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One final turn

The Petoskey Motor Speedway

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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One final turn

PETOSKEY MOTOR SPEEDWAY (1954-1958)

By Richard A. Wiles

The first car race in Michigan took place on October 10, 1901, on a horse-racing track built in 1894 by the Detroit Driving Club. It was located in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, just east of Detroit, and on that fall day, Henry Ford beat Alex Winton while 12,000 spectators watched. It was the first Michigan and Midwestern car race on a closed circle track. The track's length was one mile and Ford's car, named "Sweepstakes," won the 10-lap race as the event's underdog. Two years later, Henry Ford began the Ford Motor Company.

Oval-track car-racing became common shortly after the arrival of the automobile, but grew more popular in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. The first cars were open-wheeled racers (no fenders) specifically built to race. The other type of dirt track racer started in the southern states. These racecars were referred to as "stock cars." They were regular, everyday cars with fenders that were modified to race. A common saying among open-wheel racing fans was, "Real racecars do not have fenders."



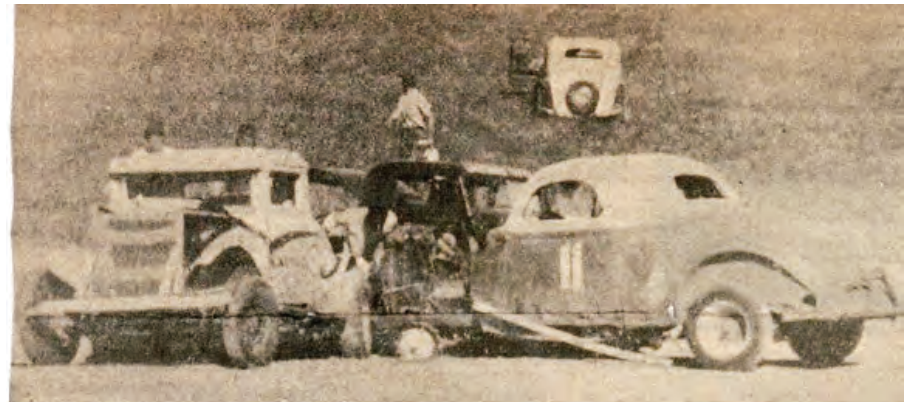
"Jalopies roar to a fast start in one of the several races at the Petoskey Motor Speedway Saturday night where over 1,000 persons lined the oval for the popular event. In the above photo starter Al Maize of Cadillac gives the racers the green flag. Near the starter is the John Stradling car from Harbor Springs while No. 1 is Dick Hubble, a newcomer from Kewadin. The races will be held again in the afternoon of July 4 and motorcycle events will be added. (News-Review photo by Fred Lovelace)" - from the July 2, 1956, *Petoskey News-Review*

Dirt track racing is still the single most common form of car racing in the United States with an estimated 1,500 tracks in operation. In Michigan, there were, at one time, over 150 dirt tracks operating from the 1940s through the early 1970s. The idea of oval-track automobile racing was first promoted in the late 1940s by William “Bill” France of Daytona Beach, Florida. He would go on to NASCAR fame as its founder.

In northern Michigan, there were dirt tracks in Benzonia, just south of Traverse City, Houghton Lake and West Branch, in Petoskey, Elmira, and one in Onaway. In all, there were some dozen or more dirt tracks in operation through the 1950s and 1960s. Most of these tracks opened in the early 1950s. Petoskey Motor Speedway, located just southwest of the city in Resort Township on Washout Road (currently Eppler Road) opened in 1954.

These dirt tracks were built with banked turns and were usually a quarter- or half-mile in length. The preferred soil on the track surface was clay, if it could be found. Most of the venues for the oval tracks were old farm fields in areas where noise and traffic would not cause a stir. The Petoskey Motor Speedway was such a place. The Sterzik family farmland was rented by Petoskey resident and downtown Gamble’s storeowner Richard Moore in 1953. His quarter-mile track was created in time for the summer 1955 opening races on Memorial Day weekend.

