

THE INDY 500

The 500? The True Believers are in the Infield guzzling beer, playing pinochle and celebrating a unique Religious rite.

"Fer Chrissake, Carl, don't forget the goddamn bottle opener!"

My old man's voice floated through the pre-dawn darkness. "You outa yer mind?" My Uncle Carl answered, his voice sharpened with scorn.

It was a ridiculous statement. My Uncle Carl had never been without a bottle opener since he was nine, and he didn't use the opener on Nehi Orange bottles either. The day, late in his eighth year, that he discovered beer was the day he discovered Life.

I lay in the blackness of my bedroom, listening to every golden word of the dialogue that was going on in the kitchen. Doors slammed; feet clumped up and down the

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back porch steps. Finally all was silent, except for the distinctive mutter and moan of a GM truck starter and an occasional muffled curse as the son of a bitch flooded again. Across the room my kid brother slept on peacefully, clutching his pink and blue Easter bunny. At last the sound of a motor finally catching; a couple of quick, bellowing roars to clear the valves of accumulated glop, and then the sound of the panel truck backing out of the driveway, the reverse gear shuddering painfully, and then finally the low murmuring hum as the True Believers disappeared into the night, heading straight South down U.S. 41. I lay in the blackness, unable to sleep, knowing that they had joined a great migrating horde of co-religionists heading toward Mecca, which lay a couple of hundred miles away on the Indiana plains; as flat, as featureless as the top of a Brunswick Bulky Collander billiard table.

The traumatic and moving experiences of Childhood are never truly forgotten, nor outlived. By God, the child is the father of the man. You can bitch all you want about it; you can shake your fist at the lowering heavens, you can pretend, posture, whistle in the dark, write a bad novel, all proving that you are far superior, more enlightened than the previous generation. If you'll excuse the expression—Bullshit! History, in spite of what Henry Ford said about it, will ultimately give you its inevitable kick in your egotistical ass.

My Old Man, my Drunken Uncle Carl and my Sneaky Uncle Al, although I doubt whether they suspected it, were part of a vast historical panoply. And the end is not yet in sight. The Old Man and his buddies were not religious men. I never heard my father use the Lord's name except in vain.

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God has been dead a lot longer than the editorialists in the *Time/Life* building would ever suspect. Like most of the Eastern Establishment, they are markedly and curiously behind the times. Long before Malcolm Boyd began his lucrative LP-cutting and Late Show Norman Vincent Peale-ing, the Old Man and practically everybody else in the vast underbelly of what had been the Bible Belt were already worshipping another God.

Like all religions, there were many sects, subdivisions, heretics, and, naturally, the Orthodox. My father believed all the way with the fervent, unselfconscious, total, honest commitment. He believed so thoroughly that he didn't even know he believed. It was as natural to him and his crowd as breathing. He believed in Oldsmobiles. The current Buick ad line: *Something to believe in—your Buick* would have sounded perfectly logical and honest to my father, except that he would have split a gut laughing because he hated Buicks, which he always associated with "Sunday drivers."

"Christ, look at the fat-assed Buick wallowin' around!" is the way he handled that sect.

Every serious religion has its Vatican, and from the earliest time I can remember the Vatican of the Indiana car nuts was that fateful, beautiful, violent brick rectangle known formally as the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. They always say you've got to be Italian to be a true Catholic. There is a great body of evidence that says you've got to be from Indiana to truly know and understand the 500. This is no mere bit of chauvinism. It is the literal truth. Indiana as the wellspring of creative Automobile genius will one day be, no doubt, the subject of a Ph.D. thesis. Fred and Augie Dusenberg's masterpiece, the magnificent Auburns, were not just cars,

