Berkley History & Museum Happenings

September 2022



Billy Lee—Champion of Road and Air

Billy Lee to Attempt 100 Hour Endurance Drive by Don Callihan

It was October of 1927, and Berkley, as well as all of southeastern Oakland County, was abuzz with excitement over the upcoming endurance drive of a plucky, 23-year-old, young lady who went by the name of Billy Lee. The Daily Tribune, along with a number of local businesses, was responsible for bringing Billy to the area and billed her as "world's champion girl automobile driver, stunt artist and auto racer." Her last endurance drive was in St. Petersburg, Florida in May, where she had established a personal record of 75 hours.

The Rules for Endurance Driving

Endurance driving tested the stamina of the driver as well as the reliability of the automobile. The rules were simple:.

- The automobile must be moving at all times with the exception of traffic stops.
- The driver must remain awake and at the wheel for the duration of the drive.
- The automobile must be a stock vehicle with no modifications.
- Maintenance and repairs cannot be performed during the drive.
- The only fluid that can be added to the vehicle is gasoline.

To assure that the rules were followed, the driver was handcuffed to the steering wheel by a trusted individual who controlled the handcuffs' key; checkpoints and appointed times were established to assure that the vehicle was not parked in an obscure location while the driver rested; and the hood of the automobile was sealed to assure that it was not opened during the drive for either maintenance or the addition of fluids.

Publicizing the Event

Publicity for the event began on Thursday October 6, 1927, with Billy's picture gracing the front page of the Daily Tribune. The photo revealed a vivacious looking young lady with racing goggles resting on a French, side-part, bob hairstyle, sitting behind the wheel of a racecar with the headline, "Girl Driver to Make Endurance Test Here." The article that accompanied the

In honor of the holiday season, during the months of November and December. the Museum will feature an exhibit on Christmas in Berkley. Pictures of the Santa that graces the northeast corner of 12-Mile & Coolidge. **Christmas** parades, the city's Nativity set and newspaper ads from Berkley stores will be on display

In This Issue

- Billy Lee to Attempt 100 Hour Endurance Drive
- Who Was Billy Lee?
- The Museum Gift Shop
- The Museum Corner Sign-Up

continued on page 2

Billy Lee to Attempt 100 Hour Endurance Drive - continued from

photo summarized Billy's accomplishments and noted that she will be the first person in Michigan to attempt a 100 hour endurance drive.

Over the next few days, the Tribune continued the buildup for Miss Lee's drive reporting that, milk will be her only source of nourishment; a Chrysler 52 automobile from the stock of J. B. Marburg, the Royal Oak Chrysler dealer, will be the endurance drive vehicle; the drive will be through Royal Oak and adjoining communities, including Berkley; and the drive will conclude at midnight on Saturday at the Daily Tribune office on South Washington Street in Royal Oak, assuming that Billy is able to drive the full 100 hours.

Her Drive Begins

Finally just before 8:00 o'clock on the evening of October 8, on the stage of the Baldwin Theater, Billy Lee, dressed in white, climbed into the driver's seat of the 1927 Chrysler 52 sedan. Royal Oak police chief Lloyd R. McClintock handcuffed her left hand to the steering wheel and the car was moved to the front of the theater for photos. Then Billy started the car, depressed the clutch, put the car in first gear and waited for the clock to strike 8:00 p.m. at which time she depressed the gas pedal, let out the clutch, and wheeled onto Washington Avenue. Her drive had begun.

For the first four hours, she drove through the streets of Royal Oak to give as troit on October 27, 1927, ten days after many people as possible the opportunity to see her pass by. At midnight, she passed the Royal Oak Police Department checkpoint and then an hour later drove by her checkpoint in Highland Park. Then it was up and down Woodward Avenue for three trips between Royal Oak and Pontiac, checking in with the Pontiac police each time.

At the conclusion of one of these trips, Billy drove to the Royal Oil Company at Main and Sixth streets where an attendant jumped on the running board of her Chrysler 52 with a can of gasoline and began pouring it into the car's tank while Billy circled the block. As the car passed by the gas station for the second time, the attendant grabbed another can of gasoline and added it to the tank as Billy continued circling. The process was repeated until the tank was full.

