RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Tommy Milton
The Story of "St. Paul's Speed King"
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Tommy Milton and his Duesenberg racing across Daytona Beach on the way to a new world speed record in 1920. This portrayal is by Peter Helck, a very successful magazine and advertising artist. Helck's realistic and highly detailed works often captured the drama and speed of racing. Sometimes called the "Dean of American Motoring Artists," Helck (1893–1988) produced hundreds of sketches, drawings, and paintings during his career as well as writing two illustrated histories of racing. Painting courtesy of Automobile Quarterly.

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RAMSEY COUNTY
History

Volume 42, Number 4 Winter 2008

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Every locale has its cultural heroes—and this issue showcases two men who filled that role for many in Ramsey County before they took to the national stage. Tommy Milton first wowed crowds driving his Duesenberg at the Twin Cities Speedway, and twice won the Indianapolis 500, in 1921 and 1923. His cool demeanor and consummate skill impressed fans, and his career reflected the excitement surrounding the new, automobile-focused culture. W.W. Erwin was a folk hero of another sort to labor sympathizers. A prominent St. Paul attorney and impassioned orator, he served as lead defense counsel in the trial of labor leader Eugene Debs for his role in the 1894 Pullman railroad strike. He also successfully defended participants in the strike against the Pittsburgh Carnegie steel works. We have been lucky to have two members of our editorial board, Steve Trimble and David Riehle, compile the stories of these fascinating characters. A grace note is the review of Georgia Ray's book on Grace Flandrau, a noted St. Paul author whose keen observations also extended her influence beyond local boundaries. As winter turns to spring, enjoy a good read with us.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Tommy Milton

The Story of "St. Paul's Speed King"

Steven C. Trimble

As vividly as the day I quit, I can feel now the wind roaring in my face, the thrill of speed, the ecstasy of triumph, the joy in the power of the roaring engine, ready at my slightest sign, the hurtling, screeching, rocketing flight that set the blood through my body in a fierce, tumultuous glory of accomplishment.[1]

—Tommy Milton

Twenty-three of the most powerful automobiles in the world waited for the checkered flag to drop. 130,000 people were in the stands and lined the track. It was Memorial Day, 1921, and the crowd was there for the tenth running of the Indianapolis 500. The cars lined up at the speedway and nearly everyone thought the popular favorite Ralph De Palma would end up in first place. He did set a blistering pace for the first 250 miles of the race, but a mechanical problem forced him to drop out. He would not be one of the eight finishers. Young Tommy Milton, a driver out of St. Paul, was now in the lead. He had started out twentieth, near the back but slowly worked his way up. While he was experienced, few expected him to win, since he did not have one of the most powerful cars. But there he was, in his Frontenac, a lap ahead of Roscoe Sarles. Milton stretched his lead to three laps, but he was having mechanical problems. He refused to come in to the pit until he needed tires and gas and even then did not want to take the time to look at his engine, heading back out on the track with only seven of his eight cylinders working properly.

Another driver later wrote about how Milton had been pushing his car, expecting it was ready to break down, and then deciding he needed to use psychology on his competition, which explained why other drivers sometimes referred to Milton as the "Old Fox." Near the finish of the race and

> opening with all the speed that was left in his car, he crowded ahead. . . . It seemed as if he had been holding back up to that moment and suddenly had decided to step out and win the race. He looked over and . . . detected the sudden collapse of Roscoe's mental attitude. And that was the signal for him to press his advantage. He did just that. Looking back over his shoulder as he continued to forge to the front, he registered carefree confidence with his wide grin. Then, as the two cars sped down the straightaway, Milton reached back and patted the gasoline tank with his right hand. That won the race. . . . Tommy's strategy had clicked, and when Milton slowed down, Sarles checked his speed too. He stayed behind the Frontenac, believing he had no chance to pass it.[2]

Most of the champions of this "Golden Era of Sports" in the 1920s whose exploits have been chronicled in various ways over the years were flamboyant crowd pleasers. Benjamin Rader, who has studied popular culture in that decade, has even coined the expression "compensatory sports heroes" to describe these men and argued that their growing appeal was a symptom of the "passing of the traditional dream of success . . . and feeling of individual powerlessness" at that time. Athletes and movie stars of the 1920s, he said, showed there was still a road to success without yielding to the demands of "the system."[3] Although automobile racing in the decade or so after World War I certainly had its flamboyant figures who fit this mold, Milton was not one of them. Even though he would become one of the most important racers of all time, he was always considered as modest in demeanor as he was serious about his driving. Tommy Milton was not a showboating champion. Instead his career as a race car driver demonstrates that he was a man who won by knowing his car and using his head rather than his foot.

Milton is well known among those who follow automobile racing, but unfortunately is an almost forgotten figure in his hometown of St. Paul. His story is compelling, but its telling is complicated by conflicting points of view and quite a few factual errors that have been passed on from writer to writer. By adding some previously unused local information and the recollections of Milton family members to the existing body of historical knowledge, this profile of Tommy Milton will answer some questions, clear up a few misperceptions, and shed new light on the man known as "St. Paul's Speed King."

Euphemia and her children in a mid-1890s photograph. Homer is on a chair on the left with Dorothea standing on the right and Florence sitting in front. An infant Tommy is in his mother's lap. Photo courtesy of Ben Gowen, Tommy Milton's nephew.

The entry to the Milton Dairy retail store on the northwest corner of Ninth (today's West Seventh) and Wabasha streets on the edge of downtown St. Paul. Photo courtesy of Ben Gowen.

Tommy's Early Years

Tommy Willard Milton was born into a prosperous family on November 14, 1893, the youngest of four children. His father had emigrated from England as a teenager in the early 1880s and settled in St. Paul, where he purchased a cow and began selling milk door to door. Eventually Tommy's father owned a downtown retail dairy operation that supposedly sold the most butter of any company in Minnesota and won several prizes for its high quality. When he was twenty-two, Thomas Milton married seventeen-year-old Euphemia Galloway. Born in Red Wing, she went with her family to Missouri for a time and then moved to St. Paul. Euphemia was a creative person whose strong personality equaled that of her spouse. Today she holds the distinction of being the original carver of butter sculptures at the Minnesota State Fair—sponsored by the Milton Dairy—and during her lifetime she was considered to be one of the best horse showers in the Twin Cities.

The Milton family moved around a bit, living at three different addresses on the outskirts of downtown St. Paul in the 1880s and '90s. Their addresses included 771 Wabasha Street, 60 West Central Avenue, just off Central Park, and 631 Cedar Street. Next to the Milton home on Cedar, there was a large vacant lot that was filled with high grass and shrubs—an ideal spot for hide and seek, except for all the burrs that caught on the children's clothes. That's where young Tommy had an accident that would affect him the rest of his life. My brother, Tommy, "followed us in," sister Florence once recalled. "He was almost too little to play, but he'd go along." He accidentally scratched his eye on "some of those wild bushes." The doctor who treated Tommy's injury ordered cold compacts applied to his eye and two nurses were hired to come to the house.

The Milton home at 217 Dayton Avenue as it appeared around 1920. Tommy lived there from the time he was seven until he married. The house was razed in the 1950s. Photo courtesy of Ben Gowen.

When the doctor came back to check how Tommy was doing, everything seemed to be all right, "but the thing we didn't know," Florence reported, was "the infection had crossed over to the other eye . . . it didn't seem serious but it was affecting it. As he grew older, it got so he couldn't see anything but light and dark. . . . We never talked about it when he went on the racing track." Based on Florence's account of Tommy's injury, he was not born blind in one eye, as all previous the biographers have assumed.[4]

Around the turn of the century the Milton family moved into a large house at 217 Dayton Avenue. The 1900 census lists the home's occupants as Thomas, age 37; Euphemia, seven years younger; and four children—Dorothea, fourteen; Florence, nine; Robert H. (who was known as Homer), eight; and Thomas W., a six year old. There was also a boarder named Hattie Marsh, who may have been a domestic worker. The household was not a particularly serene one. According to Florence, "there was constant fighting. Both my parents were very strong people, both aggressive. My father would lose his temper and throw things. Whenever I had a boy interested in me, I was afraid to bring him to the house because of what might happen. . . . I was really afraid of my father."[5]

Another family member added to this portrait, "the Miltons were great on being very powerful people," she said. "And it wasn't just the father. Euphemia was very independent," one of the first women in the city to drive an automobile and was "a powerful, powerful woman. Imagine. She showed horses in the State Fair." She learned to drive "and on Sunday afternoons the women of the city went out to Como Park, way out there where there was nothing and raced cars all day."

