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North Country LIVING Magazine

Vol. 4 No.1

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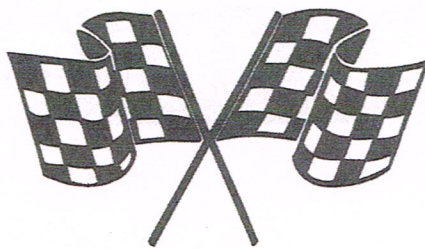
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NORTH COUNTRY AUTO RACING HISTORY



SINCE 1949

From Ticonderoga to North Hudson to Warrensburg, the North Country is steeped in auto racing history

By **Beti Spangel**

A Feb. 10, 1949 editorial in Ticonderoga's Sentinel Newspaper announced the formation of a corporation to operate "a midget car and jalopy racing track" on property owned by Elwin Swinton on Routes 22 and 9N in North Ticonderoga.

"The area, in summer, is filled with vacationists willing to spend money on good entertainment," The Sentinel stated. "Midget car racing has proven to be an extremely popular, if somewhat hazardous, spectator sport in other sections of the state and nation."

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Driver Leo Wells of Hague in No. 19 at the Champlain Speedway in Ticonderoga. Photo courtesy of Joan Swinton Walker.



Continued page 46

NORTH COUNTRY AUTO RACING HISTORY

It also noted the location was advantageous as being "...a few minutes by ambulance to Moses Ludington Hospital."

The editorial concluded with "Good luck to Mr. Swinton and the members of the corporation still to be formed - and an extra measure of good luck to the hardy (we're tempted to say fool-hardy) group of intrepid folks who constitute the midget car racing fraternity."

Luck was hard to come by for the Champlain Speedway. Swinton and other local racing enthusiasts, determined to bring racing to the area, counted on hard work and tenacity to swing luck around to their side.

Build It and They Will Come

Swinton was the operator of an auto salvage yard in Ticonderoga and aspired to bring weekly car races to the area, featuring the many locally made and driven roadsters and three-quarter sprinters. Roadsters were similar to bucket T street rods popular at the time. Three-quarter sprinters were similar in style for, accordingly, only three-quarters the length. Both styles were hazardous by today's standards as they were not fitted with any kind of roll cages or safety bars. But in 1949, that wasn't much of a consideration.

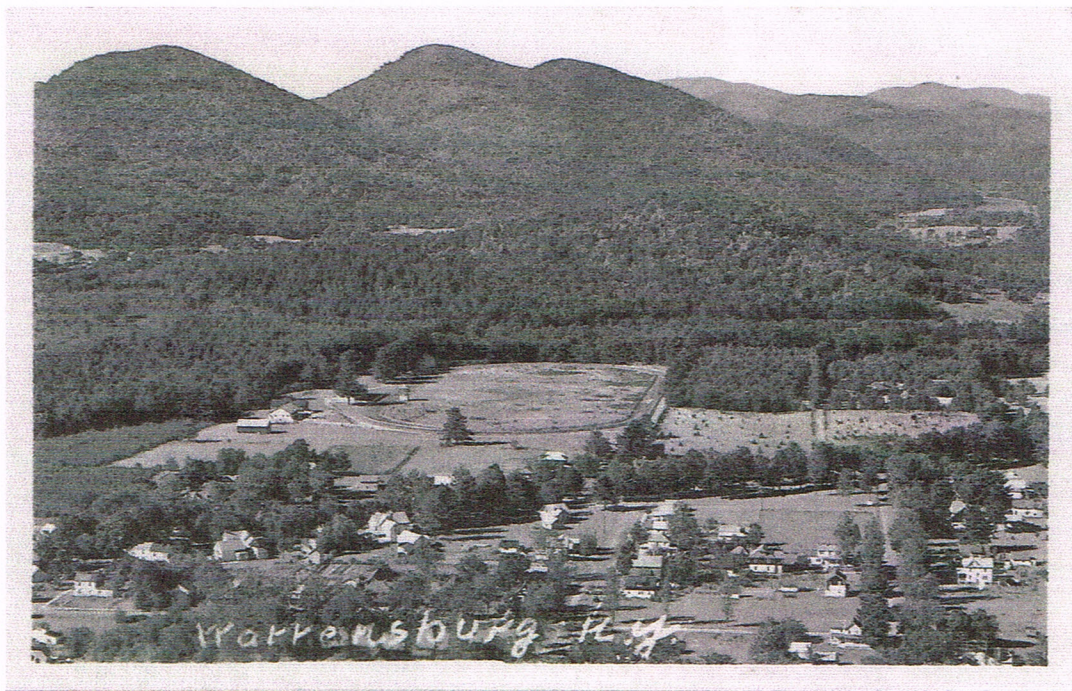
At the time, the nearest midget car track was Empire Raceway in Menands. Other tracks featuring roadsters and jalopies, as they were then called, were noted in Bolton Landing and Warrensburg.

