

GRANT KING



Grant King (Indianapolis Motor Speedway Photo)

Grant King, the son of Chinese parents, was born in 1933, during the Great Depression. His parents moved to Victoria (British Columbia, Canada) to see a better life, and that is where Grant was born and raised.

He became obsessed with race cars as a youth while working in his older brother Len's garage. According to Grant, "He taught me the trade. I had heard there was racing in town, but I never had the opportunity to see any of it. Then one day a customer of Len's brought a sprint car to store in the garage over the winter. The minute the next season opened, I went with them to help them run the car. I was still in school at the time and in machine shop class, instead of making screwdrivers and chisels like everyone else, I was making race car parts. I've been chasing race cars ever since."

Grant was a regular at the Victoria-area tracks of Langford, Sheering, and Western. Grant built the first sprint car he ever owned and it was driven by a Chinese man named Bung Eng. The first car was followed by a succession of sprinters, each superior in design and performance from the previous.

Grant moved to Portland (Ore.) and he began earning a reputation in the Pacific Northwest for roadsters, sprint cars and modifieds that were not only fast, but also beautiful. Perhaps his most enduring achievement, though, was building a sprint car in the early 1960's for Art Sugai of Ontario (Ore.). This car, known as the "Pink Lady", although somewhat modified, was still winning in the 1990's driven by Ken Hamilton.

Grant's move from Victoria to Portland allowed him to work with Rolla Vollstedt, helping to build the first rear-engine Offy to qualify at the Indianapolis (Ind.) Motor Speedway by Len Sutton.

After working with A.J. Watson in Burbank (Calif.), Grant migrated to Indianapolis in 1963, with his auto, a dog named "Offy", and little else. However, it didn't take long for the workaholic to set up shop on Crawfordville Road, one in which he still works today. During the mid-to late 1960's, Grant made money by working as a mechanic for the Indy car teams of Vollstedt, Jim Robins and Andy Granatelli's STP team. In 1969, King was the chief mechanic for friend Art Pollard's two Indy car victories, one at Milwaukee (Wisc.) on June 8th and one at Dover (Del.) on August 24th.

But Grant's first love was building cars, and it was from his shop, next to A.J. Watson's, that Grant also designed and built hundreds of race cars. He made indelible marks in midget, sprint and championship car racing that are still visible today. It is estimated that Grant produced over 250 complete cars, no "kits". Many of his cars were also shipped overseas for racing. Grant said, "It's enjoyable to be able to create something from a piece of raw material, form it into the shape of a race car, and watch it go around the track. It's a real thrill when you do this yourself."

King-built cars won championships with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA), the United States Auto Club (USAC) and countless outlaw circuits, while driven by a virtual "who's who" of open-wheel racing,

including Pollard, Tom and Jerry Sneva, Billy Foster, Bob Gregg, Tom Bigelow, Rich Vogler, Mario Andretti, Al Unser (Sr.), A.J. Foyt, Sheldon Kinser, Steve Krisiloff, Greg Weld, Jim Malloy, Billy Vukovich, Gary Bettenhausen, and George Snider.

In 1977, Grant King built dirt modified stock cars for the Drivers Independent Race Tracks (DIRT) circuit, as did other notable builders like Dick "Toby" Tobias, Bobby Allen, and Kenny Weld. Gary Balough, an ex-Hialeah (Fla.) competitor like Bobby Allen, won the big Syracuse (N.Y.) modified show a couple of times in King creations.

Not only did Grant's shop produce some remarkable cars, he also provided employment to more than a few men who have gone on in racing, including George Snider, Jerry Weeks, Johnny Capels, Steve Chassey, Willie Davis and Jackie Howerton.

He was also a respected car owner through his company, Grant King Racers, Inc. In 1970, King formed his own Indy car team for the first time. King's Kennedy Tank Special ran a limited schedule of championship car shows and finished 28th in points. One year later, Roger McCluskey and George Follmer were in the car.

