

MIDDLE AMERICA HAS ITS WOODSTOCK, TOO

They Call It the Indianapolis 500 Mile International Sweepstakes

It is a warm night, and the sky overhead is lit up by searchlights. Cars, campers, trucks, buses, station wagons—thousands of vehicles with thousands of people in and milling around them—are parked in ragged rows that stretch back and forth across the huge field at 30th Street off Georgetown Road in the All-American city of Indianapolis, Indiana.

A cacophany of jazz, pop, rock and roll blasts into the night from speakers hooked to radios, tape decks, and stereos. Hundreds of barbecue grills broil steaks, hamburgers, hot dogs. Oceans of beer, surely more than 100,000 bottles and cans of it, are popped and twist-snapped open. The whine of motorcycles, their single lights cutting through the dark, speed up and down the fire lanes between the rows of cars. Grown men with wives and children shout their *macho* yearnings at young women.

"Hey, sister, I'd sure like to get my dipstick into you!"

"Hey! Any of you girls wanna be liberated, you just come on over to this here camper, you hear?"

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BY JEFF GREENFIELD

Sleeps six and lays twelve! Ha-ha-ha."

Almost as often, the men invoke another common denominator as well:

"Hey! Whattya drinkin'?"

"Coors! Great beer!"

"Aw, that's crap!"

"Goddamn, you don't know your beer!"

At the edge of the field, on a flat-bed truck, a pleasant, balding man in his sixties, who could be the principal of a small-town junior high school, is trying to spread the good word of the Gospel.

"You boys and girls, you've got to please God by faith. How about you,

young lady? Would you like to be called a child of God tonight? How 'bout you, young fella? Will you overcome the world?"

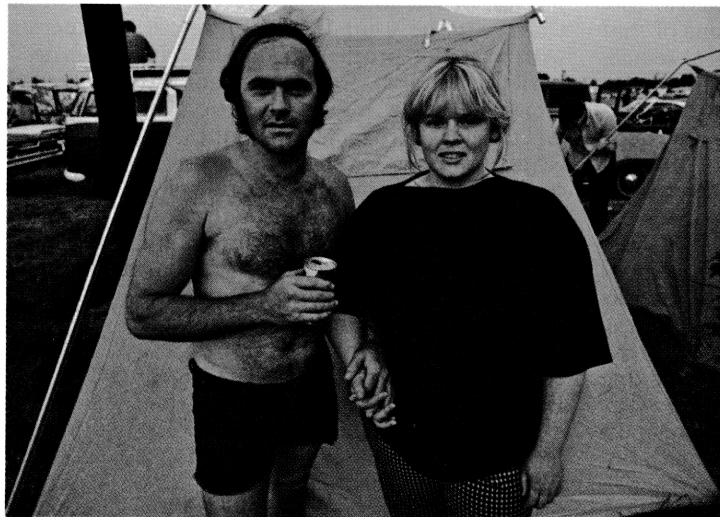
"Somebody get the preacher a beer!" shouts a crew-cut boy of fifteen, who well might be singing in the preacher's choir on another weekend. But not this weekend. This is the Friday midnight of Memorial Day weekend, and for these thousands, it is a time for furious revelry, release, and a strange blend of fellowship and indulgence, all part of one of the most extraordinary conglomerations I have ever attended anywhere: The Indianapolis 500 Mile International Sweepstakes.

Every year more than 300,000 people pack the fields and stands around the track of the Indianapolis Speedway, ostensibly to witness the running of the 500 Mile Race, with its million dollars in prize money, record-breaking speeds, and a constant promise of fiery death. It is the single biggest event held in America; on any given year more Americans meet in one place at one time here at the speedway than anywhere else in the country.

From May 1, when the speedway opens for



Some who come actually watch the race.



For many others, the 500 is a giant camp-in.

practice runs, through the time trials to determine who qualifies for entry into the race, up through the neosacred Race Day, a fever begins to build all through Indianapolis. Indiana newspapers fill page upon page with history, legend, predictions, and interviews with everyone from the hot-dog concessionaires to John MacKenzie, the man who carries into Victory Lane the ponderous Borg-Warner trophy with which to honor the winner. More than 100,000 people attend the time trials on the weekends before Memorial Day. By the Friday night before the race, fans who drive here from as far away as California and Oregon are settled in their beer-swilling camping areas, ready for the gates to swing open at 5:00 a.m. on Race Day, so they can guide their cars into the enormous infield area of the track. From this vantage point, where not more than a tenth of the track can be seen, the fans set up platforms and chairs on the tops of vehicles. The resulting cluster of humanity is something like a tract of suburbia writ small, each family or group carving out a few square feet of land. And there, under an increasingly hot sky, inhaling the stench of gasoline, burning rubber and charcoal, the fans eat and drink away the dawn and the morning and finally the climactic afternoon during which thirty-three drivers in exotic-looking automobiles flash by them.