Work on the track started in the summer of 1948 and "utilized a power excavator operated by Lawrence Huestis," according to The Sentinel. Huestis was to become a regular competitor at the raceway. Construction continued in the spring of 1949 as Swinton installed the clay half-mile oval with the intention of holding the Speedway's inaugural race on Memorial Day. He began construction of a grandstand to seat 1,000 spectators. The width of the track was to be 50 feet on the straightaways and 60 feet on the turns.

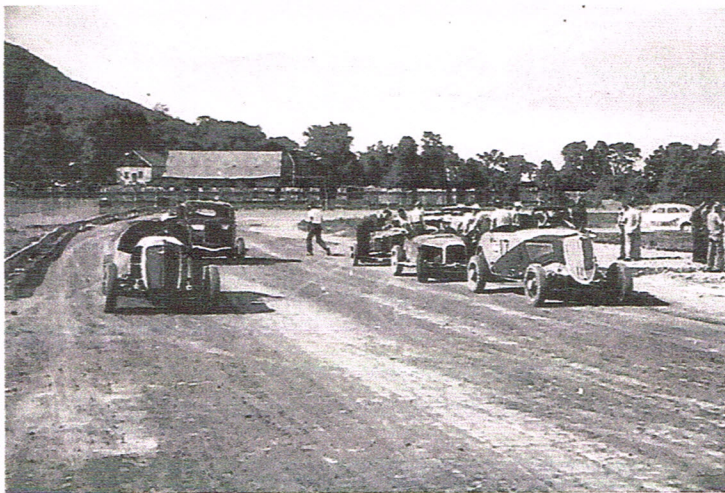
The Adirondack Auto Racing Club was thus formed as a compilation of fans and drivers. Two preliminary meetings were held in the Albany area and then in Ticonderoga in March and Crown Point in April. About 20 people gathered at Burke's Inn in Ticonderoga to discuss rules and specifications for the racing of roadsters. Dick Brown, a prominent racing promoter and former driver of the day, attended. The meetings were to determine the number of drivers interested in racing in Ticonderoga for the summer and to offer advice and assistance to those in the process of readying jalopies for competition. Brown remained in the area over the weekend to inspect vehicles under construction.

The scheduled opening of the raceway on Memorial Day was contingent upon issuance of liability insurance from Lloyds of London and receiving New York State's blessing for approval of the track prior to Memorial Day. And, that the weather cooperated.

Races planned for the card were four to five roadster and stock car races, plus a feature event. Most events scheduled would be 10 laps of the half-mile oval and the feature set for 20 laps. Admission was \$1.20 and for an extra fifty cents you could sit in the grandstand.



An undated aerial view of Ashland Park Raceway in Warrensburg. Photo courtesy of Warrensburg Museum of Local History.



Vehicles line up at the Champlain Speedway in Ticonderoga. Photo courtesy of Joan Swinton Walker.

Roadster events included the entry of Ti Motors Garage's "Miss Ticonderoga" driven initially by Ernest Duquette and later steered with great success by Leon Wells of Hague. Other roadster drivers included Jack Wells of Ticonderoga with stock cars entered by Jack LaTour of Crown Point Center, George Hamner of Crown Point, William McLaughlin of Whitehall and Jim Ide of Lake George. Roadsters classes were popular with entries from Glens Falls, Canajoharie, Nassau, Rensselaer and Connecticut.

Drivers, Start Your Engines

Wet weather and the failure to obtain the liability insurance led to the postponement of the opening races to June 12. That day 1,000 attendees braved the early summer heat and subsequent dust kicked up by the racers. The grandstand wasn't totally completed, but the racing club said it would be by the June 26 race day, and with better dust control.

"There were no serious crashes during the afternoon, although spectators had an opportunity to gasp at several peril-laden spins," The Sentinel reported. William Pratt of Bolton Landing raced an entirely stripped-down jalopy in which he was protected only by roll bars. Jack Wells raced in his 1933 Ford, minus its fenders, which he had resurrected from a local junk yard that morning after he broke an axle on the car he had been grooming for competition.

Bob Whitbeck of Canajoharie, who had been leading in his race, was knocked back into second when a stone flew up from the track and knocked off his oil plug, causing him to burn out three rods. Leon Wells locked wheels with another entrant on a turn and was spun off the track.

