

GENTLEMAN AT SPEED: FRED G. WACKER JR.

With the hell of Iwo Jima and Guadalcanal, the fear, frostbite and frustration of the Battle of the Bulge, still fresh in mind, a new generation of Americans went racing — not in a reprise of the closed-course oval competitions of before the war, but in a revival of the sport in its original form brought to mind by the Vanderbilt Cup, the Grand Prize of Savannah. Round the houses and through the tree-lined countryside, this road racing could have been over the roads of Rheims, or on the way to Brescia; but it was the citizenry of Watkins Glen, New York, or Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin, or Palm Beach Shores that lined the public roads closed for a Sunday's competition.

Prize money wasn't the issue. These early SCCA races were run to banish the taste of C-rations, the fit of Government issue uniforms, and more precisely to celebrate the success of having survived hell and the thrill of being alive.

One such celebrant in the cockpit of these early competitions was Fred Glade Wacker of Chicago. Recently rolled out of the Navy, where he saw action in the Pacific, Fred was firmly grounded in the automotive world. Ammco Tools, the family business, manufactured tooling equipment for the burgeoning automotive trade that was getting America back on the road. Before shipping out as a commissioned ensign, Fred had been studying at the General Motors Institute of Technology, working at the AC Spark Plug division, and working as a sideman in dance bands and jazz groups — all at once.

Upon returning home, the sideman became the band-

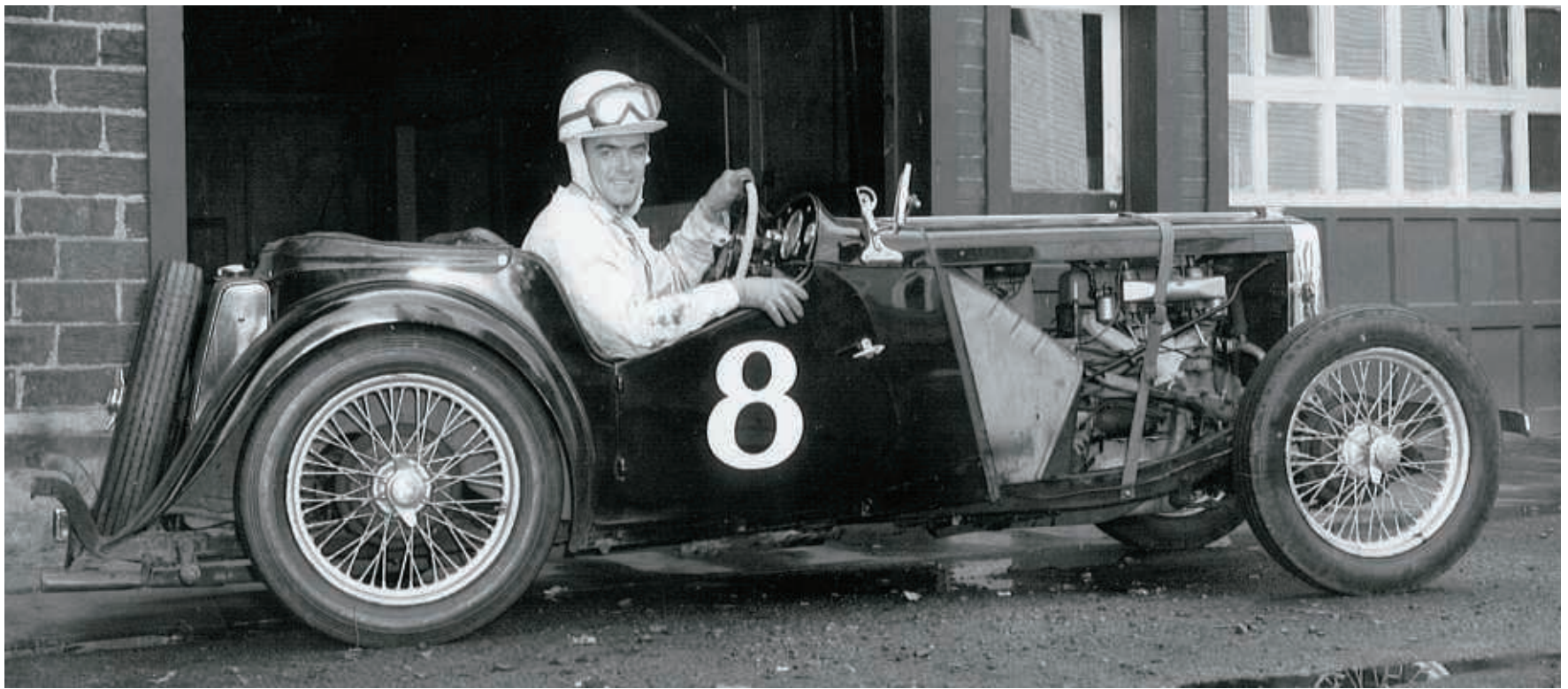
leader; first for the Fred Wacker Orchestra, then as president of his father's business, finally as founder of the Chicago chapter of the SCCA. Fred, his participation in the sport, his cars and achievements were emblematic of the gentlemen drivers who were returning road racing in its purest form to America; Fred had the required means and organizational skills, as well as the talent to get 'round-the-houses cleanly and fast...A capability that was to take him

from the road circuits of the States on to become the first American to go Grand Prix racing after the war in Europe.

"I've always been interested in cars, in fact the first Indianapolis race I saw was in 1932. My father took me down to the speedway. I remember we went down on a train that parked next to the track and then we got out and watched the race and got on the train and went back home again. We had seats on the first turn and part way through the first turn, there was a big accident. The guys didn't have seat belts in those days and these two cars hit each other and the drivers were thrown up in the air, there was also a riding mechanic in each car, so there were four people involved in this thing. As I remember it, a couple of them were killed and I remember my father to turning to me — I was, I think, 14 years old — and saying, do you still want to be a race car driver? And I remember that I didn't answer him."

His first two races were run in the car that launched road racing for competitors and became the sportscar in the public mind, the MG; an MG-TC, to be specific.

"After the war I got home from the Navy and I remember going out in the cold, it was close to winter and I went out to Stoney Island Avenue. There was a man there by the name of Joe Neidlinger who had a car agency, and he had an English fellow there selling the cars. The Englishman saw me and the first thing he did was put the top down and said, let's go for a ride on Stoney Island Avenue, which we did. I thought the car



was just the greatest thing I'd ever driven. It seemed like the steering was direct and you could control it. It was just such a contrast to the Detroit Iron in those days, that I ordered an MG. I think it cost \$1,750.

After I'd gotten home from the Navy my father had provided me with a four-door, two-tone gray Pontiac, which was about the dullest car you could imagine, and I traded the Pontiac in for this MG without telling my old man about it.

He was very sick at the time. He saw me from his bed, upstairs, drive into the driveway in the MG. He called me up, and said 'What is that I saw you driving in?'

I said, 'Well, I traded the Pontiac in for that MG.'

Well, he almost had a fit, but a funny thing happened, he came down and I opened the hood and showed him the twin SU carburetors and the little engine and everything — and he loved mechanics — and he never said another word. He said it was such a beautiful little car you couldn't help but like it.

Well, this was in the spring and I drove the car down to Indianapolis. I (had) parked in the infield, and coming out after the race I got up next to two guys in a Bentley. One was a guy named Bill Spear and the other was a guy from New York named Sam Bailey, who owned a hotel in New York; I think it was the Henry Hudson Hotel. And they said, 'Gee, with that car you ought to belong to the Sports Car Club of America.' And I said, 'Well, what's that?' They told me that it was a club and I found out that there wasn't a chapter of the Sports Car Club in Chicago.

