COUNTING DOWN TO A CENTURY OF SPEED

by "LandSpeed" Louise Ann Noeth
they've been at it for 99 years. Testing the limits of their imagination, skill and raw nerve. The road to a land speed record is a salty one. Next season will see the Bonneville Salt Flats celebrate its century mark of record setting.

Attempting to set a land speed record will wear you out and thin your wallet like nothing else, while simultaneously injecting you with a euphoric sense of youthful exuberance. How did such a forlorn, barren, inhospitable place come to be the Speed Mecca of hot rodders worldwide?

There is no championship crown, belt or purse, yet here is where you will find the fastest women and men on earth. They are all amateurs, land speed racers who design, build and run their speed machines for love, for sport, for the sheer challenge of spanning the clock at wide open throttle for five miles.

Forget those rollers in the floor; this salt is God’s own dyno. Open only a few times a year, it took some 100,000 years to form the fabulous saline speedways located 4,214 feet above sea level immediately east of the Nevada-Utah borders of Wendover. The vast, ancient lake bed is a stark, glistering white plain that was once covered by a body of water 135 miles wide by nearly 325 miles long. Almost 3,000 square miles, it was formed during the last stages of the ice age.

To get an idea of its scope, think of Wendover as being situated on the western shore and Salt Lake City, 120 miles away, on the eastern shore. In between, the water was 1,000 feet deep. When the water evaporated, the minerals and salts remained behind settling on the lowest areas. It is these sediments that make Bonneville the world’s largest natural test track of immense proportions.

In 1914, racing promoter Ernie Moross brought a fleet of eight racing machines to the salt. The jewel of the stable was the mighty 2.5-liter, 300-horsepower record-setting Blitzen Benz, under the command of “Terrible” Teddy Tetzlaff, a noted lead foot of the day.

In 1949, the SCTA held the first annual Bonneville Speed Trials. The Bill Kenz and Roy Leslie streamliner, driven by 28-year-old Willie Young, posts the first-ever 200 mile-per-hour run at 206.504.

In 1950, Winter rains can bring up to 6,000 acres of standing water that doesn’t evaporate until early summer and is an essential part of nature’s annual recovery process. High winds help manicure smooth the surface as the water evaporates. Nothing grows out of the crystalline salt beds except one’s imagination and a few mirages – so flat that you can observe the actual curvature of the Earth with the naked eye.

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records in one attempt on the 10-mile circle track. The feat riveted the attention of
European racers John Rhodes Cobb, George Eyston and Malcolm Campbell. The
European racing crowd simply refused to believe one man could have driven through-
out, because records set on the Month’s’y track, near Paris, had required as many as
five drivers.
When Jenkins convinced celebrated racecar designer of the day, Reid Railton, to
visit the salt flats the floodgates of speed began to open.
Malcolm Campbell, desperate to set a record in excess of 300MPH, showed up
September 2, 1935 with “Bluebird” the monstrously big, 11,000-pound wheel-spinning
car powered by a seven-foot-long Rolls Royce airplane engine. His arrival upended life
for Wendover’s 400 residents. At the edge of the salt, hundreds had slept in cars over-
night, or pitched tents. A steady stream kept arriving all morning: Native Americans,
ranchers, people poured onto the flats from three states. It was estimated 2,000 people
watched Campbell’s runs.
On Tuesday, September 3, 1935, Campbell set off down the 13-mile oily black line.
Bluebird twice flew across those all-important 5,281 feet, clocking a recorded average
of 301.1292 miles per hour despite a mile-long four-wheel skid that set
the tires and brakes afire.
“The Utah salt flats are the speed laboratory of the future!”
Campbell cried to onlookers.
Campbell’s World Record established, once and for all time, Bonneville’s worthiness as a safe roadway. By the end of the following race season, the salt claimed more endurance records than Daytona, or its
European counterparts, had managed in a decade.
With a wide variety of purpose-built cars, most powered by aircraft
engines, Englishmen John Cobb and Capt. George Eyston showed up
repeatedly, joining Jenkins as friendly rivals collecting and trading endur-
ance records. The latter locked in a multi-battle, thrusting the absolute
record higher and higher each year until World War II brought every-
thing to a grinding halt.
“Setting a record on the salt has a special flavor,” remembered Marv
Jenkins, “The British understood better than any of us that a record set at
Bonneville had a greater meaning than if you did the same thing any-
where else.”
Once the world got a grip on peace, gentleman driver John Cobb came back for his last race on the salt, setting the world mark at 394
miles per hour with one run at 403 miles per hour. However, it was the
publicized Novi runs that proved fortuitous for hot rodders because it
brought Southern California racing enthusiasts Kong Jackson, 28, and Chuck Abbott,
26, to watch the speed runs.
Jackson, a short and cocky type with an eye for cars and women (always in that
order), enlisted the help of Ab Jenkins in securing access to the salt for hot rodders.
Southern California Timing Association (SCTA), the land speed racing sanctioning
body, was desperate to find better racing sites and quickly sent representatives to Salt
Lake City to gain approval from the Bonneville Speedway Association.

