

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service
National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instruction in National Register Bulletin *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (formerly 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Riverside Speedway

other names/site number Site # CT0138, Riverside International Speedway, West Memphis Speedway, "The Ditch"

2. Location

street & number 151 Legion Road not for publication

city or town West Memphis vicinity

state: Arkansas code: AR county: Crittenden code: 035 zip code: 72301

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____

Arkansas Historic Preservation Program
State or Federal agency or Tribal government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting official/Title _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau or Tribal government

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that the property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

- entered in the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register
- other, explain

Riverside Speedway
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5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
4	1	buildings
1	0	sites
2	2	structures
0	0	objects
6	3	Total

Name of related multiple property listing.
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

**Number of contributing resources
previously listed in the National Register**

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Function

(Enter categories from instructions)

Recreation and Culture/*Sports Facility*

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Recreation and Culture/*Sports Facility*

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Other/Plain Traditional

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation	Concrete
walls	Cast Concrete
roof	Metal, Asbestos Shingle
other	Heavy Clay,

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Entertainment/Recreation

Period of Significance

1950-1959

Significant Dates

1950

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

C.L. Montgomery, G.H. Horstman, Walter, D. Ray

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 18.3

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1.	<u>15</u> Zone	<u>761099</u> Easting	<u>3892906</u> Northing
2.	<u>15</u> Zone	<u>761109</u> Easting	<u>3892631</u> Northing
3.	<u>15</u> Zone	<u>760893</u> Easting	<u>3892630</u> Northing
4.	<u>15</u> Zone	<u>760887</u> Easting	<u>3892898</u> Northing

[] See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Travis Ratermann (Survey Historian)
organization Arkansas Historic Preservation Program date February 1, 2010
street & number 323 Center Street, 1500 Towers Building telephone 501-324-9874
city or town Little Rock state AR zip code 72201

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps:

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative images of the property.

Additional Items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Clayton Allen
street & number 165 Quinton telephone 901-840-1970
city or town Munford state TN zip code 71601

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.* A federal agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to range from approximately 18 hours to 36 hours depending on several factors including, but not limited to, how much documentation may already exist on the type of property being nominated and whether the property is being nominated as part of a Multiple Property Documentation Form. In most cases, it is estimated to average 36 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form to meet minimum National Register documentation requirements. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, 1849 C St., NW, Washington, DC 20240.

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DESCRIPTION

SUMMARY

The Riverside Speedway is an excellent example of the long running southern recreational tradition. The 18.388 acre speedway is located to the south of Highway 70 on Legion Road in Crittenden County, Arkansas, as part of the grassroots level of auto racing that began to develop in Arkansas in the early 1950s. Designed and constructed by Walter D. May, C.L. Montgomery and G.H. Horstmann, this heavy clay race track was conceived as an idea in late 1949 and features a ¼ mile oval with heavy clay (gumbo) racing surface and semi-banked corners. Although sprawl is beginning to affect the intersection of Highway 70 and Legion due to Interstate traffic, the track's location remains the last grassy area in this area of West Memphis. The Riverside Speedway complex consists of the heavy clay (gumbo) track, east and west bleachers, entrance gate and fence, guardrails and concrete retaining wall, starter's box, original concrete block ticket office, new wood-framed ticket booth, wood-framed concession stand, and original concrete block cotton candy/concession stand.

ELABORATION

Located in Crittenden County, Arkansas, approximately 2.5 miles west of the Memphis and Arkansas Bridge, on US Highway 70, Riverside Speedway is a remarkably intact heavy clay (gumbo) race track built in 1950. The area surrounding Riverside Speedway has largely been impacted by commercial sprawl along the once high traveled Highway 70. The area immediately surrounding the race track is a mainly commercialized area with a small motel and apartment complex to the north, an American Legion baseball field and mobile home park to the east, railroad tracks to the south and a small field separating the race track from the commercial development to the west. The terrain in the area is flat.

