

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

BILL HILL

The advertisements for the upcoming event. The stories leading into the race. The interviews on radio and television. And finally, the post-race result stories. How does all the publicity work get done?

Since 1959, many promoters hosting sprint car racing events across the country have utilized the services of William M. Hill, regarded by many as a master of the publicity and public relations trade. And it is through Bill that many of the necessary promotional efforts are achieved.

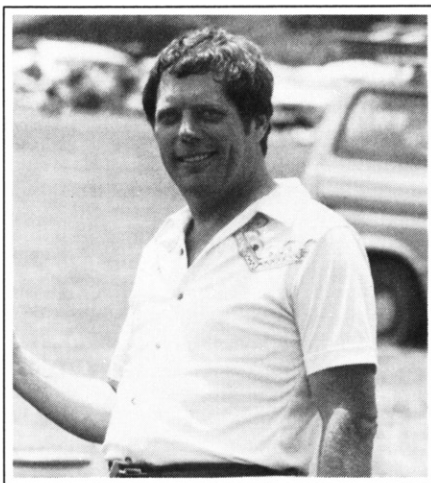
Bill graduated from East High School in Kansas City (Mo.) in 1948, and he followed that up with a stint in the United States Army from 1950 through '53. He then went to the University of Illinois (Chicago), majoring in Journalism and Business and graduating in 1957. Bill began his professional employment one year later, working as a salesman for the Johnson & Johnson Company (1958-64) and then Revlon (1965-66). He also married, and fathered three daughters, Vicki, Liz and Kay.

During this time, he also began getting active in his other real love, open wheel auto racing. Bill worked as a publicity director for the Rocky Mountain Midget Racing Association (RMMRA) from 1959 until 1961 and as a reporter and columnist in Chris Economaki's *National Speed Sport News* beginning in 1961. And he has never stopped working with Chris!

In 1963 and '64, Bill also began long associations with tracks and sanctioning bodies as an announcer. His credits include the Belleville (Ks.) High Banks (1963-94), RMMRA (1963-68), the Big Car Racing Association (BCRA) of Colorado (1964-71), and selected International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) and United States Auto Club (USAC) 'big car' and sprint car events. At the same time he began doing publicity work for the Pikes Peak Auto Hillclimb (1965-71).

Following a power struggle in early 1966 in the Western Region at Revlon, Bill Hill worked full-time as public relations director at J.C. Agajanian Enterprises of Gardena (Calif.) from March through November. However, in late 1966, Bill rejoined the world of cosmetics as a regional sales manager for a company called Cosmetically Yours. He worked in that position until the end of 1971, when the lure to return to auto racing on a full-time basis proved too great. During those five years, though, Bill continued his announcing work, with J.C. Racing Enterprises (1966-70), the

Continental Divide Raceway (1967-70) and the Englewood (Col.) Speedway (1967-70) and his publicity work, with Continental Divide Raceway (1968-70) and BCRA of Colorado (1968-71). He also worked in radio and television during this time.



Bill Hill (John Mahoney Collection)

Bill's greatest achievements, though, have come since his decision in 1972 to make a full-time return to motorsports. In 1972 and '73, Hill was an assistant news director with USAC in Speedway (Ind.), before leaving to join Don Smith Enterprises just down the road in Terre Haute as an assistant motor racing director. It was during this time (1973-79), in assisting Don Smith with the promotional chores at the Terre Haute Action Track and the Indiana State Fairgrounds in Indianapolis, that Bill Hill really made his mark on sprint car racing.

They were the glory years for the ABC "Wide World of Sports" television productions of the 40-lap "Hulman Classic" USAC championship from the Action Track, and he was responsible for making sure the world knew about dirt-track sprint car racing! While most USAC races in 1973 paid the standard \$6,945 purse, the third annual Hulman Classic paid \$25,750. The purse climbed to a record \$50,790 in 1977, the year the \$13,000-to-win race was taken by James McElreath (who would lose his life later that year in a sprint car racing accident).

