

Roosevelt Raceway

by Ken Ryesky

In 1936, the Roosevelt Raceway was built in Westbury, Long Island, New York, as a venue for automobile racing. But World War II chilled the sport of automobile racing in America, since many of the cars and drivers were from Germany, Italy or France.

Attorney George Morton Levy saw in the largely idle Roosevelt Raceway an opportunity to profit from harness racing, a sport which was not impacted by the war nearly so much as automobile racing. In 1939, Levy and other investors formed the Old Country Trotting Association to bring the horses to Roosevelt Raceway. The venture did not fare very well during the war years, but Levy envisioned great growth potential after America's eventual return to a peacetime economy.

Levy called that one correctly. Long Island's population increased, driven in no small way by the returning veterans who married, started families and purchased homes. Levy purchased additional land, and in 1957, constructed a new grandstand which provided not only a view of the horses, but also some upscale wining and dining. The venture would strongly prosper for approximately a decade.

But change was in the wind. In 1971, Off-Track Betting came to New York. The next year, the New York Islanders became Long Island's first big league professional athletic franchise. In 1976, harness racing was brought to the Meadowlands in New Jersey. All of these developments eroded the profitability of the Roosevelt Raceway, and Levy's death in 1977 did not help matters one bit. Bereft of Levy's leadership, the Raceway continued its decline. New management installed in 1984 could not reverse the trend, and the Raceway closed in 1988.

During its existence, the Roosevelt Raceway spawned much legend and intrigue. Questionable political influence caused scandals which induced New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey to clamp down on the horseracing industry, ultimately leading to legislation which placed tight controls over the sport. Ironically, this was not Dewey's first confrontation with Levy; in 1936, Levy had defended mobster "Lucky" Luciano in the very case which would thrust Dewey, then a federal prosecutor, into the national spotlight and launch his political career.

In 1951, Levy testified before the Kefauver Committee that he had paid mobster Frank Costello \$200 per week to keep the bookmakers away from Roosevelt Raceway.

In 1953, several employees of Roosevelt Raceway quit when they were required to be fingerprinted in order to remain employed. One such employee was George J. Florea, the Supervisor of Parking, who turned out to really be Joseph Massa, a fugitive wanted in a 1925 Mount Vernon trolley car murder case.

There was also the matter of the Raceway's catering concessionaire, Harry M. Stevens, Inc., imperiling its privilege to serve alcoholic beverages in 1954 by falsifying information on its liquor license application. Several artifacts from the now defunct Roosevelt Raceway remain, including this matchbook. Note the name of Harry M. Stevens, Inc. on the saddle.

