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# Hilda Mueller: The Queen of Speed

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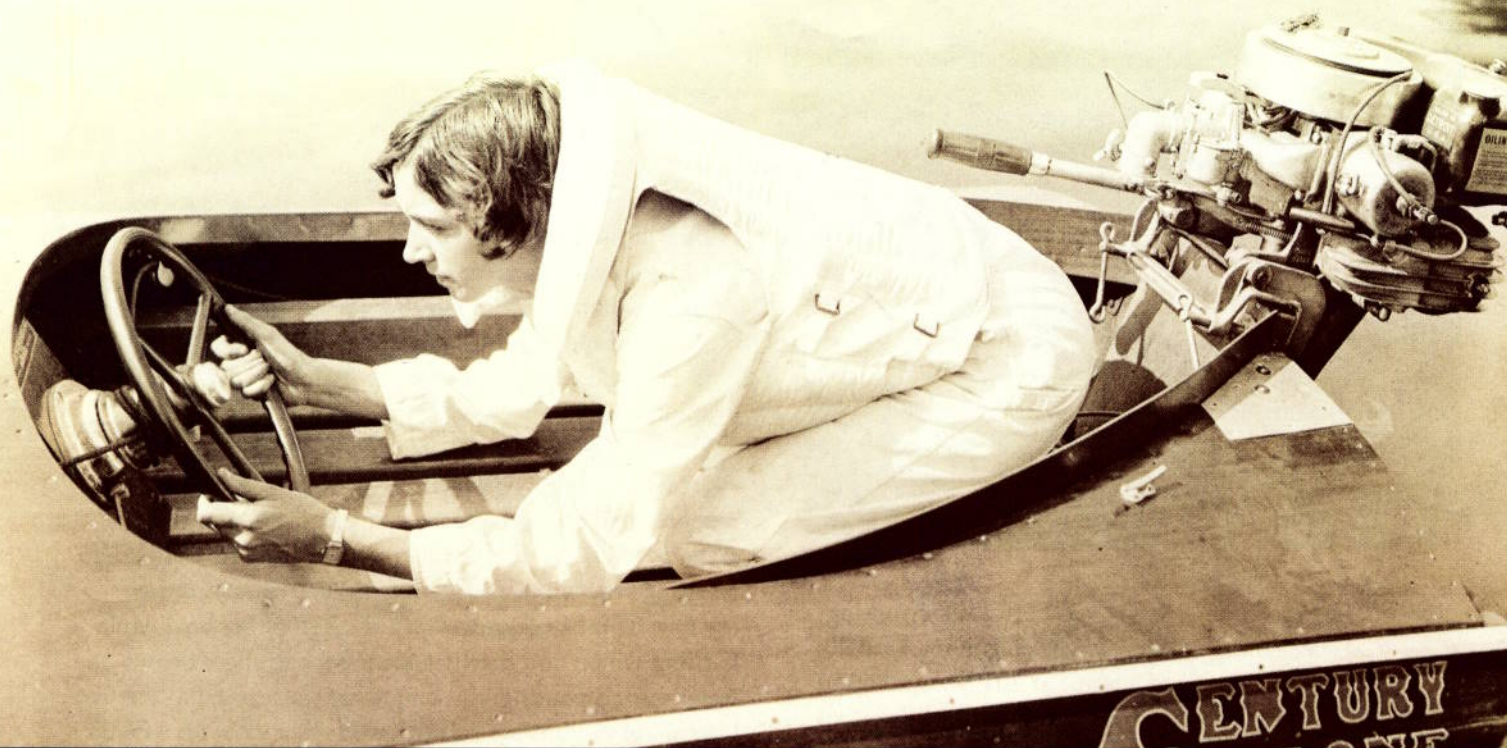
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# HILDA MUELLER

By Geoffrey Reynolds



1931  
CENTRAL  
DIVISIONAL  
OUTBOARD  
CHAMPIONSHIPS  
MANISTEE, MICH.

**DRIVER**

## THE QUEEN OF SPEED

Female sports figures of the 1920s and '30s, such as track and field star Babe Didrikson, swimmer Gertrude Ederle, and tennis player Helen Wills, were standouts in their sports—but they competed only against peers.

