



Photo by Dave Rudnik

A weather beaten farm silo still proclaims Pure brand as the official gasoline of Meadowdale Raceways beside a crumbling section of the once-famed racetrack near Rt. 31 in Carpentersville.

Raceway echoes linger in valley

By PATRICIA BOMBARD

A dozen years have lapsed by since the roar of engines and the squeal of hot rubber on asphalt reverberated through the Fox River Valley from the track at Meadowdale International Raceway.

But echoes still ripple through the sleepy valley, lingering in the lives of those touched by the magic of the place where the best European and American drivers once gathered to test their bodies and machines on the twisting track.

There are physical reminders...like the weather-beaten farm silo that still proclaims Pure brand as the official gasoline of the raceway to passersby on Rt. 31 in Carpentersville.

There are fleeting memories...of slick, fast cars roaring through the chute, hectic crews working frantically in the covered pits beneath the grandstand.

There are even hopes that the track will some day be used again.

"Every spring promoters call and say, 'Why don't we open (the raceway) again? It was such a nice place,'" said Jim Bauer, who manages the property for Leonard W. Besinger, principal owner of the racetrack.

But he said the calls drop off after the promoters learn that it will cost some \$3 million to repair the track, which has been severely eroded by time and weather. "You couldn't drive 10 feet on it without braking an axle," said Bauer.

It's unlikely the track will ever see competition again. Instead, according to Bauer, the 230-acre tract, on the bluffs above the Fox River, will probably become the

site of an industrial or multi-family residential development.

"It's a valuable piece of property," said Bauer. "You can see the whole valley from up there."

At present, the Besinger family has no plans for the property, according to Leonard Besinger's son, Greg. He all but ruled out the possibility of opening the raceway. "We're not going to get into that business again. We don't have the money to make it into a racetrack again," he said.

The life of the racetrack, once billed as sure to become "the raceway capitol of world," barely spanned 10 years, with its heyday really over in half that time. Through its turbulent, brief history, the track was loved by those in racing and scorned by neighboring residents who had to cope with the noise and traffic it created.

In its prime, the twisting 3.27 track drew all the big-name drivers of the early '60s, including Mark Donahue, Peter Revson, Jerry Titus, Roger Penske, George Follmer, and Parnelli Jones.

It was a major road racing circuit in its day, and a proving ground for some of the world's fastest cars, including Porsches, Alfa Romeos, Triumphs, Bristols, Scarabs, Corvettes and Chaparrals.

When plans for the track were unveiled in the spring of 1958, there were only four in the world - in France, Italy, Mexico and Florida - comparable. Promoters announced that the track would have the longest - 6,000 feet - straightaway in the United States, a section of track 110 feet above (Please turn to page A3)

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ground, and a highbanked corner on one end patterned after the famed "Monza Curve" in Italy. The twisting, 'far from level' course would require Indy 500-class cars to have special transmission modifications.

Promoters said the \$2 million project would include capacity for \$135,000 spectators and parking for 50,000 cars.

A hectic work schedule, which included rigging an assembly to lay asphalt for the high-banked Monza Wall, completed the track in time for a scheduled opening in September, 1958.

Critics of the track say it opened too soon - the last mile of pavement was laid only two days before the first race and the grass had barely sprouted on the newly landscaped slopes - and that the hast contributed to the track's eventual doom.

On Opening Day, Sept. 14, clouds of dust, raised by high winds sweeping across the open, dirt parking lot area, wrapped around drivers and spectators alike. Then, as if it were an omen, the only fatal accident on the track occurred in the feature race when Robert Walker, 25, of Arkansas lost control of his Ferrari on the hairpin curve and was fatally injured when it rolled over onto a wall of hay bales.

The race was won by Chuck Daigh, of Long Beach, California, who drove one of two \$50,000 Scarabs owned and built by Woolworth heir Lance Reventlow that would dominate the track through most of its short life.

The raceway was soon acclaimed by promoters and drivers, and criticized the local residents in the sleepy village's it bordered. Noise from the track overpowered the residents in Old Carpentersville, a short distance away across the river, and could be heard miles away. "I could hear it, and I lived in West Dundee...about three miles away," remembered one woman.

Those who recall the days when the

Bauer. "It made 6,000 people look like 20,000."

Bauer said those who parked outside of the track area found easy access to the 230-acre, partially wooded site. "It was never fenced...walkers could get in without paying," said Bauer, adding that the number of non-paying spectators was another reason the project failed as a money-maker.

Since the track officially closed,

and even before then, the raceway property has been used for other things besides racing. In 1962, police officers from around the country gathered at Meadowdale for the National Police Driving School. Several other police organizations also trained on the track.

In 1972, a rock concert on the site was cancelled by a court injunction two days before it was scheduled to occur. Others have been attempted

since, the most recent failed last summer when a promoter was denied a permit by the Carpentersville Village Board. "We would still like to have a concert there," said Bauer.

In addition to the concert tries, Bauer said the track manages to continue to attract "interesting people." He said photographers often ask to shoot photos on the site, including one group that filmed a dog food commercial there.