When it was built in 1950, Riverside Speedway was one of two race tracks in the Memphis- West Memphis area specifically built to accommodate midget race cars. The main feature of the racetrack is the ¼ mile oval heavy clay (gumbo) racing surface which is oriented on a north/south axis to the south of Highway 70. On both the east and the west side of the racetrack are steel bleachers that span the entire front and back straightaways. The bleachers on the west side of the track are constructed using wooden seating, while the bleachers on east side of the race track are constructed using aluminum seating. The steel-framed flag stand is also located along the front straightaway and elevated off of the ground and above the retaining wall and fence. Guardrails located along the inside of the oval provide protection to those track operators and emergency medical service providers, as well as track equipment. The original concrete block ticket booth is located to the east of the east set of bleachers, while the contemporary wooden frame ticket booth sits to the northeast of the grandstand facility and is separated from the rest of the complex by a small open courtyard. On either side of the contemporary ticket booth, is a decorative wrought iron fence with concrete block pillars used for support. The main entrance is located to the southeast of the contemporary ticket booth which is emphasized by the large decorative metal welcome sign. Just to the north of the old ticket booth is the original wooden framed concession stand. Finally, a smaller concrete block constructed concession stand is located to the northeast of the track surface and served cotton candy for the spectators. Trees line a small ditch on the south side of the track and pit area providing a little shade during the summer heat.

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RACETRACK (CONTRIBUTING)

The center attraction of the Riverside Speedway complex is the heavy clay (gumbo) racing surface. Built in 1950 by C.L. Montgomery Sr., Walter D. May, and G.H. Horstman under the affiliation of Riverside Speedway Enterprises, the racing surface was constructed of a heavy clay material known as "Gumbo." The "gumbo" material is a mixture of clay, sand and dirt. In other dirt racing facilities that use a clay surface, the clay content is just over 22%-27%. However, in the gumbo surface of Riverside Speedway, the clay content is nearly 37%. The track is nearly 570 feet long from north to south and is 300 feet wide from east to west with a 13% banking in the corners and 7% on the straight-aways. The pit area surrounds the track on the southern half of the speedway. Separating the racing surface from the spectators is a three and a half foot high cast-concrete retaining wall, with metal poles supporting a metal welded wire fence which was added at a later time, as the original outside was constructed of wood. The entrance to the track is located in the southeast corner where a gap is left in the retaining wall, while the exit of the track is located in the southwest corner also where a gap was left in the concrete wall. To provide lighting for the track at night, there are eight wooden light poles roughly 75 feet tall. Located on the inside of the track surface are guardrails used in providing protection from cars running through the infield area, where track officials and medical staff are stationed during the race.

FLAG STAND (CONTRIBUTING)

The flag stand located along the front straightaway on the east side of the racing surface, is constructed of a steel platform with wood paneling along the upper edge of the platform. The flag stand houses one of the racing officials and is usually set along the front straightaway at the finish line for the conclusion of a racing event. The official is placed in this location as it is the most visible location for both the drivers and the racing officials to control the race. Also located with the flag stand are the lighting controls.

TICKET BOOTH (CONTRIBUTING)

When Riverside Speedway was built in 1950, a very simple ticket booth was constructed and stood just outside of the eastern pit entrance. The former ticket booth is a one-story, rectangular-shaped, concrete block building with a side-gabled roof. The building contains one service window located on the northeast corner of the north elevation. The service window is covered by a set of metal bars over the wooden frame. A single hollow-core door provides an entrance into the former ticket booth and is centrally located on the west elevation just below the gable end of the roof. The former ticket booth has since become an office for the track officials and track staff.

