

The Novi

A Most Magnificent Flop...

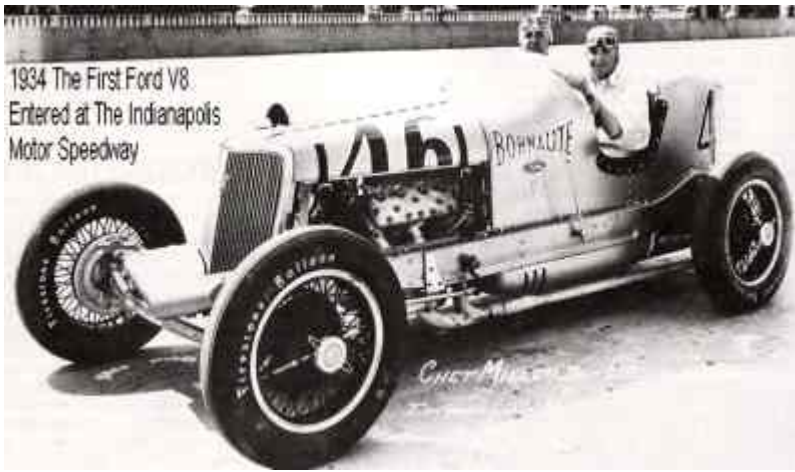


by Dick Ralstin

The Novi, A Most Magnificent Flop - Chapter 1

Photographs courtesy of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway

It is very likely the seed for the Novi's symphony of sound was planted in February of 1932 when Ford announced beginning production of its V8 passenger car engine. Lew Welch and Ray Dahlinger were two friends who worked in Ford's Development and Engineering department and were involved in the development of the poor man's V8. Dahlinger was in charge of the department and a personal friend of Henry Ford.



In the Summer of 1933 the AAA sanctioned the Elgin (Ill.) National Road Race and when the checkered flag fell on the 203 mile race over an eight mile course Ford's new V8's had captured eight of the first 10 positions, a Plymouth was in eighth place and a Chevrolet finished 10th.

The winning Ford was driven by Fred Frame, who just happened to be the winner of the 1932 Indianapolis 500, and was entered by a Ford Dealer, L.J. Cote, from a Detroit suburb. Factory Ford claimed it had no role in the lopsided victory, but full page ads quickly appeared in the Nation's newspapers extolling the "Ford speed, stamina, road-ability and You can't beat a Ford for PERFORMANCE".

Strange as it may seem Ray Dahlinger's wife, Evangeline Cote, was the daughter and sister of the owners of Cote Motor Company of Fernadale, Mich. There were also rumors of a mistress of Henry Ford's, named Evangeline, bearing a son shortly before the Cote Motor Company came into existence and there was a young man named John Cote Dahlinger who on occasions worked in the Novi crew in later years.

In 1934 two Ford V8's, "owned" by Detroit auto suppliers, were entered in the Indianapolis 500, it is thought one was owned by Ray Dahlinger and built by Dahlinger and Welch in the Ford plant. Both made the race but one (Dahlinger's ?) finished 33rd and the other lasted 110 laps and finished 13th.

In 1935 Preston Tucker and race car builder Harry Miller approached Henry's "for sure" son, Edsel, with a wild plan to enter TEN pretty much stock Ford V8 engines in Miller front drive chassis in the Indianapolis 500. It is not known if Henry approved or not, but Edsel bought the plan and a few months before the '35 race construction began on the cars and the Ford Cad Company was officially in racing.

Edsel's grandiose plan was his first failure when spending Henry's money - who can ever forget the Edsel? Only four of the cars were completed in time for the race and due to a design failure in the location of the steering gear box none of the four went the distance.

Henry stepped in immediately after the fiasco and impounded the four cars and issued an edict that no further action be taken in racing until HE rendered a decision.



Also in 1935 Lew Welch left Ford and became owner of an auto parts plant in Novi, Michigan which supplied parts to Ford Motor Car Co. and also for the first time Welch became the owner of two race cars entered in the Indianapolis 500, but the two car Ford V8 powered team was also a miserable failure. One car, driven by Herb Ardinger, was too slow to make the starting lineup and no qualifying attempt was made with the second car.

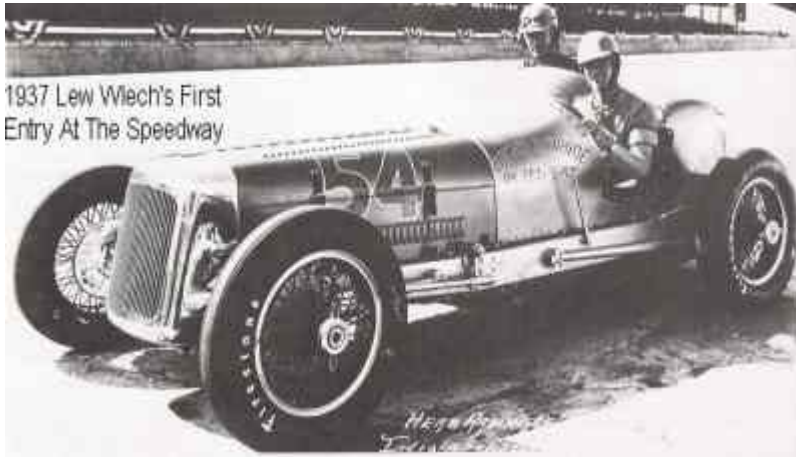
The question has been asked how a young man struggling to get a new plant started could afford two entries in the Indianapolis 500, well it never has been proven, but always thought by many that Henry, believing the Tucker-Miller deal might go sour, took out some "insurance" by financing the two Welch cars. There were no factory Ford, or Welch, cars entered in the 1936 Indianapolis 500.

Lew was back in 1937 with another entry built by Johnny Wohfeil, who just happened to work for Henry Ford, but Lew figured a Ford V8 engine was short on power to make the race so there was not only an Offy engine under the bonnet but a supercharged Offy at that.

The car carried no Novi identification, but it carried the number 54 and bore a striking resemblance to the Tucker-Miller cars of 1935. The Chicago Rawhide Oil Seal Special, driven by Herb Ardinger, qualified with a fine 121.983 and started

the on the front row in the third spot. A connecting rod failed on the 106 lap and the Welch-(Ford?)-Ardinger effort finished 22nd.

By now Lew Welch was bitten bad by the bug and for the next 19 years he was listed as the owner of at least one race car entered for the Indianapolis 500 at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.



Lo and behold when Lew's entry arrived at the Speedway for the 1938 Indianapolis 500 the chassis was one of Edsel Ford's "factory" Fords, the ones Henry had impounded after Edsel's fiasco, and it was powered by 255 c.i. unsupercharged Offy.

In practice during the Month of May the Offy had a mechanical problem that sent Welch in the search of help. Enter Bud Winfield who was working on Louie Meyers race car three doors down in the garage area. The engine in Meyer's Bowes Seal Fast Special was powered by a straight 8 engine designed by Winfield and Leo Goosen, Offenhauser's chief engine designer.

The Welch-Winfield friendship which developed led to the pair finally joining forces, the embryo of the Novi team began to form. During 1938 the two men began discussing a project which, when it became a reality, would be known as the Novi engine

But Lew's entry for the 1939 Indianapolis 500 was once again Edsel's Ford chassis, this time powered by a 270 c.i. Offy but with dual Winfield carburetors, the car carried no sponsor's name and was known simply as the Offenhauser Special with Cliff Bergere as the chauffeur. The Offenhauser Special finished third but there wasn't much joy in the Welch camp when the race ended.

Lew Welch saw the hand writing on the wall, it was very plain the Offy was down on power when compared to the winning supercharged Maserati, driven by Wilbur Shaw for his second 500 win, and the Bud Winfield blown straight 8 engine in Louie Meyer's car, which crashed on the 197th lap while nipping at Wilbur's wheels.

For the 1940 chase Welch hired Ralph Hepburn, a veteran of 12 previous Indianapolis 500's to drive Edsel's Ford chassis, still with the under powered, unblown, four-banger under he hood.

The effort came to naught when steering problems sidelined Hepburn on the 47th lap, but the names of Welch and Winfield were listed for the first time together on the entry blank, a mix up had Bud listed as the 'owner" and Lew as the "mechanic". It was official the pair was a team.



Following the 1940 race Welch and Winfield decided the new engine was needed but it wouldn't be Bud's blown straight eight, someone, maybe Henry Ford (?), suggested a d.o.h.c. blown V8.

During the Summer of 1940 Bud took his rough drawings for the engine he and Lew had been discussing to the Offenhauser plant in L.A. where Leo Goosen, probably the best engine designer in America, turned the rough sketches into the final design for the engine that powered the Novi race cars that became famous for their speed and sound and the fact that in the Novi's 24 year racing career they never won a race.

The Novi, A Most Magnificent Flop - Chapter 2

Once Leo Goosen completed the final drawings of Winfield's sketches they were turned over to Fred Offenhauser, who had taken over the bankrupt Miller plant, to build the first Winfield d.o.h.c. supercharged V8 engine.

In the meantime Lew Welch and Bud Windfield had to get the "Edsel" Miller-Ford ready to receive the engine, which turned out to be quite a chore.

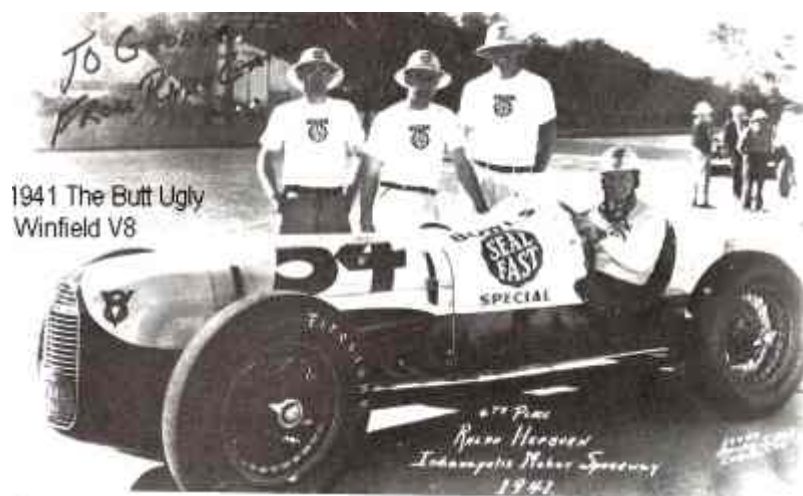
You must remember the front wheel drive Miller-Ford chassis was

originally designed in 1935 to accept a V8 engine of some 160 to 170 horsepower. The chassis was then altered in 1938 to accept a 255 c.i., four cylinder, 225 horsepower engine, then in 1939 this was upped to a 270 c.i. Offy with upwards of 250 horses. Now the six year old fwd chassis was going to have a blown V8, weighing some 575 pounds, putting out 450 horses stuffed under its bonnet.

