

# *Classic racecar rolls through Greenville*

**Ed Picard's pre-war  
midget tore up the  
tracks, and carpets,  
of the East Coast**



**By Ron Scopelliti**

A unique piece of auto racing history rolled through town last month, on its way to a private collection in New Hampshire. For a short time Greenville resident Ed Picard's garage housed a prized possession that had been spending time in Pennsylvania's Eastern Museum of Motor Racing – a 1938 Rudy Adams midget race car.

For those unfamiliar with midget racing, it has long been a starting point for oval-track racers to build their careers upon. Stars like A.J. Foyt, Jeff Gordon, and Tony Stewart achieved their first notoriety racing midgets, and the division continues to prosper on dirt tracks and paved ovals.

Picard is a longtime auto enthusiast, who has done everything from racing a Formula Vee and a Lotus Seven with the Sports Car Club of America, to working as a track official at the Indy 500. He's also a connoisseur of vintage race cars, and this particular example truly is one of a kind, both for its unusual design and its brief but colorful racing history.

The midget was built in 1938 for car owner Rudy Adams, an heir to the Adams chewing gum fortune. It was created by car-bulider Curly Wetteroth as a scaled-down version of the 1938 Indy 500-winning Burd Piston Ring Special, which he also built.

Its drivetrain particularly sets it apart from most midgets, because it uses a highly modified J.A.P. motorcycle engine – an English V-Twin design similar to those used in vintage Indians, and still popular today in Harley Davidsons and their imitators.

Extensive modifications to the alcohol-fueled power plant by Connecticut engine-builder Gus Carlheim not only increased the reliability of the engine, which was known to have a rather

delicate bottom end, but also increased the power. The engine is one of only 26 J.A.P.s that Carlheim built.

Rather than using a chain drive all the way to the rear wheels, which could be both unreliable and dangerous, a short chain feeds the engine's power into a single-speed "in and out" gearbox located just in front of the driver's feet. The drive shaft is fully enclosed inside a torque tube that runs between the driver's legs and under the seat to the rear end housing.

The light weight of the 96 cubic inch engine kept the total weight of the car down to 700 pounds, and a maximum compression ratio of 16.5 to 1 made for a healthy 100 horsepower output.

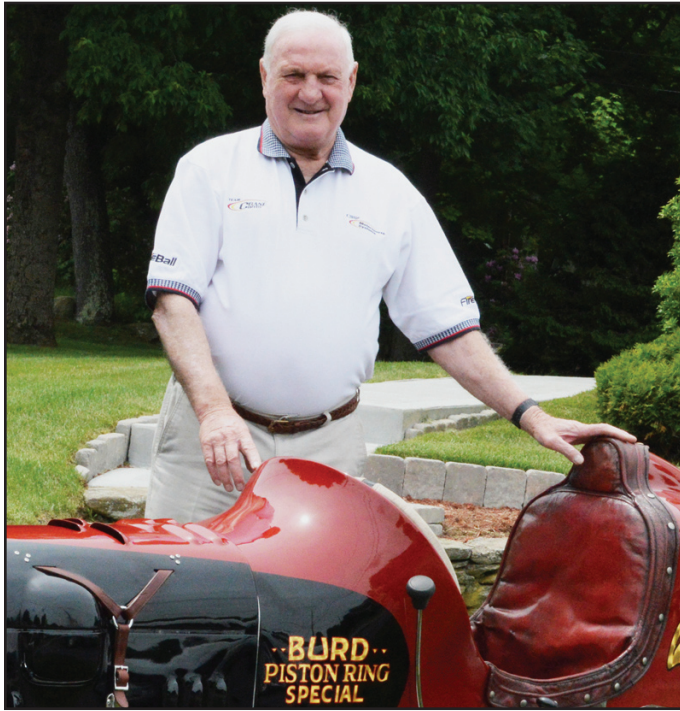
Ed's was the last of three midgets that Adams had built, all using J.A.P. engines. For this one, he enlisted the driving skills of Henry Banks.

In later years, Banks would compete in the Indianapolis 500 six times, with his top finish being sixth place in 1951. He was the American Racing Driver's Club champion in 1941, and won the AAA national championship for "big cars" (now known as sprint cars) in 1950. After retiring from racing, he served in a number of high-ranking roles at the United States Auto Club up until the 1980s.

With Banks at the wheel in 1939, the Adams midget won numerous feature races in the Northeast, including a special 100-lap event at Castle Hill Speedway in the Bronx. It finished 13<sup>th</sup> in the AAA Eastern Midget standings. Later in the year it was taken to Miami, where Banks raced and won with it through early 1940.

One of the car's most famous exploits, however, occurred off the race track, and was documented by America's most famous auto racing journalist, the late Chris Economaki, in his book *Let 'Em All Go!*

After racing through the winter in Florida, the car was brought to New York City, to be displayed at an auto racing



Owner Ed Picard of Greenville rests his left hand on the original leather seat that driver Henry Banks occupied when he won feature races all along the East Coast in 1939 and 1940. (Your Smithfield Magazine photos by Ron Scopelliti)

convention in the Hotel New Yorker on 34<sup>th</sup> Street. On the second night of the convention, the party got a bit out of hand, and Henry Banks hopped into the car, recruiting the young Economaki and others to push-start the midget in the lobby. They ran out of space on the first attempt, then turned the car around to try again.

This time, the engine turned over, and when Banks re-engaged the transmission, Chris recounts:

“Instead of the car moving, the spinning rear tires simply gathered up the lobby carpet, piling it in huge billows behind the car against the front entrance to the hotel. But when the carpet finally ran out, the tires hit the hardwood floor and the car took off like a scalded dog.”

