

Beginning with the first time I ever saw fire in the pipes of a blown fuel dragster, I spent most of my life convinced that Hot Rod Heaven could best be found at a drag strip after dark. And then I went to Bonneville.

Now nitro drag cars at sunset still tingle my T-shirt, but the salt flats in September is flat hard to beat. Single runs may be a drag at the drags, but there's nothing boring about blown fuel 1932 Ford roadsters skimming across a nine-mile-long surface of natural salt at 250-plus, even one at a time.

This illogical business of racing hot rod coupes and roadsters across dried-up Utah lakebeds had been going on under Southern California Timing Association sanction since the year of my birth (1949), and documented Bonneville racing dates all the way back to 1910. However, the fact that salt flat speed trials survived long enough for me to make the trip has little to do with happy coincidence; were it not for a small, extremely dedicated group of salt racers who banded

together against big business and big government, the fragile saline surface of Bonneville Speedway may have been stripped down to dirt before my time. And it may well happen yet, in spite of continuing efforts to save the salt by the people who race there.

Depletion of this nonrenewable natural resource has been the concern of salt racers for 20 years, but prior to a 1974 government study, their fears were consistently dismissed by public officials and local industry chiefs. Finally, six years ago, the racers' worst fears were officially confirmed:

"Loss of solid salt from the race track between 1960 and 1974 amounts to 11 million cubic yards, or approximately 13 million tons," states the 1974 report from the State of Utah Geological and Mineral Survey. "In 1960 there were almost 20 million cubic yards of salt over four inches thick; in 1974 there was no salt of that thickness." Among the study's conclusions: "If the race track is to be preserved, then some means must be developed to stop depletion of

the salt or to restore salt at the same rate it is lost."

Exactly where the salt goes, and why, remains a subject of hot debate among the parties closest to this issue: (1) the U.S. Bureau of

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Land Management (BLM), which manages and maintains most of the 44,000-acre saline plain known as the Bonneville Salt Flats; (2) Kaiser Chemical, which operates a controversial potash plant on land adjacent to Bonneville Speedway; and (3) the hot rodders, represented pri-

marily by the Utah Salt Flat Racing Association (USFRA) and Bonneville Nationals Incorporated (BNI). The racers blame the problem on a combination of weather, highway construction and a network of "brine-collection canals" feeding Kaiser's nearby potash operation. Kaiser Chemical steadfastly refuses to recognize any salt shrinkage whatsoever. Government studies have been time-consuming, contradictory and/or inconclusive, resulting in virtually no relief yet for the fragile natural race course. Meanwhile, the speedway portion of the salt flats continues to deteriorate.

The single major hope on the horizon today is a two-year-old proposal to relocate the nine-mile-long, 80-foot-wide Bonneville Speedway to a section of salt less vulnerable to natural and industrial erosion. Both the federal BLM and Kaiser Chemical have reportedly agreed in principle to this "land trade" concept, pending completion of an official study by the U.S. Geological Survey. Unfortunately, that study has yet to begin, despite continuing pressure from salt racers to get the

land swap rolling.

"The BLM can't act until the Geological Survey makes its study," says Salt Lake City's Larry Volk, VP of the Utah Salt Flat Racing Association, "and right now the USGS priorities seem to be oil, uranium and other mineral studies. After two years, it looks like we're still on the back burner."

Rearranging these government priorities is the primary objective of several hundred salt flat enthusiasts, and they could use some help from you and me. HOT ROD suggests that you send a card, letter or telegram to Mr. John B. Trippe of the U.S. Geological Survey (Stop 609, Box 26046, Federal Center, Denver, CO 80225), urging the USGS to expedite its mineral study concerning the Bonneville Salt Flats land trade. Another way to help is by applying for membership into the USFRA (P.O. Box 27441, Salt Lake City, UT 84125) and/or BNI (P.O. Box 2729, Fullerton, CA 92633), the group that produces the annual Bonneville Speed Week (upcoming September 21-27, 1980). Membership is open to the

public, and both groups also offer caps, T-shirts and other fund-raising items.

In terms of simple numbers, salt racers have always been something of an endangered species of hot rodders. When it comes time to fight, however, this smallest of hot rodding contingents owns a battle record second to none. Their example should inspire the rest of us to stand tall, tough and together for survival in the Eighties. Whatever your individual image of Hot Rod Heaven—salt, sand, street or strip—the future promises plenty of rules and regulations, business interests, consumer groups, government agencies and assorted other threats to our favorite pastime: fun with cars!

To date, our combat record is mostly poor; and the real losers will be all the sons and nephews and little brothers who never get to ride in a street rod, never see Top Fuelers after dark, or never make the holy pilgrimage to Bonneville. If you and I allow that to happen, a smart kid won't have far to look to find the parties responsible. **HR**

ENDANGERED SPECIES

YOU CAN HELP SAVE THE SALT

By Dave Wallace

Illustration: Sid Bingham

