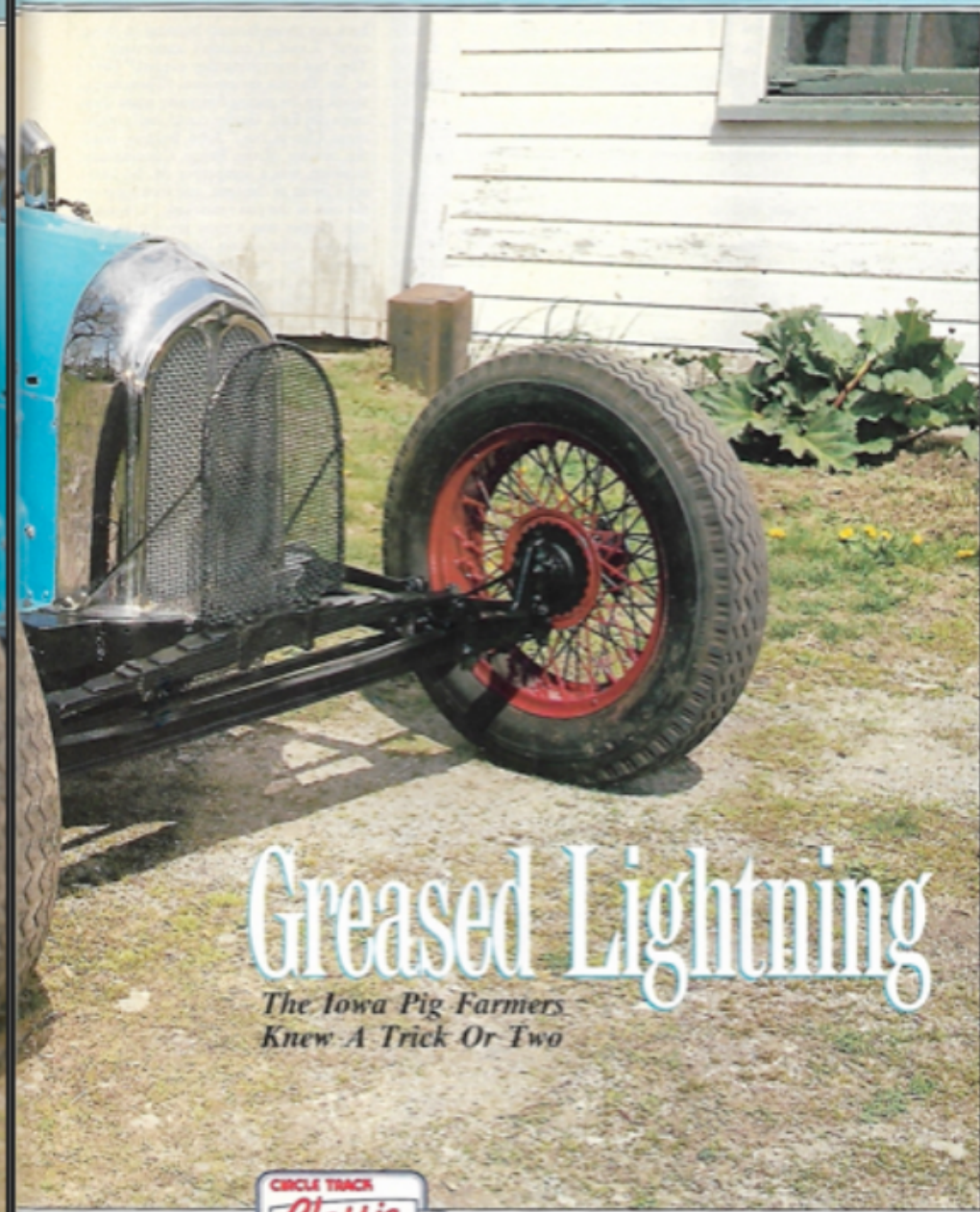




John Gerber sits in the famous "Betta" about 1910. Gerber amassed one of the best win records in history with this tiny, innovative car. (Gerber Family Collection photo)



Greased Lightning

*The Iowa Pig Farmers
Knew A Trick Or Two*



By THOMAS GLATCH

IN 1933 WE HEAD-quartered in Woodbridge, New Jersey, because I often ran there on Sunday nights," recalled driver Maynard "Hungry" Clark. "We pitched our tents in the infield, we lived there. Promoter Jack Curley's track manager comes down and says, 'A couple of Iowa farmers, huh?' So he goes out and gets us overalls, blue shirts and red bandanas, corncob pipes, straw hats, and a pig."

