



*Jerry Deitz with some of his trophies, about 1958*

## Racing at the Sunset Speedway 1956 to 1958

By Larry Strobel with help from Lee and Shirley Deitz, Harold Deming and Debbie Sagdal

The date is a Saturday evening in mid-August, 1956. I was weeding our family vegetable garden at 1503 Coeur d'Alene Ave., Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. It was warm and pleasant with a steady breeze blowing from the northwest.

Suddenly I heard a loud roaring noise. It sounded like a freight train was coming down 15th St. Problem was—no train tracks in this area. Suddenly the noise stopped and all was quiet. After about 15 minutes, the noise started again, louder and more intense than before. This was too much for my curiosity, so I put my tools away, got into my car, and drove north.

At 4th and Appleyway I seemed to be getting close to the source, but then silence again. After parking and waiting, sure enough, there it went again. I drove west on Appleyway Ave., crossed Government Way (US 95 N) and kept going. At Lincoln Way I saw the answer to the "roar." Just across Lincoln Way to the south was a large field with a grandstand and large bright lights mounted on tall power poles. Brightly painted

cars with numbers on them were parked in a pit area. WELL!! Somebody had built a race track and I didn't know anything about it. How had I missed something of this importance? Easy answer, actually. Appleyway was also known as US 10, the main highway to Spokane.

When we wanted to go to Spokane we drove west through downtown Coeur d'Alene to 1st St. where Sherman merged into Northwest Boulevard. This street skirted the west side of our city, went through the tiny town of Gibbs, past the Northwest Timber Sawmill and joined up with Appleyway. No one I knew, however, seemed to ever mention NW Boulevard; it was always referred to as "The Bypass." It had been built to relieve severe congestion on 4th St. which was still a two-way street with parking on both sides and many businesses and houses along the two-mile stretch from Sherman to Appleyway.

US 10, the forerunner of I-90, went east and west through town on Sherman to 4th St. and north on

4th to Appleway. So 4th St. was glutted with logging trucks, freight trucks, buses, tourists, locals trying to get to stores for shopping along with bicycle riders, pedestrians and jay-walkers—some of whom were pushing baby buggies. The Bypass had been a stroke of genius. To avoid 4th St. and Appleway Ave. was an act of self-defense.

Back to the racetrack. I crossed Lincoln Way and was now out in the country. This neighborhood was a series of farm houses, barns, chicken coops, pasture land, gardens and hay fields. Just west of Lincoln Way, about where Arby's is now located, a road went south, bordered by barbed wire fences on each side. A new sign on a fence post said "Race Track." I drove in and soon came to a ticket booth. Admission prices were: adults \$1.00, students \$0.50 and under 12 free. The lady was about to leave and told me to drive on in as the last race would start soon. She said to look around and enjoy the excitement and be sure to come back next Saturday at 6 p.m. The parking lot had been a hay field and had many cars from Spokane and various North Idaho counties. The Lavin family had owned this property for many years. It could have been named Sleepyville but now it was alive with roaring engines and boisterous race fans. The North Idaho Stock Car Racing Association was the new owner of a six-acre parcel. The inaugural race had been run on May 20, 1956 in the afternoon with Ken Warehouse flagging and Miss Coeur d'Alene, Eleanor Muller, trophy queen. The first night race was July 14, 1956. To install the poles and lights had been a major accomplishment.

I parked and hurried across the field as the track announcer was introducing the cars and drivers for the last main race of the night. To my surprise, I recognized some of the drivers' names. Bob Coville and Bob Tilla had been classmates. Harold Deming was two grades ahead of me and everyone knew him as



*Lee Deitz in car No. 6. Notice the kerchief over his face for protection from the dirt and dust. The boy is holding the flag, 1958.*

a fun-loving high-spirited student who was always where the action was. Jerry and Lee Deitz were announced and I recognized them as popular upper classmen from my days as a Viking at CHS.

