

# Syracuse hot rod heaven: From Salina Street, years ago, to the Nationals (with video)



There was a time when cars like this made a regular weekend appearance on Salina Street, in downtown Syracuse. (Stephen D. Cannerelli | [scannerelli@syracuse.com](mailto:scannerelli@syracuse.com))

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*My column for Wednesday recalls how the powerfully successful Syracuse Nationals have their roots in the old Saturday night hot rod cruising scene on Salina Street. I'm looking for memories or photos of that era, along with any history on the different spots in Central New York that were used as outlaw drag racing strips over the years. You can leave them here, at [skirst@syracuse.com](mailto:skirst@syracuse.com) or on the forum.*

The section of Interstate 81 that runs through downtown Syracuse is getting old. Community leaders are deciding whether it makes sense to keep the roadway where it is.

Whatever happens to the interstate, Dennis Connor remembers how excited he was when it was new. The thrill wasn't about commuting or convenience. Connor, as a young man, was a drag racer. Like hundreds of other Central New Yorkers, he spent long hours turning rusty cars into sleek and roaring street machines.

More than 40 years ago, he'd go downtown on Saturday nights to cruise Salina Street. If Connor accepted a challenge at a stop light, the showdown would be held on the newly-built I-81 or I-690. "It was like drag racing heaven," said Connor, 60. A couple of friends would come along to block off traffic by driving slowly in the lanes behind the race, while the combatants took off in a high-speed contest.

The police, as might be expected, were not happy. "I figure the statute of limitations has worn off by now," said Connor, president of the Central New York Car Club Association, the host club for this week's Syracuse Nationals car show at the New York State Fairgrounds.



Michelle Gabel/The Post-

StandardHoward Downing, volunteer event coordinator at the Syracuse Nationals, with his 1964 Mercury Comet Caliente.

Downing recalls the heyday of the "hot rod" cruising scene on Salina Street.

**Bob O'Connor, founder and director of the event, said about 7,000 participants will bring gleaming, customized cars to the show, which opens Friday to the public. Last year, almost 80,000 spectators flooded the fairgrounds. The event is one of the largest of its kind, leaving O'Connor, 65, to confirm a simple point:**

**The Nationals have their roots in the long-vanished Saturday night cruising on Salina Street.**

**"There's no question," said O'Connor, who was a downtown regular at the age of 17. He'd go there in a 1958 Chevy wagon. At that age, O'Connor wasn't old enough to drive after dark. He hated to leave at such an early hour. His buddies, in tribute to that status, called him "Sundown."**

**O'Connor and Howard Downing, an old friend who is a volunteer coordinator for the Nationals, were raised in North Syracuse. They'd hang around at the Country Squire, a hamburger stand with an old Model A on the roof. Kids who wanted to race their souped-up cars made plans to meet in outlaw fashion, where they could.**

Syracuse Nationals 2009The Post-Standard's Sean Kirst talks today with Bob O'Connor, of Brewerton, the director of the Right Coast Association, which organizes the Syracuse Nationals, about cruising when O'Connor was younger. O'Connor also talked about how people used to

While a Savannah potato farmer had a popular strip, it was hard to match the downtown allure of the new interstates. Even before those highways officially opened, O'Connor and Downing said, drag racers would sneak around the barricades to settle challenges offered on Salina Street.

Once the serious drag racers became downtown regulars, they attracted a local version of the crowd that now packs the fairgrounds for the Nationals -- the hot rodders who want to show off beautiful vehicles, and the car-loving folks who bask in the scene.

"It was like 'American Graffiti,'" O'Connor said, recalling the popular 1970s movie about the golden age of "cruising" in America.

Dennis Connor said a crowd would gather on Saturdays in the downtown parking lot of an old Carroll's Restaurant, on South Salina. "On one side you'd have the guys in their hot rods, the guys we called the 'whacky racers,'" Connor said. "On the other side, you'd have the guys with their new Corvettes."

Both groups took part in the ritual. They'd drive north from a Chevrolet dealership on South Salina Street, go under the I-81 bridge, then turn around at the Sniper Monument. Sharon Switzer, another official at the Nationals, recalls going downtown in a Corvair to take part in bursts of racing, from stop light to stop light.

At the end of the night, the regulars would pack into Tino's, on North Salina Street, to get some pizza. Or they'd buy bread from the Columbus Bakery and eat it under the bridge.

Dorothy Downing, Howard's wife, said carloads of young men would pull up next to carloads of young women, shouting out often-futile requests for dates. O'Connor once returned from a trip out of town to learn that his girlfriend Muriel had taken his brand-new Impala Super Sport downtown, where she and her friends showed up ready to race.

O'Connor's reaction? Muriel is now his wife.

As for Howard Downing, he was drafted into the Army in 1966. He served in Vietnam, and returned to Syracuse two years later. The city, to him, seemed to have a harsher edge. The downtown street rod scene had disappeared.

"I went down to Salina Street a couple of times," he said, "but it was pretty much gone."

He never forgot the communal joy he felt there as a young man. He kept working on cars in his garage, as did O'Connor and plenty of others. By the late 1980s, O'Connor was attending street rod shows, and he soon decided he could make one work in Syracuse.

Ten years ago this summer, the Syracuse Nationals were born. Thousands of visitors will again show up this week at the fairgrounds, drawn there by an elemental urge. O'Connor understands. That feeling never goes away.

Cruising Salina Street, the kid called "Sundown" would have stayed all night.

***[Sean Kirst](#)*** is a columnist with *The Post-Standard*