I got in touch with a man named Cameron Peck, who had a big old car collection, probably about 100 beautiful cars. He was involved with the Bowman Dairy Company, I think his family owned it, and he worked there, And I said, there's no region here, what'll I do? He was the secretary or vice president of the Sports Car Club at the time, maybe he was president, I don't know, but he was up there. Very nice man. And

he said, well, why don't you start one. So I said, well, how do I do that. He said, 'Just get some people together and start it.' So I started the Chicago region. I had a group of guys that I rounded up, who had cars or were going to get them, and we started the Chicago region.

Then I found out that there was a race at Watkins Glen. I started getting the Sports Car Club of America Magazine. So I wanted to enter this little MG in the race. It was the second race, I think, at Watkins Glen, and I knew a fellow by the name of Wally Mitchell who was an inventor and had built his own racing cars, and I tried to interest him in souping the car up for me and he said, no. He said he couldn't do it. So he sent me to a guy named Ray Richards, an ex-midget racing driver who was a service manager at the Ford agency in Highland Park. Well, Ray wasn't interested in it either, but he had a mechanic working there by the name of Marshall Lewis. So I met Marshall Lewis and he said he'd be glad to do it. So we took the front fenders off the car and we increased the compression ratio and I think we took the headlights off. They didn't have all these rules then, you know, like showroom stock and all that stuff. Nobody had heard of anything like that.

We got it all stripped down and running pretty good and we towed it down to Watkins Glen. I had a Ford truck and we towed it down there and entered it in the race. As I remember it, it was an 100 mile race on the old 6.7 mile course that went through the town and up through the hills and back. And that's the first time I met John Fitch. He had an MG and we were started together at the grid. We did pretty well. We got second in class and sixth overall, but we did very well with the car. I'll never forget that day because it was so exciting and now here it was 1948 and I was doing something that I'd always wanted to do since I was a little kid, drive in a race. It was just a great, great thrill.

I think there were, oh, maybe 40-50 cars, something like that. Different classes. There were some MG's and I think Briggs Cunningham had a car there called the BuMerc or something

like that. George Huntoon had something with some kind of a Ford engine in it that looked like a race car. There was another guy, George Weaver, who had a full-blown Maserati race car. There was a little bit of everything in that race. I spun once into some hay bales and recovered from that, but finishing sixth overall in the first race you were ever in and third in class was not too bad. I thought we did pretty well.

An interesting thing happened (at the next race). A friend of mine from Chicago by the name of Jim Kimberly came to the race. I used to go out sailing with him. He had a big boat on Lake Michigan, and I used to go out sailing with him on weekends and I'd shown up in my MG. So he decided to do me one better and he bought himself an XK120, a white one with red leather upholstery seats, he decided to come down to watch the race at Palm Beach Shores, not to enter it but to watch it. He was having trouble with his Jaguar. It wasn't working quite right.

I said 'well, why don't you let my mechanic Marshall Lewis look at it?'

Jim said, 'What does he know? The people from Jaguar can't fix it.'

I said, 'What do you have to lose? Marshall Lewis is a pretty good little mechanic. Why don't you let him have a look at it?'

So he begrudgingly did and in about 15 or 20 minutes, Marshall had it figured out and had the car running fine. Well, that's where I made one of my first mistakes, because the first thing I knew Jim Kimberly had hired Marshall Lewis, and Marshall Lewis, who had been a very successful midget race car driver in the earlier days, spent the rest of his life working for Jim Kimberly.

After that I got Wally Mitchell involved in it — said he was never going to do it originally, but he got interested."

Then came Donald Healey's tour of the United States, to launch his new company and the car that would build its reputation: the Healey-Silverstone. The first car from the old aircraft hangars at Warwick would give Fred the

horsepower that earned him his first class victories.

"I got rid of the MG and I drove a Healey Silverstone for Jim Kimberly in one of the races. I think it was at Bridgehampton. It was a very pleasant car. It had a unique front suspension. It handled pretty well and from what I knew then, I thought it was a great car. I met Donald Healey and drove the car for Jim at Bridgehampton and then at Elkhart Lake. We were first in class at Bridgehampton and I think we were second overall at Elkhart Lake and first in class.

The first race (at Elkhart Lake) was on a square course out in the farmland. We talked the people up there into running it through the town later. The first race was very simple. It was just four miles around; more or less of a square through some corn fields. It wasn't very difficult."

By mid 1950 the bar had been raised. Fred and his peers, such as Jim Kimberly and Briggs Cunningham, had progressed to the ranks of professional competitors with quality equipment. While Kimberly and Cunningham went to Modena and the then-exotic Ferrari for their mounts, Fred turned to Sydney Allard for what was to become his signature bolide; a J2 Allard with Cadillac power.

"I didn't have any money in those days. I was working hard to try to get ahead in life, but I couldn't afford these Ferraris. They cost twelve or fifteen thousand bucks, which doesn't seem like much now, but I couldn't even consider anything like that. So one day Tommy Cole, who was an English driver, called me up and said 'Fred, I want you to come down here to Long Island, I've got a car I want you to try out.'

So I went down, and he had a Cadillac Allard down there. It was a silver one. And we went out to drive that thing around some roads on Long Island and I couldn't believe it. Man, it was just loaded.

I ordered a chassis from Sydney Allard and I think the chassis cost me 1,750 bucks, something like that, and I got a Cadillac engine from the factory. I think that cost me 385

bucks, and then I had these guys like Wally Mitchell and some others who just helped me that I didn't pay at all — I mean, they just did it because they liked it. We put that Cadillac Allard together and took it down to Watkins Glen in 1950, this was a black one, and we finished third overall.

Then we took it to Sebring, and that was a race that was put on by a man named Alec Ullman, I think it was the first race at Sebring, and we won that race. My co-driver was Frank Burrell, who was an engineer who worked at Cadillac, and we put an automatic transmission, a Hydra-Matic, in the car; we tightened up the bands so that the thing would shift instantly — there was no delay — and it would also downshift, which automatic transmissions in those days didn't do.