The announcer was a great talker as he built the excitement level. The air fairly crackled with anticipation for the race coming up. The crowd screamed encouragement to their favorite drivers and suddenly I had a ringside seat to that roar I had heard from four miles away. I really liked the way the No. 7 car was winding in and out deftly, avoiding contact, driving in and out of corners without spinning out. This little Ford coupe was driven by Harold Deming and I decided to join his fan club. Also the driving of the Deitz brothers, Lee and Jerry was impressive, Lee was in car No. 69 and Jerry in 6 that year and I cheered for them as well.

Reading the sports page carefully in the Coeur d'Alene Press the next day provided all the details of the previous night's races. There were 3 classes of cars. The "A" cars had the best and most experienced drivers with well-prepared cars: These were nicely painted with many colors and combinations of colors. Sponsors' names were painted on and some cars had the driver's name. A few had added the names of the pit crew. The car number had to be large enough so the car could be identified easily from anywhere on the track. "A" cars were smooth-running, some with mufflers, others were LOUD. Those drivers seemed to enjoy the noise, the louder the better.

There were rules: All cars had to have engines with no more than 270 cubic inches, seat belts were required, as were roll bars and helmets. All doors were welded, bolted or strapped shut and all glass had to be removed. Car bodies built before 1932 were not allowed: Pre-1932 cars were built with wooden parts under the metal and a wreck could leave the driver sitting in a pile of kindling wood and twisted metal.

The "B" cars were next with fairly skilled drivers with less experience. The "C" cars were for beginning drivers trying to learn the tricks of the trade and making-do with a modest budget. Some of these races were hotly contested and enjoyable as lessons were learned.

Occasionally there would be a jalopy race which was wild and Al Hamby and his wrecker had a busy night. Sometimes there would be a Powder Puff race for the ladies. This was really interesting and fairly sedate in comparison. Some of the women were pretty good and drove with skill and good sense. A good example was Shirley Deitz. She drove well and told me with much happiness and pride that she had beaten her sister-in-law, Ruth Deitz. A big part of the show was to watch the male drivers sweat and yell as a woman roared by in their pride-and-joy cars. These guys were nervous wrecks whether the driver was a wife,



*Heat was the enemy and this car shows the double radiator. Notice the bleachers and the rack of flags in the foreground, 1956.*

girl friend, sister, cousin, aunt, mom or a friend.

Sunset track was built by Bill Aylward and graded by Howard Batchelder. Obviously considerable money had been spent to develop this property. To pinpoint the location try to visualize the land between Appleway and the Kootenai Health Complex without the freeway, just a flat field.

Previously there had been the Coeur d'Alene Speedway located just east of the Lariat Tavern at 3600 Government Way, now the Broken Egg restaurant. They had races for a number of years on a quarter-mile track. Space was cramped, however, and there was nowhere to expand. Thus the "new track" was built. I never paid attention to the "old track" as I didn't know any racers or anyone who attended.

Sunset Speedway was a dirt track, well-designed, graded and carefully maintained. The length was 5/16th of a mile and it was watered by a large truck with a 300-gallon tank fitted with sprayers on the back. Depending on the temperature, the track was watered after every race or two to keep the dust down. This was a little tricky; too much water and it was too slippery and everybody spun out. At best, every spectator ended the evening feeling nice and gritty and in need of a shower. This was just part of the experience.

Races typically began on Sundays at 1 or 2 p.m. or Saturday evenings at 5 or 6 p.m. with time trials to determine how the cars would line up for each race. The fastest cars started in back with the slower ones in front. All races were a rolling start and speed was controlled by a pace car, always a late-model top-of-the-line car from a local dealership. When the race start was determined by the flagman, and if he did not like the looks of the lineup he did not wave the flag. That really increased the tension and excitement as all the cars took another lap before the race started.

The real trick was to time it right so the pace car could speed up just before the flag dropped and make it to a gate just past the grandstand where the most sure-handed track employee there opened and closed the

gate. It was just a matter of seconds before the race cars roared past. Passing before the flag was waved was prohibited and anyone who got excited and passed the pace car or other race cars would be black-flagged and removed from the race.