Why do the people come? Certainly, the city of Indianapolis is no part of the attraction. This is perhaps the worst metropolis in the entire United States—a city with endless miles of indifferent gray struc-

tures, Burger Chefs, and Kentucky Fried Chicken stands and a political climate that welcomed such spasms of paranoia as the Klan during the Twenties and the Birchers in the Sixties. Even if the Indy fans were drawn to such a city, none of them would leave their valued places at the speedway to journey downtown.

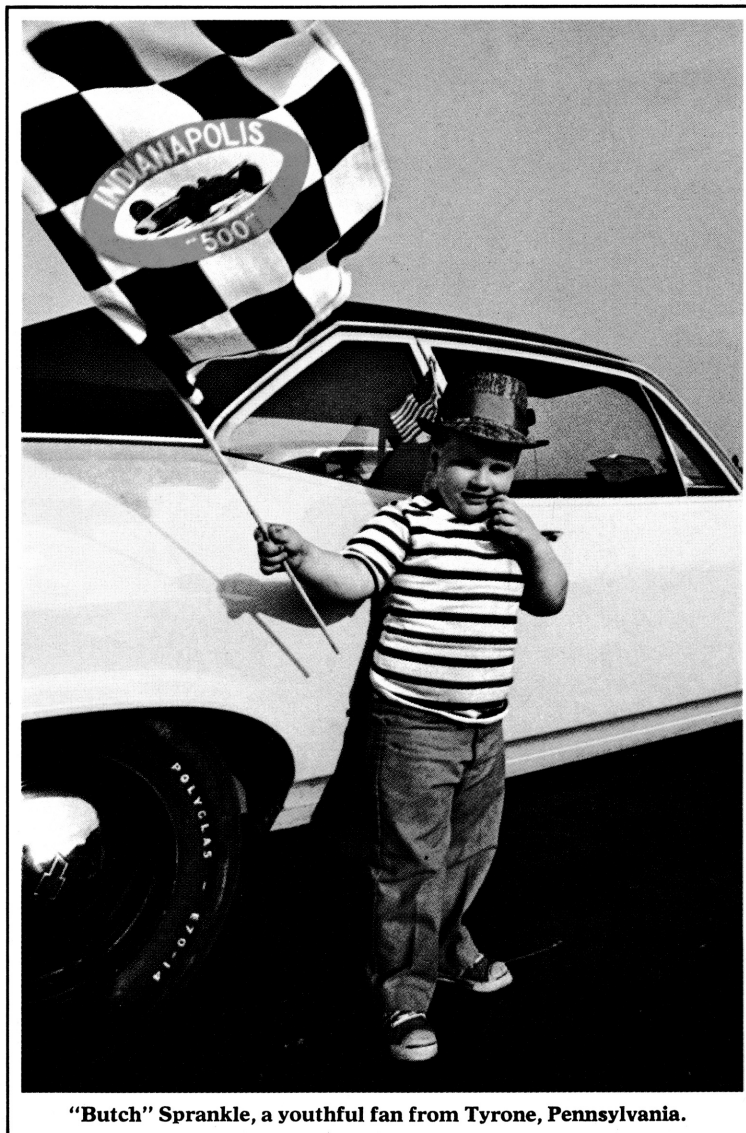
Still, it is not simply, or even primarily, the race that attracts the fans. It is the awesome, terrifying, hilarious spectacle surrounding the race, a spectacle that holds within itself a welter of contradictory yearnings tearing at what is left of our national spirit: glory, speed, wealth, fellowship, and death. After witnessing the Indy for a weekend, I came away with an overriding sense of sorrow at what we have done to each other and to ourselves.

The 500 itself is, in part, a celebration of technology, the continuation of an old American tradition, rooted in another age, when people traveled great distances from their isolated communities to hear Chautauqua speakers or witness the new marvels of the machine age: horseless carriages,

dirigibles, airplanes, and the wonders of science that promised, at the turn of the twentieth century, to turn the United States into a streamlined technological paradise.

