

BY CORNELIUS RYAN

What made Vuky race?

The story of Bill Vukovich provides a clue to why men will gamble life for speed

HIGH in a private compartment of the old Pagoda overlooking the Indianapolis Speedway, a race-day party was in full swing. Ice tinkled in cool glasses and crisp-frocked matrons nibbled cookies. Below the gay little group boiled the gaudy carnival of the annual Memorial Day 500-Mile Auto Race. The howl of high-compression engines and the acrid clouds of smoke from the race only remotely reached the party guests up in the Pagoda. They watched spasmodically, impersonally.

But the holiday crowd of nearly 180,000 jamming the great oval amphitheater below seethed over one another in their eagerness to follow the race. In the infield 70,000 to 80,000 fans milled about in happy anarchy. Here were the blue-jeaned *aficionados* who came and shared the dust, the smells and the noise with their daredevil heroes. Men, women and children stood, squatted, slept and sun-bathed on the ground if they could find space. Where there was no space they climbed the roofs of 25,000 cars parked bumper to bumper. Some roosted on swaying stepladders. Others perched precariously 20 to 30 feet in the air on wind-whipped homemade stands. A few enlivened their perches with colored banners and placards. *Ain't life great?* asked one blood-red poster. *Our 26th year at the Brickyard.* *George*

and Louise. The infield crowd munched hot dogs and gulped cans of warm beer, their eyes riveted to the spectacle on the track.

There, on the oil-slick ribbon of brick and asphalt, 33 drivers raced gleaming cars around the oval at speeds up to 175 miles per hour. Lap after lap, they fought it out for the prize money, matching the strength of their wrists against death for it. In the pack, crouched over the wheel of a sky-blue 350-H.P. racer, his black goggles masking his oil-streaked face, drove two-time winner Bill Vukovich, "the greatest gladiator of them all."

The handsome, hard-muscled Vukovich had 55 of the 200 laps behind him. He was in the position he liked best, the only one he could tolerate—the lead. With the exception of five laps, he had led all the way, weaving, cutting, edging for position. Now, his racer under knife-edge control, Vukovich lapped the field.

As he passed Ed Elisian, a close friend and admirer, he raised a gloved hand, carelessly. Elisian, a burly twenty-seven-year-old from Oakland, California, joyfully waved back.

Before the race, Elisian had quipped: "Are we gonna have steak and whisky tonight, Vuky?"

(Continued on page 64)

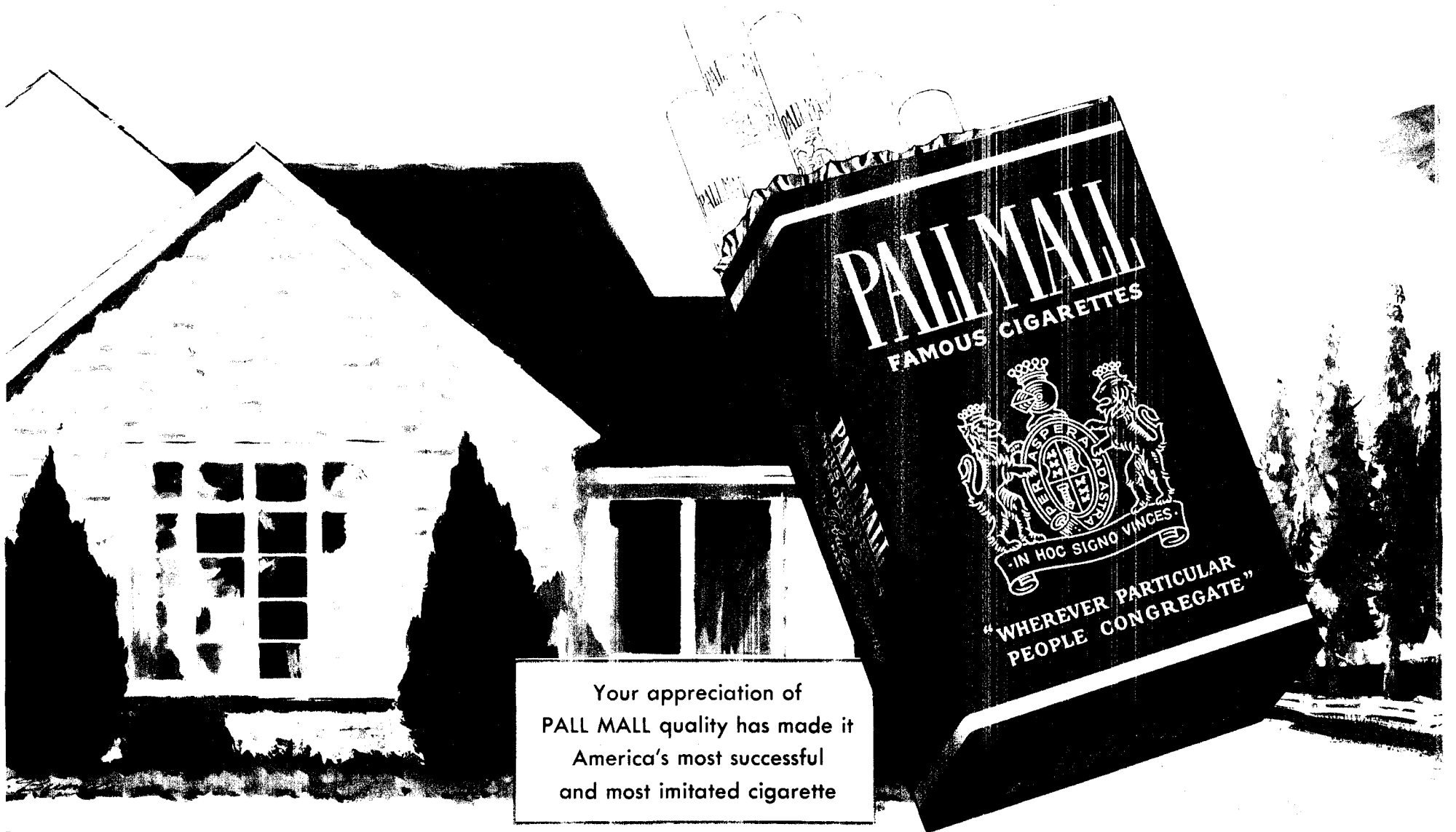
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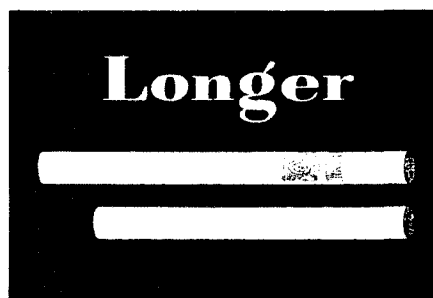


