

Whatever Happened To ... Palmyra Speedway

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During the 1940's, the Palmyra Fairgrounds racetrack was the place for stock car racing fans to go to watch their favorite local racers compete against drivers from New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

About 1949, those races were halted. Among the participants was Delbert "Windy" Wilcox. At the time, he was working as a skilled mechanic at Garlock, Inc. His avocation however, was building and repairing "anything with a motor" according to his daughter, Janet Herman. He especially enjoyed working on racecars.

Before racing at the fairgrounds ended, Wilcox and some of his friends had talked about having a track that was more suited to stock car racing. The more they talked, the better it sounded. When racing was discontinued at the fairgrounds, Wilcox got the okay from landowner Walt Pulcini and commenced shaping a quarter-mile track on Rt. 31, east of Palmyra village behind what is now the Palmyra Moose Club on the site where he had tested the cars on which he worked.

Suddenly Windy Wilcox had become a racing promoter. Memorial Day of 1950 was Opening Day at Palmyra Speedway with Wilcox, his wife and seven children running "the whole show." Janet Herman remembers that they provided all of their own music, food, grounds- keeping equipment, electricity and even their own ambulance.

May 30, 1950, promoter Eddie Collins and the Interstate Auto Racing Club staged the first of a series of races at the speedway. The field of over 40 cars was more than twice the normal expected number. Among those entered for that first race were the 1949 I.A.R.C. Western New York Division champion Billy Rafter and the third place holder, Don Daniels. Former racer Don Davison was the starter for the day.

The next five years saw many drivers race at Palmyra Speedway. A few of them were: (in no particular order) Bob Monsell, Harold DeWitt, Ken Trautman, Bob Whitcomb, Dick Priest, Bob Hudson, Harold Hicks, Paul Plumadore, Glenn Reinus, Ray Murray, Dick Neverless, "Wee Willie" Allen, the O'Neill brothers, Dick Hill and Frank Gulick, who also provided welding services for the other drivers. Bill Slocum, another former racer, remembers the Houghtaling Brothers with their "big ole' boats"—Hudson Hornet cars racing numbers 112, 113 and 114.

There were several problems to overcome in association with running the track. One of the problems with the dirt track was the

huge volume of dust raised as the cars sped around the oval at 50 mph or more. No amount of watering could rectify the situation for long. One season, Wilcox promised that he had alleviated the dust problem. According to a promotional article, reportedly he had put four to five thousand gallons of oil on the track. Obviously, that was before the day of D.E.C. intervention.

In 1954, the races were moved from Friday night to Saturday night. Doing so avoided a conflict with the races held at the Monroe County Fairgrounds, which increased the number of drivers and cars. Also, it was felt that Friday shopping hours interfered with spectator attendance. Johnny Church, a NASCAR driver of long standing, won the first Saturday feature on July 24. Palmyra Speedway regular Bob Hudson pulled up in second place.

Wilcox and his associates could not have been accused of discrimination because of gender. They ran Powder Puff Derbies, which appealed to many young and young-at-heart women. Such a race was scheduled that first Saturday, and Eve Crayton of Ontario won the race with Hattie Foss, also of Ontario, in second place. Palmyra Speedway's Joan Johnson was third and Micky Woodard of Rochester finished fourth.

Night racing under the lights was also tried. One reporter stated, "If you have never seen the stock cars run on a ¼ mile track under lights, you have missed a real thrill. With all the different colors, it sure is something to see. Last Saturday the jockeys turned the ¼ mile track at 53 miles per hour and with 16 to 20 cars on the track, there is plenty of action all the time. The cars are visible all of the time."

What racing event doesn't include a mishap or two? One such incident ended a race on a Sunday afternoon at the Speedway. What was scheduled as a 30-lap feature was stopped at the end of the fourth lap when Bob Monsell of Lyons rolled his car over seven times. Another documented mishap happened in front of "a large attendance of racing fans and a full house of stock cars on hand." According to reports, "three heats were run before the rains came. The third heat required three re-starts due to four and five-car pileups which delayed the actual start of the race." On Sept. 26, 1954, midget car driver Jack Walker of Medina cut his motor in two and flipped off the track and rolled over a 15-foot embankment. He suffered only a burned left arm from the hot oil, but was badly shaken up from his wild ride.

When asked what he remembered about racing at Palmyra Speedway, former midget car driver Harvey Rousseau said that he used to drive for "Windy." One day he and Ken Trautman had raced the "Wilhar Special" as the car was named, and had won at the

Cortland Fairgrounds. They then returned to Palmyra and used their winnings to pay the feature winners at the speedway that evening.

About sponsorship, Rousseau said, "Yeah, they gave you a set of sparkplugs and slapped a (Champion) sticker on your car and called themselves sponsors. It sure was a far cry from the NASCAR circuit."

He then added that the speedway racers were competitors, but more importantly, they were friends. He recalled once Harold DeWitt injured his knee quite badly and couldn't drive. Rousseau finished the last two races for DeWitt that night.

On Labor Day 1955, the last race was run at Palmyra Speedway. It had become obvious to Wilcox that he could not control spectator parking along Rt. 31, and that too many onlookers were seeing the show without paying admission—clearly a case of location, location, location. Harvey Rousseau summed it all up by saying, "Nobody got rich or famous, but we had a lot of fun."

And after all, isn't that what it's all about?

Thanks to the following friends for their help: Janet Herman, Ken Trautman, Harvey Rousseau, Bill Slocum and Morris VandeWalle.