



"A Lifetime Hobby" Les and Beryl Ward

By Gary 9-7-2005)



Soon after the turn of the last century, auto racing became one of the most popular of sports in the Central United States. The state of Kansas was one area where residents had a great fascination with the speed machines and by 1911, the town of Belleville in North Central Kansas, had constructed one of the first actual auto racetracks in the country. Its bowl shape and 11' (later 14' and 30 degree high banks) were a racers dream. Many may remember W.W. "Cockeye" Brown from Kansas City (won the first race at Belleville), Rex Edmonds of Houston, Johnny Miase of Amarillo, Duelin and Heinz of Wyoming, Higley, Allen, Fisher and McFadden of Colorado. Drivers such as S.J. Cropley of Racine, Wis. also joined in the field of top drivers that was well represented with the local Kansas leadfoots in L.E. Kerbs of Otis, his brother-in-law Charles Lebsack of Wichita, Larson, Klenkuf and Ericson of Scandia, Harold Roller of Abilene and the popular "Dad" Harrier of Hiawatha, KS. These drivers were among many who would frequent the high-banked oval. The speeds that could be achieved on this track, (in those days they ran on wooden spoke wheels, wearing a billed cap or a leather headgear common to the pilots of the day, with goggles) would soon garner it the reputation as the "Fastest Half-Mile in the World."

Local newspapers with pictures and stories of attended events at the track. was topnotch and it wasn't track at Belleville began to region. The facility competitors to the area, But in the early thirties, and several avid local race fans, National attention and make As many were unaware of dirt track competition ever, less populated areas of the two of these Kansas race and the diligent press the next six decades, would racing in the plains states, Climb as well.

Beryl Eldrinthoff in 1915 but the family in 1927. She was actually 1919) as a youngster being crowds common on race



Les Ward, who also held a strong interest in auto racing. Les had been introduced to the sport by his brother at about the same age as Beryl and little did these two know at the time what contributions they would make, or what racing would mean to them in the years to come (or what they came to mean to the racing fraternity).

During those days, Les and good friend Lewis Giesen would hit all the races in the area and the pair had a great time, until Les had to go work. He would spend a lot of time at the Minneapolis oval and even fashioned a track on the family farm, unbeknownst to his father who lived in town at the time. Les and his buddies used to try their luck in their passenger cars on the homemade oval as aspiring competitors. Les wanted to drive in his younger days but no one would give him a chance and he later said, "When someone finally made me an offer, I was old enough to know better."

After Les and Beryl met (1932), one of their first dates was to the races at the High Banks of the Belleville track. They were married in February of 1934 and the newlyweds spent their honeymoon at the Auto Show in Kansas City where they met William "Cockeye" Brown. They began traveling to the races during holidays and weekends or whenever they had spare time.

The most popular type of auto racing in Kansas at that time could have been the Midgets, as suggested by Beryl, and the Wards attended many events in the area. Later, the late model stock cars started running with the Wards always on-hand taking pictures, running the stopwatch and helping out. The ever-present Sprint and Big Cars were also a favorite of the duo and they came to know competitors from across the Central United States during this time.

would fill complete pages the competitors who The competition in Kansas long before the word of the spread throughout the continued to draw mostly by word of mouth. thanks to the interest of Belleville would gain its mark on racing history. at the time, some of the best was taking place in these country. The dedication of fans (Beryl and Les Ward) coverage they provided over greatly effect not only auto but the Pikes Peak Hill

was born in Hollis, Kansas moved to Minneapolis, KS carried to the races (about to small to navigate the large days. She would later meet

After the Wards arrived home from Hutchinson, KS track in the summer of 1938, national coverage on the auto racing in Kansas. aforementioned event and told Beryl, "This is desk. Beryl corrected the spelling, added some Auto Racing News. Before the story was in Publisher William Kay. This was the start of

Photojournalism team unparalleled in the history of U.S. motorsports. NARN shut down during World War II, and after the conflict, it was reborn as National Speed Sport News. The Wards continued with their coverage of racing in the region and were now working with another remarkable Motorsports Journalist/Commentator at Speed Sport in Chris Economaki.