At that time, Moore was the owner of the Bay Area gas station next to Cappel Motors on the bluff overlooking Little Traverse Bay. He also later owned



“Thrills and excitement were offered at the Petoskey Motor Speedway yesterday in the Labor Day races. In the above action shot, three cars become involved in a spectacular crash. Car 23 on the left, driven by Don Wolfe of Gaylord, spun out, hitting \$1.98, driven by Dick Moore, Petoskey. Gene Sexton in No. 11 crashed into the two cars, losing a wheel. The front end on \$1.98 was wiped out but the owner reported it back in shape today and it will be ready for the next race Saturday night. (News-Review photo by Al Schaller)” - from September 6, 1955, *Petoskey News-Review*

the Petoskey’s Union 76 gas station (1970s). The year 1947 would be listed by many southern Michigan track’s history pages as the year they first began. The Petoskey Motor Speedway was the first in northern Michigan beginning in 1954, but it was soon followed in the late 1950s by other tracks scattered throughout the Upper Peninsula and the northern Lower Peninsula.

The cars used at the Petoskey speedway were vintage 1930s and 1940-1948 stripped-down stock cars (production cars) made into “jalopies.” According to a 1929 Webster’s dictionary, jalopy meant “an old car in dilapidated condition.” These pre-World War II vehicles were the only ones allowed to race and would have their glass removed, a steel roll bar installed over, or just behind, the driver’s

4–Petoskey Motor Speedway

seat, and their original gas tanks filled with sand to weigh down the rear end. A five-gallon gas can with an electric fuel pump would be the source of the engine's fuel.

Even though the Petoskey dirt track was made with clay, the track would quickly become rough. The jalopies would fly by at 40-to-50 miles per hour and on the banked turns, they would kick up a lot of dirt. Holes in the track appeared almost immediately, which made steering sometimes quite difficult. It also led to losing control of the cars. To counteract this, the track crew would stack bales of straw along the inside and outside of the turns, in case a driver lost control. That happened quite often. It was all part of the excitement enjoyed by the crowds of people who paid to enter the racing grounds.

According to Moore, during the first race in 1954, there was so much dust and so many holes developed that he closed the track for two weeks while it was rebuilt. He decided to use kiln dust from the cement plant where his father-in-law, Larry Platt, worked. A 12-inch base of sand, water and kiln dust was laid and, over that, about 6 inches of red clay. That solved the problem of the holes and is most likely the reason the oval track can still be seen today, more than 50 years after it closed.

A trick many veteran drivers used during the race was to tie the floor-level gearshift to the dash board to keep the car in second gear — the gear most racers preferred. If the gearshift wasn't tied down, the rough track would cause it to jump out of gear. And because of the dust, many drivers wore some type of face covering, usually found at a mil-



itary surplus store. These were World War II-style goggles and leather helmets like those worn by fighter pilots. In the beginning, the safety features were primitive. Later on, helmets made of plastic were used, along with airplane-type seatbelts.

A favorite old car of many drivers was the Ford Model T. (But not at PMS – the Model T was never raced there.) The car could be picked up in a junkyard for less than \$25. It would then be modified by having its doors welded shut, adding extra body strength. A rectangular hole was chopped into the top of the car from which the driver could enter and exit.



The Ford 1932 “little deuce coupe” Model B was the PMS driver's favorite jalopy car, though racers soon realized that the 1933- and 1934-model years were even better. Those were the Fords with a wheelbase of 112 inches, along with a newer V-8 engine and an improved carburetor. When put together,



they produced an 85-horsepower vehicle. Also, the 1933 through 1934 Ford V-8 engine was located behind the front axle, which made for a better weight balance needed for dirt track racing.

Ford's two-door sedan cars known as "Tudors" were also a popular choice for jalopy racers. However, Dodge, Chrysler or Chevrolet never seemed to develop the popularity among these auto racers of the 1950s and 1960s.

Rufus Parnell "Parnelli" Jones began his racing career as a jalopy racer at the age of 17. The year was 1950 and he drove a 1934 Ford Tudor. His car number was 66, but his best friend and racing companion, Bob Sweet, once said, when he would first watch Parnelli race at the Orange Show Stadium in San Bernadino, California, "He (Parnelli) was upside down so much



6—Petoskey Motor Speedway

that his number might as well have been 99.”