1952

The 1951 “invited” motorcycles had trampled so many AMA
records, some decades old, that SCTA officials doubled the
invitation list for 1952.

1956

The average speed
for all 132 entries
was 151 miles per
hour across the
nine-mile course.

1958

Safety gets a boost with the
development of the Bell 500TX
helmet. During SpeedWeek,
Bell Auto Parts would lend,
free-of-charge, a helmet to
anyone that needed one.
SCTA Manager Wally Parks, driving the Burke-Francisco tank while busy with an engine fire, applied the newly relined brakes a bit too hard, spun-out and went twirling into the history books.

Pivotal for the event, and the sport, was the new streamliner of Alex Xydias and Dean Batchelor. They ran fast. So fast, that driver Dean Batchelor unzipped the treads right off the ribbed front racing tires, yet the car never wavered off course. The carcasses stayed intact, but sharing the tire information improved safety regulations; it meant others would be able to learn from the experience. Use of street tires was over.

Batchelor’s first run 185.95 MPH was backed up with a 187.89 MPH return run. The collective racing jaw dropped, the speeds were 20 miles per hour faster than top dog Bill Burke’s belly tank had run on the SoCal lakebeds. Saturday’s record runs of 193.54 miles per hour and 185.95 for a Bonneville average of 189.745 miles per hour got the pits buzzing again.

Competitors remarked that they had learned more in one week at Bonneville than in a whole year of competition on the lakebeds while inking 13 new records. It was speed nirvana.

A year prior to the SCTA event, on September 13, 1948, riding in his best “superman-in-flight” prone position, Roland “Rollie” E. Free set the World Motorcycle Record of 150MPH aboard a Vincent H.R.D. Black Shadow Lightning racing Rapide. He was wearing only bathing trunks, goggles, shower slippers and a Cromwell helmet.

Word of how good racing was on the salt beds spread through the ranks and 90 hot rodders from more than a dozen states pre-entered for 1950. This time, with voracious appetites, making 1,307 runs down over the seven-day event. Expanded competition classes included roadsters, modified roadsters, lakesters, streamliners, coupes, modified coupes and foreign cars.

The sparkling new streamliner of Bill Kenz and Roy Leslie, driven by 28 year-old Willie Young, screamed into hot rod history cutting the first-ever 200 miles per hour run at 206.504 miles per hour.

All through the seven-day speed fest engines went in, and engines came out, parts went on and parts blew off, wheels were trued and tires got chewed, the smell of greasy oil perfumed the air.

The racing crowd was grateful for what little there was in nearby Wendover. When the sun went down the hot rodders pulled out flashlights, turned on headlights, or relocated to well-lit motel rooms to reassemble their engines.

Competitors established nine new Bonneville records and improved on seven old ones. The Kenz & Leslie streamliner was presented with the “Best Designed Car.” Xydias and Batchelor lugged off the new, immense four-foot high HOT ROD Magazine National Championship Trophy for fastest one-way time of the meet at 210MPH.

One thing was certain; the sport of land speed racing was on the upside of the power curve. As long as the sport was done for fun and recreation, not money and fame, it would thrive. Racers enjoyed designing and fabricating new, improved performance parts and cars.

In 1951 two black oil guidelines were laid the length of the track for the 151 racers that showed up - a suggestion from Ab Jenkins. All were joined by the nervous roar of 10 “invitation only” motorcycle entries.

Women could own a race entry, but not drive. The boys were terrified that if a woman was hurt, it would spell disaster for the sport. Short-sighted as it was, it would be years before women would prove gender had nothing to do with going fast.

Making nearly 2,000 runs, a total of 16 new class records were set by 200 entrants from 15 states that year. A few had begun using Nitromethane, aka liquid dynamite, a nose-wrinkling, eye-watering explosive chemical that boosted the potency of the fuel, but its misuse destroyed engines.

Early supercharger development showed promise thanks to Tom Beatty. The first was part of his new girder-type tube frame wing tank chassis that sported a swing axle
rear suspension. His 296 CID Mercury engine was topped with Navarro heads and a roots-type blower. The combination clocked a staggering 188MPH through the quarter-mile.

The much-loved and thoroughly exploited Ford flathead was in its sunset by 1952. Chrysler released its new overhead valve “Hemi” the year before, selling more than a million in Dodge, DeSoto and Chrysler models. The race for horsepower expanded into 41 separate divisions for 1952 with many of the new overhead valve powerplants immediately being adapted for salt racing.

