

Life near the fast lane



Peter Travers / Daily Sun
Elaine Harrold, of the Village of Pennecamp, left, and Jane Route, of the Village of Summerhill, both lived in Speedway, Ind., for a number of years.

Villagers recall time spent living minutes from Indianapolis Motor Speedway

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By Keith Pearlman

Quick, in what city is the Indianapolis 500 held?

If, like most people, you offer the obvious answer of Indianapolis, you would be incorrect.

The "Greatest Spectacle in Racing" is actually held every Memorial Day weekend in Speedway, Ind.

The 97th running is set for Sunday at the world-famous Indianapolis Motor Speedway, which is located in the town of about 12,000 residents that was incorporated in 1926. Speedway is an enclave of Indianapolis with its own government, police and fire departments, and school system.

Villagers Elaine Harrold and Jane Route cringe a little when they hear the race called the Indianapolis 500. They both lived in Speedway and are proud of the town's racing heritage.

"Everybody in town hates it being called the Indianapolis 500," Harrold said. "They all believe it should be the Speedway 500."

Route agrees.

"The old-timers really resent it being called the Indianapolis 500," she said. "Speedway is a separate town with a separate identity."

Harrold, of the Village of Pennecamp, moved to the town with her family as a child in 1954. She graduated from Speedway High School in 1965 and was later married and gave birth to her own children in the town.

"I'm proud to say I grew up in Speedway," Harrold said. "We lived three blocks from the famed oval. The grandstands along the front stretch towered over our backyard."

Route, who lives in the Village of Summerhill, moved to Speedway with her husband, Steven, in 1988. Although they only lived in Speedway for four years, her time there left such an impression on Route that she wrote a book about the town – "Speedway" – as part of the "Images of America" series through Arcadia Publishing.

"I was always interested in the history of Speedway," Route said. "The town itself is really interesting. The book is made up mostly of photos of the town and the track in the old days."



Test track

Route said the founder of the track, Carl Fisher, wanted to build it in Indianapolis, but was denied by the city.

"The city officials didn't want the track built within the city limits because they were worried about the noise and they were afraid of the possibility of explosions," Route said.

Route said at the time the track was constructed, it was about 10 miles outside of Indianapolis.

"The reason the track was built was to test the engines they were working on," Route said. "Indiana was a huge car-manufacturing state. The Allison Engine Company had its big factory out there. So they built the track next to the factory to test the new race-car engines."

Fisher began hosting races at the track in 1909, with the first 500-mile race being held on Memorial Day – May 30, 1911. The name at the time was the International 500-Mile Sweepstakes Race.

A tradition was born.

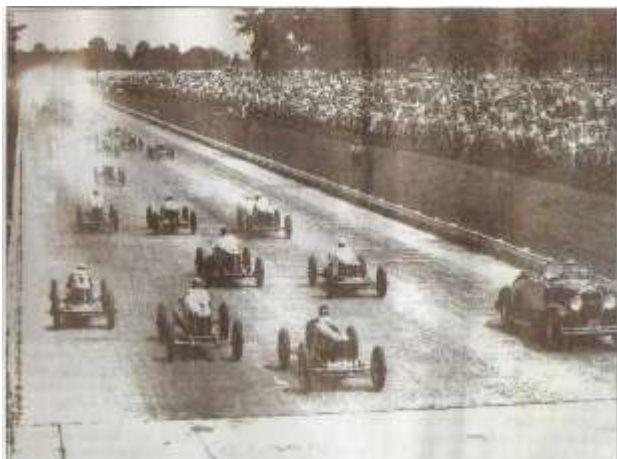
'30 days of Christmas'

By the time Harrold moved to Speedway, the town was the center of the racing world for the entire month of May.

"The month of May was magical," she recalled. "When May 1st came, it was like knowing you had 30 days of Christmas. When we were at school they would up the windows and we could hear the sounds of the engines coming from the track. School was always dismissed for Carburetion Day and it was like an annual school field trip."

Although Route grew up in Muncie – about 60 miles northeast of Speedway – she also remembers the festive atmosphere throughout the weeks leading up to the race.

"Everybody in Indiana looks forward to the race," Route said. "Once the track opened, everybody would spend their weekends at the track. We lived in Muncie, but we used to go for the time



Submitted photo
In this photo from the book, 'Images of America: Speedway,' written by Jane Routte, of the Village of Summerhill, cars race in the 1929 Indianapolis 500 in Speedway, Ind. Ray Keech won the race with an average time of 97.565.

trials. Back then, you could drive into the infield. People would take picnics and hang out all day watching the cars go around."

Harrold said the picnics were one of her favorite aspects of race day.

"We went to the race many times, but it was more fun when we just stayed at mom's," Harrold said. "We could hear everything – the cars, the crowd, (track public address announcer) Tom Carnegie. Mom would put out a spread like you wouldn't believe. It was a total celebration."

Honorary residents

The drivers and celebrities, as well as the thousands of racing fans, who descended upon Speedway each May, were welcomed by the townspeople with open arms.

"We all knew the drivers by their first names," Harrold said. "They all rented rooms in town for the month. They didn't stay in fancy condos or penthouses. They were part of the population for the month."

The Routtes owned a pub on Main Street – just across from the main entrance to the speedway – where drivers would frequently gather.

"My husband got to know several of the drivers," Routte said. "I never met any personally, but you'd see them around town. And we'd get the celebrities like Paul Newman and James Garner."

Speedway residents also are warm to the fans who flock to the town for the 500.

"A lot of die-hard fans would save up their vacation days so they could come stay for two or three weeks leading up to the race," Routte said.

Harrold said her children made a few extra dollars assisting race fans.

"When our boys were old enough, they would go down the street with their wagons and they would haul coolers for visitors going to the track," Harrold said. "They never set a price, but they always ended up making pretty good money."

Economic driver

Needless to say, the speedway itself serves as the lifeblood of Speedway.

When Harrold's father passed away in 1961, her mother, Mary Catherine Woolery, took a job as secretary to the track safety director, Bob O'Neal. She later worked for Aldo Andretti at his auto parts business.

Harrold recounted a favorite story about her mother's time working at the track.

"My mother was the sweetest little woman," Harrold said. "One year, this brash young Texan came into the office and he was demanding this and that. My mother says, 'Young man, I don't know who you are, but around here we say please and thank you.' The young man said, 'I'm sorry ma'am. My name is A.J. Foyt. I'm a rookie and I thought I needed to be noticed to get my credentials.'"

Routte said the speedway's importance to the town is felt all year long, not just in May.

"It's a huge enterprise," Routte said. "It's one of the largest sports arenas in the entire country. And of course they have the NASCAR race now and for a while they had a Formula One race. They have a golf course that goes through the infield and a museum that's open throughout the year. It employs a lot of people."

"Since a lot of the factories that were there in the old days have closed down, the track is even more important to the town. The people there take a great deal of pride in the track and the race."