

Grand Prix Festival presented by Chemung Canal Trust Company
By: Tom & Babs Lyons

For those not familiar with the Grand Prix Festival, it is held on the Friday after Labor Day every year coincident with the Vintage racing event at Watkins Glen International Raceway. The featured marquee this year was Triumph. Next year the marquee will be Morgan. The basic premise for the day is sports cars rule. The main street of Watkins Glen is shut down to make room for various groups of cars taking tour laps of the original road racing course in America.

Those that take their laps are referred to “Stone Bridge Drivers” in reference to the stone bridge you drive over in part of Watkins Glen State Park. Participants in the various events are given special display parking in several locations on or near Franklin Street. Participants and tourists alike spend the rest of the day wandering up and down the street looking at sports cars. Late in the afternoon the race cars that are at WGI for the vintage races come down from the track to the town and line Franklin Street. At about 6:00pm the race cars do their race reenactment, two laps of the old course, then head back to the track. It is a rare combination of old and new. As far as car events go, this is my favorite event every year. Babs and I have been going for over 10 years.

To give you a quick overview of the event, there are several options for drivers and navigators to participate in.

- The Chemung Canal Trust Concours d’Elegance is where some of the prettiest sports cars around are judged and displayed in the Watkins Glen State Park parking lot.
- The Glenora Run Road Rallye is open to cars 25 years old or older. The event starts at Glenora winery and features a meal followed by a road rally, two laps of the old course and ending with display parking on Franklin Street in downtown Watkins Glen.
- The Knapp Vineyard Sporting Roadster Tour is as the name implies open to roadsters further defined as “two-seater” convertibles.
- Similar to the Glenora Run, the Knapp event features a meal followed by a road rally, two laps of the old course and ending with display parking in Watkins Glen State Park.
- The Red Newt Founder’s Tour is open to any vehicle. Participants receive a box lunch that then can enjoy as part of their road rally at either Taughannock Falls State Park or at the South entrance of Watkins Glen State Park where they wait for their two laps of the old course and finish with display parking off Franklin Street in downtown Watkins Glen.
- The Glenkana is final driving event. This is a mini autocross with a slant towards humorous. Small cars tend to do better than large cars because of the tight course but sometimes someone breaks the mold. This year one participant did it in a minivan.

With several different driving events involving rallies and laps of the old course you can imagine the choreography involved. Factor in the huge crowds and the potential for

chaos is evident. With all this potential chaos looming the organizers pull it off year after year. My hat is off to them.

The Founders Tour rally left Red Newt Winery about 11:00am for an hour long trip around the hills on the east side of Seneca Lake. There were two routes in play with drivers passing each other going different directions adding to the confusion and the fun. All the roads were in good shape and offered beautiful scenery as well as great driving fun. Babs was at her best using paper map and GPS to keep us on course. We stopped at Taughannock Falls State Park to have our picnic lunch then finished the rally at the south end of Watkins Glen State Park where we waited for our turn on the old road course.

You'd think sitting around waiting to go would be boring (well it was) but it really built our anticipation when hearing the other run groups out on the course with their engines roaring. How could you not like this event?

It was finally our turn to go. Since we were leaving from the park just up the hill from the official starting line we were going to get almost three laps of the old course. In years past Babs and I have gotten stuck behind some smoking, under powered car that had trouble keeping up. Not this year. We followed a BMW M3 who was as anxious as we were to push it a little. This made the laps more exciting. A little too exciting at one point. One of my favorite parts of the old course is the right turn off the stone bridge and up through the Esses. I usually lay into it as circumstances, and the car ahead of me, will allow. What to my surprise as I hit the gas just before the end of the bridge and found myself on the bumper of the BMW. Gasping could be heard. White knuckles could be seen. "What the! @\$!\$%" could also be heard. Traffic almost stopped. As we crept along bumper to bumper I was thinking, yeah some ancient MG died on course. That was not the case however. What did happen, a tree had fallen across the road completely blocking our lane. Once we cleared the tree things started moving along again. On our next pass the tree had been moved by one of the event volunteers. Those guys are really on top of things. The rest of our 2+ laps were just a joy. Cruising along, enjoying the road and the view. Did I tell you this is my favorite event of the year?

Once into town we were lead to our parking area on the former site of Pudgies Pizza. Not the best location so Babs and I moved the car to one of the side streets so we would be able to "get out of town" once the race cars left for the track.

After we were parked we became tourists too. It almost overwhelms the senses seeing that many sports cars parked in such close proximity. We stopped by several different vantage points and met up with several other NRPCA members who were down for the Grand Prix Festival and the Vintage Weekend. Babs and I spent the next few hours wandering up and down Franklin street admiring the cars and enjoying the like minded crowd. We waited with the Keatings and the Veltzs at Milligans Corner for the race cars to show up. It's amazing who you'll run into in a crowd.

Well, my knee finally gave out and I needed to find a place to sit for a while. We ran into

the Deans, Friedhabers and the Starskys across the street from the park entrance who invited us to join them. We moved our chairs into position to get ready for the race car's trip back to the track. We heard all the speeches by local dignitaries including Brian Redmond, Porsche Driver extraordinaire.

"Hello there", Brian Redmond addressing the crowd.

Around 6:00pm the race reenactment started. The historic cars from yester year started rolling down Franklin Street and heading for turn one that would lead them up the hill and towards the stone bridge. Being this close to the race cars is the most exciting part of the weekend. The roar of the engines as they scream up the hill is almost overwhelming.

I love it. It's hard to believe that the racing hardware we were looking at, several historically significant cars, would be on the track the next day tradin' paint.

The festivities would continue ending with fireworks around 9:00pm. Babs and I were pooped and ready to call it a day. We headed to our friends house about 11 miles up Seneca Lake where we would be staying the night. There we had dinner, sat around the camp fire, talked about the day's events and almost fell asleep in our chairs. I guess we are getting too old for this stuff ;-)