When Bay City's Hilda Mueller competed, she picked the one activity in which men and women vied for the same honors: hydroplane boat racing. And, for a few years, she was the best in the world.



about the challenge and jumped at the chance to compete.

When Mueller arrived at the racing pits near Bay City's Third Street Bridge on the appointed day, she met Charlevoix-based boat builder and racer Melvin Roy Brady who offered her a race boat to use. After some quick instructions on how to drive the watercraft, Brady started the outboard motor and off Mueller went.

When she returned to the pits, the kill switch on the motor failed and caused her to crash. The impact flipped her out of the boat and onto her knees on the dock—still clutching the steering wheel in her hands. She then ran away to avoid the anger and repair bill she thought were sure to come. Brady caught up to her and instead explained that the boat could be fixed, and that—based on her performance—she could pilot it in the upcoming races. With bloody knees sustained in the collision, she jumped back in and spent a few hours with Brady learning how to skillfully operate the vessel.



Though she suffered several more wrecks that day, Mueller was prepared enough to participate in the first of three races, called heats. (The winner of two or more heats would be named the winner of the race in each class.) During the first race, Mueller tore open the hull of her boat while battling Fillion and barely made it back to shore before water started pouring in. Using what she learned in the first heat about Fillion's racing tactics, Mueller went on with a patched-up hull to defeat the more seasoned sailor—the reigning state women's outboard-powered hydroplane champion—in the next two heats. With her first trophy in hand, Mueller went back to her quiet clerking job.

**H**ilda Johanna Mueller was born into a working-class family in Bay City, Michigan on April 20, 1909. She shared a home at 201 West Chestnut Street with her parents, George and Anna Mueller, and older siblings Lily and Harold. Another sister, Anna, had died at a young age.

After graduating from high school, Mueller took a job as a clerk at the Bay City "Cash" Dry Goods Company to make some money. Like many young women of the period, though, she also cast about for an exciting leisure opportunity to pursue. That opportunity came in late August 1929, when veteran hydroplane boat racer Loretta Fillion of Lansing challenged her peers to meet her at the upcoming Eastern Michigan Water Carnival races. Mueller was one of six women who had read a newspaper article

Preceding page: Hilda Mueller posed for the camera in a Century Cyclone. Top: This quiet, small-town girl had a daredevil streak. Upper right: Melvin Roy Brady recognized and refined her talent. Bottom right: Mueller set a world speed record in Connecticut. Unless noted, all images courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland.





Miss Mueller is the first woman driver to hold a national championship . . . Also holds world record in Class A, Div. 2 38.23 m. p. h. made at Middletown, Connecticut, 9-14-31

Above: A poster was designed to commemorate Mueller's groundbreaking national championship. Right: Her home waterway was the Saginaw River.

## Racing Full Time

In early 1930, after a long winter in Bay City, Mueller decided that outboard hydroplane racing was for her and became a professional driver within the National Outboard Association. She started out racing only on weekends and working at the department store during the week. On Memorial Day, she set her first world record: reaching 38.528 mph in a Class C/Division 1 race against 15 men in Worcester, Massachusetts. On October 12, in Middletown, Connecticut, she broke another record—this one in Class A/Division 3—with a speed of 32.315 mph. She also became the first woman to win a national championship.

In April of the following year, Mueller's mother passed away, but the loss did not slow the spunky young woman. On October 11, 1931, she defended her Class A/Division 3 title on Lake Merritt at Oakland, California and earned her second consecutive national championship: the only professional driver, male or female, in any class to have ever done so in outboard motor-powered hydroplanes. During





Above: Mueller learned how to fly in just half a day. Right: It was high praise when she was compared to a boat racer of international renown. Below: The Bay City "Cash" store's loss was boat racing's gain. Courtesy of the Historical Museum of Bay County.

that racing season, she traveled more than 10,000 miles by automobile and broke six world records, including the Class A/Division 2 record of 38.23 mph.