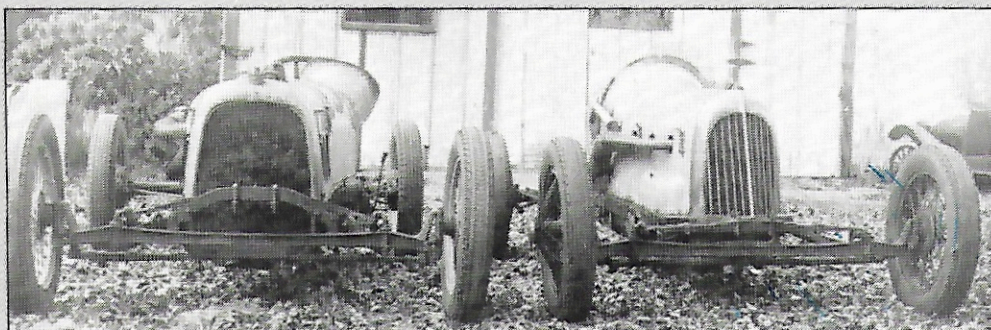
And so began one of the enduring legends of American dirt track racing. It was 1933, the first year East Coast fans would see Clark and his partner; designer-builder-driver John Gerber. Their

cars were simple, scruffy, and especially strange-looking next to the flash and sophistication of the AAA Eastern Circuit machines. Plus, the East had established stars like Bob Sall and Johnny Hannon. These "farmers" were the laughing stock of the East. And the pig in the pits didn't help. Hungry Clark continued the story, "The manager asked John, 'Do you want to have the pig in the pits?' John says, 'Well, hell, I got two race cars to work on, I can't take care of a pig too!' So they'd hire a little kid, and put a harness on the pig and walk him around. They called him 'Rasputin'. They'd take him up to the microphone and 'interview' him and twist his tail and he'd squeal like he was answering them. Boy, the fans ate that up!" The Easterners laughed . . . at least until the first race.

"They were incredible!" East Coast pilot Bill Scarince exclaimed. "What the

heck are those farmers burning in those cars?" I said. I couldn't understand it. They had everything they needed." Driver Joe Barzda remembers, "They really shook up the racing fraternity when they came out East. Gerber could really make those Chevys run." John Burgess, once the curator of the Briggs Cunningham museum, was a competitor on the Eastern Circuit at the time, and looking over the cars in the pits remarked, "I thought that Gerber was a most innovative person, and after seeing those little son-of-guns go by everybody like they were painted on the wall, I had an entirely different opinion about Chevys."

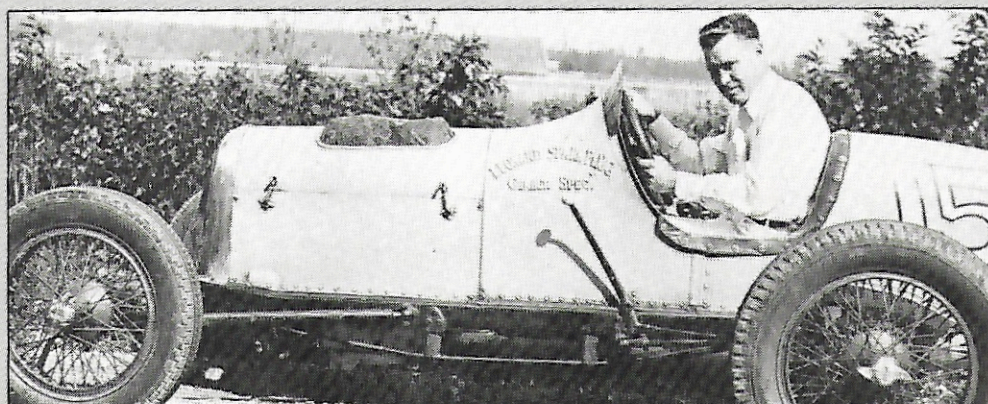
Those "Chevys" were two of the most dominant race cars in all of automotive history. And the man behind them, John Gerber, is possibly the winningest driver of all time. The records of Gerber's early "outlaw" days are nonexistent, but it is



