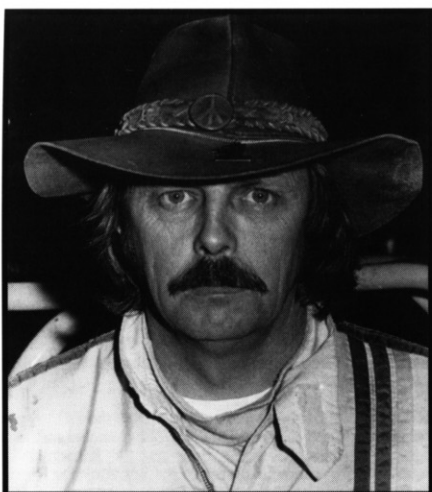


GARY PATTERSON



Gary Patterson (Mike Arthur Photo)

Gary Patterson was born and raised in Burbank (Calif.) in 1936, before his parents moved the family to a little town in Oregon, where Gary finished his high school education. According to Gary, "Went in the service after that 'cause I didn't know what else to do. After gettin' out, I just bummed around the country tryin' to square myself away. My bummin' around stopped in a bar in Georgia. Some guy started a fight with me and I knocked the hell out of him -- really worked him over. I learned a lesson. I found out that self-defense ends once you've protected yourself. And if you hurt someone -- I was put on trial for assault, got convicted and ended up puttin' two years in the joint."

Following his release, Patterson went back to Stockton (Calif.) where he got a job as an auto mechanic. He started racing locally in 1961 at the paved Stockton 99 Speedway.

Two years later, Shasta Speedway (Anderson, Calif.) promoter Jack Frost found Patterson a sprint car ride at the West Capital Raceway in West Sacramento (Calif.) Those were the days of Sherman Cleveland, "Crazy Wheels" Wally Baker and Larry Burton. About the same time, Gary was running midgets off and on with the Bay Cities Racing Association (BCRA), yet he declared, "But midgets, for me, have always been just somethin' to pick up when no sprint races were happening."

In 1966, Gary won the West Capital Raceway and Central State Racing Association (CSRA) super-modified championships. One year later, he had his first run-in with the United States Auto Club (USAC), with whom he had been competing infrequently in a midget. Said Patterson, "It's not just USAC. I don't like any clubs. They're all loaded with rules, politics, binding schedules and too much crap. I don't want to be regulated or forced to run a schedule. I'll race where, when and for whom I please."

It was also in the late 1960's that Gary received his mail-order divinity degree from a friend in the Universal Life Church, although he certainly didn't take his ordainment too seriously.

In 1970, Patterson continued his various racing exploits in northern California, racing sprint cars and midgets. At the time, northern California was a haven for Australian racers and fans during the American summers, and drivers like Marshall Sargent and Johnny Anderson would venture 'Down Under' during the American winters to race. Ron Wanless of Queensland convinced "G.P." to give Aussie racing a try in the American winter of 1970-71, which he did. Throughout the 1970's, Gary Patterson became a legend in Australia and New Zealand, very much in the tradition of Bob Tattersall. In fact, it was in Australia that Gary picked up the nickname "the Preacher" and "the Racin' Reverend", although he preferred his self-proclaimed moniker of "the Great G.P." He was best known for inciting the crowds by calling the Aussie racers 'amateurs' and their racing cars 'museum pieces'.

In 1971, he won a feature at Vallejo (Calif.) He also finished 21st in BCRA points, racing with such people as Hank Butcher, Chuck Gurney, Duane Bonini, Tommy Astone, Johnny Anderson, Nick Rescino and Jimmy Boyd.

It wasn't until 1973 that Patterson, a true outlaw, began to attract national attention when he was named the overall Dirt Cup champion by winning the Skagit Speedway main event in Alger (Wash.) over Don McLeod, Jerry Day, Leroy Van Conett, and Bob Johnson. He won that year's Tri-Holiday Sweepstakes at West Capital. It was also during the winter of '73-74 that Gary met ex-school teacher and current USAC midget champion Larry Rice in Australia. Gary, who was staying at the Texas Tavern in the rough-and tumble, anything-goes King's Cross district of Sydney (N.S.W.), immediately took a liking to "Rice-a-Roni" once he got to know him. Said Larry, "The first time I saw Patterson in Australia he looked so mean I didn't even have the nerve to talk to him."

