

Daytona's first race a sight to behold

Villager trekked from Alabama to watch the first Daytona 500 race

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By Katie Evans

When Glen Carter first walked into the Daytona International Speedway in 1959 for the first Daytona 500, he was awestruck.

"My Lord have mercy," said the Village of Summerhill resident as he looked around. "It looked like the asphalt just went on forever."

"It was a sight to behold."

Carter, president of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club, had been a racing fan since before the Daytona track was even built. He often went to a local track in his home state of Alabama. In those days, Carter said, the passion for racing was different. You didn't cheer for a driver, but for the make of the car you were driving.

"The cars were stock cars," he said. "It was like they just drove them off the showroom."

Daytona first

Carter heard about the Daytona 500 because he knew some local drivers were going to race in it. The race caught his attention, and Carter and a friend drove down that Saturday for the Sunday race.

"We spent the night in the car," Carter said. "Parked right in front of the stands, right near what would be the Daytona USA now."

And the crowd was huge, Carter said.

"Oh, my Lord, well there was a good crowd there," he said. "But nothing like it is today. It has just built up through the years."

But Carter remembers the first 500 as being uneventful.

"I don't think they had any caution flags the best I can remember," he said. Though there was the mystery surrounding who won the 500.

"We went home thinking Johnny Beauchamp had won," Carter said. "Didn't find out until about a couple of days later that he didn't win it, that (Lee) Petty won it."

Carter said it was an exciting experience.

"It was more speed than I had ever seen before," he said, adding it made him a bigger racing fan. "I was hooked already on the short tracks, but this really made me appreciate the drivers, what it took to race something like that. It made me appreciate the sport."

50 years later

And 50 years after the first running of the Daytona 500, Carter said he's still a huge fan.

"There's no experience in the world like when they go around for that green flag," Carter said. "All those cars accelerating, the roar. It's the greatest moment in racing, or any sport really."



"I just like the sounds and the smells of it: The smell of the gasoline, the smell of the rubber, and just the excitement when they come by you going nearly 200 miles per hour," he added. "You can't turn your head fast enough."

Racing has changed a lot since Carter watched that first Daytona 500, he said. The cars go faster, are more sophisticated, and now it's about the drivers.

But not all the changes have been good in Carter's eyes.

"I don't like the fact that the cars are not stock cars," he said. "It's just one car; you can't tell the difference between one car and another."

And I don't like the fact that they have taken some of the races away from the older tracks," he added. "I guess I'm prejudiced, because I liked when it was in the South. But it's going mainstream, you know. We have to share it with the rest of the country."

Forever a fan

No matter what other changes may come for racing in the future, though, Carter said nothing could affect his passion for the sport.

"They've kind of made us old fans mad (with the changes), but there's nothing we can do about it," he said. "I still like it and I'll still follow it to the day I die."

And, as Carter gears up to watch the 50th running of the Daytona 500 on Sunday, he said he's hoping to see one of the "old-timers" such as Mark Martin or Dale Jarrett, walk away the winner. He added, though, that he doesn't think they have much chance at winning.

But Carter said he's more interested in a good race than a specific driver winning.

"I just want to see a good, clean race, and an exciting one," he said. "Right now I just like all of (the drivers): If they've got enough willpower, strength, to get out there and do the job, I appreciate them for that."