While the life of a hydroplane champion proved exciting, it provided very little prize money. To compensate, Brady provided the boats and lessons throughout the 1930 season, while Mueller's brother Harold helped keep her Caille and Evinrude outboard motors running smoothly. Eventually, a family friend and mechanic, Earl Wuepper, joined the team and Century Boat Company of Manistee provided the racing boats. Wuepper and Mueller became close friends and traveled with another couple across the country as Mueller increased her fame on the boat-racing circuit.

## Conquering the Air

In addition to breaking records on the water, Mueller also enjoyed setting records in the air. On May 30, 1931, she became the first woman in the world to fly an airplane, solo, after only 4½ hours' worth of training. This feat was



accomplished at James Clements Airport in Bay City, under the careful instruction of Clarence White, an instructor for Central Michigan Aircraft Corporation.

Despite encountering low-hanging fog, Mueller showed no fear as she climbed into the dual-cockpit airplane with White at 5:20 a.m. After only 29 minutes of instruction, she took the controls in the rear cockpit. After a midday break, she was ready to fly solo and left the runway in a pelting rainstorm for a spin around the city. Hundreds of cheering spectators greeted her upon her return.

In August 1931, Mueller returned to Bay City to race at the 2nd Annual Eastern Michigan Water Carnival. Because her boat was disabled in the practice runs, she borrowed another racer's vessel and took first in the one-mile-long straightaway race. She also set another world record.

The following year, Mueller was sidelined until September when a boat and motor sponsor could be obtained. That fall, she raced in the World's Fair Lagoon in Chicago, but did not place due to rough water. Her bad luck continued in October at Bay City, where the national championships were being held. There, she flipped her boat in the Class B/Division 2 races and was eliminated from the finals. Later that day, she hit a piece of wood in the Saginaw River course and disabled her motor. Her 1932 season ended without a championship in any class.

In 1933, Mueller retired from racing when she married



**B**ECAUSE of her recent success in outboard motorboat racing activities, Miss Hilda Mueller, above, of Bay City, Mich., is planning an extensive campaign in mid-western rivers and lakes this summer, climaxing her schedule with entrance in the second annual Bay City water carnival July 31-Aug. 2. Miss Mueller drove her first speed boat last August and won an 18-mile race. She abandoned the racing game from that time until a few weeks ago when she went east to Worcester, Mass., to establish a world's outboard racing record of nearly 39 miles an hour.



Earl Wuepper and settled into domestic life. In 1934, she returned briefly to the water, but did not place well in many of her races. She chose to leave the sport for good later that year.

In just three full seasons of racing, she broke nine world records and earned two national championship trophies.

### Hilda in Retirement

With her husband finding work in a Bay City-area coal mine, Hilda Wuepper concentrated on raising a family. As her children grew up, she shared with them the stories of her days as a championship boat racer. She was known to be the parent of choice when it came to getting someplace fast, because of her inclination to speed, in any vehicle. In 1949, the local paper did a feature story on her past exploits and included a

Above: The local newspaper photographed Mueller with her children—Tom, Sue, and Mary Lou—in 1949. Right: In three short years of racing, Hilda Mueller established herself as world-class competitor.

photograph featuring her children and her trophies.

In August 1965, Wuepper—then a 55-year-old grandmother—was featured in several national newspapers, among them the *Seattle Daily Times*. In that interview, she fondly recalled her harrowing days on the water and the new activities she had taken up: skateboarding, waterskiing, and motorcycle riding. The previous June, she had spent time in the Bay City racing pits during a two-day boat racing marathon, conversing with former rivals about possibly returning to the sport since they were still at it.

In the 1970s, Hilda and Earl Wuepper retired to Gaylord. It was there that Hilda, a nonsmoker, passed away on November 13, 1978 of lung cancer, after beating breast cancer two decades before.

It's been almost 85 years since Hilda first took a title in hydroplane boat racing. In the interim, her name has nearly faded from memory. But her accomplishments live on in digitized scrapbooks and photographs at the Joint Archives of Holland at Hope College as well as at the Historical Museum of Bay County, where movies of Wuepper and other drivers racing on the Saginaw River during the Eastern Michigan Water Carnivals are available for viewing.

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