CONCESSION STAND (CONTRIBUTING)

The original concession stand, built in 1950, remains on site although the exterior has been altered from its original wooden shingles to vinyl siding along with the addition of three vinyl windows. The concession stand is a one-story, rectangular-shaped, wooden-frame building with exterior vinyl siding, and shed roof. The three service windows have been altered and changed from wooden windows to vinyl and are located on the west elevation of the building. To the north of the three service windows there is a set of steel-framed, double doors with glass paneling. Located on the north elevation is the refrigeration unit used to keep drinks and food cold. On the east elevation of the building toward the northeast corner, steel-framed, double doors with glass paneling have been added to the exterior.

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However, even with the addition of new materials, the service window's location and the refrigeration unit show people that this building is still currently being used for its original purpose, in serving the fans their concessions.

CONCESSION STAND/COTTON CANDY STAND (CONTRIBUTING)

The very simple concession stand located at the north end of the racing complex, was constructed in 1950 to accommodate the younger spectators. When constructed, this concession stand sold cotton candy to the fans. The concession stand is a one-story, square-shaped, concrete-block building with a flat corrugated metal roof supported by exposed wooden beams. Located on the south, west, and north elevations are large service windows. Two of the service windows contain stainless steel serving counters (south and north), while the west service window has exposed concrete blocks. The concession stand has since been made into a drink distribution area, where it services the older fans.

CONCESSION STAND/STORAGE/BATHROOMS (CONTRIBUTING)

Just below the bleachers on the east side of the track is another concession stand, storage area, and bathroom. The entire building stretches along the entire length east set of bleachers. This building is constructed of a one-story, irregular shaped, concrete block and vinyl sided building with a flat corrugated metal roof supported by the framing of the bleachers above the concession area. The east elevation is the only elevation used for ancillary purposes. At the south end of the building are two small storage areas with steel-framed doors. Moving north along the east elevation is the central staircase which is used to enter the main body of the grandstand area. Upon moving farther to the north just under the bleacher are the women's and men's bathroom. Just to the north of the men's bathroom the wall moves out to the east where another concession stand is located with six service windows. The concession area has been covered in vinyl siding as well as the top 1/8 of the concrete block wall.

BLEACHERS (NON-CONTRIBUTING)

Five sets of bleachers are located around the racing surface. Though the framework of the bleachers is constructed of small steel I-beams called stringers, the west bleachers are constructed with steel risers and treads welded to the stringer. The west bleachers were rebuilt in 2007-2008 from the bleachers once located at the Lehi Memphis-Arkansas Speedway. These bleachers were rebuilt using the original wooden seats and steel bracing. On the east side of the racing surface, the bleachers are once again constructed using a stringer with risers and treads welded to the stringer. The seats on the east side of the racing surface have been replaced with aluminum bench seating rather than the original wood seats like the west set of bleachers.

TICKET BOOTH (NON-CONTRIBUTING)

As the need grew to create a formal entrance into the racetrack, a contemporary ticket booth was constructed to the northeast of the former ticket booth. The contemporary wooden frame ticket booth was constructed in 2008. The ticket booth is a one-story, rectangular-shaped, wooden-frame building with an asbestos shingle, shed roof. The exterior of the contemporary ticket booth was constructed using wood paneling, giving the impression of a vertical board finish. Three service windows are located on the northeast elevation. The service windows consist of three six-over-six, double-hung, vinyl windows. A single hollow-core door provides an entrance into the contemporary ticket booth and is centrally located on the southeast elevation just below the shed roof.

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ENTRANCE GATE AND FENCE (NON-CONTRIBUTING)

On either side of the contemporary ticket booth is a wrought iron fence with a decorative entrance gate. The wrought iron fence with concrete block pillars measuring two blocks in width, one block in length and nine block in height and runs west from the contemporary ticket booth to the northeast corner of the bleachers where an alternative vehicle entrance was added with two swinging gates. The main entrance is located to the southwest of the contemporary ticket booth and is shown off by the larger supporting pillars that measure two blocks wide, two blocks in length, and nine blocks tall. Each pillar is topped with a long decorative pole, set at a 45% angle in opposite directions, but connected by two arched metal poles, with a sign centered between them reading "Riverside International Speedway." Set between the two larger pillars are two smaller, more decorative pillars set in an artistic style. A set of wrought iron fencing separates the larger pillar from the smaller more decorative pillar. The two large swinging entrance gates are then attached between the two smaller decorative pillars with the gates swinging outward in opposite directions. The wrought iron fence then makes a looping arch toward the south where it meets the older chain link fence which surrounds the entire racing complex.

