped with

the same car he had driven to 2nd place a year earlier, then bounced back by qualifying the other Walsh dirt car, which had two strikes on it in the hands of Sostilio.

Rathmann, in the roadster, made a tremendous advance at the beginning, soaring all the way from 28th starting position to 13th at the end of ten laps and 8th at 20. Among those ahead of him was Cross in the dirt car.

At 100 miles, Jack McGrath was leading for Jack Hinkle, followed by the amazing Cross, Jimmy Daywalt in the Sumar roadster and Rathmann in 4th. Hanks, in the third Walsh entry, was 6th.

The sun was not as brutal as it had been in 1953, but the humidity was making the need for relief drivers just as popular. Rathmann had to give up at 90 laps, calling in his longtime friend Pat Flaherty to take over. Pat didn't get far. Racing with Jimmy Daywalt just 20 laps later, the two tangled and both were eliminated from the race.

The Walsh dirt cars were not entered

in 1955, leaving only the roadster to represent the team. It arrived without sponsorship, as Bardahl had been won over by the Pat Clancy team.

It was a bad year all around.

Mike Nazarik, the ex-Marine who placed second in his first start in 1951, was to have driven for Walsh, but was fatally injured while leading an AAA sprint race at the infamous Langhorne one-mile dirt track oval on May 1, the very day the Speedway opened.

Johnnie Parsons, winner of the 1950 rain-shortened race for Walsh and Stephens, arrived in town with no assignment and was soon "test-hopping" for his friends. It was only a test hop, however, and JP transferred to another car shortly thereafter. Travis "Spider" Webb, fabled for showing up at the last minute and qualifying underrated cars, was given the assignment, but was none too happy when waved off a qualifying run by Stephens when averaging 138 on the third day. He tied later, ran a little slower and was unceremoniously released. Paul Russo took



over but never made it to the head of the long line on the final day. Webb was furious that his 138 would have been safe by five mph!

Jimmy Reece was on board for a 9th-place finish in the Milwaukee 100 a week later but was a DNF in the August 250 mile marathon.

It was around this time that Rodger Ward began to get some consideration.

The Filter Queen Company entered the picture for its only experience as a car sponsor although its involvement with the Indianapolis Motor Speedway spanned many years. It may be recalled that it was standard maintenance procedure during the 1950s for the entire bricked surface of the main straight to be swept with vacuum cleaners a day or two before the race. This was in an effort to suck the dirt from the cracks and try to diminish the huge cloud of dust that would always materialize at the start.

The vacuum cleaners in question were supplied by the Filter Queen

Company.

Ward left for the Wolcott team after his subsequent eighth-place finish, and young Eddie Sachs was given the Filter Queen car for a DNF in the 200-mile race at Darlington, South Carolina.

Ed Walsh sold the car after that to Fred Sclavi, who ran it for the next six years, which tends to sound most odd now in these days of "disposable" race cars.

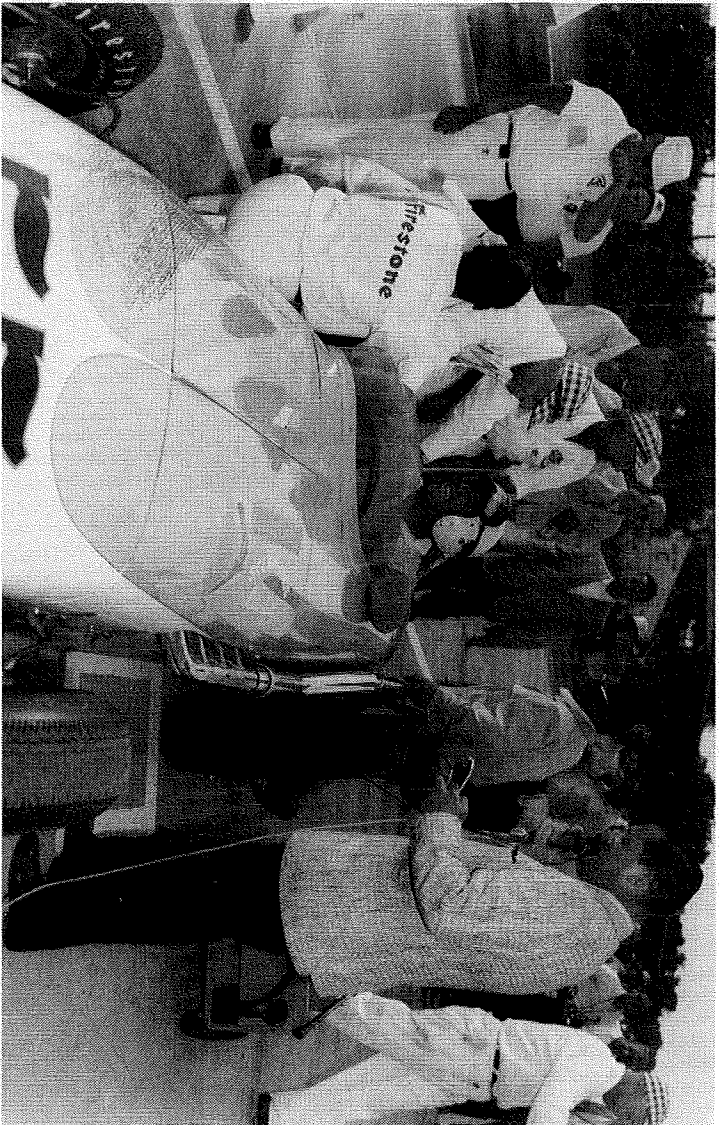
The Sclavi and Amos Special made it into the 1975 starting field in the hands of Eddie Russo, but never made it to the start, as the fuel tank was ruptured when rammed from the rear by Elmer George while lining up on the pace lap!