A prudent driver kept his speed reasonable until the first turn was safely negotiated. Basically, a large part of the race was spent turning left and each driver needed to find his comfort zone for driving into the corner and how high on this banked turn to come out onto the straight-away. The curves were 60 feet wide. All this strategy could be wiped out by another car that spun out or skidded sideways. All this maneuvering reminded me of the poker player who needs to know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. In other words, when to stomp on the gas and when to back off. If the first turn turned into a disaster, the race would be stopped and restarted after the wrecker and track attendants sorted everything out.

My first race in August, 1956 had been educational in many ways. I went early and sat in the bleachers which had been borrowed from Person's Playfield at 15th and Garden. There was a grandstand with a "crows' nest" where the announcer sat with a good view of the whole track. Two lady lap-checkers also sat high up to keep track of laps completed by each car. If a car got sideways in a turn and ended up roaring across the infield, that lap didn't count, and the flagman was obliged to run for his life and give the black flag (disqualified) to the offender.

There was a flag for everything. The green flag started the race, yellow signaled slow down, hold your position and don't pass. White meant go to the pit, something is wrong with your car, blue with orange center was move over, you are being lapped. A red flag meant stop where you are, black signaled get off the track and blue signaled one lap to go. Black and white checkered meant you had just crossed the finish line.



*Driver Lee Deitz and car owner Harold Hanks with trophies won by Lee at Sunset and Coeur d'Alene speedways*

Watching the crowd arrive was always interesting. There was a concession stand but no rules to govern what could be brought in to eat or drink. Some brought baskets of picnic items, others brought cases of beer perched on their shoulders and a few had a plain brown paper bag cradled in their arm with a six-pack of Coke in their other hand. My thought was that potential for a noisy and rowdy crowd had arrived. Restrooms had been built beyond the bleachers at the north end of the track and soon there was a constant parade of people headed north.

The format for an evening of racing was consistent. After the time trials, a four-lap Trophy Dash for each class was run using the four fastest cars in each class. This was fast and furious with a trophy and a kiss from the trophy queen of the night for the winners.

The trophy queens were consistently the prettiest girls in the area. Readers with long-ago memories will recall Diana Henson, Charmaine Deitz, Miss Hayden Lake, Amy Hand, Arlene Hartz, Nancy DeVoe, Laverne Kay Beck, Margaret Makovec, Miss Coeur d'Alene, Eleanor Muller and Miss Post Falls, Beverly Wilhelm, Caroline Wilkins, Shirley Divine, Mary Lou Hanson, Bernice Sylte, Janice Chambers, Connie Hulbert, Carol Hand and Karen Robinson just to name a few. They were all beautiful and good sports to kiss some of those greasy, sweaty drivers.

After the Trophy Dash each class had heat (warm-up) races with six to eight cars competing, depending on how many entries showed up and hadn't crashed or had mechanical problems. The last race was a "Main" for each class and featured the survivors of the earlier races. This was a longer race, perhaps 25 laps. The last race of the year for the championship was sometimes 75 laps, which was a real challenge for the equipment. Overheating was often the worst enemy as most cars were run in second gear to keep the RPMs up. Some tried larger radiators or dual radiators. Every car had an overflow tank or bottle or ingenious container to keep the boiling water from being spilled onto the track. When the engine cooled, if all went well, the water drained back into the radiator.

Drivers were always looking for a way to gain a few seconds of speed and power. Some went to the airport and bought aviation fuel which had a higher octane rating than the usual gas station product. Nobody talked about that little trick, however.