The high banks and high-speed reputation of the Belleville oval became more significant in the years to come. The Central States Racing Association "Rim-riders" ran the track for many years and drew the top drivers in the country. Beryl told of a time during this era when the CSRA drivers tried to boycott the Belleville track for a guaranteed purse. When their demands were not met, they withdrew from the competition. Les and Beryl, understanding that rules were to be adhered to, shook hands with each driver as they left the Belleville track where they sat outside the facility mulling over the situation, before returning and completing the scheduled race program.

After the war, Carl Johnson started Midget racing once again at Wichita and the Wards made every race they could even though it was a 250 (plus) mile round trip on the roads of the day. With Beryl employed as a Medical Secretary and Les busy as a skilled Optician, the trips to Wichita and back meant arriving home just as it was time to go to work, so they turned the reporting over to Emmet Carpenter who did a terrific job of coverage for NSSN for many years.

During those days, Beryl always wore the same blouse to the track and would have the drivers sign the garment. When she got home, she would embroider over the signature and this continued over the years until it was nearly covered with the names of the greats of the day. A few of the many familiar names were Judd Pickup, Lewis Durant, Joie Chitwood, Loren Fondoble, Roy Bowes, Clyde Gilbert, Herschel Buchanon, Waldo Barnett, "Buss" Bussard, Rex Edmonds and Matt Pulver. They remain inscribed on this white silk garment that Beryl has carefully preserved to this day.

Les was a man of many talents; besides Photography, he seized the opportunity to start his announcing career during a midget show in Chikasha, Oklahoma in 1942 when the regular announcer did not show. During the event, a sudden downpour of rain hit the area and Les tried to console the fans during the storm, until one of the officials excitedly reminded him, "Its no use! This is tornado country so lets get out of here!!"

With Beryl's writing and scoring many of the contests they attended, Les would also run the stopwatch. During the time trials at the Salina, Kansas track one night, he was nearly run over by an over zealous driver who spun through the pits. Les remembers the driver even had the nerve to come up and ask him what his time was!

It is rumored that Kansas stock cars after the war. The cars frame, and Jim Roper of Halstead, in the area. The Ward team while supporting and promoting the Wards have always considered became staunch supporters of the Belleville when it was formed in promote the event, and with only a west to the High Banks for the

The last of the Wards three trips to was in 1948 with Kansas racing Kerbs (a 2001 inductee into the was a Case dealer from Otis, the Midwest for a number of years. opportunity to visit the many Speedway during this final visit effort with another victory, once by fellow Blue Crown Spark Plug himself drove the High Banks of

One of the treasured is the Gilmore flag (a red Lion on a was the symbol of the Gilmore gas Gilmore) signed by Leo Kerbs and



another great night of midget racing at the Les thought it was too bad there wasn't any He sat down and wrote up a story depicting the how it should be done," and laid it back on the form to the composition, and sent it to National print, they received press credentials from their association with Kay and the beginning of a



was one of the first to start racing were mostly new ones with the factory Kansas, won the first NASCAR race continued providing press coverage oval track racing at Belleville (The Belleville their home track) and North Central Kansas Free Fair in 1945. They even went to Florida to verbal guarantee, some drivers towed show.

the Indianapolis Motor Speedway legend Leo Kerbs and his wife. Belleville high Banks Hall of Fame), Kansas and had run the dirt tracks in Les and Beryl got one last friends they had come to know at the which saw Mauri Rose repeat his '47 again followed across the finish line team driver Bill Holland. Holland Belleville.

artifacts of the Wards years in racing checkered flag background which station magnate of the day, Earl Richmond, Indiana great, Johnny

Decamp.

After the race, Les had Leo and Johnny sign the flag for him. The next day Decamp broke a right front spindle going into corner one at Belleville and flipped over the fence to his death.

Equally talented, Beryl scored the first long stock car race held at Great Bend, Kansas in 1949 where Bill Robinson won the event in a Packard. She also served as trophy girl on many occasions but dreaded delivering the prize to one cigar-chewing driver. She remembers Cecil Burmbaugh with his handlebar mustache winning at Lincoln driving one of Kerbs cars. She did not get to ride out on the track in style during those days but walked all the way out to the driver, once carrying a case of oil and later a tire which were offered as additional prizes at the early events.

