

CHESTER H. "CHET" WILSON

by Donna Wilson

Chester Hugh "Chet" Wilson was born on July 28, 1917, in Lincoln, Nebraska. He lived with his parents, candy-maker John and Della Wilson, and his four siblings.

As early as age five, Chet amazed his family with his mechanical abilities by repairing his mother's household appliances. At the age of twelve, Chet built his first motor-powered car. He assembled the frame, body, wheels and steering with junk parts strategically gathered from around the neighborhood. When he was unable to locate exactly the right parts for his little machine, he would make them himself by fabricating the necessary pieces from scrap metal and wood.

It was no surprise when his favorite subject in school was shop class. Even then, he gained notoriety from his classmates and teachers as an ace mechanic and aspiring automotive machinist. He built a fully operational, miniature gasoline-powered aircraft motor and a single-seat car powered by an Indian twin engine.

Upon the insistence of a childhood friend, Roland Badberg, Chet and Rollie hopped in Chet's '34 roadster and went to see the midgets run on the new race track at the Nebraska State Fairgrounds in Lincoln. Not wanting to spend the money for a ticket, they peered over the fence to watch. Chet intently studied every car in detail. To him, every sideways turn, every change in the sound of an engine, and every driver wiping the dirt from his goggles was magical. >From that day forward, either as a spectator or a participant, he never missed a racing event at the Nebraska State Fair. Fabrication began immediately on his first midget.

After marrying in 1940, Chet and his new bride, Althea, moved to Wichita, Kansas. He found temporary employment working as a stock boy at Motor Equipment Warehouse. While perfecting his skills as an automotive machinist, he quickly developed his reputation as an innovator during his 20-year employment with Kansas Rebabbling Co. in Wichita. Prior to the on-set of World War II, Chet raced his midget car infrequently in the midwest with driver Guy "Mac" McHenry. A concentrated effort, however, did not fully develop until after the war.

Since all racing was curtailed during the war, 1942 through 1945, Chet took his opportunity to replace the Continental engine in his midget with a Ford V8-60. He also built a midget and a three-quarter midget in his basement during this period. In 1946-1947 he took two years off work and raced the car exclusively, running as many as eight events a week. During this time he gained national recognition, fielding his bright red Ford-powered midget. From 1946 to 1954, Chet Wilson's midget was successfully piloted by Lloyd Ruby, Leonard "Cotton" Musick, Bernie Shires, "Corky" Benson, "Mac" McHenry, Jay Booth and Austin "Tex West" Wetzler. Although Chet enjoyed building and racing his cars, he never acquired the desire to professionally drive them. He preferred to leave the driving to those more adept than himself.

As early as the late 1940's, Chet started a small business in his basement. He purchased a Montgomery Ward lathe and made the necessary attachments to grind camshafts. In

1956, he built a new garage behind his house and expanded his business to include precision balancing and complete custom engine building. In 1964, he opened a full-service custom engine facility on Osage Street in Wichita. Some of the original machinery that Chet designed and adapted for his special purposes is still in use today. Chet soon earned national acclaim as an automotive machinist and accomplished custom engine builder.

By 1954, the popularity of midgets began to wane. So, during the winter of 1954-55, he bought a "Solar Car" midget and 'stretched it' to run with the sprinters. He powered the 'stretch' with the rebuilt V8-60 Ford retrieved from his midget. This number 25 car successfully competed against the sprinters during the 1955 season. The first time the car ran, driven by Frank Lies, they won everything but the trophy dash. Later in the season, "Cotton" Musick took the seat and won the UMCA championship with the car that earned the nickname "The Offy Killer".

During the winter of 1955-56, Chet would again prove to be a man of wisdom and foresight. Chevrolet had recently introduced the small block V-8 for its Corvette sports car, and since it was new, racing parts had not yet been developed. Chet used Jahns pistons, an Edelbrock intake manifold and three Stromberg carburetors. He also adapted his Ford V8-60 magneto to his new Chevy. When needed parts were not available, he was able to gain state-of-the-art performance from this engine with skillful inventiveness and clever ingenuity. Chet put the Chevy V-8 in his 'stretched' midget by making or adapting everything he needed. Weighing all of 1,400 pounds, this was the only year the car was painted black. Driven by Walt McWhorter, 1956 proved to be a less than successful season; Chet's new Chevy engine was discovered to be too much motor for the chassis that housed it.