Patterson continued his outlaw ways on the west coast in 1974, '75, and '76, bouncing between the

Northern Auto Racing Club (NARC) and the bigger-paying open competition events like Jim Raper's Dirt Cup, the Gold Cup Race of Champions at West Capital, and the Western World Championship at Manzanita Speedway in Phoenix (Ariz). He picked up a feature victory at Carson City (Nev.) in '74 and one on the half-mile Napa County Fairgrounds at Calistoga (Calif.) in '75 driving for Walter T. Ross of Carmichael (Calif.) in the Joe Reiff-built car. It was also during this time that Patterson and Rice toured Australia and New Zealand together racing midgets and being promoted as "the Preacher and the Teacher". In fact, in the winter of 1974-75, the two friends won every midget race they entered. According to Larry, "I was in a VW and he was in a SESCO and he could run as fast in that SESCO as I could in the VW nearly everywhere we went. That's when I first realized he was some kind of race driver. He was one hell of a race driver who never really got the recognition he deserved. I raced with him a long time and I've raced with a lot of people but Patterson was as good as any driver I've raced with or against anywhere!"

In fact, it was in 1976 that racer Gary Patterson and co-car-owners Walt Ross and Bill Tierney finished fourth in NARC points with a new Don Maxwell-built number 56 sprinter despite going back east to race at the Knoxville (Iowa) Nationals and throughout the midwest during the summer. They picked up four wins at Calistoga, and singles at West Capital, the asphalt at Anderson, Grass Valley (Ernie Purcell Memorial), and Gridley. The potent team also ran sixth in Ascot Park's Pacific Coast Classic behind Ron Shuman, Sammy Swindell, Jimmy Oskie, Dub May and Eddie Leavitt. At the end-of-the-year NARC banquet, the casually-dressed hippie told the crowd, "You guys were lucky the Great G.P. was gone most of the year."

Patterson capped the Bicentennial season on November 20, aboard the Don Snow Speed Shop Steve Stapp-built sprinter at the USAC show at



Gary Patterson

(Sheila Ross Collection)

(Gary Patterson Bio Continues Below)

Ascot. Patterson set fast time (a new USAC track record of 20.496 seconds), won his heat race, and won the 40-lap feature over Clark Templeman, Sheldon Kinser, Jimmy Oskie and George Snider. Over the winter, he raced 'Down Under' again. Larry Rice once commented, "I was kind of a straight arrow and didn't really know anything about anything until I got with him. I admired him because he could do everything that I really deep down wanted to do but didn't have the nerve to. He just did and said what he wanted and if people accepted it that was okay and if they didn't that was okay, too!"

1977 started off great for Patterson as he claimed three California Racing Association (CRA) wins early in the season at Ascot Park. He finished second to Jimmy Boyd in the Skagit Dirt Cup, then headed back east with Walt Ross to campaign at the Knoxville Nationals and around the midwest. Later in the season the "Preacher" won the 40-lap Gold Cup Race of Champions at West Capital over Leroy Van Conett, Boyd, Mike Wasina, Bobby Allen and Jack Hewitt by leading the last 43 laps under green while driving for "Big Bob" Davis. He competed in the Pacific Coast Classic and the Western World championships aboard the Clyde Lamar number 33 machine. Patterson also finished 12th in NARC points for the year after claiming three wins at his beloved high-speed Calistoga track. For a year-and-a-half, Gary built his own sprinters in partnership with Davis and Lamar at Side Bite Racing. Lastly, he won the Turkey Night Midget Grand Prix at Ascot and was voted the "Northern California Oval Track Driver of the Year" by the Motor Sports Press Association.

Said friend Gary Gerould about "G.P." at the '78 Gold Cup, "I vividly remember the first time my young son Bob was selling programs for the Gold Cup and Patterson quit what he was doing to walk the pits and pit line and literally strong arm people into buying a program because Bobby was getting a quarter for each one he sold."

Ted Johnson founded the World of Outlaws (WoO) organization in 1978 and Patterson competed in many of the shows in the midwest and west, although he personally thought the term "Outlaws organization" was an oxymoron. Gary later said, "Sure I feuded with USAC -- fought 'em for years. I'm not even too sold on the World

of Outlaws. The way it started out was all right. But not now, the WoO is just another club, usin' 'Outlaw' as it's name. How can it be? How can you have true outlaws followin' a fixed schedule and chasin' after point money. You can't!"

