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Remember When: The Pittsburgh Racing Association

February of 1954 was a significant date in local auto racing history. A group of men wanted to form an organization to combat NASCAR and the independent tracks which had dominated the racing scene in the area for several years. The group had a meeting at Dave Wright's Seafood Inn in Heidelberg, PA.

They formed the Pittsburgh Racing Association. Officers in the original P.R.A. were Ed Witzberger president, Buddy O'Conner vice president, along with Chuck Campbell, Jack Hollman, and Steve Petrovic as members of the board.

Ed Witzberger was the president of the Pittsburgh Racing Association from 1954 to 1972. The P.R.A. was formed to satisfy the demands of Pittsburgh auto racing fans for faster and more colorful competition where they would have a voice in the destiny of local auto racing.

Witzberger was involved in stock car racing and was tired of being dictated to by NASCAR which had its roots in the south but ran the South Park Speedway.

Witzberger was amused the Spring of 1954 when Ed Otto, who was promoting South Park for NASCAR, told him that he would put him out of business in three weeks. Witzberger decided to run Heidelberg head to head against South Park.

In 1955 P.R.A. had five member tracks: Heidelberg, South Park, Mon Duke, Claridge and Arden Downs. The P.R.A. insisted that the member tracks pay a good purse and comply with the rules set up by the P.R.A. membership.

The first year, P.R.A. tracks drew a total of 93,000 fans. In 1955 with drivers racing at the five member tracks the attendance was 326,000 fans.

Witzberger scheduled periodic meetings of all members, drivers, owners, promoters, and track officials whenever major decisions were to be made, such as rules meetings. I attended many of these meetings and Witzberger was a no nonsense kind of a guy who knew what was necessary for the growth of the sport.

The rest is history. The P.R.A. went on to become the most successful racing organization in Pennsylvania. Some of the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Hall of Fame members include many of the competitors from the P.R.A. The list is like a walk thru racing history. 1983 Buddy O'Connor, Herb Scott, Ed Witzberger. 1984 Bill Kessler, Bill Steinbach, Bill Webster Sr., Dick Linder. 1985 Woody Brougher, Tom Colella, Don Luffy, Joe Pitkavish. 1986 Dick Bailey, Nick Garin, Joe Mihalic. 1987 Lou Chianelli, Glade Neil, Lee Stover. 1988 Pee Wee Flick, Jim Irvine Sr., Hoot Martin. 1989 Bob James, Dave Lundy. 1990 Norm Benning, Don Dahle, Blackie Watt, Bob Wearing Sr. Don Gamble, 1991 Jim Bickerstaff, Whitey Lauderbaugh, Gus Linder. 1992 Ed Fiola, Dick Swartzlander. 1994 Bud Kunkel. 1995 Frank Choura, Art Munch, Ed Howe. 1998 Tommy Gale. 1999 Joe Viglione. 2002 Don Dibert, Bob Schaeffnocker. 2003 Bob Unks, and John Orbin. The hard work and efforts of these racing pioneers will long be remembered by all of us in racing today. Many of the things that we take for granted now were not possible in the early years. The growing popularity of auto racing in the United States is a tribute to these men and other men like them across the country. They are the reason that auto racing is the number one spectator sport in this country today.