they were *Indiana* cars. The racing Studebakers out of South Bend were part of it too. Even today the Hoosier landscape is dotted with grizzled old codgers who actually built, with their own hands, boat-tailed speedsters and monster SJs. So it is natural that the track, which was originally conceived as a testing ground for these fire-eaters, would be—and is—more than just another race course. As Churchill Downs was once a track where elegant men competed in an effort to actually improve the breed, so the Indianapolis Motor Speedway was one of the few places on earth where manufacturers who made motor cars for ordinary driving-around people pitted them against their rivals in an effort to improve their breed. Howard Marmon was personally tangoing with Fred and Augie when their cars boomed away for the start of the first 500 in 1911. His laconic chief engineer, who had helped design the car, Ray Harroun, tooled the big yellow Marmon, No. 32 painted on its vertical fin and called *The Wasp*, to victory in the first 500. He averaged just under 75 mph for the distance, and after it was over, said “I’ll never drive another race again. Not for twice the money.” He pocketed the fourteen grand and went back to his drawing board. Try to top that for cool, Andretti.

The air of Indiana is somehow permeated with the slight nonchalance of guys like Harroun. Wilbur Shaw, Bill Vukovich, Fred Frame, Jimmy Murphy, Howdy Wilcox, Doc Myers, Duke Nalon, Mauri Rose, the whole lot. It’s like they all strode off a Republic Picture back lot in their coveralls, their goggles pushed up high on their cloth helmets, chewing tobacco and using short four-letter words liberally. Let’s face it, the Indy—and by the way, no one who really knows the classic ever calls it the Indy: that phrase itself de-

notes profound ignorance of the tradition—the 500 is all you have to say. There is no other 500. It would be as if you called the Kentucky Derby the “Churchie” in your sad ignorance.

My Old Man, Uncle Carl and Uncle Al as they struggled south on U.S. 41 were only doing the natural thing. They never thought of it as a chic sporting event. They were heading for another 500, as naturally and as inevitably as a Catholic goes to church on Easter. It wasn’t for a few years that I was allowed to come along, because it was one hell of a rough weekend. For three days or more the Old Man and his gang parked in line, a long serpentine procession of dust-covered hairy vehicles, waiting for the big shot at the Indianapolis field parking lot. Some guys had been in that line for two weeks. They planned their whole year around this moment, scheduling their two week vacation in order to coincide with the 500. Ten days of their vacation they spent sitting on the running board of their Chevy, drinking beer, telling dirty stories, kicking the kids around, and waiting.

Over the years a whole tradition had built up around these waiting cars. Some of the cars were used only for this purpose, being kept in the back yard throughout the year like a flat-top in mothballs waiting for the next War. The Old Man, Uncle Carl and silent Al never gave a damn about being first in line. The important thing was just to *be* in line. The 500, unlike European races, is genuinely masculine. Even the movie star who hands out the traditional victory kiss always looks a little embarrassed. The 500 is as remote from the Grand Prix de Monaco as a beer bust at Gus’ Tavern on a Friday night is from a Sunday afternoon brunch at George Plimpton’s. Plimpton will never quite un-

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understand it, and the vague sense of being intruders on a secret rite always plagues the Eastern writers as they try to "capture the elusive essence of the 500," as one so delicately put it recently.

All through the weekend of the race I read all the stuff in the papers and looked at the pictures of the cars. For at least a month before Memorial Day every newspaper ran stories on the drivers and their magnificent racers with the great names: The Blue Crown Special, Zink Special, Maserati, and the fantastic Novi Specials. The night before the race the home town paper had a full section, eight or nine pages, devoted to nothing but individual pictures of the 33 drivers seated in the car each would take the pace lap in the next day. Next to his picture was the number of his starting position. A lot of these guys had raced at County Fairs, on dirt tracks all over the state, so they were more than just celebrities.

Hour after hour the race droned out of the radio. I knew that somewhere in that muttering mob, that cauldron of roars, the Old Man and Uncle Al were trying to keep Carl sober enough to watch the race. A couple of days after it was over they came roaring up the driveway, trailing blue smoke and slamming doors.

