

Speed Demons and a Tramp at the birth of air-cooled racing

Head west from downtown Los Angeles until you get to the Pacific Ocean at Santa Monica, where the old Route 66 from Chicago ended. Then follow the beachfront 'boardwalk' south for 3 or 4 miles and you'll be in Venice.

In 1891, when there was not much of anything in Southern California, tobacco baron Albert Kinney and a partner bought several miles of marshy land along the coast immediately south of Santa Monica. They developed the suburb of Ocean Park next to Santa Monica and then Kinney, now on his own, set about building his 'Venice of America'.

There were several miles of canals forming a residential area, a lagoon, and a 370m (1,200 foot) pleasure pier with an auditorium, a restaurant built like a ship and a dance hall. Later there were imported gondolas on a lagoon, a miniature railroad, a roller-coaster, a heated indoor salt-water swimming pool and numerous other attractions.

The new development opened for 4 July 1905. Visitors in their thousands arrived by Pacific Electric rail from Los Angeles on what was then regarded as the best public transport system in the World.

Kinney's pleasure facilities have long gone, but the surviving canals have been restored. There is a tightly packed and eclectic mix of beachside architecture from Spanish Mission to Modernist to Frank Gehry. Slotted through this is a deceptive hint of the area's significant motorsport heritage in a street which is simply called 'Speedway'. It's a strange name for what is not much more than a one-way alley, and it has nothing to do with the one-off Venice Grand Prix of 1915 which was won by the legendary showman, racer and record-breaker Barney Oldfield.

'Speedway' originally meant a stadium for harness racing or, as in this case, a road built for driving a carriage or car at 'speed'. This 'speedway', from Ocean Park to Venice and then on to the next suburb of Playa Del

February 2014 sees the centenary of the release of the first Charlie Chaplin 'Tramp' film. Just 6 minutes long, it was made at an event that is likely unique in motorsport history – when the leading drivers of the time got together to help youngsters go motor racing in air-cooled racing cars they had built for themselves. Probably this was the first manifestation of air-cooled racing as we know it – simple, cheap, exciting and encouraging of innovation and talent.

Rey, was laid out to attract visitors and real estate sales, and was paved with asphalt in 1910 when it was probably the only road in the area to be sealed. Visitors could motor down from Los Angeles along rough dirt roads, and then hoon up and down the new speedway to their hearts' content.

Probably the Indianapolis Motor Speedway first associated the term with motor racing, when it was announced in 1907. America eventually settled for 'speedway' as meaning a track built for motor racing with all its turns in one direction. Most of the rest of the world – starting with Australia – eventually got the idea that it



LOOSE FILLINGS

was 'a sport in which motorcyclists race several laps about a short oval dirt track, which is the fourth and last of the Oxford Dictionary's definitions.

Another term in early use was 'motordrome'. Roughly where a modern equivalent of the original canals stands on Venice's southern edge at Marina Del Rey is the long forgotten site of the first board track 'motordrome'. Board tracks started out as velodromes which had then been used for motorcycles. The one at Playa Del Rey was conceived shortly after the opening of Indianapolis in 1908, and was built specifically for cars.

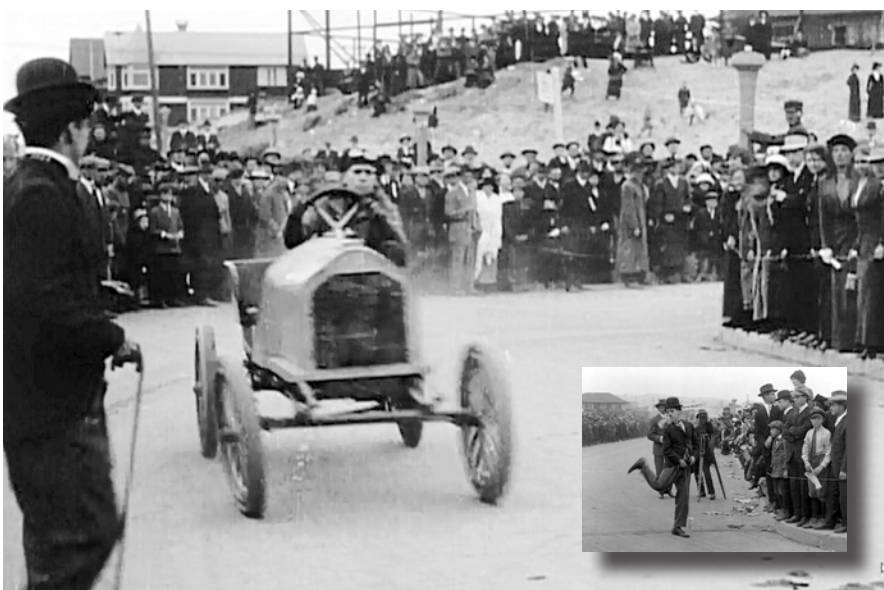
Big things were expected of it. It even had its own spur off the nearby Pacific Electric tracks to bring in spectators. It was circular, one mile round, and steeply banked with spectators seated around the rim as well as in the infield.