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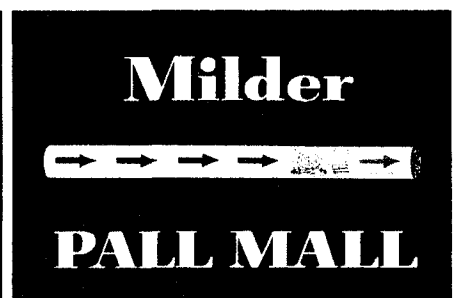
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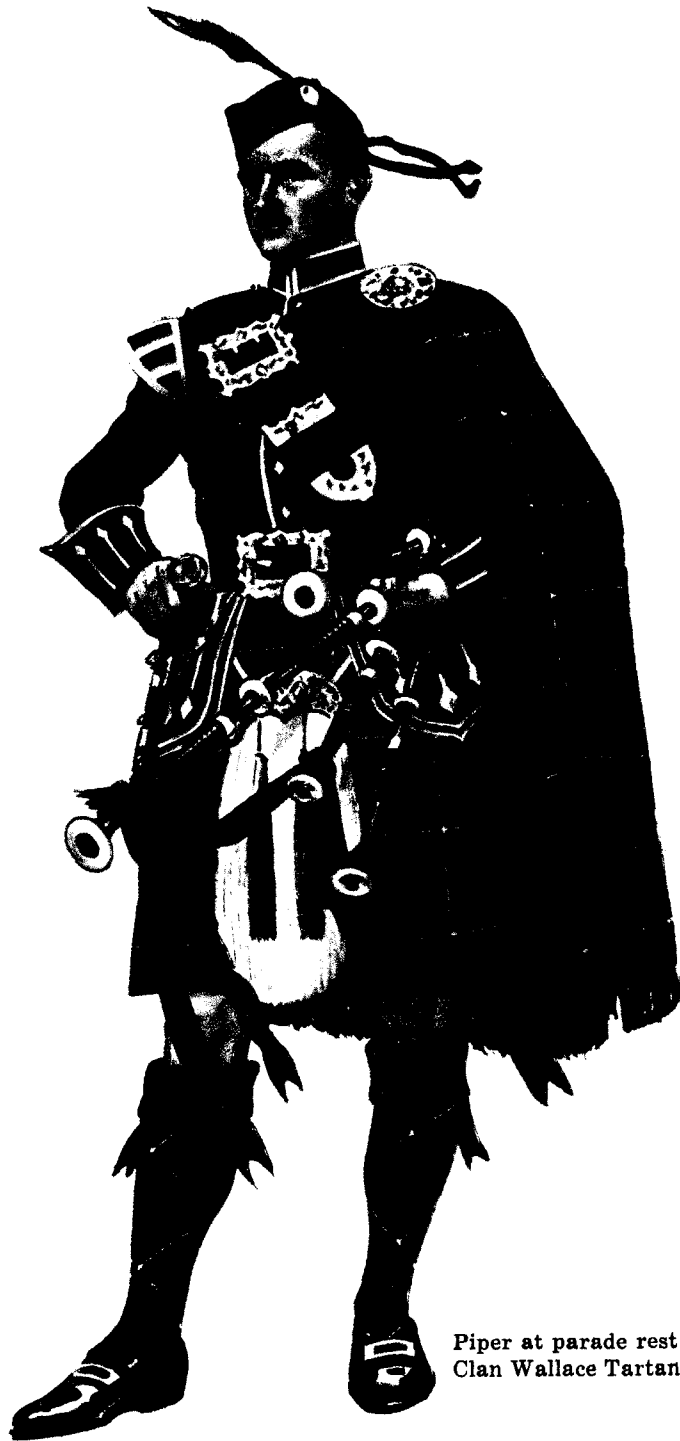
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What made Vuky race? continued

"Just take it easy out there, kid," Vukovich had answered. "And don't ever turn right on the Brickyard. That's how you get sent home in a box."

Vukovich slammed into the last turn before the straightaway at over 130 mph. Smoothly he gunned the powerful Meyer-Drake Offenhauser engine and whipped up the main stretch at better than 170 mph. He raised one gloved hand again, this time to the crowd. The fans roared.

They knew Vuky was out for the hat trick. In three short years he had completely dominated the annual "500," winning more prize money for his sponsors and himself than any other driver in the race's history. He had flashed home the winner in '53 and '54, but could he win three in a row? Nobody ever had—not even the great Mauri Rose or the late Wilbur Shaw.

In the stands, seated next to her landlady, Vukovich's attractive wife, Esther, heard the crowd roar as Vuky waved. Involuntarily she half raised her hand in return, but she knew he couldn't see her. She watched the big number 4 on his car swing into the banked curve at the end of the straightaway. Then it was gone. It was the last time she saw her husband alive.

As Vukovich roared out of the southeast curve he automatically glanced at his rear tires to see how they were wearing. It took only a fraction of a second. Suddenly, ahead of him, a heavy gust of wind caught car 27. The racer caromed off the low, wooden guardrail and back onto the track. Another car, 42, swerved wildly left to avoid 27 and careened into the safety zone of the infield. Then it spun out again across the track and smashed into another racer, 39. Vukovich, hurtling out of the turn at nearly 150 mph, found the track blocked. He had no time to brake or reduce speed; there was no time to dive for the safety of the infield. He turned to the right.

The big racer plowed into 39 and shot up 20 feet into the air over the guardrail. Like a bouncing rubber ball, Vukovich's car somersaulted end over end seven times, hit the ground, three parked cars and a telephone pole. It landed upside down. By the time it stopped flipping, flames were already bursting around it.

As Vukovich crashed, Ed Elisian, less than 100 yards behind, screeched to a stop in the infield, disqualifying himself. Frantically, he ran across the track to the burning car. "You gotta get him out. You gotta get him out," he screamed at the rescue workers.

In the stands Esther Vukovich looked for Vuky to come around again. Then she saw the yellow caution lights go on and the cars slow down. She turned to her landlady. "It's Vuky," she said.

Back in Fresno, California, Vukovich's home town, Bill Vukovich, Jr., aged twelve, and Marlene, aged thirteen, heard the news on the radio, that their father had burned to death.

