



Armond Holley.
(Dick Berggren photo)

MISSILE MAN

By Lew Boyd

He'd come riding into town in the cockpit of a rocket ship, wherever the supermodifieds, open sprinters, or midgets gathered. It could be Tampa, San Jose, Anderson, or Phoenix. Then, just as quickly, he'd be gone, having snatched all the trophies and drunk all the beer.

Teenaged Gene Lee Gibson sat in the stands at Ohio's Lorain County Speedway and first saw the late Armond Holley in 1971. "He came out on the track in a high front-end, four-wheel-drive Hite car. We'd seen nothing like this thing from Mobile, Alabama. We built our own cars. What was it, and who was he, sitting confidently in his open-face helmet, smoking a cigarette, waving at the crowd? He did have some charisma, but was he trying to antagonize everyone? As it turned out, he'd win or break. Nothing in-between."

Holley's meandering pathway to over 500 career victories started early. Even as a kid, he cut countless laps around a tiny dirt track his father owned in Mississippi. By the time he came of age, he was long gone. He barnstormed the South in the 1950s in jalopies and subsequently NASCAR modifieds. Rumors abounded about the wiry, caffeinated road warrior, and soon he was in a Grand National car, looking like a shoe-in for the big time. He even ran Daytona's road course but told writer Bones Bourcier, "It was so boring and monotonous. There was nothing to do. I listened to the radio."

By the 1960s, a new configuration of high-flying race cars had caught his attention. He summarily gave up the superspeedways in favor of an unregulated supermodified circuit twisting around Alabama, Tennessee, Florida, and Mississippi. He swapped wins with legends like the Allison, Hooker Hood, Rat Lane, and Ival Cooper.

Not all of Holley's nightly performance was trackside. Just as memorable was his captivating way of spinning a yarn after the show. He'd park on a stack of tires, a stack of beer cans reliably nearby, slap his knee, and start out, "Gawd Almighty, I was goin' down the backstretch at Jackson at 150 miles an hour and..."

The disarming aspect of Holley's stories was that they were often true. Marvin Rifchin, master of M&H Tire, saw Armond run "skeeters," the regional name for supers down along the Gulf Coast. At one point they were running faster than NASCAR cars at Daytona's tri-oval. "It was really something," Marvin said. "That Holley had absolutely no fear."

It wasn't long before Armond crossed paths with Bill Hite, the quirky builder of America's most outrageous short-track cars. Super-straight Hite and Gypsy-like, fun-loving Holley somehow shared that strange attraction of opposites. They crisscrossed the Midwest and Northeast, towing radical four-wheel drive, rear-engine monsters—and even one with no shocks, springs, or suspension whatsoever.

Ohio historian Denny Hudock remembers Holley being black flagged in Hite's car for running under his qualifying time at Sandusky—and he was fast qualifier. Another time he was beating the field so badly they started him on the pole, a lap down.

In what was a respite from constant travel, Holley moved to New England in 1976 and won the Northeastern Midget Association title with distinction. John McCarthy, then NEMA's president, recalled, "We were all in the pits at Thompson, Connecticut, time trialing. Armond was kind of moving around like he always did and glanced over at the fourth turn. He saw a photographer taking shots next to the apron. He went right over, and asked the guy—who was totally taken aback—to move away because that was where Armond would run. That's just what he did. He dropped two wheels in the infield right at that spot and set fast time. He knew what he was going to do beforehand. He'd see wrecks before they happened. He was a helluva driver."

In 1983, Holley committed to owner Skip Matczak and Oswego (New York.) Skip concluded, "One thing making Armond so fast was his vision. Did you ever

Armond and Bill Port with his Midwest Auto Specialties Hite car. (Jakessight.com)



notice the pupil in one eye was like a cat's? 'Well, Stanley,' he'd tell me, 'That's just a birthmark.' But what I saw was a periscope. He could see out of both sides and the back. And what a character! Late one night we're coming back from New York and some woman got crossed up into the fence on the Mass Pike and her car blew up. Armond jumped out of the truck, ran across the highway, and pulled her from the flames. He quickly turned around and ran back. 'Let's be going, Stanley. We can still make last call.'"

Two seasons later, Armond's final ride came in Skip's super at Thompson. Richie Evans had agreed to drive it but changed his mind. Skip turned the ride over to Armond, who ran a respectable tenth. It was the next week that Richie died at Martinsville.

Offered a job at GM, Holley, a superior machinist, moved to Columbus, Mississippi. A few years later, son Armond Jr. bought an IMCA modified. When he asked his father for help, the answer was resolute. "Don't be wasting your money, breaking your heart. I never owned a lug nut on a race car and I'm not going to now."

Armond Jr. sensed his dad was actually questioning his own career—and racing in general. Had he been a fool to forsake NASCAR and the ride he'd been discussing with Bud Moore? Over time he seemed to work it out and eventually started advising his son.

Armond Jr. smiles. "It was fun, and we won races. But, as Dad became more engaged again, he was back to pushing that technical envelope, complaining about 'all those rules.' I guess he'd fallen back in love with his missiles."

Armond Holley passed away in 2005 at age 71 of lung cancer in Shreveport, Louisiana. **FSW**