

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Assassinated ...?

Before he briefly became president of Indy's Motor Speedway, young Tony George, grandson of Anton Hulman, the Speedway's owner, spent time behind the wheels of mild Formula cars. But connoisseurs of hotter times and harder racing continue remembering Elmer George, Tony's missing father. A black sheep renegade who was a maker of violent racing history throughout his short and violent life, unlucky Elmer continued and finally concluded the tradition of violence by getting assassinated in a gun battle with the lover of his wife, Mari Hulman George, daughter of Anton Hulman, mother of Tony.



Elmer Ray George – nobody now seems to remember who the Ray in the family tree was -- like all the rest of the Georges, a dust bowl Okie, and he grew up in a squatter camp. This wretched camp, called Alisol, outside Salinas in the coastal San Joaquin Valley, was where Elmer got into the lettuce business – first he picked it, then trucked it to market.

He was the least likely racing driver anybody as ever seen, but he raced in the Indy 500, in dirt-track Indy and sprint cars at Langhorne, Reading, and on the paved killer hills of Winchester, Dayton and Salem. Going into combat, and when he and they were at their prime, Elmer shook to the foundations all those lethal speed shrines of the lost 1950s. He always liked to fight.

This, for one example, was Elmer during a tense but typical Sunday afternoon in Pennsylvania. at Reading: he qualified a poor 11th slowest; became angry and dropped out of the first heat race; took a mediocre fifth in the second heat; spun out of the third; had to overtake half a dozen drivers in the consolation ; and then erupted and won the main event.

His competition included Jud Larson, Johnny Thomson, and Eddie Sachs. Though he couldn't race as fast, he was, like them, rough-and-ready, self-educated, stoical about hardship, and physically brave; yet also a classic 1950s' player who was loyal to his people and times. He often counted on aggression instead of patience.

At his very first Indy in 1957, which also was his first 500 as Anton Hulman's son-in-law, aggression so overwhelmed Elmer that he took out two Offy roadsters, one of them his own, while merely getting lined up for the pace lap.



His temper was infamous, and often he lost it, bumping into other drivers and tipping them over. Once, on the dirt at Phoenix, Elmer found Ralph Ligouri ahead of him disobliging, and, after their two cars touched, Elmer's disappeared into the packed grandstands without hurting anybody, not even Elmer.

Back in Pennsylvania, the 1959 Langhorne 100 became the angriest fight of Elmer's life. It was Elmer against Langhorne; Elmer against all the other drivers; Elmer against his own visibly-weakening racing car ; and Elmer against all the official Langhorne flagmen and members of Elmer's own pit crew imploring him with frantic signaling to quit the 100 before Mari Hulman's HOW Special disintegrated underneath him.

But Elmer wouldn't stop because he was leading. Getting the black flag compelled him to do so, but only after he'd racked up 13 additional scofflaw miles. And as punishment for Ignoring the black flag for that, for that long, and for the additional crime of losing his temper and decking one of Langhorne's stewards, a kangaroo-court tribunal – chaired by the terrifying geezer Arthur S. Pillsbury, racing's hanging judge -- opened in Indianapolis to determine Elmer's punishment.

The episode captivated racing, and the two big issues were favoritism and privilege. These two things were brought about by the powerful presence of Anton Hulman on the kangaroo-court tribunal deciding Elmer's fate. So, amidst fierce grumbling that he might vote to absolve his-son-law, Hulman prudently absented himself from the tribunal, leaving Elmer to face by himself Pillsbury's rough justice. And when it came time for old man Pillsbury and the rest of the tribunal to pass sentence on Elmer, their unanimous verdict was to throw the rule book at him: a year's suspension from the Indy 500 and any other championship race, plus a hefty fine.

Vowing that he'd never pay Pillsbury's fine, Elmer gathered up Mari and set sail for a season's outlaw racing off in the sticks.

Nobody remembers who paid it, or why, but within a year Elmer's fine was expunged and he was allowed to resume racing Mari's HOW Offy roadster in the Indy 500 and her HOW dirt cars and sprinters on the rest of the championship mile and half-mile dirt tracks. But after Elmer launched the HOW champ dirt champ machine into the spectator grandstands at Phoenix, pressure from the Hulman family made him abandon all further racing: the multi-million dollar clan was fearful that Elmer's might cause huge lawsuits.



So Anton Hulman personally exiled Elmer and Mari to a Hulman horse ranch in Cody, Wyoming, Cody being a remote outpost where Elmer was unlikely to get into more trouble. Yet trouble continued finding Elmer, because Cody was where Mari met the horse trainer who became her boy friend. In time, Elmer, Mari, and the horse trainer all settled back in Indianapolis where Elmer was expecting to be named part of the

Speedway's management. But the only lowly job his father-in-law ever had for him was on Memorial Day, when he was allowed to chauffeur the 500 winner around the Brickyard on his victory lap.

On May 30, 1976, Johnny Rutherford, winner of the 500, became one of the last to speak to Elmer because, just a few hours later, at a Hulman house in Terre Haute, the horse trainer shot Elmer dead.

It had been another case of Elmer losing his dangerous temper. By telephoning that he was on his way from Indianapolis to Terre Haute to kill the horse trainer, Elmer gave the horse trainer plenty of time to ambush him.

The horse trainer pleaded guilty and got away with it. And yet years later, in the 1980s, the scandal over Elmer George and his murder unexpectedly came alive again. Mari Hulman George, the horse trainer, and some drinking friends were out clubbing

in eastside Indianapolis. And they created such a disturbance at a gin mill that Mari almost was arrested for assaulting a female police officer. -JS



