

# LEONARD E. KERBS

## " THE KANSAS CYCLONE "

By **FRED HOUSTON**  
*Tulsa, Oklahoma*

**CREDITS:** Many thanks to Betty Kerbs Abel, daughter of Leonard Kerbs, and her husband Walter, of Otis, Kansas, for their valuable information and photographs. Thanks also to Linda Bullock for other photos and newspaper clippings, especially the photo of her father, Noel Bullock, with Leonard Kerbs. It was that photo which set this project in motion - for penciled on the back was simply, "Leonard Kerbs. Thanks also to Les

Ward, writer for *National Speed Sport News* and former associate of Leonard Kerbs during the years he directed the Belleville track. Thanks to Jarvis Erickson who provided the Kerbs letter on the Craig-Hunt head, and also to Vern Peatling, former dirt track driver who provided photos and later commissioned the late Bennie Kerbs to build a replica of Kerbs boat-tailed Fronty.

Hundreds flocked to the tiny town of Otis, Kansas, to attend the funeral. So many came in fact that several Kansas State Highway Patrolmen were called out to unsnarl the traffic jam.

It was the end of an era. Leonard E. Kerbs, Dean and Elder Statesman of Mid-America dirt track auto racing died suddenly of a heart attack Sunday afternoon, February 21, 1960, at the age of 63. So read the news items of Kansas newspapers of that cold February.

Otis, Kansas, today has less than 400 population, but it hasn't always been that way. Rows of mostly-empty false-front stores lining the main street provide mute testimony to an earlier, more prosperous, time. Located just 25 miles due northwest of Great Bend, Kansas, Otis was a thriving farming center in the 'teens, twenties and early thirties -with the Kerbs Machine Shop one of the prominent businesses on Main Street. A combination auto and farm machinery sales and repair shop, the Kerbs business was also the oldest Case Tractor Agency to operate continuously under the same management in the U.S. Started by Leonard's father around 1912, Kerbs established such a reputation for "delivering the goods that during World War II their tiny shop provided tractor parts and repair services for the entire multi-state region. His successful machine shop provided the "know how and resources to support a highly successful dirt track racing career.

Leonard's colorful racing career completely spanned the Model T dirt track racing era and he was at his prime during the formative, developmental stages of Model T based racing machinery. He began racing hopped-up Model T's around 1915 and he last officially raced in a DO Fronty in 1930.



The great Leonard Kerbs, Kansas State Champion, hailing from the tiny town of Otis, Kansas. Kerbs dominated Kansas dirt track racing with his Kerbs Specials from about 1915 to 1935.



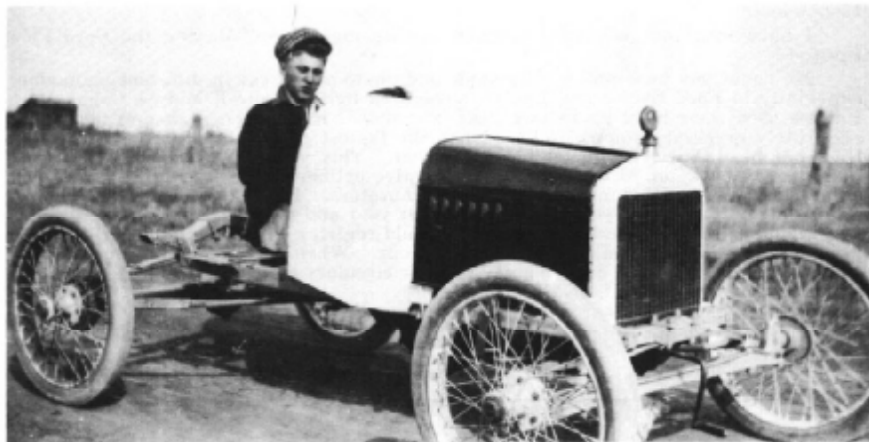
The Kerbs Garage, Main Street, Otis, Kansas in 1915 or perhaps earlier. First owned by Leonard's father, then by Leonard, this building stands today. It has been expanded at least three times.

