

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 instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 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 George Ray's Dragstrip

other names/site number Site #GE0259

### 2. Location

street & number East side of AR 135, 1/2 mile south of U.S. 412

not for publication

city or town Paragould

vicinity

state Arkansas

code AR

county Greene

code 055

zip code 72450

### 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 for 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.)

Cathie Matthews

11/17/05

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

Arkansas Historic Preservation Program

State or Federal agency and bureau

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

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

### 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:)

George Ray's Dragstrip

Name of Property

Greene County, Arkansas

County and State

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 count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	1	buildings
		sites
1	1	structures
		objects
2	2	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

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(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)

N/A

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

walls CONCRETE

WOOD

roof METAL

other CONCRETE

Narrative Description

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

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 birthplace or grave of a historical figure of outstanding importance.
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.

Levels of Significance (local, state, national)

State

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

TRANSPORTATION

Period of Significance

1961

Significant Dates

1961

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked)

Cultural Affiliation (Complete if Criterion D is marked)

Architect/Builder

George Ray, Builder

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 #

Primary location of additional data:

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

Name of repository: George Ray, Property Owner

George Ray's Dragstrip  
Name of Property

Greene County, Arkansas  
County and State

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of Property Approximately 22.5 acres.

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>15</u>	<u>730671</u>	<u>3992072</u>	3	<u>15</u>	<u>731550</u>	<u>3992006</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u>15</u>	<u>731550</u>	<u>3992072</u>	4	<u>15</u>	<u>730671</u>	<u>3992006</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	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 Ralph S. Wilcox, National Register & Survey Coordinator

organization Arkansas Historic Preservation Program date \_\_\_\_\_

street & number 1500 Tower Building, 323 Center Street telephone (501) 324-9787

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 black and white photographs 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 George Ray

street & number Hwy 135 South, Box 485 telephone \_\_\_\_\_

city or town Paragould state AR zip code 72450

**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 listing. 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.*)

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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### SUMMARY

George Ray's Dragstrip is located approximately 2.5 miles east of Paragould, Greene County, Arkansas, which is in the northeastern part of the state. The dragstrip is on the east side of AR 135 one-half mile south of the U.S. 412 and AR 135 intersection in a mostly rural area of Greene County. Although sprawl is starting to affect U.S. 412 in the area, AR 135 remains a relatively rural road connecting Paragould with areas to the south. The complex consists of the concrete dragstrip and associated gravel return roads, a catwalk and race booth at the west end of the track, wood bleachers on the north and south sides of the track, and a cinder-block concession stand located northwest of the track.

### ELABORATION

Located in rural Greene County, Arkansas, approximately 2.5 miles east of Paragould one-half mile south of the U.S. 412 and AR 135 intersection, George Ray's Dragstrip is a remarkably intact purpose-built dragstrip built in 1961. The area surrounding George Ray's is still rural, although sprawl is starting to creep eastward from Paragould on U.S. 412. The area immediately surrounding the dragstrip is mainly rural with farm fields to the north and south of the track, a complex of fish ponds to the west on the west side of AR 135, and a small housing development to the northeast. The terrain in the area is flat.

When it was built in 1961, George Ray's Dragstrip was one of the few tracks in the region that was built specifically for drag racing. The main feature of the complex is the concrete dragstrip and gravel return roads that are oriented on an east/west axis behind George Ray's home. At the west end of the track is a catwalk that spans the track for spectator viewing. In addition, a race booth is located on the catwalk that allows control of the racing equipment, such as the starting lights. Simple wood bleachers are also located on the north and south sides of the track just to the east of the catwalk. Finally, a cinder block concession stand is located to the northwest of the track. Scattered trees also line the western portions of the track and the pit area west of the catwalk, providing shade for the spectators and racers, a necessity during the hot Arkansas summer racing season.

### Dragstrip and Return Roads (Contributing)

The centerpiece of the George Ray's Dragstrip complex is the concrete dragstrip itself. Built in 1961 by George Ray, the strip is constructed of concrete and measures 2,960 feet long and 31 feet wide. The starting line and pit area are located at the west end of the strip and the finish line and shut down area are located at the east end. Natural, unfinished wood posts with chicken-wire fencing and shade trees line both sides of the track along the racing area.

Gravel return roads are located next to the track and run parallel to it. They allow the race cars to return to the pit and starting area at the west end of the track from the shut down area without tying up the dragstrip itself. Although the track had return roads when it was first built, the location of the roads have shifted. Historic photographs show that originally they were located immediately behind the fence along the track and

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were quite narrow. Now, however, they are located behind the bleachers, which has allowed for wider roads and also allows access to the bleachers that were built later.

### **Catwalk and Race Booth (Contributing)**

Located at the west end of the dragstrip, the catwalk spans the track. Also built in 1961, the catwalk is built on tall log piers. The decking of the catwalk is comprised of 2x4s laid across the log beams of the structure. The railings on the catwalk are constructed of 2x4s with vertical posts and two rows of horizontal boards. Some of the railing and deck has been removed towards the southern end of the catwalk although the log piers and beams still remain. A set of bleachers, which are original to the catwalk, are located on its east side north of the track

In the center of the catwalk is the race booth, which was added c.1967. The race booth is a wood-framed structure with a rectangular plan. The building is sheathed in wood siding and has a flat standing-seam metal roof. Sliding metal-framed windows are located on the east and west façades of the booth, giving the people in the booth a view of the track and pit areas. A door on the north end provides access to the booth.

### **Bleachers (Non-contributing)**

Four sets of wood bleachers are located on the north side of the original return road on the north side of the track towards its western end. The framework of each set of bleachers consists of three stair stringers, one at each end and one in the middle, supported by vertical posts at their northern ends. The seats are comprised of flat boards attached to the stair stringers. The bleachers were added to the facility in 1972.