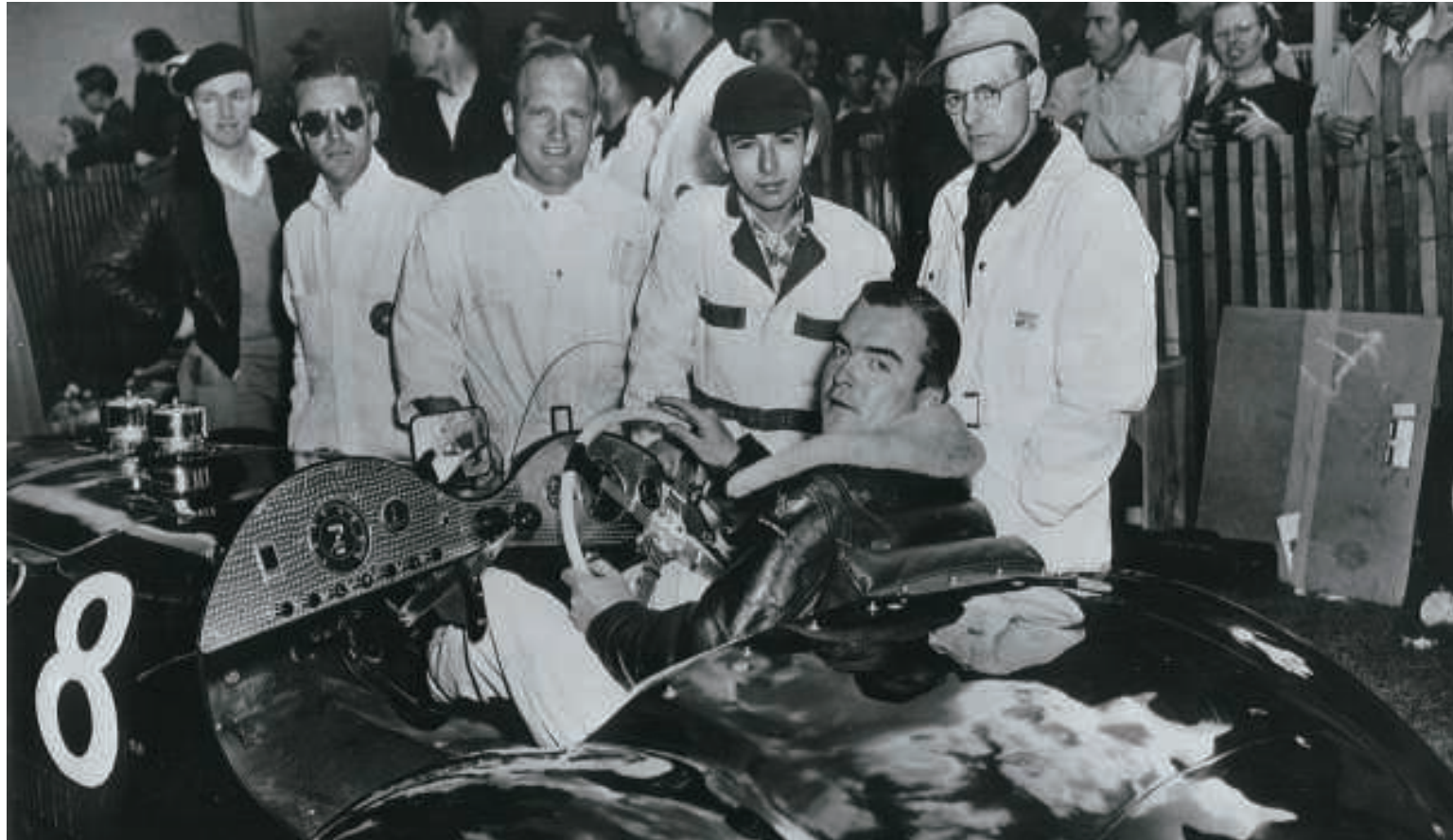
I drove most of the race down there, and Frank Burrell drove — just for a little while, because he wasn't really a driver, but you had to have two people. Alec Ullman was running the race, he didn't like me very much, because I was then vice-president of the Sports Car Club of America and I'd been elected by a pretty good majority of people who felt that sports car racing should stay amateur. Alec Ullman, having come from Europe, wanted to professionalize it. In the long run, he was right, but I couldn't go for professionalizing the race because I was elected by a bunch of people who wanted to keep it amateur, so we had (this) conflict. There were two races going on; one was the overall race, whoever got there first, and the other was a handicap race. Well a fellow by the name, I think of Fritz Koster, and another guy, they had entered a little Crosley HotShot, a little car that would go about 65 miles an hour, it was a nothing . . . and they won the race on index. And of course Alec Ullman, not being too friendly disposed toward me because of my not wanting to professionalize racing, gave all the credit for winning the race at Sebring to Koster. That didn't sit too well with me, but it happened."

Racing's 1951 began in March with a comprehensive assault by the American racing fraternity on the newly inaugurated Argentine races.

“There was a night club in New York, El Morocco, which was run by John Perona. John Perona was a wonderful, a very dapper gent. El Morocco, of course, was a posh nightclub with all the seats made out of zebra skin, and they had a good rumba band and a good regular band that played continuous music. It’s where everybody went. John Perona sat at a round table fairly near the front door so that he could see everybody coming in or leaving. If you were unattached, which I was, I wasn’t married at the time, why, he would invite you to sit at his round table and you’d meet all kinds of people in there; it might be Bob Hope or Humphrey Bogart or Clark Gable or whoever. He knew all kinds of well-known people. He was like a magnet. John Perona was a great car buff and there was an Argentinean sort of a playboy type who was very wealthy by

the name of Macoco. Macoco lived in there every night. They got together and figured out that they could put on a couple of road races down in Buenos Aires and the Peron government would pay for it. That’s the way it (the Argentine races) started.

I was invited to go down, and John Fitch went down, and I think George Rand and Briggs Cunningham. I can’t remember the whole crew that went down there, but six or seven guys went down, at least drivers, and we took our cars down there... I can’t remember whether they were flown down or shipped down, but everybody had their own cars from the States. We didn’t have to pay for anything. And they had us put up at the best hotel there. It was called the Alvoiar Palace, it was a wonderful hotel, and we really had a nice time down there.



There were a lot of Argentine guys who had cars that (made up) the preponderance of the race. That's where I first met my good friend Roberto Mieres, who later raced for Gordini at the same time that I did.

They had a little course worked out, through (Buenos Aires). It wasn't right through the center of town, but they had a little course worked out. It wasn't far away and it wasn't a very long circuit... I had the race in my hand, believe it or not, I led most of the race; and shortly before the end I spun, and John Fitch, my good friend, was able to get by me, and I couldn't catch him — almost did, but couldn't quite catch him in the two or three laps remaining, so I ended up with a second.

I could tell you a lot of stories about what went on down there, we were royally entertained. One of the fellows who entertained us was Louis Firpo, the famous prizefighter who fought Jack Dempsey many years ago. He had a barbecue place and he would entertain us in there at night. We met a lot of wonderful people down there. The Argentine people are so easy to like, they like to laugh and they like to have a good time. Gee, we ate well. The only thing they didn't do, they didn't introduce us to any of their girlfriends. They weren't about to do that. But we had a good time anyway.

I sold my Cadillac Allard down there, and when I got back to the States, I ordered another one from Sydney Allard in England. Then what happened was that Mrs. Peron decided that she would not permit that car to be imported into the country, so they sent it back to me and I ended up with two Allards which I needed like a hole in my head, but I finally sold the car to someone. But that was a very interesting trip down there. There was supposed to be two races, but the second race never came off. I don't know why, it just didn't."

His second place in the Argentine resulted in an invitation to race with Cunningham's team, first at Bridgehampton in May with an XK120, where Fred took third in class, then in June as part of Cunningham's assault on Le Mans with his new Chrysler-powered C2-Rs.

"...that first race at Le Mans I drove one of Cunningham's cars with George Rand. George Rand was the number one driver, I was the co-driver. He drove the first four hours and I drove the second four hours; (then) the weather got bad. George was driving the third four hours, it was night and it was raining; after he'd been out there about 20 minutes or so, he ran into the wall under the Dunlop bridge, and that was the end of our effort.

The second time I went over there with Cunningham (1952) he had to make a choice, or obviously he did make a choice; I was supposed to drive one of the cars, but he had Duane Carter, who was an Indianapolis driver, along, and he decided to have Duane Carter drive instead of me, so I was a spectator at that race. Duane went out and I think on the second, first or second, lap that he drove he put it in a pile of sand someplace, and took a couple of hours to dig himself out. So that didn't work. I had some fun with him about that afterwards. I used to see him down at Indianapolis a lot. He was a very nice gent, Duane Carter."

Back in the States, the autumn race at Watkins Glen and the winter competition at Palm Beach saw Fred at the wheel of his new red J2 Allard, after he successfully sold the black one that Eva Peron wouldn't let into Argentina.

"We made all kinds of changes to the Allard. You know, I used to get compliments on being a great Allard driver, but the reason that I looked like a great Allard driver was my friend Wally Mitchell, who I talked about before. Wally Mitchell did not graduate from high school, he couldn't write very well, couldn't spell, he died just last year, but during his life he had 350 U.S. patents and in all different things. He had patents on some of the tools we made at Ammco Tools Incorporated, Daycor Diving lungs and Victor Comptometer. He worked for all kinds of people. He'd get these ideas, and he never made much money, because he wasn't really concerned with that. He just liked to make things. Up until the day he died he was working on new ideas, all the time.