The first 500 Mile Race at Indianapolis was run in 1911. It was dreamed up by Carl Fisher, a local promoter-businessman and speed demon, who had originally built the track on which the races were run in order to test improvements for automobiles. Within a few years the race was attracting thousands of spectators from around the country, and it proved a powerful magnet as well for manufacturers, who saw a chance for free publicity by underwriting the cost of machines built with their parts. During the gasoline-scarce days of World War II, the speedway was abandoned. After the war it was brought back to life by Tony Hulman, its present owner and president, and since then the ties between the race and big business have become thoroughly entwined. Pistoning makers, tire manufacturers, spark-plug producers, and the like help finance the machines, which cost up to

\$200,000, counting the maintenance costs. And the businessmen of Indianapolis have for fifteen years or so whipped up a promotional effort of Babbitt-sized proportions. Checkered flags, like those used to wave autos across the finish line, decorate the city. Throughout the month of May a series of events progressively builds up excitement: Festival queens are chosen, there are gin rummy and golf tournaments, a mayor's breakfast, and finally an eve-of-race parade down streets painted with the



"Butch" Sprankle, a youthful fan from Tyrone, Pennsylvania.

checkered flag pattern. So ingrained is the race that even the soul-saving evangelists working the camping area pass out tracts bearing the checkered-flag emblem and titled, "Souvenir Victory Edition."

Boosterism, however, cannot by itself attract tens of thousands of people to Indianapolis for a week of sleeping in open fields or in the back of campers. The race itself, of course, is a powerful magnet. Each year the cars are lower, sleeker, and more ingeniously designed. This year, for example, their surprisingly fragile fiber-glass bodies are equipped with a small wing in front and a wider wing in the rear; the air pressure against these wings pushes the car down, holding it to the road at speeds that, on the straightaways, approach 200 miles per hour.

The sheer power of thirty-three cars roaring around the speedway is unbelievable. From the turn, you hear a high-pitched, angry whine, like a brigade of enraged, giant hornets. Suddenly, the cars appear, hurtling around the banked track and seeming to fly straight at you. Then in a flash of energy, light, sound, dirt, and with an assault of rubber and gasoline smells, they zoom by. It seems odd, given supersonic airplanes and rockets to the moon, that automobiles can be so awesome in their speed. The reason they are, of course, is that the high-speed auto fits into a fantasy that is grafted onto everyday experience. Watching the race at Indy is like attending a Walter Mitty Memorial Convention. Every fan imagines himself behind the wheel of an Olsonite-Eagle or

In any given year, more Americans meet at the speedway than anywhere else in the country.

a Ford-McLaren thundering and skidding around the track.

"Boy," says Jennings, head of a family of a half-dozen that journeys here every year from eastern Pennsylvania. "I'd love to get in my Chevy and drive around that track just once. They got a little bus that'll give you a tour of the track for fifty cents, but, aw, I'd love to drive around it, just once. Or even get in one of those cars. I don't see why they don't have an old car they'd let you sit in and take a picture. You'd think they'd set it up for the fans."

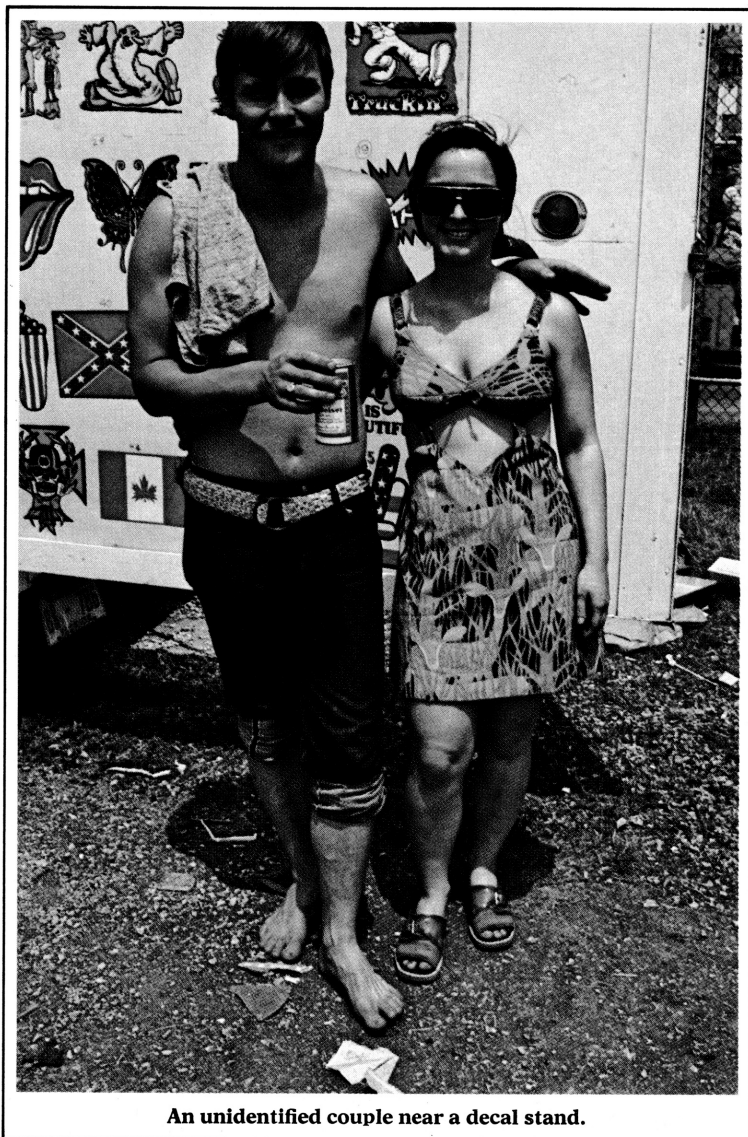
Along with the specter of glory, fame, and speed, of course, is the specter of death. Driving a car at three times the