### **Concession Stand (Non-contributing)**

When George Ray's Dragstrip was built in 1961, a very simple concession stand, along with a very simple ticket booth, stood at the western end of the facility. By the late 1960s, however, the original concession stand was replaced with the current concession stand, located to the northwest of the track. The concession stand is a one-story, rectangular-shaped, cinder block building. The building has metal-framed windows, and two service windows with small counters are located on the building's south façade. The building is crowned by a flat metal roof.

### **Integrity**

Overall, George Ray's Dragstrip retains remarkable integrity. Based on historic photographs of the dragstrip from the 1960s up through the early 1970s, little has changed at the complex in the past several decades. The original track, catwalk, and return roads appear almost exactly as built in 1961. The changes that have occurred over the years (i.e., construction of the race booth and bleachers and construction of the new concession stand) have added new facilities at the track while maintaining the look and feel of the original 1961 layout. Finally, the neighborhood surrounding George Ray's Dragstrip still reflects the rural character of the area that was present when the George Ray built the track in 1961.

George Ray's Dragstrip

Name of Property

Greene County, Arkansas

County and State

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The fact that George Ray's has retained such a high degree of integrity is all the more remarkable given the fact that it has remained in continuous operation since it opened in November 1961. The overall integrity of the facility is also significant since many of the other first-generation, purpose-built dragstrips in the region have been abandoned and are deteriorating or have been demolished.

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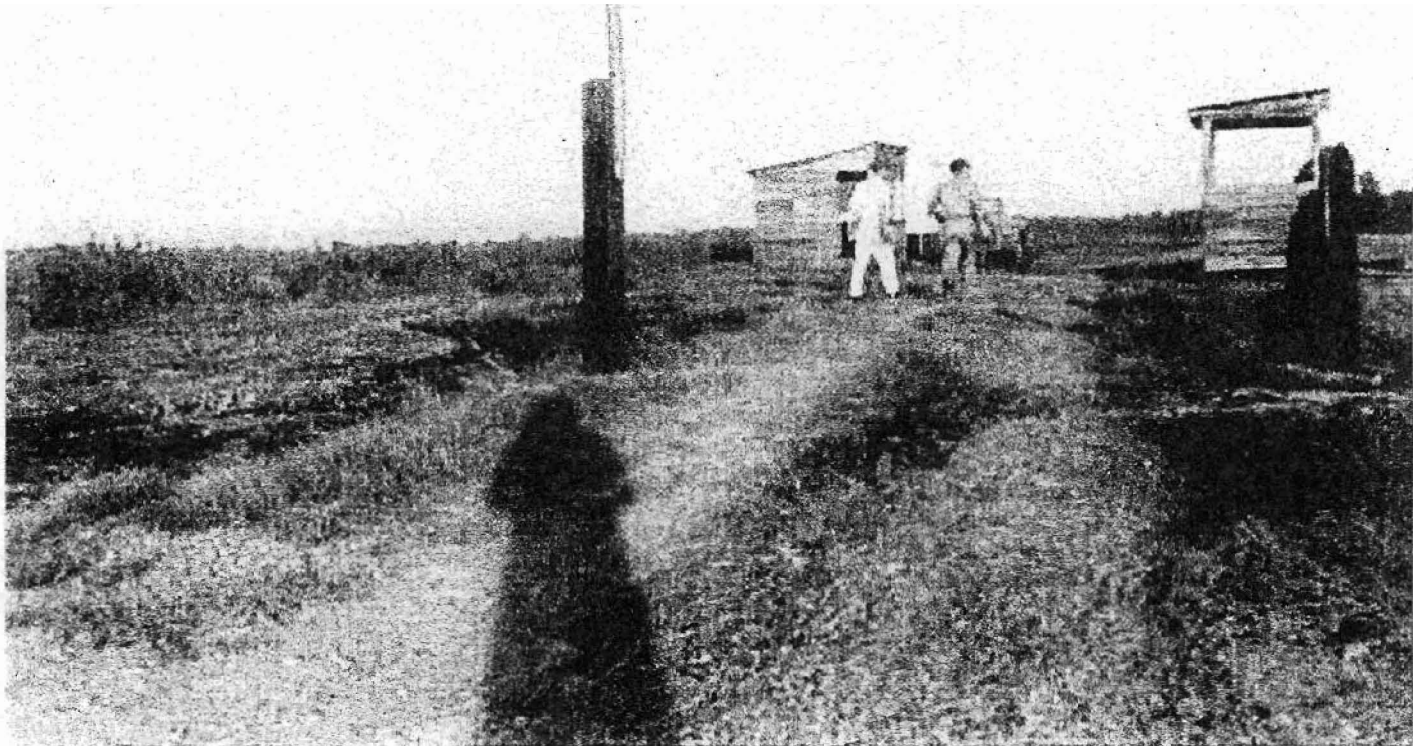
Cars lined up down the track (1961).



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The building on the left is the original concession stand and the one on right is the ticket booth (1961). Both buildings have been demolished.