INTEGRITY

Overall, Riverside Speedway retains remarkable integrity for a track that has gone through a tough period of time in the world of entertainment and sports facilities in the West Memphis and Memphis metropolitan area. Only small changes have taken place in the track's 59 year history. The original track, concession stands, and flag stand appear almost exactly as they did when constructed in 1950. The alterations that have occurred over the last 59 years consist of the construction of a new entrance gate and ticket booth, and the retrofitting of wooden bleachers with aluminum bleachers, even though the west side bleachers were constructed during the same time period in Lehi, Arkansas at the Memphis- Arkansas Speedway. The reconstructed, former Memphis-Arkansas Speedway bleachers retain the original wood seats. Only one set of bleachers no longer remain in their original location in part because a tornado ripped one section apart and have not yet been reconstructed using the remaining steel and lumber from the rest of the Memphis-Arkansas Speedway bleachers. The surrounding area looks very similar to the way it did when the track was constructed. During the 1950s the city of West Memphis was beginning to encroach upon the area surrounding the racing complex. However, empty fields can still be found around Riverside Speedway.

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SIGNIFICANCE

SUMMARY

When it was built in 1950, Riverside Speedway was one of two race tracks in the Memphis- West Memphis area specifically built to accommodate Midget race cars. The main feature of the racetrack is the ¼ mile oval heavy clay (gumbo) racing surface which is oriented on a north/south axis to the south of Highway 70.

In Arkansas and the surrounding southern states stock car racing was really beginning to hit its developmental stride. It is during this period that other tracks, such as the Arkansas-Memphis Speedway were being constructed in the dirty, rural farm fields of the area. Yet, by the time that Riverside Speedway was constructed to the east of West Memphis, Arkansas, a new era of racing was beginning to take shape in the form of paved race tracks. As this era progressed, more frequently dirt race tracks were being converted into paved ovals. Even with a shift within the sport of racing, a greater shift was taken place within the surrounding area through an increase in entertainment and recreational facilities. When Riverside was constructed, only one other track was located nearby. While nearly seven years later there were at least three dirt race tracks, a greyhound track, and numerous theaters were located within a 30 mile radius of West Memphis, all trying to thrive in a single metropolitan area. Even with these competing resources, Riverside Speedway has been able to continually operate and change to the sport of dirt track auto racing since it was constructed in 1950. The other two tracks in the area, Arkansas-Memphis Speedway and the fairground race track in Memphis, Tennessee, were not as fortunate in the unstable world of dirt track racing. In being able to continually operate for 59 years, Riverside Speedway has remained a viable entertainment and recreation destination, for people through the mid-south region of the United States, not only in providing a racing surface, but also other entertainment festivals.

As a result of unaltered state and rare intact example of a dirt race track that was built to accommodate stock car racing and later other entertainment events, the Riverside Speedway is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places with **local significance** under **Criterion A**. Of the fifteen dirt race tracks still operational in Arkansas, Riverside Speedway is the only continually running race track in the state, providing entertainment and recreation to the tri-state area every weekend, from March to November, for fifty-nine years.

ELABORATION

Riverside Speedway was built in the vicinity of West Memphis, currently within the city limits, in 1959. The property was located between the City of West Memphis and the levee located along the Mississippi River. The idea of racing was nothing new to the people of this area. Stock Car racing in Arkansas had developed long before the construction of Riverside. Though it is stated time and time again that racing was started by bootlegger during prohibition, real racing was started long before prohibition was conceived.