We made a lot of changes in the Allard. First of all, there was 'way too much weight on the front wheels, so he moved the engine back as far as he could and still get me into the car all right. The suspension wasn't very good, so in order to hold the split front axle and the De Dion rear-end — in order to keep those wheels in contact with the road at all times, so that they didn't bounce off thereby losing traction — he had some bars coming out and around the axles, with rubber doughnuts on the top and the bottom, to act as restraints. He could change the durometer of the doughnuts, depending on whether the course was real bumpy, or not so bumpy, and so on, and that would keep those wheels in contact with the road at all times.

The other thing, we changed the steering geometry, because the Allard was set up with regular Ackerman steering, so that when you went around a turn to the left, the inside front left turned more than the outside wheel. But when you're racing and the rear-end spins out, you don't want that — you want just the reverse of that, because otherwise, you're pushing one wheel sideways. So we took the Ackerman out and had the front wheels go straight back. You know, if you made a line (from the tires,) the lines didn't coincide over the differential. [They] went straight back. Well, those little things and some others made all the difference. I don't remember what the original horsepower on the Cadillac engine was, but we were getting 300 horsepower out of it, and when we got that Hydra-Matic in there that shifted instantly, we went from zero to 60 miles per hour in 4 seconds. That was pretty damn good in those days. Not too many cars can do that today."

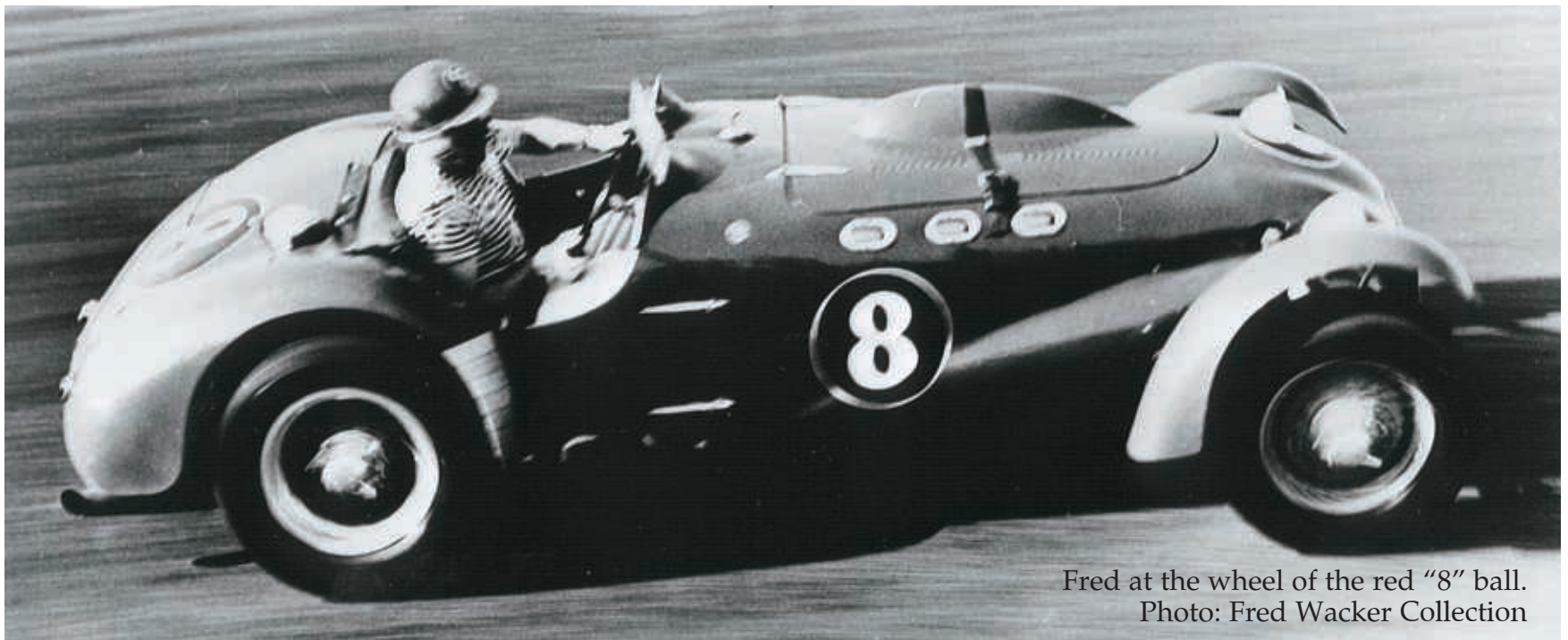
1952 proved a pivotal year in American road racing. Within the SCCA there was considerable controversy about changing the organization's mandate from amateur racing to professional competition, and Fred, as the National President of the SCCA, was at the center of it. As he faced this internal dissension, he found himself at the center of quite another dispute; the storm brewing over the use of public roads for competition.

"In the early days, when I was involved [as a driver,] it was so much fun, because everybody was friendly with everybody else, and if you had a mechanical problem you could get help, maybe, from your competitor, just like I offered to help Jim Kimberly and lost my mechanic. Anyway, it was much more free and easy-

...(but) we (started having) a terrible time with crowd control. We had one bad accident at Watkins Glen in which I and John Fitch were involved, where a small boy was killed — and it's a wonder there weren't more people killed. What happened was, I was pursuing John Fitch into a turn at the end of the main straight, and he didn't realize I was there. I was just about to pass him, and the gate got closed, as they say, and this kid was sitting on the curbstone — which he shouldn't have been. The crowds were really out of control and, unfortunately, the little boy got killed; that created a lot of publicity and, of course, that was the beginning of trouble for the races through the towns. I remember they arrested me after that, right there in Watkins Glen; James Melton, the opera singer, who was pretty influential up there and was a car buff, straightened that out in a hurry, but they did want to put me under arrest for that."

Into the well-publicized firestorm over the safety of races on public roads stepped an unforeseen ally — the Strategic Air Command, in the person of General Curtis LeMay.

"The way I met General LeMay, and the way we got started with racing on the Strategic Air Command bases, was that the General was a car fan. He also had an Allard, which I didn't know. He came up to Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin — when we were racing through the town, it wasn't that first race we talked about earlier — and he wasn't in uniform, he had a fedora on and a Hawaiian shirt of some kind, a cigar, and he kept hanging around our pits asking questions. I didn't know who the hell he was. We finally got acquainted. I asked him what his name was and he said 'Curt LeMay', and I woke up to the fact



Fred at the wheel of the red "8" ball.
Photo: Fred Wacker Collection

that he was the head of the Strategic Air Command. We became friends and, because we were getting thrown off the roads because of accidents and the lack of crowd control and that sort of thing, and there weren't any private courses around, General LeMay got this idea that we could put on races on the Strategic Air Command bases. He would fly the planes out on the weekends that the races were on, and it wouldn't cost the government anything, because he had to do a certain number of routine flights anyway. It was just a matter of scheduling. So he'd schedule the flights out on the weekend of the race, and the money that was generated [by the race] would be used for the Living Improvement Fund so they could do something nice, make a bowling alley or something, that helped the servicemen stationed at these bases.

I remember General LeMay flying into the Glenview Air Station near Chicago in this great big four-engine bomber, and he had a whole bunch of legal eagles with him, all in uniform, and I was out there representing the Sports Car Club of America all by myself in a little old Ford that I had, and we

had quite a long discussion about how the money would be divided up and how it would work and all that sort of thing. And we eventually reached an agreement on everything. And that's the way those airport races got started. I drove for General LeMay a couple of times. He had a later model Allard than the one that I had. It was funny, because the Air Force wouldn't let him drive the Allard in the races, because that was too dangerous. They didn't want him to take any risks. Hard to believe, but that's the way it was."

