The Rise and Fall of

MOTOR CITY DRAGWAY

“For Pleasant & Restful Recreation”: The Foster Boat Company

Anti-German Sentiment Invades the University of Michigan

From Publisher to Pardoner: Arthur DeLacy Wood

East Meets West: Michigan’s Silkworm Fever

Recipes From Malinda Russell, An Experienced Cook
It was 1967, and at a drag strip in St. Clair County, it was the summer of showdowns. Motor City Dragway, which opened in the late 1950s, was a haven for hot rodders, drag racers, gearheads, and thrill seekers. From transistor radios poured the sound of two announcers taking turns, sentence by sentence, hyping up nights at the strip: “You may win a chance to take the wheel of a ’67 Hemi Plymouth and take on the top nationally rated super stock team of Sox & Martin! Beautiful Motor City Dragway is located three miles east of the Edsel Ford Expressway on 26 Mile Road….Be there!”
and on television and hoped to “bring in musical entertainment so the whole family could enjoy Autorama.”

Ridler’s work paid off, and the association soon purchased 42 acres in Ira Township that would become the drag strip. “MHRA secured loans to pay for the concrete racing surface, and Michigan’s first official drag strip was a reality,” wrote Michael Sheridan and Sam Bushala in Show Time.

Although Central Michigan Dragway—later named Mid-Michigan Motorplex—opened in 1956, the strip was not paved until September 1957. With MHRA members spending their weekends helping build the track, Motor City Dragway became the first full-time, paved drag strip in the state.

**THE TRACK’S EARLY YEARS**

The track opened with a bang from May 30 to June 1, 1957, as the MHRA Dragway. Money poured in, and the MHRA soon purchased 40 acres west of the strip for a runoff. Bob Larivee Sr. served as track manager during its inaugural year and was president of the MHRA twice in the late-1950s.

Larivee’s main passion was circle track racing, but he bought a Plymouth wagon with a 350 engine in it so he could drag race at the new track he managed. In 1958, Larivee moved on to producing hot rod shows full-time, ending his role as the drag strip’s manager.

Dick Forton remembers racing his chopped and channeled 1931 Model A coupe, powered by a 1948 Mercury flathead, at the drag strip. “A lot of people got their start at Motor City and later became famous,” said Forton. “The first time I ran, it was against Connie Kalitta.” Conrad “Connie” Kalitta skyrocketed to fame in the mid-1960s as “The Bounty Hunter.” Forton, who beat Kalitta for the top eliminator, hit 98 miles per hour and ran the quarter-mile strip in 13.3 seconds.

The book *Hot Rod Detroit*, edited by Larivee, describes the “fun atmosphere to the races,” such as when “drivers would switch cars with one another and experiment with different techniques.”

**FINANCIAL HARDSHIPS**

Two years after its debut, the strip ran into financial problems. The MHRA instituted a two-dollar assessment on club members—many of whom began to drop out.

Gil Kohn opened Detroit Dragway in Wayne County in 1959, and suddenly, drag racers had a venue closer to the city. Other tracks followed, such as International Acres Raceway, near Grand Rapids; Onondaga Dragway, located north of Jackson; U.S. 131 Dragway in Martin; Milan Dragway, south of Ypsilanti; and Tri-City Dragway in Saginaw. By 1965, there were 130 drag strips in 42 states regulated by the NHRA, plus a slew of tracks sanctioned by smaller organizations.

The MHRA, strapped for cash, rented the drag strip to a promoter, but he struggled too. It was not until 1963, when John Bloom and Leo Martin leased the facility from the MHRA, that things began to turn around.
“Bloom and Martin improved the track and started promoting crowd-pleasing shows with nationally known dragsters, funny cars, gassers and super stocks,” according to Hot Rod Detroit. The track became “International Raceway Park” in 1963 and “Motor City Dragway” in 1965—the year it was illuminated for night racing.

“I put a 427 [engine] in a 1964 Falcon and used to go out there from Hamtramck,” recalled Don Sioma of Maumee, Ohio. “The ‘Little Red Wagon’ and the Ramchargers were the preeminent cars at that time. Everybody was trying something different.”

However, turning a profit remained a challenge, and in 1968, Bloom and Martin did not renew their lease. On October 22, 1968, the MHRA sold its 82 acres of land to Detroit Dragway’s Gil Kohn for $85,000. Hot Rod Detroit tells of how, during the next decade, Kohn “continued to run weekly bracket races, with a healthy dose of rail and funny car shows.” Kohn, now in Boca Raton, Florida, was still the taxpayer on the property in 2019.

DEATH AT THE DRAG STRIP
While the rise of drag strips in the 1950s and 1960s made city streets safer, the sport retained its inherent danger. In North America, 281 drag racers were killed from 1950 to 1980—15 in Michigan and 4 at the Motor City Dragway.

Ed Kacporowski, aged 19, was a member of the Bearing Burners, a Mount Clemens hot rod club. He died June 1, 1958, one day after his stock car crashed at 100 miles per hour during a solo qualification run.

