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Guy Frost's History Of The Bridge – From Streets To Straights To Fairways (Parts 1 & 2)

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1957 was an important year in the history of sportscar racing in North America. Several new racing circuits opened that year from Road America in the middle of the nation, to Laguna Seca on the west coast, to Lime Rock Park in Northwestern Connecticut. Each of these circuits remains in operation to this day, with each enjoying continued development and improvement over the last 50 years. Virginia International Raceway also opened in 1957, but it went away for quite some time before Harvey Siegel resurrected it and went on to refurbish the facility in virtually all areas and bring that wonderful track with a storied history back to life.

There was another potentially enduring east coast facility for sportscar racers that opened in 1957. It was the Bridgehampton Race Circuit – commonly referred to as ‘The Bridge’ – located on the eastern end of Long Island, a 110 mile long spit of land that stretches due east of New York City. Unlike Laguna Seca, Lime Rock, Road America and VIR however, The Bridge was born premature and lived on life support for most of its existence.

The history of the circuit dates back to the days when cars raced on the local roadways, beginning as early as 1915. Building a suitable purpose-built race circuit away from the primary roads seemed to be the answer to the question of how to continue to race cars and not endanger the spectators who watched them go.

In 1949, the tradition of street racing in the hamlet of Bridgehampton was born, and it continued through 1953. Men like Bruce Stevenson and Henry Austin Clark Jr. were able to bring all the needed resources together to conduct races on local roads. The races were a social focal point for the well heeled residents of the south fork of the island, in the area known simply as ‘The Hamptons’. Drivers from points far and wide loved to bring their latest race cars to this prestigious event and the tradition is remembered to this day by an annual Historic Car celebration that takes place one weekend in October each year.

But street racing in the 1950's was becoming far too dangerous and so that glamorous but short-lived tradition soon came to an end. But there were many who sought to have Bridgehampton remain an important center for sportscar racing, albeit off the local roads and on a purpose built racing circuit. An effort to sell shares in a new facility was begun mid-decade with the formation of the Bridgehampton Road Races Corporation, chartered in 1953. After several years of fundraising, the initial clearing began on a rugged hillside about five miles north of the village. The new track was finally under construction on more than 500 acres of sand and

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gravel covered with windswept trees and dense underbrush. This was an area set quite some distance back and away from the town itself.

But what should have been an incredibly successful tale of perseverance in attempting to create an incredible new tradition of professional racing, instead deteriorated over 40 years time into a constant struggle to keep an idea alive. In the end, the enthusiastic waving of race flags was replaced by the idle fluttering of marker flags on a golf course.

The story of what transpired from the end of the street races to the end of all racing in Bridgehampton is a fascinating one to those of us who grew up on Long Island and have sharp memories of all the great racers and race cars we witnessed at The Bridge. It is a tale of tragedy and partial triumph. One of political persuasion and persistent plodding to try and avoid the end that was inevitably to come.

One of the people who had an intimate relationship with The Bridge – moving from fan to racer to volunteer savior - and had a relationship with several of the players in the drama it became, is a gentleman by the name of Guy Frost. We spent some time talking with him about what really happened between 1955 when he was a young sportscar enthusiast and G.I. returning from Japan, and 1999 when The Bridge was plowed under to make way for an exclusive golf course.

We will only interrupt Frost's comments from time to time to introduce a new segment of his commentary or present reference information in support of his comments. For the most part, what follows is a full transmittal of his words. In the end, we think you too will find his story to be interesting, and disheartening, and uplifting in the way that The Bridge has come to be remembered and honored.

Guy Frost's recollections begin here and continue again in part two.

"My initiation to racing at Bridgehampton came while I was in the service and on duty in Japan. I had heard about the street races that were going on there so when it was time for me to transfer I was given a choice of Reykjavik, Iceland, or Montauk, on Long Island. I didn't hesitate to choose Montauk! However, by the time I got there, the street races had ended. This was not long after my interest in sportscars began with the first MG TD and Jaguar sportscars coming into America, brought back by other GI's.