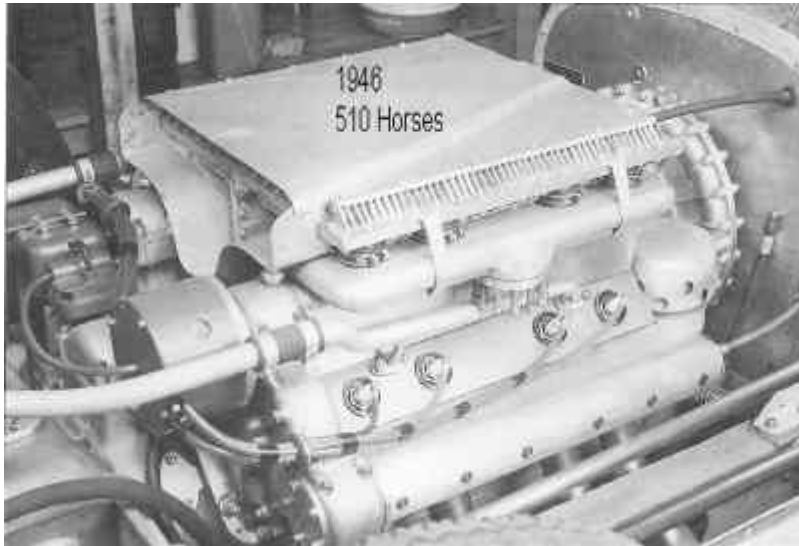
Once the modifying was completed and the engine installed there sat the most butt ugly, ill handling race car man had ever created. There was one saving grace, the entry blank read, Entrant Lew Welch and power Winfield V8. The Novi name was not connected to the monster in any way.

Again Lew Welch asked Ralph Hepburn to be the driver and after taking a look under the hood at the new power plant, but before he drove the "thing", Hepburn jumped at the chance.

It didn't take the veteran driver long to discover there was no way to use all the horses under the hood, applying all the power just meant the 8.00X18 Firestones would go up in smoke and that could be lethal for the car and maybe himself. Hepburn solved that problem by putting a wooden wedge under the foot throttle to make sure he didn't make a mistake and call on too many horses all at once.



But Winfield's V8 did bring one thing to the venerable old bricks of the Speedway. Never in their 30 year history had the bricks heard such an ear shattering scream as the supercharged d.o.h.c. V8 turned loose, from the Speedway to Monument



Circle the Hoosier natives, and all others who heard it, fell in love with the sound that became known as the Song of the Novi.

Some problems were insurmountable with a fwd chassis designed for 170 horsepower now suddenly trying to hold 450 horses, as Hepburn put it the brute had "an ill handling nature", it

just would not want to go around a corner. Hepburn did manage to qualify for the 10th starting place in the 33 car field but that was thanks to qualifying the first weekend, there were 28 cars in the field that qualified at a faster speed.

The wise old veteran played traffic to perfection during the race and, with the pine wedge under the foot throttle, managed to keep the Firestones from going up in smoke and the monster headed in the right direction all day. When the checkered flag fell there was a grinning Hepburn in fourth place.

He had proven the engine had the power to win the race and Lew Welch was determined to build a fwd chassis that could harness the full horsepower of Bud Winfield's supercharged d.o.h.c. engine. And even with the pine wedge under throttle the howling of the engine had told the fans this was no ordinary race car and they were not disappointed when the first thoroughbred Novi made its appearance in 1946.

A four year lull followed the 1941 race because of WWII but when the announcement was made late in 1945 there would be an Indianapolis 500 in May of 1946 the Novi team of Welch and Winfield flew into action. Lew Welch contracted Frank Kurtis to design and build a body for a race car capable of handling the power of Winfield's d.o.h.c. V8. Bud Winfield and Kurtis had many meetings and conversations discussing the design of a fwd chassis that could best accomplish this king sized chore.

Once again the hands of Leo Goosen were called upon in the design of the front wheel drive system and Winfield had massaged the horsepower of his d.o.h.c. V8 up to 510 horsepower.

It was getting late in May before the beautiful blue Novi with the big yellow number two painted on the hood and tail arrived at the Speedway but the "oh's" and "ah's" from the onlookers were a good description of the race car that rolled out of the truck.

The car was big, weighing in at 1,919 pounds, but it was sleek, the top hood line was two inches below the top of the front wheels, and it was expensive with an estimated cost of \$42,000 and it was built with just one thing in mind, win the Indianapolis 500.

Once again Welch tapped the veteran Ralph Hepburn to man the controls and they began working out the usual bugs in a new race car just two days before qualifying began. And bugs there were, the biggest one being the Novi's tendency to jump out of gear at strange times. The first weekend of qualifying passed with no attempt made by the Novi.

Finally on the May 25th, the next to the last qualifying day, Hepburn took the beautiful brute out to qualify but the transmission problem reared its ugly head again and the Novi crew had another all-night session. Sunday May 26, 1946 was the last chance day and for the Novi that meant now or next year.

I had the pleasure of being at the Speedway that day and the memory of that Sunday is forever etched in my mind as I sat and watched, and heard, history

made, some of which is still heard at the Speedway today.



Hepburn's qualifying run was one of the most outstanding in the long history of the Speedway, as I remember it seemed as though every one in grandstands sensed a rare moment in sports was about to happen as the Novi left the pits

with a gentle murmur. As Hepburn took his warm up laps the murmur gradually increased until, as he ran down the backstretch before taking the green flag, he had all 510 horses under the Novi hood singing the Song of the Novi in full voice,

it had to awaken the Ghosts from races past who live in the Speedway garage area.

The Novi was a blue blur as Hepburn took the green flag and headed into the first turn, you knew no one had ever seen such speed as the song continued through the first and second turns.

The crescendo grew louder down the backstretch as all the horses went back to work heading for three and four with the Veteran in full control. Hepburn flashed past



the starting line at the end of lap one and again headed for the first turn the crowd waited to hear the time and speed.

A deep, booming voice over the PA system broke into the Novi song with the words that were to become among the most famous in Speedway history. Tom Carnegie for the first time boomed the words, "AND IT'S A NEW TRACK RECORD". Hepburn's first lap of 134.288 mph had shattered Jimmy Snyder's 1939 mark of 130.757 by more than 3-1/2 miles an hour and two legends had been added to the rich lore of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway

Hepburn slowed the brute slightly for the second and third laps and then called on all 510 horses for the grand finale of 134.449 and for the second time in his coming 60+ years as the Speedway PA announcer Tom Carnegie's voice boomed, "AND IT'S A NEW TRACK RECORD". Hepburn and the Novi had fast time for the 33 car field but they would start in the 19th position.

And Lew Welch, Bud Winfield and Ralph Hepburn had given race fans a memory that would last a lifetime and the Novi had taken another step down the long road to failure.

The Novi, A Most Magnificent Flop - Chapter 3

Tony Hulman completed the deal to buy the Speedway from Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker on Nov. 14, 1945, the announcement followed quickly in December that there would be an Indianapolis 500 on Thursday May 30, 1946. Believe it or



Lou Fageol's Twin Coach
two 91 c.i. Offys

not entries piled in to the Speedway before the April 15 closing date for 58 race cars.

It's true most of the entries were pre-war Champ cars raced on dirt or pavement, there were two new cars, one very unusual.

It was Lou Fageol's Twin Coach Special powered by two 91 c.i. Offy midget engines, driven by Paul Russon.

Paul qualified for the middle of the front row with speed of 126.183. In the unusual twin engine set up, one engine drove the front wheels and one drove the rear wheels. Russon's good effort was wiped out in the 17th lap when he hit the wall in turn two and finished 33rd

Another unusual car was Preston Tucker's Tucker Torpedo 6 cylinder Miller, rear engine four wheel drive, driven by George Barringer. George qualified the beast for the 24th spot and went out in the 27th lap with transmission trouble. This car was the only survivor of the three Harry Miller built for Gulf Oil in 1938.

The other new race car was Lew Welch's new Kurtis chassis with Bud Winfield's d.o.h.c., supercharged V8 under the hood, now known as the Novi Governor Special. In the next 20 years, 23 Novi, driven by 13 drivers, would try for a win in 13 Indianapolis 500's. The 1946 race was probably the Novi's best shot at Tony Hulman's pot of gold due to the quality of the other 32 starters after a four year pause.

When the green flag dropped Hepburn left no doubt in anyone's mind what was in his mind. From his 19th starting position on the 11th lap he set a new race lap record of 129.9 mph, on the 12th lap he moved past Rex Mays to take the lead. Hep led for 44 laps then brought the Novi in to the pits with a severe brake problem. It took 8 minutes and 58 seconds for the crew to learn a crew member had put automotive brake fluid into the master cylinder instead of aircraft fluid, the brake wheel cylinder seals were pretty well cooked. Hepburn went back onto the track in 13th place with very poor brakes.



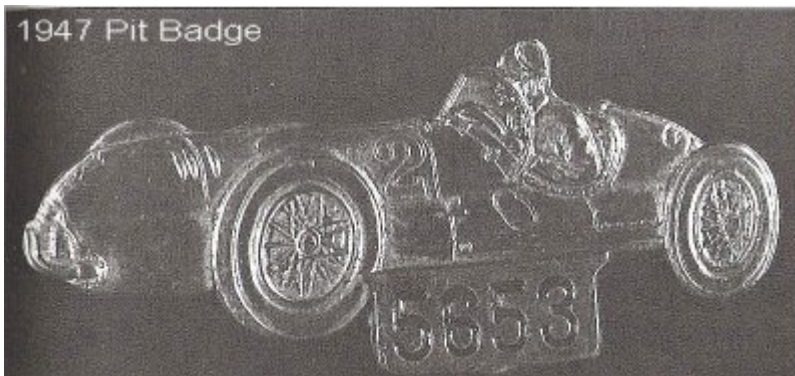
Brakes or no brakes the veteran Hepburn had no intentions of giving up the fight, by the 90th lap he had the screaming Novi in 6th place and in his 120th trip around the squared oval Hep had the Novi in 4th place. The Novi was the fastest car on the track, maybe there was still chance. But on lap 121 the Novi coasted to a stop on the backstretch, done for the day. Some say was a broken connecting rod others say the wild ride finally broke the crankshaft, no matter what Hepburn and the beautiful brute finished 14th.