However, “from 1903 to the late 1920s automobile racing developed a significant presence in the south.”¹ Racing actually began in Daytona, Florida, in 1902 when “a winter tourist to the area recognized the potential for racing and published a short article in the December issue of *Automobile* magazine calling for a winter racing meet.”² By March 1903 the winter meet turned into the a three day race with differing one, five, and ten-mile speed trails on

¹ Randell L. Hall, “NASCAR: The Corporate and Civic Promotion of Automobile Racing in the American South, 1903-1927,” *The Journal of Southern History* 68, no.3 (Aug. 2002): 634.

² *Ibid*, 637.

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the sandy beach between Ormond and Daytona.³ Racing from this point on would never be the same, but would continue to grow without leaving behind its grass-roots, which were and still are firmly planted in the dirt.

The first race in Arkansas was held in Jonesboro, Arkansas, on October 10, 1918.⁴ It is thought that this first race was probably sanctioned under the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) or another touring group of the time period. However, racing would continue in Jonesboro through the 1930s before it was disbanded.⁵ In this early period of racing in Arkansas, Little Rock also began running races “at the Arkansas State Fairground in 1925 and continued until about 1937.”⁶ Other larger cities in Arkansas also boasted racing events through the 1930s and included Fayetteville and Blytheville. Fayetteville is known to have had races for only one year during this early period of racing, though racing would make a comeback in Fayetteville during the second half of the twentieth century. The Fayetteville Track closed its doors for good in 2005 to make way for commercial development. Blytheville also contained a track which ran for three years between 1938 and 1941.⁷ Just across the Mississippi River in Memphis, Tennessee, the horse track at the fairgrounds was transformed into an automobile track for special events in the early 1940s, before hosting a weekly event on the dirt surface. However, many of these older tracks fell on hard times with the advent of World War II because all metal was going to help in the war effort. Some tracks were converted back to the horse tracks they once operated as. Despite the war, this early enthusiasm for high speed and automobile racing was taking off not only all across the US, but especially in Arkansas after the war.

Even with the launch of World War II, the enthusiasm for racing was not halted in its absence. By the end of the war, racing was again taking to the dirt though it was about to take a large shift. By 1947, there was a growing shift to create a large sanctioning body for auto racing. On December 12, 1947, Bill Frances gathered racing promoters from around the southeast in Daytona Beach, Florida, to discuss a national sanctioning body for automobile racing.⁸ By the end of the meeting, the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) was born changing the way racing would be run. With the creation of the larger sanctioning body taking over track operation, tracks began to change. With the new incorporation of NASCAR, tracks were beginning to move from dirt, sand, or clay track to paved tracks, thus separating racing into two vastly different areas by today’s standards.

It was at the beginning of this transition to paved tracks that C.L. (Sonny) Montgomery proposed building the Riverside Speedway, a full fifth-mile racetrack with five-foot banks on the curves which would increase the speed of the cars, between the City of West Memphis and the levee at a cost of \$40,000.⁹ At that time, there was already an air about the proposed track, as it had proposed seating for 7,000 people and 2,700 parking spaces. It was thought that because of the combination of increased speed and racing being held on Saturday, the track would draw more spectators and drivers since the Memphis track was “flat” and raced on Friday.¹⁰ At this point in time, the idea of racing on Saturday was “an ideal set for local racers... We would race in Little Rock on Thursday nights, Memphis [TN] on Friday nights, West Memphis on Saturday nights and Greenville, Mississippi on

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Don Radbruch, *Dirt Track Auto Racing, 1919-1941: A Pictorial History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2004), 241.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Peter Golenbock, *American Zoom: Stock Car Racing – From The Dirt Tracks to Daytona* (New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1993), 69-72.

