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Destination: A Short History of Connecticut's Racetracks

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It wasn't long after automobiles were invented that auto racing got started. At first, cars raced on city and country roads, a dangerous endeavor for driver and spectator alike—and one for which it was nearly impossible to charge admission. Those



Cars speed around Thompson International Speedway's banked track in the last race of 1941

problems were remedied when cars started racing on oval horse-racing tracks.

Connecticut's first recorded auto race was at Branford Park, a horse-racing track in New Haven, on July 25, 1899. The track was a half-mile dirt oval and was used for only a couple of years for auto racing. The race was five miles long and was won by Hiram Percy Maxim in his Columbia Special. [For more on Maxim, see Shoebox Archives, page 56.] The second venue also began as an active horse track, Charter Oak Park in Hartford. It was larger, a one-mile dirt oval. Charter Oak Park held auto and horse racing from 1904 to 1929.

Connecticut has had 31 oval tracks. Only 4 are still in operation. Stafford Motor Speedway, the oldest, is located at the Stafford Springs Fairgrounds. The half-mile dirt oval was built as a horse track in 1892, and the first auto race ran in October 1934. There is no record of any auto racing at Stafford again until weekly stock car racing started there in 1948. The original dirt track was paved with asphalt in 1967 and it has remained in operation ever since.

The second-oldest active oval track is Thompson International Speedway in the state's northeast corner. Built in 1940 as a 5/8-mile asphalt track, it was one of the first in the country to be built as a paved track. (Most paved tracks built before 1945, including the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, started out as dirt tracks.) Thompson Speedway also had

different configurations of road courses—the first known in the state—in operation from 1952 to about 1978. Part of one of the old road courses is still visible as part of the pit area. A little-known fact about Thompson is that it is the only Connecticut track ever to host what is now known as NASCAR Sprint Cup races (originally called NASCAR Grand National).

The third active oval track is Waterford Speedbowl, built as a dirt track in 1951 and converted to a paved track a month later. The fourth and newest track is unique as it only holds events during the winter: a new 1/8-mile dirt oval at Mototown USA in Windsor is an indoor Motocross track. It opened in December 2007 for Mini-Sprints and stock cars.

One of the most famous tracks of yesteryear in Connecticut held its first auto race on October 6, 1908 at the Danbury Fairgrounds. The track was a typical half-mile horse track until 1939, when it was shortened to a fifth of a mile and paved with asphalt for midget-car racing. The “mighty mite” cars became very popular in the years leading up to World War II, as they were better suited to smaller tracks. As racecars improved and speeds increased, sometimes track sizes were increased to handle the faster speeds.

Like many tracks in the country, the one in Danbury started out as dirt track and was later converted to asphalt. One reason for paving a track was the constant problem of dust and dirt that was associated with dirt tracks. Still, some drivers—and some fans—prefer one surface over the other. Danbury was expanded in 1947 to a full quarter mile, expanded again in 1951 to one-third mile and converted back to dirt. The track closed from late 1955 until 1958, when it reopened for one race before being converted back to an asphalt surface and renamed the Danbury Fair Racearena. The Racearena became one of the most successful tracks in the country—for a time. The property, which had become increasingly valuable, was sold in 1981 for development and is now the site of the Danbury Fair Mall.

Lime Rock Park in northwest Connecticut is the only active road course left in the state. Lime Rock is a 1.53-mile paved road course with eight turns. The track, which opened 51 years ago, on April 18, 1957, has been the site of numerous major road-racing events and is the pet track of actor and Connecticut resident Paul Newman.

Even a short history would not be complete without mention of the state’s three drag strips. Drag racing began on the West Coast in the late 1940s and quickly worked its way across the country. Both Thompson and Lime Rock used part of their tracks as drag strips in the late 1950s. The only purposely built drag strip was Connecticut Dragway in Colchester. The ¼-mile drag strip operated from 1961 until 1986.

If You Go

Stafford Speedway, 55 West Street, Stafford Springs; (860) 684-2783; www.staffordspeedway.com

Thompson International Speedway, 205 East Thompson Road, Thompson; (860) 923-2280; www.thompsonsporting.com

Waterford Speedbowl, 1080 Hartford Road, Waterford; (860) 442-1585; www.speedbowl.com

Mototown USA, 1001 Day Hill Road, Windsor; (860) 688-5110; www.mototownusa.com

Lime Rock Park, 60 White Hollow Road, Lakeville; (800) 722-3577; www.limerock.com

Louie D'Amore of Dedham, Massachusetts, who owned the winning car in the Thompson International Speedway's inaugural race, shared some of his racing memories recently with HRJ Assistant Publisher Diane Pflugrad Foley.

“When I was a little kid, we used to go down to the track at Reedville. We didn't have any money, so we'd jump over the fence and go in and watch the race. I graduated high school in 1936, then started working in a garage. I wanted to build my own car from the time I saw my first race. In those days, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, you went to a junkyard and got the parts and built yourself a car. None of us had any money; you had to do it yourself. Most cars were 'homemade.' Everybody had a different idea on how to make them, different engines, different styles. If you ran AAA races, there were rules you had to go by, though, and Thompson was the first AAA racetrack we ran.

The first day we ran at Thompson was busy. There was quite a crowd. ... My driver for the first race was “Dizzy” Vance. He was a truck driver, and he also raced motorcycles. He was a good driver, had been driving a couple of years for other people.

We'd run our car in about 12 races on dirt tracks, mostly old horse-racing tracks at fairgrounds. Thompson was the first asphalt track we'd run on, and we really didn't know what to expect from the car. The banked turns really let you pick up speed. We won the feature race on the Inaugural Day. ... A win might get you a couple hundred dollars. Most of us put our winnings right back into our cars.”