Even in failure Hepburn and the Novi left their ever increasing number of fans with never to be forgotten memories, the breath taking qualifying run and the two back to front runs in the first half of the race became the opening story in the legend of the Novi.

Lew Welch doubled his pleasure for the 1947 Sweepstakes, he had a second Novi built. Some thought this would make a very interesting Indianapolis 500 to see who could finish third because after Hepburn's '46 showing two Novi were a lock for first and second. The Speedway even added to the lore by making the metal badges required for admittance to restricted areas in the shape of the 1946 Novi, even to putting the number 2 on the hood and tail.

There was an unseen rut in Lew's road to success in the person of car owner, builder and former race driver Lou Moore, whose cars had already won the 1938 and 1941 Indianapolis 500's, and Moore had not been resting on his laurels during the Winter.

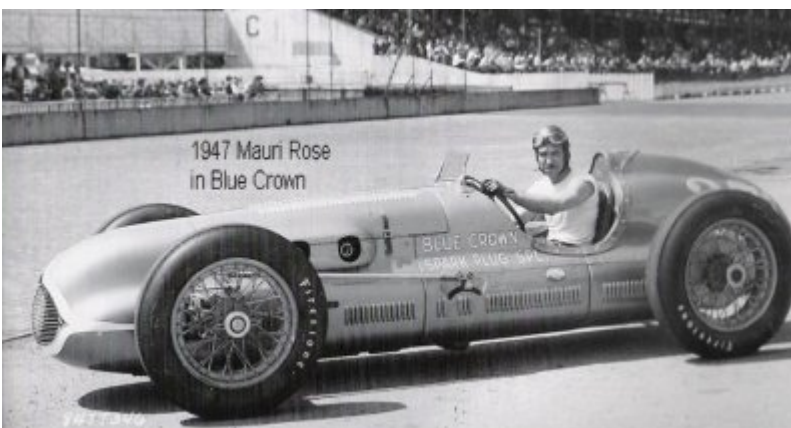
With help of Chassis builder Emil Deidt, Moore had built two race cars identical to Welch's Novi in many respects. Moore's cars, sponsored by Blue Crown Spark Plug were front wheel drives and the body shapes were almost Novi reproductions.



However under the hood of the Blue Crowns there was no supercharged d.o.h.c. V8, Moore had decided to stay with the faithful Offy four banger but he

did detune them to run on high octane gasoline and develop about 275 horses. Also the Blue Crowns came in at 1,650 pounds, almost 300 pounds lighter than Welch's Novi. It was shaping up to be a hell of a Month of May, but wait until you hear who ended up driving what.

The big news heading into the Month of May turned out not be Novi and Blue Crowns, but the threatened driver's strike by the newly formed American Society of Professional Auto Racing (ASPAR) with Ralph Hepburn as President and Rex Mays Vice-President.



Due to Hepburn's "presidency" Welch decided to put Sam Hanks in his seat in one Novi and veteran Cliff Bergere in the second Novi. Then due to a misunderstanding between Lou and Sam, about some "kindly" remarks Hanks made about the ASPAR Welch yanked Sam out of his seat and gave the ride to Merrill (Doc) Williams. Then when poor Doc missed a wave off sign while qualifying after a slow first lap, Lew gave him the heave-ho. Jimmy Jackson and Herb Ardinger both tried out for the empty seat but Welch gave the nod to Ardinger.

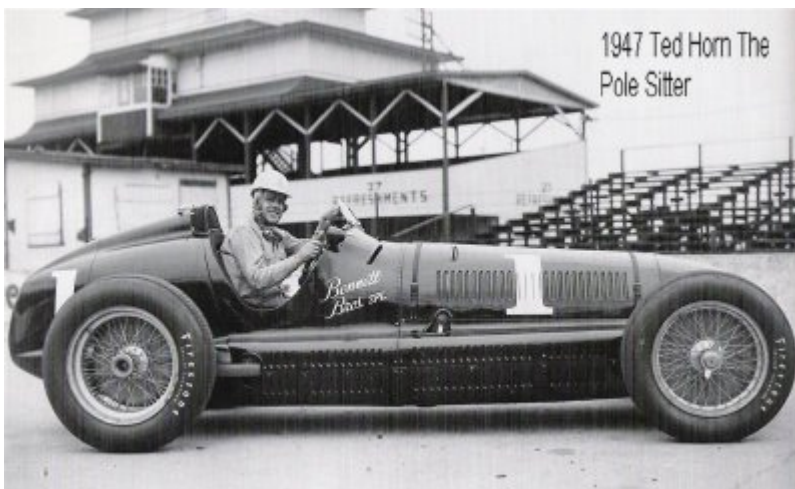
In the meantime Lou Moore had given one of the Blue Crowns to Mauri Rose and the other to Tony Bettenhausen, but Bettenhausen also favored the ASPAR so

Moore gave him the thumb and called on rookie Bill Holland to handle the second Blue Crown.

The messy feud between the Speedway and the ASPAR was finally settled when the ASPAR backed off its demands for the race purse to be boosted to 40 percent of the gate and agreed that none of its members could bump a qualified non-member from the starting field. The Speedway agreed to hike the qualifying prize money. Finally after a very bitter and confused practice period, dominated by two Blue Crowns and two Novi, the Speedway was opened for qualifying, as scheduled on May 17, 1947.

The Novi, A Most Magnificent Flop - Chapter 4

In spite of Lew Welch's, and all the Novi's crew's, best efforts to have both cars ready to qualify on the first day mistakes by the two drivers, and Bud Winfield, managed to turned pole day into a nightmare.



Cliff Bergere got things off on the wrong foot when on his first qualifying lap he spun his Novi into the creek which runs through the infield in the first turn. Other than being covered with mud and a small dent in the nose the Novi was

undamaged and it was back on the track hours later, after a mud cleaning bath and a thorough check.

This time Bergere decided to play it safe and qualified at a leisurely 124.957, nearly nine mph slower than Hepburn's record breaking 133.944 in 1946 in the same car. The speed was good enough to put Bergere in the middle of the front row along side pole sitter Ted Horn, driving Wilbur Shaw's 1939 and 1940 winning Maserati. Lew Welch was teed off about missing a shot at the pole.

But the spinning day was not over for the Novi team. It was still "legal" for team mechanics to warm the cars up by taking a few laps before the driver got in the seat and Bud Winfield decided he would see how his "Baby" acted on the Speedway.

The Baby quickly showed the Boss who really ran the show by swapping ends, but touching nothing, and the red faced Winfield promptly turned the car over to driver Doc Williams, after a few changes. But Williams proved to be no better than Winfield and on his first hot lap parked the Novi in the same creek Bergere's Novi had occupied earlier in the day.

After another mud bath, and another thorough check of the Novi, and himself, Doc tried again and this time "missed" the wave off from Lew Welch after a first lap of 120.919 and a second lap 119.538. When he completed the four laps with an average of 120.733, after missing the wave off sign, Welch's thumb told Doc

Williams he was looking for a ride and Herb Ardinger had the seat in the second Novi.

There was only one more qualifier that first day before the rains came and that was Mauri Rose, driving one of the Blue Crowns He took the outside spot on the front row with a speed of 124.040.

The track and AAA officials agreed to let the Novi, with Ardinger in the seat, start on the fourth spot since it had been qualified the first day.



Rain continued to plague to qualifying the second weekend and only three cars made the

field Saturday. Finally Sunday morning the second Blue Crown, with rookie Bill Holland replacing Tony Bettenhausen, gave the crowd something to talk about when he set fast time for the starting field with a speed of 128.755 mph. This put the two Novi in the second and fourth starting spots, the Blue Crowns starting third and eighth, and Ted Horn, in the faithful old Shaw Maserati, on the pole. The Novi had some stiff competition after all.

Due to the hassle with the ASPAR strike and the weather, and even though qualifying was extended one hour, only 30 cars qualified for the 1947 Indianapolis 500, it was the last time to date that less than 33 cars started the race.



Friday May 30, race day, dawned bright and clear and a shirt sleeve crowd filled the grandstands and

infield anxiously waiting to see if the powerful Novi could live up to Lew Welch's expectations. The start of the race looked as though it might be an easy day for for

the beautiful brutes. At the drop of the green, Bergere took off like a scalded ape with the Novi singing its song for all to hear.

Bergere put the Novi in the record book with a new opening lap record of 122.515 and then the Novi's song became a crescendo in the fourth lap with another race record of 124.622. By the 10th lap the Novi was lapping the slower cars.

It was strictly no contest until the 23rd lap when the Novi's weak point, front tires, forced the Novi in for new rubber, Mauri Rose and his Blue Crown took the lead.

When the Novi came out of the pits it was one lap down and in seventh place but Bergere went back to work and soon had the brute in second place, clearly demonstrating the Novi had no equal. The mad dash back to the front came to an end on the 63rd lap when Cliff brought the Novi in with a burnt piston.

Welch had been watching Ardinger's listless drive in the second Novi and on the 69th lap called him into the pits and with his well known thumb gave Herb the "out" sign, Bergere took the empty seat and headed back into the fray. Cliff picked up the pace but again tire wear and poor fuel mileage would not let him run the Novi full out, but he did manage to get the Novi up to fourth place.

In the meantime Bill Holland has put his Blue Crown in the lead, in spite of a spin, and the two blue Crowns ran 1-2 for 143 laps, with Holland holding a nice lead over Mauri Rose. On the 190th circuit Lou Moore decided his two Blue Crowns had things well in hand and flashed the "EZY" sign to both his drivers.



Well everyone knows the rest of the story, Bill Holland did and Mauri Rose didn't and on the 193rd trip around Rose passed Holland for the lead and Bill, thinking Mauri had just unlapped himself, watched as Mauri Rose won his second Indianapolis 500.