During this period, Leonard used most of the better-known Model T overhead equipment. Starting with a Craig-Hunt overhead kit around 1916 or 1917, switching to the Laurel-Roof in 1918-20, then returning briefly to the Craif-Hunt in 1921 by converting it to a dual overhead cam arrangement, Leonard went to the Frontenac in 1922, and drove Frontys until he hung up his cloth helmet in 1930 when his first and only son, "Buddy," was born.

In the state of Kansas, Leonard was known to have raced at Abilene, Hutchison, Great Bend, Salina and Belleville - and no doubt others. During the mid-twenties he also raced throughout the entire great plains and Rocky Mountain region. Using a "stretched Model

T Roadster as a "hauler," he competed throughout Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado. It was during this period that Leonard often raced against Noel Bullock, winner of the 1922 Pikes Peak Hill Climb and a driver of considerable reputation with RAJO powered machines. Theirs was the classic RAJO/FRONTY rivalry. Leonard and Noel were often featured drivers during the 1923-24 racing seasons. They were not only fierce competitors, but good friends as well, socializing and traveling together on the racing circuit.

Sometimes they were the featured drivers for \$500 winner-take-all match races. The following clipping from the July 5, 1924 issue of the *Denver-Rocky Mountain News* gives some of the flavor of their competition:



Earliest known photo of Kerbs and his machine. The racer is probably a flathead and Kerbs is probably in his late 'teens.

Many were disappointed when they learned that L. E. Kerbs, better known as the "Kansas Cyclone," and dirt track champion of that state, would be unable to enter the races. Not a few would like to be present when Kerbs and Bullock, old opponents on the race track, meet and break the tie that exists at present. In eight races that Bullock and Kerbs have had against each other, Kerbs holds four firsts and two seconds against Bullock, and Bullock has four firsts and two seconds against Kerbs. The two went to the track yesterday determined to change the situation, but Kerbs was forced to withdraw on account of illness, as he did on June 22. He was seriously injured some time ago while racing in Kansas and is not as yet completely recovered.

Leonard didn't retire from dirt track racing when he quit driving in 1930, but became a car owner and builder. His DO Frontys were driven by Sam Hoffman and then made famous nationally by the diminutive Pat Cunningham. The DO Fronty was later replaced by a Riley Rocker arm on a Model A block. Leonard's Fronty carried the number K-1 (for Kerbs Number One) and was sold in 1935 when Leonard retired as a car owner. He then started a new career as race director and flagman at the now-famous Belleville, Kansas, Bowl, advertised as the "Fastest half-mile track in the world."

Leonard Kerbs' contribution to dirt track racing spanned 45 years. He was well known in the midwest

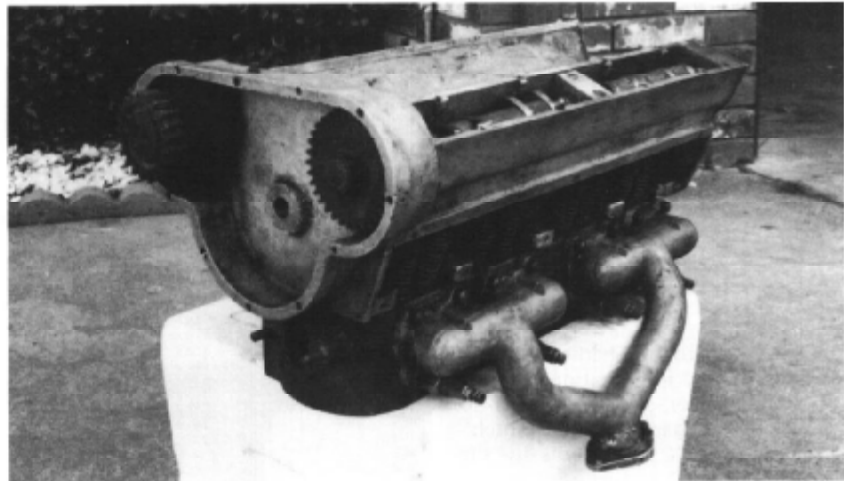
where his mere presence at a race always helped the show. Even in the later years when his name was announced over the PA system, the name of Leonard Kerbs was still magic and always brought a thunder of applause.