"Holy Christ, what a race!" was all the Old Man said as he plopped down at the kitchen table, his beet-red sun-burned face somehow different from when he had left. It was over for another year.

"How'd you like to help with the driving down to Indianapolis this year?" my father casually remarked at supper one night late in April. In Indiana kids begin to drive at just

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about the time they can see over the steering wheel. They begin dreaming of getting their drivers' license at about the moment they learn the first four letters of the alphabet. Getting a driver's license in the Midwest was a little like being Confirmed, or maybe a Bar Mitzvah. At the age of ten I already had three solid years of driving behind me, naturally with the Old Man sitting next to me, and hollering all the while.

"Uh . . . y' mean the Race?"

My kid brother put down his fork with its impaled piece of meatloaf and began turning green.

"Yeah. We're takin' the Olds this year. Uncle Al has a bad back, so I thought you might help with the driving."

My mother, hanging over the stove in the background, said nothing, although her hair curlers rattled slightly. Going to the 500 was not something you did casually.

"I'm grindin' the valves on the Olds this weekend and I gotta go down to Sears and get some gaskets. Y' wanna go?"

All that weekend we ground the valves on the Cleveland Street Special, a second-hand Olds with worn kingpins.

"Yep, I figure this is Lou Meyer's year."

The Old Man rattled on as he mixed the valve-grinding compound, dripping sweat onto the back porch steps.

"That Bowes Special is really a pisser." He thought about this for a moment. ". . . read about it in *Popular Mechanics*. Straight eight."

I said nothing, since I was in the novice class and I didn't want to rock the boat. All I wanted to do was go!

Every day this thing grew bigger and bigger, like some distant mushroom poking up out of the earth. I was going to the 500! Ever since I could remember I had been a real In-

dianapolis fanatic. I went to see *The Crowd Roars* at least forty times. Wherever it was playing, I was there. Contrast the insipid artiness of *Grand Prix* with that hairy classic and you'll see how far down the pike Western Civilization has gone. All that jazzy camerawork and Yves Montand mooning around Eva Marie Saint would probably make Kelly Pettillo want to puke. Jimmy Cagney, his oil-stained goggles, the rubber stripping off his rear wheels, his car in flames, was what Indianapolis was about, and if you think that's Fiction you don't know a damn thing about the race. Somehow I just can't see Jackie Stewart pushing his car down the straightaway after a flaming accident just to *finish*. Mario Andretti, possibly, but just possibly.

Day after day I scrounged through the papers, reading every tiny notice of what was going to happen at that Memorial Day's classic. Wilbur Shaw had a new Maserati, 183 inches. Chet Millers, Rex Mays and Floyd Roberts were all making fantastic predictions about how little chance the other drivers had. I ate up this stuff like a piranha breaking Lent. Every night at supper I'd bring it up, something I'd read in the *Chicago Tribune*.

"May drives good, but he's a blowhard," was a typical pre-race analysis from the Old Man.

"Watch Meyer. He *plans* a race. He doesn't just get out there and run like hell."

The Old Man was a Lou Meyer fan the way Madison Avenue junior executives dig Joe Namath. He could do no wrong. I didn't argue. After all, he had been going to the 500 since *he* was a kid and there's no sense arguing with history or City Hall.

Spring hits fast and sudden on the flatlands of Indiana.

One day there's snow and ice up to your posterior, with an icepick wind screaming off Lake Michigan and it feels like it won't be anything but grey rock ice and miserable-ness forever, and then zap—like some unbelievable miracle one day it's Spring. Everything melts; the sun is golden and guys start knocking out flies and chasing ground balls. There are usually three or four residual snowstorms, but you don't really take them seriously, even if they drop forty inches of snow.