"I was really disappointed when I found out the races at Bridgehampton that I had heard about had been stopped because the cars had gotten faster and the crowds had gotten bigger and pretty soon the town fathers realized they had to stop racing in the streets. When I got there the Bridgehampton Road Races Corporation (BRRRC) had just been formed. They were a group of people who had either been directly involved in the street races or simply wanted the tradition of sportscar racing to continue in Bridgehampton. I remember that they were selling shares of stock from a little card table placed in front of the Candy Kitchen, a shop located right in the middle of Bridgehampton. The shares were \$5!

"It took the BRRRC from 1953 to 1956 to get the funds together to acquire the property for the new Bridgehampton Race Circuit. When I arrived there in 1955 I learned about the BRRRC and the building of the circuit up in the area known as Noyac Hills. It took a while to find it, but once we did we would go watch them carve the track out of the hillsides every chance we got. Little by little the track came alive. You could see the contours of the new circuit gradually emerging out of the woods.

“It turned out that building the track was a very difficult chore. They never had enough money to pay the bulldozer guy and this guy and that guy and the bottom line is that, when the track finally did open the BRRC was in court being sued by the guys who did most of the work.

“But I didn’t know that at the time. For me, building the track was wonderful because right from the beginning it was a very exciting thing to see it all coming along. Bridgehampton had enough of a history because of the street races that when they finally opened the track in 1957, a bunch of great racing people showed up including people like Phil Hill, driving his own Ferrari 3.5. Within a few short years The Bridge became an international attraction for drivers and sportscar manufacturers alike.”

We intrude on Frost’s story here to point out that The Bridge was host to the racing series, and racers, who comprise what many feel make up the ‘golden age’ of sportscar racing in North America. Names like Gurney, Andretti, Donohue, Revson, Hall, McLaren, Hulme, Motschenbacher, Hill, Hansgen, Rodriguez, Surtees, Fitch and Cunningham could be found on the entry lists. And the series that raced here include the United States Road Racing Championship, the Canadian-American Challenge Cup, the Trans-Am, and countless SCCA, EMRA and other club racing events.

Frost’s recollections continue...

“The people behind the track were really a combination of playboys and farmers who had put up much of the money. The sad thing was the track opened before it was really finished and it never did get finished. They had a tiger by the tail but they began in debt and remained in debt throughout the whole life of the place. They only could do the bare minimum of maintenance, with one exception.

“Austie’ Clark was a longtime Southampton socialite and he was one of the instigators – or founders - of the BRRC. He wanted to bring some ambiance and class to the new facility so he built a little building on the grounds overlooking the pit lane and somehow got himself a bar from some defunct place in Southampton, and created what became known as ‘The Circuit Club’. It wasn’t much more than a patio with some picnic tables, surrounded by a picket fence. But it brought the rich together and it was only open to those who could pay the dues to get in. I remember that I couldn’t afford the dues so I would peer over the fence like Kilroy to see what was going on!

“Over the years I got to know Clark fairly well and it was just wonderful that he had this antique bar in that building. He managed to bring a little charisma to the place. But the track was always a financial failure. Guys like Clark would spend their own money to make improvements that they wanted.

“Let me back up a minute to say that Bruce Stevenson is the man that started the street races. He died a few years ago virtually an unknown by the people in the sport today. He and Cameron Argetsinger – the man who started the races at Watkins Glen – were really contemporaries. Argetsinger died recently with great fanfare and publicity but Bruce just faded away. That’s sort of a reflection of the Bridgehampton Race track. It was a marvelous place. It was also never given a lot of amenities. My own wife said to me, ‘I’m not going to go up there anymore because the minute I get out of the car I’ve rocks in my shoes. And there is no shade anywhere!’

(Bridgehampton was noted for its challenging 2.85 mile layout, and for the enormous amounts of loose sand and gravel that made up the terrain. Drivers knew that if they went off course they could be buried in the stuff.)

“Amenities were few and far between. There was just one small building in the middle of the paddock that had running water. And there was a building at the start finish line that was used for timing and scoring and media. Years later they added a small store in the paddock where drivers could buy things like gloves and helmets. And they even got around to installing showers, which were a great relief to the drivers!”