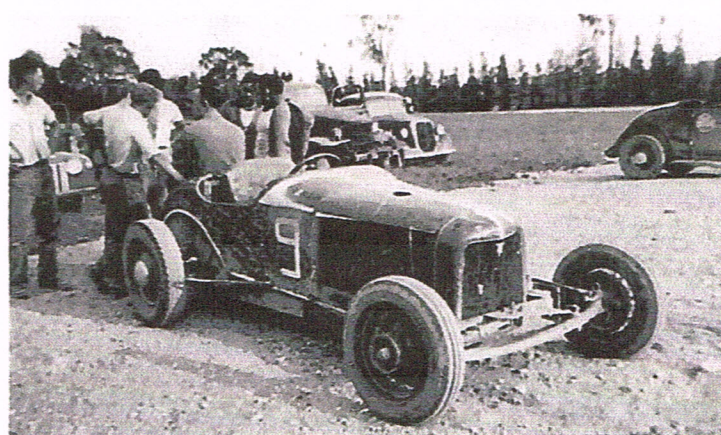
On June 26, three-quarter racing was the main attraction. The grandstands had been completed and concession stands were now being erected.

Swinton also had the track soaked with water prior to the races in an effort to keep the dust from choking the spectators.

P.A. Soaper of Essex was a well known driver and car builder in the Plattsburgh area. The first event of the day featured his three-quarter cars, which was delayed when one of the cars lost a wheel. The second event, for roadster and stock models, was won by Leo Wells driving Miss Ticonderoga. The highlight race of the day was when the three-quarter cars were pitted against the roadster and stock cars. Miss Ticonderoga emerged victorious.

Scorching heat wilted attendance at the July 3 meet, with a scant 200 fans braving the sun and dust. The heat was so intense that the racing cars couldn't negotiate over 10 laps at a time without boiling up, necessitating the lopping of five laps off the scheduled 15 lap main event. Leo Wells in Miss Ticonderoga set a new track record of 24.4 seconds for one lap on the half mile clay oval.

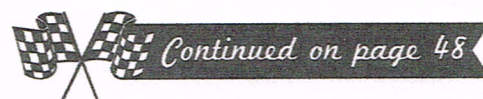
The grandstand, while finished, had not gotten the blessing of New York State, and racing was temporarily suspended for the July 19 meet, pending inspection. The local favorite Miss Ticonderoga was gaining interest on the circuit as it turned in the fastest time recorded in time trials at Richlieu Park in Montreal on July 24.

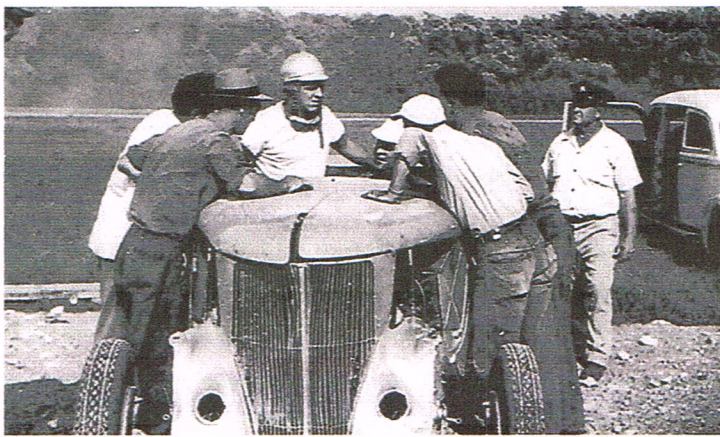


A local roadster at the Champlain Speedway in Ticonderoga. Photo courtesy of Joan Swinton Walker.

A Local Attraction

After the state gave the grandstand a thumbs up, the engines revved again on July 31. Swinton and his group continued to tweak and improve their attraction. Now the track was oiled down before races to manage dust. Admission was reduced to \$1.00 and included parking and access to the grandstand.





A meeting of drivers with Elwin Swinton (in dress hat) at the Champlain Speedway in Ticonderoga.
Photo courtesy of Joan Swinton Walker.

A “regulation 600-16 passenger car tire” was given as a gate prize. The card included the addition of stunt driver Ted Bruno of Bolton Landing performing roll-overs, a show he had taken to various tracks and fairs in the area.

Racing continued through the summer months. While the stands filled with tourists and locals alike, the majority of drivers were local amateurs who still had to earn a living. When a regular face did not compete, they were missed. The Sentinel noted in its race recap that Ed Palmer crashed Lawrence Huestis’ No. 20 racer. “Smiley Hogan, who had cracked up the No. 20 car on a former occasion and usually finished well up among the leaders, was delivering apples to New York City and did not complete Sunday,” it reported.

The 1949 season ended with attendance records being made at the October 16 meet, when Leo Wells driving Miss Ticonderoga broke the speed trials record with a time of 22:09. The duo improved on that at the October 23 meet with a time of 22:02.