⁹ “Midget Race Track Is Proposed,” *Crittenden County Times*, 27 January 1950. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

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Sunday nights. Such an arrangement would attract many racers,"¹¹ stated Tom Palmer of West Memphis, who drove a midget race car. With the proposal made, "Riverside Speedway Enterprises, Inc., of West Memphis filed its notice of incorporation Wednesday [March 15, 1950] at Little Rock,"¹² as it held a 15-year lease on the original 16-acre tract.¹³

The once \$40,000 track, grew to a \$100,000 track, with the possibility of becoming a recreation center along Highway 70. By mid-April, the now "quarter-mile" track was already under construction and was designed to accommodate all types of race cars, unlike the originally proposed midget track. The track was now going to be able to accommodate "midget auto racing, hot-rod racing, stock car racing and motorcycle racing."¹⁴ As part of the recreation center concept, the idea of "an ice skating arena in the center of the oval during the winter months"¹⁵ was thought up but does not seem likely to have occurred at anytime during the track's existence.

In order to get the track in the minds of the spectators and drivers, the new "streamline" track operated by the Riverside Speedway Enterprises, Inc, negotiated a contract with Matty Brescia Enterprises to conduct the publicity and promotion while the track was still being constructed.¹⁶ It was believed that the track would be completed by the middle of June.¹⁷ However, the construction was completed a little earlier than expected with the first race scheduled for June 10, 1950, and it was expected to be able to accommodate more than 9,000 spectators. At the time the track was opened on June 10, 1950, the track was being labeled as "one of Mid-South's Finest Tracks" and it cost nearly \$150,000 when completed.¹⁸ By June the track was not fully completed because the east set of stands, containing 525 box seats, was completed but the west set of stands was not expected to be completed until early July. The new track also had eight, seventy-five foot tall, light poles containing 64 gigantic spot bulbs that transmitted 96,000 watts of electricity. When completed the track had banks that were seven and one half feet high on each end and straightaways that were banked at two feet high.¹⁹ The straightaways were fifty feet wide, while the corners were sixty feet wide.²⁰ On either side of the straightaway were wooden planked guardrails.²¹ With the opening so widely publicized, box seat tickets for the year cost \$1.25 per night, while general admission was \$1.00, and children were \$0.50.²² Having prices like this might have been a little stretch for most families at that time, but it was able to bring people out in droves across eastern Arkansas and the rest of the country.

Consequently, inclement weather postponed the opening of the track on June 10, 1950, for the midget race, so it was moved back to June 17, 1950. However, the first race run at Riverside Speedway happened only two days earlier when the Stock car program was run on a Thursday night at Riverside, though no other information was

¹¹ *Ibid.* 2.

¹² "File Papers on Racing Track," *Crittenden County Times*, 17 March 1950. 1.

¹³ "Work Underway On Race Track East of Here," *Crittenden County Times*, 14 April 1950.1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Riverside Sp'dway Starts Publicity, *Crittenden County Times*, 26 May 1950. 2.

¹⁷ "Riverside Sp'dway Starts Publicity, *Crittenden County Times*, 26 May 1950. 2.

¹⁸ "Riverside Speedway Will Open Here Saturday Night at Seven: One of Mid-South's Finest Tracks Will Seat More Than 9,000 Persons." *Crittenden County Times*, 9 June 1950. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ "Speedway Faces Damage Suit In Federal Court," *Crittenden County Times*, 29 September 1950. 1.

²² "Riverside Speedway Will Open Here Saturday Night at Seven: *One of Mid-South's Finest Tracks Will Seat More Than 9,000 Persons.*" *Crittenden County Times*, 9 June 1950. 2.

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found about this first program.²³ Still, the first midget race was won by Johnny Bergeron, who narrowly beat out Angie Howerton. Following this race, it was stated that the inaugural midget race was “one of the best ever staged in this area.”²⁴ Extraordinary comments such as this one lead more drivers and spectators from around the area to begin showing up to take part in or witness this great new attraction. This is evident by the car count at the track, as it was reported on June 30, 1950, that 45 midget cars were said to have been signed up for the June 31, 1950 weekly all-star racing program.²⁵ To have 45 cars show up for a weekly all-star series was a great accomplishment for an up and coming track, it is rare even by present times that there be a car count of 45 in a given series, which goes to show that the promotion of the track and the facilities kept the drivers and fans entertained week in and week out at Riverside Speedway. This is even better considering that racing was competing against other local tracks, cinemas, and semi-pro baseball throughout the West Memphis and Memphis area for spectators.