The inaugural meeting was held in April 1910, only 3 months after construction started. Prior to the meeting, Barney Oldfield had run a

Left: a postcard view of the Motordrome looking north to the Santa Monica hills.

Below: racing on the Santa Monica road circuit with 'Terrible Teddy' Tetzlaff's Lozier winning in 1910. (Old Motor). The Santa Monica races were the setting in 1913 for the *Speed Kings* starring Tetzlaff and Earl Cooper. Cars like these were modelled by the boys at Venice and later.





mile at Daytona at 131.73mph, and on the first day at Playa del Rey he did a mile in 36.22 seconds, which was just 99.40mph. That was only to be bettered marginally later in the meeting; his and the other cars were really too fast for the track.

This first meeting attracted only 55,000 spectators over its 7 days' racing and record breaking, and it is not clear that things ever got better crowd-wise. In total there seem to have been just 19 days of racing before the end came.

Maybe an arsonist was engaged? On 11 August 1913 a fire was started, allegedly by vagrants, which burned the place down. Up-and-coming sports writer Damon Runyon is said to have commented, 'Playa del Rey burned last night with a great saving of lives.'

Another kind of motor racing held sway to Venice's north. The streets of Santa Monica hosted annual road races over an 8.4 mile course from 1909 to 1919 with the prestigious Vanderbilt Cup and Grand Prize races being held there in 1914 and 1916.

About the time that the Motordrome burnt down, plans were being made in Venice for a unique motor race that also saw the debut of one of the cultural icons of the twentieth century – Charlie Chaplin's little 'Tramp'.

No doubt the inspiration was the news of 9 December 1913 that Santa Monica had been awarded the prestigious Vanderbilt Cup and Grand Prize races in February 1914. In American motor racing terms it was a bit like being awarded the Olympics.

Motor racing fever clearly infected the good citizens and merchants of neighbouring Venice too, because within a week they had come up with a plan for the Junior Vanderbilt Cup. There seemed to be no problem with the hijacking of the Vanderbilt name. On 17 December the *Venice Daily Vanguard* announced 'Mid-winter Motor Race for Venice.'

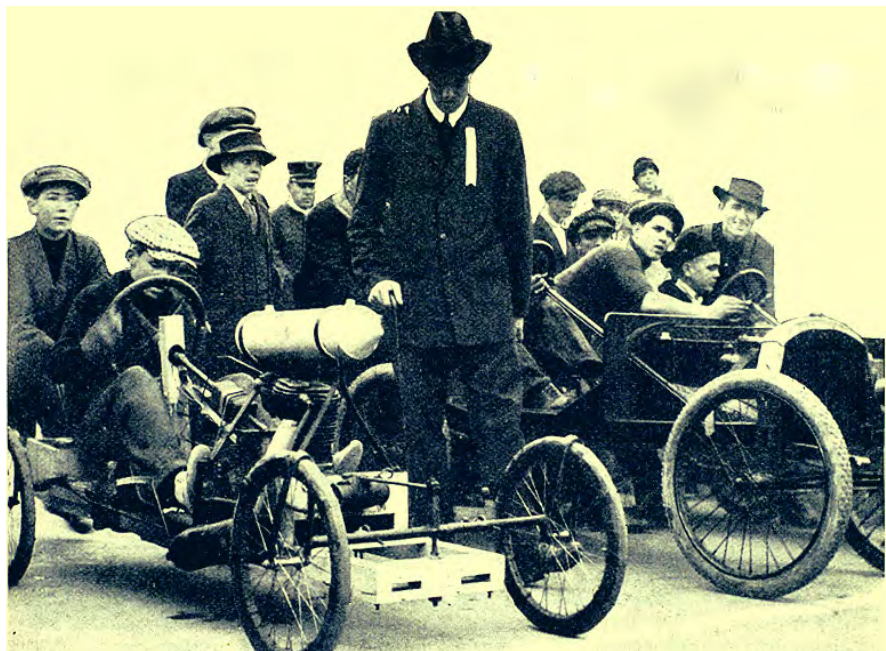
'...Venice is destined to eclipse them all with its Junior Vanderbilt Cup Race which is to become an annual mid-winter event. Venice is known as the children's paradise and the creation of this day of enjoyment is for boys

Left: stills from Kid Auto Races captured from a restored version on the DVD 'Chaplin at Keystone' released in 2011 by the British Film Institute.

