

## Barton County Historical Society

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<http://bartoncountymuseum.org>

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# The Village Crier

Barton County Historical Society

March 2013, Volume 21, Number 2

## Museum Memos

The calendar keeps changing because exciting things are happening. Volunteer Orientation is planned for Thursday, April 4th, from 1-3 p.m. The session is for anyone interested in volunteering at this fabulous facility, the best museum and village in the (fill in the blank: universe, country, state, etc.)! You should receive a notice by mail soon, but in case we have overlooked you, please call the office and correct our error. Of course cookies will be served.

A birthday party! The Sunflower Rod and Custom Association is celebrating 60 years of drag racing – right here on what was once a B-29 runway. Members have loaned us part of their stash of collectibles to display for several months. And we have set Sunday, May 19th, to celebrate. Watch for more information and news on plans for Rolling Sculpture II.

Last May, all 3rd graders from USD 428 came for “Pioneer Days”. Another is scheduled for this year, cheered along by the district. A full day of activities – learning, seeing, and even touching, parts of the fabric woven into our area’s history will take place. If you are able to help for part of the day on Wednesday, May 8th, don’t even think about scheduling anything else and come on to help tomorrow’s citizens learn about their heritage. Further incentive? Lunch will be provided!

If this newsletter has a date circled on your label, this will be your last newsletter unless you renew at the current rates listed. But, members at the annual meeting earlier this year elected to raise family membership dues to \$30 per year beginning in 2014. Single memberships will remain \$15 and contributor memberships \$100 respectively. Life Memberships are again available, for \$1,000.

Selected copies of high school and college year books are for sale in the gift shop as well as some other out of print volumes. Come by or call during office hours to see if there is something missing in your collection. We are always glad to see you however; you don’t need an excuse to stop by.

~ Beverly Komarek, Executive Director

## Wish List

Automatic washing machine in working order



Do you have any memorabilia or information on the early drag races here? We are preparing a new exhibit to celebrate sixty years of drag racing at the strip and would greatly appreciate your help.

Thank you!

## Is it time to renew your membership?

Check the top line of your mailing label for a letter designation and date. If it is circled in red, your membership is now due.

S \_\_\_\_\_ \$15 Annual Individual Membership

F \_\_\_\_\_ \$25 Annual Family Membership

C \_\_\_\_\_ \$100-\$499 Contributor

X \_\_\_\_\_ \$500+ Benefactor

\_\_\_\_\_ Additional Donation

R is for Reciprocal and L is for Life members

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

## Calendar of Events

Mar 4 - Board of Directors Meeting, 7:30 pm  
Mar 13 - Museum Committee Meeting, 1:15 pm  
Mar 25 - Program Meeting, 7:30 pm  
Mar 31 - **EASTER**, Museum Closed

Apr 4 - **Volunteer Orientation**, 1-3 pm  
Apr 9 - **SUMMER HOURS BEGIN:**  
Tues-Fri, 10 am-5 pm; Sat-Sun: 1 am - 5 pm  
Apr 10 - Museum Committee Meeting, 1:15 pm  
Apr 22 - Program Meeting, 7:30 pm

May 6 - Board of Directors Meeting, 7:30 pm  
May 8 - **3rd Grade Pioneer Days for USD 428**  
May 15 - Museum Committee Meeting, 1:15 pm  
May 19 - **Drag Racing Open House**, 12-4 pm  
May 27 - **MEMORIAL DAY**, 1-5 pm (tentative)

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# GET YOUR MOTOR RUNNIN’

*Karen Neuforth, BCHS Research Coordinator*

It may have started on dry lake beds in Southern California in the 1930s, but drag racing became a major, national event on a B-29 runway west of Great Bend, Kansas, in 1955. Just two years before, local “hot rodders” formed an organization called the “Gasket Blasters” and this year, we are celebrating the 60th anniversary of the first organized drag races on that B-29 runway at the former Great Bend Army Air Field.



*Legendary dragster, the Green Monster, built by Art & Walt Arfons of Akron, Ohio, made its national debut at the NHRA Nationals in Great Bend in 1955 with Walt taking the Top Speed trophy in the gas class.*

In 1954, drag racing enthusiasts formed the Sunflower Rod and Custom Association, holding drag meets on Sunday afternoons on the north runway of the old Air Field. Among the organizing members were Leroy Foos, Bob Engle, and Joe Mackel. In January of that year, Foos told the *Great Bend Daily Tribune*, “our purpose is to run police sponsored ‘drag’ races and to teach safety on and off the streets, while always bearing in mind that these ‘drags’ are for the land strip and not the streets”.