* * *

VUKOVICH WAS THE SECOND driver killed at the track in 1955 and the 46th fatality since the Speedway was built in 1911. He was thirty-six.

"Nobody," he had told his wife, as he punched a fist viciously into one palm, "but nobody, will ever have to send the hat around for me."

Nobody had to. Even in death, Vukovich, the champion, won more prize money than the driver who came in fifth. Officially Vukovich placed 25th, eight of the 33 racers having retired prior to the time he crashed. But when Speedway officials added Vukovich's 25th-place money to his lap prizes—\$150 for each of the 50 laps he'd led—they found that the "Lindsey Hopkins Special" had won \$10,833.64. Vukovich's share was \$4,333.46. That closed his account with Indianapolis.

Weeks later, as papers blew aimlessly about the whitewashed privies in the desolate infield and dust gathered in the echoing stands, nothing remained of Vukovich's meteoric career at the Speedway but a grim set of black tire marks leading out of the southeast corner.

Those tire marks haunted many of the emotional superstitious racing fraternity. The unbelievable had happened: the remote, invincible Vukovich had been killed—*through no fault of his own*. Who might be next?

Two weeks later, at Le Mans, France, in a pile-up similar to the Vukovich crash, a sleek Mercedes hit a barrier at 140 mph, exploded over the heads of the watching spectators and guillotined, mangled or burned to death more than 80 onlookers. Six weeks later, twenty-six-year-old Jerry Hoyt, who had also raced in the "500," died of a broken neck in a race at Oklahoma City. Next came Jack McGrath, at thirty-five, Vukovich's only real competitor and holder of some of the fastest speed records ever made at Indianapolis: he crashed to his death at a race in Phoenix, Arizona, when his car, out of control, flipped over on top of him.

I talked with both of them about Vukovich—within days of their own deaths.

I sat in the partially furnished living room of McGrath's brand-new home on the outskirts of Los Angeles, with his pretty wife, Lois, and listened to McGrath explain why he had never beaten Vukovich. "There is something more to life than winning," he told me. "I've driven faster than old Vuky but I'll never take the chances he did—no race is worth it."

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Jack McGrath's last race—at Phoenix, Arizona. "I'll never take the chances old Vuky did," he said shortly before this fatal crash. "No race is worth it"

Jerry Hoyt said that he was one of the last to speak with Vukovich before he crashed. "Freaks," Vukovich had said to him as he gazed about the packed stands. "Freaks—that's what they think us chauffeurs are. And you know something? They're right."

Vukovich, two years before, had expressed his doubts to the late Wilbur Shaw, then president of the Speedway: "We're going too damn' fast." Shaw agreed with him, then replied, "Well, why don't *you* slow down, Vuky?"

THE USUALLY COCKY racing fraternity, shocked by Vuky's death, knew also that they were traveling too fast. Who was going to slow them down?

Said Ray Crawford, one of the few independently wealthy drivers in professional racing: "Racing is like being on dope; it's like being an alcoholic. You know what you're doing is crazy, but you don't know how to get the desire out of your blood. There you are sitting in a \$25,000 piece of machinery specially bred for Indianapolis. You feel this whole beautiful unit rapidly gaining speed, letting out smoothly, evenly. The car is an extension of yourself—you feel part of it. The engine is hot and running sweet. You're not conscious of the noise, but you know it's roaring. The track slips away in a blur. You're running close to the bone. Then suddenly you find tears on your face. You're crying with elation. That's racing; that's how I think Vuky felt about it. Believe me, he couldn't have quit. Like all of us he was hypnotized by the roar of those engines."

The paradox of men knowing they were going too fast, yet unable to slow down, was burned into the life of Bill Vukovich. What made Vuky race?

Professionally, Vukovich was the greatest—that had been proved in competition and victory. Racing fans were aware that while racing he was merciless, coldly calculating and utterly fearless. But of Vukovich the man they knew nothing. Silent, taciturn and withdrawn he had been—as a personality—virtually unknown.

Vuky shied away from publicity of any sort and avoided the press whenever he could. In one rare, expansive moment he said to a reporter: "I wish you guys would at least get my name right. Years ago when my family came from Yugoslavia, the name was Vucurovich. To make it easy for characters who couldn't pronounce it, they went to a lot of trouble to have it changed to Vukovich."

One clue to what made Vuky race was offered by Walt (Little Dynamo) Faulkner, an ace driver himself and a long-time friend. Looking back on their early days in the game, Faulkner recalled: "It was a jungle. Kids like Vuky and me had to get our thrills and a few bucks besides. What did we have to lose? Nothing. We were depression kids, and neither of us had an education." Faulkner, at 37, was killed himself only last month.

The money angle was important, but not by any means the only one. Vuky himself supplied a deeper-seated, more intangible motive for his worship of speed just a few days before he died. Vukovich had stood listening to the cars as they whipped around the track in practice. Perched on the back of his head was a long-peaked yellow baseball cap. "I don't like the sound of that baby," he told Jerry Hoyt as a big racer called the "Novi Special" flashed by the pits. He listened again and shook his head. "Funny thing," said Vukovich, "but years ago I heard a calliope playing one of those *ump-baa-baa* tunes. I never knew what the name of it was, but when I'm out there on the track, showing you dummies my tail pipe, I hear that tune clear as a bell."

He was nine the time he first heard the sound. He stood with a little friend watching a roller coaster at a local fair. A long string of red and yellow boxcars slowly climbed the first gradient. At the top they paused as though undecided, then, slowly gathering momentum, the cars swished down into the valley, up the other side, over the top and out of view. Billy Vukovich watched spellbound.

"I could drive that thing," said Billy to his friend.

"They wouldn't let you."

"Yes, they would, too," said Billy.

"No—they wouldn't. 'cause you're a foreigner," said his playmate.