The driver who loved dogs and kids won twice at West Capital and finished 15th in NARC points in '78. He finished sixth in the Dirt Cup behind Doug Wolfgang, Rick Ferkel, Allen, Boyd, and Jerry Edson, and ninth at the Eldora (Rossburg, Ohio) Nationals. He was tenth in the Pacific Coast Classic in the Walt Ross number 56 machine.

In 1979, "G.P." won twice at West Capital and once at Dixon, and he picked up another CRA win at Chula Vista. He was seventh at the Skagit Dirt Cup behind Wolfgang, Ron Shuman, Steve Kinser, McSpadden, Hewitt, and Johnny Anderson in the Brandy/Glaspey number XX car. He ran the Gold Cup and took third in the Pacific Coast championship in the Leonard Faas car behind Dean Thompson and Shuman.

The following season Patterson won again at Dixon and finished tenth in NARC points, won at the Midwest Speedway in Lincoln (Nebr.), and competed in the Eldora and Knoxville Nationals for Joe McCray. At the Dirt Cup, Gary was second behind Jimmy Sills, and he finished second in the '80 Jerry Weld Memorial.

He was seventh at the 1981 Skagit Dirt Cup behind McSpadden, Shuman, Fred Brownfield, Wayne Sue, Brent Kaeding, and Ron Robertson. Patterson once revealed, "Racin' is my whole life -- I've lived for racing and practically nothin' else. Guys like 'Opp' and me -- racin' is what we know. It's all we've ever been. When will I quit? Hell I don't know. When I die. When I can't go fast. When I can't get a ride. Who knows? I'm only a racer -- what else could I be."

In 1982, Patterson won at Chico (Calif.) and he was fourth at Tucson (Ariz.) for owner Jack Gordon. And he was still being called the "Dancing Phantom" or the "Hostile Hippie" by the motor-sports press.

On Memorial Day weekend of 1983 at the Calistoga Speedway, Chuck Gurney swept both nights of competition, but Gary "the Preacher" Patterson was killed in a violent wreck in the finale. Said

friend Roy Loy, "His story is happy, sad, tragic, but most of all it's real because he was real. In some ways Gary was like Elvis, except Gary died with his boots on, doing what he wanted. Like an entertainer even at the end, he went out in a blaze of glory so spectacularly no one will ever forget."

On the eve of Gary's funeral, best friend Walt Ross, with whom Gary had raced and won during three separate periods in his career, hosted a fitting tribute at his home and backyard race shop. Patterson's friends, many adorned in "And on the 7th day, GOD created Dirt Tracks" t-shirts, were invited to drink beer and shots of Jack Daniels, eat food, and listen to Bob Seger and his Silver Bullet Band, all of which were Gary's favorites. The quiet, unassuming and unflappable Ross was like a big brother to Gary and once, when a deal in Colorado didn't pan out, he sent Gary the money to come home and he put "G.P." to work in his auto repair business, which daughter Sheila Ross-Fasig now owns and operates. Said Walt, "I've been across the country with him three times, including the time going through Georgia when we went out of our way to stop in and buy beer at Billy Carter's famous gas station and Patterson and Carter hit it right off. He ran my shop like it was his own and he did a hell of a good job. He could do anything."

At the well-attended funeral, Bob Seger's song "Turn the Page" was played, and mourners walked behind the hearse from the chapel to the grave site. He will always be remembered for his long hair, leather hat, the word "Outlaw" on his arm (which was tattooed over his ex-wife's name) and peace signs, which he flashed often and adorned the blue Walter T. Ross Special. According to "the Preacher", "If a hippie means bein' a free spirit, then I'm a hippie 'cause I sure am a free spirit. Yeah, that's my deal -- bein' a free spirit."

Said Gary Gerould at Gary Patterson's funeral, "There is not a doubt in my mind that everyone of us here today owes a debt to the spirit of Gary Patterson. He entertained us with his driving ability ... his incredibly intense competitive nature ... his colorful, often unpredictable antics that captivated crowds, that always produced some kind of reaction. He left us a legacy of memories and we're all the richer for it."

Gary Patterson died 15 years ago today.