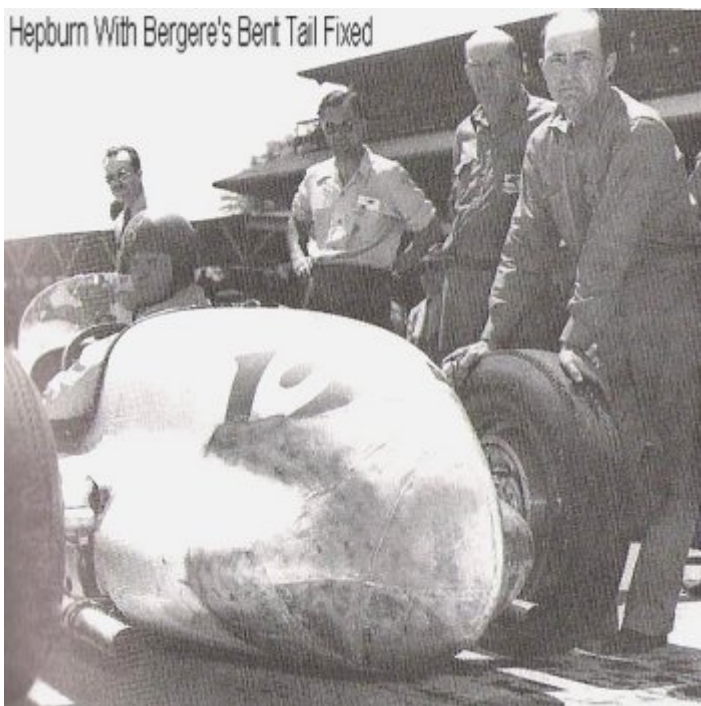
So there was the finish, the Blue Crowns were one and two, Ted Horn brought the Maserati in third and the Novi, well Bergere, in relief of Ardinger, held on for

fourth but the burnt piston relegated Cliff's front row starting Novi to a 21st place finish.

The overweight, front wheel drive Novi were once again to be the fastest cars in the race but their voracious appetite for tires and fuel proved to be their downfall.

After the race came an invite from Mobil Oil to take a Novi to Bonneville, Utah to sing its song on the wide open Salt Flats.

The Novi, A Most Magnificent Flop - Chapter 5



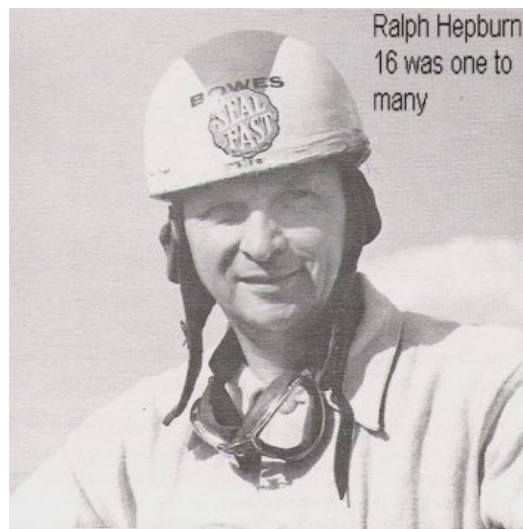
Shortly after the 1947 Indianapolis 500, Mobil Oil decided the Company should sponsor an attempt to rewrite the Land Speed Record book for class E (110 c.i.) engines, Class D (261-305) engines and unlimited class on the Bonneville Salt Flats.

Danny Oaks, driving a 110 c.i. Offy powered midget, Ab Jenkins was chosen to direct the Novi symphony and John Cobb was set to try for the unlimited record with his Railton Mobil Special, powered by two 12 cylinder 1250 hp Napier Lion aircraft engines

Danny Oaks, driving John Blach's 110 c.i. Offy midget, drew the straw to break Ronnie Householder's 123.29 mark set driving an Offy midget in 1937. Danny was the first to write his name in the record book by making the two required runs through the measured mile with an average speed of 139.12

A planned 24 hour endurance run around an 11.5 mile circular track by the Novi was cancelled when driver Ab Jenkins said he didn't feel comfortable in the car. Then after Novi owner Lew Welch, took a shakedown run in the Novi at better than 170 mph he decided the Novi should try for several Class D (261 - 305 c.i.) records on the circular course with Marv Jenkins, Ab's son, doing the driving.

On August 21 1947, Marv took to the circle track twice, the first time out he averaged 183.6 mph and the second run was 175.4. Once again the Novi proved there was no problem under the hood with



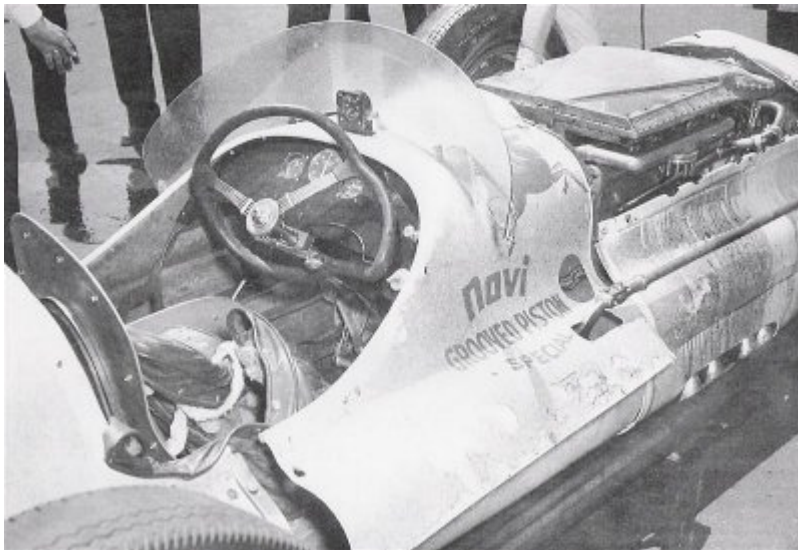
power or speed potential. The two runs broke two International marks for five and ten kilometers and two for National records for five and ten miles.

But alas all was in vain for Oaks and Marv when on September 16 John Cobb set a new unlimited record on the measured mile of 394.196 driving his Railton Mobile Special powered by two 12 cylinder 1250 hp Napier Lion aircraft engines. All publicity from the Salt Flats was aimed at John Cobb and his new LSR, Danny and Jenkins were the forgotten men.

So ended the Bonneville interlude and once again it was time to prepare for the reason the Novi's existed, the Indianapolis 500 and May of 1948, the race that should have belonged to the Novi but once again Dame Fortune turned her back on the snake bitten beast.

Of course Dame Fortune had some help in turning the month of May 1948 into a disaster instead of a Victory Celebration, and one of the first to give the fickle Lady a hand was none other than Novi owner Lew Welch. Lew remembered the Blue Crown's one-two finish from 1947 and their one pit stop strategy and figured the same plan would work for his Novi so he had 112 gallon fuel tanks

installed in both Novi entered in the '48 race.



The rumor was the Novi was good for about 3-1/2 mpg so how Lew figured it took a 112 gallon tank to make the 500 a one stop race no one has explained.

The single pit stop worked fine for Lou Moore's much lighter Offy powered Blue Crowns, but not for the heavier, more powerful

Novi and with the added weight of the extra fuel, tire wear made the one stop race a dream and a nightmare for the Firestones bolted to each corner of the cars.

But the Novi arrived at the Speedway on May 12 filled with hope and confidence and they were definite favorites with the crowds and throughout the garage area. Once again Welch tapped Cliff Bergere, a veteran of 16 Indianapolis 500's, and Chet Miller, with 13 previous 500's to his credit, to fill the seats in the two Novi.

On May 13 Bergere was the first to take his Novi for a spin and, whoops, that is just what he did his first time out, the only damage was to Cliss's pride as he tried to figure out the cause for the strange behavior.

May 14, with qualifying due to start the next day, Cliff took the 800 pound gorilla out again and coming off the fourth turn the brute did another loop. This time the Novi's tail clipped the outer wall, but, thankfully, the new fuel tank was not damaged so there was no fire. Once back to garage, Bergere told the World he had had enough and packed his bag. Welch disagreed with Cliff's version and said he fired the veteran Indianapolis driver.

Bergere's problems had another bad effect for the Novi crew, Chet Miller decided he did not feel comfortable driving the cantankerous beast and informed Lew Welck he wished to be released from his contract as the driver of the Novi. Now Lew had two seats to fill, one day before pole day.

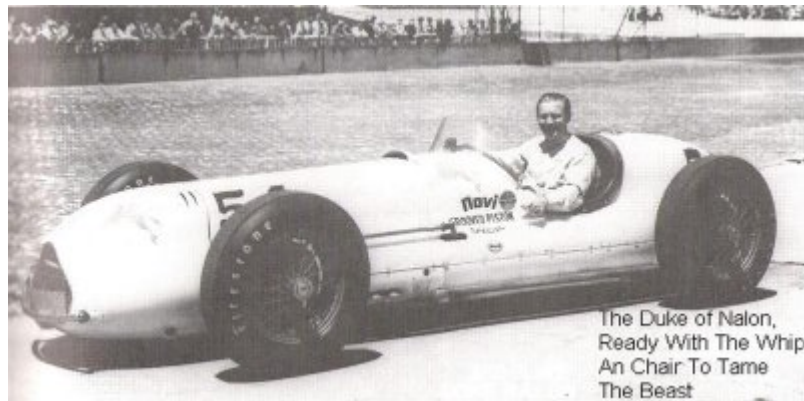
The search for Bergere's replacement was short lived, Ralph Hepburn, after a year's lay off due his involvement with the American Society of Professional Automobile Racing, was set to drive Don Lee's Mercedes but when approached by Lew Welch immediately agreed to drive the Novi.

Hepburn took the Novi for a few warm up laps Saturday afternoon and suggested some changes he wanted made to make the beast behave as he remembered. On Sunday, May 16, 1948, Ralph Hepburn felt ready to make hot laps in the Novi he had once called "the greatest race car I have ever driven".

Thanks to George Peters in his book "Novi The Legendary Indianapolis Race car" there are two eye witness accounts of what happened that Sunday morning after Hepburn had completed his first hot lap at an

unofficial 133 mph. Driver Paul Russo and racing mechanic Ray Nichels were in an observation stand at the entrance to turn three and gave this account.

