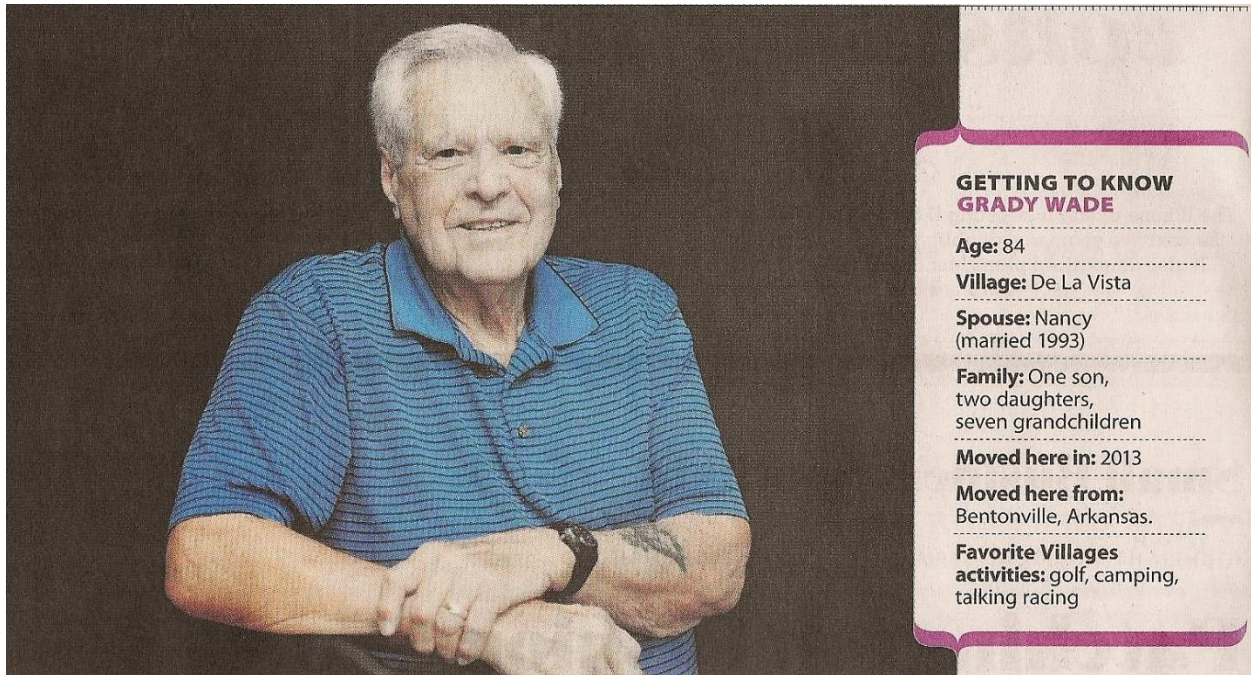


## Villager Backstory

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By Jeff Shain

**You may have seen Grady Wade on golf courses, but you may not know his real driving skill came behind the wheel. He drove 27 years on circuits near his Kansas home base, including time in the famed “Indy Killer” sprint car.**



For a Kansas lad attracted to fast cars, Grady Wade could not have picked a much better street to grow up on.

Down the street was a neighbor who raced a 1934 Ford jalopy on weekends. Another neighbor had a small dirt track behind his machine shop. A deal was made: If 14-year-old Wade would clean up the Ford on Mondays, he could drive a few laps on that track.

“I’d clean that car up and hot-lap the (heck) out of it,” recalled the Village De La Vista resident, noting that neighbors doing Monday laundry were less enthused.

“They didn’t care for the dust,” he added, “but I was having a ball.”

A seed had been planted. Wade started entering races at 18, spending 27 years at tracks across the heartland while taking the checkered flag in modifieds, supermodifieds and sprint cars.

He won the BCRA (Big Car Racing Association) sprints title in 1965, despite a harrowing crash that required much of the car to be rebuilt one week before the finale. A year later, he was Rookie of the Year on the IMCA (International Motor Conference Association) circuit, considered just a couple of notches below IndyCars.

## **“Offy Killer”**

He did that behind the wheel of the No. 25 “Offy Killer,” which had made its own name some years earlier as builder Chet Wilson sent a small-block Chevrolet engine up against the more expensive Offenhausers and frequently beat them.

“Oh man, that car was fantastic,” Wade recalled. “That car would just jump and run. I had a lot of good cars, but they weren’t the 25.”

Wade, though, was never limited to one car or even one series. Many weekends would find him racing three different cars for three different owners on three different tracks in three different towns – driving a few hours through the night before reaching the next stop.

“We’d run either Oklahoma City or Topeka on Friday nights,” he recalled. “Saturday you could run Tulsa, Enid, Dodge City. You had plenty of places for racing. After (World War II), it seemed every little town had a race track.”

As Wade worked his way up the racing ranks, his territory stretched accordingly – from Illinois to Colorado, South Dakota to Texas. And he did it all while still holding down a full-time job in Wichita as a construction chief, driving between projects to check their progress.

“As long as all my crews were busy, I could do what I wanted,” Wade said. “So I got a lot of Fridays off, a lot of Mondays off.”

## **An Immediate Hit**

The 1965 BCRA title proved a springboard for his best years, though his season nearly ended one race too soon. A wreck sent him end-over-end several times, leaving the track and settling on its wheels in a nearby field.

“Every part of that car was bent” he recalled. “We had to make one more race and I had to at least take eighth place. My mechanics – there were four of them – they worked on that car day and night in shifts. In four days, they had it running again.”

Starting from the back in Oklahoma City, Wade took second to claim the title. Soon thereafter came Wilson’s call.

“That car was fabulous,” Wade reiterated, “and I was an immediate hit.”

The next step, it seemed, would have been to one of the top developmental circuits in the Upper Midwest, where he could find his way into the IndyCar pipeline. Wade even had an offer to drive a car up there sponsored by Bardahl Oil Company, but turned it down.

“I thought it over for quite a while,” he said. “But I thought, ‘Nah, I can’t do this.’ I had a house, cars, family. I had three kids. You’ve got to think about those.”

Wade kept his usual race schedule until 1975, when he abruptly hung up his helmet after being offered a partnership in a construction materials supplier in Arkansas.

“We drove to Little Rock,” he said, “looked at it, shook hands on it and two weeks later, I’m down there opening a store.” A second store in Louisiana followed a few years later.

Wade still watches races, preferring the open-wheel IndyCars to NASCAR.

“I still think I can do it. That’s my problem,” he said.