

# **Joe Scalzo's**

## **City of Speed and elsewhere**

### **T.M.C.**

**Back at Indianapolis during the 1920s, the hip racing cars and cocky personalities of Los Angeles were blowing off everything and everybody.**

**And after their Duesies had dropped many a 500 to them, those two disgruntled brothers, the Duesenbergs, were whining and lambasting Miller, Lockhart, and the whole blasted lot as “those damn cowboys out of California!”...**

**More California cowboys kept arriving for the rest of the century and beyond but especially during the 1950s and 1960s.**

**Aglow with the same wise-ass infallibility that had so infuriated the Duesenbergs and the rest of their generation, the T.M.C.'ers were preparing to blast wide open the Indy 500.**



**Their ranks included midget and hot rod grads Troy Ruttman and Billy Vukovich; street-smart chief mechanics like the mastermind, Clay Smith and the “rich kids” Jim Travers and Frank Coon, and big, bluff, jolly Jud Phillips; plus strange iron including the reverse-weight Meyer-Drake Indy roadsters of Kurtis, Watson, and Eddie Kuzma; plus the**

**low-belly laydowns of Lesovsky and Epperly.**

And Indy's establishment got P.O.'d all over again. One peek at the unwelcome visitors from cloud cuckoo land was all it took, and a Hoosier put-down was invented, T.M.C, meaning, "Too Much California."

Deftly turning the dig into a compliment, the hipper-than-thou L.A. mob proceeded to invent a retaliatory dig of its own: "Hoosier Clems". It became a banquet of good-natured – not always – insults that L.A. won with ease.

The T.M.C. personalities weren't in the majority but could behave as though they were, because for 15 consecutive Memorial Days through the mid-1960s, T.M.C. drivers, chief mechanics, and roadsters smothered the 500. They also dominated the 100-championship dirt track matches.

In fact, as I pause in this scribbling, I stare at a picture of the Peter Schmidt, a Kuzma upright, named after the proprietor of a Kansas City slaughterhouse, and one of Eddie's most brilliant creations. Its pedal man for Indy's 1955 running was the incredible Johnny Thomson, always underrated, and who, being from Pennsylvania, didn't have an ounce of T.M. C. in his often-battered carcass; but somehow he'd been able to

overcome the deficiency, and, after struggling, had qualified the Schmidt on the back of the last row.

Five hundred miles later he had the Schmidt careening for the finish a fast-closing fourth. Nothing to it. The following Sunday, the Schmidt won at the Wisconsin State Fairgrounds in Milwaukee. And two weeks later, back in Pennsylvania while in the lead,

Thomson wore the Schmidt by putting it on its roof at Langhorne. This was a legitimate fluke; well-behaved as they were on the bricks of Indy, Kuzmas did even better on dirt boilers like Langhorne.

In fact, out of approximately 100 dirt track 100s contested between 1954 and 1958, Kuzmas lost only 18 and won 26, including June 2, 1957's "Race of the Century," again



at Langhorne. The D-A Lubricants set a national record dancing through 100 furrowed miles in 59 minutes and 53.74 seconds, including the minute it lost sitting in the pits while its crew feverishly changed a shredded right rear Firestone. Pedal man on the D-A Lubricants was, once again, the incredible Thomson.



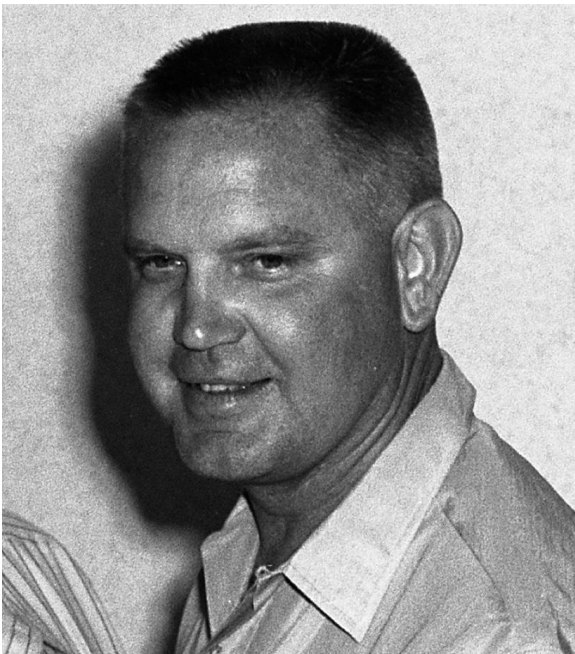
You can get hung up on individual Kuzmas, but the crowning glory of Eddie's career may have been the Agajanian Special which he tooled up for its hog tycoon namesake, J.C Agajanian who happened to be one of T.M. C.'s most rabid carriers.

