

ART SPARKS

Stunt Man to Piston King

BY JOE SCALZO

IT WAS MODEL San Francisco weather—chilly and dusky, with white caps in the harbor—when the imposing Cunard White Star luxury liner slipped out to sea for a 10-month tour of the Orient. It was fall of 1919, the war was just over and the cargo of plutocrats on board was anticipating ports of call such as Honolulu, Guam, Bangkok, the Philippines, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

One of the passengers, a husky, dark-haired, 19-year-old college dropout, was pacing the decks, trying to control his seething urge to attack the ship's gambling tables. For company, he had both a \$10,000 bankroll and a bride of two days, aged 17, whom he had met the previous week in a Berkeley drugstore.

To Arthur Sutton Sparks, the whole cruise was to be a lark—a madcap, howling blowout wherein practically anything was permitted.

It lasted one giddy, soaring month. By then, the liner was in Hong Kong and the hapless Sparks was flat, dead broke. In fact, he actually owed the ship's purser an additional \$3200.

Today, 47 years later, the memories are still green to Sparks. "You could borrow money from the purser in those days," he says. "But \$3200! That was the limit. I spent the rest of the trip below deck. And when we did get back to San Francisco, the police were waiting for me. I must have sat in a cell about two months before my Dad decided I'd had enough and settled the debts and got me out. It taught me a lesson, it sure did. But it probably wasn't a bad price to pay for all the action I'd had on that ship."

Sparks' father, a hotel kingpin with half-ownership in three major Kansas inns of the day, had proffered the original \$10,000 to Art as a "gift" for graduating from Sacramento High.

"I was always a hell-raiser in school, always fooling with motorcycles and working on cars. My Dad thought I'd never graduate. The money was supposed to put me on my own and get me through college."

Sparks did make a college effort. "I went down to Berkeley and enrolled. I went to classes steady, for two weeks. Then I met Ada (his first wife). I jumped school and we took off on that cruise. When we got back, and everything was finally set straight, I did go back to school. I thought I wanted to be a medical doctor."

SPARKS DID NOT become a physician. Again, and for the last time, he drifted out of school. And there was no glittering voyage awaiting him.

Instead, there ensued a long, hard, 10-year span during which he spent time—concurrently—as a daredevil movie stuntman, a high-school ma-

chine shop instructor and a roughneck dirt-track race car driver.

Dusting himself off and letting the various broken bones heal, he stepped into the breach in the 1930s as engineer/designer/builder of magnificent track racing cars, the fastest of the era. Into the picture came another remarkable figure, ultra-wealthy playboy Joel Thorne, who provided Sparks with the funds he needed for development work and signed him to an extraordinary lifetime contract.

Then, in the 1940s, it was Sparks pulling out of racing, the engineer again, founding the Forgedtrue Piston Corporation, which, of course, continues to provide speed shops and virtually every automotive manufacturer with various quality hardware, but mainly pistons. This year Sparks will enter his 18th season as president of Forgedtrue.

Art Sparks now is 64. He is nearly 6

ft. tall, weighs close to 200 lb., is broad-shouldered and flat-bellied, and could pass for being 10 years younger. He has been married twice and has two sons. He is outspoken, arrogant, tough and probably still could handle himself well in a fight. He is not bashful about his own achievements. He uses slang and profanity much of the time, but can speak with perfect grammar if he chooses. He is positive he has more enemies than friends, but isn't bothered.

When Sparks rejected college for the second and last time, he and his wife packed and headed for the Los Angeles area, where Art had been born. He liked the climate.

A few weeks later, riding his 61-cu. in. Harley-Davidson to and from work, he was spotted by an executive from Famous Players-Laske Hollywood film studios.

"They were making a comedy starring Will Rogers. There were some scenes with riders on motorcycles. They offered \$50 a day—\$25 for the bike and another \$25 for riding it. That was big money for the Twenties, just for riding a motorcycle."

When the Rogers film was completed, Sparks was retained by the studio for more work, including stunt riding. He also had taken a position with nearby Glendale High School teaching machine shop classes.

Sparks' filmdom days, which stretched from the early 1920s to about 1931, included stunts with Famous Players-Laske, Columbia and Fine Arts. He appeared in more than 50 pictures, including one of the all-time box office smashes, *Hell's Angels*, Jean Harlow's first major effort. ("Harlow

—she was a real knockout, all right.")

In one particular epic—*Poison*, a 16-episode serial—Sparks was a member of a murderous gang of thugs involved in a spectacular land-sea-air chase after a chest of diamonds.

HOWEVER, IT was the nerveless stunt work that Sparks best remembers. He once took a 150-ft. jump with a motorcycle into a lagoon, for \$1000. "It darn near killed me and they asked me to do it over again—at half price. You know what I told 'em.

"They really had me with that stunt work. They knew if I said I'd do something, I'd go ahead and do it. I always figured I was as brave as anyone else and could do anything anybody else could.

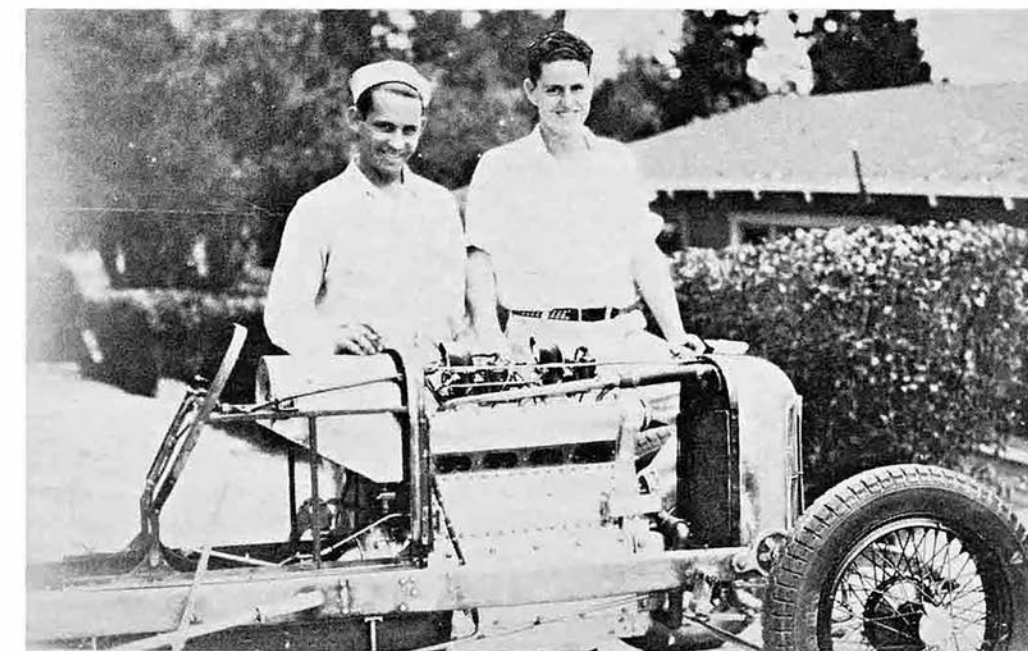
"A lot of times when I got hurt, it was my own fault. Once, Fine Arts had bought an old 25-ft. fishing boat and the idea was to blow it up for the camera. I had 10 sticks of dynamite to do the job and figured the concussion from the explosion would knock me off the boat and into the water and I wouldn't be hurt. But it knocked the wind out of me for a couple of days."

