

Sad finish for mile of 'mystery, lore and legend'

The alpha and omega of automobile racing at the New York State Fair may well have come from the same Albany office.

The beginning: The Onondaga Historical Association has a letter in its files dated June 12, 1900, in which Timothy Woodruff — lieutenant governor to Theodore Roosevelt — urges Frederick C. Stevens, a future state senator, “to get up an automobile race for the State Fair.”

If “one bigger than any other so far attempted could be gotten up,” Woodruff wrote, “it would arouse a good deal of interest and lead to much free advertising in the newspapers of the Fair.”

In 2015, columns like this one are still proving his point.

Woodruff wrote the letter less than a month after the state went to bid for a new \$10,000 dirt track at the fairgrounds. Automotive technology was in its infancy, but his wish came true in a big way: Within three years, there'd be auto racing at the fair, racing that soon grew into world-class competition. Over more than a century, a collection of driving legends would find triumph — and sometimes tragedy — on what's called the “Moody Mile.”

As for the track's goodbye, that arrived Tuesday. Gov. Andrew Cuomo, in a news conference at the Empire Room, spoke of a “reimagined” fairgrounds as another step toward Upstate revival. He made a quick reference to removing the grandstand and track, part of a \$50 million plan that would include such attractions as a new exposition center and expanded equestrian facilities.

Cuomo would later empha-

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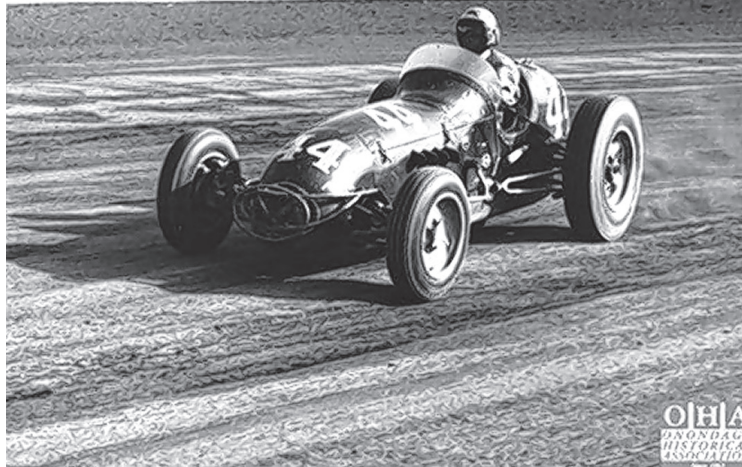
size that Super DIRT Week, a series of major dirt races held each October at the fairgrounds, will be moved to another location in Central New York. There was no talk of the economic reasoning for tearing up the track, and maybe — at some point — Cuomo and his staff will explain in detail why they feel racing doesn't fit into what the governor envisions as “a year-round, premier, multi-use facility.”

In any event, the decision is made. Yet before bulldozers plow up the mile, it seems as if someone ought to say what went unsaid at that news conference. In the words of Brian Boettcher, an author and historian who has written extensively about the Indianapolis 500:

“In a sense, I see this like tearing down Ebbets Field or the Polo Grounds,” he said of the mile, comparing it to lost ballparks that retain a kind of spiritual power. “People don't realize how much history is associated with this (track), not just sporting history but technological history and social history as we made the transition out of an agricultural society.

“There is a respect due for what happened, especially on these major tracks, where people risked their lives and (sometimes) lost their lives.”

The Syracuse racing legacy, once you look back, is stag-



Indianapolis 500 winner Tony Bettenhausen races at the New York State Fair in 1956. He won at Syracuse three times, but lost the 100-mile “big car classic” in 1960 by 10 feet, one of many exciting finishes at the “Moody Mile.” (Photo courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association)

gering. Gary Spaid, an Upstate racing historian, can tell you about such DIRT racing champions as Jack Johnson and Brett Hearn and their triumphs at Syracuse, or how Indianapolis legends Al Unser and Mario Andretti battled on the oval in 1974, or about the exploits of Steve Kinser, a monumental figure from the World of Outlaws, who was often a leader in “some of the scariest races you'll ever see” at the fairgrounds.

The loss of the mile, Spaid said, “is a big thing, a big chunk of Northeastern racing history going right out of there.”

The tragedies included the death of the great Jimmy

Murphy, who'd won the French Grand Prix, in 1921, then came home in 1922 to win the Indianapolis 500. On Sept. 14, 1924, he was battling for the lead in a race at the fairgrounds when his car hit the inside rail, and he was killed. That was 13 years after Lee Oldfield's vehicle flew into the crowd, killing 11 people in one of American racing's worst disasters.

Those deaths, Boettcher said, give the track a solemn resonance that goes beyond mere sport. But the year-to-year chronology more often involved celestial racers in great duels, before big crowds. An example: On Sept. 10, 1960, Bobby Grim held off

Tony Bettenhausen, a former national champion, to capture the 100-mile “big car classic” at the state fair.

The race was decided by about 10 feet, costing Bettenhausen — who died a year later, at Indianapolis — his chance for a fourth win at the fairgrounds.

In third place, behind the leaders: A.J. Foyt.

All of that, in Syracuse. Compelling racing rolled on, in a different form, once Glenn Donnelly brought his DIRT racing championships to the Moody Mile, in the 1970s. “Oh my God,” Spaid said. “There were so many great events.”

He said the mile is one of

the five remaining mile-long dirt tracks in the nation. While Boettcher said he understands that “time sometimes overtakes these places,” the reverence in his voice when he speaks of racing in Syracuse is exactly what was missing from the governor's news conference Tuesday morning.

That emotion is certainly intertwined with recognition for some of the biggest names in the sport. Still, Boettcher and Spaid also pay homage to the legion of everyday drivers and mechanics who routinely go out to the garage after getting home from their day jobs, who toil over car engines until the middle of the night.

They do painstaking tasks of magnificent precision in pursuit of one dream:

Making it to Syracuse.

Sometimes, as night fell during Super DIRT week, you'd see reverent fans making their way out onto the quiet oval, walking the track and leaving their footprints in the dirt, the way a kid might walk the grass in center field in Yankee Stadium.

Maybe the state is right. Maybe the world has changed and racing at the fairgrounds has to go.

But it should never be some shrug, some news conference afterthought. The Moody Mile is a gritty and unadorned monument to the essential nature of American auto racing, “a place of mystery, of lore and legend,” as Spaid put it beautifully.

Upstate revival? This track cuts deeper. Guts and dust, it's Upstate soul.

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