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Jim Bickerstaff by Walt Wimer

Jim Bickerstaff of Mineral Ridge , Ohio , a legend in Penn-Ohio Late Model racing, passed away Friday March 21, 2008 at age 76. Bickerstaff dominated pavement Late Model racing in this area from the late 60s into the early 80s. He won races at no less than 18 different race tracks and was the all time top pavement Late Model winner at both the famed Heidelberg Raceway in the Pittsburgh area and at the Sharon Speedway in Hartford , Ohio just across the border from Sharon , PA. But Bickerstaff started on dirt, and was a driver who could win on either type of surface.

He actually started his career way back in 1949 at a little quarter mile track simply known as "Green" located north of Warren , Ohio . He first had an old Plymouth coupe, but then replaced it with a flathead Ford. But after the 1950 season Bickerstaff's racing went on hold as he joined the US Air Force. He served during the Korean War and was discharged in October of 1955. After that he went back to racing, but didn't start winning until the Late Models had replaced the coupes in the early 60s. He won more than his share on the old Canfield Fairgrounds track south of Youngstown , Ohio , but his glory days were yet to come. They came after Heidelberg was paved in 1967 and Sharon in 1971. From then until Heidelberg was closed after the 1973 season, and Sharon went back to dirt in 1981, Bickerstaff was the guy to beat. During that period no driver won more races on the two tracks than Bickerstaff. He scored on the Heidelberg pavement 31 times and Sharon 35 times, both records. He also won 6 races on the Heidelberg dirt and another 5 at Sharon on the dirt, for a total of 77 wins at the two tracks.

Bickerstaff was no doubt at his best in the long distance races as he was a driver who drove with his head as well as his foot, knowing how to pace himself, pick off his rivals one by one and take care of his equipment. During his glory days he drove for some of the very best in the way of car owners including Dave Parilla, Bob May, Joe Viglione, John Reban and "Tub" Tessean. He was a winner for all of them! No other pavement driver from this area could go out of town and win races like Bickerstaff could.

At home he won the 1970 Pittsburgher 250 at Heidelberg and the Tri-State 150 twice. In 1975 he was the Ohio State 500 champ in a series of Ohio special races. He won the Ohio Invitational at Midvale three times and that track's Firecracker 150 twice. Also he won a 150 lapper at Ohio 's Tri-County Speedway in 1973. He even won a Modified race at Florida 's New Smyrna Speedway and on the road course at Nelson Ledges in 1965.

He won more than his share of point titles as well including the Heidelberg PRA title in 1970, four titles at Sharon (1974-75-77 & 80) and two dirt titles at Canfield in 1962 & 64. In addition

to Heidelberg , Sharon and Canfield, Bickerstaff won at Expo (7 on dirt), Greater Pitt, Midvale (11 wins), Lorain County , Hartford (Mich), Toledo , Zanesville , Holland (NY), Sandusky , Cayuga, Tri-County, New Smyrna, Columbus (6 wins) and Nelsons Ledges. Career win totals are at least 152 and there may be others not recorded.

Bickerstaff was good enough to make his living from racing, but he chose not to, He was happy living at home with his wife Janet, family and his full time job as a Millright at the huge General Motors plant in Lordstown , Ohio where he retired in 1994 after 30 years service. After Sharon went back to dirt, there were no longer any "local" asphalt tracks, so Bickerstaff pretty much hung up the helmet after a few dirt races. But he never really got away from racing as he followed and helped his son Jimmy race in E-Mod cars for a number of years. That was a big enjoyment for him after Janet passed away in 1994 after 33 years of marriage.

Jim Bickerstaff is gone, but he will never be forgotten by the racing fraternity in the Penn-Ohio area, Here are three of his best known rides during his "glory" years,

1961 Chevy owned by Ohio tire dealer Dave Parilla, 1969 Chevelle owned by Bob May. Bickerstaff had one of his best years running for May in the #44 car., 1969 Chevelle in his second run with Parilla, which lasted about five years.

Note: Special thanks to John Stasiak, the most knowledgeable Heidelberg and Late Model historian in the area for all the stats here!! In 1998 I had the honor of writing a story on Jim Bickerstaff for the old TRACKSIDE Magazine. I had not known Bickerstaff personally before that, but when I went to his house in Mineral Ridge, I found a very down to earth gentleman who was very unassuming despite all that he had won and the records he had set over the years. A class act!!! BTW, Bickerstaff, like many drivers from the "old school", kept little in the way of records. But John Stasiak came to my rescue back then as well. THANKS AGAIN JOHN!