Even though it was just the beginning of her drive, it was a grueling experience as Billy navigated the darkness in almost constant heavy rain. The Chrysler 52 may have even driven under another had windshield wipers that worked on engine vacuum. However vacuum dropped when the engine accelerated causing the wipers to slow down and in some instances stop totally. It was thus a welcome sight when the first traces of dawn appeared in the east and the rain subsided.

Another welcome sight was the Gabel's Creamery truck that met Billy at 8:30 in the morning at Winter's Drug Store. Here she was passed a quart of Gabel's certified milk, her first of three for the day. Owing to the handcuff on her left hand, she found it difficult to drive and drink from the bottle. The problem was solved by passing her small amounts in a cup as she drove back and forth in front of the drug store until she had consumed the full quart.

Billy Lee Drives Through Berkley

Her route then took her past all of her sponsors before she began driving through Berkley and Royal Oak's adjoining communities. Berkleyites were surprised to see her as the itinerary published each day in The Daily Tribune did not provide a time for her drive through the village. However, there was no mistaking the Chrysler 52 automobile that was being driven by Billy. It was covered on every surface with the names of Billy's sponsors as well as her name under the driver's door.

The second day of Billy's drive was more or less a repeat of her first day, driving past her sponsors' locations, receiving her milk ration three times during the day and getting gasoline on the fly. Her mother announced that after 24 hours, Billy always had a passenger in the car to help keep her awake and to also be available in case of emergency.

By 3 p.m., on day three, Billy had completed 67 hours behind the week and the effects of her exhausting struggle were beginning to show. She was experiencing cold symptoms that were attributed to the cooler weather that had descended on the area. (Automobiles did not come equipped with factory installed



Who Was Billy Lee

If not for an automobile accident in Deher record-breaking endurance drive, we would not know Billy Lee's true identity. The Detroit News reported the accident and identified Billy as Lucy Rust.

Lucille was born in Denver, Colorado, in June of 1904. It appears that her first endurance drive was the one in St. Petersburg, Florida, and that her only other drive was in Ann Arbor, a year later, in 1928. However, records are sparse and she may have done others. She pseudonym.

In 1929, Lucille married Arthur Sullivan in Geneva-on-the-Lake, a summer resort town on Lake Erie, east of Cleveland. The couple returned to Highland Park after their marriage. Arthur worked as a toolmaker for Excello Aircraft and Tool Corporation in Detroit. Their only child, a daughter, Arlene Louann, was born in 1931.

Sometime thereafter, Arthur suffered a head injury as the result of a robbery that left him an invalid for the rest of his life. Lucille became his caregiver and the couple eventually moved to Florida. Arthur passed away in 1943.

Caring for Arthur motivated Lucille to become a nurse. Her daughter and granddaughter followed in her foot-

Lucille passed away in 1969 at age 66, Three grandchildren survive. Her granddaughter remembers her grandmother as "strong-willed and a tough cookie." She was also plucky.

Billy Lee to Attempt 100 Hour Endurance Drive

continued from page 2

heaters at the time.) As a precautionary measure, a nurse became Billy's passenger for a few hours during which time she questioned Billy and confirmed that she was able to continue her drive.

It was also reported that Billy's left wrist, the one handcuffed to the steering wheel, was swollen, even though it had been heavily taped at the start of the drive. In spite of her difficulties, Billy was excited



Publicity Photo of Billy in Race Car Tanken by an Ann Arbor Photographer

because at 11 p.m., she would surpass her personal record of 75 hours, set last spring in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Also on day three, a change in plan was requested by The Daily Tribune. Miss Lee was originally planning to complete her drive at midnight on the following day. However, in order to allow more of her fans to see her finish, the Tribune requested that the completion time be moved back to 8 p.m., thus ending Billy's drive after 96 hours rather than the originally planned 100 hours. Billy, not wanting to disappoint some of her fans, reluctantly agreed.

Will She Make It?

With 24 hours remaining, Billy drove to Highland Park to consult with her personal physician who cleared her to proceed. As Billy continued driving through the night, her cold worsened. She put on more clothing to stay warm, used pillows to alter her position in the car and had the nurse massaging her arms and legs on a more regular basis to stimulate circulation. In spite of the hardships the plucky young lady was determined to finish.

When 8:30 a.m. came, she welcomed her a.m. rendezvous with the Gabel's Creamery truck at Winter's Drug Store. The milk gave her a small energy boost, and together with the fact that it was daylight, and an ever increasing number of people were shouting words of encouragement, she pressed on.