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Establishment automotive engineers often informed the enthusiasts that their modification ideas were impossible, yet every year more impossible things were done. A prime example was when Willie Davis and George Hill turned up with the “City of Burbank” to collect the “Maremont Cup”, given to the car that had not only the best engineering idea, but one that also proved itself in the traps.

Hill & Davis came back to the salt two weeks later and driver Hill set new international Class C records for the flying start kilometer and mile, taking the record away from Germany’s Auto Union. With that one act, the hot rodder achieved legitimacy heretofore unknown. It would be the first of many.

Bonneville’s biggest threat for continued vitality was the newly formed National Hot Rod Association (NHRA). Although in its infancy, a decade later it would be the rational Class C record holder.

The high degree of safety at Bonneville was due to Roy “Multy” Aldrich’s stringent, technical inspection process for SCTA. Aldrich could easily see flaws and dangerous conditions that eluded some of the most dedicated inspectors and knowledgeable racers. It is “safe” to say many a young life was protected because Aldrich volunteered for decades.

By 1953 the pits now swarmed with Detroit’s new overhead valve engines. Of the 17 records set in 32 classes, 12 were with the overheads, but the vintage engines were not through.

The Vesco-Dinkins lakester was a three-foot high, open-wheeled car that sported a mere 36-inch tread, front and rear and was powered by a Model B engine that stormed to a 156 mile-per-hour average equipped with a Riley four-port head and custom-built fuel injection.

By 1954, the sixth consecutive speed gathering gained national attention and respect as America’s newest automotive proving ground. The meet was interrupted by rain twice. It was the first time weather had been a problem for the racers.

Stormy Mangham, from Smithfield, Texas, ran his fully streamlined Triumph “Texas Cigar” motorcycle. Unless other documentation can be found, he should be credited with being the first to use a braking parachute on a motorcycle.

Bruce Crower’s Hudson sedan that also doubled as his daily driver, averaged a whopping 151 miles per hour with a supercharged Chrysler.
Jim Lindsley joined the 200MPH Club when his “Harold Raymond Special” roadster inched over the 200-mile mark with a 201. It was the first roadster to do so, but it required the power of two Chrysler V8s.

Too much rain in 1955 made for crummy course conditions at the 7th annual meet and led to the death of John Donaldson driving the Reed Brothers lakester. When the car rolled, Donaldson, who was taller than the rollbar, was fatally injured. From that moment on, the SCTA Bonneville Board ruled it mandatory that all cars have adequate driver protection in the event of a rollover.

By the time the eighth Annual Bonneville Nationals finished in 1956, the average speed for all 132 entries was 151 miles per hour across the nine-mile course. Heavily populated were the new competition classes for cars running straight pump gas.

By 1957 Dr. J.E. Teverbaugh mounted a parachute to the back of his Bonneville racer. It was the first known use on a car at Bonneville and is today an essential stopping and safety device.

Teamwork paid off for the quartet of Waters, Sughue, Edwards and Smith from Bakersfield, California when their stock height ‘32 roadster flew like a vengeful brick to clip the D class record with a 191 miles per hour average running a 292 CID blown DeSoto engine.

John Vesco and Jim Dinkins entered what had to be the world’s thinnest streamliner. The radical car did not meet the general formula set down by SCTA for safe wheelbase and tracking width, but its stupendous detail, sound theory and quality workmanship earned the car a waiver to run in an experimental class. Dinkins pushed the 182-CID four-cylinder ‘32 Ford engine with a Riley overhead conversion to 166 miles per hour.

John Vesco’s 17-year-old son, Don, had been coming up to the salt with his father since he was 12. A newly licensed driver, Don rode his Triumph T 100 R, a bike he put together by drop light out on the family’s front lawn. He would go on to clock stunning records with bikes and cars.

The late ‘50s saw the gas coupe sedan classes pregnant with entries. In 1958, during the 10th annual SpeedWeek, the Chrysler-powered Studebaker entered by SanChez and Cagle was the first to crack the 200 miles per hour mark, reportedly using a deadly 100 percent nitro fuel load for a one-way speed of 210 miles per hour.

Marion Lee “Mickey” Thompson and Fritz Voigt showed up in 1958 with quadruple Pontiac V8s jam packed into “Challenger.” Only 19-feet long and 59-inches wide, two engines powered each axle. The car ran 362 miles per hour, but an engine failure again scratched the car from the record books, but not the minds and hearts of hot rodders everywhere.

Heavy summer rains had made the salt mushy in places. The push trucks took the brunt of the wet salt, getting so plastered in the sticky, white spray that it looked as though they had been in a cottage cheese factory explosion.

Safety at Bonneville got a boost with the development of the Bell 500TX helmet. During SpeedWeek, Bell Auto Parts would lend, free-of-charge, a helmet to anyone that needed one.