Yet the track was continually promoted and more drivers were showing up for the weekly all-star midget series. Drivers from all around the US were traveling to West Memphis to race at Riverside. While the local drivers were still active at Riverside, more and more people from out of the area were coming to participate in the action. Drivers such as Jimmy Summers, of Kansas City, MO, and Roy Hall, of Erie, IL, traveled over eight hours to race at Riverside Speedway.²⁶ This not only helped out the track, but also helped the local economy on the weekends as these out of the area drivers would also bring spending power with them wherever they raced.

Still, as racing continues to change so does the venue. By the end of July, only one month after opening, racing in the mid-south had changed. Midget racing was no longer the top ticket seller. Moving in to replace midget racing was the stock car series. In order to accommodate the want and will of the spectators for stock car racing action, Riverside Speedway started running the series twice weekly, Tuesday and Saturday. It was during this period though, that midget racing was discontinued. However, at that period of time, C.L. Montgomery was working hard to revive the midget series on Thursday nights. Being able to have three nights of racing a week would be a great attraction for the people of West Memphis as more and more spectators would continue to roll into the area and patronize their establishments.²⁷

Adding to the availability of the spectators was the other attractions that were shown at the race track. On October 1, 1950, the race track was home to Joie Chitwood’s internationally famous automobile and motorcycle stuntmen. At this time Chitwood’s talent was showcased in *Life* magazine and in the MGM film *To Please a Lady*. It was not and still is not uncommon for acts like this to be shown at Riverside Speedway. In June 2009, Riverside International Speedway was the host to the X games, which included a free style motorcycle and four wheeler show. Shows like this bring participants in from around the country and showcase the great spectators of West Memphis as well as the great facilities.

Riverside would need to continue to promote activities like the stuntman show so that more attractions would come to the West Memphis area. One large attraction which came to the area was another dirt race track which was built only six and one half miles away from Riverside. The new track, the Memphis-Arkansas Speedway was much bigger at one mile in length, and occupied nearly “320 acres of land and had parking spaces for more than 12,000 vehicles. It opened October 9, 1954, with a 250-mile feature and 15,000 attending.”²⁸ Lehi was constructed

²³ “Speedway Skeds New Opening Date,” *Crittenden County Times*, 9 June 1950. 1.

²⁴ “Angie Howerton To Try Local Track Again Saturday Night In Midget,” *Crittenden County Times*, 23 June 1950.

²⁵ “Large Field Lined Up For Speedway Races,” *Crittenden County Times*, 30 June 1950. 4.

²⁶ “Fast Trio Will Make Appearance On Race Card,” *Crittenden County Times*, 14 July 1950. 3.

²⁷ “Stock Car Race at Speedway,” *Crittenden County Times*, 28 June 1950.

²⁸ Margaret Elizabeth Woolfolk, *A History of Crittenden County, Arkansas* (Greenville, SC: Southern Historical

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at one and one half miles in length. It was also the site of the 300-mile National Association of Stock Car Racing Championship and on September 16, 1956, hosted the 300-mile convertible race. It is fair to say that the Memphis-Arkansas Speedway overshadowed the accomplishments of Riverside Speedway until it closed in 1957.²⁹ The track had a bigger facility, more cars and was sanctioned by the newly introduced NASCAR. It was during this period of time that NASCAR really began to change the sport of racing, whether it was through types of cars or changes being made to the track. It was also at this point in time that a rift was being created between grass roots dirt track racing and NASCAR and its promotion of asphalt and concrete track surfaces. The last dirt track race for the NASCAR sanctioning body was held on September 30, 1970, at the State Fairground in Raleigh, NC.³⁰ Up to this point NASCAR was slowly eliminating dirt tracks from their schedule and leaving the dirt tracks to separate themselves from NASCAR completely. Dirt track racing has been said to have been once the backbone of the sport. Yet, even though the large sponsors have generally faded from the dirt tracks, it is still the grass roots level of racing that keeps fans excited about the sport while also gradually developing top tier athletes in the sport.