The 1957 season got underway with the arrival of summer weather. There were many new cars that had been built during the winter with some unusual and unique paint jobs. More cars were attending; quality equipment and fine drivers were showing up from Sandpoint, Bonners Ferry, Moscow, Lewiston, Kellogg, Wallace and, of course, Spokane and Coeur d'Alene. Harold Deming was now No. 2 and Jerry Deitz was

No. 1. Lee Deitz's driving especially caught my attention. He had a new car purchased from Harold Hanks and he was now No. 6. His car was bigger and longer than most and was painted white and he looked like a big white shark waiting patiently to take advantage of other peoples' mistakes. Dick Limesand, Dwight Switter and Joe Purjue were good drivers from Kellogg. George Elliott and Ed Arndt from Sandpoint were top-notch. Other Coeur d'Alene drivers who were fine competitors were Dick Capaul, Harvey Bossingham, Roger Knapp, Bill Kobs, Bert Lommel, Harold Benham, Harold Bald, Howard Rude, Chuck Walker and Ed, Al and Floyd Rosenlund to name a few. Spokane was represented by Ed Sneva, Rick and Fuzzy Sprinkel and Hillary Hector plus many others.

One night a beautiful purple coupe showed up from Clarkston, Washington. It was immaculate and was referred to as the pipe organ car. The six exhaust pipes were lined up behind the driver's head and were different lengths in ascending and descending order. The cars were announced, and then the announcer asked for the Clarkston car only to start his engine. Then the show began. The tones of those pipes ranged from softly melodic to bombastic roar as he hit the gas in short spurts, long spurts and every combination in between. It was a great show and I probably enjoyed it more than some because of my musical background. I had never before been to an exhaust pipe concert and it made my day.

A year passed and 1958 brought more racing, with bigger crowds and more cars. Al Hamby continued to provide wrecker service and some nights he was really busy. Ambulance service was provided by Ken Johnson and was rarely needed; a tribute to the safety



*Harry Benham, a handkerchief over his face for protection from the dirt, driving for Runge Furniture at an evening race at the Sunset Speedway.*



*This driver just joined the "Upside Down Club"*

measures in place. Flagman duties were handled by Dwight Switter or Woody Coombs with George Capaul, the pit manager. Announcer was Ed Owens. A good announcer was a huge part of the show as he told funny stories about the drivers and track employees. Teasing was in order with comments about driver's height or lack there-of, weight, gait, or "that huge shadow on the north turn is provided by Ronnie Round Boy," most anything to keep the crowd excited and laughing. One night as a car started into the straight-away past the bleachers, the driver looked left and noticed he was being passed by a lone wheel—a real shock. The announcer got right on it. "The wheel," he said, "is disqualified for not having a number." I don't know how it developed such momentum as it made it to the south end of the track and disappeared into the darkness.

The Upside Down Club was considered an exclusive group only for drivers who had managed to roll completely over at least once. No partway rollers qualified. That type of activity was always upsetting, happened quickly and could happen to anyone. Jim Brown rolled over in 2 different races on the same night and was not badly hurt. One night Harold Deming snagged the fence, went airborne, rolled, and literally flew off the track. He was trapped in his car and it took 20 men and the wrecker crew 15 minutes to get him out of his car. He spent the night in the hospital, but was limping around the next day. This was his introduction to the Upside Down Club. Harold did end up as 1958 track champion based on points earned for the season as he squeaked past second-place finisher, Lee Deitz, by 30 points as noted in Sept. 29, 1958 Coeur d'Alene Press.

I went to most 1958 races, sometimes with relatives or friends, sometimes with a date. The excitement and noise never let up. My vote for most interesting fans was for folks from the Silver Valley. They were wholeheartedly devoted to Kellogg-Wallace-Smelterville-Osborn-Pinehurst drivers. Those drivers were their heroes, and woe-be to the driver who wrecked one of the cars of their own. They blasted away with some innovative language and abusive scolding. They were the beer-drinking champions, too.

Most drivers tried to get along without bending the

equipment. But some were a bit too aggressive and the crowd let them know it. My vote for the most reckless and colorful goes to a tall, gangly fellow from Spokane. Hillary Hector was completely unpredictable and nobody could have written a script to match his antics. He drove a "B" car and it seemed he spent considerable time crisscrossing the infield and terrorizing the flagman who set records for the 10 and 20-yard dashes while getting out of his way. Hillary's wife, Charleen, drove in the Powder Puff races but she couldn't hold a candle to Hillary's escapades.