Eddie Russo wasn't even able to qualify the car for the 1958 500, but it still saw service a month later in Europe. It was one of the USAC cars airlifted to Italy for the Monza 500, in which ten top European drivers in European cars were to take on an equal number of their Indianapolis counterparts.

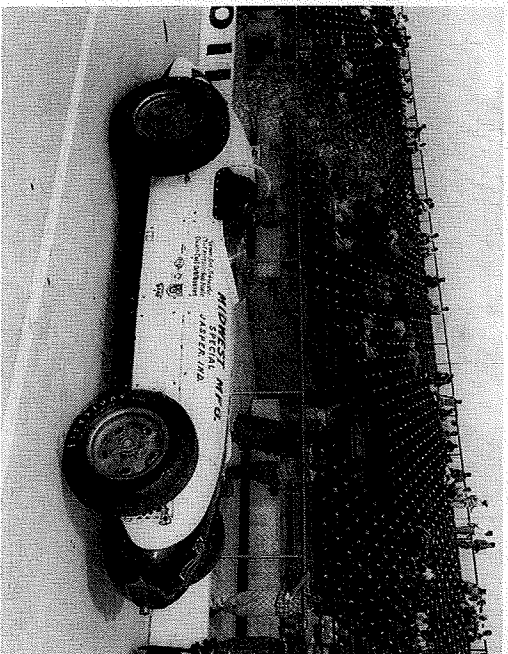
This race had been all but totally boycotted by the Europeans in 1957, and while the drivers had come around this time, there was still a shortage of cars. USAC took some extras and the Sclavi & Amos car was given to a Frenchman named Maurice Trintignant, who twice won the Monaco Grand Prix, marketed champagne from his own vineyards, later served as mayor of a tiny French town and who, within the last couple of years has fathered another child in spite of now being in his seventies!

While Trintignant's participation would no doubt be of little interest to the average American oval track enthusiast, the identity of his co-driver most certainly would be. Trintignant did not like the steep banks and sustained high speed of the Monza oval, withdrawing after the first of three heats. In his place went a 23-year-old American who went along "on spec." His name was A.J. Foyt.

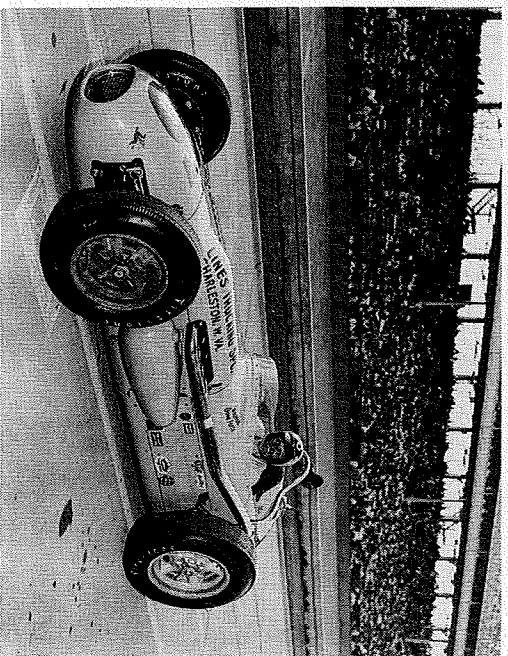
After Trintignant's 9th place in the opening heat, Foyt placed 6th in the



Eddie Russo crashed out of the 500 on the parade lap in 1957. He was credited with 32nd spot.