A battle had raged all year between hot rodders and the United States Auto Club (USAC) after the SCTA/BNI formally asked the world governing body, the FIA, to offer direct certification to racers for world speed attempts. USAC objected for no other reason than it would be deprived of collecting timing fees - very expensive for the average racer. Again the almighty dollar had shown itself to be a boil on the butt of amateur racing. USAC eventually prevailed.

The Jet Rodders

It is essential to understand that all the early jet powered cars were built by hot rodders looking for higher speeds, not outsiders trying to hijack the sport. The early 1960s saw a thrilling shootout for the World Land Speed Record that would forever separate the piston motors from the ultimate speed fight. Regardless of how much
horspower is produced, there comes a point where wind resistance equals tire adhesion and that's when things start slipping, or breaking, or both. Donald Campbell, the British speed heir apparent came to the salt in 1960 with all the bravado of a military operation, but ignored pleas for caution and crashed at 345MPH making scrap metal out of the multi-million dollar car.

Mickey Thompson, convinced he had the answer to the 400 mile-per-hour barrier, took Challenger onto the unusually hard, rough salt in September 1960 and his optimism sailed into reality as he tripped the USAC clocks at 406.60 MPH. The first hot rodder to run in excess of 400MPH, he was denied a record due to engine failure.

Out of the wheel-driven crowd, came a hot rodder Norman Craig Breedlove, a skinny kid with the hee-haw laughter of a mule. With his J47 jet car “Spirit of America,” Breedlove brought back the World Land Speed Record back to the United States after 13 years topping Cobb’s 394MPH mark.

When Breedlove secured the services of Lockheed engineer Walt Sheehan he was on his way to five World LSR titles. Breedlove would battle with brothers Art and Walt Arfons for several years before ending up on top with a plus 600MPH record in 1965. The FIA amended the International Sporting Code, establishing a category called “International Records for Special Vehicles”, and later separated out thrust power from Otto cycles engines.

It is noteworthy that Lee Breedlove, Paula Murphy and Betty Skelton all drove jets on the salt. However, thanks to a fragile male ego and overbearing sponsor influence, none could achieve any meaningful numbers because the engine speed was reduced to ensure the men stayed faster.

In reflection, it had been quite a traffic jam on the salt throughout the ‘50s. Friendly competition that started with mundane passenger cars had been reshaped into remarkable, high performance machines. The early modified cars had also been street driven, but as speeds increased, purpose-built cars forged a new motorsports heritage. Salt racing encouraged and promoted family-style participation, yet the “family” was not necessarily defined by bloodlines. As the extended families grew and matured, the relationships proved to be stronger than Velcro pulled sideways.

Salt racing doctor, understood both points of view. He spent more than $50,000 to build “The Flying Caduceus,” the first jet-powered car to blast across the salt. Powered by a J47 turbo jet engine, the 28.5 foot long, brilliant red car, was an imposing sight with its 48” tires and aluminum billet wheels. After an assortment of experimental teething problems, the good doctor finally clocked 331 miles per hour on the salt in 1962, but the front wheel came off in the process and the big car spun three times. The good doctor gave up.

1960s

Bursting with new vehicles, the SCTA expanded to 57 competitive classes in 1960, and the entry fee had risen to $28. The trend was toward small, diminutive streamliners and compact cars.

1960s

The slickest little flyer was Bill Burke’s fiberglass streamliner nicknamed, “pumpkin seed” because of it shape. It delivered him into the 200MPH Club with a 205 average from a dainty 156-inch Ford Falcon engine.

Another bit of tiny thunder was the elfish Wee Eel II driven by Els Lohn. Powered by a supercharged Morris engine; he nabbed a new record in class G at 135 miles per hour.

Firestone debuted a new “low profile” tire that would run on 100 psi. Less bulky, the new rubber simplified streamlining challenges while at the same time increased the critical contact patch needed for good traction.

In 1961 the salt was in sad condition, the result of not enough rainfall during the winter months to fuel the natural surface regeneration. Dirt from the surrounding mountains settled on the surface and not only made the salt brown, but caused fluctuating surface temperatures cracking and lifting the salt. The eight-mile course, 2.5 miles less than the year before, lowered speeds, but 20 new class records were recorded and the top speed was 313 miles per hour.

In 1962 the salt was as perfect as any hot rodder could want and the fast car crowd

1976

Bonneville’s surface is reduced to 25,600 and thickness is less than a foot in many places.

1978

Marcia Holley rides Vesco’s bikeliner (with one engine) to a 229MPH milestone record that pierces the up-to-then, all-male Bonneville 200MPH Club.

1979

Interestingly, the 2 Club votes Emily Gillette their “Most Valuable MAN of the Year.”
inked 32 new records, including one by a jet when 141 cars and 15 bikes starting pounding the ground on August 19th Nationals. The cycle riders penned eight new records into the books, but the one by New Zealander Bert Munro, 62, on his streamlined 1920 Indian - a bike he bought new - at 162 miles per hour, was show stealer.