Races at the Petoskey Motor Speedway were on Saturday nights during the summer months beginning with Memorial Day weekend. Admission was charged per car, from 50 cents up to 90 cents. Moore stated that 40% of the night’s gate was always given to the drivers in the form of prize money. The more spectators there were, the higher the prize money.

According to author Garret Smith of Harbor Springs, “On Saturday nights in the summer when one could not go to the races at the track ... a young man could sit on the porch or lie in bed and hear the engines roaring across Little Traverse Bay like it was approaching thunder.”

Some of those engines in 1957 belonged to Charlevoix’s Jim Novotny, Petoskey’s Bill Boyer, or Harbor Springs residents John and Jim Stradling. Other names listed in the 1957 PMS brochure included Norm Pemberton, Garth Hall, Bill Beyer, Jack Niswander, Dick Durlin, Dick Hubbell and Jake Ellenbach. Gene Denman, founder of Gene’s Auto Parts in Traverse City, was also a regular of the Petoskey track.

Operating the speedway was a family affair, with Moore’s wife, Joyce, handling the ticket sales and the concession stand. She also was involved in making sure the financial aspect of the track was cared for. Young son Richard Jr. and daughter Linda, would stack the pop cases, pick up trash around the track and help make



“Jalopy entry in the July 4 races at the Petoskey Motor Speedway is Bill Boyer’s 7-11, a rebuilt Ford that withstood the acid test in Traverse City last Sunday when it was rolled in a race there. There are 12 cars lined up for the opening race according to track owner Nick Moore. (News-Review photo by Fred Lovelace)” - from the July 1, 1955 Petoskey News-Review

the popcorn. The old bus concession stand was run by Joyce’s parents, Larry and Helen Platt.



Joyce Moore

According to Richard Jr., his father once hired a Roy Rogers look-alike riding a Trigger look-alike horse to wave fans into the stands and infield. For that evening’s slate of races, he was the official greeter and the crowd loved it.

Author Smith’s unfinished book, titled, “Thunder Across the Bay,” was based on his father’s recollections of the speedway. He wrote, “A short walk through a clump of pine trees and tall grass behind the new

Odawa Casino will bring you down to the area of the track. You will be surrounded by old rusting remnants of the Saturday night battles of long ago that are the only reminders of Petoskey Motor Speedway ... The old yellow school bus that once served as the concession stand has been removed. The old wooden grandstands, track fencing, and the lighting have all fallen over or collapsed from the many hard winters since 1958.”

The track’s announcer was John Rostar (at least in 1957), and Al Maize would serve as the flagman. A pit man was on hand to serve as a mechanic and he was George Gregory. Even an ambulance service was provided in case of an accident. The track was heavily banked on the one end that faced the northeast and coming out of that turn downhill toward Little Traverse Bay was always



at a full bore. That was the track's back stretch where many lap passes would take place.

The flag man stood on the track or to the side to flag the races. It was his job to be the eyes for the drivers by watching what was ahead and then using colored flags to warn or inform the drivers. He used a green flag to start the race and a yellow flag to warn the drivers of a problem ahead. A motionless yellow flag meant there was a problem off track but if he was waving the yellow flag, there was an on-track problem ahead.

When the yellow flag was in effect there was no passing allowed from the point of where the flag man stood to the point of the problem ahead. If a red flag came out, the race was stopped. The final lap of the race was indicated by the white flag. When the

checkered flag was waved, it meant the race was over and it was time for the drivers to take a cool-down lap.

The flag man always started the race from the center of the track and then would flag the race by moving over to the side of the track (on the inside). A black flag meant — get off the track! During one of the 1958 races at Petoskey Motor Speedway, flag man Frank Rostar was accidentally struck and his legs run over while performing his job. The unfortunate accident had a very negative effect on the speedway operation with the direct results eventually bringing permanent closure of the track.

After the track closed in the late 1960s, the parcel of land began to revert back to pasture. However, the hard-packed surface of the track made it impossible for a disc or plow to churn it and it is

still in place. Today, all that is left at the track's site are some old tires and metal parts. From the air, the site can be easily seen during the non-winter months. The infield is now home to pine trees and grass. Immediately next to the old site sits the Odawa Casino. The roar of the track's jalopy engines and the crowd watching is just a memory. Few driving by the spot would ever guess it was home to the Petoskey Motor Speedway. 🌿

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.