It was a spectacular May, where every day was warmer and greater and more golden than the one before. Three days before Memorial Day, Uncle Carl, Al, the Old Man and I nosed out onto Route 41. The trunk was packed with everything from mustard to spare can openers. Inside the car we sat wedged between thermos bottles, blankets, comforters, folding camp chairs, a card table, and God-knows-what.

Ten miles out of town the Olds started to drift hard to the left, pulling toward the center line.

"Son of a *bitch!*" The Old Man banged on the wheel with his fist, blowing cigarette smoke through his nostrils like some really bugged dragon. We pulled off onto the shoulder and for the next fifteen minutes struggled with the jack. The sun hung overhead, beating down on the top of us as if it was trying to make up for all that winter.

"God Dammit! It slipped again!" He was trying to line up the wheel nuts.

"Why don't you pretend it's a pit stop?" My Uncle Carl laughed and spit hard into the gravel.

"God dammit, if you're so smart why don't you help instead of standin' around cracking wise?"

Eventually we got the jack down, and the spare tire held. We rolled on, through cornfields just beginning to show green, with high tension wires stretching off into the horizon.

Every time he had a flat the Old Man got moody for a while. He brooded about some Utopia where tires always had rubber. You didn't talk to him during this period. Uncle Al, however, didn't know this.

"Well, you should have heeded Barney Oldfield's advice," he said in a quiet sarcastic voice from the back seat.

"Who?" I asked. The Old Man remained silent.

"Barney Oldfield, my boy," said my uncle, exuding superiority. "A famous race driver of the ancient past."

"Oh," I said, immediately bored. The ancient past holds no glories for budding youth.

"Okay, I'll bite." The Old Man said with a rising note of irritation in his voice. He didn't like to be interrupted while brooding.

"He had a famous phrase which was emblazoned on his car. It dealt specifically with the problem of flat tires."

"All right, wise guy, let's hear it." My father peered gloomily out of the window at a passing Bull Durham sign.

"My only life insurance is my Firestone tires."

"Oh fer Chrissake, what a load of crap!" My father snorted in disgust and spit out of the window. He was a Goodyear man.

We had cheeseburgers and rootbeer at a truck stop outside of West Lafayette and pushed on. Ahead of us a big Chrysler with an iron pipe rack on the roof rumbled steadily. Behind us a fenderless Chevy with a cracked windshield contained five blue-jowled 500 fans hurling beer cans at in-

tervals into the cornfields.

Just as the day was ending we pulled into line to begin the Big Wait. It was all I'd heard, and more. Squad cars cruised up and down, watching for trouble. Bonfires broke out. A fat lady squatted on a wooden bench next to a Studebaker and breast fed a kid who looked like it was asleep. Uncle Carl went off to get ice for the beer.

That night I slept in the back seat, propped up in the corner between the card table, a big sack of hot dog rolls and my Uncle Al, who snored like the roars of a primeval beast.

The next morning I wandered up and down the line of cars, looking at the guys who wore jackets covered with patches showing they had been to 500s going back to the days when the Stutzes battled the Marmons. They sat around and played pinochle and sniffed a lot, the way old men do in the morning. Big Harley Davidsons and Indians roared up and down. The day wore on. Rumors floated back and forth.

"Joe Thorne just turned a fantastic practice lap."

"Billy DeVore has got a gut ache."

"Chet Gardner's having valve trouble."

The Old Man already had the admission tickets for the infield. Everything was set now for action. The trunk was locked. Every movable thing was battened down. Final instructions were issued.

"Now look . . ." the Old Man tossed the car keys into the air, with his skull and crossbones keyring that he won at a raffle at the American Legion Hall.

". . . Now look, when that Dago bomb goes off I want all of you to be ready. I don't want anybody wandering off, because when that bomb goes off, I'm going! If you're out in

the bushes takin' a leak or something, that's your hard luck. Any questions?"

Uncle Carl pried the top off another bottle of Atlas Prager.

"Could I help it last year 'cause I got a weak bladder?"
 "It's all that goddamn beer." The Old Man scratched his rump.