Fred, as National President of the SCCA, solved the problem of public safety by holding the races on the airbases and, at a stroke, resolved the amateur-vs.-professional controversy within the SCCA. With races now held at closed courses, where revenue was generated from gate sales, money became available to pay the drivers.

"That's right. And you know I've never thought of that before, but you're absolutely right."

Amidst all this Fred still managed to campaign the Allard, taking a first at Janesville, a second at

Bridgehampton, DNF's at Vero Beach, Elkhart, and the Glen, and a third at the first AFB race, at Turner Air Base at Albany, Georgia.

" Those airport races, they were all right, but they were on runways and sometimes they had a pretty long straightaway; and the guys with the 5-speed Ferraris, you know, that could get up to a lot of top speed if there was time to do it, they were pretty hard to beat. So if it was an airport race we would have to beat them by guile.

I remember one race. It wasn't one of LeMay's races, but it was on an airport up at Janesville, Wisconsin. It had a long straightaway, and my friend Jim Kimberly had a big Ferrari — I don't remember what model it was, but it had five speeds, it would just go like stink. We knew we couldn't beat him because of that long straightaway, so we devised a whole series of phony pit signals, that he would see when he'd go by, to sort of put him to sleep...you know, tell me to lay back, take it easy, this, that, and the other, and it worked. About half way around through the last lap I stepped on the gas and passed Kimberly, he was asleep, he thought he had the damn thing won. I remember he was so mad he was fit to be tied. He got out of his car [and] threw his helmet on the ground. It was a nice race to win because there was a lovely girl up there by the name of Greg Sherwood, who later married Horace Dodge, but she was a movie actress of sorts and, I got to meet her and, you know, drive around the last lap and all that. It was a lot of fun. It was strictly guile."

The Strategic Air Command races greatly bolstered the reputation of the SCCA under Fred's stewardship. Community relations benefited from good publicity; the soldiers were pleased with improved living conditions; the revenue now obviously to be made from Sports Car racing resulted in more non-SAC airport races and, more importantly, the construction of new dedicated closed circuits. Drivers began to be compensated. But over the horizon came another storm.

"I don't remember how many of (the SAC base races) we had. We had maybe, I'm just guessing, six or seven of them, I didn't go on all of them, just on the ones that I could. And the reason they came to an end was that some Senator found out that General LeMay was having these races on the Strategic Air Command bases and was flying the planes out. The Senator took the position that they were wasting Government money to fly the planes out; of course, as I mentioned, LeMay flew the planes out because he had to do that anyway, it was just a matter of scheduling. But we got on the phone and talked about it, and he said it wasn't worth it to him to fight that, we just better not have any more races; so that's the way they ended."

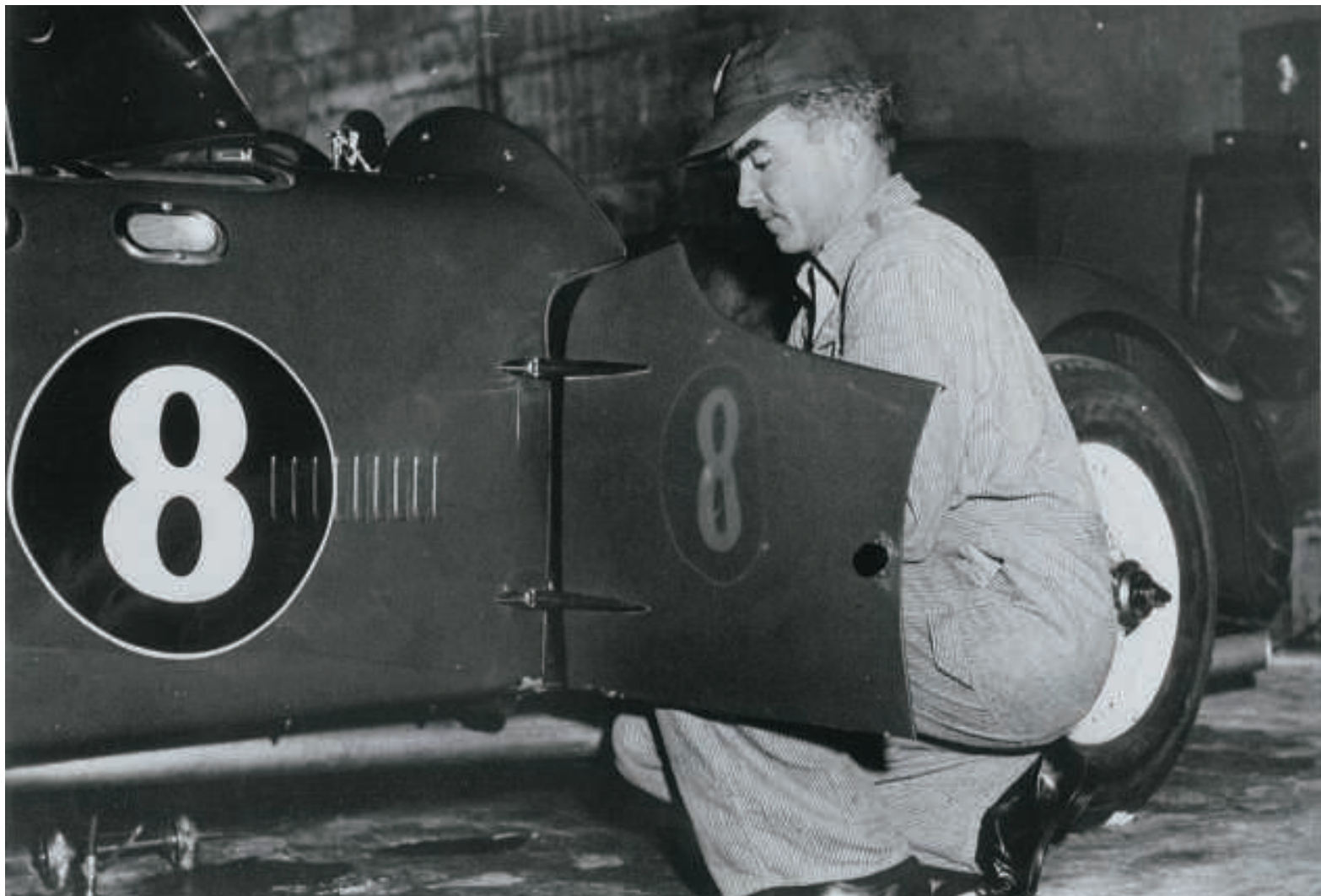
Now free of the National Presidency of the SCCA, Fred set his sights on racing again, but in a new arena — Grand Prix. To appreciate his decision we must look at what was taking place in Grand Prix after the War.

From 1946 until the establishment of the Drivers' Championship in 1950, an assortment of pre-war cars dueled it out while a few Marques strove to find and keep places in front-row competition. The results were nearly constant; when *Alfa Corse* showed up with their constantly upgraded 158 *Alfettas*, they won. In the second tier, Maserati's supercharged 4CLT battled it out with the new team from Ferrari and their supercharged 125. When the fearsome fuel consumption of their 1.5 liter supercharged engines robbed these latter two of victory, the less thirsty 4.5 liter Talbots from Tony Lago would come through from behind.