By 1963 it was clear that the salt was shrinking. Worried racers started vocalizing their concerns when the potash company dug a huge ditch at the west end of the salt flat, part of the mineral extraction process. The subsequent drainage from the salt beds forced the Utah state highway commission to collect 40 tons of salt from the edge of the beds and spread it over the south end of the nine-mile course in a desperate attempt to achieve smoothness.

New timing lights placement proved ingenious for the 15th annual event, and combined a “short” and “long” course on one piece of real estate for the 169 cars and 18 motorcycles that would complete 1,415 runs.

Alan Richards built the smallest car to ever crunch the salt crystals. Aptly named, the 200-pound “Claustrophobia” mystified most as to how anyone could fit in it to drive. With a 32-inch wheelbase, 18-inch tread and powered by a 2.8 CID Garelli engine that maintained 20 miles per hour per cubic inch!

In 1966 the salt surface was in terrific shape, better than it had been in years, giving traction to Kaiser’s claims of weather-related changes. The event had 164 car entries and 24 bikes. Of the 62 new records, six brought new members to the 200MPH Club.

The obsolete flathead and inline engines got another chance for glory when Class X was added to 10 of the 13 categories. The antiques accounted for six records, including the fuel roadster of Mardon-Ohly-Bentley built in 1958.

Mario Andretti drove a fastback Mustang stuffed with an unblown Indy engine to run 175 miles per hour. Tachless, salt veteran Ak Miller tells Andretti, “Just wind it up until you feel something float and then back off a little.”

In 1967 a bureaucratic bungle occurred when Utah state officials blindly sold 640 acres on the Bonneville Salt Flats basin that included a portion of the speedway. The new owners filed a court injunction and the racers were barred from crossing part of the speedway. The state eventually repurchased the land at a cost to Utah taxpayers of $14,400 for desert property they’d sold for $1,600.

The crown prince of salty delights, Bill Burke, one of three men (along with Ak Miller and Jim Lindsay) who raced at Bonneville since the 1949 beginning, reflected on the past two decades saying, “This event belongs to each one of us who participates in any way… each year I look to Bonneville with greater desire, deeper respect and more admiration, and I hope each of you does the same.”

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were enthusiastic supporters of BNI, rather unusual for bureaucrats.

Noel Black, driving the twin-engine B&N Automotive streamliner, Motion I, had run 352MPH on Monday, but on his Tuesday morning return run while clocking 380 miles per hour, the car wiggled, slid, lifted into the air and disintegrated. Black did not survive the night - a sad way to begin the decade.

America was in world news again on October 23, 1970 when former test astronaut Gary Gabelich became “World's Fastest” driving the rocket-powered “Blue Flame” to a 622.407 mph record in the flying mile.

At this point the young men who had pioneered salt racing were all over 40, most in their 50s and a few were over 60. Now, the children, a second generation who shared their father’s love of the speed chase were donning helmets and strapping into adventures of their own.

In 1973 a special, quarter-century banquet at the State Line Hotel and Casino, was attended by pioneer saline citizens. Utah Governor Rampton showed up and presented the SCTA/BNI officers with a plaque of appreciation.

In September of 1974 actor-racer Paul Newman, Luigi Chinetti, Jr., Milt Minter and Graham Hill attempt to topple Ab Jenkins endurance records, but could only manage three national and international records before conceding defeat.

“I don't care how much horsepower he had, that Ab Jenkins had guts, he deserves his records,” said an exhausted Chinetti. He was referring to the 20 records Jenkins set back in 1940 while driving solo the Mormon Meteor III.

The Bureau of Land Management finally responds to the controversy over salt deterioration and in 1975 asks the U.S. Geological Survey to conduct a detailed hydrology and surface morphology investigation. An earlier state survey had found that “there was 20 million cubic yards of salt over four inches thick; in 1974 there was no salt of that thickness.” The survey validating racer complaints noting that “11 million cubic yards, or 13 million tons had been lost between 1960 and 1974.”

Among the study’s conclusions: “If the race track is to be preserved, then some means must be developed to stop depletion of the salt, or to restore salt at the same rate it is lost. The evidence we have appears to show a connection between the withdrawal of potash and the thickness of the salt,” states Howard Ritzman, assistant director of the US Geological Survey. Geologists in the 1920s had estimated the salt flats to be 96,000 acres and up to six feet thick in places. By mid-decade, the surface is reduced to 25,600 and thickness is less than a foot in many places.

Wanting to broaden the racing schedule for land speed racers as well as keep a closer eye on what was happening out on the salt, a group of stalwart speeders founded the Utah Salt Flats Racing Association (USFRA) in 1976.

