

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

JOHN BAGLEY

by Bob Mays

John Bagley was born in 1894 in Omaha, Nebraska. He started his racing career with motorcycles in 1919 and was soon racing all over the Midwest on the two-wheelers. Some of his competitors at that time included future Indianapolis 500 racers Ralph Hepburn and Johnny Kreiger.

In 1925 Bagley made the move to four-wheel competition, building a bob-tail dirt track car with a Fronty Ford engine. It didn't take long for Bagley to make his presence known. At a county fair race in South Dakota in 1926, Bagley soundly defeated Gus Schrader three days running. These wins stamped John Bagley as a force on the dirt tracks of the Midwest. By 1928, he was winning on a regular basis against such drivers as Schrader, John Gerber, Sam Hoffman and Pat Cunningham.

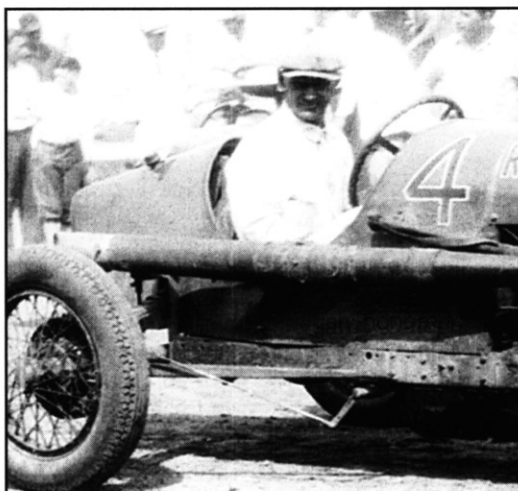
Bagley could be a ferocious competitor who hated to lose. One time in 1928 at Ord, Nebraska, Bagley battled with Andrew Fuller of Oklahoma in a duel that had 3000 fans on their feet the entire race. Fuller just edged Bagley at the line for the win and the two nearly got into a fight after exiting their cars.

The crowd loved every minute of it since the Ord track and the Aksarben track in Omaha were already waging a war of words over which track provided the best competition in the state. The fact that Bagley was from Omaha made him the driver they loved to hate! John did not let his setback at the hands of Fuller keep him down for too long, as he set a track record during the Ord meet and was the top money winner for the three days of racing in his Frost Special.

In 1929, Bagley opted to cut back on his time in the cockpit, and started hiring other drivers for his car. His first hired gun was little Pat Cunningham out of St. Joseph, Missouri. This combo was almost unbeatable, winning many races across the Midwest. The duo was undefeated at Aksarben, winning on August 11th and again on August 17th. In between, they took on the powerful International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) at Hastings, Nebraska, beating them the first day and running second to Emory Collins the next day. They then rolled into Ord, but had their winning streak snapped when Cunningham was involved in a crackup the first day. John tabbed Bert Ficken of Denver. To replace the injured Cunningham, Ficken picked up right where Cunningham had left off, winning the final day at Ord, then capturing the final race of the season at Aksarben

[which is Nebraska spelled backwards]. The team also took on IMCA one more time, this one at Lincoln, Nebraska, with Ficken again running second to Emory Collins, then easily winning on the last day of the Nebraska State Fair. Bagley proved that he could still drive by jumping in the car for wins at Atlantic, Iowa, and Neligh, Nebraska.

At the Aksarben mile track in Omaha, the Ficken/Bagley team contin-



John Bagley

Larry Sullivan Photo

ued its dominance in 1930, but they were soundly beaten at Ord by John Gerber. The Aksarben and Ord tracks had, by now, become bitter rivals, with John Bagley the focal point of the feud. In one of his last races as a driver, John swept the show at Neligh, Nebraska, on September 11, 1930.

In 1931, Bagley equipped his car with a Cragar head and with Ficken still in the seat, they kept on winning. One big win was at Cedar Rapids on September 7, 1931. It was during this same time that Gus Schrader drove another Bagley car at Legion Ascot in American Automobile Association (AAA) competition.

John Bagley made his living as a motorcycle cop in Omaha. For 1932, he hired another motorcycle cop, Sam Hoffman from Sioux City, Iowa. Hoffman transferred to the Omaha police department during this time so he could help John at the shop, which now sported several race ready cars. They scored a big win at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines, defeating Mark Billman, Tony Willman and Maynard "Hungry" Clark. Hoffman also beat Clark at Neligh as Bagley's undefeated streak at that track reached epic proportions.

With first Hoffman and later Pat Cunningham, Bagley's Cragar was beginning to obtain a national reputation in 1933. By 1934, John figured it was time to

step up the program and started traveling east to some of the big AAA meets. At one of those, in Winchester, Indiana, Clarence "Speed" Haskell of Lincoln, Nebraska, crashed to his death in Bagley's car. John returned to the racing wars rather quickly with Floyd Davis doing the wheel-turning.

In 1935 John hooked up with George "Doc" MacKenzie from Eddington, Pennsylvania. MacKenzie was a colorful character, but had only limited success up until that time. Racing on AAA's Eastern Circuit in John Bagley's "Cresco Special," MacKenzie made a shambles of the competition, winning 19 features and the AAA Eastern crown. On top of that, MacKenzie also won the Hankinson Circuit Championship promoted by Ralph Hankinson. Doc MacKenzie was the first driver to win both of these titles in the same year!

Unfortunately, Doc's success would prove short-lived. He was killed at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on August 23, 1936, when his Cresco Special tangled with the inside guard rail.

For 1937, John Bagley came back with a two-car team featuring Frankie Beeder of St. Louis, Missouri, in the Bagley McDowell, and sensational young Tony Willman from South Milwaukee, in the Bagley Cragar. Willman's hard-charging style wowed the fans throughout the Eastern circuit, but it was Beeder's steady driving that ended up winning the AAA Eastern crown. Frankie was driving the same chassis with which Doc MacKenzie had won the title in 1935. To top it all off, Beeder also won the Hankinson circuit in 1937, becoming only the second driver to manage such a feat in the same car in which it had happened two years before.

During a career of driving and owning 'big cars' (before they were called sprint cars), John Bagley experienced the highest of highs, winning championships at the top level of the sport, as well as the lowest of lows. He had drivers like Cunningham, Schrader, Ficken, Hoffman, Haskell, Davis, MacKenzie, Beeder and Willman chauffeur his cars to many wins. Years later, when asked who was the best he ever employed, Bagley stated, without reservation, "Tony Willman was the toughest man I ever had in my equipment!"

After his racing career was over, John Bagley retired to the upper Midwest and managed a fishing lodge until his death many years later.

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