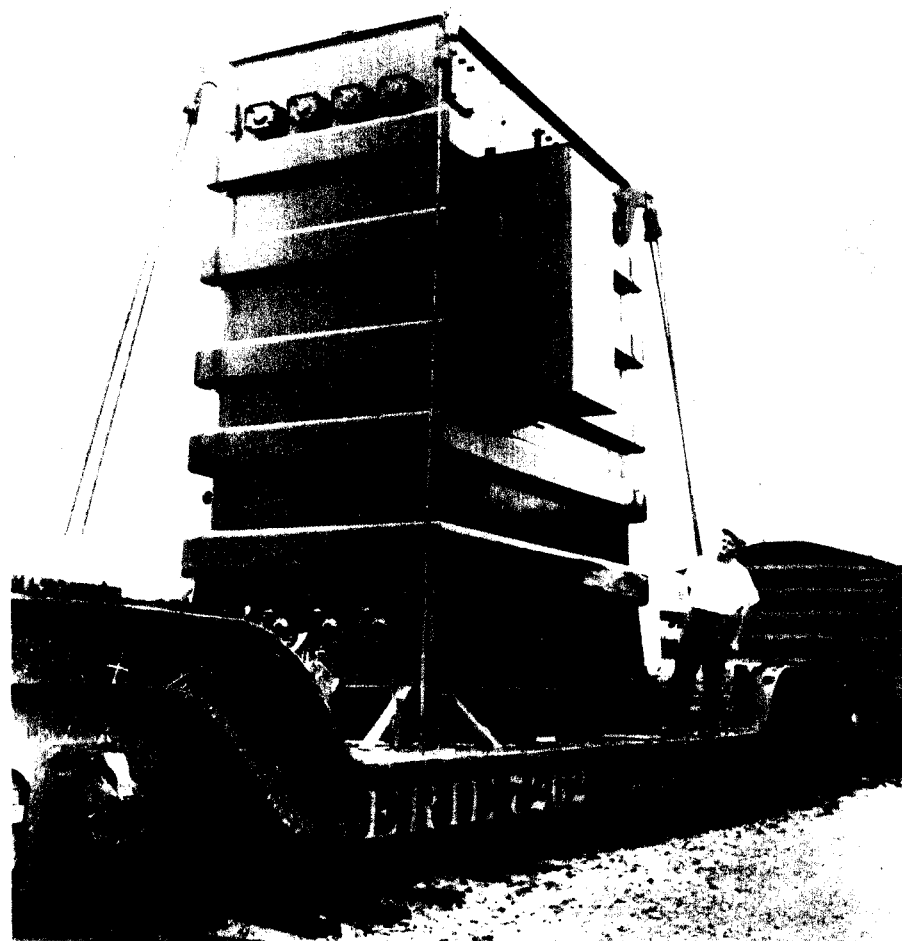
"They would. They would," yelled Billy.

"Foreigner, foreigner, foreigner," taunted his little friend, running off.

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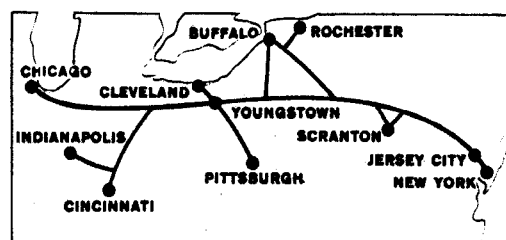
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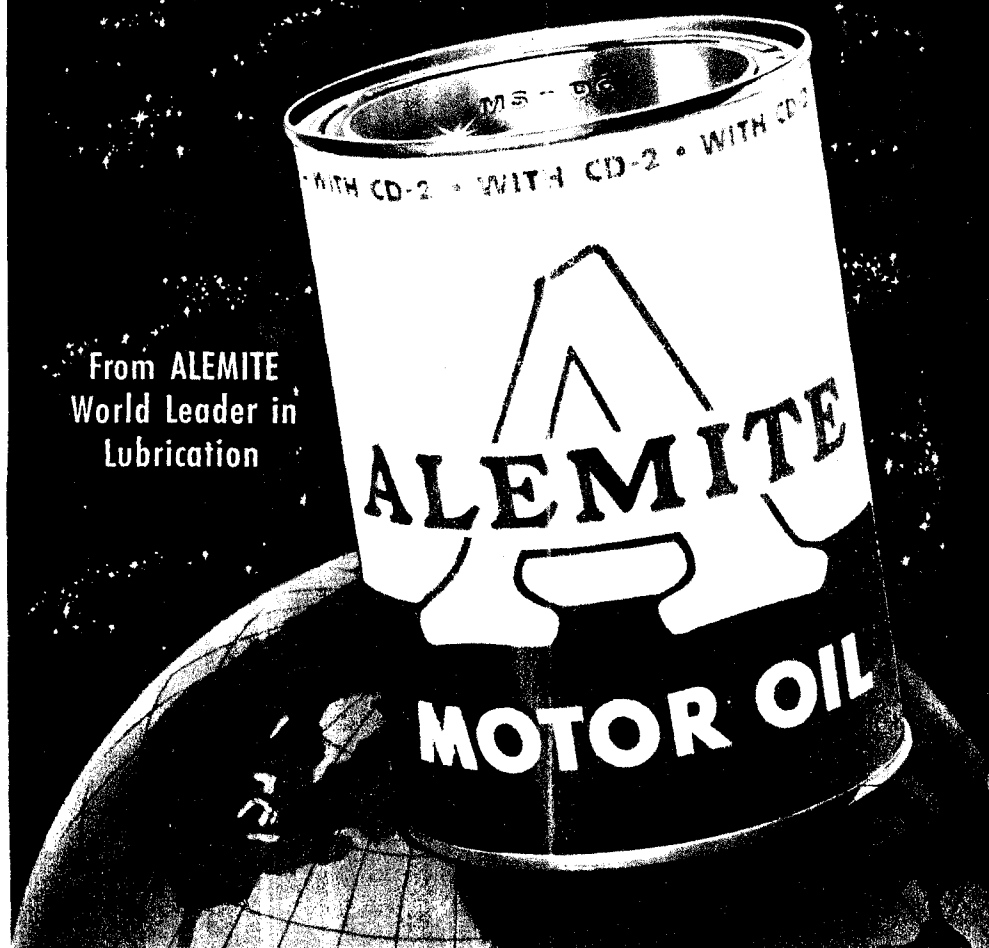
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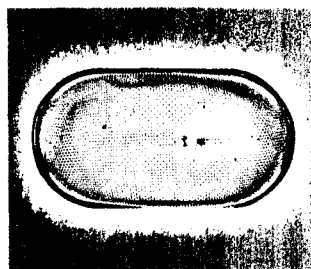
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BEFORE. Photograph of car's oil screen after service test using conventional motor oil. Note filter-clogging deposits of sludge.



AFTER. Clean, sludge-free oil screen after identical service test made with new Alemite Motor Oil. (Unretouched photographs.)

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and Billy Vukovich burst into tears. The calliope popped merrily away.