George Ray's Dragstrip

Name of Property

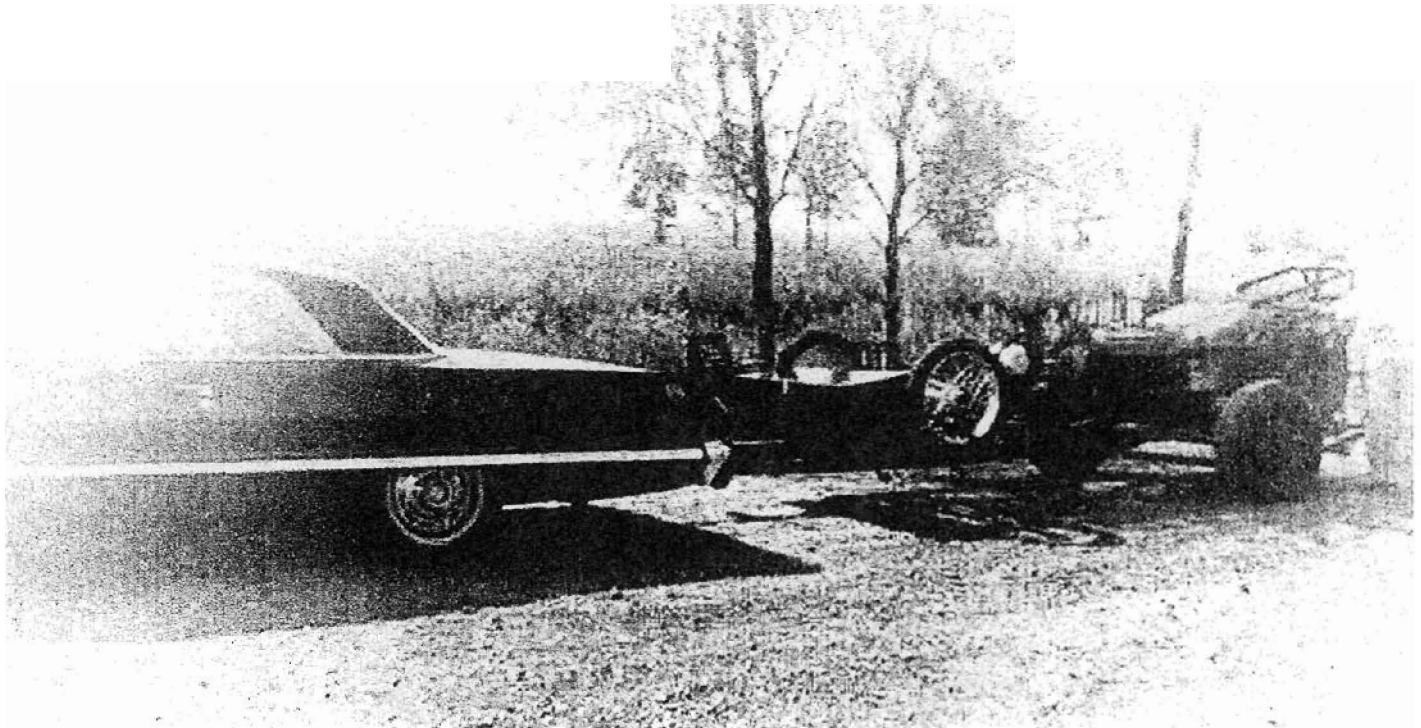
Greene County, Arkansas

County and State

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Rail Car (c.1961)

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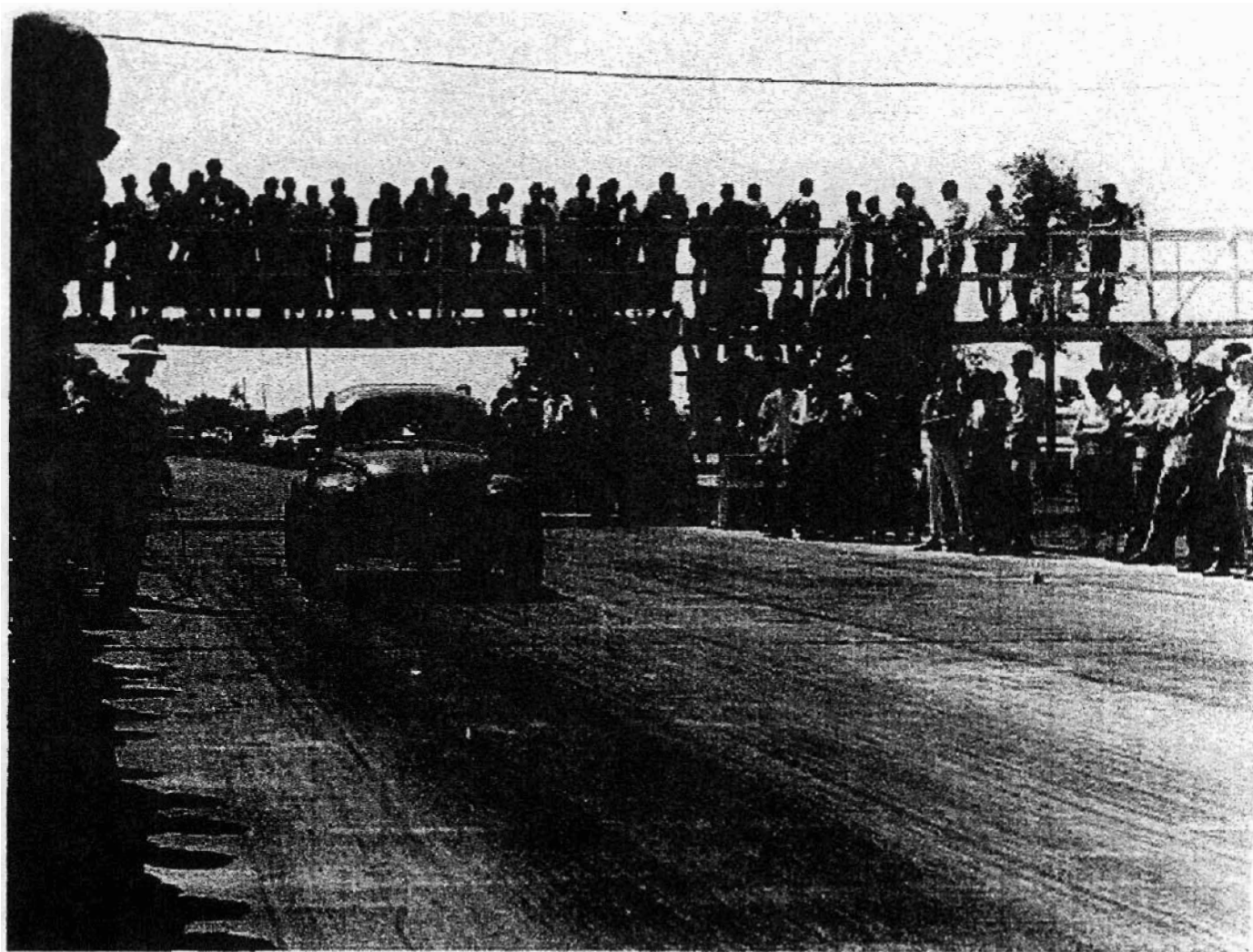


View of the return road (c.1970).

