

## The Watkins Glen Public Library and the Creation of the IMRRC

In June 1996 Watkins Glen International and community leaders were discussing the best way to commemorate the upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of racing in Watkins Glen. At a meeting early in the month, John Saunders, then President of Watkins Glen International proposed that the main project be an addition to the Watkins Glen Public Library, to allow for the growth and development of the library's collection on racing history. At the opening of the public library in 1987, an alcove had been dedicated to books on racing history following generous gifts from the Collier family. This small but excellent collection was outgrowing the space in the alcove, and had attracted the attention of writers, historians and fans. The new wing would be a destination for racing enthusiasts who visit the village, and a resource for the growing number of historians of the sport. This was part of a plan that envisioned the Village of Watkins Glen as the Cooperstown of Motor Racing.

This proposal was brought before the library Board of Trustees, whose approval was necessary for the project to move forward, on June 12, 1996. The minutes of that meeting note that, "According to this proposal, the library would be the beneficiary of proceeds of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, beginning with the 1996 Grand Prix Festival, and WGI would seek corporate and state sponsorship for funds to construct a facility adjacent to the public library, to be completed in time for the 1998 anniversary. This facility would house motor racing books, archives and memorabilia, as well as audiovisual, multimedia and online resources for research and education."

Several obstacles had to be overcome. At the time, the land to the north of the library was occupied by the Elementary School Kindergarten Playground. The library board moved quickly in the vital task of making land available for the addition. Over the next year, they used funds from a recent bequest to purchase a house to the north of the playground, engaged a local builder to move the house, negotiated with the school to exchange this property for the playground, and raised money for playground improvements as required by the school.

The Board began discussions with Anne Hersh, Architect, and preliminary drawings were ready to present to the public at the fund-raising kickoff on September 7, 1996. At this time the project was dedicated to John Bishop. Admiral Bob Rogers was chosen as the chair of the fund-raising committee. It was possible to begin the process immediately as the library

had in place a capital fund with 501 c(3) status. WGI provided seed money for initial brochures, mailings and logo development. The library board applied for construction money from the State Library Construction grant program. By the end of the campaign the library Board had obtained much-needed grants of \$250,000 from New York State. The Friends of Watkins Library agreed to pay for a grant writer to submit a grant to the Kresge Foundation.

Throughout this process, the Trustees of the Public Library were the body responsible for all expenses, permits, bids and approvals. A Library Trustee served as treasurer of the capital campaign and managed funds, payments and reporting requirements on a volunteer basis. Plans had to be approved by the State Education Department Division of Library Development and various bureaucratic hurdles had to be overcome at that level. The Board put out bids for the construction in February 1998 in order to meet the target dedication date of September 1998. Fundraising was not complete at that time, and the Board took on a line of credit for \$200,000 to insure that construction would move forward. Library Trustees and staff were fully involved in planning fundraising events, working with donors, architects and contractors and managing the funds for the capital project.

The remarkable cooperation of the public library with WGI and the racing community made it possible to dedicate the almost-completed building in September 1998 and to open the facility—debt-free-- to the public in June of 1999. The entire Motor Racing Collection from the Public Library was transferred to the IMRRC at that time, and formed the basis of the book collection. The Public Library also obtained a state grant of \$30,000 for needed technology at the IMRRC.

The Motor Racing Research Council was formed in November 1998, initially composed of members selected by the public library Board of Trustees. The Racing Research Center was granted non-profit status in 2000. The IMRRC wished to raise money through car raffles, but could not do so according to State law until it had been in existence as a non-profit for 3 years. The Library Board agreed to serve as the raffle sponsor until that date, with all proceeds going to the IMRRC.

There has been a history of excellent cooperation between the Public Library and the IMRRC, which has made it possible for both institutions to flourish. We look forward to constructive adaptations to the future needs of both as well.

Submitted by: Harriet Eisman, Director, Watkins Glen Public Library  
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## Timeline

- June 1996: John Saunders proposes addition to Public Library to Commemorate 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Motor Racing
- July 1996: Library Board arranges to purchase Wilkinson land, to be exchanged for playground  
Preliminary architectural plans are drawn up
- Sept. 1996 Project is announced to public. Fund-raising committee is established.
- Summer 1997: Fund-raising events. Wilkinson house is purchased and moved. Land exchange with school is completed. Playground is moved and upgraded. Site is prepared for new construction. Plans for memorial sidewalk are drawn up.