To ensure safe driving, the organization operated under the supervision of the Great Bend Police Department and the Kansas Highway Patrol. In fact, they had a ‘three strikes and you’re out policy’ for their membership – three traffic tickets and the members was automatically banned from the club.

Then, in April 1955, representatives of the SRCA went

to the Great Bend City Council to seek support in their bid to host the National Hot Rod Association’s first national speed finals. By a unanimous vote, the Council agreed to send a letter of invitation to the NHRA. On behalf of the SRCA, Earl McDonald explained that “some 450 to 550 cars would take part, bringing anywhere from 4,000 to 8,000 hot rod enthusiasts here from all parts of the country.” Great Bend was considered a likely site due to its central location and the track, considered to be one of the best quarter-mile tracks in the Midwest.

On June 13, 1955, the official announcement was made that Great Bend had gotten the bid. By late June, the *Tribune* reported that NHRA officials were in Great Bend, planning the first national championships, to be held here September 29th through October 3rd. At the time, it was estimated that as many as 20,000 spectators and 1700 competing cars might attend.

By August, hotel and motel rooms in Great Bend were filling rapidly and the need for housing – just for participants and crews – was overflowing Great Bend and spreading out in a 60-mile radius. “What is worse, only the participants in the event are taken care of as yet. The spectators who are expected to come for the four-day drags still have to be taken care of”, according to Wynette McDonald, SRCA secretary.

While the extravagant numbers predicted by NHRA staff for participation and attendance didn’t materialize, cars were lined up for registration on opening day. With 219 cars participating, attendance was estimated at about 15,000, roughly the population of Great Bend now.

The top qualifying speed was turned in by Art Chrisman of Compton, California, driving a gold-colored dragster with a 300 horse power Chrysler engine that ran the straightaway at 145 mph. One of the more unusual entrants was a Gas Turbine Boeing 502, built by the Air Force in Omaha, and driven by Sgt. John Davis, which was reportedly clocked at 140 mph, from a standing start in five seconds.

As Leroy Foos told the *Topeka Capitol Journal* in 2011, “We had a good thing for three days.” Then, the rains came – in torrents – as four inches soaked the facility overnight and NHRA officials decided to move the last day of finals to Arizona.

NHRA was back again in November 1955 promising

the SRCA and the City that the 1956 Nationals would return to Great Bend – “if” the strip was black-topped. Even though the City Council had agreed to blacktop the dragstrip and a new organization, National Championship Drags, Inc., was formed locally to help manage the races, negotiations fell through and NHRA took Great Bend out of the running for the 1956 championships when the national organization rejected the proposed contract and decided that a larger metropolitan area would garner more attendance.



*It wasn’t just dragsters that raced, everything from ‘jalopies’ to stock cars took to the track at the 1955 Nationals.*

It wasn’t long, however, before local hot rod enthusiasts were in discussions with Walter Mentzer, Jr., of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, about formation of the American Hot Rod Association and by April 1956, a contract was signed which would lead to Great Bend hosting the AHRA National Championship Drag Races from 1956 through 1959. Led by local businessman Nelson Pointer and attorney Ray ‘Jiggs’ Schulz, the NCDI negotiated the deal with AHRA.

The first AHRA-sponsored Nationals were held Labor Day weekend 1956, bringing in an estimated 7,000 people just to watch the final runs on Sunday. The 1956 races are also notable for the appearance of the young Don Garlits, since dubbed ‘The King of Dragsters’. Indeed, the first of his ten AHRA championships was won at Great Bend in 1958 with his “Swamp Rat”..

In 1958, the SRCA, with donations from local businesses, spent \$16,000 to lay a smooth blacktop surface on the old concrete runway. After the AHRA Nationals in 1959, the president of that organization decided to move the races to Kansas City International Raceway.

Racing continued under the auspices of the SRCA until it disbanded In 1993, the club reorganized and in 1994 the drag strip was listed on the Register of Kansas

Historic Places. Thanks to a grant from the Kansas Department of Transportation, the track was resurfaced in 2000. Additional improvements since have included a Compu-Link timing system and scoreboards, a new concession stand, and a new tower with a meeting room was constructed and 1320 GO LIVE TIMING installed. And, the hay bales that were used as safety barriers for the first NHRA Nationals have been replaced with concrete barriers.



*Some of the cars that came to run at the 1956 AHRA Nationals.*



*A 1932 roadster “burning off the line” at the 1956 AHRA Nationals.*

Today, the SRCA strip continues to host nationally sanctioned races and brings thousands of spectators to the area each season. Things have come a long way from those first drag races in 1953. Let’s congratulate them all on sixty years of racing history in Central Kansas!

*Our thanks to Harold Schneidewind for these photographs and to the members of Sunflower Rod & Custom Association for their cooperation.*