His Fascination with Automobiles

Tommy became fascinated with automobiles at an early age. One of his nieces said "the family used to go out for picnics . . . way out in the country from St. Paul." Tommy would usually ride in the car with his aunt and uncle. "On the way home he would ask to drive and his uncle would put him on his lap and let him steer. . . . By the time he was eight or

nine he had learned how to drive a car." She told another story about Milton and a downtown automobile dealer. "To sell a car you had to teach someone how to drive because nobody knew how. . . . So you had to not only convince them that they could learn to drive but teach them." The dealer hired Tommy to demonstrate the cars and help people learn how to drive. The dealer's "psychology was if they saw a nine-year-old boy teaching them to drive, they'd think it was a piece of cake."

Tommy also worked for a wealthy woman from White Bear Lake who bought a car "but instead of learning to drive, she paid Tommy to be her chauffeur. . . . He would catch the streetcar in downtown St. Paul and ride out to White Bear. Then he would drive the lady around all afternoon to her social events or shopping or whatever else she was doing and then he would take the streetcar back home."[6]

When Tommy was around eleven, his father bought the boys an Orient Buckboard. With no chassis to speak of, it was the cheapest car available, powered by a small one-cylinder engine. It was driven with a bar and the speed topped out at thirty miles an hour. They started out by driving it the few blocks from home to Neill School, but the principal soon asked them not to bring the car because it was disruptive. At recess everybody came out and wanted a ride. Milton once recalled that "it did very well, indeed, until one summer evening I went driving with my father" and "on the way back the car wouldn't go up the Dayton Avenue hill. His father got out to push, but put his hand on the engine, which was almost red hot. And the experience scared him so that we sold the car the next day."[7]

As time went on, the Miltons watched the building of the new Cathedral of St. Paul, across the street from their home, after its cornerstone was laid in 1907. By the time the 1910 census was taken, Dorothea had married and moved away, leaving Thomas and Euphemia with a group of teenagers—Florence then nineteen; Homer, a year younger; and sixteen-year-old Tommy. Sixty-seven-year-old George Galloway, Euphemia's father, was now staying with them. There were also two live-in servants. Emily Steichen, a German-American was the cook and Julia Quam, whose parents were from Sweden, was listed as a "domestic." That same year the Milton household was part of a unique event. A Minneapolis newspaper was sponsoring an automobile trip to South Dakota and back which Homer and Tommy made. The paper regularly reported on their journey by printing accounts it received from a wireless sending and receiving radio that Homer and Tommy rigged up in the car in which they rode. At various stopping points, one of them would raise a portable aluminum aerial and use the transmitter to send signals back to "an immense aerial . . . erected at 217 Dayton."[8]

An undated photo of Tommy Milton in his teens. Photo courtesy of Ben Gowen.

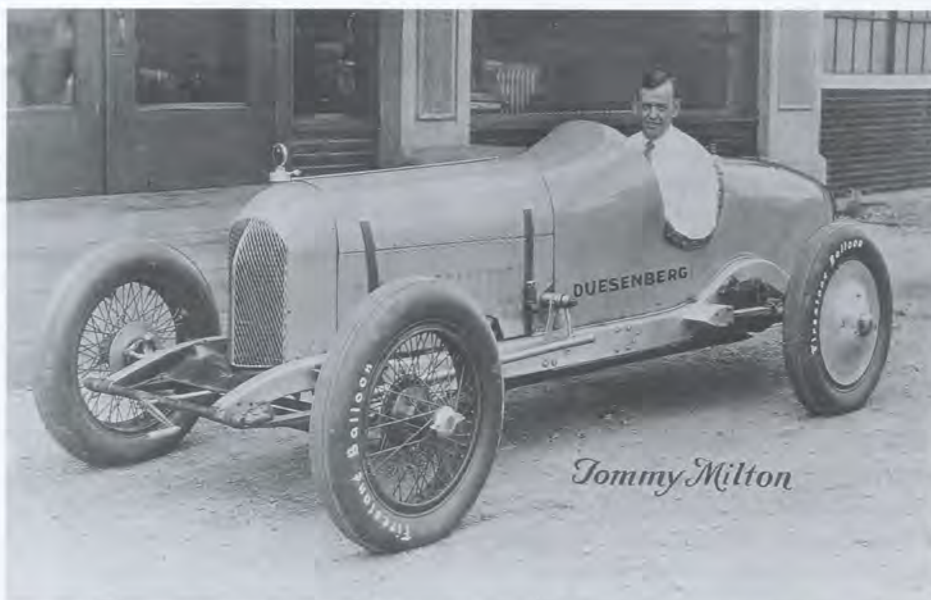
Tommy Milton first raced with a motorcycle. "He had his own machine and it wasn't much of a task to get into some races. . . . Almost as soon as he could straddle the motorcycle and reach the pedals he began races, first at the State Fair here and other fairs nearby and later branching out more," the *Pioneer Press* wrote. But he had his eye on cars. One time "a string of automobile racing cars were brought to the Minnesota State Fair and Tommy persuaded the manager to let him try a couple of fast laps around the track. . . . The first time around he had the drivers and spectators gasping for breath and the second time around, he went into the fence. The damages to the car and fair property amounted to a considerable sum, but Tommy escaped uninjured." After that he went back to motorcycles for a time.[9]

Tommy attended Central High School for a time and then transferred to Mechanic Arts. He was an average student taking a mixture of academic and trade courses, including mechanical drawing and the basics of tool and die. Even with little peripheral vision, he was able to be a starter on the football team. Tommy was five-foot-eleven and weighed 185 pounds, so he was put on the line, something he didn't enjoy. Instead he joined the hockey team because it allowed for more individual initiative and became one of the best players in the city.

Tommy and Homer proudly pose on their 1911 seven-horsepower Indian motorcycles. The signs over the tires read "St. Paul to Springfield, Mass.," so the newspaper photo was probably taken around the time of their 1912 cross-country trip. Photo courtesy of Ben Gowen.

A Mechanic Arts publication commented that while he attended, "Tommy's only athletic ambitions were in the closed rink, but he showed an inclination for racing."[10] Tommy saw racing as an ideal outlet for a person who wanted to achieve on his own. He and Homer constantly tinkered with combustion engines and became skilled mechanics without any formal training. Their school paper related a classic story of the time in 1909 when the brothers decided to attend races at the newly opened Indianapolis Speedway. Different sources have varying accounts of this road trip, but all agree the boys traveled a long distance over very poor roads. The school journalist saw it this way: "One outstanding incident of Tommie's life that the old grads will never forget is the time he borrowed his Dad's car—with permission, and set out for Indianapolis, with three other school-mates to watch an auto race." A city newspaper article added some amusing information, telling how the vehicle was so crowded that they somehow attached a yellow rear seat from a touring car to their own red automobile to squeeze everyone into the vehicle.[11]

