



It's difficult to find a word to best describe H. Clay Earles.

He was a stock-car racing pioneer, but that doesn't do justice. Neither does visionary nor creative thinker, or diligent or persistent.

Perhaps if you combined all of the above, it would adequately describe the founder of Martinsville Speedway. And one thing is certain: he was one of a kind.

Earles built and opened Martinsville Speedway in 1947. What began as a dusty tribute to one man's vision endures today as modern speed plant that rivals any in the land.

Earles seen the sons, and even grandsons, of great drivers grow up to compete here. Earles knew Red Byron, Fireball Roberts, Joe Weatherly and Fred Lorenzen as well as he does Darrell Waltrip, Dale Earnhardt and Rusty Wallace.

"I can remember watching Buddy Baker, Richard Petty, and later Kyle Petty, and Davey Allison following their fathers around the pits when they were just kids," Earles said.

"I can remember giving a young kid enough money to get home on after a race because he was broke. His name was Fred Lorenzen."

NASCAR is the premier stock car racing sanctioning body in the world and Earles was there at the very beginning. The .526-mile asphalt speedway, built as a dirt track, has grown from a dusty, primitive operation into one of the most beautiful racing facilities in existence.

Earles, who died November 16, 1999 as Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of the speedway, spans racing's rough and tumble birth to its current mega-buck attraction.

The track runs basically the same weekends each year and highlights four NASCAR racing divisions.

Back in 1947, Earles originally had planned to put only \$10,000 in the facility, but spent \$60,000 before an engine was fired.

"When we finished building the track and filling in the lake, we had only about seven to ten acres left for parking, enough to accommodate about 1,400 cars or about 4,000 people," Earles said. "And we had completed only 750 of our

proposed 5,000 seats.

"But we went ahead and ran our first race, they called them Modified Stock cars then, on September 7, 1947."

Today, Martinsville Speedway covers over 340 acres. Earles has turned the track into a multi-million dollar facility. It has 800-foot straights, short, tight turns banked at only 12 degrees and has been called "two drag strips with short turns."

Despite the fact that there were no fences and some 3,000 fans were able to watch the race without paying, the initial effort was a financial, if not artistic, success.

"We had a paying crowd of 6,013," Earles said.

Robert N. "Red" Byron, Virginia-born but racing out of Anniston, Ala. and Atlanta, Ga., which later became his hometown, bumped and skidded his way to the first victory at the track. He wore a special stirrup on his left leg, which was smashed by flak in World War II, and the injury necessitated the use of a special clutch pedal.

Byron won \$500 out of a \$2,000 purse.

Earles always insisted on beautification, excellent concessions and attended restrooms at the track. "We like to think of our track as a family-type facility," he said. "We like to see a man bring his wife and children to our events and be comfortable. Racing appeals to all ages and many of our most avid fans are young folks and ladies."

The track has 26 corporate suites, a chalet village for tent entertainment, a 100-seat press box, high-rise grandstands, a fully-staffed medical Infield Care Center, and a helicopter for quick evacuation of any seriously injured person.

Improvements continue to change the face of the facility each year, and it has evolved from a nightmare to a dream. But the track itself and the battles that go on there are little different from 1947 when Red Byron won the first race.

Martinsville is a driver's track where exchanging paint is commonplace and no car completes 500 laps without body damage. But, with its long straight-aways and short, tight turns, such is expected.

The winners at Martinsville compose a Who's Who among drivers. The "King", retired driver Richard Petty, still leads all modern era Winston Cup winners with 15 victories although his last victory came in the spring of 1979.

Darrell Waltrip is second to Petty with 11 wins, while the victory list includes

Rusty Wallace, Jeff Gordon, Jimmy Johnson, Cale Yarborough, Dale Earnhardt, Fred Lorenzen, Geoff Bodine, Harry Gant, Mark Martin, Ricky Rudd, Ernie Ivan, Bobby Isaac, Buck Baker, Junior Johnson, Morgan Shepherd, Buddy Baker, Dave Marcis, David Pearson, Earl Ross, Bob Welborn, Lee Petty, Jim Paschal, Jim Massey, Bill Amick, Fireball Roberts, Rex White, Tom Pistone, Joe Weatherly and Nelson Stacy.

Ray Hendrick, who died in 1990, still leads the track's modern era win list for Modified, Grand National and Late Model Stock cars with 20 victories followed by the late Richie Evans with 10.

Over the years, the fans enjoyed wild, action-packed events and even though there were numerous wrecks and flips, there were few serious injuries.

Tony Siscone, seriously burned in a Modified wreck in the 1982 Cardinal 500 Classic, returned two years later to win the same event in one of the most emotional victory lanes ever witnessed at the track.

Tragedy struck the speedway during practice for the October 1985 triple-header. NASCAR National Modified Champion Evans of Rome, N.Y. died instantly when his Chevrolet crashed into the wall between the third and fourth turns during practice.

In the 1987 spring Miller 500 Classic, another Modified veteran, Charlie Jarzombek of Baiting Hollow, N.Y., was killed when his Pontiac crashed into the wall between the first and second turns.

"Those were the two worst days of my life," Earles said. "You have to remember that everyone in racing is like a family. When anyone in racing dies, it's like losing someone in your family and it hurts.

In 51 years, what was the best race Earles has seen at his track?

"Well, after all those races, I can't say which was the best, but I know which one had the best finish," he said.

"In the Modified half of the 1981 Dogwood 500, Richie Evans and Geoff Bodine came off turn four side by side going for the checkered flag. They got together and Richie's car climbed up on the retaining wall so high you could read the number on the top of his car from the infield.

"He never let off. Geoff crashed into the inside retaining wall and Richie, with his right front wheel coming off from the impact, came bouncing across the finish line to win on three wheels.

"In my opinion, that was the greatest finish of any race, anywhere."

Earles' efforts in racing did not go unnoticed. He has been honored by NASCAR, Winston, the National Motorsports Press Association with its Myers Brothers Memorial Award, the Virginia General Assembly, Virginia's Governor, the Department of Justice, the City of Martinsville, the Navy, and the Air Force with its "American Spirit" award, which first was received by Bob Hope.

And in 1994, he received the GM Goodwrench/L.G. DeWitt Lifetime Service Award, honoring his lifelong commitment and dedication to NASCAR Winston Cup racing.

In 1984, Earles was honored at a testimonial dinner and one of his awards was the establishing of the H. Clay Earles Scholarship for Automotive Technology at Patrick Henry Community College.

Since he first built the track, Earles' promoting philosophy was simple and effective. He took care of the fans and the competitors.

A year never went by that Earles doesn't add something, from seats to restrooms.

"The secret to success in our business is giving the customer what he wants," Earles said. "When a man plunks down his money, he deserves the best. You try to make him comfortable, give him a great show and make sure he gets his money's worth. And we've always tried to do just that.

"Your customers are your greatest asset. And that will never change. You actually sell the customer a memory as much as a race. If his memory of Martinsville Speedway is good, he'll keep coming back.

"Racing will change, continue to grow, and you can thank the fans for that. They are the best fans in the world."

And Martinsville Speedway will continue to change and grow, all for the better.