Leonard Kerbs' exploits are yet another chapter in that great story which continues to unfold about the brave men who on dusty tracks donned cloth helmets and blasted their way to glory in their amazing Model T based racing machines.



<i>Goodpear and Firestone Tires and Tubes</i>	<i>Ford Parts</i>
<b>The Kerbs Garage</b>	
<b>Ford Authorized Sales and Service</b>	
<i>If it's Made by Ford we have it in Stock</i>	
<b>OTIS, KANSAS</b>	
	February 28, 1921.
Speedway Engineering Co., Indianapolis, Ind.	
Gentlemen:	
I have seen your advertisements in various magazines "Making the Ford Fleet Footed."	
No doubt you have noticed my name and photo of my car in different magazines, especially in Ford Owner and Dealer, advertised by the Laurell Motors Corporation. I have used their head up to this year, and now I have made a change which was absolutely necessary for me to do. I had the fastest car in the state last year with the roof head, but I could not hang together. This year I am coming out with a more reliable wagon. I am using your 16-valve cylinder head casting, carrying dual camshafts, two-spark ignition, and two carburetors. From the equipment I carry, you will see that I will be just as fast as last year and more reliable, not using your complete head. I was just wondering if I could register with you for the prize which you offer for hundred miles or better per hour. When the racing season opens up you will hear from me. Send me one of your circulars and catalogue. Hope to have an early reply.	
Yours truly, The Kerbs Garage, L. E. KERBS.	

Letter from Leonard Kerbs to Speedway Engineering Company, manufacturers of the Craig-Hunt heads. Here Leonard makes reference to his DO modification of the Craig-Hunt head. (Letter courtesy of Jarvis Erickson, Alderwood Manor Washington.)



*One of a Kind* - Dual overhead cam Craig-Hunt. Developed by Leonard Kerbs and his machinist, John Schoeber, approximately three years ahead of the famous DO Fronty. The cam covers and other DO castings have absolutely no lettering to indicate the source, date, etc., however.

Les Ward, who writes for *National Speed Sport News*, remembers from a conversation with Kerbs that the DO casting was done in Topeka, Kansas, and came from Green Engineering. Kerbs may have purchased the head sometime prior to 1918.

Broken rocker arms caused him to abandon the original single overhead cam arrangement. How successful the DO conversion was is not known, but there must have been some problems because Kerbs went to the single-port Fronty in 1922. Also, the unit today still sports the original factory updraft intake manifold, rather than the more elaborate dual carburetion referred to in Kerbs letter to Speedway Engineering.

For more information on the Craig-Hunt and Speedway Engineering, see Jarvis Erickson's excellent article in Volume 16, Number 4 of *The Vintage Ford*.

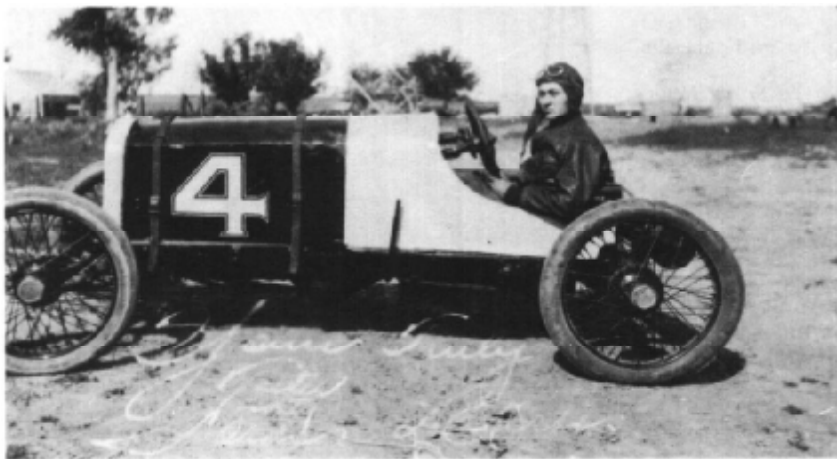




Leonard Kerbs (right) about 1920, with Charlie "Butch" Liebsack who drove Kerbs second car (Number 4).