(At one point, the track installed a small section of grandstand seating along the main straight, opposite the pits. The seats were said to have been sourced from the demolition of the old Polo Grounds baseball park. We have often wondered whatever became of those seats. In today’s collector market those ‘scrap’ seats would probably command a pretty penny.)

“The new track was almost the secret known around the world. A lot of locals worked there and many revered the track because it extended the summer tourist season. There was usually an event in April or May but the fall races were really great for local business. This was obvious when the big races like the USRRC and the Can-Am and Trans-Am ran there, but it was also true in the 1980s when all the big events had long since run their course at The Bridge and moved on to greener pastures at other race tracks. The motels still did good business, as did the restaurants, because there were races every single weekend, but it wasn’t at the same level as when the big races ran.

“From the beginning, the track management was trying to do everything they could to survive and then came the 1970s when the Can-Am era at The Bridge ended and the major races went away. That really disturbed me. When the Can-Am left after 1969 – we lost the 1970 race to Elkhart Lake (Road America) – I decided I had to try and do something to help.”

Part Two of this column continues on the next page.

Guy Frost's History Of The Bridge – From Streets To Straights To Fairways (Part 2)

“For tracks like Elkhart Lake and Watkins Glen, the difference was they had money to run those operations. Bridgehampton never did. And when the race organizers would come to Bridgehampton they would point out all the deficiencies but the owners just didn't have the money to make the improvements. They could beg, borrow and steal to try and make the bare minimum improvements but they couldn't compete with the tracks that had the modern amenities, the nice press buildings, and so on.

“The reality is that the people who run the various racing series are in the sport to run it as a business. Bridgehampton was started and run by a bunch of playboys who simply wanted a place to race and didn't care to invest too heavily in what they had.

“In 1970 I joined the SCCA and subsequently found out that the SCCA was not responsible for the demise of Bridgehampton. It was the owners of the property, the Bridgehampton Road Races Corporation. And when you look at who they were you see they had over 900 shareholders with about half of them local people - farmers and businessmen from up and down the Hampton's. The other half was city-slickers, and Europeans and west coast people and racing buffs who would buy shares simply because they loved racing.

“The bottom line is, the city slickers ultimately got control of the corporation in the late 1970's and they put the track on the market because of the increasing real estate value of the land. This was when the first burst of insanity hit the real estate market. Today we would think those prices were cheap!

“I think they paid something like \$35,000 or so for over 520 acres. By the 1970's the land was worth several million dollars. And you have to remember that, by this time the original shareholders are now 15 – 20 years older, retired, living in Florida and so on. The rest of them simply died away or lost interest. That was why I started a group called 'The Friends of Bridgehampton'.

“My pitch to the younger racers in the group was that we have had a free ride here for 20 years and so we should buy the shares from the old-timers and keep the place going. But that effort was not successful. We did hold off the developers for quite some time and we did manage to buy some shares, but it wasn't until Bob Rubin came along that we were able to lengthen our stay. I told him we were going to lose the proxy count if we didn't get more votes somewhere. He was in his driving suit and getting ready to try out his latest Ferrari when he told me, 'I want to help.'

“Bob became the angel that saved the place for another 10 years. When I asked him how many shares he would like to buy he said, 'Well, I'll come in for a million!' The biggest stock purchase I had up to that time was \$500! Wow!

“We then talked about how we got into this trouble in the first place. I said one group owned too many shares. What we really wanted to do was keep this a grass roots organization so no one could pack up their bags and say I don't want to do this anymore, because that is what happened to the original owners. They were overwhelmed by the law firm that got all the shares for defending the corporation against the bulldozer operator and the folks that were looking to

get paid for building the place. It's funny the way things evolved. Back on opening day, track publicity ballyhooed the \$100,000 cost of the 'Road Racing Center of the East'.

