



# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL OF FAME

## E.A. "ERDIE" MOROSS

BY LARRY BALL JR.

Ernest A. "Ernie" Moross was born to Rosa and Joseph Alexander Moross on December 9, 1874, in Greenfield Township, Michigan. Ernie's siblings included Anthony, Mary, Richard, Elizabeth, Rose, Joseph, Theodore, Edward and Isabella.

Like many racing pioneers, Ernie got his start in bicycle racing. While there is not a lot of information about Ernie's bicycle career, he did win events at the velodrome in Detroit, some of which were on a tandem bike with his older brother Joseph.

In the early 1900's, with the advent of auto racing, Ernie changed course and became involved with race promotion and driver management. In 1904 he would team up with Barney Oldfield and the Peerless Green Dragon. This relationship would last most of Oldfield's career. William H. "Bill" Pickens would join the pair in the fall of 1904 as an advance man. Under the banner of the Moross Amusement Company, the trio would barnstorm at dirt tracks all over the country. Most of the races were hippodromes. That is, they were rigged. And usually the winner was Barney Oldfield, who almost always set a new "Worlds Record" in the race.

Moross' success with Oldfield would come to the attention of Carl G. Fisher, who had plans for a speedway in Indianapolis. Fisher would hire the Michigan native to become director of Speedway contests. Ernie was the track's general manager and helped guide the Speedway during its construction. Some of the events orchestrated by Moross included the June national championship gas-filled balloon race, the August motorcycle and auto races, and the December speed trials, all in 1909. In addition, he organized the May race meet on the newly brick-paved speedway, the June aviation show and the July race meet, all in 1910.

As reported in the "Indianapolis Star" newspaper on July 20, 1910, with the Indianapolis Motor Speedway moving towards running a single annual event, E.A. "Ernie" Moross resigned as director of contests. Immediately upon his resignation, Ernie announced plans for speedways in New York and Detroit. Ernie indicated that his plans would result in the fastest tracks ever built. At the time, periodicals of the day indicated that "whether that will be forthcoming remains to be seen as, in spite of the lead they hold in the matter of production, Detroit makers have never been particularly partial to the racing game."

The speedways were never built.

Also in 1910, Moross acquired the 200-horsepower Benz, originally known as the 'Lightning Benz,' for Barney Oldfield. Moross cut a deal with the New York-based Benz importer: Ernie's 150-hp Grand Prix Benz plus \$6,000, in exchange for the newer more powerful 200-hp model. Upon taking delivery, Moross and Oldfield headed for Daytona Beach, Florida. On March 16, 1910, without any specific preparation, Oldfield reached a speed of 131 mph breaking the land speed record, but only unofficially. That is, the car

had gone only one way. The rules specified the distance to be driven in the opposite direction as well, with the average from the two runs being used to determine the valid speed. The purpose of the rule was to prevent any advantage due to favorable tailwinds. The record not being officially recognized didn't matter. Moross and Oldfield made a small fortune touring the country with the 'Blitzen Benz' during 1910. It was said that, in 1910, Oldfield was able to command \$4,000 per appearance.

By the end of 1910, Oldfield had so offended the American Automobile Association (AAA) with his barnstorming (more specifically, his match race with heavyweight champion Jack Johnson) that he was banned from all racing activity. With this ban, Oldfield announced his first retirement. Moross didn't miss a beat. In 1911, he became the manager of Bob Burman. On April 23, 1911, the Blitzen Benz was back in Daytona Beach with Burman behind the wheel. He averaged 141.73 mph for the mile with flying start. Unlike Oldfield's run in 1910, this time, the record was certified and remained the absolute land speed record until 1919, when Ralph DePalma reached 149.875 mph over the flying mile at Daytona in a Packard. A month after Burman's record run, Ernie organized a promotion at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Bob Burman was named "World's Speed King." Harvey Firestone presented him with a \$10,000 crown covered with jewels when he broke the track record at the Speedway, with a time of 35.25 seconds (102:127 mph). Many speculated that Carl Fisher only went along with the event to please his friend Harvey Firestone, who was Burman's sponsor.

In 1912, Ernie took possession of a second 200-hp Benz ('Blitzen Benz II'). Both cars would tour the country barnstorming. The Blitzen Benz and Blitzen Benz II went head-to-head on September 30, 1912, in St. Louis. A massive crowd witnessed the event. The two record-breaking cars lined up alongside each other for further record attempts on San Diego beach shortly before Christmas, 1912. During the attempt one of the cars, presumably the original Blitzen Benz, burst into flames, prompting the quick-thinking Burman to drive into the water to put out the flames. Moross spent \$4,000 restoring the car to its former glory.

In 1914, Ernie was still promoting events throughout the country. In addition, he was managing the Maxwell racing team with drivers Hughie Hughes, Teddy Tetzlaff, and Billy Carlson. That same year, Moross was in Salt Lake City, Utah, with his travelling troupe of drivers and the Blitzen Benz. While talking with a local sports editor, Ernie was talked into taking a car out to the salt flats for an exhibition. Teddy Tetzlaff, the Blitzen Benz, and over 100 spectators were hauled 125 miles west by rail. Upon arriving at the salt flats, a one-mile course was measured out and Tetzlaff unofficially broke the land speed record by covering the mile at 141.73 mph. This exhibition became the first of many speed trials at Bonneville.

The 1915 season brought a new promotion for Moross. He promoted a series of night races at Brighton Beach in New York. Papers of the day reported that the races would be run using a portable electric lighting system. Lights would be spaced every twenty-five feet around the infield with the outside of the track surrounded by a ten-foot-high white canvas wall reflecting the light. It was said that the new system of lighting employed in connection with the canvas walls "made it possible for the spectators to distinguish the contestants at any point on the track."

Also during 1915, Moross continued with the Maxwell team and its newest driver, Eddie Rickenbacker.

By 1916, Ernie had pretty much retired from racing. In January of 1917, Moross announced that he would offer the Blitzen Benz as a prize to the winner of the 1917 driver championship. "The 1917 champion will be presented it without any conditions as to his use of it," Moross said. There is no evidence that the car was ever awarded to the 1917 champion.

Out of the racing game, Ernie and his wife, the former Mary Kathryn Valentine, returned to Michigan. He lost a fortune in the crash of 1929. In 1932, Ernie was the unsuccessful communist candidate for Michigan State Senate, 10th District. In 1933, he refused to renew his car's license plates as a protest against the cost. When his car was seized, he and his wife locked the doors and remained inside it for a month. Finally police broke into the car and arrested them. Ernie was convicted of resisting arrest and sentenced to 30 days in jail.

Moross spent the latter part of his life in the gold and mercury mining business in Nevada. The gold mine was in operation before the war, but was closed to permit the Army to operate a bombing range in that area.

In 1947, Moross had moved to Long Beach, California, and was attempting to reopen his gold mine when he was stricken with a blood clot on his brain. His medical bills mounting, his wife was forced to sell everything of value. For a year he had required intravenous feeding and oxygen tents at frequent periods.

Occasionally his wife wrote notes to old friends, and received courteous letters of interest in response. But she asked for no help, and received none at their home in Lakewood. Just two days before his death, Mary Kathryn sold her last asset, her wedding ring. Ernie Moross died of pneumonia, penniless, on April 4, 1949, at the Los Angeles County Harbor General Hospital.



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