"As this curve began, the rear end of the Novi seemed to swerve around and by the time the skid could be corrected the front end was on the infield grass. With the entire car on the grass Hep gave it the gun and the car jugged straight across the track into the wall, about three quarters full. It did not turn around but



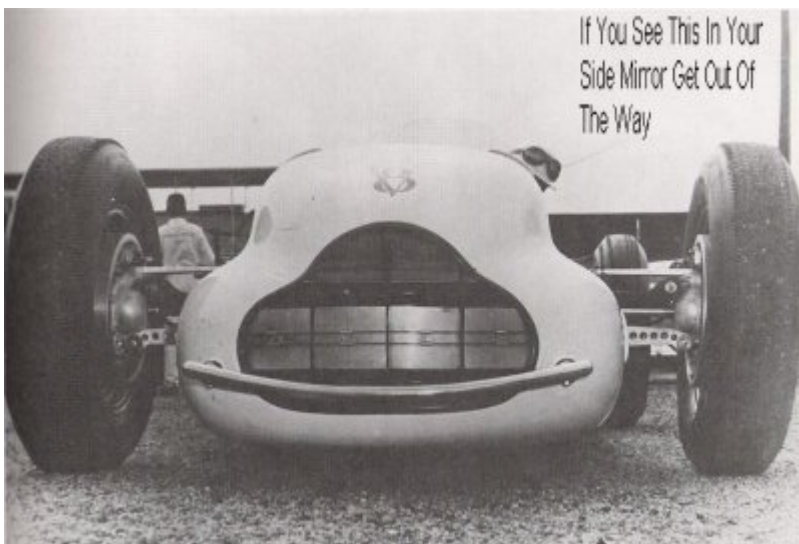
skidded sideways across the track and came to rest in the north straightaway. Hepburn was badly crushed, his helmet and goggles were thrown fifty yards."

Ralph Hepburn, a veteran of 15 previous Indianapolis 500's had paid the ultimate.

The one remaining Novi, the fastest and most powerful car entered in the race, was sitting in it's garage with only five days of practice left, and no one to fill the empty seat. There was one driver who wanted the ride, even though some of his friends tried to convince him it was a bad idea, and when Lew Welch made the offer Duke Nalon didn't hesitate to answer the call and the uncivilized Novi was his to tame.

The Novi, A Most Magnificent Flop - Chapter 6

In spite of only five days remaining before the last qualifying weekend, the Duke's Novi remained in its garage out of respect to Hepburn's fatal accident and all track



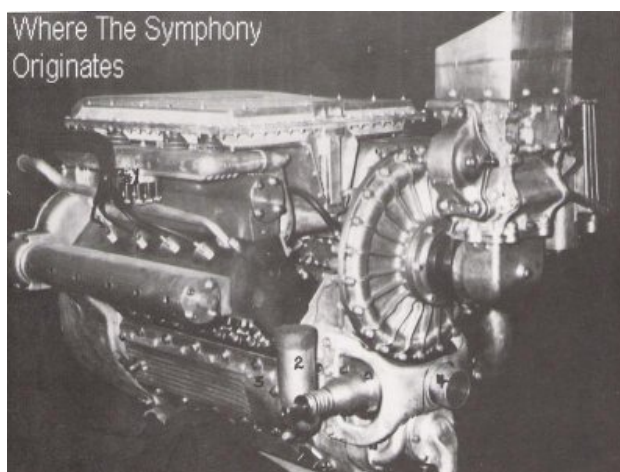
activity ceased during the hours of the memorial services for Hepburn in California. On Wednesday Nalon was given his first chance to see if he could tame the powerful, front wheel drive beast.

For several easy laps it was a get aquatinted session until the Duke decided the time had come for the Novi to play its song with him

waving the baton. The Novi, almost as if it had a mind of its own, promptly spun into the infield grass. There was no damage and, more important, Nalon thought he had discovered the reason the Novi swapped ends so easily.

He told Welch and Windfield the foot pedals were to close together, when he tried to tap the clutch pedal he had hit the brake, causing the Novi's whoop-dee-doo. Changes were made and in three days of practice there were no further incidents.

The qualifying weekend arrived and Nalon felt he and the Novi were both ready. With the first 10 spots in the field already filled, Welch told the Duke "go as fast as you feel safe" as he prepared to make his run, but the Duke had some things he wanted to prove.



His first lap under the green was 133.274, and the next one was quicker at 134.008. Nalon's third trip around the squared oval dropped to 131.272 and the fourth circuit a meager 128.023, his four lap average 131.603. Hepburn's four lap track record of 133.944, set in '46, was still

intact but Rex Mays 1948 pole winning speed of 130.577 had been bettered by more than one mph and Nalon and the Novi had fast time for the field of 33.

Race day needless to say the Novi crew was full of hope, along with countless fans and many in the garage area - this had to be the year of the Novi. Nalon played it cool at the start and held the Novi's eager horses in check as he began to work his way to the front from his center, fourth row starting position.

A cheer rose up from the crowd on the 92nd lap when the scoring boards around the track announced Nalon and the Novi had passed Rex Mays and his Bowes Seal Fast for the lead. The Duke led easily for eight laps and on the 100th circuit, following the one stop plan, he pulled in to pits for fuel and tires.

The 1 minute 48 second stop cost Nalon the lead but the Novi sounded solid as the Duke loosed the reins and let the beast roar out of the pits in hot pursuit of Mauri



Rose who had put his Blue Crown in first place during the Novi's downtime.

Things became very confusing around the 160 lap mark, both the Blue Crown crew and the Novi crew were giving their charges the P1 sign and no one seemed to know who was right. Finally after

167 laps it was officially announced that Duke and the Novi were P1, but this proved to be wrong. On the 180 circuit the Duke was really almost 27 seconds behind Rose but he was gaining more than a second a lap.

Whether or not the Flying Red Horse could have caught the fleeing Blue Crown in 20 laps became a mute point when the Novi began to sputter on the backstretch on the 186th lap and an unbelieving Nalon headed for the pits and a drink of fuel for the thirsty beast. Later examination decided a gigantic air bubble had given a false reading of a full fuel tank on the stop at lap 100, the tank had been shorted, the price had to be paid.

Rose and his team mate Bill Holland, driving the second Blue Crown, both passed Nalon and the Novi and they sat helplessly in the pits as the crew worked getting the thirsty Novi fueled. The Duke's mind was working furiously as he figured maybe, just maybe, with 14 laps to go there was still time.

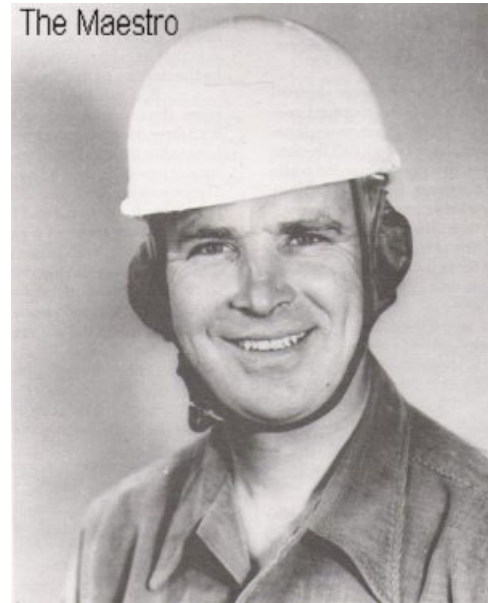
Lew Welch finally gave Duke the signal and he opened the throttle and eased his foot off the clutch pedal and the mighty Novi's engine stalled. The crew immediately gave the hand crank a couple quick spins but the hot engine refused the crew had to get the battery starter and finally the engine roared and Nalon, and the Novi were on their way.

Two minutes and 18 seconds had ticked off the clock while Dame Fortune was twiddling her thumbs and the Novi was doomed to a third place, finish 2 minutes and 30 seconds again behind the two Blue Crowns.

For the second year in a row the same four cars finished one, two, three and four, but this time the Novi was third and Ted Horn in the old Wilbur Shaw Maserati was fourth.

If it was any consolation to the four they all broke Floyd Roberts 10 year old record for the 500 miles. Roberts old mark was 117.200, Rose's winning speed in '48 was 119.814, Holland's 2nd place speed was 119.147, Nalon came in at 118.034 and Horn finished at 117.844.

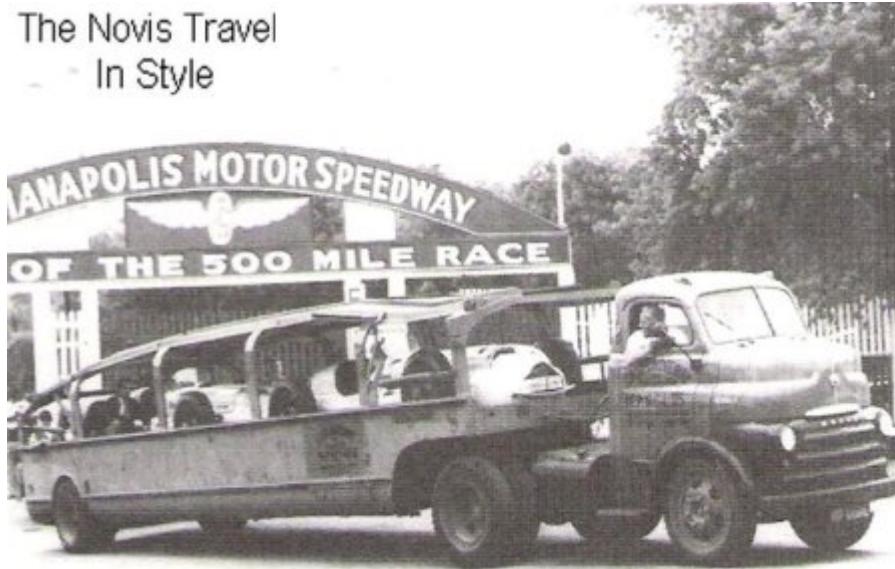
Again the Novi proved the package contained all the ingredients it took to be a winner. Power was never a question and for the second year stamina was beyond question but another question had also been answered there was a new maestro waving the baton for the symphony of Novi, Duke Nalon.