Then a cloud of unbelieving despair descended on Sunset Speedway when a shocking announcement was made in the papers and on the radio. Progress was unavoidable, and the new Interstate 90 freeway through and around Coeur d'Alene was about to be built. Earth movers and bull dozers would make quick work of this well-loved racetrack leaving nothing left but memories.

Many people had worked long and hard and dreamed seemingly impossible dreams to finance, design and develop the details required to build this sort of project. There were many, but one I will especially mention was Don LaVoie, a beer distributor for many years in Coeur d'Alene. He made a huge effort as a major sponsor and backer. Bottom line—it takes a lot of money and know-how.

This part of Coeur d'Alene's history was important in the mid-1950s and now most of the players have driven off into the sunset. This is my way of honoring the memories of good times and good people. I have done my best to make this an accurate account. Once in a while there really were some good old days.

We thank Dwight Switter, Lee and Shirley Deitz and Charmaine Deitz Kolb for information and photographs. We are looking for an aerial view of the Sunset Speedway area.



*Left: Jerry Deitz, Harold Deming, Bert Lommel and unknown. 1956-1958 at Sunset Speedway.*

## From the Board President

The last few months have been an exciting time for the Museum. The exhibit hall was a whirlwind of activity with more than 5,000 people visiting between April and October. We welcomed people from across North America and the world, including countries as far away as China and Australia. Beyond the exhibit hall, over 800 people experienced the history of North Idaho on summer walking tours and at community events including our Inland Northwest Milestones monthly lectures. This Fall, students are learning history through the interactive programs we bring into the classroom. A huge thank you to our staff and dedicated volunteers for their tremendous efforts to make our Museum so successful!

I had the privilege of meeting many of our members at Museum events this summer. I enjoyed learning how North Idaho history is personally meaningful to them. For some, there is a direct connection to local history through family ties. Others want to understand Native American cultures or perhaps learn how our region developed from a remote military outpost to the vibrant community it is today.

Visitors in our exhibit hall told me they enjoy seeing history first-hand, such as peering at the 1861 inscription on the Mullan tree or inspecting the ship's wheel from a steamboat that once sailed on Lake Coeur d'Alene. Many have a strong desire to preserve cultural heritage through oral histories, collection of artifacts or preservation of historic structures. Clearly, history touches each of us in different ways.

On a recent visit to Washington, D.C. a plaque describing the Smithsonian Institution as "America's

Treasure Chest" caught my eye. I paused for a minute, thinking that it captured the essence of why museums are so fascinating. Our Museum of North Idaho is truly a treasure chest for each of us to open and discover what inspires us most!

Things will be a little bit quieter at the Museum during the winter months. However, the staff and board will still be hard at work putting actions in place to turn our vision for growth, and ultimately a new facility, into reality. We encourage members to bring us their ideas and tell us what you would like to see when you open the "treasure chest". Above all else, we want to continue to offer our community an inspiring historical experience.

As a final note, I want to express my gratitude toward our members and community sponsors for their tremendous support this year. Our accomplishments are possible only through your generous contributions. In 2018, the Museum will celebrate its 50th anniversary and we are looking forward to planning special programs in honor of this event. I hope you will consider including the Museum in your year-end giving plans to help mark this extraordinary milestone and those beyond. Have a wonderful holiday season!

*Julie Gibbs, Pres. MNI Board*

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Geoff Howard: Trip expenses for Director Dorothy Dahlgren to the Western Museum Association conference in Edmonton, Alberta.  
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## Artifact Donations Since August

Dwight Switter: Photo and clippings related to stock car racing in this region.  
Shirley & Lee Deitz: Stock car racing photos, Casey homestead on the Rathdrum Prairie.  
Gloria Warnick: History of Dalton Garden Elementary School.  
Katie Sayler: Collection of oral histories taken by her high school students.  
George Ives: Scrapbook from Scott Reed of efforts to secure Tubbs Hill.  
Echo Schuon: Farragut NTS Co. 748 photo.  
Analee Cole Compton: Photo of Kossoff's Coffee shop interior, c. 1930.  
Gary Franta: Panoramic photo of Coeur d'Alene 1928.