In 1951, Les was elected chairman of the Concordia Kansas Fairground committee under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce. His infectious influence led to a combined effort of community clubs, civic groups and volunteers as a new racetrack was built, complete with new grandstands. Concordia was a very successful track for a number of years and hosted many forms of racing including the Big Cars from the region.

In 1960, the Wards Photo-Journalism team began coverage of the Pikes Peak Hill Climb competition for Speed Sport News. This Dynamic Duo was still covering the Big Cars and other racing in the heartland and would take a week off for the trip to Colorado Springs. During that week, the Wards were up at 3:00 am for the practice session that ran from 5:00 am until 9:00 am before the road was opened up again to public travel. They became fast friends with the Unsers and talked of Jerry and Uncle Louis, who was known as the "Old man of the mountain" as he won the event nine times during his career. He had no children but Jerry had twins in Jerry and Louis and two other boys, Bobby and Al. Jerry Jr. died of burns suffered in a frontstretch crash during practice at Indianapolis in 1959. Brother Louis, also an avid competitor before being afflicted with MS, became a legendary engine builder. Both of these boys drove and won titles as did Bobby whose short-track career was nearly as spectacular as his three Indy 500 victories and 13 wins at the Hill Climb. Al enjoyed a successful career on the short-tracks, won at the Hill and was also a four-time winner at the Speedway. The Wards also knew Mildred lives at Manitou Springs in Uncle Louis's old helmet and used to keep his hair down or the protection.

Beryl talks of the day Slim course (mile 16, Devils Playground) Offy. Both had cameras that day happening, she pulled her camera in horror at the impending disaster. times during its off-road excursion. action getting to the car and crawled and half drug himself living at Salt Lake City, if he was going to be rescued, he

Talking about the Beryl remembers the family dog cross canine. Beryl said that if going to the races and during the mountains) Beryl taught her how to

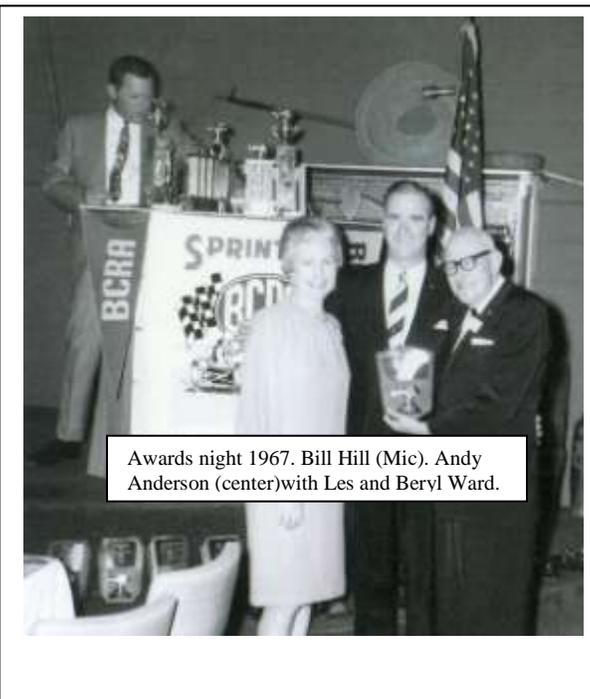
describe the teaching methods Beryl used to accomplish this feat on paper). She tells of the drivers feeding Penny salty foods so they could watch her drink out of a pop bottle. Back in those days they would have to call in the news from the "Hill" to Speed Sport, this process often taking an hour or so over the phone. Later they got a fax machine that expedited the procedure.

The IMCA ran the High Banks for a number of years before the growth and expansion of the club meant it was competing at other venues, too often at the same time, with the car counts and attendance at Belleville on the decline. In 1965, the track contracted with Don Budy and the BCRA of Colorado. Beryl remembers, "This owner/driver association was one in which no promoter got a big slice of the purse and after the officials were paid, the rest went to the drivers."

Formed in '57, this BCRA philosophy produced a membership roster numbering over 500 from 23 states by 1972. The club was recently revived as a historical organization in 2003.

Over the next 20 years of competition, the Wards were there to catch the events on film. All the sprint drivers remember the race-day picnics the Wards would host in the backyard of their home at Concordia. The menu consisted of Beryl's exquisite baked ham, fried chicken and baked beans that she served for many years to the competitors. One attendee remembers the path to the backyard of their home was marked with a sign that read, "Twisting Winding Road Ahead."