Of all his performances, however, there is one feat he judges the most suicidal of them all—a drop from an airplane.

Sparks says, "We filmed it in Long Beach Harbor. All I was wearing was a white shirt, slacks and tennis shoes. It was 300 ft., straight down.

"As soon as I jumped, I knew I was in big trouble; boy, was I hurtling through the air! That water coming up looked like cement. I had to slow myself down. But instead of holding my arms and legs out to take up more air

SPARKS AND Paul Weirick, right, grinning with their 1932 machine, were producers of Indianapolis near misses and a horde of national track marks.





THESPIAN SPARKS, foreground, appeared as part of a tough mob in *Wild Buccaneer*, filmed in 1925.



STEPPING FROM the wing of one JN-4 to the wing of another was all in a day's work for stuntman Sparks.

SPARKS

space, I folded myself into a ball. I hit just like a rock."

Initial impact tore him out of his tuck and splashed him spread-eagled across the surface. "The camera showed everything," he shuddered. "I ricocheted seven times for 150 ft. When I stopped, I was only 30 ft. from the breakwater, and just about all my ribs were broken. I was in a hospital seven weeks."

In one of his yellow-with-age scrap-books, there is a snapshot of the murderous stunt unfolding. Underneath is the caption, "Oh, I'm some fool."

Of course, all during his movie days, he was doubling in the role of teacher at Glendale High, with six classes a day. And even that wasn't enough. Any free nighttime hours were dedicated to readying his very first racing car, an open-wheeled flathead Ford Model T. It was built on an Essex chassis, used a Chrysler front axle and Ford rear end and was painted a striking purple. It took three years to

complete, with occasional help from Ed Winfield. The engine included such features as a solid-billet crankshaft, hand-forged rods, roller tappets, a camshaft with lobes keyed on the shaft. And this was 1927!

"Ninety per cent of the parts came from junk yards. Any machine work I needed I did myself with equipment at the high school. I always carried the keys. I got the billet steel in 70-lb. blocks from Germany. It wasn't cheap."

The finished machine, producing something like 110 bhp, is still around, now the property of Bob Pegalouosa of Glendale, Calif. The engine is reputed to be in running condition.

Sparks' raging ambition naturally was to put it onto a race track. Racing in those days was divided. It was either the AAA-conducted contests on the terribly fast board tracks of Culver City and Fresno, where the expensive, howling, front-wheel-drive, 91-cu. in. blown Millers were sweeping things clean, or the barnstorming, unsanctioned, outlaw dirt track races.

The racing that interested Sparks was the outlaw variety. The tracks were dirt, pancake-flat ovals. Competing cars were primarily second-rate Ford T specials, some sporting the new Rajo and Riley rocker-arm overhead valve heads. Feature race length usually was 15 laps, "and there were

always darn few cars running by the finish," Sparks remembers.

"I led every race I was in," boasts Sparks, who ran in a total of three, two at Banning and one at Colton. "The first race, I started to spin around in a corner, and spun like I was never going to stop. The second race, the car broke. The third one, I had an accident."

In 1927, at Banning, Sparks knifed into the first turn neck-and-neck with Bill Bundy. Sparks' machine jumped away from the track, and took Bundy's with it. Both cars flipped, then pin-wheeled. "When everything stopped, I had a mouthful of dirt, a broken collar bone, a broken jaw, and the wind knocked out of me. I couldn't say a word. Bundy ran over screaming, 'Art, you're going to be OK!' He slapped me harder than hell on the back. I darn near swallowed all the dirt."

SPARKS TOOK his wounded car home and patched it up during the winter, while his own injuries healed. He never drove another race.

When Sparks did return to the tracks, he employed a variety of drivers for his car, including Lou Moore and Charlie Gelston. But he finally settled on the services of young Billy Spence.

Sparks and Spence began competing

in the AAA circuit, which included the northern tracks of San Jose, Hanford and Bakersfield. In the south, they occasionally competed at an obscure oval called Ascot.

Running in peak form, Spence left Sparks in May, 1928, for a shot at Indianapolis. Qualifying among the leaders, he was killed early in the contest.

When Spence quit, Sparks secured Jimmy Sharpe. "Sharpe was a charger. He couldn't stand not to be leading and he'd really run hard to get there. He'd always win one main event out of three." However, Sharpe's recklessness finally put him in the hospital with a badly fractured arm and that ended his stint with Sparks.

Racing during this era in California was popping to life like a roman candle, particularly at the Ascot track in the quiet hills of eastern Los Angeles. American Legion Post No. 127 had cautiously taken over promotion of the plant and was armed with AAA sanction.

The Legion's Ascot take-over possibly was the start of the greatest era in American racing. Crowds of 20,000 attended weekly Wednesday night big-car races at the Soto and Valley street plant. Ranking, rowdy drivers from everywhere, the East, Midwest and South—anywhere there was racing—showed up to chase the dazzling prize money.

There were super-stars—Triplett, Gordon, Mays, Petillo, Insinger, Stapp, Horn, Rose, Roberts, Cummings, Shaw—bathed in glaring track lights, tearing round a magnificently-groomed, much-too-fast, banked, five-eighths-mile macadam oval, with turns 130 ft. wide.

And the cars! The laboratory-spotless, chromium-plated, gleaming, wire-wheeled machines, Miller and Offenhauser powered to run at 115 mph on the straightaways, and plunge through the corners three abreast, lowering the track record from 36 sec. to 29 sec. in less than five years.

Art Sparks, his cars and drivers, were to play the dominant role throughout the fantastic reign of "Legion Ascot."

IN 1930, when Ascot really started boiling, Sparks quit teaching and decided to end his stuntwork. Racing simply was too profitable. "I had \$10,000 in the bank from racing. That's how good it was."