Bill Vukovich heard that music until the end of his days—in rattling hot rods at fairground tracks, in whining midgets on dirt tracks, and, finally, on the howling merry-go-round at Indianapolis. From 1938 to 1951, with the exception of three war years when racing was forbidden, Vukovich drove like a maniac up and down the Pacific Coast on anything that even faintly resembled a race track. "I've met every piece of dust and every flying rock on the hamburger trail from Fresno to San Diego," he used to say, "and I know every brand of oil just from the taste."

* * *

WHEN HIS CARPENTER FATHER, John Vukovich, died in 1932, Vukovich's education and, in some intangible way, his childhood came to an abrupt halt. Bill was thirteen then, one of eight children and the youngest of three boys. Next to him came Eli, fourteen, and Mike, eighteen.

The family lived in the little farming community of Sanger, on the outskirts of Fresno, California, where they had settled in 1921, two years after Bill was born in Alameda, California.

"We weren't poor, you understand," Eli told me, "but you couldn't exactly say we were wealthy."

Bill Vukovich was shy and reserved even then. His mother, who never fully mastered English, used to take him in her arms and in mock sadness shake her head, saying in her native Serbian: "*Bil Je najglasniji, kad nista ne govori.*" ("Bill makes the most noise because he never says anything.")

The fascination of the dark and mysterious interior of the local garage and the family's beat-up Model T was sufficient to keep Bill happy in those days. "We spun around in that jalopy like three crazy demons," Mike said, "and when we got tired we'd take off across the open fields, chasing jack rabbits."

Somehow, by 1931, John Vukovich had saved enough to make a down payment on a 40-acre muscatel vineyard. One year later, he died. Bill and Eli, the only two of the children still living at home, found that they had their ailing mother and the acreage to keep.

The two boys left school and began working at anything they could get. They picked cotton, pruned grape trees, tilled fields and drove trucks.

"One week Billy paid for the groceries," Eli said, "and then it would be my turn. Those were sad years."

In those years, Bill Vukovich grew up suddenly, harshly, under pressure. By the time he was eighteen, he was molded and tempered, mentally and physically, into the silent, rock-hard racing phenomenon who was to scourge the race tracks for the remainder of his days.

One day late in 1937, Vukovich set out for Dick's Service Garage in Fresno, where a friend of his named Fred Gearhart kept a souped-up Chevrolet hot rod. Gearhart was working in the cool dimness of the small garage when Vukovich got there.

Vukovich stood at the door, the hot Fresno sun outlining his big T-shirted shoulders and blue-jeaned legs. He looked at Gearhart bent over the hot rod. "I want to drive that thing," he said. Gearhart didn't even look up.

Vukovich stood his ground, stubbornly. "I want to drive that thing," he said again.

Gearhart lifted his head from the engine. "Do you want to get yourself killed, boy?" he asked.

Vukovich turned away without answering. But the next day he was back. Day after day he came to the garage, stood in the doorway and repeated his demand. In the end he got his way. In his first race for Gearhart, on a nearby dirt track, he placed. The third time out, he won.

"In the next few months," said Eli, "Bill drove the Chevvy on all sorts of tracks. Gearhart loved him so much that he let him keep all the dough he could win. But even at that it wasn't much. In a good week maybe he cleared \$10-\$15."

By 1938, Vukovich had graduated to midgets. But in his first race he crashed. He locked wheels with another midget and flipped end over end. He broke three ribs and a collarbone. Seven weeks later he was back on the dirt tracks again.

The same year Eli began driving midgets and in his first race he found himself competing with his younger brother. Vukovich clarified the situation quickly: "Don't tangle with me, Eli," he said coldly. "Out on that track you're just another driver to me."

Vuky won the race.

Driving from track to track in an old Ford, with his sponsor's midget in a trailer, Vukovich lived like a gypsy in '38 and '39. Eli traveled with him most of the time. "We'd sleep in the trailer," he said, "eat pork and beans right out of the can and swap each other's clothes."

Often Vukovich would drive 15 to 20 races a week and, if he was lucky, he got as his percentage of the car's winnings \$40 to \$50. It is estimated that, before taxes, Vukovich netted \$500 in 1938, \$800 in 1939 and \$1,100

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in 1940. Said Walt Faulkner: "We were risking our necks for burnt matches and peanut shells."

But money didn't seem to bother Vukovich. His life seemed dedicated to speed. Every morning he ran a mile or pedaled a bicycle to keep fit. He didn't drink or smoke and nobody ever saw him with a girl. Then, on a blind date in Fresno, he met Esther Schmidt, a tall seventeen-year-old brunette. Vukovich was so bashful that for three weeks he dated Esther by ringing her sister and asking her to make the arrangements.

A few months later he took Esther out to the park. He parked his car and for a long time said nothing. Then, looking out the car window he mumbled: "How would you like to be married to a racing driver?" Esther did not mind.

Marriage didn't slow Vukovich down. But in 1942 racing was suspended, and Vukovich went to work for an Army contractor. As a skilled mechanic he spent the next three years in a maintenance depot repairing jeeps and trucks. But Vukovich, in his usual determined way, had already made up his mind about his future in auto racing: after the war he would drive his *own* midget.

And like everything else he'd wanted throughout his life, the midget became an obsession. He had to have it.

Vukovich knew Fred Gearhart had a midget. "It's yours for \$750," Gearhart told him, "but where are you going to get that sort of money?"

One year later, he returned. He took \$750 out of his wallet and pushed it across the table to his old friend. "Okay, there's the dough," he said; "where's the washing machine?"

Vukovich worked nights and weekends on the midget. Like a child with a new toy he took it apart piece by piece. Every nut and bolt, every rod and washer, was examined for structural failure and replaced or thrown away. He painted the car a bright red.

"That's our little jewel," he told his wife, patting the hood. Then, as though remembering that for a moment he had stepped out of character, he said: "I'm going to blow those chauffeurs off the track."

And blow them off the track he did. The moment racing resumed in 1945, Vukovich and his blood-red chariot hit the midget circuits like a whining typhoon. "Old Ironsides," as he named the midget, snarled all over California leaving in its smoky wake a trail of disillusioned—often painfully sore—race drivers.

"Oh, man, Vuky was a mean chauffeur. What sort of guy was he? If he couldn't pass you he'd run over you—just to win," said Walt Faulkner. "Sure he was tough—he had to be to survive. And when Vuky got in my way, I'd run over him too."

"Vuky crashed plenty. He scarred his hands up pretty badly, broke his shoulders, smashed his ribs. Why, on one track he went through the fence three times in exactly the same place—and each time he smacked his head. The third time he said: 'I'm going to quit racing—it's costing too damn' much for crash helmets.'"