maximum speed permissible on a superhighway is, to say the least, unsafe; running over a piece of metal on the track, making a slight miscalculation in braking or steering in a turn, can send the car smashing into a wall. And while no visitor will admit openly that it is the prospect of witnessing death that draws him to the race, the anticipation of danger is clearly present in many minds.

"Yeah," says Paul, a shipping clerk from Iowa. "I was here in '39 when Floyd Roberts got it, and I remember '64 when Eddie Sachs and MacDonald were burned up. Jeez, that was something. And in '68 I was right there when a guy got killed. Got a great picture of that wreck."

For Mike, a state trooper from Ohio who is half-Indian, witnessing the race in person cannot be equaled by television because "the thing that's wrong with TV, they try not to show the grisly part of it when it happens. Now you take this Jim Malloy, who got wrecked in the trials this year. Well, when it first happened, they didn't show the grisly stuff—you know, when he actually hit the wall, how bad it really was."

"You'd be surprised," says Cleek, a sun-red-dened harvest hand in his sixties who drove in by himself from Oregon in a pickup. "Ninety-nine-and-nine-tenths of 'em come to see wrecks. You hear 'em say, 'Wasn't no good race, no wrecks.' Just like people watching a man on a ledge, most of 'em want him to jump. That's what a lot of people come here for, I believe. I dunno, I see it the other way. That just about ruins it for me."



An unidentified couple near a decal stand.

People gettin' pretty damned hard-hearted now. They don't give a damn about their fellow man."

The strange mixture of honor and bloodshed, sudden wealth and sudden death, courage and the mechanical skill involved in building a championship car and keeping it moving (a task assigned the "pit" crews who service the cars with the frantic speed and competence of a team of open-heart surgeons) can get a hold on a fan that lasts for a lifetime. It happened to Clyde de Botkin, who was stationed near the speedway during World War II, when it lay idle. "I said to myself, 'If they ever have a race here again, I want to see it.' I came back in '47, and that was it," he recalls.

Now in his late forties, Clyde is a round-faced, pleasant man who works as a handy man in Kaycee, Wyoming. For the last twenty-seven years the only vacation Clyde has taken has come between late April and early June. Every year, he has driven—most years by himself—to Indianapolis, taken a room in a boardinghouse, and stayed at the track from April 28 to June 5. He usually hangs out in Gasoline Alley, where the cars are stored and worked on; he has come to know the mechanics and pit crews by sight. The pride of his life is Special Pit Pass Number 777, which a speedway official gave Clyde a decade ago after he had noticed him at the 500 year after year; the pass permits him to watch the mechanics and drivers at work. The Indy is the only event outside of his daily routine that Clyde de Botkin has experienced in his adult life. He has never even

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seen another part of America.

"Why should I want to?" Clyde says. "This is the most exciting place in the world." Too exciting, in fact. Clyde has an enlarged heart, and he must lie down several times a day in the air-conditioned press room to safeguard his health. "I know it's dangerous," he says; "but if I couldn't be here on Race Day, I just wouldn't . . ." He shrugs.

