

THUNDER, DIRT AND MUD AT MCHENRY

Maryland

"Deep Creek Speedway Was NASCAR Before NASCAR Was NASCAR." — Hugh Umbel

Written by **Dan Whetzel**



"A LOT OF GUYS would buy a car at the junkyard for fifty or a hundred dollars and fix it up for racing. We certainly didn't have big money sponsors back then. Stock car drivers saw racing as a fun thing to do; they liked to play with their cars."

Mountain Lake resident "Red" Frederick's memories of local stock car racing capture the humble origins of the National Association of Sports Car Drivers, or NASCAR. The competition can be traced to the Appalachian Mountains and the scores of dirt tracks that generated Saturday night, small town excitement during the 1940s-1950s. And while not a formally designated NASCAR facility, McHenry, Maryland, hosted stock car races during the early days of the sport.

SPILLS!!! THRILLS!!! CHILLS!!!

STOCK CAR RACES

Deep Creek Speedway

ON U. S. 219, 10 MILES NORTH OF
OAKLAND, MARYLAND

SUNDAY, JUNE 21

TRIAL RUNS 1 P. M. RACE TIME 2:30 P. M.
STANDARD TIME

Races Every Holiday and Every Sunday

Don't Miss 'em!

Admission \$1.25 Children under 12-25c

Deep Creek Lake's inaugural race was held on Memorial Day weekend, 1953, when fourteen hundred fans paid the \$1.25 admission fee to the quarter-mile track at McHenry. The two day event attracted a slate of seven drivers, who provided competition and excitement as they vied for prize money by racing homemade hot rods. Organizers and promoters, Gordon Bray, Leon "Speedy" Sites, and Bud Vanucci, began building the "Deep Creek Speedway" during the fall of 1952 on the present day site of Garrett County Fairgrounds. Garrett County drivers competing in the early races at McHenry included Don Glotfelty, Al Gatto, Dale Upole, Bill Herman, Junior Pritts, Charles "Speedy" Shahan, Dayton Alexander, Whitey Bennett, Red Frederick, Paul Thomas, Marlin Lawson, Park Tressler, Don Sisler, Ollie Beckman, and Frank Beckman.

The speedway provided fans with wooden bleacher seating and a refreshment stand, while drivers were accommodated with a clay track and a \$100 first place award in the feature race—quite a contrast to the high dollar venues NASCAR fans and drivers enjoy today.

Local drivers were sometimes offered limited support from local promoters and sponsors. According to Red Frederick, "You might find a sponsor who would give you ten or twenty dollars. I remember one ice cream store in Oakland that would buy me five gallons of gasoline. And to cut expenses, we towed our cars to race; we didn't haul them inside a trailer. Money was scarce." Paul Thomas, a competitor at the McHenry speedway, also recalled limited money being offered for his vehicle. "Coca Cola paid for the lettering on my Ford and that was it. I was never paid to race. The only money I got was from whatever I won in the race." Deep Creek Lake resident Frank Beckman echoed those memories. "A lot of drivers did their own work on cars in those days. They just put up their own money and built it from scratch."

Ralph Pritts Garage, Vetter Brothers, and Harvey Spiker consistently sponsored the McHenry drivers. Paul Thomas also remembered, "There were a couple of drivers who had a garage mechanic—one was from Pritt's Garage and another one was from Kern's machine shop. But most guys worked on their own cars."



Friendsville resident Marlin Lawson in his #119, '34 flat head Ford coupe with a supercharger. People couldn't always see what it was but they could sure hear it.

Red noted that in the early days of McHenry racing a stock car was "a regular production model you drove right off the road. Guys then overhauled the engine. If the engine got too hot and blew up, you just went to the junkyard and bought another one." Drivers would "start by boring engines out to make more cubic inches. Sometimes a 239 cubic inch Ford would end up with 300 cubic inches. They also used aluminum fly wheels and changed the crankshafts. There were a lot of tricks." Another modification was the installation of hydraulic brakes. "The old mechanical ones didn't work very well. We used to take them from Dodges and Chevys to put on Fords because they (Ford) didn't come out with hydraulic brakes until later." He also noted that, "Most cars were equipped with a bigger radiator for cooling purposes and the steering was modified to make for quicker responses on the tight turns."