(Ironically, Lime Rock Park also adopted that moniker and still uses it today. Of course, unlike The Bridge, Lime Rock is still in business and can thus validate claim to its use)

"The law firm didn't give a damn about the racing. There was one guy who was a racer but when he died the other partners in the firm thought, 'What the hell are we doing with this? It never paid a penny in dividends.' Now along comes Bob Rubin, who is as savvy as they are and he says, 'Hey, wait a minute!' It turned into a six or seven year battle between Bob and the lawyers but ultimately Bob won. Bob bought out most all of the 900 shareholders from around the world to keep the track from going on the real estate market, and in the end became the sole owner of the property.

"Of course, the town government had to get involved in what was happening at this race track hidden in the rolling hills of Southampton Township. Guess what? They got in bed with the developers who were anxious to cash in on the booming vacation home market in the Hamptons. Things are much improved in that regard today but back then the town government was basically 'selling the farm'. Developers were buying all the farms and woodlands and submitting plans for subdivisions left and right. Like carpet baggers, the out of town developers came in, raped the land, and now we're stuck with a bunch of houses on little lots all over the place.

"Eventually, the land that Bob Rubin now owned was surrounded by developers. Not yet completely developed with houses, there was still a lot of raw land, but in the town hall were all these filed maps with streets going right up to the race track. (These may not have even have been the people who filed those maps, but the people who came to own them were friends of the government.) So the government, in so many words, asked, 'Are we going to take care of our friends or are we going to let this Bob Rubin come in from New York and continue to run a race track that has been a noise problem for the people who already live nearby?

"And so the battles to kill off the race track to encourage construction of more houses began. The irony is that houses are widely recognized as the least productive taxable land use. The town raised Bob's taxes dramatically but they weren't satisfied with that. Bob finally got the message: the handwriting was on the wall, the town did not want a race track. He finally capitulated and said he wasn't going to keep fighting this battle it's a hopeless case. This decision came only after he made several pleas to the town to do things like limit the number of major racing events to two a year, and turn the race weekends into premier social events like Pebble Beach, here on the east coast. Apparently the town powers didn't know what that was all about, but they did know all about developers so they didn't want to hear about racing events from Bob Rubin.

"I personally think that the town board just got tired of the complaints about the noise the Westhampton Drag Strip and The Bridge. It was problematic for them for over the years. It had become a nuisance. The Bridge wasn't drawing tourists like it did when the big events ran there. It had become a second-class, little league race track, even though Bob's intentions were always to rebuild it into something important once again.

"At this point I think it is important to note that, when the professional events went away, the owners had to start renting out the track for ever more car club weekends in order to pay the taxes. This meant that more and more weekends there was more and more noise, and more and more houses were being built nearer to the track. And, because the racers were guys like

me, simply racing for fun as a hobby, the glamour of the 1960's and income for local business decreased.

“And it didn't help that the police kept getting more and more pressure from the new neighbors who were constantly calling to complain that they couldn't enjoy being out on their new decks because of all the noise. It was just like at an airport. You buy the house next to the airport and then you want to get the airport shut down.

“In the end I think Bob just said something like, ‘If you don't want a race course then fine, I'll build a golf course.’ But then he ran into problems with environmentalists who were concerned about groundwater pollution from the chemicals used to keep the greens in shape. That was another extended period of discontent and the funny thing was that the environmentalists and the racers were now on the same side! Our motto was ‘Noise is transient - water pollution is forever’. Of course, now the racers were turned against Bob Rubin because they felt he had sold them out to build the golf course.

“As The Friends of Bridgehampton, were able to run out the first group of developers but then a second developer came along who was, in the simplest terms ‘connected’ with the town, but he eventually wound up in jail. This is when Bob stepped in. But by 1990 it was us and the environmentalist's trying to fight the golf course.

The Friends of Bridgehampton were then renamed Bridgehampton Racing Heritage Group and began to focus on the track as an historic site for motorsports in America.

BHRG filed an application for designation by New York State and, after due consideration, the state notified Southampton that the race circuit had been found worthy of preservation. It was thereby deemed eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. Southampton ignored this notice and proceeded to ring the death knell for the bridge by approving a zoning change to permit the golf course.