Their father was not happy about the boy's fascination with racing, but he did buy them powerful Indian motorcycles and in 1910 let them take a round trip of over 3,000 miles to Springfield, Massachusetts, to visit the factory where their bikes were manufactured. Two years later Tommy and Homer made another lengthy motorcycle trip back east. On their way through Milwaukee on this trip, they stayed over to watch the running of the Vanderbilt Cup, a 300-mile race through the city's streets.[12] On one of their treks, the boys convinced a local business to pay them to attach signs to their cycles to promote the durability of the merchant's tires. According to a family member, once they got on the road, "they switched to used tires and used them" until they were near their destination and then they put the other tires back on their bikes. "The trip ad was a scam, but it paid for their trip." Watching the various races convinced Tommy that he wanted to make racing his life work. He drove the family Mercer whenever he could and often practiced a stunt that was popular in the thrill shows—spinning. It worked best on wet or icy pavement, so whenever there was rain, Tommy would take the car out. Also "there was virtually no traffic in the winter time . . . so he could practice skidding" on downtown streets.[13]



Tommy Milton in a Duesenberg, probably taken in front of the company headquarters at 2654 University Avenue in St. Paul near today's Highway 280. Although this photo is dated 1925, Milton had terminated his relations with the company four years earlier. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Around 1911 Euphemia moved out of the house. It's unclear what caused this separation, but the Miltons' marriage had often been a stormy one. This time the breach was more serious and she took an apartment in Minneapolis. A little later her husband's health went steadily downward and she returned to take care of him. He died in late October 1913. Shortly thereafter, Tommy dropped out of school before graduating. He may have been prompted to do this because he needed to take over at the dairy rather than just his desire to race, as some writers have supposed. Tommy and Homer merged their dairy with another small local operation, but they no longer had full control of the business. They were, however, able to keep partial ownership in a newly incorporated company called Milton Stores, Inc.[14]

Milton Begins Racing

There has been some question about when Tommy began his automobile racing career. Quite a few writers say he began racing automobiles in 1916. Milton himself and other local sources confirm, however, that he began this part of his career three years earlier. His name appeared in the newspapers in early September 1913 in an article on the "Harvest Auto Racing Classic" on the one-mile dirt track at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds. A few days before the event, the *St. Paul Daily News* printed a list of thirteen scheduled drivers, including the well-known "Wild Bill" Endicott and announced the entry of two additional cars, one of them "to be piloted by Tom Milton."[15]

J. Alex Sloan, a former St. Paul sportswriter who was sometimes called "king of the dirt track promoters" directed this event. Tommy did not take first place in any of the runs, but he made a good enough showing to catch the eye of Sloan, who persuaded Milton to join his touring group on its cross-country treks. The newcomer had to bring his own car along to use. It was aging but had been well-maintained. "When I started racing back in 1913," Milton said two decades later, "I had a Mercer which was tuned up so that it had a maximum speed of about seventy-two miles an hour." That was not the fastest car available, but it was in the range of what was needed to win races.[16]

"It was 1913 and I was just a kid who wanted to race," he recounted later, and

> I happened to have my own Mercer. Sloan brought his show to St. Paul. He offered me a job with his fakeroo outfit. He would pay me fifty dollars a week. As soon as we left and hit the open road, he cut my salary. . . . That was his style. There was one eight-day period when we traveled three thousand miles and raced in five cities. Thirty-five dollars a week. No prize money."[17]

In September one of Sloan's choreographed shows was back at the State Fair Grounds in front of a crowd estimated at 50,000. The last race was the climax of the day and featured well-known driver Louis Disbrow, Sloan's anointed champion. At first Disbrow laid back letting the other drivers, including Tommy, get ahead. And then, as always happened, he made his move. As the *Daily News* described it, "with the Mercer, driven by T. Milton of St. Paul nearly around the track," Disbrow's task of overtaking and passing "eight cars in five miles appeared almost impossible." By "driving in dust and smoke," however, Disbrow eventually overtook them all to win the race.[18]

In Sloan's contrived races, Tommy was never supposed to win. While being part of the traveling troupe gave Tommy a great deal of practical experience, it was also a frustrating time. He stuck it out for over two years but finally decided to win a race. Sloan was furious after a second unscripted win and issued a final warning. Subsequently, at an event at the Minnesota Fair Grounds attended by his sister, Milton was running far behind and some fans started booing him. "Those bums in the stands got to me," he remembered, so he picked up the pace and took first place. Milton was fired but later said "it was well worth it."[19]

On His Own

Tommy Milton was now on his own. In September 1915 he was again racing at the Minnesota State Fair Grounds in front crowd estimated at 40,000. No longer shackled by the need to let a headliner prevail, he showed his true abilities. In the last event of the day he was in position to win, but in the twenty-fifth mile of the race the car in front of him blew two tires and there was a crash. "The two were piled together, after tearing out five posts and filling the air with splintered lumber," the *St. Paul Daily News* reported. The newspaper account went on to explain that "Milton's car came to a rest upon its side . . . however, he was quickly out and aided by spectators raised the Marmon machine" off the other driver and his riding mechanic. These men were cut up and bruised from the crash and Milton had suffered a gash under his right eye.[20]

Tommy with Jimmy Murphy, on the left, who was making one of his last appearances as a riding mechanic. They were taking part in the over-the-road race, which Milton won, at Elgin, Illinois, in 1919, when this photo was taken. Photo courtesy of Automobile Quarterly.

This was only the first of Tommy's many smashups. Automobiles were still in the development stage at the time and racing them was dangerous. Safety equipment was minimal by today's standards. There were constant accidents and although this episode was relatively minor, there were numerous fatalities. The racing track was also a testing ground. Technological changes were constantly being made to the cars, constantly pushing the speed they could deliver upward. One of Tommy's strengths was his understanding of how the machines worked and what he had to do to get the most out of them. He also was proficient in driving at high speed on the various racing surfaces around the country. Initially auto racing events were held at fair grounds on dirt tracks that had originally been designed for horse racing. There were also road races on temporary courses of several miles in length that utilized existing highways. Soon cities began building permanent facilities for automobile racing. The two-and-a-quarter-mile Twin Cities Speedway, which opened in 1915, was made of concrete. Perhaps the most interesting of all the racing surfaces were the board tracks. Built of lumber and highly banked like bicycle velodromes, they were popular with the public because they were designed to give spectators a good view of the racers and there was no bothersome dust from the track surface.[21]

In all of the newly developing motor sports, the quality of the equipment—the cars—was as important as the person doing the driving. Racing was an expensive activity and it made good sense to be part of a team sponsored by automobile manufacturers. By 1916 Milton had joined up with the Duesenberg Automobile and Motor Company, one of the most respected auto manufacturers that competed in racing. At the time their headquarters was on University Avenue in the Twin Cities, so it is likely they had frequently seen Tommy race. In the first race he entered after he allied with the Dusenbergs, Tommy had to drive his battered Mercer because the car they were supposed to provide was not yet finished. Within a year, he had a new vehicle and

had worked his way up to lead driver. When Milton was with the Duesenbergs, in 1916 he met Jimmy Murphy, a motorcycle racer who became a riding mechanic, or "mechanician," with the team. Tommy became a friend and mentor to the young man, helping him fulfill his ambition to become a driver.