A later photo of Charlie Liebsack, who also had a reputation of being a good driver. No one seems to know what happened to "Butch" but he wasn't with Kerbs by the late 1920s.



This photo is autographed by Kerbs, "Yours truly, Faster Fronty Fords, L. E. Kerbs."

**ANNIVERSARY PHOTO** - Leonard Kerbs poses on his front porch at Otis, Kansas, July 4, 1940, while celebrating the 15th anniversary of his victory in a 50-mile race at Salina, Kansas, in 1925. These trophies were won by Kerbs in various races in Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado in the 1920 s, and were later destroyed by a fire in the office of Kerbs Machine Shop.



The showroom and office of the Kerbs Case dealership in the early to mid-1930 s. Sometime after 1940 a disastrous fire occurred in this room, destroying the Kerbs trophies and damaging this photograph.

**Smashed Racer** - Leonard Kerbs took his Fronty through the fence at the Great Bend, Kansas, race track. At the rear of the Kerbs Machine Shop, Leonard displays the smashed radiator, cowling and wheel.





Fierce Competitors and Good Friends - Leonard Kerbs and Noel Bullock. These three photographs were probably taken on the same day in Colorado about 1924. The photo of Bullock and Kerbs with Bullocks racer in the background, came from Linda Bullock, while the other two came from Betty Kerbs. Shown are the Kerbs families with Kerbs racer on the "stretched Model T roadster in the background. It is likely that Bullock took one photo and Kerbs the other.



#### SPEED RECORDS

We note that the question has been asked as to what are the records for Fords on half-mile dirt tracks. It is extremely difficult to gauge the speed of a car from the recorded times, as the condition of the half-mile dirt track enters very much into the speed attained. And what may appear as slow time, may be really very fast time, when all the conditions are known.

We would say that, as a rule, from 34 to 36% seconds seems to be very high speed for a half-mile track, in the time trials. Mr. Roof's little racing car "Cootie" has made 33 seconds, and we know of a few others which have made this speed.

For the mile distance, L. E. Kerbs, at Pleasanton, Kansas, has made a record of 1:07-2/5. Kerbs has been a consistent winner in races, and it is his policy to trail the leader, until the last lap - then fight him to the finish. And Kerbs usually comes in ahead. In 1912, Barney Oldfield set the track record at 1:07-4/5, which record was broken by Kerbs. In the 3-mile race at Brockport, N.Y., Art Barhold's Ford made the distance in 4:01-3/5ths.

The Williams brothers of Philadelphia are great dirt track winners. Williams won the 10-mile race at Belmont Park, Narbeth, Pa., in 10:00-2/5ths. In the one-mile time trials, Williams made 59-2/5 seconds. The track record being held by Bob Burman at 57-3/5 seconds.

Dirt track speed records. These comments from the pen and wisdom of Technical Editor, Murray Fahnestock, of *Ford Owner and Dealer* magazine, December 1920.



Leonard Kerbs and Racer Number '1, probably around 1923. The car was Fronty powered.

**LEONARD KERBS REPLICA**  
 (From an article by L. A. Ward,  
*National Speed Sport News.*)

Now we have a new chapter to the Kerbs story, starting with a wide-eyed boy who thrilled to the feats of Leonard Kerbs and the winning ways of the Kerbs Specials on the old mile track in Salina, Kansas. Vern Peatling, a former race driver of the 1930 s, became a collector of antique cars but search as he would he could not find one of the old bob-tailed race cars of the early 1920 s. So he commissioned Benny Kerbs, the master mechanic of the old Kerbs Specials, to build a replica. In due time, Benny found an old dust covered rocker-arm Fronty head in the attic of a garage in Great Bend where Leonard Kerbs had completely wrecked his racer. Was it off the same car? No one knows, but Peatling is the proud owner of a rocker-arm Fronty on a Model T block, authentic in every way except for the old multi-tuned wire wheels, which he was unable to find.

On August 23, 1969, Vern donned his old cloth



helmet and drove several exhibition laps on the Belleville high banks just to prove that his replica was also functional. Needless to say, he drew as much applause as the winner of the feature.