For many years, Beryl was a Medical Secretary for Dr Starr, Dr. Kosar and then Dr. Owensby, and once wrote a book



Awards night 1967. Bill Hill (Mic). Andy Anderson (center) with Les and Beryl Ward.

Roberts went off the Pikes Peak during competition in Vince Conze's and when Beryl saw what was away from the action as she watched It was reported the car flipped 13 The primitive rescue team went into offering assistance as Slim half back up to the road. Roberts, now remembers thinking to himself that had better do it himself.

Colorado "Race to the Clouds," named Penny, a little Pekinese Penny lived in this family, she was trips up the hill, (she loved the equalize her ears. (It's hard to

on the prisoner of war camp (Wards even hosted POW families in later years.) Besides his optical business and photography, Les had many hobbies and was the president of the Mineral Society of Kansas.

She was a 44-year charter member of the Cloud County Historical Society and Secretary of the organization for 23 years. Her contributions to the Belleville High Banks Hall of Fame during its conception and operation over the last six years was paramount in the success now enjoyed by the hard working and dedicated group of individuals who maintain this historical institution including Bob Weber, Wayne Dake, Don McChesney, Norris Holt, Don Danielson, Kenneth Naysmith, Sally Splichal and Nancy Holt along with Museum curator Bob Blazek. Beryl has also been a nominator for the Knoxville National Sprint Car Hall of Fame for several years.

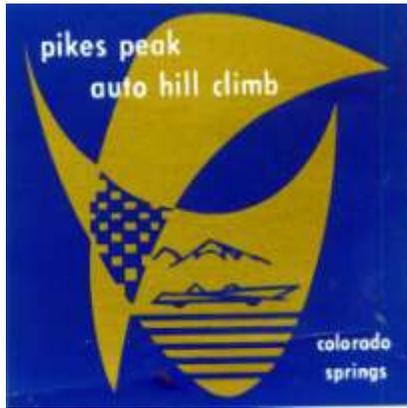
During a recent conversation with Beryl, she said she still has the first television she and Les ever owned. "We never had time to watch it enough to wear it out." She also speaks of the racing in '40 and '41 as the "Glory Years" of Big Car racing at Belleville. These were the days of the CSRA when we "Had a lot of hot cars and no short fields." The first lights she remembers at Belleville was in 1966 with Budy's BCRA. Beryl mentioned some of the racing superstitions such as no peanuts in the pits, no green colors, no drivers pictures developed on race day. She still carries a Speed Sport News press card and contributes as time and health allows.



L to R. Charlie Gottschalk, unk, unk, Beryl Ward, Les Ward, Don Budy (sitting), Ms. Anderson, Warren Hamilton and Andy Anderson (Back Row) Mary Anderson (holding Trophy) Tom Bentz and a young Mitch Miller

Over the years I have heard many stories from the contestants of the old BCRA and Hill Climb about the Wards generosity and dedication to the sport of auto racing. Over 6000 photos remain in the collection representing their time behind the camera while contributing to Motorsports. Not one was ever sold, but literally thousands were sent out at Christmas time to the many drivers and owners over a six-decade period. Many of these have become treasured possessions of the hundreds of recipients and their families over the years since the "Glory Days" on the ovals in Central U.S. and the Pikes Peak Hill Climb.

The pair also enjoyed fishing in the even went to Wyoming to fish (Wheatland) with BCRA and Hill Climb spoke of Les and Beryl, "They were always quick to give a driver a pat on the back." Jack and gave him a picture he had taken. When nothing but a dust cloud. Jack asked him what "I tried to get a picture of you but you were so get you to show up on the film!!!" Ted and two-time Hill Climb Champ and BCRA Ward's detailed record keeping and their fantastic pictures they always received at



Rocky Mountains on their trips and (Pathfinder/Seminole) and hunt Champ Jack Hahn. Recently, Jack there, were always positive and were remembers a time when Les came up Hahn looked at the picture, it showed the picture was of, to which Les replied, far behind and going so slow, I couldn't Carol Foltz of Colorado Springs (Ted a competitor) made mention of the terrific memories along with the Christmas from the Kansas couple.