Injuries didn't seem to worry Vukovich, but losing a race did—especially when competing against his brother Eli.

FOR SOME MONTHS the three Vukovich brothers, Mike, Eli and Bill, traveled the midget trail together. Mike, on alternate weeks, acted as mechanic for Bill and Eli. During one race—it was a week Mike was working for Bill—one of Vuky's wheels came off just as he passed the pits. Mike waited until all the cars had passed and then ran out onto the track and picked up the wheel. Vukovich came storming over to his elder brother.

"Why the hell," he roared, "didn't you leave the damn' wheel where it was? Eli might have hit the thing on the next lap."

Vukovich seemed unbeatable, unbreakable and, to some people, unbearable. Once, in Los Angeles, in a race with Troy Ruttman (who was later to beat him in the 1952 "500"), Vukovich drove so fiercely that he scared the crowd. They jumped to their feet yelling, "Stop! Stop! Stop!"

When he pulled into the pits Vukovich shook his head, as though coming out of a daze and said innocently: "What are they yelling about?"

But despite all his victories up to 1950 (he was West Coast midget cham-

pion in 1946 and 1947; national midget champion in 1950), Vukovich's personal earnings were small compared to the frightening risks he took. Did he race for money? In those five big years, after all expenses had been paid, Vukovich earned less than \$7,000 per annum. He might have made more running a garage.

By 1950 the postwar midget racing craze had slowed down. "Hell," said Walt Faulkner, "it began to look as though we'd have to go to work."

The lure of Indianapolis had drawn such top midget drivers as Walt Faulkner, Manuel Ayulo, Andy Linden, Jerry Hoyt, Tony Bettenhausen. But Vukovich, despite his reputation, had never been asked to "chauffeur" a \$25,000 car at Indianapolis.

In a way, the big cars had always loomed as a dark fear to Vukovich. He was afraid—afraid that he couldn't win in one. According to Faulkner, he had a mental block about racing the big ones. He could not bear to race and lose. Still, the lure was irresistible.

"Vuky showed up at the Speedway in May of 1950. I persuaded him to take a driver's test," Faulkner said. "He drove a Maserati. It was a dog—old and used up—but it was one of the most famous cars that ever raced."

PERHAPS IT WAS PROPHEPIC that Vukovich's first trip around the brick and asphalt track should have been in this car. In 1939 and 1940 the late Wilbur Shaw, three-time winner at the Speedway, had driven it to victory. Shaw won both races at an average speed of 115 mph. But by 1950 the *qualifying* speed had jumped to 130 mph.

"The car wasn't so bad," Faulkner recalled. "Vuky passed his driver's test, but he couldn't get it to go fast enough to qualify."

The next year Vukovich was back—this time complete with a sponsor. The car was the "Central Excavating Special," entered by Pete Salemi, of Cleveland. Vukovich referred to it as a "sled."

He and his wife stayed with Mrs. Lawrence Thompson, who boarded race drivers at Indianapolis.

"I showed Vuky and Esther a big double room," she said, "but I apologized because it was green—racing drivers don't like green." Superstitious? Not Vukovich! (He had once flouted the fates by dressing in a pair of green

shorts for a race.) Vukovich took the room. But in a pocket of his trousers was a large money clip, made from a silver dollar, and given to him by Fred Gearhart years before. He carried it during every race.

The next day Vukovich, as relaxed and calm as usual, took the big car out on the track and secured himself a place in the 33-car line-up by qualifying. The saga of Vukovich at Indianapolis had begun.

The night before the race Tony Bettenhausen, an old dirt-track friend of Vukovich's, felt unusually confident. This year his car might be up there among the winners, he told Vukovich.

Vukovich listened enviously. Dark brows knitted together, his right hand forever squeezing a little rubber ball, he said: "My own box will run about 30 laps and then fall apart."

He was right. The "sled" lasted exactly 29 laps, when an oil leak sent it out of the race. Vukovich's 1951 "500" earnings came to a little over \$750.

But Vukovich didn't go unnoticed in that race. From far behind he had come up to tenth position when he was forced out. Jim Travers, chief mechanic for millionaire oilman Howard Keck, of Los Angeles, had watched Vukovich carefully. Travers suggested Vukovich as driver for Keck's '52 entry. When the offer came, Vukovich promptly accepted.

In many ways it was a rookie's dream: Vukovich was being asked to accept the mantle of Mauri Rose, three-time "500" winner, who was retiring. All his life he had considered Rose the greatest racing genius in the U.S. and in some ways he had patterned his life after him.

He even called him "Mister," which for Vukovich was probably the greatest compliment he could pay any man.

Vukovich came back to Indianapolis in 1952 in his usual taciturn armor. In the months preceding the race he had astounded his rivals by retiring from midget racing. "It's getting too damn' dangerous," he said.

He'd changed since his first year at Indian- (Continued on page 70)



Vukovich in Victory Lane after his first Indianapolis win in '53. His 40 per cent share of the prize: \$35,800

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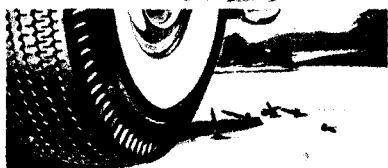
Here's your guide to the *most advanced tire safety available anywhere!* For the Prestige is *truly* tubeless . . . yes, it's a complete airtight unit in itself, free of gummy sealants, heavy liners or other "tube substitute" devices. Its super-strength cord, pre-stretched and heat stabilized, is Safety-Welded with new bonding compounds into a single unit that is air-tight . . . lighter, cooler,

smoother-running . . . and incredibly strong. All this, plus Kelly's famous Armorubber tread that gives you extra *thousands* of miles!

What does it add up to? Exactly what you want in a tire: blowout safety . . . puncture safety . . . stopping safety! And *economy*, too! For economical, *worry-free* driving—switch to Kelly Prestige . . . the perfected tubeless tire!



BLOWOUT SAFETY! The stronger, Safety-Welded cord body gives the Prestige almost unbelievable resistance to impact damage . . . makes it lighter, cooler-running, softer-riding.



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STOPPING SAFETY! The instant you touch the brakes, the Prestige tread is converted into thousands of sharp-angled "stopping edges" that grip the road and hold fast.

*Get tires
this*

What a
tire!