Before bowing out of the movies, he had a final fling in Howard Hughes' *Hell's Angels*, a fighter plane epic. In addition to stunts, Sparks also flew fighter aircraft. He and a friend bought an aged World War I trainer and rented it to Hughes for something exceeding \$250 a day during filming.

Sparks had leased a small machine shop in Glendale for race car headquarters and had formed a partnership with a genial, soft-spoken, former Muroc Dry Lake tuner/driver named Paul Weirick. The Sparks-Weirick alliance, which resulted in several Pacific Coast championships, a cluster of near-misses at Indianapolis and a horde of national track records, lasted five years, exactly five more than anyone expected.

Weirick was the complete opposite of the hot-tempered, outspoken Sparks; he was mild-mannered and quiet. "I don't know how Weirick could stand it," one old-timer says.

"It's true that Sparks' cars could command the respect of anyone, but Sparks himself was cold-blooded and arrogant. No one could get along with him."

Weirick, now running his own plastics plant, said, "Maybe the reason we lasted so long is because we were of such different temperament. During the whole association, we never had a bad argument. We were both so dedicated to racing, we didn't have time to pay attention to anything else."

Sparks earlier had replaced his original flathead special with a 2-cam Cragar Model A Ford. It had run well and won its share of races, but was not the all-out weapon he and Weirick had in mind for Ascot. "We really wanted to go first cabin," Weirick recalls.

Work was started on an all-new frame and solid-axle chassis, using elliptic springs in front, platforms in the rear. The wheelbase was stretched to 102 in. and 4-wheel brakes were fitted. Everything was kept exceptionally light.

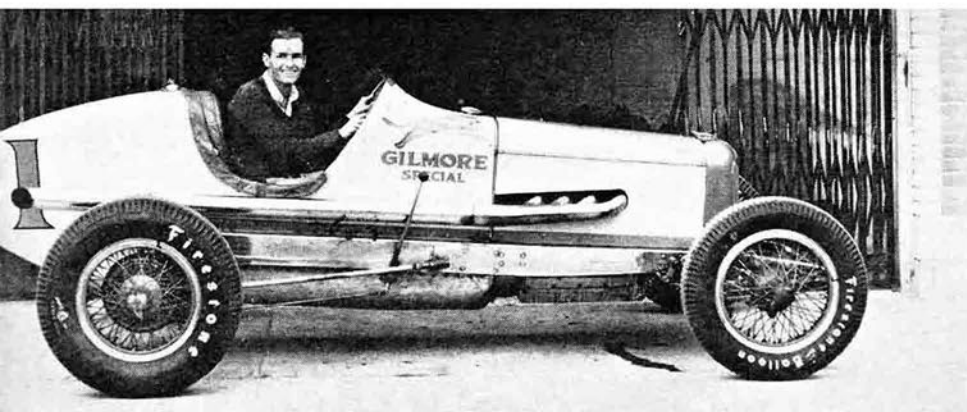
By coincidence, Harry Miller had just introduced a 4-cyl., 16-valve 200-cu. in. version of his blown board-track engine. Downdraft carburetion was used and horsepower output equaled the displacement.

Sparks and Weirick paid \$2750 for the privilege of acquiring the second Miller engine built. They fitted it in their chassis, dropped on a slinky, pencil slim, Clyde Adams-built body, finishing everything off in a light metallic blue—which always was their team color—and went to Ascot.

"Stubby" Stubblefield was the first to race the new mechanism, and got off to a ripping start, snaring four suc-

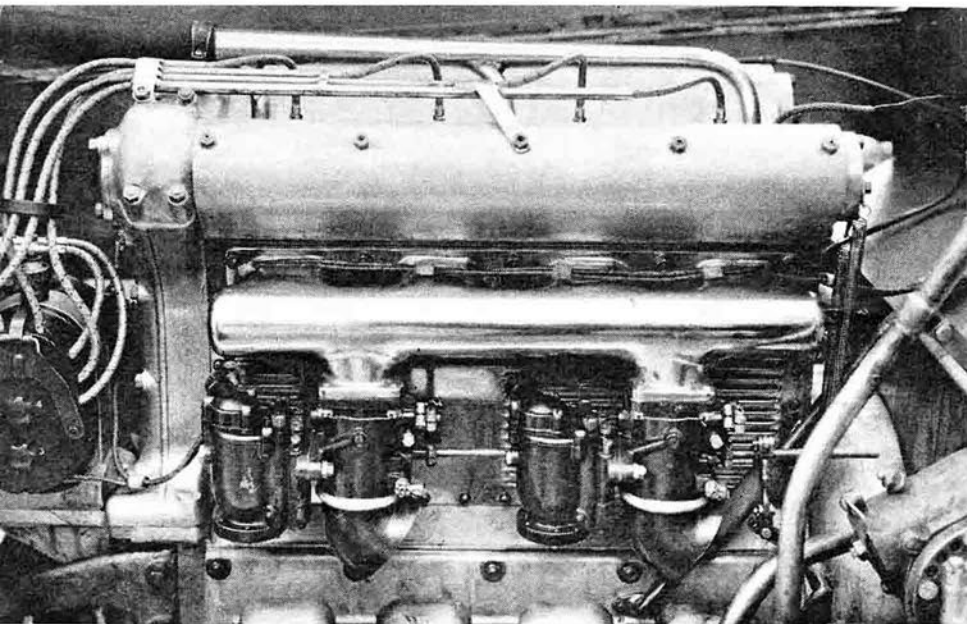
WIND TUNNEL tests aided design of Sparks' "Catfish" for the 1932 Indianapolis 500. Driver Stubby Stubblefield and riding mechanic Otto Wolfer were running in sixth place when a fuel leak forced their retirement on the 175th lap.





REX MAYS, winning with boring regularity at tracks across the U.S., earned a Pacific Coast championship for Sparks and Weirick in 1935.

SPARKS REWORKED this Miller/Offenhauser engine to carry two valves per cylinder instead of four—and "Poison Lil" sped to the '35 Coast trophy.



SPARKS

cessive Ascot main events. Arvol Brunmier also briefly drove the car, but it was Bill Cummings, a newcomer who quickly earned national rank and fame at Indianapolis and Winchester, Ind., who manhandled the little machine the majority of the time. He was one of the few drivers ever to get along with Sparks.

Gilmore Oil Co. climbed onto the bandwagon and offered Sparks and Weirick a sponsorship arrangement that was to last until the two parted in 1936.

After a Memorial Day reconnaissance trip to Indianapolis in 1931, Sparks told Earl Gilmore he wanted

to build a car for the 1932 500-mile classic. Gilmore was only slightly interested, so Sparks started initial work without financial aid.