Reporting Milton's new affiliation, the St. Paul papers called him "the St. Paul driver" who had "allied himself with the Duesenbergs." Whenever the Minneapolis papers wrote about Tommy, they usually referred to him as the "Twin Cities racer." Whatever he was called, the newspapers kept track of the local boy, including one of his early races for his new team. Under the headline "Tom Milton 'Hit 'er Up,'" the *Pioneer Press* reported that the local favorite "easily qualified for the Independence Day event at the new Twin Cities Speedway by circling the oval at 93 miles an hour." About 7,000 people attended the race the next day. According to the newspaper, "on the twenty fifth lap Tom Milton, St. Paul driver, piloting a Duesenberg, moved up and challenged De Palma and [Eddie] Rickenbacker. The latter two were four laps ahead of the St. Paul man, who ended the race in fourth place."[22]

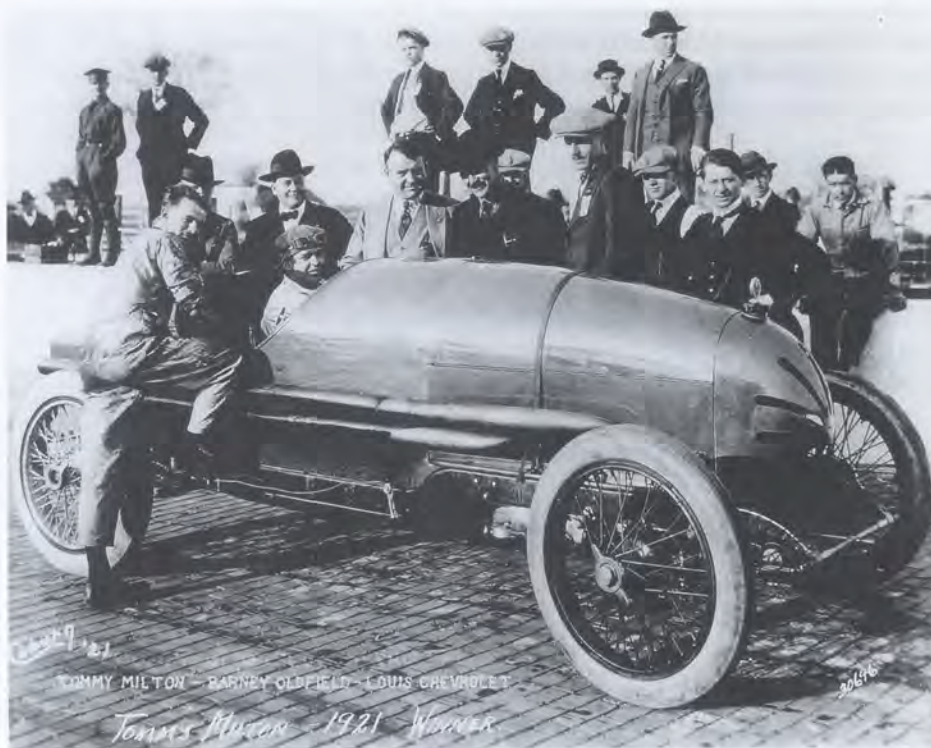
When the United States entered World War I, Milton was unable to serve because of impaired vision. His Minnesota draft registration form listed him living at 217 Dayton and his occupation as an automobile racer who was employed by the Duesenberg Motor Company. The exemption line stated "claims blind in right eye." Tommy was tall and stout, according to his registration document, with brown hair and blue eyes. Racing activity was cut back during the duration of the overseas conflict, so he mostly worked as a liaison for Duesenberg, handling their contracts and overseeing production of the various engines they built as part of the war effort.

There were, however, some contests at that time. On July 15, 1917, there was a well-advertised attempt to get the races going again at the financially troubled Twin City Motor Speedway. To counter any possible criticism of auto racing during wartime, ten per cent of the gate was given to the American Red Cross. Milton was in the featured 100-mile race, but he did not have a good day and finished in eighth place.[23] During that time, however, Tommy did have his first major victory. In September 1917, he won the twenty-five and the 100-mile races on the concrete oval in Providence, Rhode Island, setting speed records in both. Tommy's performance in the Providence races earned him $5,100, an amount that should be multiplied by at least sixteen to express it in today's dollars. Milton's successes were duly reported in the St. Paul newspapers, who said the victories "again proved that he is one of the stars of the speedway tracks."[24]

A Banner Year

1919 was a banner year for Milton, who was developing into one of the dominant figures of American auto racing. In May, with Jimmy Murphy as his mechanician, he won on the boards at Uniontown, Pennsylvania. The *New York Times* referred to him as a "veteran driver" when it reported his victory in the 300-mile road race at Elgin, Illinois, in August 1919. Tommy finished twenty-five miles ahead of his next competitor and took home $4,000 for his efforts. Because Jimmy Murphy was slated to become one of the Dusenberg team's drivers, this was the last time Murphy competed as Tommy's mechanic.[25] Milton also made his debut in 1919 at the prestigious Indianapolis 500, starting out in the thirty-first position. He was doing fairly well in the race until his car threw a rod after fifty laps. Still, things seemed to be going his way. But then on Labor Day 1919, in a race at Uniontown, Milton was seriously injured when his fuel line broke and his vehicle caught fire, filling the cockpit with smoke. Using the skill he had gained as a teenager on the wet streets of St. Paul, he went into a half spin and slid backwards, so that the flames went away from his upper body as the car came to a stop. While visiting St. Paul years later, Milton recalled how as a teenager he would "speed along and enjoy spinning his car suddenly to go backwards." Referring to the Uniontown crash, he said "it saved my life one time . . . My engine caught fire. The flames were all around me, but I instinctively spun the car so the flames were going away from me."[26]

St. Paul papers mentioned the crash, but their accounts did not register a great deal



Tommy Milton in the Frontenac he drove when he won the 1921 Indianapolis 500. He is surrounded by Barney Oldfield, Louis Chevrolet and other onlookers. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

of alarm. The *Pioneer Press* claimed that Tommy was "painfully but not critically burned" when his Duesenberg caught fire. He "quickly brought the machine to a stop and escaped with only superficial burns about the legs." The *Daily News* said that "the plucky driver brought the car to a stop and escaped with burns that were found to be superficial. He is not in a critical condition."[27] The reality was much grimmer. One of his legs was burned so badly that doctors thought they might have to amputate it. Milton had other ideas. "I did not want to live with one leg because I did not see how I could drive with one leg," he later said. "Racing was my life." He spent two months in the hospital. Tommy's injuries were the start of a life of frequent pain about which few were ever aware.[28]

Jimmy Murphy came to visit at the hospital and sadly said that he had been demoted to mechanic after a couple of crashes and wanted to quit. There are several versions of the dialogue, but according to one writer, the exchange went something like this: "To hell with that, kid. Stick it out until spring," he said, and he would tell Fred Duesenberg that "if he doesn't put you at the wheel, I'll quit!" As captain of the team, Tommy did have some clout and Murphy got another try at driving.[29] During the two-month recuperation in the hospital, Milton began planning a new car that could set the land speed record on the beach at Daytona. He designed a streamlined automobile that would have two eight-cylinder engines mounted side by side. The Duesenbergs agreed to support the project as long as Tommy would also put in significant funds. He agreed and since he was still recovering from the crash, he sent Murphy down to work on the car.

When Milton got out of the hospital, it seemed there was plenty of time to go to Cuba for a race before the new car was ready. A handful of other leading racers were going, including Ralph De Palma and his nephew, Peter De Paola, who later wrote about the adventure. "It was on this Havana trip that I learned to appreciate Tommy Milton. He had a brilliant mind, and a quick tongue and temper as well as physical and moral courage." According to Peter, he was one of the few who could ridicule his uncle and get away with it:

> [Tommy] would tell Uncle that he was just a "showman" and Uncle would fizz over like a bottle of champagne and come back at Tommy by calling him "cheese champion." Tommy's folks owned a large dairy and creamery in St. Paul. But with it all they really admired each other's driving ability. It was also on this trip that Joe Boyer and Milton became such fast friends. Joe regarded racing lightly but was really a splendid driver. Milton on the other hand was always serious about it. This friendship . . . lasted until Joe was killed at Altoona several years later.[30]

The Falling Out with Jimmy Murphy

While Milton developed a new friendship in Cuba, he may have lost an older one upon his return to Florida in late April 1920. While he was gone, Murphy was convinced to take the car out on a test run. He broke the old record and even though it was unofficial, word got out to the press. "When I got back to Key West and picked up the morning paper, it said in screaming headlines that Murphy had smashed DePalma's record," Milton remembered. He was furious since it was in the car "which I had paid for, had actually built and was paying him to be there preparing. . . . I don't think that the world ever had looked so black before or since." On another occasion Milton added he "was sick with disappointment and mad enough to kill" upon arriving at Daytona. Milton blamed Fred Duesenberg for initiating the problems and charged Murphy with stupidity and personal disloyalty. Jimmy tried futilely to explain that he had been working under orders, but he was strongly rebuffed.