Unlike Clyde de Botkin, who is caught up in the drama of the long, grueling challenge, a remarkable number of Indy fans are almost totally uninterested in the race. "I'd guess about one hundred thousand people here never see the cars in action, don't know

who won, and couldn't care less," says a race reporter. For the fans who pack the infield, in fact, the race is almost impossible to watch. Even the more affluent spectators in the upper grandstand can see barely a fourth of the track—it's just too big to see in its entirety.

"We'll be watching the backstretch," says Sam, a shipping clerk. "We'll only see a tenth of the race. But when they go by, we'll see this one's first, this one's second, and so on. So if their positions change, we'll know somebody passed."

For a sports junkie like me, this was odd to contemplate; it was as if I could watch a hockey game only from a ten-foot-wide stretch of ice, or a baseball game from an obstructed view that revealed only a six-foot chunk of base path. What kind of sports fan would watch an event where he could not see who scored, how, and what outstanding achievements won or lost the game?

"See, that's the thing," explains Bill, who has been here since Monday to be first on line to drive through the gate to the infield. "You could just not run

the race, and most people here wouldn't give a damn. The main thing is that people get together, and there's no fighting or anything. . . . I know these guys—they been coming here for years. They all park in the same spot at the gate, they mess around for three or four days with each other before the race starts, buying each other beer . . . they take care of each other. When we get inside the track, there'll be friends on both sides of us where we park, everybody sharing everything,



Some fans from Ohio, Michigan, etc., on their own grandstand.



The Hellings from Plano, Illinois.

and they all have a ball. No, we don't see each other the rest of the year. Just here. And we talk about the times we had and party it up."

What Bill says is echoed by many of the hard-core Indy spectators. They come because it is a "good time" and "the world's biggest party." For three or four days they live away from the home, the factory, or office. ("Why do I come here?" asks a Bendix-Westinghouse worker from Elyria, Ohio. "Four days away from the kids, with my buddies.") They move outside their existence. They see friends who are friends for a weekend each year. They drink endless cases of beer, grill their steaks together, and yell at the young girls in hot pants and T-shirts with no bras underneath.

"You know what this is like?" asks a dark-haired, muscular auto worker. "This is just like that Woodstock. Only those hippies had their music and their dope; we got beer and racing."

"Yeah," a buddy interrupts. "Only nobody around here is taking off their clothes and running around bare-ass. Goddamnit." He laughs.

There is a sense of Woodstock here, a sense of camaraderie. That sense is kindled by staying up all night together on Friday, waiting for the aerial bombs to explode at 5:00 a.m. Saturday signaling the opening of the track, and then the furious, Oklahoma-land-rush sprint to the best positions in the track ("The real race is at 5:00 a.m.," says a security guard. "The car race, that's just an anticlimax.") But there is also a fierce sense of personal, material pride: in the outfitting of the

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campers ("We got four bunk beds here, paneling, a can, running water, air conditioning") and the food ("Now, most folks have cold fried chicken. Hell, we got eggs any style, bacon, ham, home fries, and then steak, baked potato and sour cream, salad with blue cheese dressing"). The dull glow of television sets flickers in the late night air, that umbilical link with reality that cannot be turned off and left home.

I could not help thinking that we have at Indianapolis a metaphor for the way we live: Here before me are decent, hard-working people, seeking a sense of community and excitement beyond their individual lives, waiting

patiently to be packed together with their small luxuries and large discontents, being told what is happening by electronic tote boards and a loud-speaker system, seeking what fun they can find from a spectacle whose drama they cannot very clearly see. Much of the pomp and majesty of the race—the start, the solemn intonation, "Gentlemen, start your engines," the pit stops, the salute to the victor—all of these important events go unwitnessed by those who have come the farthest and endured the most to be "where the action is."

An hour before the race ends, hundreds of spectators' cars are already streaming out of the speedway, under a cloud of gasoline fumes, dust, and heat, heading for home. They will not see the climax of the race, the victorious driver receiving his kiss on the cheek from the queen, the victor's slow, triumphal circuit of the track, nor the winning driver acknowledging the cheers from the grandstand. They have gotten what they came for in the revelry and release and camaraderie; and most of them will be back again next year.

"I been goin' to my sister's place for Memorial Day since 1938," says Cookie, a factory hand in his fifties who made his first visit to the Indianapolis 500 this year. "This is the first time I missed going to my sister's. And I think she's never going to see me no more."

"One thing about this," observed Cookie, speaking as one of the latest initiates to Middle America's perennial Woodstock. "I guess you either love it or you hate it. And I love it." □



Darlene Dollar and Charlotte Early from Greenfield, Indiana.