During a conversation with Slim Roberts, who enjoyed much success in Midgets, Sprints and the Hill Climb, he echoed Jack's sentiments and remembered that day in 1962 when he went off the Hill Climb road. He said he had been told he went down three hundred feet, flipping 13 times during the wreck. He said he didn't remember how many times he went over, "But it was a lot." He added, "13 was always my lucky number." Of the Wards, Slim recalls, "Les was a great photographer and I just can't say enough good about that couple."

BCRA, Hill Climb and USAC great Bobby Unser recently spoke of the Wards dedication to the Hill Climb with, "We have been good friends for years. They were always at the races and gave out a lot of great pictures at Christmas. They were some of the Originals!!!"

George Harding, son of driver/owner/builder Bill Harding and grandson of George "Pop" Harding (2001 Belleville High Banks Hall of Fame Inductee) remembers seeing the Wards at the races in the forties and fifties as a young man. He told of the team as, "Unique and special people. They didn't make much money at it; it was for the Love of the Sport."

Don Budy's son Bruce, ('60 BCRA rookie of the year) made the comment that he and his father knew the Wards for many years. "They were a HUGE benefit to racing with their writing and superb photography and also by their always positive attitude while helping out wherever they could." Alma, Kansas Midget and Sprint driver John Yonke remembers the Wards as very congenial people who always had time for the drivers, even talking to a "Snot-nosed" kid like me. They were a real credit to auto racing."

The 1965 BCRA Champ Grady Wade remembers the first time he ever met Les and Beryl. It was his first sprint race, which was at Belleville (same for owner Pius Selenke) and he felt honored that they came over and talked to him. "They made us feel welcome, and then they would always stop by to see how we were doing, but I never remembered them saying anything about themselves. They were always a class act."

Racing Historian and Author Bill Hill knew the Wards for years, mainly after BCRA started running Belleville in the mid-sixties and when the Midget Nationals started at the Kansas oval. Bill was also involved with Public Relations at the Hill Climb starting in '65. He remembered the "Cokie Pops" Les was famous for and said, "The Wards were devoted to each other, traveled together and worked closely together at events across the Midwest but always maintained a low profile." Bill's wife Ruby mentioned having met Les a couple of times, the first at a celebration held at the Little Springfield track in Illinois. "They were always faithful to the Belleville Nationals and Beryl continued coverage even after Les passed away. She has given the L.A. "Les" Ward Memorial Award for Sportsmanship to a deserving competitor every year at the Belleville Midget Nationals.

Les and Beryl were inaugural inductees into the Belleville High Banks Hall of Fame in 1999 along with Andy Anderson, Pop Goodrich and sons, Red Forshee, Bill Smith, Mitch Miller, Bobby Grim, Jim Roper, Bill Hill and Chet Wilson. The unique and dedicated team was also inducted into the prestigious National Sprint Car Hall of Fame in 2000.

The time they spent in working up results and scores and writing their articles, and the expense of the gas, the postage and photography supplies are dismissed by Beryl saying, "It was our hobby, a labor of love."

I never had the opportunity he was a generous man of many photographer (he started with a He also ran the stopwatch, stood in also took time to help young drivers pits if needed.

Les passed away in March tradition of covering the Belleville when failing health kept her closer to holding press credentials from Speed and I am reasonably sure that there Ward and Chris Economaki.



L to R. Leroy Byers, Junior Ward and Ms. Beryl Ward. '77

of meeting Les, but by every account, talents, much more than just a Brownie Camera) I was recently told. as flagman, announcer or judge, and get their start and even helped in the

of 1986 but Beryl kept up their Nationals every year until recently home. It is hard to imagine someone Sport News for nearly seventy years can be only two such people, Beryl

The Ward racing team received many awards through the years for their contributions to their community and racing. Of the many trophies they received, there is one from BCRA inscribed with, "To Les and Beryl Ward for Scoring and Photography Extraordinaire." It's interesting to note that they spent a lifetime writing and photographing competitors from across the United States at various events and were well known and respected (they received mail through the Postal service for decades addressed only to, Ward Racing Team, Concordia, Kansas) but operating the cameras and covering the events left few pictures of and even fewer stories about, the Wards themselves. GW