Sparks had aerodynamics in mind. Using results of wind tunnel tests conducted at Stanford University, he designed his first 2-man Indianapolis car. Clyde Adams, who constantly worked with Sparks and whom Sparks calls the "Houdini" of the trade, carried out the body shaping.

Sparks used a stroked Miller engine, trying to compete with the anything-goes 366-cu. in. Speedway limit, which favored stock block engines.

Sparks' completed car, dubbed the "Catfish" because of its peculiar shape ("It was strange looking—I'll give you that"), was finished the very day driver Shorty Cantlon clocked a record 145 mph at Muroc Dry Lake in a supercharged machine.

Seizing on the opportunity, Sparks

went to Gilmore where it was agreed that if the unsupercharged Catfish could break Cantlon's record, Gilmore would sponsor Sparks' Indianapolis effort.

With Stubblefield driving, the Catfish roared across Muroc at 150 mph, easily winning the free Indianapolis trip.

Gilmore was not disappointed by Sparks at Indianapolis. Stubblefield qualified at 118 mph, faster than any other car, when an "egg" developed on one of the rear tires and he was forced to ease up. "We'd have had fast time by over 2 mph if that hadn't happened," Sparks claims.

A RECORD 45 cars started the 500 that year and in the mad scramble to the first corner, Stubblefield and riding mechanic Otto Wolfer were left in the lurch. Stubblefield regained composure, however, and was in sixth place at 175 laps when the Catfish developed a fuel leak and was flagged off the track.

The following weekend at Hammond, Ind., the Catfish and Stubblefield won a 100-mile contest easily, and immediately afterward, Indianapolis victor Fred Frame bought the car for \$6500. In 1937, Wilbur Shaw won his first Indianapolis race in a copy of the Catfish.

Meanwhile, Ascot was booming. Winning \$2000 in an evening wasn't unusual and the elite of auto racing arrived continually to fight for the honor of it. The 100-lap main events looked like trophy dashes.

Sparks put the dynamic Kelly Petillo in his Ascot car, called the Gilmore Lionhead Special, and Petillo floorboarded to win after win. Petillo's streak was stopped only by a blow-up with Sparks, which resulted in Bill Cummings sitting in the car for the remainder of the '32 season and for the first part of 1933.

Cummings departed for the Eastern race circuit in April and Sparks was temporarily without a driver, so he selected Al Gordon, who, at 34, was still little more than a brave, hard-charging rookie. It was Gordon's first big chance and he became a winner instantly. He succeeded in winning both the car and driver Pacific Coast championships for 1933.

It was all so good Sparks passed up Indianapolis. "We made \$36,000 for the season and never left the Coast."

However, along the way, Gordon had picked up a sidekick, a slender, lean-faced dandy named Ernie Triplett.

Triplett, like Gordon, was a charger who would never settle for less than first. Triplett drove a Miller for Bill White and the duels he and Gordon staged now are legendary.

The stormy battles that went on during 1933, reached their peak in March, 1934, on the desolate mile track at El Centro, location of the annual Imperial County Fair. The El Centro race started typically. Gordon and Triplett pulled away from the field in a repetition of past contests. But as the race progressed, Sparks waited, nervously keeping a restless eye on the quickly deteriorating track conditions. "It was so dusty, I couldn't even see Gordon. It was the worst track I've ever seen."

Gordon and Triplett were dueling, exchanging the lead several times in a single lap. On the 21st mile a chain-reaction tragedy was triggered.

A car had stalled in the last corner and officials either didn't realize it was there, or believed it wasn't a hazard. Finally, driver George (Swede) Smith plowed into it, cluttering the course with wreckage.

Triplett and Gordon roared out of the gloom and found no place to go. A pit man had run from the infield and was helping Smith from the wreck when Triplett's car bore down, hitting and killing both Smith and the mechanic. Triplett's car then careened into Gordon's, setting off an end-over-end crash of both machines. Triplett's car, completely destroyed, ended upside down in a collection of horse corals. Triplett was dead. Gordon finally stopped broadside against a solid 2-ft.-square wooden post. He was in shock, the car wrecked, but aside from a broken nose and mashed lip, he was uninjured.

The race was stopped and rookie driver Herb Balmer was declared the winner. Heaping on even more trag-

edy, Balmer himself was killed four days later while road testing one of his race cars.

It all made the most gory newspaper copy imaginable. And it was Sparks who added even more. Sparks had immediately filed a protest of the race, declaring that his driver, Gordon, should have been named winner, as he was leading the pack at the time of the accident that stopped the race.

Sparks then went even farther. He, along with assistant starter James Grant and Joe Petralli, Sparks' pit man, filed official sworn affidavits bearing everything from track conditions to AAA officialdom.

AAA was in a frenzy over Sparks' vocalizing, which naturally made all the newspapers. Paul Weirick remembers, "Three-A was really mad. It didn't want any more of that. It was set to make a real example of Sparks."

SPARKS WAS summoned to Indianapolis for a closed-door AAA hearing. Earl Gilmore went with him and expressed readiness to settle any fines. AAA had nothing that paltry in mind, however. Instead, Sparks was irrevocably and absolutely banned from all AAA-sanctioned events for a period of two years. He was not allowed on a race track or in the pits and couldn't even buy a pit pass. It was one of the stiffest auto racing penalties on record.

Sparks left open-mouthed and flabbergasted, somehow having had the wisdom to remain silent and not make the penalty even worse.

It was disaster for him. Not only did it signal the possible end to all his racing, but also his development work. He had just completed a new 2-man In-

dianapolis car. Also, he had been engaged—at considerable expense—in re-working his Miller/Offenhauser engines. He had fabricated his own blocks and rods and had changed the 4-valve-per-cylinder Miller arrangement to 2-valves per cylinder, allowing the engine to rev 1000 rpm higher and pull a lower gear. Out of the improvements came the nickname, "Poison Lil."