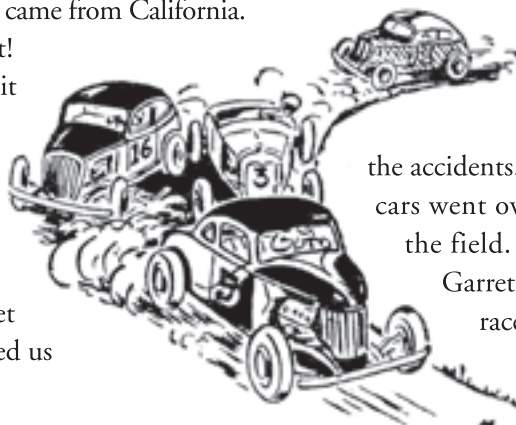
Paul Thomas made inexpensive modifications to his flat head, 1938 V-8 Ford coupe. "I used an aluminum fly-wheel and a highlift three-quarter inch cam. I also put in a roll bar; that was all I could afford. All modifications were made to suit the drivers because there were no classifications or restrictions on the cars. "We didn't have many rules back then. You just showed up and ran the heats. Nobody checked anything. You did to your car whatever you had



Even in the 1950s, roll bars were a necessity for safety. As shown above, the roll bar protected Frank Beckman from injury when his car overturned.

the money to do.” Apparently the only consistent rules required a roll cage and a bucket seat equipped with a seat belt. Rear ends on the cars were also typically modified, so that both rear wheels would spin at the same time.

Friendsville resident Marlin Lawson raced the #119, '34 flat head Ford coupe that was modified by “using an Offenhauser head, turning over the cam, and installing a blower on the carburetor. We put on a supercharger and it caused more commotion than any other car in the county. People couldn't see what it was but they could sure hear it. We took the supercharger from a Frazier and then ordered a bonnet for it from Englewood, California. In the meantime we used a Prince Albert tobacco can to put over the four barrel carburetor until the bonnet came from California. The Prince Albert can worked great! When the bonnet came, we installed it by putting gaskets on the bottom and top. It worked too but the Prince Albert can was just as good. We were the only ones with a supercharger at that time because it was a high price item. The Frazier dealer let us have it for two seasons and it helped us win races.”



During the 1950s American made cars were used exclusively by racing enthusiasts. According to Paul, “Most guys liked to race Ford coupes in those days; the favorite one was the '32 Ford. Those cars actually became scarce because so many drivers wanted them.”

The Deep Creek Speedway fought for a competitive edge over nearby dirt tracks by offering special attractions like the 1953 “powder puff” (women's) races and dare devil drivers. Buddy Wagner's 1955 Tournament of Thrills promised spectators “22 Smashing, Crashing, Events.” The spectacle returned in June, 1956 and promised race goers that brand new Fords would be featured. Despite added attractions, the McHenry races did not last beyond the 1956 season.

According to Paul Thomas, “Deep Creek was a few years ahead of its time. The racing didn't catch on with the people here.” Another problem was the type of clay used for the track surface. “When they watered the track it was too slick. When it was dry it was just too dusty and dirty. People in the bleachers were covered with dust and drivers had a hard time seeing the other cars.” Marlin Lawson remembered unique characteristics of the track. “You would roll to the outside every time you went into the lake turn. And when it wasn't too wet, it was too dusty. But in those days, we weren't choosy. We took what came to us. I was just glad to get out and race.”

Hugh Umbel, business owner at Deep Creek and McHenry, was an avid fan of the races as a youngster and retains fond memories of the speedway. Hugh's father dropped him off along old Route 219 and he walked across the field to the bleachers. He recalled, “The track was usually dusty and it would have to be watered. Maybe that caused some of the accidents. I remember a couple of times when cars went over the rail and rolled down through the field. Even today when it's time for the Garrett County Fair, I have memories of the races I saw as a kid.”

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Some of the racers and their cars at the Deep Creek Speedway during the 1950s. The Speedway was on the present day site of Garrett County Fairgrounds. There was limited sponsorship in those days — most drivers did their own work and used their own money.

Bottom right photo: The #6-7/8 car was raced by Charles "Speedy" Shanan.

We would like to thank Hugh Umbel for suggesting this story and for supplying old news articles for our research and photos from his collection for use here.

Local tracks at Morgantown, Fort Ashby, Elkins, and in nearby Pennsylvania maintained their circuits until paved tracks and sanctioned NASCAR events attracted the attention of racing enthusiasts. Most small dirt tracks were closed by the 1970s as NASCAR exploded in popularity and increasingly attracted corporate sponsors. R.J. Reynolds' sponsorship of the 500 mile race at Talladega in 1971, later known as the Winston 500, marked the beginning of big money stock car racing. Paul noted there is "no comparison between the old dirt track races and today's NASCAR. They spend more money on one engine than all of us spent in an entire summer of racing." Marlin agreed, "Today's racing is about money; back then it was a hobby. If we won \$30 in a race, it was a lot of money."