Shown are the Bobtail [left] and the #15 AAA car [right] in front of Gerber's Stanwood, Iowa, shop around 1932. Gerber continued to drive the Bobtail in outlaw competition during 1932, and Hungry Clark drove the #15 while the second car was being completed. (Gerber Family Collection photo)



Number 15's first race was at Chippeewa Falls, Wisconsin in 1932. Gerber drove and he set a new track record. (Gerber Family Collection photo)



Hungry Clark is with the #15 Gerber Special somewhere in the East. Gerber found his cars ran best with Leonard spark plugs made in New Jersey. Leonard sponsored Gerber's cars for some time. (Hungry Clark Collection photo)

estimated he won over 1000 features in a driving career that spanned from 1921 to '33. What is known is that he won nearly \$100,000 during that time; a time when Henry Ford's \$5-a-day wage was thought of as extravagant. And after his retirement as a driver, his cars continued their winning ways in the hands of Tommy Hinnershitz, Indy winner Floyd Davis, Ronnie Householder, Paul Russo, and other greats.

Born on November 20, 1896 to an East Kansas farming family, John Gerber developed a love for mechanical things at an early age, and by 1921 he had established an automotive repair shop in Meriden, Kansas. His own transportation was a model 490 Chevrolet to which he added a speedster body and other speed equipment. That same year he attended his first race and was surprised to discover that his speedster was no different than the machines on the track. He entered the race, took it easy, and finished second in the feature. His prize was a then-princely \$300.

Lured on by the big money, he began barnstorming the county fair "bullrings" throughout the Midwest. In 1925 he built a new machine; a lightweight, low-slung creation based on a shortened, upside-down, Model-T Ford frame powered by the 180-cubic-inch Chevy 490 engine. This revolutionary machine became known as the "Bobtail" and was practically unbeatable. Traveling throughout the Central Plains states, he amassed a record of wins possibly unequalled in auto racing history. Floyd Davis, in Jack Fox's book *The Illustrated History of Sprint Car Racing* (Carl Hungness, 1985) remembered: "Man, would he run. He'd just play with Gus Schrader. At Lexington, Illinois, he let Schrader get about a half-a-lap lead on the field in a 30-lapper and then at about the 25th time around, Johnny kicked it in and went right around Gus to win." Schrader, driving a bobtailed Dodge, was the big name in the Midwest at the time. And Hungry Clark, who spent a number of years chasing the Bobtail with his own 16-valve Frontenac, just exclaimed, "That damn little Bobtail!"

By the early Thirties, the big money was gone. The Midwest with its agrarian economy was reeling from the Great Depression. The East Coast, however, was faring much better. John Gerber decided to leave the outlaw tracks for the AAA Eastern circuit. To do so meant abandoning his faithful Bobtail for something AAA-legal. His ambitious plan included campaigning two revolutionary machines of his design. His choice to drive the other car was Hungry Clark. "When

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John asked me to drive his cars," Clark said, "why, I jumped at the chance. I knew how good his cars ran. I stayed up at his place over the winter of 1932 and helped him build the cars."