Top: the Tramp's first moment on screen. The boy in the second car looks to be no more than 5 or 6 years old. His elder brother (probably) has darted out of the crowd to give him a push.

Centre: The Tramp obstructs the film crew (left) and then nearly gets run over.

Bottom: another near miss - one of the bigger cars.



Above: slender of face, this is not Barney Oldfield (see him below congratulating winner Alf Van Vranklin) but it could be three times AAA champion Earl Cooper.

16 years of age and under. The purpose of the event is to stimulate mechanical genius in the boy and to create within him confidence in his ability to master the problems of life. Not only will there be enjoyment, but health and sanity in this keen, wholesome sport, minus all danger.

There were to be two main groups of events – for ‘pushmobiles’ (billycarts or soapboxes with handles) and for small motor cars, and they were divided into two divisions – with and without rubber tyres, and single and twin-cylinder engines.

The races were to be held on Saturday 10 January 1914 and ‘foreign entries’ were said to be welcome – the ‘noted Italian driver Willie Wells’ was expected to enter. The entry fee was ‘one dime’ (10c) and the Ocean Park Bank was going to hold the money. Entries were to be lodged with E.H. Pendleton of the Venice Cycle Shop; Mr Pendleton was notable for having invented electric timing equipment which had been in use at the nearby Motordrome and at Santa Monica and was later put on the market for trapping speeding motorists.

Prizes would be worth \$200 and there would be 4 cups, one for each class. The pushmobile race would be over a ½ mile stretch of the ¾ mile Venice street course while the motor races would be over 5 and 10 miles. The programme included a twin-cylinder 10 lap heat, a single-cylinder 10 lap heat, a twin-cylinder match race and a ‘free-for-all’ over 20 laps.

‘Speed demons’ from as far away as Pasadena were expected to enter. A galaxy of motor racing stars was behind the organisation. Barney Oldfield was starter, Teddy

Tetzlaff referee and Louis Nikrent inspector of entries. Earl Cooper headed a list of judges. George Adair was chairman of the advisory board. By the time entries closed a total of 40 had been received with 9 or 12 (according to the report) in the motor car classes.

At this point Charles Spencer Chaplin needs to be introduced. Newly signed-up by the Keystone Film Company at twice his salary as a touring music-hall comedian, Londoner Chaplin arrived in Los Angeles on 13 December 1913. His first film, *Making a Living*, in which he played a dandy aspiring to be a newspaper reporter, was made between 5 and 9 January 1914.

His next film was most likely *Kid Auto Races at Venice, Ca* (to give it its full title), and it was unquestionably the first film finished and released in which audiences saw Chaplin’s ‘Tramp’ with Derby hat, baggy trousers, tight jacket and toothbrush moustache. Wholly improvised, and reputedly shot in just 45 minutes, the 6 minute long ‘half-reeler’ film features a series of scenes where the Tramp keeps getting in the way of a camera crew trying to film the races.

There are shots of boys practising and racing with their pushmobiles up and down one of the ramps and of the motor cars scooting round and narrowly missing Chaplin. The Tramp gets pushed and kicked to the ground by the actor playing the director and for

the first time executes his signature ‘flick-kick’ of a discarded matchstick.

The trade journal *Exhibitors World* wrote, after the release of the movie, ‘We do not think we are taking a great risk in prophesying that in six months Chaplin will rank as one of the most popular screen comedians in the world’. Chaplin was to make no less than 35 films for Keystone that year, and by the end of it, when his contract was expiring, he asked Keystone for a pay rise from \$150 to \$1000 per week and they turned him down. He signed for the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company at \$1250, and the rest is history.

Most of the boys were in home-made likenesses of current top racing cars with single or twin motorcycle engines, but two were in modified single-cylinder Browniecars made by the Omar Motor Company of Newark which they advertised as childrens’ cars.

In the Chaplin film we can identify a cherub-faced Alfred Van Vranklin in a Browniecar in which he won both the 10 lap single cylinder race, and the 20 lap ‘free-for-all’ in 37min 17.4sec. On his 19th lap he had such a lead that after skidding into a roadside ditch and overturning, he was able to right his car and finish to win.

Although the *Santa Monica Daily Outlook* judged the spectator numbers at a mere 1000, a report in the magazine *Technical World* in May 1914 claimed 10,000 were there. Certainly there was a crowd at least 4 or 5 deep around the course as is clearly seen in the Chaplin film. It was obviously a big success from the Venice perspective and its daily paper headlined its report with ‘RACES A HOWLING SUCCESS’.

‘Junior’ motor racing under the guidance of the sport’s top drivers was now well under way and soon boys all over California were doing it. It was to make one of them a star and eventually become one of America’s biggest spectator sports in the form of midget car speedway.

Terry Wright ... to be continued