"It had been the experience of everybody on the beach that you got slower with each run because with each run, you pump more sand into the machinery. All I could do was send Murphy on his way and try to make the car go faster." The next morning he took the car out but fell short of the new unofficial record. Things got worse when a newspaper suggested that Murphy was the better driver. Milton decided to stay at Daytona and tinkered with the car, hoping to make improvements. Both engines were taken apart and thoroughly cleaned inside a makeshift enclosure of rented tarps. "When we got them back together," Tommy said, "we didn't have to wait too long for a suitable beach" and he was able to get the rig up to slightly over 156 miles per hour, a new record.[31] The *Daytona Daily News* was filled with articles on the "New Speed King" the day after the record run. Even though he had earlier been furious, Milton was professional enough to give "thanks to a few of the many persons who have so ably assisted me in the record-breaking. First of all . . . comes Fred Duesenberg. . . . Then comes my good pal, 'Little Jimmy' Murphy, a great driver and loyal friend. Jimmy gave up his own work and came down to help me out in preparing the car. He has done wonders and deserves great credit." Milton had planned to make several more tries to set records at different distances, but there had been a major problem. The *Daytona Morning Journal* reported that on one run the Duesenberg

TOMMY MILTON
World's Greatest Driver
Breaks Track Record
FOR 1 MILE, 5 MILES, 10 MILES AND 15 MILES
USING
Puritan Motor Oil
—and—
Energy True Gasoline

Energy
True Gasoline
Pure Oil Co. Emphatically Independent
True Gasoline Puritan Pure Pennsylvania Motor Oils

This newspaper ad from the St. Paul Daily News *in 1921 shows how sports figures, such at Tommy Milton, were typically used to endorse products. Advertisement courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

caught fire and crossed the finish line "with smoke pouring from under the hood of the giant racer." Then "for a few minutes frantic efforts were made to raise the hood and turn sand and extinguishers on the blaze."[32] This version of what happened contradicts the oft-repeated story that Milton calmly drove into the sea to put out the flames pouring from his engine. In a later interview Milton confirmed the use of sand, but he did say he had considered veering into the surf.[33] Somehow the press went with the run-into-the-water story, probably because it was much more dramatic. Most later writers have repeated the newspaper version.

Milton made more runs in the new car and set speed records for different distances, but while working on his car, he had a physical mishap. "In this operation," Milton later said, "I got a small piece of steel in my good eye, which didn't help matters. *Motor Age,* a national racing magazine covering the event confirmed the fact that "a painful although not a serious injury to his left eye forced Tommy Milton to forgo the completion of his attempts to corner all world speed events." Local physicians were unable to tell if he was suffering merely from dirt in his eye or whether the trouble was more serious." He was advised to go to Illinois to consult with specialists and later "in Chicago a small piece of steel was drawn from the corner of his left eye."[34]

The falling out that Milton and Murphy had in Daytona has been a classic sports story. Many authors describe it as a feud with one even suggesting that the two never spoke to each other again. That seems improbable, given their frequent appearances at the same races and the necessity that they travel together for long hours on the train going to various events. A Jimmy Murphy biographer even suggests that the idea of the feud was manufactured by a drama-hungry media.[35] Even if their mutual coolness was not a classic two-way feud, the events on the beach marked a turning point for two of the best drivers in America. Murphy seems to have tried to reach out and reconcile, even sending Tommy a postcard from a race in France. But Milton likely carried a grudge and the relationship between the two was never as close as it had been.

An undated photo of Milton in a jaunty hat shows him characteristically squinting with his bad right eye. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

In May, Milton qualified for the 1920 Indianapolis 500. Although planning to leave the Duesenbergs, he fulfilled his contract with them for the race. He drove well and nosed out fellow team member Murphy for a strong third place finish. There were many cars faster than his, "but he plugged along through the event, keeping an even gait and except for his monotonous regularity would have been unnoticed," the *St. Paul Daily News* later wrote. "Toward the end of the 500 mile jaunt, when other cars were breaking down under the grueling grind, Milton was still going at the same speed and he rushed under the wire for third money."[36]

Milton was becoming the center of national attention. As *Motor Life* put it, "four victories in 1919 and as many again in 1920, gave him more triumphs than any other driver during these two years." He was "easily the most consistent winner and the most dangerous challenger on the circuit." The article pointed out Tommy's ability to do well on any surface, calling him "the master of the Florida sands, the dirt track, the road racing course and the speedways." He had only "to conquer the Indianapolis bricks to complete a record unequalled in accomplishment and versatility."[37]

A June 1920 Mechanic Arts student magazine published an article about Milton. According to this article, he seems at time to have been planning a short career. "Years ago, when I took up automobile racing," he said, "I made up my mind that I would either become the world's speed king or die in the attempt. Last year I won the speedway and road racing championship and now I am ready to give them both barrels for another season and then retire. I will go for still faster records."[38] On June 29, 1920, Tommy Milton married Elinor Giantvalley, a close friend of his sister Florence. The ceremony was performed on a Tuesday evening at St. Paul's Unity Unitarian Church. A few days later the *Daily News* society page carried a short notice that twenty guests celebrated with the newlyweds at a dinner dance, which appropriately was held at the Automobile Club in White Bear Lake.[39]

The 1921 Indianapolis 500

After his contract expired, Milton left the Duesenberg team and in early 1921 teamed up with Cliff Durant, whom the

St. Paul Dispatch described as "a millionaire race enthusiast," who was a driver himself. The 1921 Indianapolis 500 was approaching, and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* recounted that the local celebrity's "racing life has been one thrill after another," and that much of his success came from the fact that "Tommy is a thorough mechanic as well as a great driver and he always knows just how far to push his mount."[40] He showed that talent on Memorial Day at the 1921 Indianapolis 500. Still a perfectionist at heart, Milton decided the night before the race that the Frontenac car he was to race needed a set of new bearings. He stayed up with his mechanics until two in the morning doing much of the work himself. It seemed like things were ready as he began trial runs. Even then, some problems remained. As Milton described it:

> During practice . . . my Frontenac developed a stubborn lubrication problem that could not be corrected prior to the start of the race. Fortunately . . . I discovered that I could run at close to racing speed—without burning out any bearings—by not exceeding an engine speed of 4,000 revolutions per minute. That was fast enough to qualify, although I had little hope of finishing better than eight or ninth. But the leaders, one by one went to the sidelines with a variety of troubles. Only nine were running at the finish and I was first to get the checkered flag.[41]

After the race, according to the *St. Paul Daily News,* "he immediately asked for his wife and kissed her as she rushed to his arms. . . . The old luck is with us," he told the crowd. It was a big payday for Milton and would launch him into the top tier of drivers. The winner took home $20,000 plus $6,200 lap-prize money, which was given to the racer who was ahead each time around the track, and nearly $10,000 in accessory prizes given by companies such as tire and battery makers.[42]

After this victory, *Motor Life* published a lengthy article that was effusive in its praise of Milton, saying that he drove at Indianapolis "as he always drives—with consummate skill, repressed daring and admirable restraint. He drove as Dempsey fights, unmindful of the tense thousands who are watching his every move." He was efficient and not at all dramatic, they continued:

> There is nothing theatrical about Tommy Milton. He is calm and precise and admirably modest. Unless he turns showman and resorts to the showman's tactics, he will never be the popular idol that [Barney] Oldfield and De Palma are, but he will continue to win races and rich purses. Baseball, the prize ring and all other sports have men like him, stars that are truly great but not widely known because they lack totally or in art the dramatic instinct and color that have made the names Ty Cobb and Jim Corbett household words.

Tommy won the 1921 Indianapolis race, the magazine stated, "because he knew his car, just how strong and fast it was, and carefully used that knowledge. He never extended it beyond the safe limits of its endurance and speed. . . . Milton wins because he uses his head when the rest of them are using their foot."[43]

Following this triumph, the St. Paul newspapers talked to several people who had connections with Milton including his mother, now Mrs. Benjamin Knauft, and his brother Homer. One paper said "he was always a careful driver, not sensational, not dramatic, but with what is known among race drivers as a sensitive touch and delicately tuned car." In the same article auto racing promoter Alec Sloan was quoted as saying that "Milton is without any doubt the greatest. There are a lot of drivers who can handle a steering wheel, step on the gas and IF everything holds up all right, win a race sometimes. But for real driving, Milton has them all beaten. He knows an engine thoroughly, has a perfect ear and knows how his machine is at all times."[44]

Friends and family eagerly awaited Milton's return home. It was a fairly uneventful arrival for the "modest champ," as the *Daily News* dubbed him. "This quiet, unassuming man, true to his nature, quietly slipped into St. Paul," and it was some time before the paper knew he had arrived. The reporter suggested he was "possibly the greatest champion St. Paul has ever had . . . yet, you would never know it to see him or talk to him. . . . What a relief such a young man is after listening to the loud bragging of the average champion." For some reason the article added that "Milton is also a classy handball performer and gives the game considerable credit for his speedway victories."[45]

Milton sits in a race car at an unidentified location, about 1924. The photo may have been shot in Minnesota, but Pacific & Atlantic Photos, which is credited with taking the picture, was located in New York. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The *Pioneer Press* asked Milton to explain his recent victory. "I planned to set my own pace for the first 250 miles and

then to start after De Palma, if he hadn't cracked by that time," he responded. "I figured that if he could keep it up for 250 miles he might go the distance and the only thing left to do was to try to catch him. I was just about to cut loose when he dropped out and that gave me the race." The hometown paper emphasized how winning the Indianapolis 500 was a great source of pride for the city. The *St. Paul Dispatch* declared Milton "the world's foremost automobile racer" who "helps advertise St. Paul all over the world." At a time when sports were becoming an increasingly important part of American culture, Milton was "one of the most prominent of those who have been making St. Paul famous as the home of champions in various branches of sports."[46] The *Daily News* went further and insisted that "Milton is possibly the greatest advertising asset from an athletic stand point that St. Paul has ever had."[47]

Two of Milton's race cars were subsequently put on display in the Twin Cities. The Pence Motor Company in Minneapolis showcased the Duesenberg that Tommy had driven when he set the world speed record and the Hudson-Essex Agency in St. Paul exhibited the Frontenac that he drove when he won the 1921 race.[48] There was a big reception after he returned with his wife from Indianapolis. An "auto caravan" was arranged to meet him twenty miles outside St. Paul and escort them back into the city. A parade and a dinner dance at the St. Paul Automobile Club House in White Bear Lake were also on the schedule of celebratory events.[49] The "Twin City Speed Star was coming to town," said the *Minneapolis Star.* He was going to be welcomed by "the biggest reception seen in the northwest since the days of torchlight processions." Milton arrived for these events, however, walking with a cane. He had injured his foot while playing handball.[50]

While in town, Tommy participated in a fund-raising event the Elks were having for the Boy Scouts at the State Fair Grounds on June 26, 1921. As often was the case, it was promoted by Tommy's old employer, Alex Sloan. One of the features of the day was when Minnesota Governor Jacob A.O. Preus acted as Tommy's riding mechanic for one lap. In this role, the governor experienced "some speed, terrible wind, lots of dust, awful roar," he told a reporter, but it was "thoroughly enjoyable." The races were run, and Tommy did very well, seemingly setting some speed records for the fair. However, there was a problem and a "rather tempestuous time" getting the facts straight. Alex Sloan disputed the fact that Milton had broken the one-mile record of one of his drivers, but was eventually proven wrong. Tommy's "work on Saturday," the *Pioneer Press* concluded, "clinched his claim to be regarded as the world's greatest driver on any kind of track."[51]

Tommy Moves to California

Shortly after their marriage, Tommy and Elinor had moved to California. Several other well-known racers lived in the area, possibly because of the Beverly Hills Speedway, which was considered to be the top board track in the country. They lived in what a Minneapolis paper called a "palatial home" at 514 Canon Drive in Beverly Hills, an "exclusive section" of the city. The *Southwest Blue Book* said they were members of the Los Angeles Country Club and listed their telephone number. Their household soon grew when, on August 17, 1922, ten-and-a-half pound Tommy Jr. was born in a Los Angeles hospital.[52]

Milton's California years included some involvement with the movie industry. *The Road Demon* was a 1921 release that catered to the growing interest in automobile racing. It starred cowboy hero Tom Mix and included small parts for Milton, Ralph De Palma, and others. The plot of *Racing Hearts,* a 1923 Paramount picture, revolved around rival car manufacturers, dirty dealings, and romance. It featured a climax that included a big road chase. The film had actual race footage along with cameo roles for Milton, Murphy, and De Palma. Interestingly, the leading male role was played by Richard Dix, an actor from St. Paul. Later, during World War II, Milton was asked to be a consultant on a film about Eddie Rickenbacker, the former race car driver and World War I flying ace. According to his niece, Tommy suggested that the filmmakers do "as little as possible with the racing scenes since the old war hero was really was not a very good driver."[53]

Milton's eyesight was deteriorating further during this period. "A fact little

Tommy and his family outside of their home in Beverly Hills, California. The photo is undated but was probably taken around 1924. Photo courtesy of Ben Gowen.

Tommy Milton—in the white car in the front row—waits for the 1923 Indianapolis 500 race to begin. The man with the checkered starter's flag on the suspended catwalk is World War I aviation hero and race car driver Eddie Rickenbacker. Photo courtesy of the Indianapolis Star.

known is that Tommy is almost blind in one eye," the *Pioneer Press* revealed in the spring of 1922. "For years he has had trouble with his right eye and for the last two years it has been of no use to him. This is the cause of his peculiar squint noticed in all photographs of him."[54] One of the often repeated stories about Milton's damaged vision was the explanation of how he managed to hide this injury from racing authorities by memorizing the eye charts. Unfortunately, it is hard to pin down specifics. One writer says Milton's disability was found out fairly early in his career, but this version gives no information on where or when this occurred. One Milton nephew recently shared this bit of family lore: Tommy "passed eye tests for racing covering the blind eye, reading the chart, then covering the good eye and repeating what he had just read. Late in his career an official discovered his secret and banned him from a race about to be run. In protest, all the other drivers refused to race unless Tom was allowed."[55]

The local papers liked to keep in touch with their hometown favorite's exploits. The *Daily News* interviewed his mother's second husband, who had just come back from a visit to Beverly Hills in August 1922. Mr. Knauft said Tommy had been having trouble with engines, but now "exudes confidence with his new car." According to this relative, the "machine has reached a high stage of perfection that will carry him through to many victories."[56] That same year the *Pioneer Press* ventured that even though Milton was still piling up wins, he was no longer a celebrity with racing fans. "Tommy is not the popular idol with racing fans" like Oldfield and De Palma are, it stated. "This is because he is not spectacular. . . . He drives methodically," the article said, "and never resorts to theatrical tactics. In the inner shrine of racing fans, though, where standards are most exacting, Tommy is most honored and admired."[57]

Those racing fans were surely looking forward to the 1922 Indianapolis 500. But if they wanted a repeat performance, they were disappointed. "I didn't even finish that race," Milton wrote later. "I had a new car built for me in California, hoping to repeat my Indianapolis victory. But after less than 100 miles, the gasoline tank shook loose. We managed to keep it in place by strapping it to the car, but I never had a chance after that."[58]

The 1923 Indianapolis 500

Tommy eagerly awaited the 1923 Indianapolis race. So did the 138,000 spectators who gathered for the event. He was driving a white H.C.S. Special, built by Harry Miller, and sponsored by Harry C. Stutz. This race was the one time Milton tried to become something of a showman and it was almost a disaster. In the days leading up to the 500, some of his supporters had convinced Milton that a champion should dress like one. Consequently Tommy arrived at the track the day of the race sporting all-white attire, having replaced his old comfortable shoes with a shiny new pair and his old gloves with tight white kidskin ones. He even had the usual black friction tape on the steering wheel replaced with white surgical tape. Riding for the first time without a mechanic, he had gained the pole position in the time trials that had been held earlier. After the race began, the lead changed ten times in the first one hundred miles with Jimmy Murphy always in close pursuit. Murphy had had to drop back when his tires showed signs of wear, but the race was not yet over.

By this point in the race, Milton's new white shoes were painfully pinching his feet and sweat caused his gloves to shrink, which had raised blisters on his hands so he he had to pull them off. Then the steering wheel tape started slipping because of the heat and pressure and its adhesive began to ooze from under the tape, adhering to his blisters and pulling off bits of skin. Milton made a pit stop. While he had his hands bandaged at the field hospital and he retrieved his old shoes, a team member drove Milton's car for over forty laps. Milton returned to the course with forty-nine laps to go. Despite the changes in attire, Tommy still finished the race far in front, recording an average speed of almost ninety-one miles an hour.[59] After the race, he took two extra laps and received a "thrilling ovation." Then "Mrs. Milton broke through the crowd and, throwing her arms around her husband, kissed him as he removed his greasy and dust-stained goggles." Milton received $20,000, $9,650 in lap prizes plus an estimated $5,000 awards from firms that sold accessories, such as spark plugs, gas, and tires. The victory was even more heralded

because Tommy was the first person ever to win two of the Indianapolis classics.[60]

Tommy and Elinor drove back to St. Paul with their young son for a ten-day stay with the Giantvalleys before leaving for a Fourth of July race in Kansas City. The hometown newspapers gave the returning champion plenty of space. As was often the case, Milton shared the glory. "I was greatly assisted by my team mate Howdy Wilcox who drove my car for me for forty-eight laps while I was having my blistered hands treated at the hospital," he said. "I was tired at the finish, but victory assuaged the severe blisters on my hands and the natural fatigue of such a long grind. My motor never missed a 'shot.'" The engine may have been helped by what was possibly the first use of the gasoline additive "ethyl" that "jacked up the compression ratio of my racing car" and gave it "greater power and performance."[61]

The *Daily News* interviewed the champion. "There is a great thrill when you win one 500-mile automobile race in Indianapolis," he said. "There is a far greater one when you win a second and realize that no other man has done it." He gave credit to the great power of his H.C.S. Miller, feeling it was the "fastest of its size in the world," so he optimistically expected "but little difficulty in winning coming races."[62]

The Death of Jimmy Murphy

He was also confident that he could win again at Indianapolis, but there would never be a third victory. Instead, in 1924, Jimmy Murphy took the crown. The two former friends continued to meet each other at races throughout the country and always engaged in their fierce competition. Milton was more the master of dirt tracks where his ability to accelerate out of a turn was unrivaled, while Murphy was renowned as "King of the Boards." The two competitors went at it for the last time on September 15, 1924, on a dirt track in Syracuse, New York. On that day, Milton went into the fence on the eighty-fifth lap and was out of the race. According to the *St. Paul Daily News,* he "leaped from his car without suffering any injury." Murphy was not as lucky. He later crashed into the wooden guard rail and took out over a hundred feet. A large section of lumber crushed his chest. The *New York Times* reported that "the ambulance reached Murphy a few seconds after the accident and brought him to the city. He was accompanied by Tommy Milton and . . . Murphy's mechanic." Unfortunately, the injuries were fatal.[63]

A reporter from the *Syracuse Herald* showed up and observed Milton:

> A broken spirited white faced man, his head bowed, walked into the County Morgue last night and inquired if the body of Jimmy Murphy had been brought in from the hospital. An attendant led him to where on a stretcher reposed the body of the famous automobile driver. . . . As the face was unveiled, tears coursed down the face of the visitor. . . . Unashamed and despite the throng that had come to . . . see the famous Jimmy Murphy in death, he wept.

The newspaper reported that when Milton was asked if the dead driver had been a friend, he was quoted as saying "almost a brother."[64]

Along with Earl Cooper, another driver, Milton was asked to deal with the aftermath of Murphy's death. Staying in Syracuse, they gathered up Murphy's personal effects and arranged to send his wrecked car to California. The two also sent the following telegram to the racers in California: "Jimmy has received his last checkered flag. He was a wonderful boy, a clean sport and always a contender for first place. He was a real pal and we will all miss him."[65]

The death of his rival had a profound affect on Milton. He would not speak of the event for many years but later expressed regret at their falling out, saying "it was a waste." The depth of his feeling about Murphy's demise might be an indication that he had, indeed, held a lengthy grudge against a man who had been one of his closest friends and now realized that it was too late to mend the rift. He later said that Murphy was "the greatest" and the blame for what happened at Daytona certainly was not his alone. "I know beyond a doubt that Fred persuaded Jimmy to run the car all-out. Undoubtedly the temptation was tremendous to the extent that, momentarily, it overrode his sense of loyalty. . . . The final word on the matter is that after his untimely death at Syracuse, I was privileged to escort his body to Los Angeles." He actually took a later train, accompanying Murphy's personal effects,

Milton in the pace car he drove for one of the Indianapolis 500 races. Beginning in 1936, the Speedway's management honored Milton's contributions to the sport of auto racing with this position. Tommy initiated the custom of giving the automobile used as the pace car to the winner of the race. Photo courtesy of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Tommy Milton, left with hat, in conversation with Indianapolis 500 crewmembers. This photo is from the late 1940s or early 1950s, when Tommy served as chief steward for the race. Photo courtesy of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

and paid for a substantial portion of the funeral expenses.[66]

This was a turning point for Milton. He went on driving, but never reached his earlier levels of performance. In his last two years of active racing, he formed his own three-car team with two other drivers and won three important events in 1924 and 1925. Milton entered two more Indianapolis 500s, but he never challenged for the lead. Some speculate that Milton had lost his edge. He was expected to race in 1926, but with no forewarning he announced his retirement in March and said "there's too much glamour to the sport." Milton discussed his decision with a *Los Angeles Times* reporter:

> It has been a real struggle for me to quit. I feel as if it was only a year or so ago that I was hailed as the "boy wonder," but in reality I am a grizzled veteran. I made up my mind that when I quit there was to be no next race. . . . I'm not superstitious, . . . but I've seen a lot of the boys meet the Grim Reaper in the next race. I really had two ambitions left—to win the Indianapolis race a third time and one of the European classics. Even then I'm not sure I would have been satisfied. It's better to quit cold.[67]

Many people wondered why Milton was stepping out from behind the wheel. At the age of thirty-one, he was still winning races and was one of the most celebrated drivers of the time. One of his nephews offered this insight: "Tommy admitted that he had been cocky when he was young and thought that he was the best racer in the county, so it felt like there was little risk involved." He eventually realized there were other racers who were probably just as good. "Then one by one his friends died in crashes and one day," he said, "'I just lost my nerve'" and that's when Tommy knew it would soon mean the end of his career. "It was the realization that he was vulnerable that led him to be more hesitant to make a risky pass or take chances."[68]

In the 1950s Milton gave a similar explanation in *Popular Mechanics.* "Maybe it is a year or two before you start winning, but you laugh that off some way or other. Then you win a race. . . . You are the best and from there on out nobody else is going to win," he said. "Then some other drivers beat you," and you have to admit they are probably as good as you. Then "those drivers start getting bumped off. It now begins to penetrate your brains that the thing is hazardous and when that happens, you are all washed up as a race driver."[69]