The 1950 season opened on May 28 with over 500 people in attendance and continued dust control efforts being made. Swinton stated the track would be open every Sunday, weather permitting. Al Belden of Ticonderoga was leading driver that day, driving Irv Rooker’s new entry, when he swerved in the third lap of a race and took out about 50 feet of hub rail. “Belden broke a tooth and suffered a punctured lower lip,” The Sentinel reported. “The car was not badly damaged.”

After the meet on July 30, Swinton announced that racing would be discontinued until further notice, for reasons that are unclear. Races resumed on September 24, with The Sentinel reporting that they had the largest crowd of the season.

On October 1, the International Helldrivers, a group of thrill drivers that performed at small racetracks and county fairs, performed their show including The Leap of Death, The End for End Jump and The

Flight for Life stunts. It did not appear that regular racing took place that day, and seems to have been the last time the track was utilized.

Track roadsters, popular at Champlain Speedway and other small tracks in the 1940s and early 1950s, were notoriously unsafe. They were not designed with roll cages and the drivers who rolled them often died. In 1950, New York State began cracking down on their racing. The 1950s also saw the introduction of closed stock cars, and the roadsters were phased out. It appears that Champlain Speedway failed to make the transition successfully, and ended its existence only two years after it began.

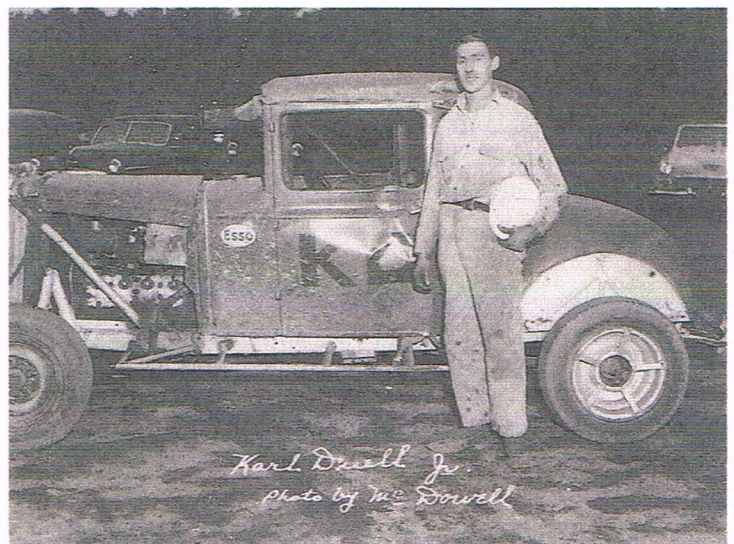
The property is now partially under the shallow waters of Miller’s Marsh, having been reclaimed by the land, and the outline of the oval only slightly visible via Google Earth’s aerial viewpoint. Elwin Swinton died at the age of 80 in 1986.

Warrensburg’s Ashland Park

Ashland Park in Warrensburg started out as a harness track built in the late 1800s by the Warren County Agricultural Association. It was also the location of the Warren County Fair when the area was a largely agriculture-based community.

The inn on site was called the Agricultural Hotel, at the gateway to the grounds. When Maurice Ashe took over operations from his father, Henry, in the 1930s, he renamed it Ashe’s Hotel and continued featuring the harness racing. After a period of inactivity, the racetrack was reincarnated as a half-mile dirt oval for stock car racing and operated by various individuals and partnerships from 1954-1961.

After a grandstand fire in 1961, the property was subdivided and sold. Ashe’s Tavern remains today.



Karl Duell, Jr., a top driver at Ashland Park Raceway.
Photo courtesy of Warrensburg Museum of Local History.

NORTH COUNTRY AUTO RACING HISTORY

North Hudson Dragway

The Adirondack Eliminators formed in 1958 as a group of racing enthusiasts and investors in the Schroon Lake/North Hudson area who purchased a tract of land in North Hudson. They cleared the land and built an eighth-mile drag strip. By 1962, the North Hudson Dragway was in full operation, boasting a control tower and electronic timing. The dragway operated successfully from 1962 through 1970, until the onset of the Vietnam War when drivers and money began disappearing, making the track no longer viable. In 1970 the partners sold the land to a developer. An informal annual drag strip reunion is held each spring in North Hudson, organized by the North Hudson Volunteer Women's Auxiliary.

Most local dirt race tracks and speedways are now mere shadows on subdivided properties or reclaimed land. But once they were early economic drivers bringing in tourists and their dollars, while serving as wholesome family entertainment in their local communities. They also served as springboards for

young drivers who continued their careers at tracks such as Airborne Park Speedway in Plattsburgh and Albany-Saratoga Speedway in Malta. The memories of these early tracks serve as their foundation and part of the Adirondack's history.



Vehicles line up at the Champlain Speedway in Ticonderoga. Photo courtesy of Joan Swinton Walker.

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