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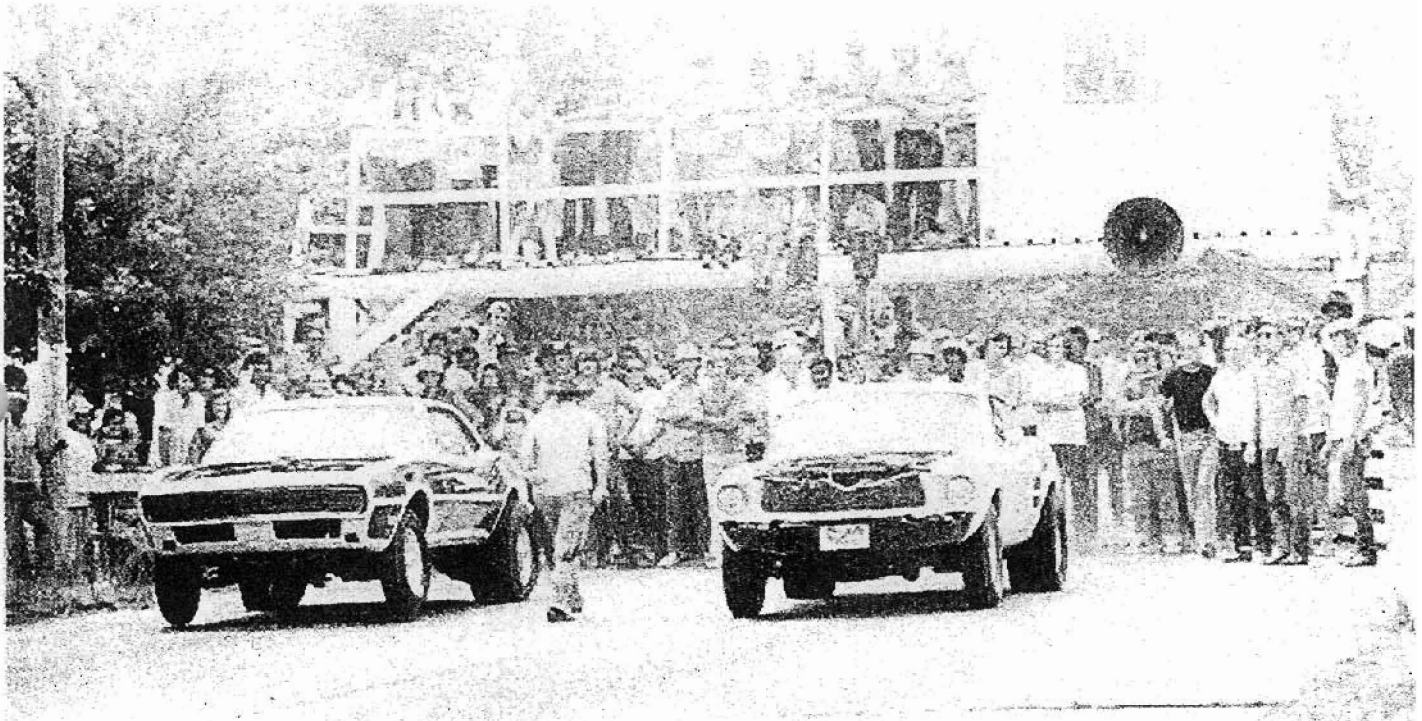


View of the Catwalk (c.1961).

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View of the catwalk and race booth above the track (c.1967).

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### SUMMARY

Built in 1961, George Ray's Dragstrip represents a rare and intact example of an early purpose-built dragstrip. In Arkansas and surrounding states during the early years of drag racing in the 1950s and 1960s, many drag racing meets were held at airports or airfields in the region. However, by the late 1950s and especially the 1960s, tracks began to be built specifically for drag racing. Over the years, however, most of the dragstrips in the region have been abandoned and have deteriorated, have been upgraded and modified, or they have been demolished. George Ray's Dragstrip, on the other hand, remains virtually unaltered from the time of its construction in 1961, even though it is still actively used on a weekly basis.

As a result of its unaltered state and as a rare intact example of a first-generation, purpose-built dragstrip, George Ray's Dragstrip is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places with **statewide significance under Criterion C**. Since George Ray's Dragstrip is the premier known example of a first-generation purpose-built dragstrip in the Arkansas region, it meets the "exceptional importance" requirements of **Criteria Consideration G: Properties That Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years**.

### ELABORATION

Although Frenchman Nicholas Cugnot built a three-wheeled, steam-powered carriage for hauling cannons c.1767, it was not until the late nineteenth century that inventors in the United States began tinkering with automobile production. There is great debate about the "inventor" of the automobile in the United States, but credit is generally given to Frank and Charles Duryea, who founded the Duryea Motor Wagon Company in 1895. As their name implies, the vehicles that the Duryeas produced were little more than wagons with motors attached. However, the American auto industry was born.<sup>1</sup>

Not long after the Duryeas built their first automobiles in the 1890s, the idea of men racing their cars to see how fast they could go was born. By 1900, automobile races were held in various cities in the U.S., such as Detroit and Newport, Rhode Island, but because of the cost of purchasing one of the newfangled horseless carriages, it was a sport only indulged in by the wealthy. In the 1901 Newport Races, for example, "The special 3-mile race for De Dion-Bouton motorettes resulted in a win for Oliver H. P. Belmont's vehicle, it being driven by the owner's chauffeur. Wm. K. Vanderbilt, Jr., was second," while "The 3-mile race for steam-propelled vehicles was run in heats; the first bringing out Colonel John Jacob Astor in a Toledo..."<sup>2</sup> Vanderbilt also created a race in 1904 called the Vanderbilt Cup that was supposed to inspire American

<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Boyne. *Power Behind the Wheel: Creativity and the Evolution of the Automobile*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1988, pp. 31, 38-39.