The Novi, A Most Magnificent Flop - Chapter 7

The disappointment of 1948 didn't disappear over night but finally the results of three years running the Indianapolis 500, with four cars, shined through the gloom

The Novis Travel
- - In Style



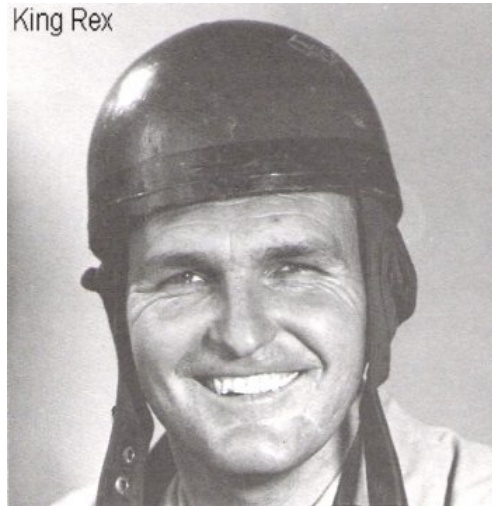
and the Novi team realized their results for the four years had been fantastic.

Four Novi, in three races, had ran a total of 584 laps and led all three races for 116 laps with only one mechanical failure, a broken piston.

In addition the four cars had set fast time for the field twice, set on the front row once, started fourth once and finished fourth one time and third once.

Lew Welch and Bud Winfield knew what the Novi could do with Duke Nalon pushing the buttons, maybe all they needed was another chauffeur who could do the same for the Novi rebuilt from Hepburn's crash and they would double their chances for the elusive victory at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. With this thought in mind the ride was offered to Rex Mays, a 12 year veteran of the Indianapolis 500 and the leading pole sitter in Speedway history with four poles, '35, '36, '40 and '48, to his credit.

King Rex



Even though he had never raced a front wheel drive car, Mays knew the Novi's potential and jumped at the chance to drive the beast. The first of May arrived and the only question in anyone's mind was about King Rex and the front wheel drive. It didn't take long for Mays to dispel that question when he quickly began running practice laps in the high 120's and a then tossed in a 130 for good measure.

The garage area, and the experts, quickly decided the 1949 Indianapolis 500 was going to be one hell of a race for third place. In fact I heard Peter DePaolo say many times in the 1960's that in all his years at the Speedway, he thought the two Novi in 1949 were the most dominating cars he could remember.

Wilbur Shaw, Speedway President, joined the chorus, in 1949, when he said he thought it was possible one of the Novi's would run 135 mph in qualifying.

On pole Saturday, believe it or not, both Novi's were polished and shiny sitting in line waiting to qualify and they did not disappoint the many fans. When the smoke cleared the Duke had his Novi on the pole with a speed of 132.939 and Rex Mays put his Novi next to the Duke with at 129.552.



There were those who once again thought maybe the Duke had made his run with a light foot so his departed friend, Ralph Hepburn could hold the track record he set in 1946 with one lap at 134.449 and four laps of 133.944. In describing his run Nalon said , "there is one inch of throttle left on the Novi that I don't want anything to do with". Think what the other 31 drivers in the field must have thought when they heard that remark.

Race day morning found the Novi crew, and the two drivers, feeling very confident this was their day, Welch held a meeting with Nalon and Mays and according to George Peters in his book "Novi The Legendary Indianapolis Race car," gave them their last minute instructions.

However, they were leading at the end of the first lap. "That's the way you will run all day. I don't want you to run out of tires and fuel racing each other."

"If you finish 1 - 2 the split will be 50-50, if it's 1- 3 or further back the winning driver gets 50 percent, the other driver will pocket 40 percent."

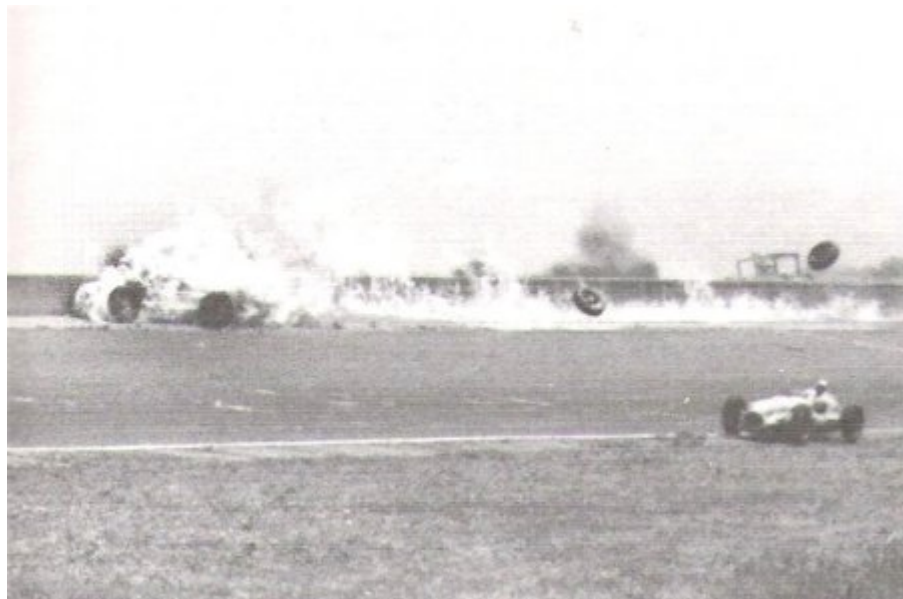
At the start of the race Mays knew, after the rebuilding process, his mount had a slight edge in horsepower over the Duke's Flying Red Horse so he figured second

gear would get him into the lead going into the first turn, he didn't believe Duke had figured the same thing.

At the flag Duke's Novi was singing full song in first gear, Rex's had his mount singing the same song but it was in second gear and for those few yards going into the first turn an amazed Mays watched as Nalon faded into the distance, shifting into second as he made the left hander and headed down the short chute into two.

Duke set a new opening lap record on his first lap with a speed of 126.5 and held a lead of more than 300 yards as the crowds cheered the Novi's song in stereo sound. By the 23rd lap starter Seth Klein had the blue-yellow move over flag waving constantly as the two monsters began lapping the field, in fact one of those being lapped was Marui Rose driving last year's winning Blue Crown.

As he passed Rose entering the third turn his Novi's left rear axle shaft snapped and the left rear wheel flew high in the air. The Duke fought the wildly spinning brute but it slammed into the outer retaining wall tail first, rupturing the 60 gallon fuel tank and burst into flames.



Nalon later said, "Hitting the wall thankfully did

not stun me and I knew from the heat if I was going to get out I had to do so quickly." He dove out of the car over the wall, badly bruising his arms as he cleared the concrete, and began rolling in the grass to smother his burning clothes.

The race continued under the caution flag with Mays leading but almost immediately Rex noticed the song from his Flying Red Horse was no longer a robust tune and the pack began closing.

The first to pass him was Lee Wallard driving the venerable old Shaw Maserati. Mays fell in behind and tried to follow the Maserati but then, on lap 48, the Novi

engine simply quit running when the magneto failed and Rex coasted to stop in the grass.

For 29 days in the Month of May Dame Fortune had smiled on the Novi but on the 30th day her daughter, Miss Fortune, once again took charge and the chances for the Novi first win in the Indianapolis 500 vanished.



The Novi, A Most Magnificent Flop - Chapter 8

Every year since 1941 when the first Winfield V8 (Novi) raced at the Speedway, stuffed in the six year old Miller (Edsel) Ford chassis, the results had been good enough to look forward to bringing the V8 power to the next Indianapolis 500.

The 1949 race had been no different with the two Novi starting on the front row, Nalon on the pole and Mays in the middle, and each leading the race before a horrific crash put Nalon out and a bad magneto sidelined Mays.

In fact seven Novi's had raced in five Indianapolis 500's, completing 855 laps with only one engine mechanical failure. Cliff Bergre's burned a piston in 1947 after 63 laps. Power, speed and stamina were not problems.



However on November 6, 1949 they may have been a harbinger of things to come, the Novi lost another driver when Rex Mays was killed in a race at Delmar, CA.

Then 1950 rolled around and Novi owner Lew Welch was unhappy with the purse structure at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway even to the point of talking about not entering the Novi unless significant changes were made. Evidently the Speedway had heard the rumors because when the 1950 Speedway race program appeared there was a likeness of the Novi on the cover.

Welch, Tony Hulman and Wilbur Shaw had a meeting at the Speedway on April 15, the last day entries for Speedway would be accepted, in a final attempt to resolve the dispute. After the meeting Lew said the Novi entries would be in before the midnight deadline.

The entries made it in time, but the Novi didn't arrive at the Speedway until May 10 and immediately ran into trouble. There were 68 entries in 1950 and all the garages in the garage area were full. The Novi finally found "housing" at a

downtown Lincoln-Mercury dealership but had to be hauled back and forth to the Speedway every day for practice and qualifying, a time consuming operation.

The Novi, with the Duke in one and "new" old Novi driver Chet Miller filling the other seat, were on the track three days before the first qualifying day. On Friday, May 12, Welch made the simple statement that the Novi would not be at the track for pole day. Some said he was still mad at the Speedway and wanted to hurt the pole day crowd, others said it was due to the Novi's short practice time.

Those that decided to stay home missed getting to see a rookie win the pole for the first time since 1914 when Jean Chassagne won the pole in a drawing. Rookie Walt Faulkner finished his driver's test three days before pole day then on Saturday not only won the pole, but broke Novi driver Ralph Hepburn's one and four lap records, 134.499 for one lap and 133.944 for four laps. Faulkner's new marks were a scorching 136.033 for one lap and his four lap run 134.343 driving J. C. Agajanian's converted dirt car.

Meanwhile back at the Lincoln-Mercury sat the two Novi.

The Novi were on the track Sunday but no attempt was made to qualify, and no one seemed quite sure when a qualifying attempt might be made by either car.



During practice the next week Miller had his Novi in the 131 mph range but the crew decided a few more adjustments could make it a little better. The adjustments were made and Chet's Novi promptly burned a valve. It was back to the Lincoln-Mercury shops for some major engine work.

With one Novi in the shop Miss Fortune turned her attention to the Duke's pride and joy and put her hex on the supercharger with a sheared drive shaft. Two Novi in the shop for major repairs and the second qualifying weekend, May 20-21, came and went.

