

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Jiggler Joe

His name was Jiggler Joe Gemsa, and he was the walking, talking encyclopedia and patron for all dead and gone racing cars and engines of the last century. The more obscure they were, the more he loved praising them:



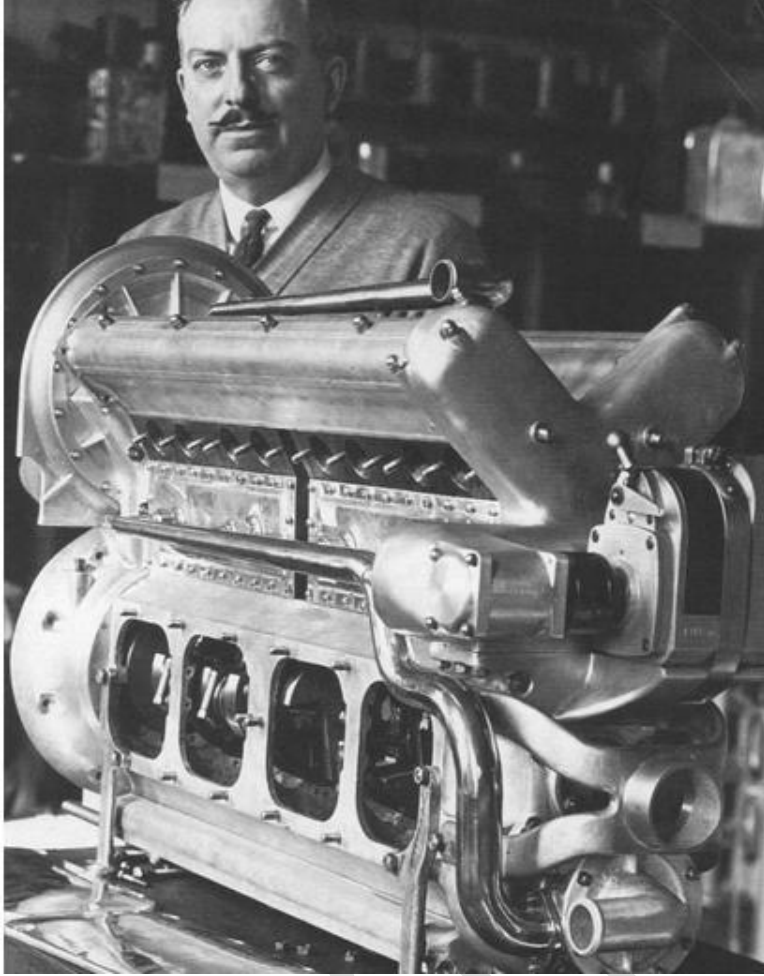
“Ever hear of the Mulfinger? I didn’t think so. She was a beautiful double-overhead cam 16-valver that Ace Owen raced on the Cornstalk Circuit oh, 80 or 90 years ago. Built in Iowa by the five Mulfinger brothers who ran a little welding shop in Sioux City.”

Staggervalue Frontenacs, Miller-Scofields, HALs, Cragers, Gerbers, four-port Rileys, Dreyers, and Model B Ford Jigglers – the source of Joe’s name – all passed in and out of Gemsa’s custodianship. And at his collecting peak Joe the Jiggler possessed sufficient racing cars to conduct his own curiosity Indy 500.

And what a 500 it could have been, complete with Jimmy Wilburn’s “Golden Bullet” Offenhauser, another sovereign of the Cornstalk Tour; “Big Bertha,” a 300-cubic inch HAL that campaigned fiercely up down the left coast during the era of Doc MacKenzie; Umbrella Mike Boyle’s two-man Indy Miller; Clark Gable’s red Kurtis-Kraft from “To Please a Lady,” which won a big 500-mile road race for Gemsa and his pal Bud Rose; and violent “Poison Lil,” used in the 1930s by Al Gordon to defeat Ernie Triplett at Legion Ascot, and which Gemsa bought originally in 1953, sold and then re-purchased again around 1958, and finally got rid of for good and with regret in 1959.

Perhaps the oldest, oddest racing car ever owned by Gemsa, and the one he kept for 37 years, made the best story. It also was the most complicated story. As constructed by nonpareil Harry A. Miller in 1927, it was praised to high heaven by Millerphiles because it was claimed to be one of their master’s famous “Junior Eight” series. After taking seventh in its inaugural Indy 500 of 1927, by 1930 it started competing at Legion Ascot and winning Francis Quinn the championship of the Pacific Coast.

Quinn's demise the following spring in a highway accident made Floyd Roberts, the future Indy 500 champion and casualty, the Junior Eight's next pilot. But in 1936, after Legion Ascot burned down and racing hit the doldrums, the engine out of the Junior Eight went to Rajo Jack, racing's pioneer black driver, and the wheels, chassis, and running gear went to Dudley Samuals, .