<sup>2</sup> "The Newport Races", 1901, reprinted in Oppel, Frank (ed.). *Motoring in America: The Early Years*. Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1989, p. 187-188.



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carmakers to be more competitive against the Europeans, and to be “a race between cars purposely built for speeding, and intended for no other use whatsoever.”<sup>3</sup>

Since auto racing was initially a sport participated in by the rich, race car drivers were seen by some to have an almost superhuman quality. Ritchie G. Betts' 1901 article, *Faster than the Locomotive: The Flight of the Automobile*, wrote:

The world marvels at the nerve – the lion-hearted courage – of the engineer who sits in his cab and manipulates the throttle and levers of the locomotive that speeds fifty, sixty, or more miles per hour; and the engineer deserves his meed of praise.

But what of the man who, without smoothest of rails to guide it, sits at the wheel of an automobile, and, exposed to blinding dust and the elements, steers it at fifty, sixty, or more miles and hour over the common highways, up hill, down dale, around corners, over crossings, across bridges none too smooth, and through lanes of craning, surging, nervous, humanity, miles in length? Who will say that the courage, the superb skill, the clear-headedness of the chauffeur does not pale that of the locomotive engineer?<sup>4</sup>

It would not be long, however, before auto racing would become more than a sport reserved just for the upper class, and racers across the country would be starting to build hot rods and race cars of their own.

By the late 1910s and early 1920s as automobiles became more prevalent on the landscape, especially with the introduction of the Ford Model T in 1908, more and more young people had dreams of being race drivers in their own right. Teens and other young people began modifying their parents Model Ts strictly for speed, and calling them “hot rods.” Although the origin of the term is not known for sure, it is believed to be a corruption of the phrase “hot roadster.”<sup>5</sup> The Model T was popular with hot rodders because it was lightweight, cheap, and plentiful, and as a result, teens could feel the thrill of speed and racing without investing a lot of money.

Hot rodding originated in Southern California where the state's long, straight, flat roads were ideal for racing, especially since many of them had little traffic on them in the first decades of the twentieth century.

<sup>3</sup> James E. Homans. “The Meaning of the Vanderbilt Cup Races”, 1906, reprinted in Oppel, Frank (ed.). *Motoring in America: The Early Years*. Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1989, p. 451.

<sup>4</sup> Ritchie G. Betts. “Faster than the Locomotive: The Flight of the Automobile”, 1901, reprinted in Oppel, Frank (ed.). *Motoring in America: The Early Years*. Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1989, p. 313.

<sup>5</sup> *AutoManiac: Hot Rods*. Hosted by Bill Goldberg. The History Channel. 6 July 2005.

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However, the increased presence of police officers on the roads proved to be a menace to racing and the racers were forced to find other venues to carry out their activities. They found a perfect location at the dry lake beds northeast of Los Angeles with Muroc (now part of Edwards Air Force Base) becoming the most popular.<sup>6</sup>

The dry lakes of California's Mojave Desert were formed after thousands of cycles of rain, runoff, and evaporation, which left behind a layer of alkaline silt. At one time, all of the dry lakes of the Mojave contained water year-round, but changes in the geology and weather of the area transformed them into the dry lakes present today. Only on rare occasions do the lakes flood currently, which smoothes out any irregularities in the silty surface and leaves a crust that is perfectly flat.<sup>7</sup>

Organized racing time trials began at the Muroc dry lake bed in the 1920s, and by 1932 the Muroc Racing Association (MRA) was founded, hosting their first meet on May 8. Although the founding of the MRA did provide some organization to racing at Muroc, it was loosely organized at best. Some of the meets had as many as five cars racing across the lake at one time, with only the leader having any clear view of the lake bed ahead. The cars following were often blinded by rooster tails of dust that would hide obstructions on the lake surface.<sup>8</sup>

By the late-1930s, with car club activity growing by leaps and bounds in Southern California, it quickly became apparent that more safety and structure was needed at the dry lake races. On November 29, 1937, representatives from several car clubs met to form a larger organization that would be made up of several clubs, which would have the purpose of organizing lakes events and allow for safer, structured, and coordinated racing competitions. The first meeting of the Southern California Timing Association (SCTA) was held on February 7, 1938. A second organization, the Russetta Timing Association (RTA) was formed in 1948 and, unlike the SCTA, which only had classes for roadsters, the RTA also had classes for coupes and sedans.<sup>9</sup>

When America was thrust into World War II after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941, it would bring large-scale changes to the hot rod and racing scene in Southern California and there were no organized races between July 1942 and April 1946. Muroc and Rosamond dry lakes were taken over by the Army Air Corps and many of the hot rodders and racers joined the military to help the war effort. In fact, many of them remained in Southern California working for North American Aviation in the Los Angeles area building P-51 Mustangs while others worked for Lockheed in Burbank building P-38s. The fact that both

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Robert Genat and Don Cox. *The Birth of Hot Rodding: The Story of the Dry Lakes Era*. St. Paul, MN: Motorbooks International, 2003, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 30.



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gasoline and tires were rationed during the war also meant that any hot rodding or racing occurring in the early 1940s was done on a very low-key basis.<sup>10</sup>

Once the War was over, however, and the soldiers returned home, hot rodding and racing picked up right where it left off. Soldiers also came home with extra cash that they could use to modify their cars, and new manufacturing technology developed during the War allowed new kinds of aftermarket parts to be made for cars. Another way that the war effort helped hot rodders was that there were many available surplus airplane parts available for adaptation to auto racing. Belly tanks from aircraft were especially popular with hot rodders in making their cars more aerodynamic and, therefore, faster.<sup>11</sup>

Although dry lakes racing was alive and well once again after World War II, hot rodders wanted to race more than once a month, which is how often races at the lakes were normally scheduled. As a result, street racing grew in popularity since it could be done whenever people wanted without having to travel the distance to the dry lakes. However, because of the number of innocent people who were hurt or killed as a result of the street races, it was determined that a solution had to be found to allow more frequent races while maintaining a safe environment. The result would lead to the growth of dragstrips and mean the virtual extinction of dry lakes racing.