Times have changed and Deep Creek Speedway memories are exclusive to senior residents. Only the Allegany County Fairgrounds continues to host regional stock car racing on the half mile track at Fairgo. Perhaps the McHenry races were ahead of their time. As Hugh Umbel states, "The McHenry races were NASCAR before NASCAR was NASCAR. I always enjoyed them and hated to see the track close." Or perhaps the races reflected a time when shade tree mechanics could enjoy the hands-on experience of using wrenches, screw drivers, and sockets to modify what Detroit had manufactured. New vehicles don't offer the same mechanical opportunities because they are equipped with a sophisticated combination of components and software packages that restrict engine work to highly trained technicians possessing expensive diagnostic equipment. Or perhaps the races were simply part of the inevitable evolution toward the bigger, faster, stronger philosophy that influences all competitions. Regardless of the reasons for its demise, the Deep Creek Speedway provided fun and competition during a less hectic time when guys could still build 'em and race 'em just for the fun of it. Maybe that is the most important legacy of all.



Cumberland Area 2009 Car & Truck Shows

May 23 – Super Cruise
Memorial Day Weekend
Industrial Blvd., South
Cumberland, 5-9 pm

May 29-30 – Jenkins Chrysler
MOPAR Show – Country Club Mall
(inside), LaVale, MD, 10am - 9:30 pm

July 25 – 7th Annual Ali Ghan Shrine
Cruise-In – Cumberland, MD, 3-8 pm

Sept. 5 – Super Cruise Labor Day
Weekend – Industrial Blvd., South
Cumberland, 5-9 pm

Sept. 19 – 9th Annual Ford Model T
& Model A Car & Truck Show –
Downtown Cumberland Mall /
Allegany Museum, 10am - 4pm

Sept. 26 – C&O Canal/Rail Fest 5th
Annual Car & Truck Show – Canal
Place, Cumberland, 10am - 4pm

For information call: 301-724-4339

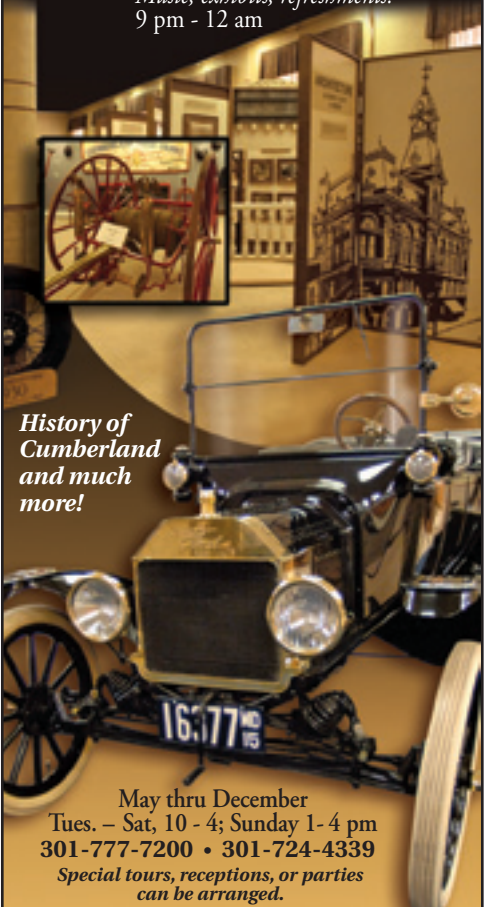


Allegany Museum

81 Baltimore St., Downtown Cumberland

2009 Calendar of Events

- May 15** **Allegany Museum Open House**
*Exhibits New Museum Mission
Refreshments, entertainment 5-9 pm*
- May 15** **Allegany Museum Opens**
- June 13-14** **Heritage Days Open House**
*Special tours and exhibits.
Sat. & Sun. 10 am - 4 pm*
- May-Sept.** **"Friday After Five"**
Friday evenings 5 - 9 pm
- May-Oct.** **Bus Tours** – *Allegany Museum,
Gordon Roberts House, Castle, etc.*
- Sept. 19** **9th Annual Ford Model T
& Model A Car/Truck Show**
Dash plaques, goodie bags, etc. 10 - 4
- Sept. 26** **Canal Fest/Rail Fest**
*Museum Antique Car/Truck Show,
model canal boats, etc. 10 - 4*
- Nov. 6-15** **Cumberland Goes to War**
Tours, Military appraisals 12 - 4 pm
- Nov. 20-** **Festival of Trees** 12 - 4 pm
Dec. 12 *Chefs, Children's Day, Ladies Night*
- Nov. 27** **Holiday Open House** 5-9 pm
Special decorations, quartet, carols.
- Dec. 4,
11, 18** **Santa Claus Visitation**
*Mr. & Mrs. Claus, carriage rides,
photos, treats, etc. Free 5 - 9 pm*
- Dec. 31** **New Year's Eve Open House**
*Music, exhibits, refreshments.
9 pm - 12 am*



*History of
Cumberland
and much
more!*

May thru December
Tues. – Sat, 10 - 4; Sunday 1- 4 pm
301-777-7200 • 301-724-4339

*Special tours, receptions, or parties
can be arranged.*