



Rajo Jack

by Larry L. Ball, Jr.

The oldest of six children, Dewey Gatson was born July 28, 1905, in the East Texas town of Tyler to parents Frances (Gee) and Noah Gatson. Dewey's father had steady employment with the railroad, which certainly put the Gatsons in a better financial situation than many other working class families in the small Texas town. Very little is known about Dewey's childhood, although his siblings were Lindsey, Katie,

Jennie, Warren and Gerald. It has been suggested that the family moved to the San Francisco area while Dewey was a teenager and relocated to Los Angeles in 1919.

In 1921, Dewey was hired as a 'roustabout' for the M.B. "Doc" Marcell Medicine Show and was on the road. It didn't take long for the young man to show his talent with all things mechanical. Eventually, Dewey would be in charge of the show's fleet of 20 vehicles in the Portland neighborhood of St. Johns, Oregon. It was around this time that Dewey began his racing career. Dewey raced all over the Northwest in the early 1920s with moderate success. In 1925, Dewey found himself in Vancouver, Washington, taking part in a match race against Francis Quinn.

Unfortunately, for Dewey, now racing under the name "Jack DeSoto", the seat fell out of his car as he approached the green flag. The race was cancelled.

By the early 1930s, Jack DeSoto was living in Los Angeles. When Joe Jagersberger of Racine, Wisconsin, the father of the Rajo cylinder head for the Ford Model 'T', made Jack the Los Angeles distributor and salesman, "Rajo Jack" was born. The new name suited him as he went on to sell more of the heads than anybody on the West Coast. Although he sold the Rajo heads, he didn't feel he should be limited to driving only Rajo engines. He tried them all and found success with every one. In fact, he had his big success driving a 225-cubic-inch Miller. The Miller was given to him after the death of friend Francis Quinn, on whose Legion Ascot team he was a mechanic.

Many drivers used to tell a story about Rajo and his Miller. It was April 29, 1939. Rajo stood in his garage and looked at the Miller scattered all over the garage floor with a bearing job still to be completed. The next day there was a 100-mile race at Oakland over 400 miles to the north. He looked at the parts and called to his wife Ruth in the house to get ready to go to Oakland. She thought he meant to go watch. Instead, she came outside to see him backing his ton-and-a-half Cragar-Ford truck up to the garage door. Together, they wheeled the car on to the truck. Then Rajo put the pieces on the bed, checked to make sure he had all the tools, and said, "You drive... I'm goin' to put this thing together on the road." And he did. While Ruth drove from Los Angeles to Oakland, Rajo put the Miller together from the bottom up. They arrived at the speedway just in time to qualify third. He finished second in the 100-miler.

Rajo never raced with the American Automobile Association (AAA) and, as a result, was a true 'outlaw'. He often said the reason he never raced with AAA was because he couldn't pass the physical due to being blind in one eye (apparently the result of a failed motorcycle stunt). Many of his fellow racers knew there was another reason preventing him from getting the AAA license and a shot at Indy. Rajo raced mostly with Charlie Curryer's American Racing Association (ARA), finishing third in their point standings in 1941. Although he did most of his racing on the West Coast, Rajo also traveled east in 1941. He went as far as Dayton, Ohio, running fair races.

On the trip back west, Rajo raced at the Steele County Fair in Owatonna, Minnesota. While running a reverse handicap race, Rajo along with Bayliss Levrett was badly injured in the fatal accident of Wayne "Boots" Pearson of Des Moines, Iowa. Rajo received a compound fracture of the leg and a severe concussion. Bayliss suffered a head injury and burns. It was said that each man had to be strapped into his hospital bed to keep them from sneaking into the other's room to bench race.

After the war, Rajo flipped hard at the three-cornered San Diego Speedway, the mile track promoted by Cavino Michele "Kelly" Petillo. He was no longer as fast as before, and the Miller struggled in the middle of dirt track packs. He retired shortly after. He was once a strong hardy man who could pick up the front of a 1500-pound sprint car. Now, as the result of racing injuries, his body had been ravaged. He had an arm that barely bent, making it difficult to reach the steering wheel.

Rajo Jack had quite a few notable wins during his career. He won the 200-mile race at Silver Gate Speedway, San Diego, in September of 1934. He won the 100-mile race at San Jose Speedway, March 17, 1935. He won the 100-mile race at Oakland Speedway in September of 1936. At Oakland Speedway, he was the co-winner of a 500-mile race driving in relief for "Tex" Peterson in Gil Pierson's Miller. He won the 200-lap Pacific Coast Championship race at Southern Ascot Speedway (not to be confused with Legion Ascot), where he also won a 40-lap night race driving his Miller.

Rajo was also known to give stock cars a go (in fact, he was posthumously inducted into the West Coast Stock Car Hall of Fame in 2003). In 1936, he won the 250-mile stock car championship race at Mines Field Speedway in Los Angeles. In June of 1940, Rajo won a 250-lap stock car race at Southern Ascot Speedway behind the wheel of a 1.9-liter front-drive French Citroen.

All of Rajo Jack's accomplishments in racing would be impressive on any resume. What makes Rajo's stand out is that he was an African-American racing in 1930s America. This was in a time where segregation and overt racism were prevalent in society. Jack was a professional driver long before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, a decade before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major league baseball, and over 25 years before the Civil Rights Act was signed.

When Rajo first started racing, he would avoid having his picture taken by ducking his head behind the cowling. Occasionally he would have to tell promoters he was Portuguese or Native American to get around the color barrier. Even winning presented problems for Rajo Jack. Once when he was driving for Jack Taylor, he let another driver beat him in a two-lap trophy dash. He knew he couldn't kiss a white trophy girl. Although he was a favorite, the fans' acceptance had limits. As a result, his wife had to be with him every time he won because when the trophy girl came down to kiss the winner, his wife had to give him the trophy and kiss instead.

Rajo was well thought of and well respected by his fellow racers. When they spoke of Rajo, the term regularly used was 'gentleman'. Often times, while on their trips up to Oakland, racers would travel as a group. At one restaurant along the way, the proprietor refused to serve Rajo saying, "We don't serve his kind here." The racers all agreed that they would all be served or they all would leave. The proprietor gave in rather than lose the business. The same kind of thing would happen at motels along the way. Again, the racers would band together.

By February of 1956, Rajo's life had changed considerably. He had retired from racing. He had divorced his wife Ruth. He became fond of driving his own trucks on a route between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Perhaps the Los Angeles to San Francisco route reminded him of his many successful trips to Oakland Speedway. In any event, it was on this route on February 27, 1956, that Rajo Jack died from what was reported to have been a heart attack while traveling on Highway 395 near the town of Inyokern, California. Rajo was 51 years old. Rajo's friend, Ed Winfield, was the administrator of his estate. He is buried in the Lincoln Memorial Park Cemetery in Carson, California.