In 1977 the shortened, five-mile course made things tough for the big motor vehicles, but racers still managed 18 new records, half were former “open” records. The wind was again malevolent, not only interrupting the racers, but toppling the port-a-potties throughout the pits.

The weather in 1979 was gorgeous and after a few rough years, the salt was back in

1985
Al Teague brings his lakester-turned-streamliner to record the first ever runs in excess of 350 miles per hour.

1986
SpeedWeek had only four days of qualifying and three days of record runs, but 28 cars set new records along with 10 motorcycles.

1988
Drag Racing’s Don Garlits drives a XX/gas streamliner that earns 200MPH Club status with modest 217 miles per hour average using a supercharged flathead.
The BLM turns over racecourse preparation to the racing community. As a reward, use fees are reduced.

Al Teague drives his handcrafted Speed-O-Motive streamliner to a 409.986 MPH average to become the fastest hot rodder of 'em all.

Excellent shape with an 11.5-mile course. The perfect way to end the decade!

1980s:

The salt got a dandy bath late in the summer of 1980, dumping nine inches of rain onto the course. Still, 275 entrants (the largest meet to date) were able to ink 36 new records into the books.

By 1981 it had been a loooonnng time since the hot rodders had 11 miles of salt upon which to pounce. The year’s 241 entries wasted no time racking up 43 new records, set by 29 cars and 14 motorcycles. Still, in September, try as he might, Englishman Richard Noble, is foiled from making a serious attempt at the World Land Speed Record driving the jet powered “Thrust2.” The solid aluminum wheels “ice skate” on the moist salt surface and Noble repeatedly slide off the prepared track into the dreaded “crunchies.”

The 1982 and ’83 racing seasons were a complete washout. The SCTA/BNI is now in grave financial trouble. Perhaps the salt knew what was happening and wept for its impending loss as the rains also ruin, for the second year in a row, Richard Noble’s world record runs.

In 1985 the USFRA’s first “World of Speed” event is cancelled due to standing water on the course, but the high water levels from the previous four years rejuvenated the salt to a prime condition, nature had healed itself. Things dry out in time for the SCTA/BNI SpeedWeek and an astounding 72 records are set with 14 runs exceeding 300 miles per hour.

On-board computer technology shows up on salt speed machines by 1986. Some warn of “a wholesale invasion of new 200MPH Club members through this ‘dia, dia-a-speed, dia-a-speed’ method.” There were seven new 2-Club members this year.

In 1987, Monday afternoon hailstones the size of golf balls put an immediate halt to racing until Wednesday morning. Full-tilt racing unfolded the rest of the week and 11 new members joined the 200MPH Club, including two women – Tanis Hammond at 251 miles per hour and Sylvia Hathaway at 202 miles per hour in a Citroen. Indy Car Drive A.J. Foyt also qualifies for “2-Club” honors at 267 miles per hour.

1988 saw the BLM issuing an edict that any racer who deliberately dumps used crankcase oil onto the salt would face disqualification and/or criminal prosecution while the USFRA World of Speed added 19 new records to their books, the fastest coming from the lakester of hard hitting, “No Nitro Hammond” at 251 miles per hour.

Closing the decade out, the 1989 event started with great promise, an 11-mile long, 100-foot wide course, 255 entries, FIA recognition and more media attention until a Wednesday night deluge. But the big story was the massive letter writing campaign initiated by USFRA which adopted the motto “SAVE THE SALT.” The Club makes appeals through the media in enthusiast magazines gathering grass-roots support and funding to keep the issue fresh and uncomfortable in the minds of government. Utah Senator Jake Garn responds and a contingent of racers trek to the State Capitol to educate legislators on the chronic situation.

1990s:

As land speed racing turned the corner into the last decade of the century, growth was evident everywhere in the sport except for the salt itself. Speeds continued to rise as the racers developed better driving skills using improved engines, chassis, parts and body styling, but emphasis shifted from record setting to ramping up pressure on the government to take corrective action at Bonneville.

Save the Salt gets a major lift when new mining owner Mr. Thomas Reilly, of Reilly Industries comes forward to join the effort in preserving the salt flats. The racers are delighted. The BLM forms a special advisory committee to investigate salt loss in a three-year study. No action, mind you, just another study.

At the 42nd annual SpeedWeek, the pedal-to-the-metal racers, find two courses on the salt: the long course for anything going plus 175MPH and a short course for vehi-

Hot rodders, once the scourge of highways and byways, blink and they are celebrating the 50th Anniversary of SpeedWeek in 1998.
Gary Meadors swapped his Hawaiian shirt for Nomex underwear and a firesuit before driving the Dozier & Hegarty streamliner to a record speed of 223.220 mph. Because the feat also earned the Goodguys Chairman membership in the 200MPH Club folks who saw him afterwards wondered if that smile stuck on his face was real or had someone stuck a coat hanger in his mouth?