After World War II, Southern California had several unused military and emergency airfields which were built as a result of the war. It was necessary to have a large number of airstrips in California since many airplanes were being built and tested in the area, and also because bases were needed for the defense of the West Coast. The abandoned airstrips, many which were one mile long and wide enough for two cars to race safely, were the perfect place to have organized drag races on a weekly basis. After several test runs, it was determined that  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile was the perfect length for a race (a length still often used today) with  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile or runway left for stopping safely.<sup>12</sup> "Big Daddy" Don Garlits, arguably one of the greatest drag racers in history, described the change from street racing to drag racing:

By 1950, the situation in California was critical. Civic leaders around Los Angeles were viewing street dragging as a major crime wave and they couldn't seem to bring it under control. The more patrol cars they put on the street, the more hot-rods showed up to torment them. The populace was in an uproar and guys who drove fast cars were rapidly gaining a reputation within the community on about the same level as dope addicts and pickpockets. Something had to be done because these hot-rodders weren't criminals, and

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 10 and 11, and *AutoManiac: Hot Rods*. Hosted by Bill Goldberg. The History Channel. 6 July 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Genat and Cox, p. 11.

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conventional law enforcement methods were not going to work in controlling them.

It all changed in Santa Ana, California. There on a runway of the Orange County Airport, the California Highway Patrol decided to approve an organized drag race. Some people were horrified at the idea. Imagine, they protested, the law playing into the hands of hoodlums! But the department persevered and the first organized drag race in history was held in July 1950. A mob of cars showed up and from that moment on drag racing was on its way toward becoming a recognized sport. Aside from giving the hot-rodders a race track of their own, the Santa Ana strip created a real impetus toward ending the lawlessness on the streets. It was ruled that anybody with serious traffic violations on his record couldn't race at the strip, and you'd be amazed at how much that slowed everybody down! With the pioneering effort at Santa Ana came dozens of other drag strips across the country, sponsored by civic groups, police forces, and hot-rod clubs.<sup>13</sup>

Drag racing at airstrips like Santa Ana revolutionized the sport because it allowed competitors to race head-to-head, rather than against the clock, and the frequency of the racing and the proximity to racers' homes made it an instant hit.

Although the exact origins of the term "drag racing" are unknown there are several theories. One theory suggest that it emerged from the simple challenge of the race (i.e., "Drag your car out of the garage and race me!") while another theorizes that it emerged from the term "main drag," a town's main street and often the only street wide enough to accommodate two vehicles. A third theory, on the other hand, suggests a mechanical root in which the term "drag" meant holding a car's transmission in a gear longer than normal.<sup>14</sup> Don Garlits poses yet a fourth theory, where "The sport was called 'dragging' for some obscure reason, traceable, I would guess, to the old country fair contest of horse-pulling, where powerful teams of horses would 'drag' massive weights. The team that dragged the heaviest load the longest distance was the winner."<sup>15</sup> Whatever the origins of the name are, it has stuck since the earliest days of the 1950s.

Even though drag racing had its origins in Southern California, it was not long before it started to spread nationwide, especially after the creation of the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) in 1951. The brainchild of Wally Parks, who was born in Goltry, Oklahoma, in 1913 and moved to California with his

<sup>13</sup> Don Garlits and Brock Yates. *King of the Dragsters: The Story of Big Daddy (Don) Garlits*. Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1967, pp. 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> "NHRA History: Drag Racing's Fast Start." From <http://www.nhra.com/aboutnhr/history.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Garlits and Yates, p. 3.

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family in the early 1920s, the NHRA was founded in order to "create order from chaos." It accomplished that goal by creating safety rules and performance standards that really helped to legitimize the sport. Parks was no stranger to racing having helped to organize the SCTA and serving as its general manager in the 1930s and 1940s. He was also the editor of *Hot Rod* magazine, a monthly magazine geared towards hot rod enthusiasts.<sup>16</sup>

The NHRA held its first official drag race on a portion of the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds parking lot in Pomona, California, in April 1953. Two years later, the NHRA staged its first national event in Great Bend, Kansas, called "The Nationals." The Nationals was held in various locations around the country to help spread interest in drag racing before it settled in Indianapolis in 1961. The NHRA Winternationals, held in Pomona, California, became the NHRA's second event.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time that the NHRA was starting to organize events outside of California, drag racing began to grow in popularity in the Arkansas region. Most of the drag racing in the region in the 1950s, as in California, took place at airfields. In Arkansas, racing was taking place at the Walnut Ridge Municipal Airport (former Walnut Ridge Army Flying School) by c.1960 and by 1959 racing was also occurring at the Carlisle Municipal Airport. (The track at Carlisle was also significant as the place where legendary drag racing commentator Dave McClelland got his start in 1959.) Drag racing events were also being held at airport tracks in Halls, Tennessee, and Malden, Missouri, both of which opened c.1960.<sup>18</sup>

However, it was not just at airports that drag racing was occurring in the region in the late 1950s and early 1960s; a few purpose-built drag strips did exist. The first known purpose-built drag strip in the region was the Houston International Drag Strip, originally known as the Freeway Drag Strip, which opened in Dickinson, Texas, in 1957. A 1959 article in the *Houston Chronicle* described the development of the strip.

The Freeway Drag Strip, a 1½ -mile asphalt track located 25 miles out the Gulf Freeway near Dickinson is filling a big need in Houston, according to Houston law officials.

B. E. (Ug) Williams, chief deputy in the sheriff's department, said:  
"The Freeway strip has helped confine drag racing considerably. Of course, a few still get out on the streets."

<sup>16</sup> "NHRA History: Drag Racing's Fast Start." From <http://www.nhra.com/aboutnhr/history.html>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Charles Joliff and George Ray. E-mails to the author. 30 June and 1 July 2005, and Dick Martin. "The Voice of Drag Racing: Dave McClelland's 40-Plus Years Behind the Mike." *Rod & Custom Magazine* October 2001, found at <http://www.americansportscasters.com/mclelland.html>.