William Maltby of Birmingham was killed August 15, 1965, at the age of 22. His car flipped over while going 100 miles per hour, and he was pitched out of the vehicle.

Thirty-year-old Dick Sawallich of Brighton died on May 20, 1967, when he was thrown from his front engine rail as it came apart at 160 miles per hour under the force of its deploying parachute. He left a wife and three daughters.

Matthew May of Detroit died on July 20, 1975, when his 1967 Chevy rolled three times during a race. According to bracket racer Jim Blake of St. Clair, who witnessed the tragic event, May “developed a water leak and sprayed the track and his tires with engine coolant. It spun him around at top speed. He blew out a tire, went down on his rims and flipped the car.” May was 20.

TOP FUEL & SUPER STOCKS
Top Fuel dragsters have been the kings of the quarter mile since the late 1950s, with their elongated frames, small front tires, giant slicks, and huge engines powered by nitromethane.

In 2001, Don “Big Daddy” Garlits headed the list of the NHRA’s top 50 drag racers of all time. Driving his series of Swamp Rat dragsters, Garlits won 17 national championships, his last at the age of 54. Garlits is now approaching 90 years old and trying to break 200 miles per hour in an electric dragster. He raced at Motor City Dragway a number of times beginning in 1959 and continuing through most of the 1960s, Garlits said from his drag racing museum in Ocala, Florida—though he “never raced there when Kohn owned it.”

Garlits accepted appearance money to race and recalled that he and his opponents, such as Connie Kalitta, would be the only Top Fuel drag racers on the bill. When asked about the Motor City Dragway scene, Garlits said that it was “not bad for a very small operation” and that he loved “the up close interaction with the fans.”

In the early 1960s, Super Stocks had specific carburetor setups, and racers had to stick with factory engines and original seat layouts. Beginning in 1964, Dave Warren of Lexington, Michigan, raced a 389 GTO at Motor City Dragway with his brother, Sid. The car ran 12.3 elapsed times at the drag strip, hitting 112-113 miles per hour.

“Just about everybody ran out there,” said Warren, including Shirley Muldowney, the most famous woman in drag racing.

In 1966, Sid and Dave Warren went to work for Royal Pontiac, the number-one performance car dealership in the nation. The brothers tested cars at Motor City Dragway. “They do the mechanical work in the Royal garage in Royal Oak, then run the car out to Motor City Dragway,” wrote Roger Huntington in the February 1967 issue of Super Stock.
**FUNNY CARS & BRACKET RACING**

By the end of the decade, funny cars eclipsed Super Stocks, and Dave Warren walked away from the sport. But he remembers fondly his time spent at drag strips in the 1960s: “You had a little tower. The pits were all gravel. It was barbaric, really. But it was fun. The average guy could run a car and be competitive.”

In 1966, Logghe Stamping Company of Fraser, Michigan, built the first flip-top funny car for Don Nicholson’s Mercury Comet. The car’s body was constructed out of fiberglass and hinged at the back, allowing the crew to lift the whole body above the lightweight chassis. That design set the course for all future funny cars. Some of the biggest names in funny cars raced at Motor City Dragway, including Roger Lindamood in “Color Me Gone” and Terry Hendricks in “Seaton’s Super Shaker.”

Jim Blake competed in bracket racing, which is a “run what you brung” competition with a built-in handicap system. Drivers establish their own dial-in times through test runs and competitions. In races, they try to come as close as possible to the dial-in time without exceeding it.

Blake drove a 1967 Barracuda with a 340-cubic-inch engine, hitting 100 miles per hour in around 12 seconds. He raced from 1972 to 1978, winning Motor City Dragway’s “Outstanding Drag Racer of the Year” award in 1976. “Reaction time was everything,” said Blake. “And my car was very consistent. I won a lot of races there. I won a lot of money there.”

**THE DRAGWAY’S END**

According to Blake, the drag strip stayed busy until the recession of 1973, right before dying off rapidly. The recession and subsequent stagflation of the 1970s took their toll on drag strips everywhere. Gas was often in short supply, and prices nearly doubled during the decade. The Motor City, Onondaga, and Tri-City drag strips all closed in 1978.

Tough individual circumstances did not help. When manager John Broaden went to open Motor City Dragway for the 1978 season, all of the track’s wiring had been sabotaged. “The vandals were thorough; they cut the wires every three feet or so, ensuring the cables would have to be entirely replaced,” said Hot Rod Detroit about the incident. Faced with the cost of rewiring the facility, the rising expense of track safety, and dwindling crowds, owner Gil Kohn shuttered the strip.

Today, at its former location, evidence of Motor City Dragway’s roaring past remain, such as the crumbling quarter-mile drag strip and quarter-mile runoff, the base of the announcer’s tower, and the teetering frame of the old MHRA Dragway sign—all succumbing to nature.

But, for two decades in the heart of the twentieth century, deafening quarter-mile contests made Motor City Dragway a coliseum for gearheads.

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