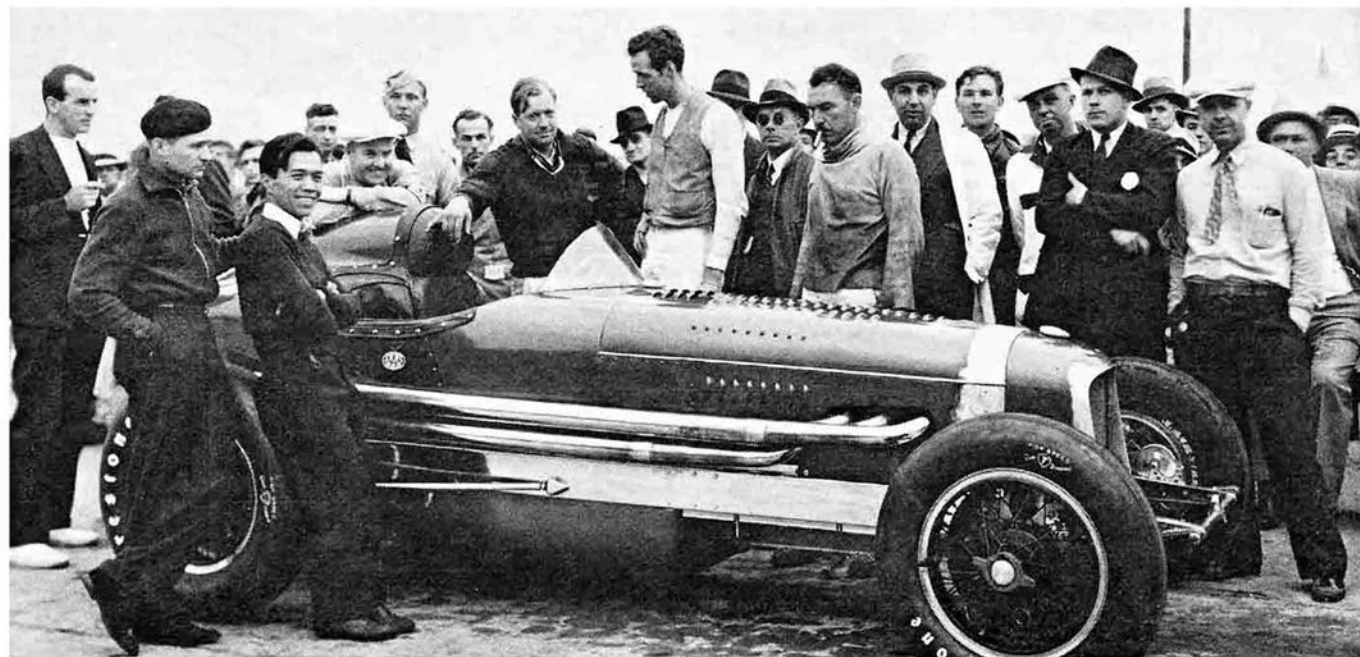
It appeared that Poison Lil might never see a race track. Fortunately, a way was found. Weirick had kept clear of the El Centro controversy. He was still pristine pure in the eyes of AAA and could continue to field cars.

Weirick had accompanied Sparks to his Indianapolis inquisition which was held the opening day of practice for the 1934 classic. Weirick immediately went to Gasoline Alley and the garages, leaving a frustrated Sparks in the infield, where he sat for a nerve-racking, chain-smoking month, shouting instructions through the fence as Weirick and mechanic Dave Frank readied the equipment.

Gordon was still driving the Sparks-Weirick car and, after a quick try at Indianapolis—where he raced from 17th to second place at 160 miles and was getting ready to pass the leading, 4-wheel-drive Miller of Frank Brisco, when he hit an oil slick and nudged the wall—campaigns actively on the Eastern AAA big-car circuit.

Ascot races during 1934 were conducted on a new half-mile dirt track inside the big five-eighths-mile oval. It was an attempt to cut down the appalling driver death rate. Sparks and Weirick weren't much interested in the new track.

FORMER MILKMAN Jimmy Snyder turned a sizzling 130.495-mph lap at Indianapolis before the 1937 race in Sparks' Special. At the start of the race, Snyder pulled away, passed 17 cars and held the lead for 65 miles, then was forced to retire.



SPARKS



CHEVROLETS, Louis and Arthur, chatted with Sparks in 1936.

MILLIONAIRE Joel Thorne, right, and Sparks tackled the 1938 500.



"Our car couldn't run competitively there because the wheelbase was too long. And that half-mile took all the precision away," Sparks says.

Sparks, then divorced, took up residence in Indianapolis during the hot summer of '34 while Gordon and Weirick towed to the distant and dangerous Ralph Hankenson Eastern AAA meets. They had a highly successful run and, at one memorable June race at Langhorne, Pa., Gordon won two featured 50-mile races, averaging a record 83.1 mph that stood for years.

However, even though Weirick could get along with Gordon, Sparks never could and Sparks finally fired him after a heated argument.

Gordon stomped back to the West Coast and Ascot to drive for Bill White, Triplett's former sponsor. Racing was due to resume on the Ascot five-eighths-mile oval, due to lack of success of the half-mile circle. Sparks went home and picked Kelly Petillo to drive.

PETILLO PROVED his worth in short order, winning the first return race held on the big track after a hectic duel with 22-year old Rex Mays, who accomplished wonders in Paul Fromm's 2-cam Fronty.

What really endeared Petillo to both Sparks and Weirick, however, was a win (and \$4200 payoff) at the Mines Field track (where Los Angeles International Airport is today). It was a winter AAA 200-mile national championship go for the 2-man Indianapolis cars.

Petillo, driving with the tiny Tak Hirashima, screamed across the line first on the 126th lap when the race was called because of heavy fog. Petillo had had to charge up from the back after a pit stop and flailed so hard that one of his elbows once struck poor Hirashima in the jaw, knocking him out for three laps.

Petillo was to drive for Sparks-Weirick in the approaching 1935 Ascot season, but perhaps remembering his abrupt dismissal by Sparks two years previous, quit at the last minute and built his own car with prize money earned driving Sparks' Poison Lil.

That set the stage for the hiring of the most successful Ascot driver ever, Rex Mays. Mays signed with Sparks-Weirick and, with what finally turned into boring regularity, completely annihilated all competition. No matter where he raced—and Sparks and Weirick took him all over the country—Mays was on top.

He led for 300 miles at Indianapolis—after snagging pole position in time trials—until the front suspension collapsed (race winner, to the chagrin of Sparks, was Petillo). He won several times at Hammond, Milwaukee and

Langhorne in the East. He won El Centro. He set a sizzling 106-mph lap record at Oakland. He once won 12 straight main events at Legion Ascot, and an uncountable number of trophy dashes. And, as the 1935 season ended, Mays was runaway Pacific Coast Champion.

Unfortunately, there also was bad news in racing during '35, at least as far as Ascot was concerned. The American Legion no longer was promoting. People in racing circles were frantically trying to tag the reason for the popularity drop. Gimmicks were tried, such as an Ascot 2-man car race. It was a failure.

Things hung in the balance until January 26, 1936, when Ascot finally died in the dust and rubble of the fatal crash of Al Gordon and his riding mechanic, Spider Matlock. Mays won the tragic race, which was the final Ascot event. AAA investigated the accident and declared Ascot unsafe, calling for \$10,000 in improvements before another meet could be conducted there. The money was not forthcoming.