### Make Your Ford a \$3,000 Car from the standpoint of motor service



Two Ford racing speedsters carrying Roof & Overhead Valve Equipment and their owner, E. S. Kerbs, Old Kent, Grand Kent, N. Y. in 1914 and 1915.

#### ROOF & OVERHEAD VALVE EQUIPMENT

Power Device Needed by Every Ford Owner.

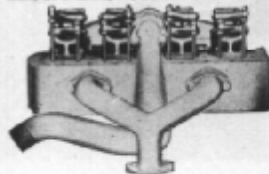
The hooded car and motor efficiency, with greater freedom and all economy for other touring car or truck, with economy for the hooded car, the Roof & Overhead Valve Equipment, which is the most perfect device ever devised for the Ford owner with the hood of valve cylinder head.

#### FORD RACING CARS

WHEEL-ROAD race with its 12 mile cylinder head equipment has long since of the best racing cars in the world and has given racing all over America. The hooded car, with its 12 mile cylinder head, is the most perfect device ever devised for the Ford owner with the hood of valve cylinder head. The hooded car, with its 12 mile cylinder head, is the most perfect device ever devised for the Ford owner with the hood of valve cylinder head. The hooded car, with its 12 mile cylinder head, is the most perfect device ever devised for the Ford owner with the hood of valve cylinder head.

#### REPAIRS—REPAIRS—REPAIRS

The hooded car, with its 12 mile cylinder head, is the most perfect device ever devised for the Ford owner with the hood of valve cylinder head. The hooded car, with its 12 mile cylinder head, is the most perfect device ever devised for the Ford owner with the hood of valve cylinder head. The hooded car, with its 12 mile cylinder head, is the most perfect device ever devised for the Ford owner with the hood of valve cylinder head.