The car ran through the hall, and through the swinging doors of the hotel’s Empire Room, where actress/dancer Cyd Charisse was performing. The car bottomed out on the steps to the dining room before causing any further havoc.

“Everyone in the dining room – including Cyd Charisse – is hysterical with the explosion of noise and fumes suddenly appearing in the dining room,” Economaki wrote. “That brought an early end to the convention.”

That year also marked the end of the car’s racing career. Adams sold the racer in 1941 and there is no indication that it

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ever raced again.

It sat in pieces for many years, until being bought in 1983 by Jim Staats, who began an extensive restoration, but died before it could be completed. A longtime friend of Staats, Ed purchased the car after his death, and enlisted the help of Grant Marceau of Chepachet who, sadly, died before the restoration was complete. Final assembly was completed by Dave Tourigny of Foster and painting was done by Hank Fournier of Scituate.

Except, that is, for the elaborate lettering and the numbers. For that Ed sought out Greg Heger who specializes in applying similar lettering to fire engines. He captured not only the style, but also the slight angle of the racing numbers based on photos of the car during its heyday.

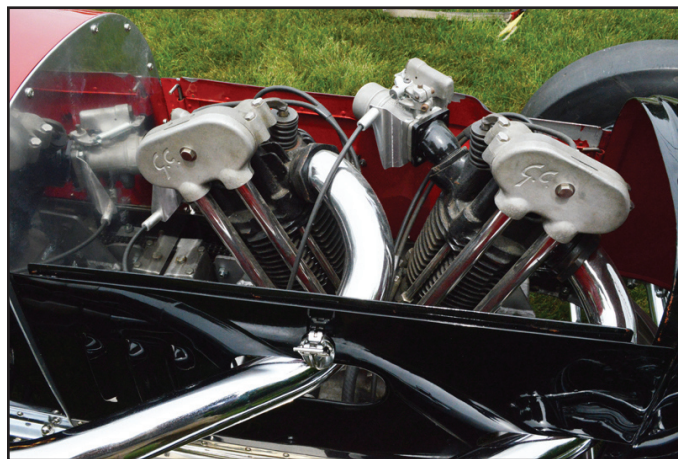
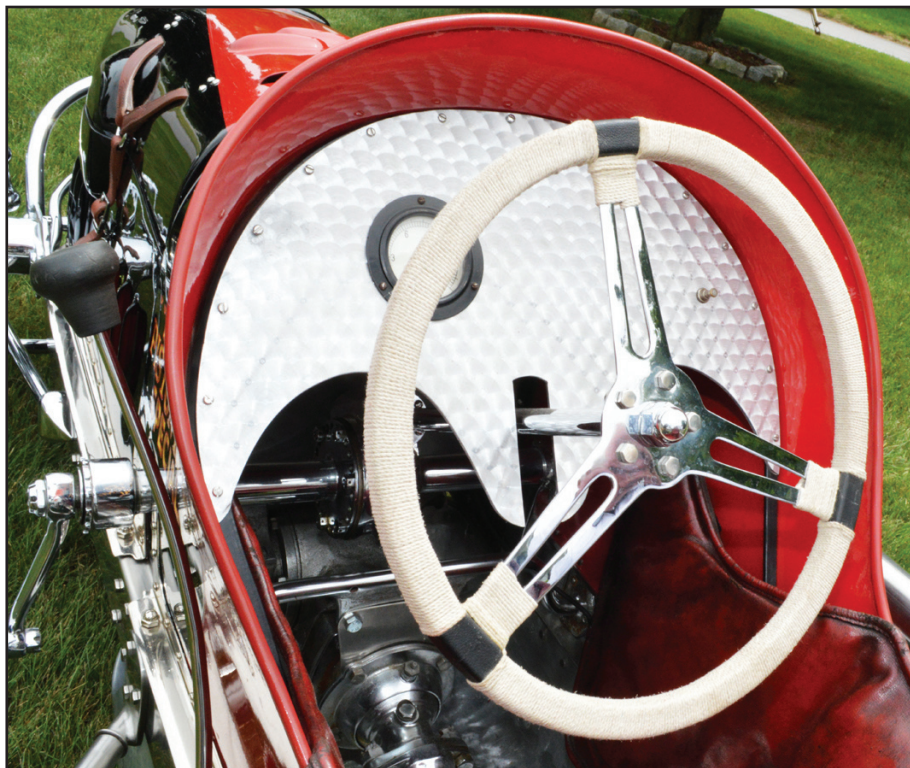
When Ed acquired the car, he also got the original wooden “bucks” used to shape the one-of-a-kind, hand-made aluminum body. Constructed of multiple pieces of hardwood, the bucks are works of art in their own right.

Since the restoration was completed, the midget has made the rounds of vintage race car events and museums. The car hasn’t been driven in any events, however, because of the extreme rarity of its engine.

Ed took the midget to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 2011 for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Indy 500, at the request of the organizers. They were looking to assemble cars that Indy 500 competitors raced earlier in their careers, and Ed’s car fit the bill.

In 2010, he was lucky enough to reunite Chris Economaki with the Adams midget, when the two drove together to an event in New Jersey.

“We took it to Hinchcliffe Stadium, where they used to run midgets,” Ed recalls. “He was so glad to see it still in existence.” Undoubtedly, many racing enthusiasts will agree.



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**Top:** The engine-turned dashboard of the midget had only a fuel pressure gauge, to remind the driver when he had to pressurize the gas tank with hand pump mounted outside the cockpit, just below the hand brake lever. **Center:** The letters “GC” cast into the rocker covers identify this J.A.P. engine as one of 26 built by Gus Carlheim of Connecticut. **Bottom:** The wooden buck used to shape the car’s tail includes a feature absent from the first two Rudy Adams midgets – a headrest for the driver. (Your *Smithfield Magazine* photos by Ron Scopelliti)

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