Bob Schroeder tried only once to make the Indy 500, used the **Filter Queen** car (then as the **Midwest Manufacturing Special**), and failed to make the program. The year was **1959**.



Don't believe the name on the car. That's Bob Cleberg behind the wheel in 1961. He was the 2nd alternate.

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next two, nailing that same spot down in the overall standings.

Jim Packard crashed the car while taking his rookie test at Indianapolis in 1959, then waved off an attempt a year later that would have been fast enough to make it. Gene Force, who had made an incomplete qualifying attempt in the car in 1959 after it was repaired from Packard's accident was the entered driver for '61, but he was sidelined by a heart attack in February. Bob Cleberg qualified it instead, but couldn't quite hang on to a starting spot, being bumped to second alternate.

The car's Indianapolis career wound down in 1962, with sprint car driver Leon Clum trying to get it in the lineup on the last day as the Bell Lines Trucking Special, and not quite having enough speed. It marked the fifth consecutive year that the car had failed to make a lineup, and obviously its useful days at the Speedway were over.

In 1978, some sixteen years after Leon Clum's waveoff, the car found its way into the hands of a dentist named Jim Giganti, who oddly enough was from the very same town as Ed Walsh — St. Louis.

It was not Giganti's original intention to have the car completely restored, but he did plan to have some work done on it eventually — and it needed plenty! Most of the body work was

missing, for one thing.

In 1982 he made an arrangement to have the car rebodied by sprint/midget driver Jerry Weeks, a master metalsmith who had just started his own business in Indianapolis.

"I only had a few of the body pieces when I got it," recalls Weeks, adding, "the only part in place being the cowlings that wraps around the cockpit. The frame appeared to have been shortened at one time and it had either been crashed or bent. It was back to full length and had been straightened but the condition was not what you'd call 'pristine.'"

Weeks embarked on the project with great relish, but soon found himself hampered in two areas. The more he got into it, the more he and Giganti

agreed about what should be done. But at the same time, Weeks was constantly forced into putting the project on hold whenever current participants came in with panic projects they just had to have for this weekend!

As time drew on, it was mutually agreed upon that the project should be taken over by restoration expert Jim Robbins (who is in no way related to the late car owner of the same name). Weeks notes, "I left my place lacking a myriad of little detail things, amounting to about a thousand little ten-minute jobs that I had never been able to get to."

It wasn't long before Jim Robbins began to realize that he had underestimated and that the task was going to entail considerably more than at first anticipated. It was at that point that Chris Cumberworth came on the scene.

Cumberworth, the fourth-ranking USAC Midget driver of 1977 and son of a long-time West Coast car owner, had relocated to Indianapolis from Southern California in the mid-1970s and was now servicing racing cars for other contestants. A friend of Weeks since boyhood, Chris had followed the saga with great interest and was aware that Giganti was beginning to entertain thoughts of selling.

It just so happened that Cumberworth knew of a potential buyer in the person of Don Weber, a friend of the Cumberworth family for as far back as Chris could remember. Already armed with a variety of collector cars, including six Ferraris, Weber had recently been on the lookout for an old Indianapolis car. Chris subsequently arranged for the transaction, and then moved the car to his own place in order to complete the job.

"Much of the work was done," notes Cumberworth, "but Don likes his car polished. My job," he adds, hesitating and grinning, "was to make it 'blitz-in'!"

With that in mind, the entire car was disassembled during the next few weeks, and was shipped in boxes to the West Coast, first for chroming by Orange County Plating Co., and then for polishing by Shilling Metal Polishing Co. An Offenhausser engine was assembled from several sources by mechanic Ed Baue with many of the parts coming from Grant King, and when difficulty was experienced in firing it up, none other than four-time 500-winning crew chief A. J. Watson came to the rescue.

Finally, in December 1987, the job was completed and this classic Kurtis, driven at various times by 500 winners Roger Ward, Jim Rathmann, Pat Flaherty, Bill Holland, Johnnie Parsons and A. J. Foyt, was prepared for its trip back to California, the state of its birth three decades earlier. ●

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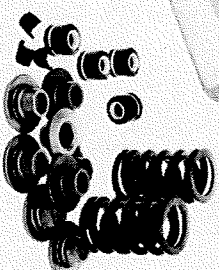
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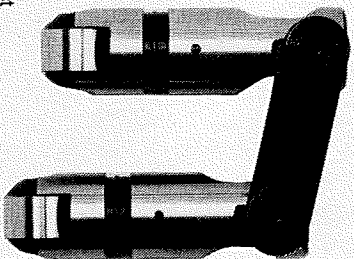
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