The early Eighties found Bill Hill on the move again. He was general manager at the Devil's Bowl Speedway in Mesquite (Tex.) in 1980, and announcer/public relations director at the Tulsa and Muskogee (Okla.) tracks in 1981 and '92. While living and working in Tulsa, Bill met and

married his partner Ruby on May 17, 1981. In 1983 and '84, Bill and Ruby formed Bill Hill Productions, continuing to specialize in all forms of public relations and promotions for such series as USAC Championship Dirt, World of Outlaws (WoO) and the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA).

"All the basics have to be done more than two weeks ahead of the race," he said. Among the list of promotional items that need to be completed and press releases about the race to be sent to all appropriate racing trade newspapers, advertisements be placed in many of these same papers, a program to be completed for the event and flyers touting the event to be distributed.

"You can cover a lot of ground with flyers," Hill comments. "By handing them out at trade and auto shows, and at the track in the weeks leading up to a special race, flyers put all the information right in the fans' hands."

Working on large special events at many of the nation's short tracks has always been the mainstay of Bill's success. According to Hill, there is a "game plan" for each promotional event. He breaks down his promotional efforts to those that need to be completed more than two weeks before a race and those that should be done within the 14-day period leading up to an event. This lays the groundwork for his personal efforts that take place in the two weeks prior to the event.

He has a basic routine that he follows leading up to a show. The region around the track is studied and all newspapers within a 100-mile radius are provided with releases about the show. Radio and television stations within a 25 to 30-mile radius are also invited.

"From my standpoint, nothing beats the legwork and personal contacts one to two weeks before a race," claims Hill. "Many think this sounds easy, but you get up early and get back to the motel late at night."

Using guide books as to circulation and costs involved, Bill chooses what he feels will be the most beneficial newspapers to place advertisements in. He considers all the daily newspapers, the larger weekly publications and shoppers of more than 4,000 circulation.

While Bill is at a newspaper placing an ad, he uses the opportunity to visit with the sports editor. A press release about the event is handed directly to the sports editor along with a press kit on the show and organization. This kit contains statistics, histo-

(Bill Hill Bio Continued Below)

ry and other pieces of news that may be of interest.

These visits to sports editors are carried on all day. Sometimes Bill will make nearly 100 stops to hand deliver the material. And it is through these contacts that many sports stories get to print.

"I follow up on the initial visit and call back. I see everyone at least three times. This way I can answer questions they may have and on each return visit, I deliver another story about the show."

Radio and television coverage usually depends on the use of a driver or personality that will participate in the upcoming race. "I like to work with a race driver that is a national name," Hill comments. "It makes it easier to get such a person on the air."

Reaching the grassroots level is often achieved by using radio call-in sports shows. Many times this arouses the race fans' interests and results in their phone calls. Also, it serves as an education source for those no familiar with auto racing.

But Bill's work doesn't end when the race is held. Among the post-race chores are providing the media with race results and other items of interest from the show. "This followup is important," Hill claims. "Sports editors and broadcasters need the

results after the race and by helping them out, it gains credibility for the next time you are in the area."

While his work usually covers the publicity area, Bill may often be found behind a microphone at the track. His specialty is pit-side interviews, an art which can bring the fans right into the trackside action.

While racing has always been a part of Hill's life, the development into a public relations person was almost accidental. The Rocky Mountain Midget Racing Association was in need of someone to do race result stories for their club while Hill was involved as a car owner of two midgets.

Hill also recalls one of his most memorable publicity persons, Blair Ratliff. Ratliff handled Dayton and New Bremen Speedways years ago and was noted for outrageous methods to gain attention for an upcoming race.

Several of his antics would end up drawing the police force to a downtown area, but right with them was the press corps. And the final outcome of his actions always ended up with added publicity for his event.

"I think that if there is ever an award made to auto racing PR people, it should be named after Blair.

His style may not work as well today, but he was always looking for that something extra to gain attention for his client. I admire that attitude, it is one that is disappearing."

Since 1985, Bill has worked as a senior account executive with the K&K Insurance Group of Fort Wayne (Ind.). After decades of working at race tracks as an announcer, publicist, and/or promoter, and then inspecting race tracks as an insurer, Bill Hill is retiring from K&K at the end of this year. And, with his loving wife Ruby, from their home in Chandler (Ariz.), he is going back to what he loves best . . . going to race tracks as a fan!