



Pursuit of dad's life revives vintage era of auto racing

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Tracking an auto racing legend

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That was 41 years ago. Ever since, John Snowberger, now 58, has been working on a book about his father, Russell "Snowy" Snowberger, an early racing pioneer who built winning racing engines and piloted the cars himself, a glamorous figure who met Amelia Earhart when she flew onto the Indy 500 track and posed for a photo. The son kept working, because he kept acquiring more information, filling in the blanks of his father's life.

The elder Snowberger was a man in motion, always propelled forward, never dwelling on the past.

"I am going backwards, trying to pick up what he left behind," says John Snowberger of Sterling Heights, whose adult life has been an homage to his dad.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Russell Snowberger was a national celebrity who made his home in Mount Clemens. Eager newspaper reporters recorded what Russell Snowberger ate for breakfast (thin toast, one egg poached, black coffee) on Indy 500 day. Twice, in 1930 and 1932, he finished fifth at the Indy 500, the second time in a Hupp Comet, the same car that's gleaming in the tidy Sterling Heights garage that's his son's workplace.

Snowberger's obsession with his father's life has grown in intensity, not dimmed. Fifteen years ago, he left his job as a Chevy sales manager to work full-time producing meticulously crafted models of vintage race cars -- collectibles signed by famous drivers (A.J. Foyt, Bobby Unser) that cost \$4,000 and up.

For decades, he roamed racing car swap meets, collecting programs, clippings, and memorabilia from the racing driver's life. Every new find delighted him: "It would be like finding gold," he says.

He rescued the Hupp Comet from a Mount Clemens field, buying it when he finally could afford to. When that was finished, he began working on the book he always promised himself he would write.

Now he has published that book -- a coffee-table scrapbook that's 783 glossy pages, including 563 photographs, many in color. It's a project that has cost him the price of a luxury automobile.

In the 3 1/2 -car garage beside his house, Snowberger -- a trim, compact man with rugged features -- maintains a working shrine of his father's cars, framed clippings and photographs, even the 1940s era lathe from his father's Cass Avenue shop. His tools are perched on a workbench used by his father.

So is a copy of the book, nine pounds of automotive lore. If the price sounds high (\$100 on his website, www.johnsnowberger.com), every copy costs him \$101.17 to produce.

The book fulfills a promise he made to his father that day his father suddenly died in 1968 of an aortal aneurysm. It fulfills a promise John Snowberger made to himself.

In less than two weeks, he's sold 77 of the 400 copies he plans to publish. The buyers have been mostly strangers, avid fans of the early days of auto racing. They are men who still cling to memories of dashing racing drivers in goggles and helmets, men fascinated by races run on dirt tracks, when 100 mph laps were grueling ordeals.

Or perhaps they are moved -- some have told him so -- by a man whose love for his father has filled his lifetime.

From The Detroit News: <http://detnews.com/article/20100615/OPINION03/6150316/Pursuit-of-dad-s-life-revives-vintage-era-of-auto-racing#ixzz0qwYgeOAH>