"People wonder what happened to Ascot, why it folded," Weirick explained. "A lot of people blamed Art and me. When Rex was winning all the races, it took interest out of it. No one liked seeing the same driver win them all—except Art and me. And we had a 'B' class car we used to run, too, with Chris Vest driving. It would always win the 'B' main event."

With Ascot no longer in operation, the East and Midwest were the last bastions of big time racing in the country. Sparks-Weirick fielded two cars at the 1936 Indianapolis race, with Mays and Ray Pixley driving. Mays again won pole position, and then was leading the race when he ran out of gasoline a short distance from the finish. A remarkable 37.5-gal. fuel limit was imposed that year and Mays' mount was just one of the faster cars that fell from the race because of it. Pixley, however, kept going and took sixth place, the only finisher Sparks-Weirick ever had at the Brickyard.

Mays raced the Midwestern/Eastern circuit fully with Sparks, his AAA ban finally lifted, allowed back in the garage area with Weirick. It was a disastrous, crash-marred year, with Mays spending most of his time in hospitals and Sparks and Weirick continually rebuilding the car. Finally, at the first international race at Roosevelt Field in Long Island, which drew Nuvolari and others of that ilk, Mays hung Poison Lil on the wall in an accident with Wilbur Shaw and Sparks cried, "Enough!"

IN BAD financial shape and only recently safe from an embarrassing income tax hassle, during which both he

and Weirick spent an evening in jail, Sparks sought to dissolve the partnership. Weirick agreed and, in late 1936, bought out everything—cars, tools and spares—for \$8500. He and Sparks shook hands and broke up perhaps the most successful partnership racing had produced to that time.

Sparks always had had a raging desire to have an Indianapolis winner, a desire really fanned when he witnessed the factory-backed Alfa Romeos and the Nazi-supported Mercedes and Auto Unions at Roosevelt Raceway. With facts he had gleaned from these cars, plus some ideas of his own, he set to work assembling craftsmen and tools for a major Indianapolis effort on his part in 1937.

Keeping the money he'd gotten from Weirick, he took out a mortgage on his Glendale home, obtained additional money from a bank. Everything he had or could borrow was tied up in his proposed Indianapolis project.

IT WAS August of '36 when Sparks had assembled the manpower and equipment he deemed necessary. Among those he hired were Leo Goossen and Fred Offenhauser. He had earlier re-examined and discarded his principle of extracting tremendous horsepower from small engines. "Unit loadings were getting too heavy and too risky to try and draw even more horsepower from the existing engines," he said. "I was going to build my own engine and car, from the ground up."

Since 1930, Indianapolis had been governed by the wide-open 366-cu. in. supercharged/unsupercharged rule. But with the lack of popularity in the semi-stock engines, practically all winning cars had been propelled by full-race units of only 220 to 270 cu. in. Sparks, not giving AAA an inch, went the whole 366 route, with a 6-cyl. twin-cam supercharged layout.

His "Big Six" engine, as he called it, used a 7-main-bearing crankshaft and cylinder studs that extended through the main bearing caps. The cylinder head and block were cast as one unit. Sparks employed a two-valves-per-cylinder layout. The supercharger was a centrifugal type with a planetary step-up of 5.5:1 and was a unit within itself, having its own oil tank and pump. Magnesium was used extensively throughout.

Sporting a scruffy, half-finished paint job, the Sparks Special was loaded on a trailer and carted to Indianapolis, where the ex-milkman, Jimmy Snyder, was to drive it.

The Sparks machine spent the first week of qualifications in the garage while finishing touches were applied. Not until the final Saturday afternoon of time trials did Snyder and riding

mechanic Tak Hirashima climb aboard. Snyder whistled around for the 25-mile qualifying distance at a cool 125.-287 mph, with one sizzling solo lap at over 130 mph. It was a staggering run, over 5 mph faster than the next quickest qualifier, Bill Cummings.

"Jimmy had to start in the back because we qualified so late," Sparks says. "That first trip down the back-straight he and Tak passed 17 cars and were 50 yards ahead at the end of the first lap." Snyder's runaway flight lasted a spectacular 65 miles and then he crawled into the pits with supercharger trouble.

Sparks was in a surly temper when a gangly, well-dressed 23-year-old youth in a top hat sauntered over and announced that he was Joel Thorne.

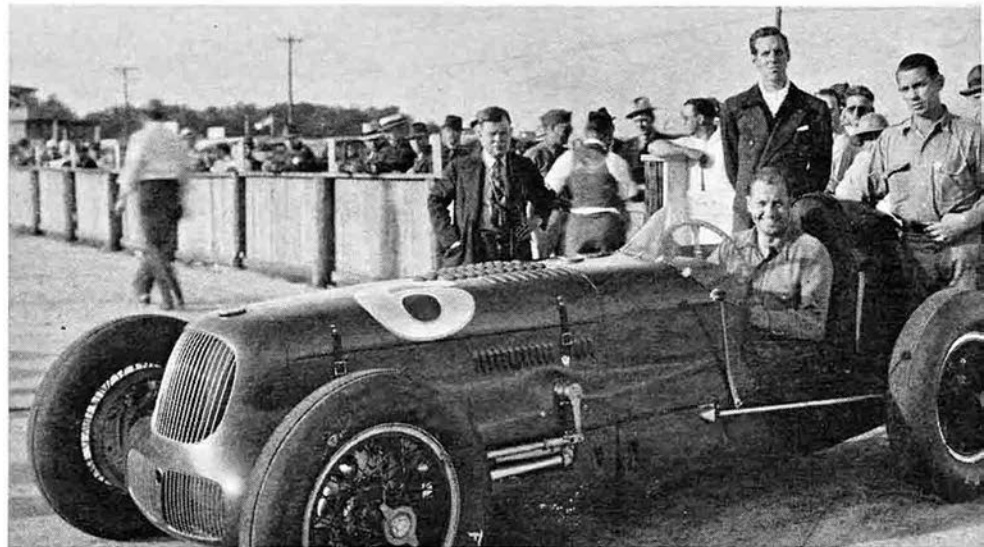
Certainly everyone knew who Joel Thorne was. The speed-chasing multi-

of the red and continue developing the Big Six.

The Thorne fortune was worth something approaching \$37 million. But it was all in an irrevocable trust, and the Catholic Church in New York City was executor. Thorne received an allotment of \$300,000 a year and could not sign a single legal paper until he was 30.