In the Stanwood, Iowa, garage of his fiancée's parents, John built two of the most unusual dirt track cars seen up to that time. He layed out the cars on an 86-inch wheelbase, which was much shorter than the norm, but within AAA rules—if barely. Clark recalled, "Up at Cook County [Chicago], the AAA tried to outlaw John's cars. They said they were Midgets. They measured and measured us for half an hour trying to get us under 85 inches. They *were* 85 inches." John Burgess observed, "My first impression was that they looked like a three-quarter Sprinter or dirt track car, as they were known in those days. They were simple, minimal machines and handled lightning-fast. I imagine they took a little getting used to because they could get a little 'squirrely' if you weren't right on top of them." The first car completed, this month's CIRCLE TRACK Classic, was numbered 15 and driven by Hungry Clark while Gerber drove the other car, usually numbered 14.

The "Chevy" that powered Gerber's car was hardly a Chevrolet at all. What started out as a Chevy 490 engine evolved over the years into an almost purely Gerber creation. The four cylinder powerplants featured a single-over-head-cam conversion Gerber crafted from a 3-port, 1921 Oldsmobile flathead engine. For years the block was from the Chevy 490 mill, but was replaced by an all-Gerber casting in the mid-Thirties. Two big, bored-out, Winfield carbs poked through the hood. It looked rather crude, but it worked. Hungry Clark remarked, "I ran three 100-mile races with John's cars that year, and I got two firsts and a second. The second I got was at Langhorne, Pennsylvania, on that circle mile. [Johnny] Hannon beat me, it was the only time Hannon ever beat me. He had an [220] Offy on that track and I only had a 180-cubic-inch motor at that time. You can't believe how well John made those motors run, as small as they were. We were bucking Offys with 180 cubic inches!" Much to the chagrin of the competition, Gerber later built a 220-cubic-inch AAA engine, and a 255-cubic-inch version for outlaw races.

Gerber retired from driving in 1934, but the winning continued until World War II put an end to all racing. After the war, Gerber gave up racing and sold the #14 to one of his drivers; Iowa's Cecil Burnaugh. Burnaugh moved to California and ran the car competitively until

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he blew the engine to pieces in 1949; the victim of too much nitro. Californian Joe Gemsa bought the pieces, patched it together, and dropped it into the car he had. In 1951 Gemsa won 7 out of 9 races to capture the Pacific Coast championship. The car last ran in 1954 in a 100-mile race on the dirt mile at Phoenix. Gemsa's machine started 33rd—dead last—and proceeded to pass the other 32 competitors on the backstretch of the first lap. The Gemsa-Gerber held on for a fitting victory in its final race.

What was John Gerber's recipe for success? Floyd Davis bragged, "It was the best handling car I ever drove. I won every race I finished, and lead every race I started. That wasn't any great accomplishment because the car gave you such an advantage." John Burgess said, "I think that Gerber's cars influenced a lot of car builders, as we began to see less and less of the average 90 to 92-inch-wheelbase cars and more in the 80+-inch bracket. Most of them were a bit heavier than Gerber's machines. The fairgrounds horse tracks we raced on usually had tighter turns than the half-mile tracks built for dirt tracks as used today, another advantage of having the short wheelbase and light weight." Hungry Clark stated, "Those cars of his were so different. All four wheels slid [in a perfect drift]. I had so much confidence in those cars."

Another ingredient was the Gerber engine. Joe Gemsa feels, "It was a combination of the valve timing and the crank having a big offset. The crank was not directly below the bore, it had a $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch offset. And the valve timing on the camshaft was very, very tricky. In fact, a lot of guys said, 'We don't know how that thing even runs with that kind of timing.' Between the timing, the size of the valves, the stroke, and the offset on the crank, the thing had a tremendous amount of torque. That's what it was."

Add to this the driving talents of Hungry Clark, Tommy Hinnershitz, Floyd Davis, Paul Russo, etc., seasoned with the mechanical ability of John Gerber, and you had the class of dirt track racing.

The racing community lost John Gerber to cancer in 1979, and Hungry Clark suffered a debilitating stroke in 1985. But Jim Gerber, John's son, keeps the one remaining Gerber Special in authentic racing condition. Jim is also restoring the Bobtail and completing a never-raced Indianapolis car in John's machine shop and garage; a working museum of Gerber history.

And whenever the racing "old-timers" get together, the legend of the Iowa Pig Farmers lives on. **O**