Seeking to involve more people in the sport, the USFRA offers opportunities to join its “130MPH Club” comprised of street driven cars and motorcycles. Passing a simplified safety and mechanical inspection, drivers only need to wear a Snell approved helmet. Motorcycle racers are also required to have approved leathers, gloves and boots. 39 people earned membership: 3 women and 36 men. It is harder than most think to join the 130MPH Club. For faster vehicles, there is the 150MPH Club, but it has more robust rules and safety requirements. The Bonneville 200MPH Club, more than four decades old, now has 320 members.

Hot rodders, once the scourge of highways and byways, blink and they are celebrating the 50th Anniversary of SpeedWeek in 1998. More than 200 cars, motorcycles, semis and even a motor home help celebrate in 350 classes. In six days the racers clicked off 1,520 high-speed runs down a seven-mile magical Mecca to ink 77 new automobile and 33 motorcycle certified speed records. Participants came from all over the U.S. and five countries.

Adding a special patina to the Golden Anniversary proceedings was the attendance of 42 of the original 49 racers from the first event. Salt racing is an elixir of youth. The years have not dimmed their determination to go fast, then faster and faster, though each is eligible for Social Security.

There must have been some magic in that golden anniversary because from here on out the entries exploded as they did in the early 1950s. In 1999 275 entries showed up for SpeedWeek making 1,515 runs. The 1999 season and the century closed out with 85 new marks going into the record book that included 5 blown tires, 27 spins, 4 crashes and 2 fires.

2000s

Everything about the 2000 meet was fast! The 361 entries clicked off 1,857 runs that produced 137 records. By Wednesday there was no waiting in the staging lanes. Racers towed right up to the starting line to be waved off. Al Teague, in the Spirit of 76, posts the fastest record at 381MPH while Derek McLeish proudly claimed the slowest at 44MPH.

What helped every racer this year was the 1.8 million tons of salt that had been reflowed back onto the speedway during the winter lay-down project. Years absent, racers again saw thick, white salt, no mud and very few pressure ridges to upset suspension travel.
2000

Al Teague, in the Spirit of ‘76, posts the fastest record at 381MPH.

2002

Don Vesco becomes the first person in the history of motorsports to have held top honors for both automotive and motorcycle world land speed records.

2003

Tricia Kincer sets Top Time of the Meet (325mph) becoming the first woman to earn the honor.

By 2006 it was clear the sport of land speed racing was enjoying participant resurgence. Entries at all the speed meets had increased. SpeedWeek had a record 493 entries that earned 155 records.

They didn’t know it yet, but not only would SpeedWeek 2001 be the largest on record with 2,016 runs made by 346 entrants who set a whopping 130 records, but a World Record would come home to America after nearly four decades. Plus, racers report the salt was “hard as concrete.” Conditions were so good that the old, 11-mile international course was back in use.

Taking full advantage of the good salt was TEAMVesco. On October 18th, Don Vesco, driving the Turbinator, built by his brother Rick Vesco, demolished a near four-decade British stranglehold on the turbine-powered wheel-driven records: 458.440 mph in the mile and 458.208 mph in the kilometer.

When Speedweek 2002 began, a mere 10 salt racers had ever seen 400-plus on a time slip and only two of those 10 did so with piston-driven engines: Bob Summers in the Goldenrod and Al Teague driving his Spirit of 76 streamliner. Nolan White of San Diego, California, ran a 401 on his first pass, then pushed the #131 streamliner to 422 mph on the return run averaging 411.3 mph to make him the world’s fastest with a piston-driven engine. White lost both parachutes and was unceremoniously mired up to his hubs in mud at the far end of the course, but son Rick and grandson Brad were only too happy to help their patriarch dig out. Sadly, White would not survive another crash following a 422MPH run at the World Finals later that year.

In 1993 a storm flooded the 2003 Speedweek course, followed by a mysterious fire in the SCTA/BNI storage unit that destroyed $10,000 worth of equipment, including 17 miles of timing wire, 700 cones, equipment, and fire extinguishers. Insurance covered the loss, but officials had to scramble hard as the disaster transpired just 10 days before the event. Racers would thank the Utah Salt Flats Racing Association (USFRA) for essential equipment loan. Gotta love that “can-do” volunteer ethic!

For the 2004 season everyone who pulled into Wendover noticed Wendover Will was gone. After 52 years the 90-foot tall neon cowboy who waved to travelers beckoning them to pull off the road and “set a spell” was dismantled by the new owners of the State Line, but local townsfolk mount a campaign to bring the ‘ole cowpoke back.