COMPLETE EQUIPMENT \$115.00

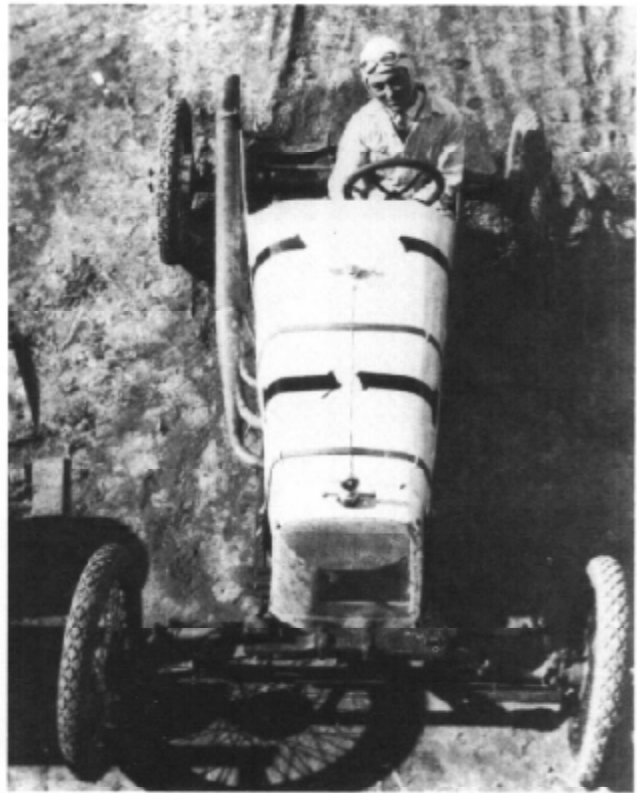
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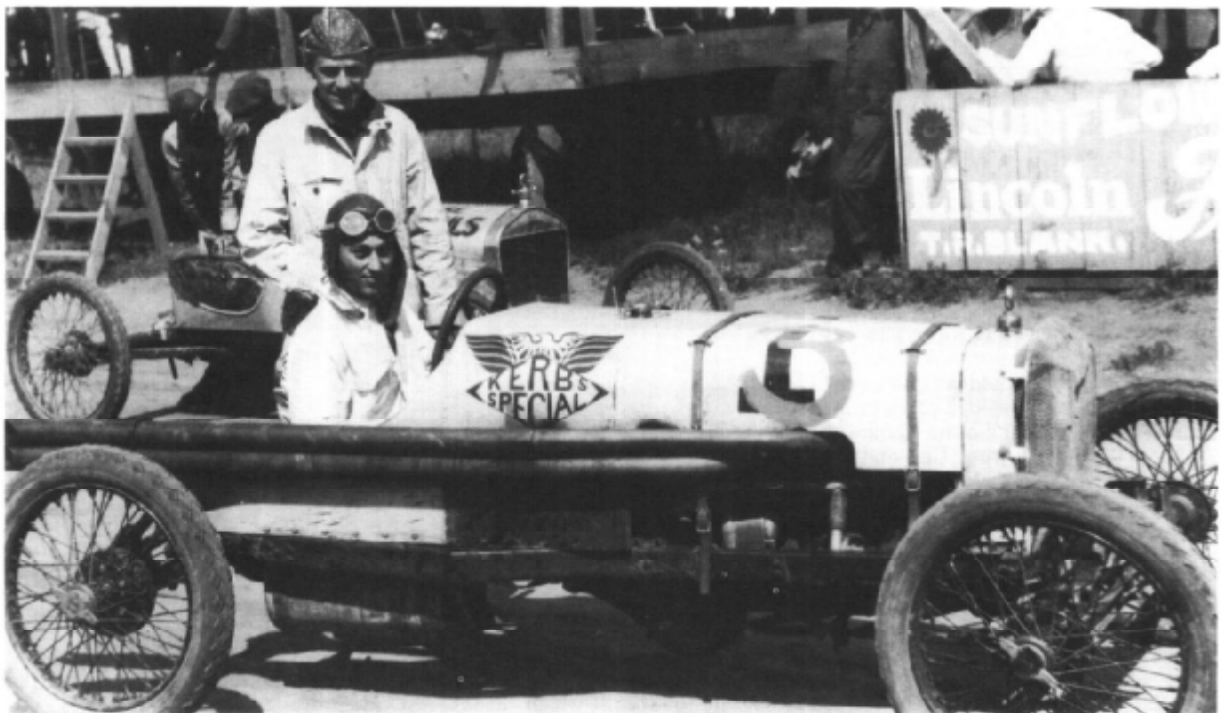
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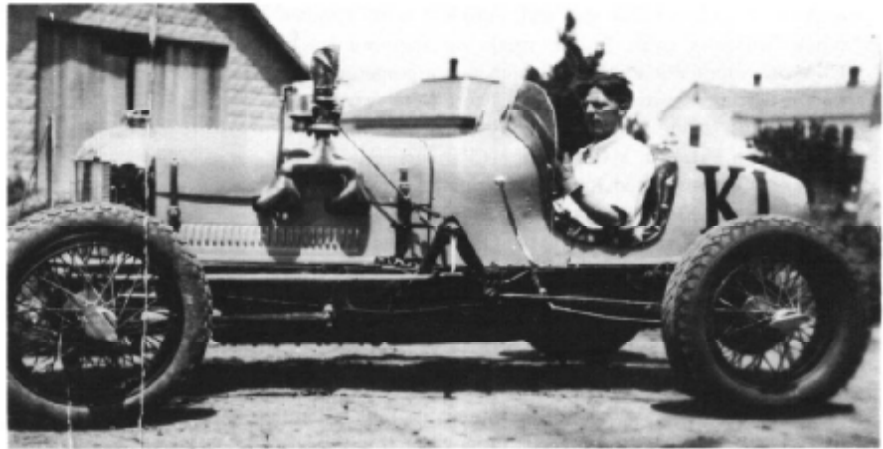
Perhaps shot from the stands, this view from above displays nicely the symmetry of Kerbs' bob-tailed Fronty racer (about 1924).



Kerbs Special Number One Fronty-Ford. The number on the hood has apparently been changed for this particular race. The driver and the car in the background are unknown.



Behind the wheel - Owner Leonard Kerbs in his DO Fronty in the early thirties.



Driver, Pat Cunningham, seated in K1 (Kerbs Number One), 16-valve DO Fronty about 1933.



A familiar sight at Kansas dirt tracks in the early to mid thirties. Kerbs and his driver, Pat Cunningham, with their Ford truck and DO Fronty.