With the establishment of the Drivers' Championship in 1950, though, Alfa went after GP dominance with a vengeance; the new 159's straight-eight blown 1.5 liter engine produced 425hp @ 10,500rpm on the dyno, from a mere 91 cubic inches. This superb car promptly captured the first two Drivers' Championships, with Farina driving in 1950 and Fangio up in 1951. Their only real compe-

tition was to come from Modena; in 1950 Ferrari took a page from Tony Lago's book and struck at the *Alfetta's* Achilles heel — its ghastly 1.6-mile-per-gallon fuel consumption. A normally aspirated engine would be crucially less gluttonous, Ferrari surmised, as Lampredi designed and Maranello built V-12 long-blocks of progressively larger displacement, ending with a thunderous 4.5 liters.

The '51 season was closely contested indeed between Portello and Modena. Other teams watched slack-jawed as they realized that no one among them had a hope of competing with these cars in 1952. When Alfa, in its full glory, announced retirement from racing to focus on touring-car development, promoters sighed with relief and quickly agreed to transfer the Drivers Championship to Formula Two. Many more constructors would step



forward to fill out a field with normally aspirated 2-liter cars; Ferrari had a new in-line four-cylinder called the 500, Maserati was ready with its six-cylinder A6GCM, as was Osca with a twin-cam six. From Britain, always the breeding ground of the near-instant car, came the Alta, Connaught, Cooper-Bristol, ERA & HWM; battered but determined Germany contributed the AFM; and the French blue was worn by the cars of Amedée Gordini.

Amedée Gordini had made his reputation as *Le Sorcier* — Sorcerer — by building nimble lightweight formula and sports cars around highly tuned engines produced by Simca under license from FIAT. After breaking with Simca over their refusal to build a V-12, Gordini went out on his own and built a twin-cam six presented in his customarily featherweight chassis. Gordini's tricky engines were producing 175hp from 1498cc, an output that some of his competition could only dream of. The Drivers' Championship came to him in 1952; Fred Wacker followed a year later.

"The way I met Gordini was through John Baus, who was Briggs Cunningham's contact man (in Europe). He was an American but he lived in Paris. He sort of arranged things for Cunningham's Le Mans forays. John Baus introduced me to Mr. Gordini (when) we went out to his little shop on Avenue Victor. We worked out a deal where, if I would help finance one of his cars, he would paint it....American colors, which were blue and white, and he would enter it in all the races that I could make the following year, and supply all that. If there was any entrance money or prize money, why, we would split it; that's as nearly as I can remember how it all worked.

I remember, when I was learning how to drive the Gordini, we went out to Montlhéry, which was an old race course outside of Paris, to try it out. We didn't have seat belts or driving suits — some of the drivers didn't even wear helmets. I had a little helmet, but it didn't amount to much. I would race in a pair of slacks and a T-shirt. The shift on the Gordini, it was a

5-speed, was between your knees, and I remember I was tearing down the straightaway at Montlhéry, and hit a bump, and I almost came out of the car. The only thing that held me in was the steering wheel, because I was holding on to it. Nobody had ever told me that the way you stayed in the car was you had to put your left foot up against the firewall and push against the back of the seat, except when you're clutching, and that's the way you stayed in the car. So I learned that the hard way.

(The Gordini) was all right. I took Wally Mitchell over with me the first year and we went up to Zandvoort for the Grand Prix of Holland, that was a little short circuit on the ocean, a lot of sand, you know, and we went out there and I tried to qualify the car and, gee, it just didn't handle well at all. I was having a terrible time, doing the best I could, but I didn't feel comfortable in any way.

We got up to my room afterwards and I said, 'Wally, I came over here to race, but I don't like the way this thing feels at all, I'm really scared.'

Wally said, 'Well, I don't blame you, that car isn't right, and there's no way you're going to keep that thing on the road with that suspension the way it is.' So, knowing what he'd done with the Allard, I said, 'Well, maybe we can get Mr. Gordini to change it.'

We were just lying up there in the room wondering what to do, and I didn't want to enter the race the next day with that car. I really didn't, because I was scared and I'd never been scared before, but I was then. So John, I think his name was John Lucas, but anyway one of Gordini's men — Gordini wasn't there, but John came up to our room and said that Harry Schell, who also drove for Gordini, had blown his engine and that Harry got more starting money than I did; therefore, would I be willing to let Harry Schell take the engine out of my car, and I would sit the race out the next day.

I said to Mr. Lucas, 'Well, I don't know, I came over here to race, we'll have to think about that. Let me think a little while and you can come back.'

(When Lucas had left) I said, 'you know Wally, why don't we get in touch with Mr. Gordini, and if he will agree to make the changes that you want on my car, I will agree to let Harry Schell have my engine tomorrow.' Wally said, sure, that's a good idea. So Lucas came back up and we got Mr. Gordini on the telephone in Paris and he agreed to everything.

When we got back to Paris, the first thing that Wally changed was the steering geometry, same as on the Allard. He took the Ackerman out of it. Of course, once we'd done that, Jean Behra and Maurice Trintignant, who also drove on Gordinis, they wanted to try my car out. I said sure, go ahead, try it out. They felt better with it right away, so they wanted [the same modifications] done to their cars. Well, then we tried to get Mr. Gordini to make the other changes, to move the engine back and put the suspension under the rubber donuts, the same way we had with the Allard; and he wouldn't agree to any of that. Why? Because it was a not-invented-here syndrome. He just wouldn't do it. He didn't live up to his end of the bargain. So that's the way it was. To Gordini it wasn't a bad little car, but it wasn't competitive — I mean with the other(s).

Gordini was a nice man, but I think he just didn't want advice from outsiders. I suppose he didn't want to be shown up, I don't know, or maybe he didn't think the ideas were any good, who knows. I can't speak for him, but the car was kind of fun to drive because — I don't know if you can see it in the pictures, but the radiator went down quite steeply in front, and you just saw those front wheels up there and really felt you were doing some motoring in those little things."

Fred's first race for Gordini was the Grand Prix des Frontières, at Chimay in Belgium, on June 24th 1953.

"Chimay was not a full-blown championship Grand Prix race, but the cars were all there. We (had) some little garage someplace or other. This was before the days of the big trucks and all the equipment — there was none of that. You would drive the car from wherever your garage was to the racetrack,

and it was fun, because you'd drive through town on the way to the race track and everybody would be out cheering before the race started. You know, racing was big in Europe, it was like baseball in America. Everybody was into it. If you were a race car driver, man, you were really somebody. That was fun.

You'd race (at Chimay) through the town and it was just like Watkins Glen. People would be hanging over your front wheels as you went around a turn through the town. Unbelievable! Yeah, I had myself down for third, is that correct?"

Fred's teammate Maurice Trintignant won in Chimay, and Fred placed third, behind a 500 Ferrari and ahead of Hans Stuck in an AFM.

The following week found him at the Nürburgring for the Eifelrennen.