JCB Dieselmax, the dream machine of Anthony Bamford, owner of a British manufacturer of construction equipment shows up on the salt with a huge team smartly dressed in company yellow and black colors. Mesmerized by land speed racing as a kid, Bamford believes a record will prove the worth of his new JCB444 diesel engine while showcasing British engineering. In the cockpit is Andy Green wearing a “Mr. Sunshine” bright yellow firesuit. Already the World’s Fastest at 763MPH; he longs for a salt record years) world land speed records.

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2007
SCTA founder Wally Parks passes away.

2008 was the 60th anniversary of the SCTA/BNI SpeedWeek on the salt, a long way from its “trial” event back in 1949, but still a amateur event run by the same and having great time doing it. More than 100 volunteers work to make the event a reality. Another gargantuan event, it was marked by 530 entries comprised of 368 cars and 162 bikes including 62 class changes (when a single entry competes in more than one class). The racers made 2,488 runs over three courses inking 175 new records from 65 bikes and 110 cars. There were 152 rookie drivers. Staff and crews were watched by an estimated 12,000 spectators and had to deal with six “incidents”, where two resulted in moderate injuries to the racer.

The 2009 salt was hard and bright. The best evidence was lack of salt footprints tromped into town by the racers. Only faint, powdery imprints were seen. Wendover residents were grateful, always wondering why racers make noise about “saving the salt”, but then track it into town and drop gobs of it everywhere they go.

An eye-popping 560 entries (381 cars and 179 motorcycles) comprised of 504 vehicles and 56 class changes made an unbelievable 3,110 runs down the three courses. The week ended with 178 event records by 101 cars and 77 motorcycles, of which 23 earned life membership in the 200MPH Club and three stepped-up into the 300MPH Chapter. Chauvin M. Emmons, son of Chauvin and Sharon, made the biggest dent in the books boosting the class C blown fuel rear engine modified roadster record from 240 to 280MPH!

Save the Salt is told the BLM’s mining plan draft includes a restoration section. The idea is that the mining activities would include a “mass balance” provision: replacing the same amount of processed salt as it removes from the speedway area annually. If this is implemented the STS board will then pursue a “prior loss recovery” objective. In a cooperative spirit, government, industry and racers more than 80 tons of salt were transferred to the end of the road area to fill the perennial low area that washes out each year, but a more permanent solution needs to be found.

2010s:

This decade started off with a bang with another whopper of a SpeedWeek where volunteers processed 561 entries from 381 cars and 180 motorcycles with 74 class changes. Nathan Stewart held classes for 150 rookies on the first day. A stunning 166 event records were recorded by 108 cars and 58 motorcycles that managed to produce 22 new red hatters and bump-up a couple to the 300MPH Chapter of the Bonneville 200MPH Club.

Save the Salt reports it, and the racing community who trusted them, has been snookered by the BLM who had repeatedly assured the group the developing mining plan would have a “significant segment on salt restoration.” Not true. For months STS was continually denied access to the preliminary document and when STS board members finally get a look, they see only a mention of salt laydown is a four-paragraph recap of 1998-2006 activities. Unfortunately there are no commitments, no intentions, nothing to restore the salt and it is a major setback to the preservation of the Bonneville Salt
Flats. Thankfully, Intrepid Mining continues to aid the chronic salt loss problem at the end of the access road, this time trucking in 600 tons of salt to patch the problem area in addition to the 312,000 tons pumped back to the playa over the winter.

The Speed Demon streamliner picks up the top time trophy two years in a row with a 409MPH trap speed while former Spectre Performance owner Amir Rosenbaum finally gets to drive his matte black streamliner and blasts his way to a pair of plus 300 records stopping with 356MPH.

Looking toward the future, alternative energy vehicles were entered – all by educational institutions and as part of Utah Valley University outreach program, USFRA welcomed 650 high school students enrolled in local shop classes. UVU professor Todd Low, entered his 1969 El Camino in the classic gas coupe category setting 179MPH record for the young, impressionable assembled. You can bet a few of those teenagers will be back.

Historically speaking, Charles Nearburg took center stage at Mike Cook’s Shootout when he erased Goldenrod from the top of the list after 45 years with 414MPH average to claim the Group II, Class 11 World Land Speed Record. That he did so driving his Spirit of Rett streamliner with only two-wheel drive was even more shocking. The car is named in memory of Charlie’s son Rett, who passed in 2005 after battling cancer.

Meanwhile, the BLM continues to ignore repeated requests for more data on salt extraction volume numbers, monitoring and measuring techniques until the group begins to copy legislators. Then, after years of supposed “cooperative discussion,” they
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“The Utah salt flats are the speed laboratory of the future!”
– Malcolm Campbell, 1935
"We were stunned, because on the lakes we had been crawling along, gaining a mile per hour, or two, with each run," Xydias recalled, "Here at Bonneville we went more 30 miles faster than anyone ever had, it was a hell of a thing."