“Through Bob's tireless efforts the track remained in operation as the struggles continued for a good number of years more. I think 1999 was the last time I actually ran on the track but preparations for the golf course were under way at that time.

“In essence Bob ‘got the message’. He always wanted a race track but he knew it wasn't ever going to be what he envisioned it without the blessing of the town government. But he still wanted to keep the heritage of ‘The Bridge’ alive so all the time he was fighting to keep the track alive, or fighting the people who didn't want the golf course, he put out notice that he was interested in buying any sort of memorabilia or artwork or whatever related to the history of the track. Money was no object. Whatever the seller wanted, Bob paid it.

“He then went on to build a spectacular new golf club house at the top of the hill, past the bridge that crosses over the start of the track's first turn. He has dedicated the club house to the history of racing at Bridgehampton. That is why he named the new golf course ‘The Bridge’.

“And he kept nearly a third of the original race track in its original condition. He restored the bridge we drove over to get to the paddock. Most of the long straightaway and the entire downhill section from that bridge through the first few turns is still there, as are the original flag stands. I don't know where that will lead in the future but the dedication to motorsports is immediately obvious. Even the markers on the golf holes are checkered flags.

“And while there is still plenty of that famous Bridgehampton sand around, he has really turned the place into something beautiful. The views of the Peconic Bay are even better now because the fairway clearings open new vistas to the water. And when you sit in this dramatic new club

house and look out at all the beauty you think, 'Man, if it had only been like this when it was a race track it might still be as thrilling today as it was then.

"If they could have raised the money to bring it along into the modern racing era, and I don't mean stadium style, I mean just having some landscaping, grass and trees to make it more amenable, what a different story might have been written here.

"Later this year, Bob Rubin will hold a special, invitation-only 50th anniversary celebration at the facility. 2007 was actually the 50th anniversary but we didn't get our act together in time to make the event happen last fall. The whole thing got put off but the time was well spent. A special video artwork has been put together that captures the essence of the evolution of the track from 1957 until its demise. There are many racing people featured in the video art and separate compilation of authentic films is an ongoing project that will continue to be expanded and improved. You can relive a sense of what it was like to be a part of the history of the track. Bob plans to introduce the video artist, his own art and photo collection, and the vintage film project at the anniversary event.

"You know, back then Bob and I fought tooth and nail for many years when he first proposed the golf course. We thought he was the biggest traitor when in reality; he was the smartest one in the bunch. We said he's given up so we will continue to fight him and the town board at the same time. But ultimately he was right. They won and we lost. But in the final analysis, it was the elected officials that were the real losers from the outset.

"In my eyes, Bob won and we won because alone perpetuates the memory of The Bridge for all of us. He doesn't have a car museum but he does have a history museum in the club house. He tried for years to save the track but when that became impossible, he did much to save its history and the sense of the place."

We have been fortunate to be invited to attend the 50th anniversary event at The Bridge. Honestly, we can't wait to see what remains of the place, and the homage Bob Rubin has created to the magnificent, if all too brief, history of The Bridge. We might even bring home a small bag of that famous sand as a souvenir. After all, this was the same stuff that clogged the injectors and stuck to the tires of some of racing's greatest cars. And we walked in that sand so many years ago in pursuit of the best vantage points to watch our favorite racers and race cars at speed. The Bridge will always hold a special place in our hearts and minds and, like Guy Frost; we suspect there are many more who too have wonderful memories of racing at The Bridge.

Frost Supports Another Long Island Racing Icon

Guy Frost is also involved in honoring another important part of the history of road racing on Long Island, the Vanderbilt Cup Races. William K. Vanderbilt sponsored and promoted races that took place at the start of the 20th century on another purpose-built roadway known as the Vanderbilt Motor Parkway. Visit www.vanderbiltcupraces.com for more information on the history of these races and for the details of the centennial event to take place in the fall.

For more information on the annual October event that commemorates the original street races in Bridgehampton, visit the website of the Bridgehampton Historical Society at <http://www.bridgehamptonrally.org/>