Friday, May 26, one day before the third and last qualifying weekend - yes Children in those days there were really 31 days in May at the Speedway - the

Novi were finally back at the Speedway with major repairs completed. Nalon had his mount on the track running easy laps to let the supercharger become acquainted with the new pieces.

On Saturday the 33 car field was filled and the bumping began but both Novi were experiencing carburetion problems and neither made a qualifying attempt.

Sunday morning, the last day of qualifying, the Novi were trucked to the track in a downpour of rain. About noon, with it still raining Chief Steward Tommy Milton said qualifying hours would not be extended, the Novi were trucked back to the Lincoln-Mercury dealership. But this was Indianapolis in the Month of May, shortly afternoon the rains stopped and the sun came out. Tarpaulins were quickly removed from the cars and they were pushed in line to qualify. The Novi were trucked back to the track. When they arrived they found seven cars sitting in line, waiting for the track to dry.

Finally the bricks were dry and the track was opened for qualifying, the roar from the crowd announced it was time for the first Novi as the crew built a fire in Chet Miller's ride.

Unfortunately Chet had a passenger with him as he rolled out of the pits, it was Miss Fortune riding along and there was a tell tale sign of blue smoke from the exhaust pipe. Chet pulled back into the pits and the crew fired Nalon's car.

It took a tow truck to get the Duke back to the pits when the Novi stalled on the backstretch, the supercharger shaft had sheared once again.

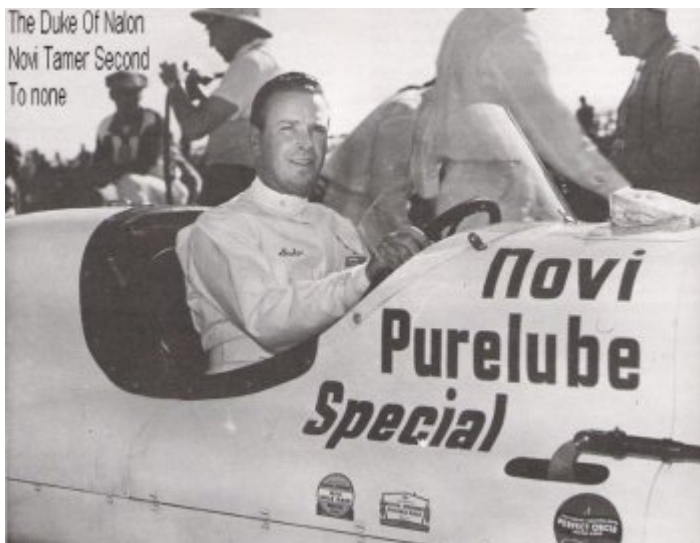
A tired Novi crew had been furiously working to get Miller's Novi cured of its fueling ailment but Chet, sitting in his Novi, was fifth in the qualifying line when the bewitching hour of 6:00pm arrived and the track was closed.

Johnnie Parsons won the 1950 Indianapolis 500, which was stopped short at 345 miles because of rain, but the Novi crew read about the race they will never forget in the newspapers, they were downtown at the Lincoln-Mercury dealership packing to go home.



The Novi, A Most Magnificent Flop - Chapter 9

The disaster at the Speedway in May became small potatoes for the Novi team in October when Bud Winfield was fatally injured in a traffic crash returning from a



sprint car race at the Clovis (Cal.) Speedway. The Novi team lost its right arm and the mechanical decisions fell into the lap of Jean Marcenac, the genius who had been the guiding hand behind Wilbur Shaw's faithful Maserati.

Bud had worked for years on the project and never wavered in his confidence that the Novi would be a winner and Lew Welch, with this in mind, organized a new plan of attack for the Indianapolis Motor

Speedway effort in 1951. Part of these plans included an early arrival at the Speedway and to be sure of this both cars were air freighted to the Speedway from their base in California.

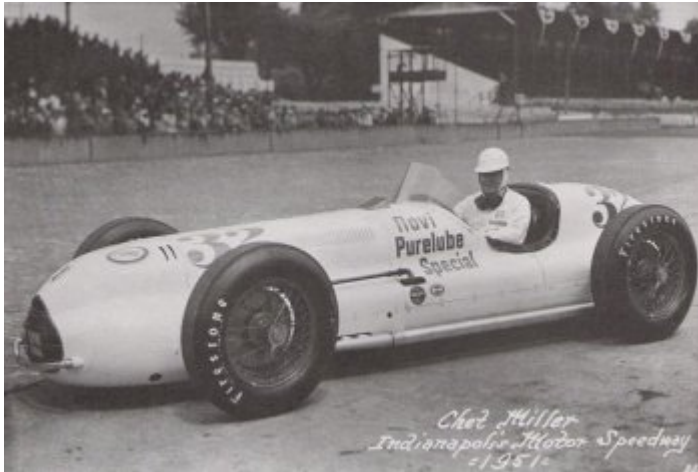
Once again it was the Duke of Nalon and Chet Miller set to drive the Novi and all was ready when the Speedway opened with one exception, Duke was among the missing, at the Speedway.

Nalon was still at his "off season" job working for the Ford Motor Car Company tying up loose ends. It was going to be up to Chet Miller to shake any bugs out of both Novi in preparation for the first qualifying day May 12.



Nalon did not arrive at the Speedway until the Friday before the first day of qualifying, and his Novi was sixth in the qualifying line on Saturday. Evidently

Chet had done an outstanding job getting Duke's mount ready to run. Nalon not only set the crowd on its ear by breaking Walt Faulkner's year old one lap record of 136.013 by hitting 137.049 but then shattered Faulkner's four lap mark of 134.343 with a sizzling four lap run of 136.498. Proof positive not only were the Novi back

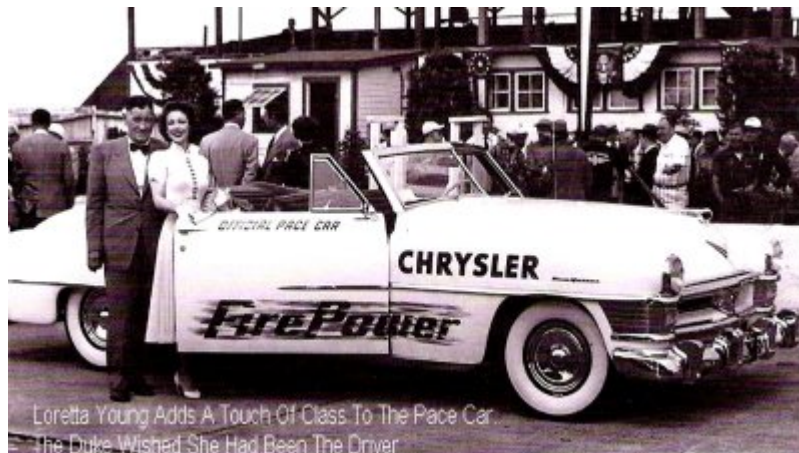


but the Duke had not lost his touch after the disaster of 1950. The Novi was on the pole for the 35th running of the Indianapolis 500.

Chet Miller came down with a case of flu and didn't make a run on Saturday and on Sunday a mechanical bug bit his Novi. When the second weekend rolled around Chet was ready but his Novi was still ailing. Walt Faulkner and

Agajanian's new Kuzma roadster were more than ready and once again the diminutive Faulkner became the one and four lap record holder by besting Nalon's time with a first lap of 138.122 and a four mark of 136.872, but he started in 14th place.

Finally on the last day of qualifying Miller and the Novi were both ready to go at the same time, and what a ride Chet gave the Novi. His speed for the four circuits of the squared oval was a sizzling 135.798 which was the third fastest time of the 33 starters behind Walt and the Duke, but he had to line up in the 28th starting position.



All in the Novi camp were smiling. Qualifying had once again proved their

charges were ranked among the best of the best and if the human mistakes within could be eliminated they would once again be the feared beasts of old. They forgot mistakes could also be made outside the camp.

Came race day and David Wallace, president of Chrysler, was scheduled to drive the New Yorker pace car, and that proved to be the down fall for Duke and his

hopes for a winning day at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Years later when telling of the '51 race Nalon would joke about Wallace's speed driving the pace not being able to match his age of 75 years.

Despite Duke's best efforts to keep the Novi engine cleaned out the slow pace fouled the spark plugs and Nalon was forced into the pits after a few laps to have a new set of spark plugs installed. When the hood went up any hopes for a good finish went out the window. On one stop for another set of plugs Duke found



Miller already in the pits, his Novi also suffering ignition problems.

On the 56th lap Chet's troubles proved terminal and his Novi left the chase and was credited with a 25th place finish. The Duke labored on with his ailing mount until the engine in the Novi simply quit. Due to the

torrid pace of the leaders the drop out rate was exceptionally high, only eight cars were left to take the checkered flag, and Nalon was credited with a 10th place finish in spite of completing only 151 laps.

Lee Wallard drove Murrell Belanger's Champ Dort car to a record setting 126.244 mph in 3 hours and 57 minutes the first 500 mile race in less than four hours

The Novi, A Most Magnificent Flop - Chapter 10

The Novi, again with the Duke of Nalon and Chet Miller chauffeuring, returned to the Speedway in 1952 to be greeted by a couple new ideas from master builder Frank Kurtis. One of the new Kurtis Kraft creations was a sleek 2,400 pound dinosaur powered by 430 horsepower Cummins Diesel engine. The other had a conventional 270 C.I. Offy for power but with the chassis designated as a Kurtis



Kraft 500 Roadster, the first of a new wave on the Speedway beach.

Even to George Peters and Henri Greuter in their book, *Novi, The Legendary Indianapolis Race Car*, the powerful, much loved Novi were becoming just two more cars in the garage area.

But this was the seventh year of the love affair between the guy sitting in the stands, the one who bought tickets to hear the song of the Novi, and they were still his favorites for the pole and the race.

On pole day only seven cars made a run for the coveted honor, but the day was still full of surprises. When the sun set Nalon had managed to put his Novi in the field, the best the Duke could manage was fourth fastest qualifier. Chet Miller's Novi suffered mechanical problems as he prepared for his qualifying run and returned to the garage on the end of a tow rope



The big buzz at the the end of the day was Freddie Agabashian, driving the over weight 2400 pound Kurtis creation powered the Diesel truck engine, was sitting on the pole with a new one lap track record of 139.104 and four circuits in the record books at 138.010.

