



# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry

### Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



## Charles "Charlie" Edwin Wiggins (July 15, 1897 – March 11, 1979) "Motor Racing Pioneer"

**Charles Edwin Wiggins** was born on July 15, 1897, in Evansville, Indiana. His mother died when he was just nine years old, leaving him to be raised by his father, who worked long hours in the coal mines. When Charles was 11 years old, he would leave school to shine shoes outside of an auto dealership to earn money for the household. When he didn't have customers, Charlie would hang out with the mechanics in the shop, where he learned to diagnose vehicle problems as they drove onto the lot.

Charlie was hired as a mechanic's assistant. After the start of WWI, many of the mechanics were drafted.

As a result, Charlie was promoted to shop floor manager. Soon after, Charlie married Roberta in 1917 and the couple moved to Indianapolis, Indiana in 1922, for better work opportunities.

Charlie began working in an auto body repair shop and later purchased his own garage. Charlie became the city's top mechanic. Even though the area was heavy with the influence of the Ku Klux Klan, the shop quickly became a gathering spot for young men of all backgrounds who were interested in the auto industry and the new Indianapolis 500 auto race. One of the young white men who used to hang out in Charlie's garages was Bill Cummings, who later became an Indy 500 winner.

Charlie studied other race cars and the European Grand Prix cars. In 1920, Charlie designed his own "Wiggins" special car out of assembled parts for auto junkyards, with the determination that he would participate in the Indy 500. Unfortunately, the Indy 500 rejected Wiggins' application because of the color of his skin.



Undeterred, Charlie joined the Colored Speedway Association for black racecar drivers in the Midwest and participated in its first race at the Indiana State Fairgrounds on July 4, 1924. The event was sold out to a cheering crowd of 12,000 spectators.

One reporter covering the race for the local black newspaper, was quoted as saying "they are racing for the Gold and the Glory". The Association named future races the "Gold and Glory Sweepstakes". The race was an annual 100-mile race for black drivers on a one-mile dirt track at the Indiana State Fairgrounds. The race ran successfully from 1924 through 1936 and Charlie was crowned the winner four times in cars he built himself, earning the title "the Negro Speed King".

In 1934, Charlie helped build the car that Bill Cummings drove when he won the 1934 Indianapolis 500.

Although the entire racing community recognized Charlie's contribution to the winning car, he was not allowed to stand in Victory Lane with his fellow crewmates due to his race. Charlie watched the race and the victory party from the "coloreds only" section of the grandstand.



Charlie's racing career ended abruptly in 1936, when, in the fourth lap of the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes race, he was involved in

a 13-car accident. Charlie was seriously injured, causing his right leg to be amputated. He also lost sight in his right eye. Without Charlie in the race, the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes folded at the end of the year. Following the crash, Charlie made himself a wooden leg and for the next 40 years built and repaired cars while training and advising drivers and mechanics. He continued to fight for black participation in motor racing until his death in Indianapolis on March 11, 1979, at the age of 81. Charlie Wiggins was inducted into the Automotive Hall of Fame in 2021.