"If you would hold off on the beer till we got into the infield we'd make it easy."

"I always get nervous just before the bomb goes off. Then I gotta go." Uncle Carl was a truthful man.

"Well then, goddammit, take a milk bottle and pee in the car!" Being a 500 fan, like driving in the race itself, puts a severe test to the physical side of man. More than one driver has lost a couple of laps, and the race itself, because of a weak bladder. There is no point in mentioning names, but among the true *aficionados* there is a story of a famous driver pushing a seventy-five thousand dollar Offenhauser-powered Kurtis roadster for an owner who had his last cent invested in the car, when all of a sudden, eight laps to go and in the lead, Nature not only beckoned but began to press so insistently that he came into a turn too fast, trying to hold it back, and almost flipped over the wall. He whistled into the pit and tore off for the john. By the time he got back and into the cockpit, it was all over but the shouting. He had dropped back to third, and there was no chance to make it up.

"Fer Chrissake, why the hell didn't you go in yer pants? We just booted seventy grand right out the window!"

The owner could see his wife packing for the Poorhouse, and his kids selling the dog to raise carfare to get to the Or-

phan Home. The driver came back with what has now become a classic and is often quoted in the inner circles: "Gee, I never thought of *that!*"

All that night I didn't sleep a wink, and I guess nobody else did either. At 6:00 AM with the sun just coming up good, we sat around the Olds chewing on hotdog buns for breakfast and passing around a quart of lukewarm milk. The tension was getting unbearable. Up and down the line guys started their engines. You could hear them revving up again and again. The Old Man pulled out his Ingersoll.

"Seven minutes." He gunned the Olds. Time ticked on. 6:29:30. . . BOOOOOM! KA-BOOOOOOOOMMMMM!

The aerial bombs exploded high overhead, the same sound that had marked the opening of the first 500 back in the ancient primordial days of Ray Harroun and *The Wasp*. The line of cars roared forward in a great crunch of excitement and aggression. We lurched out. I got hit on the back of the neck by a loose thermos. The pain roared down my shoulderblades. I would feel that knock for years to come, although I didn't know it at the time. In a mad maelstrom of crashing metal, flailing fenders and swearing drivers we finally got through the gate and into the blessed historical Infield. Already it seemed to be mostly filled with families who had parked in the same spot since the days when cars carried mechanics and they had balloon races before the start of the 500.

It was now about nine o'clock and the sun was getting hot. All around me the great tapestry of Infield life began to take shape. Guys put together platforms made out of threaded pipe, with canvas canopies on the more elegant. They sat and teetered high above the earth like some

strange race of stilted birds. Blankets were spread and the party began. The first pinochle games broke out here and there.

I stood on top of the roof of the Olds, peering through the spyglass I had bought from an ad in the Johnson/Smith catalog. A flash of yellow down near the grandstand. Holy Christ, it was a race car! I could see it clearly through the lens, bright yellow, low, with jet-black tires. Some guys in white coveralls were pushing it. Suddenly I heard from somewhere off to my right a low rumble. It grew louder. Just like on the radio! A red streak hurtled through my lens, past the yellow car.

Anyone who has heard the sound of an Offenhauser engine at speed will never forget it. The great crowd in the infield eddied and surged with a life of its own. The sun grew hotter and hotter as the time for the race drew closer. From where we were, only a tiny sliver of track could be seen, but that was enough. I could see the heat waves rising from the surface of the track, and from time to time a car would streak through, leaving a blue haze behind it. That sound of *oooooooooooooooooooo* when he decelerated in the turns and then *wwwwoooooooooooo* coming out made the air vibrate.

From somewhere a PA system kept squawking incessantly. My Uncle Carl sat on the running board and strummed his banjo.

Yessir, that's my baby

No sir, don't mean maybe . . .