Sparks flew with Thorne to his estate in New Rochelle, N. Y., and huddled for days with Thorne's battery of attorneys. A week later a contract was drawn and signed and Sparks had his security—in spades. Sparks' contract was for life. It was unbreakable. It called for him to work for Thorne for a meager monthly salary, plus getting 10% of any race car earnings. When Sparks reached 75, he would receive a settlement of \$50,000. Sparks could not

UNDER TERMS of a lifetime contract, Sparks built this roadster for Thorne for the 1938 Indianapolis classic. The car failed to finish.



millionaire playboy, whose ancestors had carved out the Erie Canal and controlled the Erie & Penn railroad, had hit the Indianapolis Speedway that year. A syndicate of smart operators had found him to be a ripe target and had sold him a horrid selection of junk hardware for a stunning sum. Of the sad 7-car package Thorne bought, only three had qualified for the race and not one had ended in the money.

Sparks trucked the Big Six home to the West Coast, but Thorne trailed him in his own plane and finally cornered Sparks at his home where he broached a lusty plan. "We will beat Indianapolis once and for all," he told Sparks.

Thorne wished to render funds on an unlimited scale and wanted Sparks to build him a team of race cars. It all sounded simple and ideal and gave Sparks the opportunity both to get out

quit, nor could he be fired by Thorne.

Sparks was to be unrestricted boss of the operation. He jumped into it on a 24-hour basis, rounding up machinery and men to start preparing a 3-car team for the 1938 500-mile race. Sparks established headquarters in south Los Angeles in a massive single-story structure and ran things with an iron hand. Upward of 40 race car specialists soon were in his employ and over \$150,000 was invested in equipment, including an \$11,000 gear grinder, the only one of its kind on the West Coast.

He met a monthly payroll of \$5000. To offset this he began taking in aviation work that soon was bringing in over \$2000 a month. The Thorne Engineering Corp. was recognized as the country's most complete headquarters for building race cars, aircraft engines, or any other type of specialty work re-

SPARKS

quiring the utmost in precision. "It was absolutely the greatest," says Pete De Paolo.

In the fall of 1937, however, the whole operation almost received an early death blow. AAA changed the engine sizes for Indianapolis. The old 366 formula was junked in favor of a fresh one that allowed unsupercharged engines of 274 cu. in. and supercharged units of 183 cu. in. Naturally, it completely ruled out Sparks' monstrous Big Six.

The task of scaling down the "Big Six" into a "Little Six" required massive re-tooling. No less than 5500 parts in the engine needed an individual blueprint. Also, the '37 Indianapolis had been the final 2-man car race, so single-seat bodies were required for the 1938 event.

The changed machines were big, weighed close to 1800 lb., but put out nearly 400 horsepower. One was supercharged, the other was the 274 non-supercharged size, still with six cylinders and six carburetors. Three cars were to have been readied, for Snyder, Ronnie Householder, and *le patron*, Thorne. Time ran out and Thorne was entered in one of the front-wheel-drive Millers he had bought the previous year, now fitted with a greatly reworked Offenhauser engine stroked to 240 cu. in.

As it was, Thorne was the only member of the team to finish the race in ninth position. The scowling Householder, after breaking Snyder's 1937 qualifying record, dropped out with valve spring trouble, the same ailment that parked Snyder. Snyder led for 300 miles, setting track records that remained unbroken for 10 years.

The following year, 1939, Sparks had his own valve springs in the cars, allowing the engines to twist as tight as 8200 rpm. Snyder, Rex Mays and Thorne drove the 6-cyl. Sparks-engine cars, with Mel Hansen entered in the rig with which Thorne had finished ninth.

Snyder finished second, Thorne seventh while Mays and Hansen dropped out. It was the closest Sparks had ever come to bringing in a winner.

Sparks was not in attendance at Indianapolis the next two years. His relationship with Thorne was becoming strained. "We never got along," Sparks says, "not from the moment we first shook hands. Thorne was always trying to run the show and that's what blew us up."

By 1940, Sparks' desire to get out of the Thorne tie-up was increased by the death of Jimmy Snyder in a sand-lot midget race in St. Louis, Mo. Snyder was the only driver besides Bill Cummings with whom Sparks had been really close. "Snyder was the best of them all. And he died before he really proved himself."

With World War II near, Sparks, age 42, made a bid to hitch himself to the Marine Corps. It was an awkward attempt to thwart the "double-edged" Thorne contract and friends fortunately talked him out of it.

Then World War II hit. All racing was shelved. Sparks completely revamped the Thorne headquarters to fulfill government contracts that began arriving in volume. Soon \$36,000 a month was coming in, mainly from Lockheed. Thorne gave Sparks 5% of the gross to run the shop. This all ended with a snap during the middle of the war when, simultaneously, Thorne stopped paying and Lockheed bought out the operation.

Thorne then took Sparks and went to "Ma" Perkins, the Secretary of Labor in the Pentagon, who also happened to be Thorne's aunt. Thorne arranged to have a plant built in Litchfield, Ariz., to maintain the tooling that was used by Consolidated and Boeing in building flight decks for B-24 bombers.

SPARKS HEADED the Arizona project a brief six months, he says, "living on Thorne's promises. He never paid me a dime. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. Thorne was in the East and I could never get hold of him. I just left a note on my desk and walked out. But I was still in trouble. I still couldn't work for anyone but Thorne."

Sparks eventually had the ill-fated contract broken in court and also received a judgment of \$90,000. He and Thorne also went to Indianapolis as a team one final time, in 1946. Out of the parts that were left after the race cars had rested under dust covers throughout the war, two machines were patched together. With Tak Hirashima, Eddie Offutt and others from the old gang, everything was readied a bare two months before the first post-war race.

The German, Rudolph Caracciola, demolished one car in practice, after a bird flew into his face, but the other Thorne-Sparks car—the non-supercharged version—made the race at a 125.541 mph qualifying speed, good for outside in the fifth row. The driver was George Robson described by Sparks as, "a plugger; he wasn't really fast, but was very steady." By 80 laps Robson was in the lead and from that point until the finish, he engaged

rookie Jimmy Jackson in a tight duel. Robson was in front at the wire by only 32 sec.

After more than 10 years of trying, Sparks finally had his Indianapolis winner, although he had to survive two eleventh-hour protests by Jackson, while Robson drank milk in Victory Lane. Poor Robson drank barely got a chance to spend any of his \$42,350 pot. He was killed only five months later at a race in Atlanta, Ga.

Sparks spent the remainder of the Forties drifting in and out of a maze of projects, among them a brief partnership with Earl "Mad Man" Muntz in a tool and die business and, when Muntz became a Kaiser-Fraser dealer, raced a couple of the flathead sedans at the Los Angeles stock car tracks of southern Ascot and Gardena. A teenage Troy Ruttman and a slender Rodger Ward drove the cars.