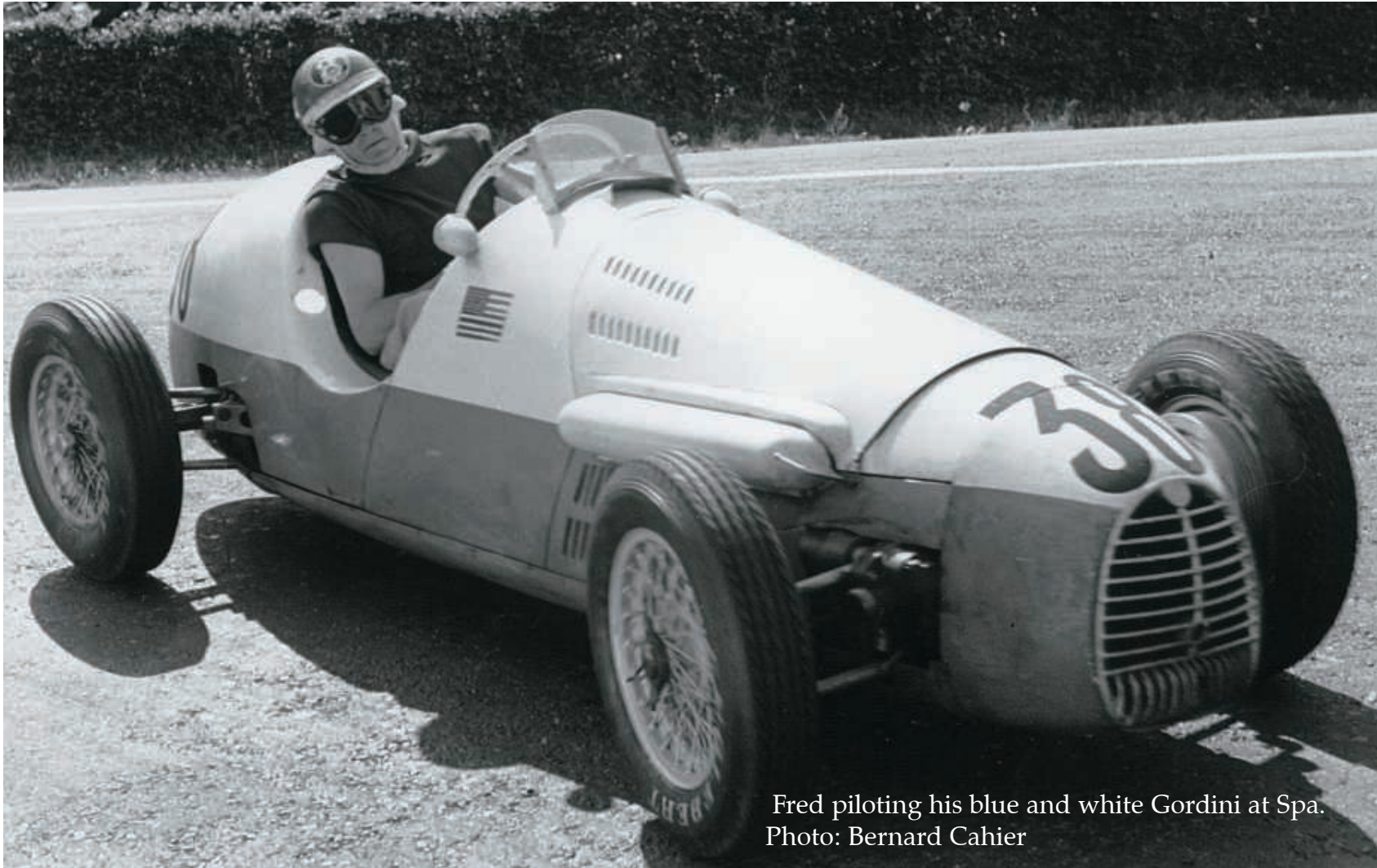
"Oh, that course was wonderful. I just couldn't get over that circuit. That was wonderful. In fact, Sherwood Johnson went up there with me. I had a little Hillman Minx, a dumb little car, very small, that I drove around in because Gordini would get the cars to the races, but you had to get yourself there. Sherwood came up with me, he was a very colorful guy, an American driver, and I remember we were allowed to drive around the circuit beforehand. You had to memorize the circuit and, I mean, I had never driven there before. So we'd go around and around, I think it was fourteen miles around, and some of the turns would be right after a rise so you had to know whether the turn was to the right or the left, otherwise you'd be positioned wrong and you'd be in all kinds of trouble. So I would be driving and would memorize these things and call them off to Sherwood Johnson until we got that circuit down in the head as well as we could.

I remember the race started, it rained part of the time, and I went off one turn, slid off the side of the track onto some wet grass and down into a little valley. I figured oh, my golly, I can't do this, I've got to keep this engine going and get back up there, and somehow — I was spinning wheels and throwing

mud all over the place — I got back up onto the track and continued. I had to dice with Prince Bira in that race. He had some kind of a red car, I don't know whether it was a Maserati or what it was, but I remember him passing me, and then I got by him again and was able to stay ahead of him, and that seemed pretty good to me. I think I had a ninth overall in that race,

which was pretty good. And I love that circuit. Oh, boy, that was so interesting. That was just a wonderful circuit to drive. Fabulous! That was a high point."

The Eifelrennen was won by Baron Emmanuel de Graffenreid driving a Maserati A6GCM. The HWM-Alta team drivers, Paul Frère and Peter Collins, took second



Fred piloting his blue and white Gordini at Spa.
Photo: Bernard Cahier

and third. A private Ferrari 500 and an EMW came next, with Stirling Moss coming across in sixth.

"Then after the Nürburgring we went to Le Mans, and I was driving an Osca, which was made by the Maserati brothers. I didn't own the car; it was owned by a man in Chicago by the name of Reese Makins. And the fellow who was sort of running things for Reese around Chicago was an Italian man by the name of Edgardo Fronteras. Mr. Fronteras did not consider that Reese Makins was a very good driver, so he was trying to talk Reese out of driving the car and letting Phil Hill drive in his place. Being that I was driving for Reese and sort of a — I wasn't a paid hand, but I was just driving for somebody else — I kept my mouth shut and I didn't say anything; you know, I just was along for the ride.

I was the number one driver and Phil Hill was the number two driver, and it was his first race in Europe. We knew that we couldn't win overall, because the Osca wasn't fast enough to do that, so the only thing we could do would be to try to win on index; and the people who built the car, and all, had told us exactly what RPMs we should run and how we should run it — you know, everything a certain way. Well, being the number one driver I started the race — you had to run across and jump in the car, turn the key and start off. I got a beautiful start [and] I was one of four cars to get away, if you ever saw a movie of that you'd see that. I drove my four hours according to the formula, what I was supposed to do. Well, Phil got in for the second four hours, and we spent four hours trying to slow him down. He was going to win the race, you know, overall, and we weren't successful at doing that. I got back in the car after his four hours and there wasn't any car left — the clutch was gone, the engine was rough, the brakes didn't work. I struggled around three laps and the whole thing just stopped, so that was the end of that. But Phil, a wonderful man, he didn't make that mistake again. He went on, as you know, to become the first American to win the overall championship in Grand Prix, which was no small accomplishment.

The next race that I went into was the Grand Prix of Belgium, Grand Prix de Belgique, at Spa. That turned out pretty well. That was a world championship event and we pulled in ninth and didn't have anything untoward happen. I know I wasn't feeling well that race, I had the flu or something, so I was awfully tired, but we got through the race okay and it was a good circuit, very interesting and very fast, and I enjoyed that race a great deal."

Ascari won that day at Spa in his Ferrari 500, Villoresi came across second in a similar car, and Fangio shared his Maserati A6GCM with Johnny Claes to take third.

"Yeah, and those drivers were interesting. Ascari was a nice fellow. You know, when you have a car that's non-competitive, you're faced with the situation; you're going into a turn and you want to adopt a certain line, and you know that Ascari or Fangio was breathing down your neck in a faster car behind you, what do you do? Do you drive your line, or slow down and pull over and let him by? Well, I believed I had as much right to race there as they did, so I always held my line. It was very interesting — the reaction — because Fangio and Stirling Moss would stay behind you till you got through the turn and then they'd pass you and they'd wave, but Gonzalez would shake his fist at you. Unbelievable! It was just like a grade 'B' movie, you know, what are you doing in my way! But Fangio was a great gentleman on the track and so was Stirling Moss, so was Michael Hawthorn, but all the drivers had different personalities.