KELLY
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PRESTIGE

SAVE WITH SAFETY

***built for Worry-free Driving
money-saving way!***

**What a
trade-in!**



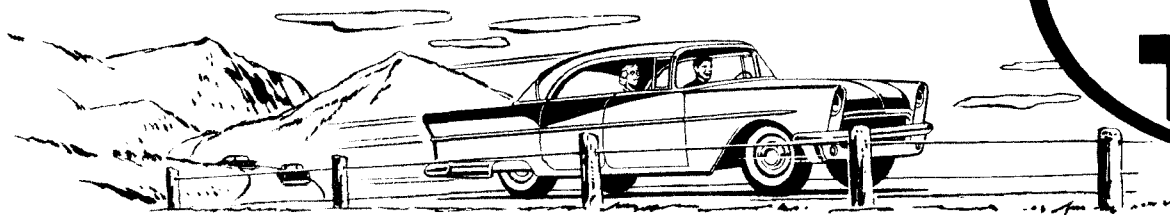
- 1** The Kelly Tubeless Prestige gives exceptional value at low price . . . costs no more than a regular tire and tube. So it's a bargain to begin with!
- 2** When you switch to Prestige Tubeless Tires your Kelly Dealer will allow you the *full* value of *all* the mileage left in your present tires—plus the full value of tubes you no longer need! You get the *maximum* allowance . . . and it'll go a long way toward putting tough, safe Kellys on your car!
- 3** What's more, your Kelly Dealer will give you expert tire service and maintenance advice . . . help you get *maximum mileage* while you drive worry-free!

WHY CONTINUE to drive on worn, risky tires? Or on old-fashioned tires that don't have the advanced features of the Kelly Prestige? There's no need to—because your Kelly Dealer will make it easy on your

budget to put new, safe tubeless Kellys on your car. And you'll find that just a little difference in dollars and cents will make a big difference in safety and comfort! Talk it over with your Kelly Dealer!

THE KELLY-SPRINGFIELD TIRE COMPANY, CUMBERLAND, MARYLAND

**Look for the sign of
Worry-free Driving . . .**



What made Vuky race? continued

apolis. Vukovich, the racing man, still spoke the jargon of the tracks—heavily spiced with garage profanity. But Vukovich, the family man, worried considerably about the future of Bill, Jr., and Marlene on whom he lavished his own lost childhood. In a bull session in the Keck garage, a fellow driver taunted him about his retirement from midget racing and asked, “What does your wife think about your driving at Indianapolis?”

“Don’t know,” snarled Vukovich, “I never asked her.”

In the Keck car Vukovich qualified for the ’52 race with the second fastest speed, over 139 mph. In the race itself he dominated the field from the 32d lap until eight laps from the end when a 50-cent clamp on his steering wheel broke. He came to a skidding halt against a retaining wall, climbed disgustedly from his car, and sat out the end of the race on the wall. For his day’s work he had made \$7,500.

When the Keck car failed to come around again, his pit crew began to worry. From the Pagoda he was spotted and loud-speakers blared out a demand for him to return to the pits. But Esther Vukovich didn’t know he was safe; she was already on her way to the hospital. Vukovich ignored the strident sounds from the loud-speaker. Dirt and dust from the track swirled up around him; he seemed oblivious.

“I watched Vuky,” said Dr. Carlyle B. Bohner, medical director at the Speedway, “and I think it began to dawn on him that not only could he race big cars but that he had licked Indianapolis.”

When the race was over, Vukovich came back to the pits. “It’s a cinch,” he told Travers, “I should have been here 10 years ago.”

Vukovich blazed across Indianapolis like a meteor in the next two years. The gremlins which had plagued him were gone. In 1953, with the temperature in the 90s, Vukovich and his old competitor, Jack McGrath, were two of only five drivers who finished the race without relief. One driver died from heat prostration in a blazing day which saw only 19 of the 33 cars finish the race. When he came into the winner’s circle, the “Keck Fuel Injection Special” had grossed a phenomenal \$89,496, of which \$29,250 had been won in lap prizes alone. Vukovich’s 40 per cent share was nearly \$35,800.

The windfall had been a “cinch” for Vukovich. Throughout the race he’d been completely relaxed, even at 175 mph. During a pit stop of less than a minute Vukovich even found time to chat with Herb Porter of the Keck pit crew. “You know, Herb,” Vukovich said, “there ain’t as many people in the bleachers as there were last year.”

EVEN BEFORE his second win, in 1954, the challenge of Indianapolis had begun to fade. It was a restless year—he missed the camaraderie of the midget races and once referred contemptuously to Indianapolis as his “four-hour-a-year job.” When he was hired by a film company to sit in his car and act the part of a race driver for \$50 a day, he stayed on location three days, then left for Fresno. “I was wasting my time,” he said later.

Time seemed precious to him as his crew prepared his car for the 1954 qualifying runs at Indianapolis. He fumed around the garage, forever needling his mechanics, Jim Travers and Frank Coon. One day he hung an ax on the wall, and, below it, scrawled “Travers’ tools.” Later he tacked up a photograph of “Old Ironsides,” with an admonition to Travers and Coon that “when the going gets rough for you butchers, just take a look at this hunk of iron.”

But on race day the calm, confident Vukovich of old settled down to his second win. He won the race with a scorching record speed of 130.84 mph for the 200 laps. (The record still stands.) His take-home pay amounted to \$29,972.

With his Indianapolis winnings Vukovich bought two gas stations in Fresno, invested soundly, planned to build himself a new house and set up a trust fund for his children. The family man was looking to the future, shoring his foundations against the memory of a vineyard in the San Joaquin Valley.

In the fall of 1954, Lincoln invited him to drive again in the Pan American road race. Vukovich was off like a shot. During the race his co-driver was horrified at the speeds with which Vukovich took the corners. Again and again he protested to Vukovich. Suddenly the car shot over the bank of a 30-foot drop. As it sailed through the air, Vukovich took his hands off the wheel and said to his driver: “Okay, Vern, you drive it.” Neither was hurt.

By Christmas it was apparent that Howard Keck’s new car for the 1955 “500” would not be ready in time. Lindsey Hopkins, owner of a new sky-blue “roadster” capable of 180 mph, wanted Vukovich if he were free. Vukovich agreed—providing his beloved “butchers” came with him. Keck also agreed. Hopkins knew Vukovich well. Years before, in the midget-racing days, he had asked Vukovich: “Vuky, why do you play it so rough?” In one of his rare, candid moments, Vukovich replied, “The crowds want a villain, don’t they, Lindsey? I’m a pretty good villain.”