However, with this new separation, dirt track racing continued to develop gradually. The one thing that kept it going was the fact that NASCAR was pricing people out of sanctioned competition, while local dirt tracks were the welcoming arms for those everyday passionate racers. But with this gradual change came more perils in the area of West Memphis. As the Memphis- Arkansas Speedway was gaining prominence in the area, a new type of racing was developing just down Highway 70 which would compete for revenue and spectators with Riverside and the Memphis-Arkansas Speedways, the Southland Greyhound Park. Southland Greyhound Park was constructed and completed by the end of May 1957. Though the greyhound track was successful in 1957, it has remained successful ever since. The push and pull of revenue at all three locations was give and take, yet they all had their own beloved fans. It would not take long before one would fail, and by 1957 the Memphis-Arkansas Speedway had closed its gates for the final time. It is stated that the Memphis-Arkansas Speedway perished when "the owners intended to pave the track but could not afford the \$100,000 price tag, and the dirt surface proved to be unmanageable."³¹ This devastating loss goes to show that changing the sport is a necessary goal to keep both cars and spectators rolling through the gates, as Riverside has continued to do since 1950.

Yet, even with the larger track moving to within seven miles of Riverside Speedway, the local fans of Riverside stayed with it through the rough years, which include the years between 1954 and 1957, while the Memphis-Arkansas Speedway was functioning. The fans even stuck it out during the 1970s when the US was caught up in the oil embargo. The oil embargo created rough times for both drivers and spectators to make it to the Riverside Speedway. However, like all other entertainment, the show must go on, and it did for Riverside as it is completing its 59th season of continuous racing on the track.

Through all of the development around the track in both West Memphis and Memphis, the track has continually put on a show for the racing faithful in the area. Although both the entertainment industry and professional sports have found a home in cities such as Memphis, Riverside Speedway has continued to thrive even with the added pressure from competitors. This continuing ability to thrive is all the more reason to recognize the ability of Riverside to adapt to the entertainment environment on a continual basis, while also showing the passion brought

Press, 1993), 312.

²⁹ Allen E. Brown, ed., *History of America's Speedways: Past and Present* (Comstock Park, MI: America's Speedways, 1994), 100.

³⁰ Tim Bongard and Robert Coulter, *Richard Petty: The Cars of the King* (Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing, LLC, 1997), 70.

³¹ <http://www.na-motorsports.com/Tracks/AR/MemphisArkansas.html>

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to the race track by the die hard spectators who come to see the shows put on at Riverside Speedway. Dirt track racing provides a welcome environment for every man, as opposed to some venues which are solely for the elite. Even as our pastimes change and interests wane, this fun and family friendly pastime has continued to grow and flourish.

As a result of Riverside being the longest continually operating dirt race track in Arkansas, as well the entertainment that it brought a the West Memphis area, Riverside Speedway is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places with **local significance** under **Criterion A**. Throughout Arkansas's history, there have been 74 oval race tracks in the state. Of that 74 race tracks,³² fifteen dirt race tracks are still operational. However, Riverside Speedway is the only continually running race track in the state, providing entertainment and recreation to the tri-state area every weekend, from March to November, for the past fifty-nine years.

³² Brown, x.

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GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

East 100ft, south 2240ft of West half of NE Quarter, Less railroad, East 50ft, North 400ft, West half NE Quarter of Lot 3, NE Quarter, NE Quarter less South 50ft and Lot 7 NE Quarter, NE Quarter.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

This was the original boundary of the land that was that was originally leased by the Riverside Speedway Enterprises, In

