

Original Speedways in Kirkwood

By: Karen Ferguson, Town of Kirkwood Historian

Kirkwood is no stranger to racing but many equate that to one specific track: Five Mile Point Speedway. It was definitely one of the longest continually weekly running tracks operating from 1951 until its final season in 2023. However, it was not the first track, nor was it the second track in the area. In fact, Five Mile Point Speedway was the third track in Kirkwood.

The first track was the Kirkwood Speedway. The original owners and operators of the track were Owen Heath and Elmer Ayres. They opened the track in 1937. Elta M. Benjamin began managing the track in 1940 until it closed in 1941 due to WW2. Almost all racing was suspended during this time.

The half-mile dirt track was located on the flats near the current location of Veterans River Park. Access to the track was off of Bridge Street. Turns 1 and 2 were located where the current Kirkwood/Conklin bridge spans across the river. The front straightaway and small wooden bleacher grandstand were parallel to the river while the back straight ran parallel to Main Street. The track was lined with railroad ties as seen in some of the pictures.

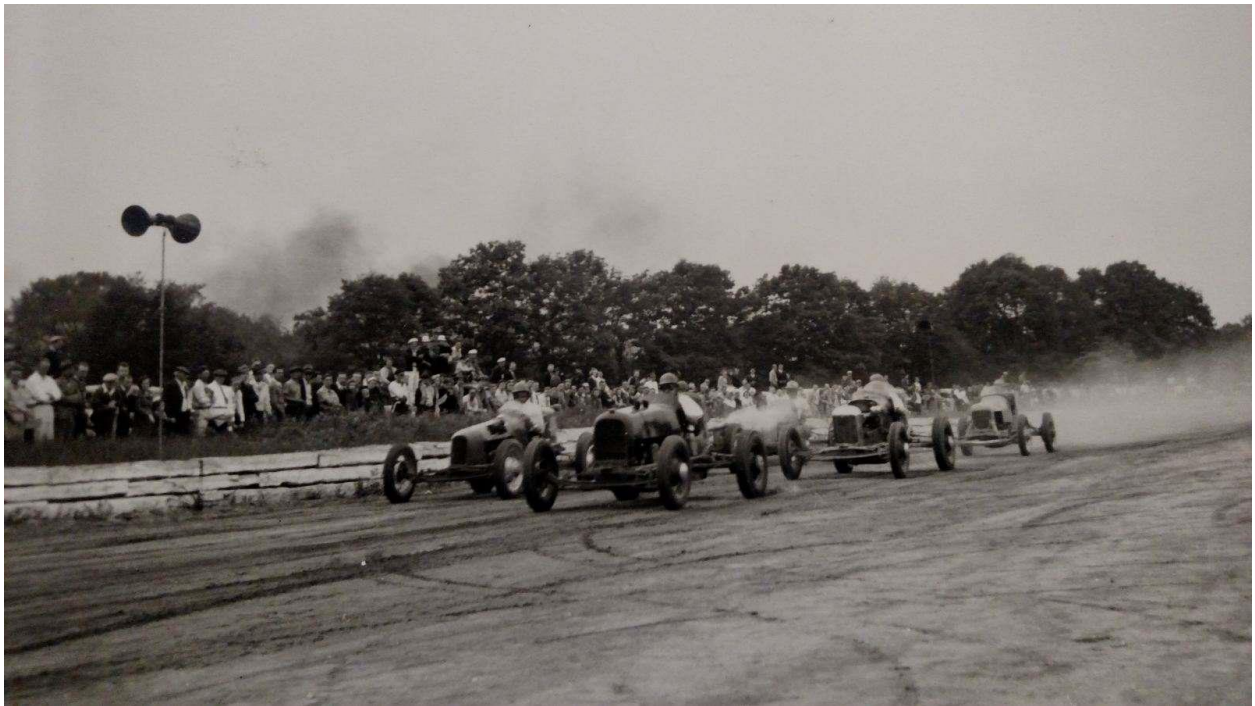
These races drew crowds ranging from 3000-4000 fans. Admission was 55 cents (including tax). Spectators would watch from their cars parked outside the fence, stand around the perimeter or sit on the bleachers. Canvas sheets were put in turns 1 and 2 to keep people from viewing the race for free from Bridge Street. Racers would come from all over to make money here including Indianapolis, Boston and Providence, to name a few. In addition to the race cars, the track was used for horse racing and motorcycles as well as featured attractions such as thrill shows and carnivals.

Following the war there was increased momentum to begin racing again. However, due to severe flooding of the flats, the Kirkwood Speedway was no longer operational. That is when the Kirkwood Airport Speedway was opened. I have found information from the Heath family that says it was located at the old Airport which is off of US 11 in the Riverside area. There has been confusion because many folks thought the flats that housed the original speedway was also the airport. That couldn't be the case since they were so badly damaged. The Kirkwood Airport track was very small only measuring $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. It was operational from 1949-1950 and hosted a number of motorcycle races and quarter horse races. Admission for the motorcycle races was 75 cents. I am assuming this track closed when the brother of Owen Heath, Iva, opened the Five-Mile Race Speedway in 1951.

Clearly the Heath family has been synonymous with racing throughout Kirkwood's history.



Kirkwood Speedway in 1940-1941



The back stretch which shows the railroad ties and standing spectators