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H. (Buddy) McGill, inspector in charge of traffic for the Houston police department, said: "We haven't had any reports of dragging of any consequence on the streets since the strip was built."

Realizing the need of a drag strip, a group of 50 civic-spirited citizens put up approximately \$50,000 two years ago to build the Freeway Drag Strip.

After detailed planning the drag strip, one of the few in the United States built specifically for drag racing, was completed in the spring of 1957.

Its size allows for plenty of room for the quarter-mile race against the clocks and adequate stopping distance after the finish line. All money earned from the strip is put back into it for improvement.<sup>19</sup>

Soon other tracks opened in the region, including the Collierville Dragway in Marshall County, Mississippi, which opened likely in the 1950s or early 1960s, Lakeland International Raceway, which opened in Memphis, Tennessee, on July 4, 1960, and the Green Valley Raceway in Colleyville, Texas, which opened in c.1964.<sup>20</sup>

As drag racing became popular in Arkansas and surrounding states, George Ray of Paragould became interested in the sport. Born on July 8, 1924, in southeastern Missouri, Ray was a prize fighter as a young man, but supposedly after seeing a man beaten to death in a money fight in Portageville, Missouri, he decided that he no longer wanted to fight for a living. After a stint as a lumberman and driving a Caterpillar tractor during the lumber era, he began working for Dr Pepper in Paragould in the 1940s. While working for Dr Pepper during the 1940s and 1950s, Ray also worked on peoples cars and was involved in hot rodding on his own.<sup>21</sup>

In the late 1950s, Ray took a trip to the track at the airport in Halls, Tennessee, which is located approximately 65 miles northeast of Memphis, and was the closest track to Paragould at the time. Ray did not have a good experience at the track, and was unhappy with the way that he was treated by the operators. As a result, he returned to Paragould and decided to build his own track.<sup>22</sup> (One version of the story indicates that Ray told the track promoter that Arkansas racers were not being treated fairly and that the local police told him later in the day that he was no longer welcome as a racer in Tennessee.<sup>23</sup>)

<sup>19</sup> Jerry Ribnick. "Drag Strip: Race Against the Clock." *Houston Chronicle Magazine, Texas*. 1 March 1959, page unknown. Found at <http://www.aafueler.com/his/hcfrontbig.jpg>.

<sup>20</sup> Information on Collierville Dragway found at [http://lakelandraceway.com/collierville\\_dragway.htm](http://lakelandraceway.com/collierville_dragway.htm), information on Lakeland International Raceway found at <http://www.lakelandraceway.com>, and information on Green Valley Raceway found at <http://www.aafueler.com/gvr.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Joliff and Ray. E-mail to the author. 1 July 2005.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Geoff Stunkard. *Nitro Hallucination*. Found at <http://www.quartermilestones.com/hallucination.htm>.

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Ray purchased a plot of ground east of town ½ mile south of the U.S. 412 and Highway 135 intersection. The location was good for a dragstrip, easily accessible to the area's highways and far enough out of town that the resulting noise was not liable to anger Paragould's residents. Even so, county and city politicians fought to stop the track's construction and operation, but to no avail. The result of Ray's labors was a 2,960-foot long, 31-foot wide concrete dragstrip that allowed for quarter-mile races and a shut down area for the cars. The track opened to the public in November 1961.<sup>24</sup>

When the track opened, it also featured a primitive ticket booth and a small concession stand built to its west and a catwalk that spanned the track at the starting line, allowing spectators an exciting bird's-eye view of the racing action. Since the time of the track's opening, improvements have been few. By the late 1960s, a more substantial, cinder-block concessions stand was built.<sup>25</sup> Also, the original ticket booth was replaced. The early 1970s also brought a few changes to the facility, including the construction of the race booth on the catwalk c.1967 and the construction of the bleachers in 1972. Also, c.1973, the return road was relocated behind the bleachers and it was paved in the early 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

The biggest change at George Ray's Dragstrip over the years has not revolved around the physical fabric, but rather around the racing itself. When the track first opened in 1961, the races were originally ¼ mile long. However, as cars got faster and needed more stopping distance, the race distance was shortened, first to 1,000 feet, and then the current distance of ⅛ mile.

Since opening in November 1961, George Ray's Dragstrip has remained in continuous operation, with each season beginning on the first Sunday in March and lasting through the third Sunday in October. The fact that George Ray's has remained in continuous operation with so few alterations is even more remarkable considering what has happened to the other first-generation dragstrips in the region. Houston International Drag Strip, originally known as the Freeway Drag Strip, in the Dickinson, Texas, vicinity closed at an unknown date, and by 2000 was largely demolished, while the Green Valley Raceway in Colleyville, Texas, closed in April 1986, and has also been largely demolished.<sup>27</sup> The Lakeland International Raceway in Memphis, Tennessee, closed in 1979 and, although still extant, is abandoned and deteriorated. Likewise, the Collierville Dragway in Marshall County, Mississippi, is still extant, but it is also deteriorated and has been part of a junkyard for at least the past decade.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Joliff and Ray. E-mail to the author. 30 June 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Joliff and Ray. E-mail to the author. 20 July 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Information on Green Valley Raceway found at <http://www.aafueller.com/gvr.htm> and information on Houston International Dragstrip found at <http://www.aafueller.com/his.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Information on Collierville Dragway found at [http://lakelandraceway.com/collierville\\_dragway.htm](http://lakelandraceway.com/collierville_dragway.htm) and information on Lakeland International Raceway found at <http://www.lakelandraceway.com>.

