

103 Miles an Hour in 1915

BY BILL SEWARD

Only the older racing fans will remember one of the most noteworthy eras in the history of automobile racing in Iowa. This era was centered on the summers of 1914 and '15 and its focal point was a field just south of West Des Moines.

In 1914 Iowa had sent three cars to the Indianapolis race, all designed and built by Des Moines' Fred Duesenberg and one was driven by Eddie Rickenbacker. The following year a one-mile board track was erected just south of West Des Moines (then Valley Junction). This saucer-shaped structure made possible speeds so fast that the danger of racing on it contributed to its own destruction.

A Chicago organization solicited the help of the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce in building the track. About 150 tickets at \$50 each, good for the lifetime of the speedway, were sold before work was begun on the huge structure. The track was built of two-by-fours laid so that the track was four inches in depth. The whole works required 96 box cars of lumber and 50 tons of nails, and at times 250 workmen were busy putting the structure together.

Auto racing had gotten its start several years previously with I.M.C.A. meets at the fairgrounds. And the builders (Prince Speedway, Inc.) evidently foresaw a great future for racing in Des Moines. They constructed the \$100,000 layout to seat 10,000 in the grandstands and to accommodate 6,000 cars and passengers in the infield. They guaranteed the Chamber of Commerce speeds of better than 90 m.p.h.

The track was formally opened July 25, 1915, with Barney Oldfield, first I.M.C.A. champion, on hand to make the first runs. The big cigar-smoker averaged 103 m.p.h. in going two miles in 1 minute 10.15 seconds and 99 m.p.h. in going five miles in 3 minutes and 1.45 seconds. This was considerably faster than had been recorded on the 2½ mile track at Indianapolis and probably faster than anyone has driven the two mile distance on an Iowa track in the many years since. Indianapolis records don't show 100 m.p.h. speeds before 1919.

Quite an aftermath in police court ensued. Oldfield and seven other participants in the activities were hauled in for violating the Sunday closing law. Barney paid a \$5.00 fine and \$2.85 costs. Actually though, this was only minor business. Police had hid around a curve in the 5300 block on Grand avenue and had taken down the license numbers of more than 100 fans speeding 30 or 35 m.p.h. They all received summonses that week.

The first big event on the track, a 300-mile race, was scheduled July 31, but it had to be postponed a week because of rain. Fourteen drivers had arrived in Des Moines several days previously and following the time trials prior to the day of the race, the 12 fastest were given starting positions.

A crowd of 10,000 was on hand, having traveled by private auto, special street cars running just two minutes apart and by special Rock Island train direct to the track. Ticket prices ranged from \$2.00 to \$4.00.

Among the entrants was Ralph DePalma, winner of the Indianapolis "500" that year. In the time trials, DePalma had broken American Automobile Association records for five miles, averaging 98 m.p.h., and for 10 miles, doing 97 m.p.h. Bob Burman had broken the four-mile mark with a 96 m.p.h. average.

The *Des Moines Register and Leader*, on the day of the race, described the event as "being watched by the auto world, for it will establish more completely than any previous event, the worth of a new element in the auto racing game: the one-mile, scientifically banked board speedway."

The day was to be marked by tragedy, however. Two racers were killed and two seriously injured. One of the two-man cars went off the top of the saucer, another turned over and rolled 50 feet to the infield. Driver Joe Cooper of Sebring, Ohio, was killed and his mechanic, Louis Peio, was badly injured. Morris (Stubs) Keeler of St. Paul, Minnesota, mechanic for Billy Chandler, also met death and Chandler suffered serious injuries.

Winner of the 300-miler was Ralph Mulford in a Duesenberg. He averaged 87 m.p.h. despite the wrecks with a clocking of 3 hours 27 minutes 5.35 seconds.

Thus the Des Moines Speedway had its one big fling. The fans had clamored for speed, but they'd seen a bit more than they'd bargained for. Though several more events were held at the track in 1915 and 1916, the crowds fell considerably short of the 10,000 who saw the 300-miler.

J. E. Bennett of West Des Moines and Cal Bennett of Waukee, descendants of the family which owned the 100 acres leased to the speedway corporation, blame poor construction and poor attendance for its eventual disappearance. The track, which became unsafe under the effect of adverse conditions, was dismantled and the lumber sold to individuals. The spot where the track stood, just west of the present Penn-Dixie cement plant, is a quiet spot these days. Corn soon will be growing there again, just as it has the many summers since the invasion of the speed machines.—From the *Des Moines Sunday Register*, May 19, 1953 .

Income Tax . . . a Century Ago

The internal revenue blanks for 1865 will be made out upon an amended form. The assessors are required to ask the following questions:

Had your wife any income last year?

Did any minor child of yours receive any salary last year?

Have you included in this return the income of your wife, and salary received by minor children?

Have you any stocks, and what are they?

Is your report made on the basis of gold?

Have you bought or sold stocks or other property?

Have you any United States securities?

Have you kept any book account?

Is your income estimated, or taken from your book?

Have not the expenses, etc., claimed as deductions, already been taken out of the amount reported as profits?

Did you estimate any portion of your profits in making your returns for 1863?

Was any portion treated as worthless and, if since paid, have you included it in this return?—*The 83rd Illinoisan*, Clarksville, Tenn., May 5, 1865.

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