"Oh, did we cheat," Sparks reminisces. "Those cars were bored and stroked, lightened and sometimes even ran on fuel. To keep from having them protested or torn down, we'd have Ruttman and Ward drive the damn things home right after the races."

Interspersed in this period was work Sparks did for DeSoto. Contracted by the factory to design a hot stock car racing engine, Sparks dreamed up a 265-cu. in. dynamometer-tested 327-bhp Six that was particularly successful on the major Southern stocker tracks.

Sparks' final crack at Indianapolis came in 1949. Prowling through the garages as a spectator only a week before the final qualification rounds, he was confronted by a breathless A. R. Hollyday, a sponsor of the Indianapolis Race Cars Inc. team. There was major trouble. The regular chief mechanic, Cotton Hennings, had died during the winter and his replacement had just quit. Would Sparks care to take his place.

Sparks was led to the garage where the three IRC race cars, two supercharged, 8-cyl. Maseratis and one Miller Special, lay in mad confusion.

Sparks took over the chief mechanic duties and, arousing the wrath of the Speedway regulars, many of whom were out of work, phoned California and enlisted the aid of Joe Petralli and three little-known motorcycle tuners, Tim Witham, Red Hudspeth and A. J. Lewis. The lights burned all night and Sparks took up temporary residence right in the garage. Both Maseratis were readied and duly qualified by Fred Agabashian and dirt-track star Lee Wallard.

Witham, who worked on Wallard's car, said, "We got the car qualified okay, but in practice only a day or so before the race, the engine lost a rod

and it was work-all-day-and-all-night again."

AGABASHIAN'S CAR failed early with overheating, but Wallard desperately carved forward and, in one quick move, ducked clear down onto the infield grass of the first corner and passed three cars, including Rex Mays' leading Novi. Wallard was running away with the race when the rear end gears failed on the 55th lap. "It was the only thing we hadn't checked" lamented both Witham and Sparks.

Sparks' full effort thereafter was applied to his newly-formed Forgedtrue Piston Corp., an operation he'd been laboring with on and off for an extended period.

Sparks had built his first die in 1945, producing the first-ever impact-extruded (forged) piston [Except for aircraft applications—ED.]. A limited number were made for 270 Offenhauser engines.

Offenhauser success led Sparks to create pistons for the flathead Ford V-8. Over 200,000 forgings were made. Then Ford produced the overhead-valve engine and Sparks was left with an expensive surplus of worthless flathead pistons. "I ate crackers a lot when that happened."

In 1947 he founded Forgedtrue. Initially plagued with financial woes, partnership shake-ups and many headquarters changes, Forgedtrue and Sparks survived it all and, in 1949, a full line of pistons for popular engines was put into production.

This was the beginning and led to the way things are today. Forgedtrue now does a yearly business in excess of half a million dollars, servicing such customers as GM, Ford, Chrysler, Ferrari and Porsche. Several overtures have been made to Sparks to tie him to an exclusive contract, but he has always shunned them.

On the specialty, or racing side, Forgedtrue products get workouts everywhere from super speedways and dragstrips to marine racing. Winning cars at Indianapolis for 11 straight years were Forgedtrue equipped. No less than 65% of Forgedtrue's business is the manufacture of special racing components.

The Forgedtrue piston is noted for its strength, extreme lightness and expense. Blanks, received from Douglas Aircraft, are of No. 2018F Rolls-Royce aircraft-type nickel-base aluminum alloy and are forged from bar stock. All forgings undergo ultrasonic inspection.

Other Forgedtrue components are Sparks-Witham (S & W) valve springs and caps, and piston pins and rings.

Sparks hand selects his 30 workmen. Conditions are good; 15% of each man's salary goes into a trust fund.

Sparks is the sole ramrod at Forgedtrue, having bought out all his early partners. He runs things in the same hard-fisted manner he did the old Thorne Engineering Corp., "with an iron hand." He speaks of retirement constantly, but continually arrives at the Pasadena facility at 8:30 a.m., five days a week, in his black VW.

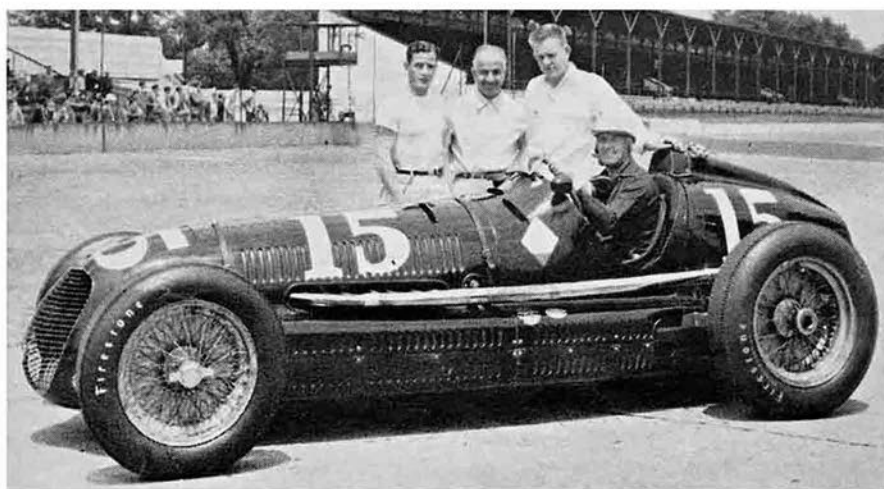
At his spacious home in the hills above Pasadena, Sparks lives with his wife of 30 years, Thelma. In the double garage and warehouse in the rear are six Porsche engines in various stages of disassembly and experimentation. Porsche is one of Forgedtrue's best customers and the engines were a gift. Sparks is constantly re-working them.

There is a den over the garage with

a large desk in the middle completely covered with framed autographed pictures. The walls also are covered. Most of the still figures in the pictures are drivers who at one time or another worked for him: Spence, Sharpe, Stubblefield, Gordon, Mays, Cummings, Pixley, Vest, Snyder, Robson. They are all long dead from racing wrecks, although Sharpe is the only driver Sparks personally lost.

There are also shots of stunt work, of cars, his first flathead and Poison Lil.

Sparks is neither sentimental nor maudlin about these old, long-gone days. He likes talking about them. But, if he grows tired of describing it all, he simply barks: "Well, it's a long story. . ."



ON SPARKS' 1949 team were, left to right, A. J. Lewis, Pete De Paolo, Tim Witham and driver Lee Wallard—and a too-hastily reassembled Maserati.

SPARKS, WHO hasn't missed an Indianapolis 500 race since 1934, discusses ignition problems with Champion Spark Plug representative Dick Jones.