After the war, in 1946, a Lockheed engineer and chum of Joe Gemsa's named Les Spriegel attempted to buy the engine-free Junior Eight, but Dudley Samuals held out for more than money. And when Spriegel mentioned the Mulfinger, Samuals expressed interest. The difficulty was, Spriegel didn't own the rare motor and Joe Gemsa did,

So Spriegel first traded Gemsa a Cragar and some cash for the Mulfinger, and next Spriegel and Dudley Samuals exchanged the Mulfinger for the Junior Six, into which Spriegel deposited a four-port Riley.

Lockheed sent Spriegel to the Persian Gulf in 1950, and Spriegel sold the Junior Six, again engine-free, to Gemsa. Jiggler Joe in turn acquired a four-cylinder Cragar and he and the ancient Cragar and now-ancient Junior Eight – Gemsa named the mélange “the Orange Blossom Special” – won main

event after main event with the Western Racing Association. Retiring from racing in 1954, Gemsa delayed putting his Orange Blossom on the vintage market until 1986, and then at a bargain basement price. Its new owner promptly re-sold the beauty for almost \$100,000.

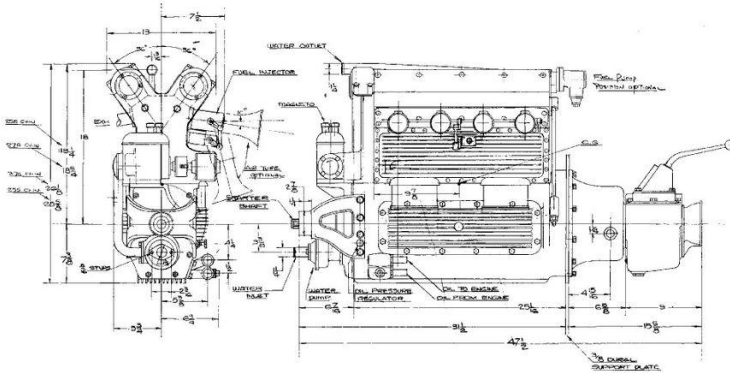
Gemsa's most unlucky purchase, made in 1947, was Clair Cotter's Miller-Scofield. Throughout the war it had sat rotting away inside a railroad boxcar, so Gemsa purchased it as a liberating act; yet the first time he ever raced it, while piercing an Iowa fence in Webster City, he broke an arm and leg.

A far luckier purchase occurred in 1955, again in Iowa, at the Des Moines State Fair, where, to his surprise and delight, Gemsa discovered what was left of the Leech-Craycraft Offy, a classic sprint car that had given Rex Mays many excellent afternoons. Its owner, who was a haven't-got-a-clue TV repairman, had just blown the engine to smithereens, so Gemsa bought

the cadaver and towed it to Illinois where he knew Jerry Blundy and many of his International Motor Contest Association cronies at Galesburg. Negotiating another quickie deal, he bartered the exploded Offy for a big Hispano-Suiza out of an airplane. Barnstorming around the IMCA tour, Gemsa earned enough prize money to ditch the Hispano-Suiza; repair the exploded Offy; put it back in the Leech-Craycraft; make still more prize money; and then sell everything at a nice profit.

Gemsa lived on the edge of Los Angeles in a tumble-down compound surrounded by barb-wire, a gang of vocal and sharp-toothed German shepherds, impressive locks, and a loud wailing burglar alarm. Jiggler Joe's headquarters was a combination museum and warehouse, bulging with racing treasures and peculiarities.

Hanging from a naked lightbulb inside the compound was an epigram written by Clay Smith, martyred witch doctor of the 270 Meyer-Drake, ending with Smith's exhortation, "wind, wind



you SOB!" Nearby were Leo Goossen's original blueprints on the Miller 91s and 122s, including gear ratios for Beverly Hills, when it was the swankiest facilities of Roaring Twenties board trackdom. Most astonishing of all was a nine-decade-old Miller with "Earl Devore" etched on its crankcase. DeVore had been one of two Indy 500 drivers to die of shark bite when he and

his Chromolite Special went down with the death steamer Vestris off Cape Fear on November 12, 1928. How had Gemsa ever found such an engine?

Picking up at random a piston the size of a coffee can, Jiggler Joe had reverently extrapolated, "Out of a Gus Schrader-Emory Collins 318 Offenhauser - made out of a 270 tall-block Offy with five-inch crankshaft - connecting rods weighed three pounds - monster engine - Gus and Emory must have had the grandstands jumping out of gear with excitement -" And then he continued on and on and on.