From this point on, all of her driving was in Royal Oak, primarily past her sponsors. As the hours passed, the crowd continued to grow. People from Berkley, Ferndale, Oak Park, Pleasant Ridge, Huntington Woods, Clawson, Big Beaver, Detroit, Birmingham and elsewhere turned out to see her. As 8:00 p.m. approached, the number of people in downtown Royal Oak continued to grow, becoming the largest crowd ever assembled there.

As Billy approached the Royal Oak Police Department for the last time, she guided her Chrysler 52 to the rear of an escort led by police chief McClintock who drove with sirens wailing and lights flashing. He was followed by three gleaming Chrysler automobiles from J.B. Marburg's dealership, three delivery trucks from Gabel's Creamer and an oil truck from Royal Oil Company. The cheers were deafening as Billy approached the finish line at The Daily Tribune office on South Washington Street.

Her Drive Ends

It was slightly after 8:00 p.m. when the Chrysler came to a stop. Billy was unable to get out of the car and had to be assisted by her manager, William Burton. Hardly able to stand on her own, Mr. Burton asked that the ambulance from the J. H. Spiller Funeral Home be called to drive her to the bedroom set up in the J.B. Marburg dealership showroom window where she would sleep for four hours. Upon lying down, she dropped off immediately before awakening two hours later to eat her first real food provided by the City Café. She then went back to sleep for two more hours before being awakened to go home. It was estimated that more than 10,000 spectators filed by to watch her sleep.

Upon arriving home, she slept until 5 p.m. on Sunday afternoon, sleeping through the first of two scheduled appearances at the Baldwin Theater. She did show up for her 10 p.m. appearance and told of her experience and answered questions from the audience. Thus ended one of southeastern Oakland County's largest and most popular events.

The Big Question

When learning that an endurance driver cannot leave the car for the duration of the race, the first question that pops into most people's mind is "How do they go to the bathroom?" This question is never answered and we can only speculate. Billy tried to eliminate the need for no. 2 by going on a liquid diet during her pre-drive training and stuck to liquids during the drive. There were no highly absorbent diapers at the time and catheters were primitive. Use your imagination.

The Museum Gift Shop

The museum gift shop has the perfect gift for that person with a Berkley connection. Selections include books about Berkley history, posters, banners, post cards and more. Watch for our new Berkley Map prints, coming soon.

Christmas Mugs and Ornaments

Come see our best-selling Berkley coffee mugs, with the Berkley Theatre mug being our most popular, along with a Christmas ornament featuring the Berkley Theatre. These items are a great addition to any Berkley Christmas stocking and all three are nostalgic gifts for those with a Berkley Connection. Stop in and pick yours up and be sure to check out the museum while you are here.. Christmas mugs and ornaments are \$10 each. Our larger nostalgic-restaurants-of-Berkley mug is \$15.



Visit Us

Berkley Historical Museum 3338 Coolidge Highway Berkley, MI 48072 248-658-3335 museum@berkleymich.net

Hours:

Wed: 10 AM till 1 PM Sun: 2 PM till 4 PM

Group tours by appointment.

Visit us on the web at www.berkleyhistory.org

Facebook: Berkley Historical Museum

The Museum Corner Editor:
Don Callihan

Get the Newsletter

If you wish to receive *The Museum Corner* each time that it is published, please put your name and email address in the body of an email and enter the phrase "The Museum Corner" in the subject line. Send the email to: museum@berkleymich.net

Make a Donation

If you have artifacts or historical photos that you wish to donate, stop by the museum or email: <u>museum@berkleymich.net</u>. Items should be clean and in restorable condition.

Become a Member

Do you enjoy history and/or the preservation of historical artifacts? If so, we have a place for you on the Berkley Historical Committee. We are an official committee of the City of Berkley dedicated to preserving and promoting its history. We educate and engage the public in our efforts through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum. If you wish to become an active member of this committee, send an email to museum@berkleymich.net indicating your interest, or call 248-658-3335 and leave a message.

Photo and Text Credits

All photos were provided by Lucille Sullivan's granddaughter, Sandra Park-O'Hara. Historical information was primarily sourced from The Daily Tribune, originally in Royal Oak, Michigan, The Detroit News, Detroit, Michigan and the Ann Arbor News, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The mission of the Berkley Historical Committee is to preserve and promote the history of the City of Berkley, Michigan, and to engage the public through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum.