

Gerald “Jerry” White Wunderlich (1889-1937)

From Bloomington to Hollywood by way of the Indianapolis 500, Jerry Wunderlich literally lived the fast life as he raced cars to fame and fortune.

Gerald “Jerry” Wunderlich was born in Chicago in 1889. When he was about three years old, he was adopted by Reinhold and Emma Wunderlich of Bloomington. Reinhold Wunderlich, who was originally from Germany, was a doctor on the medical staff of St. Joseph’s Hospital. He and his wife had had one son, Otto, who died when he was seven months old. Several years later they adopted Jerry. Shortly after the adoption, Reinhold died, leaving Emma to raise Jerry alone.

Jerry attended school in Bloomington and then St. John’s Military Academy in Wisconsin. After graduation, he returned to Bloomington and began a career as a car salesman. He was married by 1915 and the young couple continued to live with Jerry’s mother in the family home on Front Street. Later they divorced. Perhaps it was working with cars that led to Jerry’s interest in racing. He began entering amateur races at county fairs. Soon he was racing at a professional level and by 1922, he competed in the Indianapolis 500.

The Indianapolis Motor Speedway opened in 1909. Originally the track was made of tar and crushed stone. After two fatal accidents and the breakup of this primitive asphalt, the track was replaced with paving bricks. This gave rise to the track’s nickname, “The Brickyard.” The first Indy 500 race was held in 1911 with 40 starters. When Jerry competed in 1922, he drove a Duesenberg Straight-Eight Automobile with an eight cylinder engine, single- and double-overhead camshafts, three- and four-valve heads, superchargers and aluminum casting. Jerry finished in 6th place in 5 hours and 38 minutes traveling at an average speed of 88.8 mph. He won \$2,200 which would be \$28,000 in 2012. Today a driver expects to finish in nearly half that time at an average rate of 215 to 223 mph.

Racing at that time was a very dangerous sport. Like today, it could be deadly. Later, in September of 1922, Jerry participated in a race at the Kansas City Speedway when veteran race car driver Roscoe Sarles was burned to death after his car crashed into another car, jumped the rail of the speedway, and fell 25 feet. Four other drivers were injured in that race. Jerry finished the race in fifth place unhurt, but was not so lucky two years later. In Altoona PA Jerry wrecked his car on the 160th lap of a 250 mile race. His injuries were so severe that several newspapers mistakenly reported that he had died of his injuries. Despite the faulty reporting, Jerry survived and continued to race.

It was racing that took Jerry to the West Coast and into movies. The “Roaring Twenties” was the era of the “silver screen” and silent movies. The racing and film industries joined forces to make a new type of thriller movie. Jerry raced in a number of these films but rarely received billing as he was the “action double” for the actor. He took part in many racing scenes which made the films attractive to thousands of viewers. Of course, he was paid well for this dangerous work.

Jerry also supposedly met and married his second wife Agnes Ayres during this time. Agnes Ayres was a Hollywood star who had appeared in many films like “The Sheik” opposite Rudolph Valentino in 1921. Valentino was a hugely popular actor of the silent film era. Ayres and Wunderlich worked on the movie “Racing Hearts” in 1923 which may have led to their romance and marriage. It is unknown when or if they were married or how long, in fact, the marriage lasted. Married or not, they “divorced” and Jerry later returned to Bloomington.

Jerry retired from racing in 1932 and returned to Bloomington. He lived with his mother at her home on Front Street until she passed away in 1934. He then took up residence at the Hotel Tilden-Hall located at 219 W. Washington Street. Just five years short years after he retired, Jerry Wunderlich died on April 9, 1937 at the age of 48. He suffered a stroke, was taken to Brokaw Hospital (now Advocate-Bromenn) and died four days later. He is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his adoptive parents, Reinhold and Emma.

Discussion Question: How was Jerry Wunderlich's life a reflection of the "Roaring Twenties"? What events of the 1920s influenced his life?