He sang between sips at a beer, bottle. The old man had out his race program and was writing things as they an-

nounced last-minute changes over the PA. A band struck up somewhere; some High School band paraded down the track. The pace car, a big white convertible, rolled out. The people cheered. I could hardly stand it. At last all thirty-three cars were lined up in that long, wild mosaic that is the traditional 500 start.

"Now listen careful, they're gonna say it pretty soon." The Old Man listened for the magic words that had been spoken in Indianapolis from the very beginning.

"GENTLEMEN, START YOUR ENGINES."

The PA system echoed the immortal words. I never thought I actually would hear them in person. A great roar spread out over the Infield as car after car revved over. Blue-grey smoke and the smell of burning exotic fuel made me almost pass out with excitement.

The pace car started to roll and the great parade roared by on the classical Pace Lap. They moved out of our sight. Balloons floated high up over the stands. Guys stood on hoods, fenders, rickety platforms, everything, to see the start, and when it came it was more than even I had imagined it to be.

BBBAAAAARRRRRRROOOOOOMMMMM! The earth trembled. Tires screamed. The crowd actually *did* roar! Just like the movie! I squinted through my glass as car after car streaked past the tiny sliver of track I could see. Blue, yellow, red, and a white blur that was Wilbur Shaw's Maserati. The race was on. And for ever and ever no one would be able to convince me that there is any more exciting a happening, and that's what it is, than the 500.

I've sipped chablis on an elegant balcony overlooking the harbor at Monaco, and watched the finish from in the

stands, right on the line, but somehow the whole spectacle is different. There is an animal, primitive thing about the 500.

The Infield was swinging into full action. Lunch baskets were opened, tablecloths spread, pickle jars spilled, pork and beans, fat ladies, skinny kids, old men in baseball caps, all sort of jammed up in one big compost heap of humanity.

The race droned on and on in the heat. Unless you're really damn lucky you don't see much of the race from the Infield. You hear it; you feel it; you eat it; you smell it. The PA system kept up a running tattoo of trivia and information. Jimmy Snyder in the Sparks Special, Lou Meyer in the Bowes Special and Wilbur Shaw were battling it out. Suddenly, from somewhere off in the distance, a dull *whuump* broke the steady drone. Instantly card games stopped; people leaped to the tops of cars. The yellow flag was out. For a while no one knew what happened, and finally the story reached even the ladies sitting in the shade eating ham sandwiches: Floyd Roberts had tangled with another car and had gone over the wall, and was dead.

The race began again. Finally, just about the time I thought I'd pass out from heat and too much rootbeer, Wilbur Shaw took the checkered flag, and the ballgame was over. You couldn't have told it from where we were parked, but that's what the PA system said. Wilbur Shaw had done it again.

Guys began taking down their racks and packing away the baskets and card tables. It was getting late, and a lot of them had a long way to go before they got home, places like Olathe, Kansas; Red Cloud, Minnesota; and Turtle Creek, Iowa.

We finally got back out on 41, after dark and after the biggest traffic jam I ever saw in my life. I would, from that day on, always associate races with agonizing traffic jams. We droned northward between the same cornfields.

"Too bad about Roberts," My Uncle Al said in the dark. He never talked much, but when he did it wasn't often about cars.

"Yep," the Old Man answered, lighting up a cigarette as he hunched over the wheel.

"He won last year, but I guess his number come up. I always figure if your number comes up there's nothing you can do."

After making this Folk observation he drove on in silence. I opened a Baby Ruth bar in the dark and chewed on it, thinking about what a great thing the 500 is, and how I'd tell everybody back home how I saw Floyd Roberts' car flip over the wall even though it was a lie.

"Wilbur Shaw in that goddamn Maserati." The Old Man said it as though he couldn't quite get over it.

"You know, I come to a conclusion . . ." He paused dramatically.

" . . . Them damn Spaghetti-Eaters can really build fast cars!" The great race was over, and my Old Man had foretold the future.