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George Ray's Dragstrip remains today as an important part of Arkansas's transportation and recreation heritage. As the best example of a first-generation purpose-built dragstrip in the Arkansas region, it is an important reminder of the automobile's role in Arkansas's transportation and recreational development. Referred to by noted drag racing expert Geoff Stunkard as "arguably the 'purest' dragstrip left in America," George Ray's has remained remarkably unaltered since its construction in 1961, and as a result is a notable and rare example of an early purpose-built dragstrip.<sup>29</sup>

### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Built in 1961, George Ray's Dragstrip represents a rare and intact example of an early purpose-built dragstrip. In Arkansas and surrounding states during the early years of drag racing in the 1950s and 1960s, many drag racing meets were held at airports or airfields in the region. However, by the late 1950s and especially the 1960s, tracks began to be built specifically for drag racing. Over the years, however, most of the dragstrips in the region have been abandoned and have deteriorated, have been upgraded and modified, or they have been demolished. George Ray's Dragstrip, on the other hand, remains virtually unaltered from the time of its construction in 1961, even though it is still actively used on a weekly basis.

As a result of its unaltered state and as a rare intact example of a first-generation, purpose-built dragstrip, George Ray's Dragstrip is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places with **statewide significance** under **Criterion C**. Since George Ray's Dragstrip is the premier known example of a first-generation purpose-built dragstrip in the Arkansas region, it meets the "exceptional importance" requirements of **Criteria Consideration G: Properties That Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years**.

<sup>29</sup> Geoff Stunkard. *Nitro Hallucination*. Found at <http://www.quartermilestones.com/hallucination.htm>.

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George Ray's Dragstrip  
Name of Property

Greene County, Arkansas  
County and State

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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George Ray's Dragstrip  
Name of Property

Greene County, Arkansas  
County and State

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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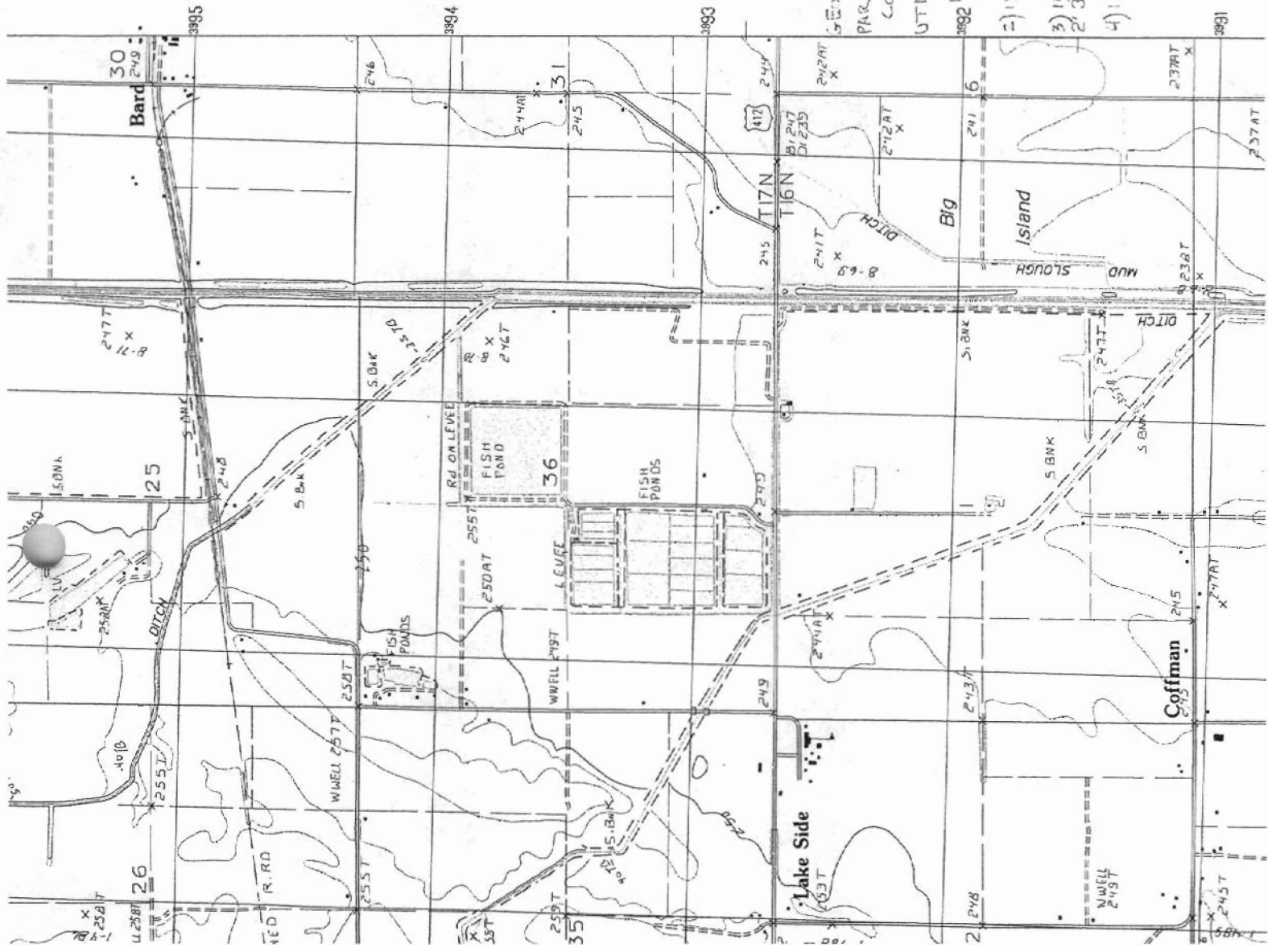
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### VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

From the southeast corner of the U.S. 412 and AR 135 intersection, proceed southerly along the east side of AR 135 for 2,640 feet, thence proceed easterly for 495 feet to the point of beginning. From the point of beginning, proceed easterly for 3,000 feet, thence proceed southerly for 330 feet, thence proceed westerly for 3,000 feet, and thence proceed northerly for 330 feet to the point of beginning.

### BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

This boundary includes all of the George Ray's Dragstrip facility that retains integrity along with its immediate setting.



GEORGE RAY'S DRAGSTRIP  
PARAGOULD VIC., GREENIE  
COUNTY, AR.  
UTMs:

- 1) 15/730671/3992072
- 2) 15/731550/3992072
- 3) 15/731550/3992006
- 4) 15/730671/3992006

