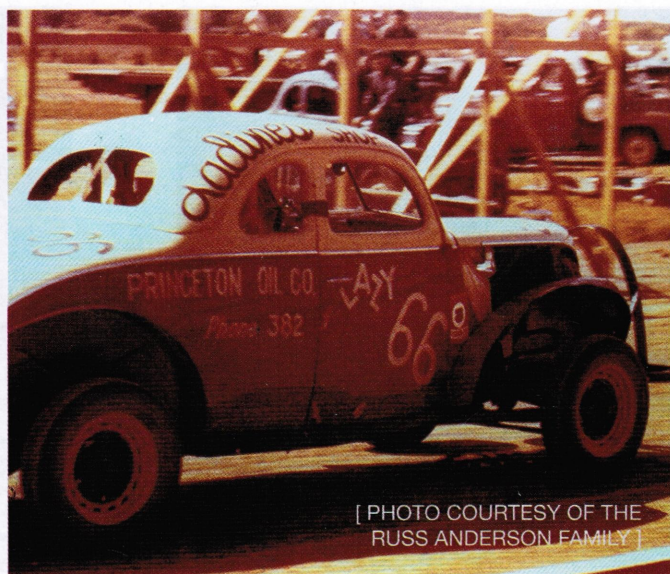


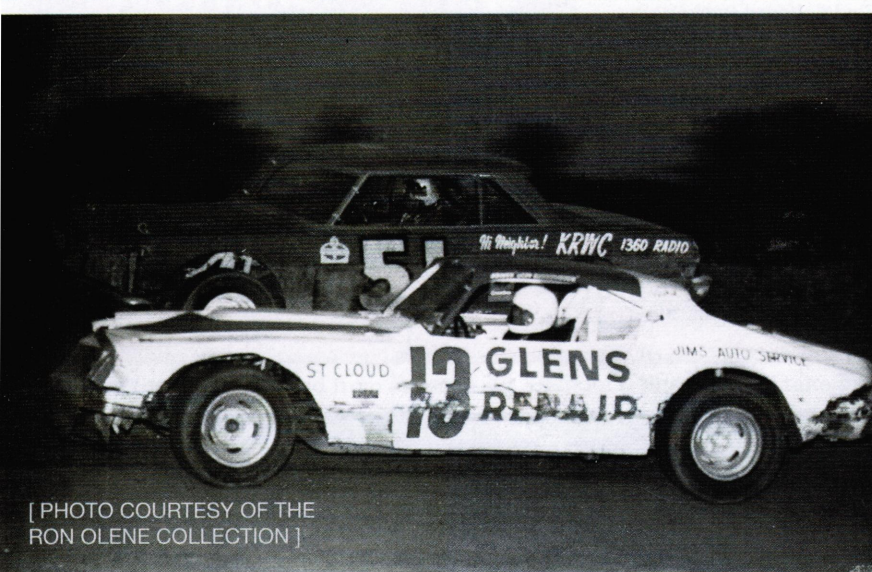
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58 Years of Racing on Dirt

BY CATHELENE N. BUCHHOLZ

Princeton Speedway celebrates its 58th year with a late start due to April's snowy weather. Located on the fairgrounds of Mille Lacs County, this former horse-racing track was transformed into a speedway in 1956. The track hosted races on Sunday afternoons. Drivers were required to be members of the Mille Lacs Stock Car Association, Inc.

In its second year of operation, lights were added to the track's four corners, and Friday night became race night. The speedway opened its gates to all competitive drivers and added Powder Puff racing for the ladies.

No winners were recorded in the track's first two years. According to Princeton race track historian,

Ron Olene, men had returned home from the Korean War and the speedway was an outlet for frustration and pent-up energy.

In 1958, Pete Peterson and Cliff Englund were announced as the first Princeton Speedway Champions for Class A and B, respectively. Olene says these two classes were divided according to whether the car was modified or had no extensive modification.

On Memorial Day of that same year, 400 fans swarmed the stands. Attendance more than doubled the following year. Additional bleacher seats were added in 1960 and again in 1970.

As cars became more powerful, the classes were restructured based on engine size limits. And with power, came speed. Olene says that John Stevenson broke the 1959 track lap time record of 19 seconds in 1972. He finished in 14.5 seconds. Craig Dollansky broke that record in 2004 with a finish of 10.138 seconds. In order to achieve that time, Olene says, "A car would have to reach 100 miles per hour on the straightaway and maintain 80 around the corners."

As for race track injuries, Olene describes cars flipping and rolling, engine fires, and the weekly replacement of grandstand boards. "But," he says, "we have not seriously maimed anyone yet." Drivers are required to wear fire-retardant jumpsuits, gloves, boots, and helmets. Olene sped around the track for a total of one night. He crashed his car and was lucky to have walked safely away. "That was enough for me," he says.

Attendance at the speedway in recent years has reached over 2,000 fans. Heard from miles away, drivers rev their engines as they prepare to motor through another year of dirt track racing.