Vukovich drove to Indianapolis with his old friend, Walt Faulkner. “He had something on his mind,” Faulkner said, “all the bounce was gone. He felt he had to win three in a row because everybody had built him up so much. He was completely depressed.”

At the track Vukovich was more withdrawn than ever. He was down to 160 pounds. He had spent the spring months driving himself, with his usual thoroughness, through a regimen of exercises. His temper flared as quickly as ever. At previous “500s” he’d never driven more than 10 miles in practice. But now he endlessly circled the Speedway.

“I watched Vukovich going around and around,” Walt Faulkner said. “He didn’t go fast—not for him—only about 90 mph. He sat in his car very still as though he were thinking about something and using the track to iron it all out. He must have gone about 50 miles, just holding steady at around 90.”

“Then about a week before the race we were having coffee and he said, ‘I don’t think I’ll finish the race,’ and then he changed the subject.”

THE NIGHT BEFORE the big “500,” Vukovich went to the midget races at the 16th Street track next to the Speedway. He walked home about eleven thirty. The jammed frenzy of 16th Street surrounded him. In a long blaze of light, cars, three abreast, stretched back into Indianapolis itself. Service stations were doing a land-office business—charging 25 cents for the use of rest rooms. Neon lights sizzled coldly and colored bulbs winked on and off. Fans from all over the U.S. struggled along the packed sidewalks, stood listening to the yelling pitchmen or milled about the hamburger, hot-dog and cotton-candy stands. Hawkers sold souvenirs, peanuts and racing literature. Children cried. Cars honked. And competing with it all a group of evangelists preached from an amplifier truck.

When Vukovich got to the house, he said to his wife: “Esther, this is crazy. What are we doing here? Let’s go home.”

But Vukovich didn’t go home.

He was up and ready to leave for the Speedway before seven the next morning. Before he left, he and Esther talked about the dress she planned to wear that day.

“I wore a white dress the first year he won,” she said, “and he always wanted me to wear white when he drove. This year I wore a blue and white dress. I asked him if it would be all right and he said yes.”

Vukovich took out his billfold and gave his wife all the money in it with the exception of a dollar.

“I don’t want to be completely broke,” he told her as he left for the Speedway. At about nine that morning, he telephoned Esther and asked what time she was coming to the track. It was the first time he had ever telephoned her before a race.

“I’ll see you in Victory Lane,” she told him.

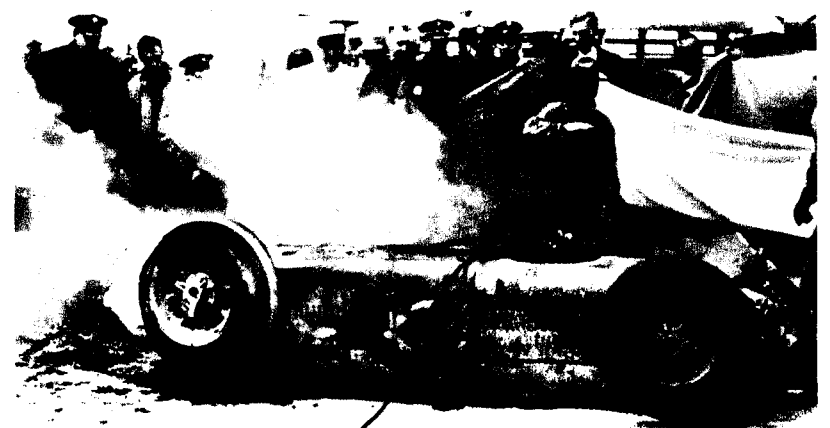
At the garage Vukovich took off his ring, put it down with his billfold. He also left the silver money clip Fred Gearhart had given him.

He walked out to the track and stood there looking slowly around the jammed stands. His helmet’s straps were loose. He wore only a T-shirt with *Mobiloil* stenciled across the back, a pair of white-duck pants and bowling shoes. He climbed into the “Hopkins Special,” pulled on a pair of gloves, fixed the straps of his helmet, and with Lindsey Hopkins posed for some photographs.

Outside the gates of the Speedway, over by the midget race track, a Ferris wheel spun lazily, and a calliope was playing.

At exactly 10:00 A.M. the 39th Indianapolis Memorial Day “500” began. One hour, two minutes and eight seconds later, in the Speedway hospital, the telephone rang.

“Crash,” said the track safety director. “Southeast corner.” THE END



Bill Vukovich died instantly beneath his overturned “Lindsey Hopkins Special”



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Ruth turned. "Something's wrong, isn't it?" she asked. Well, Tom thought, here goes. "I've just quit my job," he said

The idea man

Tom was one of the company's brightest young men. He was headed for the top. But now there was a new man—brighter and younger—who was determined to push Tom aside

By **ROBERT MC LAUGHLIN**

RESEARCHERS have estimated that 94.6 per cent of the human race would rather talk about themselves than do anything else. Tom Harding belonged to the small minority who make good listeners. He came by this great talent naturally. As the only child of a successful newspaper columnist and a celebrated Chicago beauty, Tom learned early that children should be seen and not heard.

When his father died, Tom's regal mother—after a suitable period of mourning—bravely carried on. She became the star of her own radio interview show and her fashionable Near North Side apartment usually had on exhibition the latest British author, Manhattan poet or Hollywood actor who happened to be passing through the Midwest.

During these years, when Tom's mother spoke to him it was continually to remind him how lucky he was to be brought up in a home where the Arts reigned supreme. Though silent, Tom was not unintelligent, and it was clear to him that his mother loved not the Arts, but artiness. When he graduated from college, his mother graciously made a place for him on her

radio show as a sort of male secretary. Tom refused. He astonished her even more by going to work for the Curvex Corporation ("Home Appliance for Happier Homes"). One of the main reasons he chose Curvex was that it lay several hundred miles from Chicago—in Dayton, Ohio. His mother would have been less shocked if he had taken to drink and loose living.

In his second summer in Dayton, Tom met Ruth Forbes, an intense, dark-haired girl who was a student at one of Ohio's countless small colleges. Ruth was an only child too, whose parents had been divorced when she was very young. It seemed to Ruth that she had passed her childhood packing and unpacking bags for six-month trips between Cleveland, where her carefree father lived, and California, where her dissatisfied mother moved restlessly about in a succession of identical towns.

Their first date told Tom and Ruth that it was no longer necessary for them to search the world for love and understanding. Ruth was in Dayton on a two-week visit. They were engaged before she left and planned to marry the following June, after her graduation. But, back at college, she

ILLUSTRATED BY TOM LOVELL