At Indy in 1951, with its dwarf rookie chauffeur Walt Faulkner, the Agajanian set speed records in time trials; came 1952, the Agajanian's new gas man, Ruttman, still nothing but an underage Okie, won the 500 outright.

Perhaps an even faster and busier Kuzma was the Dean Van Lines, funded by Al Dean, a moving van czar infected with as bad a case of T.M.C. as Agajanian. The Dean won 17 dirt track 100s, including eight in succession, and was the legendary Kuzma responsible for creating the legend of the great Jimmy Bryan.

Eddie Kuzma was the hermit racing car constructor extraordinaire, and his esteemed emporium was on the fringe of inner-city L.A.; in addition to building winners, he specialized in the crisis work of rehabilitating wrecks at bargain-basement rates. A fond tradition of the T.M.C. era was that all its tin men were at least half-goofy, or seemed to be, and "Eddie Ka-zoom" didn't disappoint. His eccentricity was to work with the radio blasting away at peak decibel — music, news, whatever — so that conversation was impossible. Once a client told Eddie what he wanted, and Eddie understood, it was time for him to be gone, so that Eddie could work in peace and alone. This eccentricity of Eddie's lasted throughout the T.M.C. period, or until the middle 1960s, when the senile brains running the Brickyard eradicated everything by giving free reign to such carpet-bagging Brits as John Cooper and Colin Chapman.

**Demand for T.M.C. racing chariots ended; yet demand for Eddie's preternatural skills as fabricator of racing tackle actually picked up, or least did until the 1980s and that dangerous decade's arrival of the fragile and foot-demolishing redcoat marques March and Lola, who caused the death of the Indy 500 as an American race. Prior to that tragedy, Eddie, still cooking hard, turned out the slick coachwork and much else on the three dominating Yankee rear-engines of the late 1960s and 1970s: Andretti's Hawks, Foyt's Coyotes, and the Wildcats of Patrick Racing.**



**“Nothing's perfect!” Jolly Jud Phillips would exclaim, and it was the perfect summation for the mixture of hopelessness, inevitability and love he held for the impossible but rewarding profession of chief mechanic in the Indy 500. And Jud also used to exclaim, “The bar is now open for practice and qualifying!” No, sorry, that was an insider's joke about the beery saloon called Mate's White Front, which was located on 16<sup>th</sup> Street, just down from the Speedway.**

**Kicking back at the White Front with a brew or three, Jud seemed the personification of T.M.C. And he was so sharp at his trade that, back home in L.A., he was regularly taking apart and putting back together again Meyer-Drakes; plus, when he had to, was also assembling whole Indy cars. Before TV addicted him to NFL games on Sunday mornings and afternoons, he used to spend his winters doing all that.**

**One famous open-cockpit sprint car he constructed, the Konstant Hot, was the first truly modern sprinter, and immediately made every stick of Hoosier Clem equipment obsolete. Armed with deafening megaphone exhausts, and a honking Traco V8 specially customized by Jud's pals, the Rich Kids; suspended to perfection with four trick torsion bars; and looking drop-dead beautiful with jet-black livery and numerals of gold leaf, in just five tournaments it won three national titles and additionally launched the short but spectacular career of the demon go-karter Mickey Rupp.**

**Over the years collectors in half a dozen states have been in a scramble to locate the Konstant Hot's remains**

**Although he was the spirit of T.M.C., Jud didn't get his first Indy 500 win until 1968, and by then T.M.C. was long over. Jud and his driver, Bobby Unser, outdid themselves: their independent turbocharged Eagle outran every factory Eagle as well as the hated turbines and all the notorious members of clan Granatelli.**

**As Indy chief mechanic in 1980, Jud orchestrated a charge that exceeded the Peter Schmidt's 33<sup>rd</sup>-to-fourth blast of 1955. There school teacher Tom Sneva barreled Jud's "Ol' Hound" Cosworth from 33<sup>rd</sup> to second, and it was just another of those "Nothing to it" deals.-JS**