The second qualifying weekend provided the race fans with the thrills that made the Speedway famous as second year driver Bill Vukovich pulled on to the track for the four lap run into the history books in driving the new Kurtis' Kraft Indianapolis 500 Roadster.

When Vuky pulled in after his four lap run the record book had to be rewritten. Vuky and the Indianapolis 500 Roadster owned the one lap record with a lap of 139.427 and four lap record with four laps of 138.212.

The crowd was still buzzing when Chet Miller and the second Novi rolled down pit road. Chet's first lap was 139.600 and once again the fans heard Tom Carnegie said his immortal words "And it's a NEW TRACK RECORD", the Novi slowed slightly on the second circuit to 139.061 and on the third lap the Novi power plant went away completely and once again the Novi was a tow rope passenger for the trip to the garage area, but for the third time since 1946 the Novi held the one lap record.

Qualifying on Sunday was a complete rain out but since the field for race day was two short of the traditional 33 cars Chief Steward Harry McQuinn ruled qualifying would be extended through Monday. This was blessing for the Novi crew since



the extra day gave them time to complete the repairs to Miller's Novi and have it ready to go for qualifying on Monday.

The rail birds had decided Miller would run four conservative laps to put the second Novi in the field on it's last chance run, they

were shocked to learn Chet, and the Novi, were not made of "conservative" stuff.

A first lap of 139.039 had the experts shaking their stop watches and a second lap of 139.513 left them speechless. Chet completed the four lap run with an average of 139.034, which not only made the Novi the fastest of the 33 starters but once again returned the four lap track record to the Novi team.

In their seven year history since 1946 the Novi set the one lap record three times, four lap record twice, set on the pole twice and had the fastest time of the 33 starters four times, but the crowd favorites had yet to see the inside of Victory Circle. Pole position proved to be no advantage to the ponderous Cummins Diesel, when the green flag dropped all Freddie Agabashian could do was wait helplessly as the 430 horsepower Diesel tried to get the 24000 pound monster up to speed. Five cars passed Freddie before the field reached the first turn. Freddie parked the Diesel on the 71st lap with the blower intake clogged with debris due to its low location in the grill.

As for the fastest car in the field, Chet Miller's Novi, it never really had a shot at showing its tail to anyone as it rolled into a 30th place finish on just the 41st lap suffering from an old ailment, a sheared supercharger shaft.



Nalon and the second Novi, from its second row start, was able to run with the leaders until the 84th circuit when the bug bit again, a sheared supercharger shaft, and Duke parked the Novi hopes for another year in 25th place.

The star of the 1952 race, without doubt, was Speedway sophomore Bill Vukovich driving the new Kurtis Kraft Indianapolis Roadster. Vuky and the new style Indianapolis race car led 151 laps of the chase until 192nd lap when the steering gear failed and Vuky brought the car to a stop resting against the wall in the Northeast turn. Vukovich watched helplessly as twenty-two year old Troy Ruttman drove J.C. Agajanian's dirt car to victory, the last dirt car to win the Indianapolis 500.

While Frank Kurtis new design had failed to win in its first outing many old timers saw the handwriting on the wall, the wave of the future was at hand. The day of the dirt cars, which had ruled the Speedway for years, was over and the days of the front wheel drive cars was seriously in question.

Lew Welch's two most powerful cars in Speedway history set in their garages with big question marks on their hoods still looking for their first win.

About the Author – Dick Ralstin

For all of my life, which is more years than I care to remember, the automobile has played a major role.

Well that's not quite true, there were those years from early '43 till Jan. of '46 when one of Uncle Sam's 2100 ton Fletcher class Destroyers was my home and first love. Lordy I did love that ship, the USS McDermut DD677.

My Dad opened his automobile "repair" shop in 1919 so you can see the Ralstin family and the automobile sorta grew up together.



After the Navy I went to work for Dad and, under his expert tutelage, became a pretty fair mechanic. That is until I got in an argument with the editor of the Peru Daily Tribune one morning about all the mistakes in an automotive column he was running in his newspaper.

The editor told me if I was so damn smart why didn't I write the column. Presto before I could say Ernest Hemmingway I am a "famous" newspaper columnist, at least in Peru, Indiana.

Next stop Kokomo Morning Times where I finally wound up as Sports Editor, with a strong tilt toward anything automotive, especially racing.

I saw my first race in 1933 in Rochester, Ind., at a half mile dirt track, what else in those days, and was hooked for life. As a kid I lived, breathed and dreamed automobile racing.

My heroes were any of those guys in the cloth helmet and goggles who had nerve enough to drive one of those fire breathing monsters. Louie Meyer, Rex Mays, Ralph Hepburn, Wilbur Shaw, Wild Bill Cummings those were names kids in my neighborhood spoke with reverence.

The Morning Times was perfect, I had a "reason" to go to such places as Langhorne, Phoenix, Milwaukee, Trenton, Allentown, Springfield, Atlanta and the holiest of all Indianapolis with a silver badge. I was suddenly living among some of my old heroes and a lot of new, younger ones.

Hey they were all humans, just like me, some of the same likes and dislikes. I even found a couple who were Cub fans.

When the track closed it was time for a cold brew and then the stories would fly, God what stories they told, each of those guys should have written a book.

Then Dame Fortune smiled at me again and suddenly I was manager of public relations for Goodyear's racing division. I was in heaven riding a racing merry-go-round, 30,40,50 races a year representing the world's largest tire company.

Eleven years of this and I was burned out, so I became field manager of off road racing for Goodyear and became a lover of the dirt and desert. Met many, many more damn fine people and had an absolute ball in Baja for the next nine years, until I retired in 1987.



Now I set on a mountain in Tijeras, New Mexico and watch the world go by, perfectly happy, perfectly content. I've been there, done that.

If I had written a script the day I was born, I couldn't have written it more perfect that my life has been.

I would hate to be the undertaker who has to try to get the smile off my face.

Dick Ralstin

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The Novi's Song, A Symphony

By Dick Ralstin

The dictionary defines a symphony as "a long musical composition in several movements, for full orchestra". A perfect description of the song brought forth by the engine that was the dream of five men.



You might say the words and music were by Bud Winfield, his brother Ed, Leo Goosen and Fred Offenhauser with money furnished by Lew Welch, and just maybe a couple of bucks tossed in the pot by Henry Ford --- maybe.

Bud Winfield and Leo Goosen had designed and built a straight eight in 1938 which was a good engine. Louie Meyer and Rex Mays both ran the engine at the Speedway for several years with success but no wins.

In the Fall of 1940 Lew Welch approached Bud Winfield about designing a supercharged V8. Goosen, Bud and brother Ed put pencils to paper and the blueprints for the first Novi appeared.

The blueprints were delivered to Fred Offenhauser and low and behold a 181 cubic inch engine with a centrifugal supercharger and a top engine rpm of 8,000 was born.

The new creation was fitted into one of the Miller-Ford chassis that ran so unsuccessfully at the Speedway in 1935. With Ralph Hepburn named as driver, it headed for Indianapolis and the 1941 Indianapolis 500 known simply as the Winfield Supercharged V8, sponsored by Bowes Seal Fast.

The six year old Miller-Ford chassis proved to be woefully inadequate to handle the 510+ horsepower of the screaming monster under the hood. Hepburn finally solved the problem by placing a wooden block under the foot throttle so he couldn't mistakenly jump on the throttle, deliver too much power and get himself in trouble.

Still, even with the throttle blocked, Hepburn qualified for a very respectable 10th starting position and managed to wrestle the beast to a fourth place finish, with the throttle still blocked so he couldn't use all the power.

Then came four years of darkness at the Speedway while the World took time out to settle an argument with some unruly rulers.

With the sun shining again in 1946 Lew Welch christened the V8 the Novi,

Leo Goosen put a new front-drive chassis on paper and Frank Kurtis converted the blueprints into a chassis designed for the Novi engine.



It was a parade stopper the first time it rolled onto the famed bricks. Just 36 inches from the ground to the highest point the Novi had the lowest center of gravity ever seen to that time.

It was so streamlined the hood line actually stood two inches below the tops of the front Firestones. Under the hood there were three Winfield carburetors to feed the eight hungry cylinders. Sitting on a 106 wheelbase and weighing in at 1,919 pounds the new creation was truly a thing of beauty.

Once again Ralph Hepburn, now 50 years old, was nominated to fill the seat and act as director for the first playing of the symphony to be known for years to come simply as the "Song of the Novi".

But as with all things the road for the Novi that first year, and many other years, was not to be smooth. The first day of qualifications came and went, with the Novi sitting forlornly in its garage, missing a couple spare parts.

Second day of qualifying --- it rained.

Finally the Novi was rolled out ready to qualify and took off, but once again Dame Fortune sent her daughter, Mis-Fortune, to oversee the proceedings. The transmission in the Novi popped out of gear, not once but twice. Back to the barn for another all-night session and the last chance tomorrow.

Then came May 26, 1946 and Hepburn, baton in hand, and Novi once again rolled onto the bricks.

Ralph took one slow warm-up lap and then began to stand on the Novi for the first time as he entered the backstretch on the second lap. The 20,000 or so fans sat in stunned silence as Hepburn entered the third turn, never had such a sound been heard in the Speedway's history.



A symphony of supercharged power, a crescendo of drums, the scream of every instrument in the orchestra pit. The song of the Novi had been

unleashed in full force.

Needless to say Ralph Hepburn and Novi rewrote the Speedway record book that day, with a new one lap speed of 134.449 and a four lap average of 133.944 mph. Breaking the old mark by more than four miles per hour.

But the race wasn't meant to belong to Hepburn and the Novi. For the first 50 laps it was effortless, from his 19th starting spot to lead the field for 44 laps. Then brake problems caused an eight minute pit stop and it was back to 13th. Hepburn and the Novi were once again carving their way through the field when on the 121st lap the valve train in the Novi surrendered to the horrible pace and Hepburn coasted to a stop on the backstraight and into a 14th place finish.

George Robson went on to victory in the 1946 Indianapolis 500, but the race fans had discovered a new love in their life. The intoxicating song of the Novi.

When the Speedway opened on the first of May in 1947 and drivers and mechanics picked up their credentials the pit badges were not the bust of some famous person, or a past winner of the 500, or a famous Indiana landmark.

The 1947 pit badges were in the shape of Lew Welch's and Ralph Hepburn's Novi.

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