I became friendly with Stirling Moss, not so much with Fangio because we spoke different languages. On the Gordini team I'd say the friendliest was Maurice Trintignant. He was a gentleman. Behra was a little difficult at times. He would give you advice as to what to do, but I tried his advice once and it wasn't right, so I didn't do that any more. Harry Schell was very colorful. He was a nice chap, but we didn't socialize too much — at least I didn't, we stuck to ourselves. I would socialize with Sherwood Johnson, who was with me, and also my

friend Bernard Cahier, who was just starting out in the photojournalism business covering Grand Prix races in those days. He used to travel to the races with me sometimes in my little car; that started a life-long friendship.

Gordini had a chief mechanic, a Frenchman by the name of Robert, who I think was a brandy salesman in his spare time and he was a wonderful guy, (and) as I remember, a car never broke down — I mean, we never abandoned the race because the engine blew up, or anything like that. No, those cars weren't perfect, but they weren't all that bad. I mean the engines were pretty good and they didn't weigh much, but they were not really competitive with the (front line teams), you have to say that. I could not get on one of the top teams because I was unknown; they wanted people who would spend a whole season, and having these two businesses to run, I couldn't devote full time. I could only go a few weeks, and try to squeeze in the most races that I could, and then go home again... And it caused me trouble. One good example was the Grand Prix of Switzerland.

I was due to race in the Grand Prix at Berne and I was having some labor problems at home. I had to fly home just for a few days to try to get things straightened out and I flew back to Paris; it took much longer to fly over there in those days. You had to stop in Shannon and here and there to get gas, it wasn't a little short flight like it is now. John Baus met me in Paris and we drove down to Berne in his Cadillac. When we got there, there was about an hour of qualifying time left for the race the next day. I didn't even have time to get into any driving clothes. I just got into the car in whatever I had on on the plane and put my helmet on and started going around the circuit. Every time I'd go by the pits, they would give me the kick-it sign — 'you're not going fast enough' — so I kept trying to increase the speed. I remember going by the pits — this was the last thing I remember, for reasons that I'll tell you in a minute — and they all had their thumbs up and beckoned me to come in.

Well, on the lap to get back around, I went off a turn and I was thrown out of the car; the car rolled over, and I had a basal skull fracture, broken ribs, friction burns, and a concussion. I don't remember anything about it to this day. The only memory I have was that they were trying to move me off the stretcher onto an operating table in a hospital someplace. I started screaming bloody murder because I guess it hurt and I was starting to regain consciousness. I was in the hospital there in Berne for, oh, a couple of weeks recovering. The nice thing about it was it was a beautiful hospital, I had a beautiful room looking over mountains and streams and a valley, and it was really a pleasant place.

The (other) nice thing about it was, the drivers came up to see me, including Stirling Moss and Fangio. I couldn't speak Spanish and Fangio couldn't speak English, and neither of us spoke French very well, but he had a little something on his lapel that had a checkered flag on it. He saw me admiring it in the hospital bed, or just looking at it, and he took it off and he gave it to me. It's got his name inscribed on the back, just a little thing that he might have won, and I have that to this day. It's funny, it's probably worth about two bucks, but it's a treasured possession from the great man who came to see me in the hospital; you know, that was really nice."

After recovering from his Swiss accident Fred returned home and took the Allard to victory at the autumn race at Wilmot Hills in Wisconsin. Fred's 1954 racing season began at Andrews Air Force Base, where he took the Allard to a 2nd in class. This was followed by another victory, and the last outing, for the faithful red Allard; four AFB races followed which found Fred piloting an Arnolt-Bristol.

"The Arnolt, that was a disaster car. That was not a good machine. I didn't enjoy driving that. I drove it a couple of times because there was nothing else to do, but that was not much of a car."

To follow the Drivers' Championship, Gordini pre-

pared a new 2.5 liter engine which met the 1954 Formula One specs, a twin-cam six that displaced 2473cc and produced 220hp. Operating, as he perennially did, with scant funding, he wedged the engine into a Formula Two chassis slightly modified from the year before. The result was a car of only 580kg, the lightest in Formula 1.

Gordini would need good luck as well, since the front-line teams had anticipated and prepared for the new 2.5 liter formula, which was to embrace some of history's most memorable Grand Prix cars. From Maserati came the 250F; Ferrari was ready with his in-line four, the 625; Lancia was waiting in the wings with Jano's D-50; and distant thunder was heard from Stuttgart in rumors — all too true — of Mercedes' unforgiving but unbreakable W-196. Fred would compete in only four races that year, facing Mercedes' silver predator at all but one.

The season started where it had so ignominiously ended, at Berne.

"Apparently the car broke down — right after I said they never broke down, I guess it did break down that once — but I don't remember what the cause was. Then following that was one of the high points of my very short career; the Grand Prix of Italy at Monza. Boy, all the big (teams) were there ... And I came out sixth overall, and that's like me coming out sixth at Indianapolis. I mean, it isn't easy to do. I would have come out fifth except for my friend Maurice Trintignant (who was driving a Ferrari); with only about two laps left to go, he and I ended up pretty close together, and the pits signaled me to lay back because I had a lap on him. Well, that wasn't the case. I let him by because of the pit signal, and he got fifth and I got sixth."

The placings for the Italian GP are worth noting; Fangio came in first with a streamlined W-196, Hawthorn was second driving a 625 Ferrari, Maglioli and Gonzalez shared third in a 625 Ferrari, and Hans Herrmann, in a streamlined W-196, sprinted home ahead of Maurice's

third Ferrari and Fred's Gordini.

The next race Fred attended was at the non-Championship race at Cadours in France. This race was held in two 34.75 mile (15 lap) heats and a 74.5 mile (30 lap) final; Fred took second in the second heat and fourth in the final.

"That was a little race out in the country. Those were fun."

The Berlin Grand Prix at Avus, Fred's last race of the 1954 season, was also his last Grand Prix competition. The race was somewhat of a showcase for Mercedes' return to racing, and a benefit for hometown favorite Karl Kling, whom Fangio allowed to win by less than a second. Fred took sixth here in a field of the Mercedes team, the Gordini team, and some privately run red cars to keep things colorful.

"The Gordinis were pretty fast, that's the funny part. We raced at the Avusring in Berlin and, as I remember, that circuit was maybe six miles [a lap] and all it was was two straightaways. You could see the cars coming in the other direction, almost right next to you. There was a U-turn at one end which was flat, which you had to get way down into second gear to get around, but at the other end it widened out into a big banked turn. A car couldn't stay up there without going fast enough. The thing that would get you was that there would be so much downforce on the car going around that bank that the springs would bottom out sometimes, but the car wouldn't stay up there by itself unless it was going fast. In that race, I don't remember what the average speed was, but we reached top speeds of over 180 mph."

Fred's responsibilities running his family's two companies were taking more and more time. Thus he participated in only three more races, all in the States. In July of '55 in Milwaukee, he drove a Porsche that didn't go the distance. In the September road race at Watkins Glen Fred drove the Cunningham C-4RK then owned by Charles Moran to a second in class and eighth overall. This was

the car that Briggs had decided to turn over to Duane Carter at Le Mans in '52.

In 1956 Fred ran his last competition in a 105-mile event at Waterboro, South Carolina, driving another Cunningham '52 Le Mans car, this time a C-4R. In a field of much more contemporary cars Fred finished first in class and sixth overall.

We'll leave this visit with Fred Wacker at the wheel of this C-4R, some years later....

"I think it was at Laguna Seca where (Cunningham) had all the drivers that had ever driven for him out there, and I drove a C-4R and I had my son with me. We were allowed to take passengers. It was supposed to be an exhibition race and, as I remember very well, it fell just short of being a real race."
[laughter]

By SSC 1997







Cunningham C2-R
(1951)