In 1971 and '72, Sheldon Kinser teamed with car owner/builder Grant King and mechanic Galen Fox to go "outlaw" sprint car racing. According to Sheldon, "We went sprint racing all over the country. Florida, Kokomo, the Little 500, the Knoxville Nationals several times; we ran the IMCA races that were handy. Back in those days, you'd get the *National Speed Sport News* out and see what race paid the most to win and that's where you would go to race. That's the way you'd do it."

In 1972, Jackie Howerton and Greg Weld wheeled King's USAC sprint car, Howerton and Rollie Beale drove his champ dirt car to a seventh place position in the final USAC points, and Steve Krisiloff and Weld piloted his Kingfish Offies on the Indy car national championship trail. Merle Bettenhausen also went to Indy with Grant in '72.

Krisiloff piloted King's Indy car in 1973, Weld wheeled the Dave McIntire Chevrolet-sponsored champ dirt car on the Indy Mile, and Sheldon Kinser drove Grant's McIntire USAC sprint car at Eldora in October.

In 1974, King again teamed with Sheldon Kinser in the USAC sprints, and he took Tom Sneva and Bentley Warren to Indy that year as well.

In 1975, Bently Warren piloted his primary Indy car sponsored by Thebottomhalf, and Kinser was given an opportunity in Grant and Doris King's second car, the Chinese Eagle, at Indy. Kinser's car, officially "The Spirit of Indiana", was unique in that grass-roots fans could sponsor it for as little as \$100. Said Doris, "We (artist Ron Burton and the King's) had discussed it for a long time, letting the little guys be involved in racing. And, with the country's bicentennial celebration coming up, we decided

to go ahead and try it. This was Grant's way of expressing his feelings for the state of Indiana and the Indianapolis 500."

One of the most cherished contributions was a \$100 one from the mother of the late Peter Revson, heir to the cosmetic firm and polesitter for the '71 "500". Sheldon finished 12th in his rookie run. He also drove Grant's red number 20 McIntire sprint and champ dirt cars. In fact, Sheldon won the Syracuse 100 for Grant King Racers. It was the same year that craftsman Jerry Weeks moved to Indy after working for Don Edmunds.

Weeks got the opportunity to pilot Grant's McIntire sprinter in 1976. Sheldon, Bob Harkey and John Martin drove for the combined Grant King-J.C. Agajanian Indy car efforts in '76 and they finished the "500" in 19th, 20th, and 21st, respectively. That same year, Sheldon wheeled Grant's Genesee Beer-sponsored dirt champ car to third place in the USAC standings.

At Indy in '77, King owned and wrenched the J.C. Agajanian/Evel Kneivel Special of Gary Bettenhausen and the Gohr Distributing/Genesee Beer car of Kinser. Bill Vukovich also competed on the Indy Car circuit for King. Weeks continued to race the McIntire-sponsored USAC sprinter for King Racers.

Gary Bettenhausen replaced Kinser in 1978 on the championship car circuit, including the Indy 500. He also drove the dirt champ car circuit with an Oberdorfer number 98 car. In fact, Bettenhausen finished a close second to Duane "Panco" Carter (Jr.) in the dirt car point standings after winning the Springfield (Ill.) 100. Bettenhausen also drove the Oberdorfer Indy car from King in '79.

In 1980, King owned the Del Ray Marine's Fast Lane Special Indy car with drivers Billie Harvey and Roger Mears on the USAC national championship car circuit.

And in 1981, Jan Sneva started in the Giuffre Brothers Cranes-sponsored Agajanian-King Indy car at Pocono in USAC's Gold Crown championship event.

The 1980's were tough times for Grant King personally, but he has rebounded in the '90's.

Sprint and champ dirt cars have been Grant's passion. His direct involvement continues as he restores cars he originally built, like the McIntire sprinter or the Viceroy dirt car. His on-going restoration work, like his annual presence at the Winchester Old-Timers Club meets, lends further evidence to his continuing dedication to sprint car racing.

In addition to his car building, Grant also was a promoter with friend Bill Marvel of the 1970 "Pole Day Sprints" show at the Indianapolis Raceway Park.

Grant was inducted into the Victoria Auto Racing Hall of Fame in 1994.



Grant King with Sheldon Kinser

(Indianapolis Motor Speedway Photo)