## Tell Us Your Museum Story

The Museum was incorporated in 1968 and we will be celebrating the 50th anniversary next year. I want to take this opportunity to ask for your stories and memories about the Museum. As I look back even 20 years the people involved are no longer here so I would like to collect the recent history because, as is so often true, by the time we have the questions the people are gone or the memories have faded.

For those who prefer to tell their story, rather than write it, Don Pischner has agreed to interview people. Let me know if you would like to schedule a time to reminisce with Don. We are also looking for someone to operate a recorder or camera.

### Dorothy Dahlgren's Story

In the spring of 1982 I was just finishing my degree in museology and history at the University of Idaho when Professor Burcaw notified me the Museum of North Idaho wanted to interview me. Lee Fossum, Colonel John McFarland and Carl Krueger interviewed me for that position. At 24 years old, I was thrilled to have a job in my

hometown in my field of study. I started part-time in mid-May. June was my first full month, and I worked 110 hours for \$5.00 an hour and took home \$481.

Carl Krueger and Colonel John McFarland were the mainstays of the daily operation.

Carl had worked as a National Forest supervisor and teacher and by 1982, he was in his late 70s. Rail-thin and walking as if he was wearing shoes too big, he was a sweet and gentle man, despite the pain he was in. When I asked him for more details about what the job entailed he said it was up to me to make it my own. I'm not sure he realized where that would lead.

When I proposed a project about unions in the timber industry to Board President Gard Teall he was less than enthusiastic. I suppose I was a bit naive not to realize the Museum was made up of many people who were, or had been, in managerial positions in the timber industry. Gard made his argument that those Industrial Workers of the World were bad people. I argued that union groups in the timber industry deserved to have their story told and preserved and we were not glorifying anyone but just telling the history of labor unions in the timber industry in our region.

In 1983, Kay Grant Powers and I wrote a grant proposal to the Idaho Humanities Association for a project entitled "Unions in the Timber Industry". The project included collecting oral histories and photographs, a traveling photo exhibit, a lecture series and folk singing, an exhibit at the Museum and a brochure. The first



Board President Gard Teall, Dorothy Dahlgren and Board Member Bernice Couch, 1982.

lecture was on Labor Day in the city park with internationally known folk singer, Utah Phillips singing labor songs including "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum". About 250 people attended including TV stations and the press. We made many new friends through this project.

## A Bright Future For the Museum

There are several things you can do to ensure the museum has a bright future:

- \*Tell people about the Museum and what it means and why it is important to you and our community
- \*Serve on the board and/or the fundraising committee
- \*Give often to the building and endowment funds
- \*Pledge over a span of years
- \*Include us in your estate planning
- \*Keep your membership current

## Memorials

- For Paul Wilson from Mary Lou Wilson
- For Mary Ellen Wilson from Chris & Wendy Smith
- Helen Naslund from Darrell & Marjorie Storkson
- For Margaret Price Petrogallo from Peggy Price Cameron
- For Ray Capaul from Pat Barber, John & Linda Mitchell and Mary Beth Dixon
- For Dick Whitney from Mike Dixon

Remember your loved ones and friends with a memorial donation. These donations help build our endowment.

Please include the address of the family member you would like us to notify.

**Museum Calendar of Events**  
**Inland Northwest Milestones**  
**Presented by Robert Singletary at 7 pm**  
**Coeur d'Alene Public Library**  
Nov. 30 - *History of Skiing in North Idaho*  
**Sponsored by Super 1 Foods and Cd'A Service Station Equipment**  
Beginning in January on the 4th Thurs.



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## Museum of North Idaho

*Our mission is to collect, preserve and interpret the history of the Coeur d'Alene Region to foster appreciation of the area's heritage.*

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Editor Dorothy Dahlgren [dd@museumni.org](mailto:dd@museumni.org)  
 PO Box 812, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83816-0812  
 208-664-3448 [www.museumni.org](http://www.museumni.org)

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