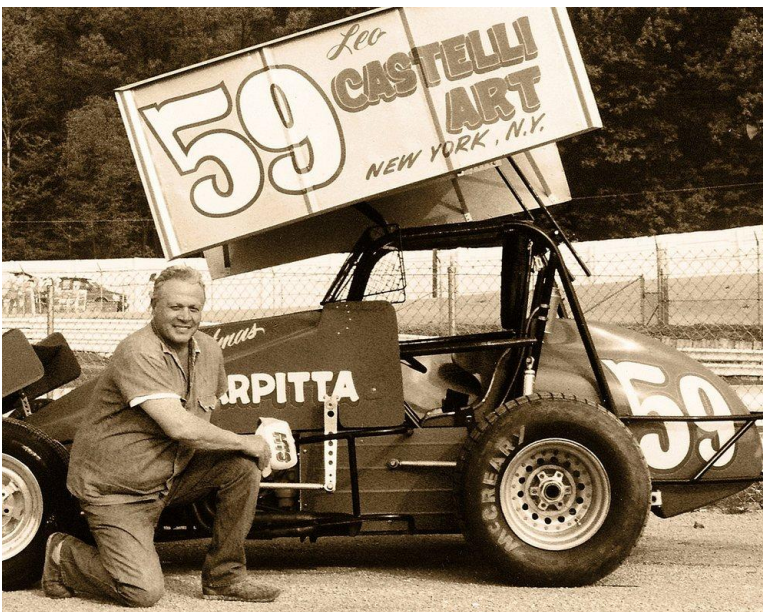


Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Sal and Rajo

Sal Scarpitta and Rajo Jack no longer are much remembered, although they remain two of racing's most fascinating creatures. The pair never met. Had they done so, they could have appreciated each other's worlds, objectives, and, especially, problems. Scarpitta was the artist and owner of a sprint car racing team from Baltimore and New York;



Jack was the lonely black driver, first a nomad and later a religious fanatic, who raced and won on outlaw dirt tracks before and after the Second World War.

It was in 1964 when Scarpitta mysteriously came upon a photograph of one of Jack's decrepit early cars. He decided to create a facsimile of it, and did, soon following that original facsimile with others, including a

Legion Ascot winner raced by Ernie Triplett, an icon and martyr of the 1930s.

This was the start of an art show at Leo Castelli's exclusive New York City gallery. The two facsimiles attracted scant attention and, of course, no buyers. Appreciation of Scarpitta's racing cars, when at last it arrived, occurred not in America but Europe. In 1972, when the Ernie Triplett Special and another prototype named Rail Duster went to Italy, and got transported by barge to a big festival in Venice. There, at last, they became sensations.

Confusion raged in art circles as to the worth of Scarpitta's work, and whether his facsimiles represented pop art, new futurism, or some ism that art critics had yet to dream up. Wholly oblivious to critical opinion, Scarpitta happened to be a born rebel.

In Los Angeles, in the 1930s, rebelling against something as a child, he climbed a tree and didn't come down for a month. And it was in L.A., too, where Scarpitta participated

in the life-changing experience of observing, on Wednesday nights, the amazing spectacle of Legion Ascot, which became the wellspring for his art and racing passion.



As for Jack, his true name, according to his first wife, was Dewey Gatson. He called himself Jack DeSoto. When Joe Jagersberger, the father of the Rajo cylinder head for the Ford Model T, appointed him Los Angeles distributor and salesman, he became “Rajo Jack.” This was in the early 1930s, before injuries and wear and tear set in, and Jack still was a lean and handsome man with a narrow, clipped mustache and a handsome Dalmation for a mascot.

He had several important white friends, including the camshaft wizard Ed Winfield to whom he used to deliver

eggs raised on his farm in Mud City (today known as the sometimes-riot-ravaged community of Watts); and Francis Quinn, the Legion Ascot racing driver, on whose team Jack was a mechanic. Following Quinn’s demise, on the highway, the rest of the team made, as a gift to Jack, Quinn’s fast Miller. Jack was a racing outlaw and non-stop traveler, as restless as a gypsy. He campaigned the Miller in Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, the Midwest, and all over California, most notably at Silver Gate, where he was the oval’s best driver, and at Oakland, on whose scary high walls he captured a marathon or 500 laps; then purchased a new truck with the prize money. This may have been the same race where Jack’s spouse had had to chauffeur their tow vehicle all night from Los Angeles, while her hubby labored in the back with a flashlight repairing the Miller, which he’d wrecked just the day before. Not only did Jack know how to race but he also was an uncanny mechanic. Gossip about him said he was a bad luck as well as accident-prone driver. Fortunately, in his prime, he was in great physical shape and very strong; single-handedly he could lift up the front of a racing car weighing 1,500 pounds; could miss three nights of sleep and still race creditably; and was so indifferent to injury that he used to cauterize his many wounds with chewing tobacco.



He loved to talk and embellish, telling people that he was an American Indian, a West Indian, and once described himself as the renegade black son of a white state senator. It's possible that he wasn't embellishing at all but attempting to muddle his ancestry, for his color excluded him from the bastions of the American Automobile Association like Legion Ascot and of course Indianapolis, the Brickyard, where Jack most wanted to be.

As an outlaw, just making ends meet was a struggle, causing Jack to scuffle operating a steam-cleaning rack, hauling oranges, collecting scrap, running a hog farm, and always being a hustling showman. He used to challenge spectators at old Atlantic Speedway to come down from the grandstands so he could race and then beat them around the track with his racing car in reverse, or while blindfolded. Exactly like Scarpitta, he at times

Rajo Jack Winner at Silvergate Speedway
SAN DIEGO, Aug. 27.—(U.P.)—Rajo Jack, well-known Middlewest pilot, defeated a group of leading Southern California drivers here yesterday to win a 50-lap main event on a program of auto races at Silvergate Speedway.

left the country, racing in Mexico and Australia, where he was far more appreciated than at home. Then, following a bad crash at Kelly Petillo's dangerous triangle track in San Diego, everything turned against him.

Not only was he no longer as fast as he'd once been, but his Miller, too, was slowing down. After swallowing so much grit from running in the middle of dirt-track packs, only the hottest spark plugs in his pal Joe Gemsa's tool box could keep it firing, and finally it

blew up anyway. By then Jack was 52 years old and just as worn out as his Miller. Racing disasters had cost him an eye and given him an arm so badly warped he could hardly grip a steering wheel.

Then something unpredictable happened. He broke out in a religious streak, praying endlessly before and after meals and even while crossing an intersection. He also started collecting rocks, judging each rock to be a prayer; over time the front yard of his ramshackle home resembled a quarry. Worn out or not, Jack still was as restless and hungry to travel as ever. Telling his wife he was going to the market, he might instead commute all the way to New Jersey – whereupon he'd immediately turn around and drive home again. Finally and fatally, in 1956, when he was crossing California's high Mojave desert, and was right in the middle of another of his locomotive journeys, he succumbed to what was reported to be a cerebral hemorrhage.

Scarpitta passed in 2007, aged 88. For art to work, he'd pontificated, the artist must be part of the total experience. In that spirit, he once sacked his regular professional driver so he could negotiate his own 800-horsepower lap of the Hagerstown Speedway.



Judging from the bewildering reaction his work always elicited, Scarpitta never attempted to equate racing with art. Modern racing people were capable of annoying him nonetheless. Because he was an artist, he considered it most natural that he knew by heart the lives and history of giants of the ilk of Matisse and Van Gogh; so it outraged him that members

of the present racing generation were generally in ignorance of many of their own heroic sires, such as Rajo Jack.-JS