Life After Racing

Milton may also have felt he was financially able to quit. He had saved money and around 1923 had been hired as a consultant to the Packard Company. There were other business opportunities. One time Carl Fisher, who owned the Indianapolis Speedway, tried to convince Milton to buy the famous track from him. Tommy responded to Fisher's proposal by saying that he knew nothing about running such an enterprise, but he was sure that it would "be a headache. . . . I'd rather put what money I've been able to save into your Montauk Beach project."[70] And so he did. A large article in the *Pioneer Press* in March 1926 said Milton would sell lots in the Long Island development in New York and still keep an eye on two of his protégés who drove cars that he owned. Tommy and Elinor stayed for a few weeks in Miami Beach with multimillionaire Fisher. According to the paper, it was this visit that resulted in the "decision to forsake the chugging chariot for real estate." Milton was said to have invested with the promise that his money would be doubled. He was also going to continue his consulting job with Packard.[71]

The decision to retire from racing brought a new style of life for Tommy. No longer would he be constantly on the road and he would be able to spend more time with his family. Shortly after Milton's announcement, the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed Elinor. "This afternoon for the very first time we will sit together in the grandstand at the race," she said. "Not so thrilling for my husband but, yes, nicer for me. Though I never would have admitted it while he was racing."[72] Milton's own response to the situation was not so upbeat. He later told one interviewer, "the hardest job I ever had is being a retired race driver. I want to drive every race I see. And I see every race I can. I can't stay away from the track, even though it's torture to be there."[73] Unexpected circumstances would lead Tommy into one final foray onto the track. After his retirement, he had continued to work on the development of cars. He and a partner built Cliff Durant's Detroit Special, a new car for the 1927 Indianapolis event. When Durant got sick, Tommy took the wheel and brought it in eighth after a number of unscheduled pit stops. Following his "re-retirement" Milton was involved with a number of projects. He worked with Packard as an engineering consultant, including design

An undated photo, probably from the 1950s, showing of group of old-timers lined up outside the Indianapolis Motor Speedway office. Left to right: Peter De Paola, Harry Hartz, Ralph De Palma, Tommy Milton, and Earl Cooper. Photo courtesy of the Automobile Quarterly.

and testing of the company's cars and headed up their public relations efforts.

Milton's name occasionally turned up in the newspapers. "Champion's Son Likes Speed" was the headline of an article and photo in a July 1929 issue of the *Los Angeles Times*. According to the paper, the Milton family spent a lot of time in the summer at Montauk Beach on Long Island. He had business interests in California, Florida, Detroit, and New York and always rode in a Packard roadster. His son, Tommy Jr., especially liked it when his dad took the car onto the Motor Parkway and then "brings his foot down on the accelerator and holds it."[74]

While the newspaper painted a pretty picture of the Milton family, the reality may have been something else. They had moved away from California. The 1930 census documents that Tommy, Elinor, and seven-year-old Tommy Jr. were now living in Miami Beach, Florida. The census identified Milton's occupation as an automotive engineer. Miami Beach seems to have been the last place the family was together because not too much later Tommy and Elinor divorced. Tommy Jr. and his mother returned to the Twin Cities while Tommy Sr. began living in the Detroit area.

In the 1930s Milton began having serious health problems. Over the years he had continued to suffer pain related to the injuries he had sustained in the Uniontown crash. A Minneapolis newspaper reported in November 1933 that he had entered a Detroit hospital. Doctors said the old hot oil burns did not heal well and had left blood clots in his circulatory system. A second journal reported that Milton was, in fact, "fighting for his life," suffering from "a recurrence of an infection from a burn sustained in a race accident years ago." This newspaper concluded by saying that "his condition is none too good." Milton did recover, but the frequent pain never went away.[75]

Milton stayed in touch with folks in St. Paul, once sending a big brown Packard to his sister Florence, whose family used it for many years. Now and then he returned to the Twin Cities, traveling to Minnesota in 1932 to attend an automobile show where he was interviewed about whether he felt the speed of American cars was too high. Later he made an appearance at the Joy Brothers Packard dealership in St. Paul to talk about the new line of cars he had helped design.[76] When in town, Milton would always visit relatives and as one of them offered, "he had a winning smile that would light up the room." He loved to sit with them, joking and telling stories. In the late 1930s, on a short visit, Tommy told several guests that he could lift the baby grand piano off the floor:

> After the bets were made, he crawled under the piano, located the center of gravity of the piano, crouched under it and then raised his back using his hands and knees. Indeed, all of the legs of the piano were off the floor, if only an inch or two. I saw this and was as amazed as anyone! This demonstrated to me that he had a way of looking at a problem differently—outside the box—which probably contributed to his genius."[77]

Milton's life began to hit a few bumps. The Montauk project went bankrupt during the Great Depression. Carl Fisher lost almost all his money and Milton, who had also invested in the venture, may well have suffered losses. Nevertheless he still had his job at Packard. In 1940 Tommy and Homer started the Milton Engineering Company, which became a successful enterprise near Detroit. Tommy also became a sales representative for the Hercules Drop Forge Company. In the late 1930s or early '40s, Tommy married again. This union with a Helen O'Connor apparently lasted less than two years. Despite these problems, Milton stayed connected to the world of racing where he was a respected elder. For a few years, starting in 1936, he drove the pace car that led the start of the Indianapolis 500. Beginning in 1949 he was asked to serve as the chief steward for the 500, which meant he spent every May and some of June at the track. Business involvements and health problems forced him to retire from this position in 1957.

In his later years, Tommy stayed closer to home, but relatives sometimes came to visit. In the 1950s, one of his nephews would travel to Detroit a few times a year. Tommy always picked him up at the train station, driving a late model sports car, and would suggest they stop at the Detroit Athletic Club and have a drink. He seemed to like giving people something to talk about. For example:

> When we got about a block away he would suddenly speed up, zip . . . in front of the building with tires squealing, and came to a sudden stop . . . We would enter the club without looking right or left. . . . He would belly up

to the bar accompanied by me—a priest wearing the collar . . . We would down our drinks slowly, rise and leave without a word to anyone other than the bartender. I would notice that every eye in the bar . . . and all of the staff were watching [us] closely. He would give the parking attendant a ten dollar bill . . . and burn rubber as we left. . . . Once away from the club he would drive carefully and gently.[78]

Tommy Milton died in 1962 in the Detroit suburb of Mount Clemens in a lovely home on the Clinton River that he shared with Homer. He was sixty-eight, had been in failing health and almost constant pain for several years, suffered from cirrhosis of the liver, and had recently survived a heart attack. Perhaps most disturbing to Tommy's state of mind in those last days was having his doctors schedule him for amputation of the leg that had bothered him for years. On Tuesday, July 10, 1962, he took a .22-caliber pistol into the shower and took his own life by shooting two bullets into his chest. Later those who were making final arrangements for Tommy discovered that the meticulous Milton had reserved a funeral home for the following Friday and already planned and paid for the services.[79]

Tommy Milton was a man who had high expectations for himself and during his lifetime, he met most of them. Overcoming blindness in one eye, he became one the best automobile racers of all time. A high school dropout, Milton worked as an engineer for the Packard Company. He was inventive and creative and was usually charming in spite of a quick temper. Milton experienced many triumphs as well as some disappointments in his professional and personal life. As a man who liked storytelling, his own story is one worth remembering. Tommy Milton's ashes were brought back to the Twin Cities. They now rest in the mausoleum at the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Maplewood, along with those of his mother and brother. After a long life on the road, "St. Paul's Speed King" came home for good.

Steve Trimble is a member of the Society's Editorial Board and a frequent contributor to this magazine.

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Tommy Milton in the Frontenac he drove to victory in the 1921 Indianapolis 500. This is #27 in a series of trading cards showing great moments in racing history. It was produced as a marketing promotion in 1994 by the Valvoline division of Ashland, Inc. and is reprinted with their permission. The back of the card explains that Milton was a replacement driver that day, using the car in which Gaston Chevrolet had died. It also recounts how Tommy dealt with a main bearing leak by slipping the clutch on turns, using friction to burn off the dripping oil. See Steve Trimble's article on page 3.

R.C.H.S.
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