The winter of 1956-57 would bring a necessary change. At a time when Offy and Ranger motors dominated sprint car racing, Chet built a brand new car to house his 283-cubic-inch, fuel-injected custom Chevy engine. The Chevy-powered sprint car was totally hand-crafted. Chet made and assembled every piece, except for the fiberglass nose and tail.

As the first driver, Harold Leep successfully piloted the car for several seasons, winning three straight United Speedways crowns. And, together, Wilson and Leep dominated International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) action at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, winning there in 1958, '59 (twice), '61 (twice),

'64 (twice) and '68. They also won IMCA features at Sedalia, Missouri, in 1959 and '64; Des Moines, Iowa, in 1959 (twice) and '64; Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1959; Memphis, Missouri, in 1960; Knoxville, Illinois, in 1961 and '63; Faribault, Minnesota, in 1961; Minot, North Dakota, in '63; Mason City, Iowa, in 1964; and Lincoln (twice) in 1965.

In IMCA points, the Wilson/Leep combination finished third in 1959 behind champion Pete Folse (Sr.) and Jim Hurtubise, and ahead of Jack Rounds and Parnelli Jones. After a lackluster year in 1960, they rebounded with another third in points in 1961, behind champion Folse and runner-up Emmett "Buzz" Barton, and ahead of Jerry Richert (Sr.) and Jim McElreath. Following two years of an on-again, off-again relationship, the Wilson/Leep combo had a strong year in 1964, finishing fourth in IMCA points behind champion Richert, Jim McCune, Jerry Daniels, and ahead of Jay Woodside.

Gordon Woolley won for Wilson at Tampa, Florida, to start Woolley's IMCA championship season in 1963. Although the tragic death of Al Chamberlain during a consolation feature in September, 1963, at the Nebraska State Fair curtailed Chet's enthusiasm, he completed the necessary repairs to the car and resumed racing. Jud Larson took the car to a feature win later that year at Chet's beloved OKC fairgrounds oval. Grady Wade, who earned the '66 IMCA Rookie of the Year award while driving for Chet, wheeled the Offy Killer to IMCA wins at Des Moines in 1966 and '68; Granite City, Illinois, in 1966; Sedalia and Topeka, Kansas (twice), in 1968; and Oklahoma City in 1972.

With the image of "Mighty Mouse" painted on the side of the hood, the reputation of the legendary "Offy Killer" grew until it was retired from professional racing in the mid-1970's. In 1982, Chet's widow Althea allowed Rollie Badberg to take the car and exhibit it on the vintage circuit after he and Chet's son Jerry did some restoration on the car. The car has also been shown at the National Sprint Car Museum in Knoxville, Iowa, and at the Performance Racing Industry trade show in Columbus, Ohio, in celebration of the 40th anniversary Of the small-block Chevrolet.

In 1973, a team effort with Jerry would mark the birth of the first Wilson V-4, an engine originally designed for midgets. The first of these incredible little power plants, housed in a midget built by "Jelly" Wilhelm of Wichita and driven by Jerry Stone, won the national midget show at Seattle's Kingdome. A total of 15 complete custom Wilson V-4 engines have been built and continue to successfully power midgets and street rods around the country. Another forty, in kit form, were constructed and distributed worldwide.

A dedicated family man, Chet passed away from inoperable brain cancer on February 1, 1977, at the age of 59. His wife Althea, son Jerry, daughter Donna, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren survive him. Chet's passion for the industry and his inspiration lives on in his son Jerry, who continues to own and operate the Chet Wilson Engine Service located on West Douglas Street in Wichita. Chet Wilson was inducted in 1999 into the Nebraska Auto Racing Hall of Fame.



Chet Wilson (on right)

Bob Mays Collection