



# CAR GUY NEWS

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**VOLUME 7 - ISSUE 9**

**September, 2015**

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**TOP DEAD CENTER MOTOR CLUB  
P.O. BOX 173  
LIONVILLE, PA 19353**

## Presidents Message

**Well, it's the start of the school season. Some say summer is over. I disagree. Summer is not over until you decide that it is. This is one of the most active times of the year in our hobby. I have written how much I enjoy getting out to see the spectacular cars at all the events, but I don't think I have mentioned the people I have met and the friendships I have made.**

**As you well know, this hobby of ours is addictive and challenging, too! It's a ton of hard work and can be very expensive to redo our rides. Most of us can't do it without a little help. Whether it is simply to offer advice or to actually help with the knuckle busting and wrench turning. That's where friendships are born, people helping people. Let's not forget TDC Tool Time.**

**This last part of the year, let's make it an exciting one!**

**Thanks for listening,**

**Joe O'Fria,  
President**

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**Included in this issue is a re-print of a story about a little known  
Chester County race legend - Ray Keech from Coatesville, PA  
who roared into 1920s auto racing lore.**  
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Two of our Newest Sponsors are listed below:

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There is a list of all our "Sponsors" on the last page of the Newsletter and on our Website.

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**2015 TDC CALENDAR**

(check website for cancellations and/or changes)

Blue = TDC Sponsored Red = TDC Cruise-To's

**Saturday - September 19**

Thursday -September 24 - 26

Tuesday - October 6

Saturday - October 17

Saturday - October 17

**Saturday - October 24**

Tuesday - November 3

Tuesday - December 1

**Saturday - December 5**

**6th - Cruise for the Troops**

Wildwood Boardwalk Show

General Meeting - Tom Oates

Cars for Kacie - Tom Oates

Brandywine Tech. School

**Halloween Show**

General Meeting - Tom Oates

General Meeting - Tom Oates

**Christmas Party**

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**Information to all "Cruise-to" events will be published prior to cruise**

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SEPTEMBER BIRTHDAY'S

- 9/1 - Rob DeGrandis
- 9/19 - Tom Sholl
- 9/20 - John Russo
- 9/21 - Adam Sahagian
- 9/25 - Lois Santopietro

OCTOBER BIRTHDAY'S

- 10/11 - Pat Bodeck
- 10/11 - Rene Weed
- 10/22 - Carl Nathans
- 10/24 - Gerry O'Fria
- 10/24 - Louise Albitz
- 10/24 - Dave Leary

**TDC MOTOR CLUB MONTHLY MINUTES FOR  
SEPTEMBER, 2015**

**Tom Oates Automotive - Chester Springs, PA**

**The September monthly meeting was called to order by the President, on September 1st, 2015 at 7:30pm, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.**

**Happy Birthday and/or Anniversary wishes were conveyed to all members celebrating during the month of September.**

**Due to the illness of our Treasurer, Joseph O'Fria, the Treasury Report was emailed to all members.**

**August minutes were emailed to all members. Minutes were accepted, seconded and approved.**

**Carolyn proposed doing Christmas Stockings for our deployed troops. She still had materials left over from the last time they were sent. It would be appreciated if members would bring bags of candies, including chocolates, to put in the stockings. The stockings have to be sent out in November in order to get to our troops in time for Christmas.**

**Only one speaker is working on our sound system. Researching buying a new system. Harold Little said he might know someone who may have one for sale, or maybe the gentleman could look at ours to see what is wrong.**

**Downingtown East is having their school meeting where they will discuss charging for the use of their parking lot and other facilities. We received a \$900.00 invoice for DOH. If you are a non-profit and use the facility there was a no-charge policy, but now they are reconsidering charging everyone for the use whether it be just the parking lot or inside the school. We are trying to get as many members as possible to attend, including persons from the Chester County Food Bank. If we end up having to pay the invoice Joe said he will produce an invoice for the repair the club had to do to the parking lot, grass cutting, weed wacking, etc**

**Holiday Express has approached us about becoming a sponsor.**

**Volunteers are needed for our Halloween Show. Six will be needed for parking, that includes one for spectator parking. Gerry O'Fria and Wendy Corbette will handle the "Opening Gate" to collect money and give out "Registration" paper-work. C.W. and Frank Dubeck will sell T-Shirts. Venders will be positioned along front parking lot next to Registration and**

**T-Shirt Sales.**

**Harold thought it would be nice if the members could dress in costume.**

**George Corbett questioned changing the starting time for our last cruise on September 19th. But, as Joe explained, it was too late to change the time due to the fact it was printed on our flyer and in the ads being printed.**

**October 17th - show at Tom Oates Automotive for "Cars for Kasie". Brandywine Technical School will also have their show October 17th. TDC will be the DJ at the show.**

**A perspective new member, Linda Rhizor, said she may have an auto to donate to the school, to repair and donate to someone in need of a vehicle.**

**The members present at the meeting agreed not to have a January meeting in 2016.**

**Gerry O'Fria will sell 50/50's and Joe O'Fria will take of selling club apparel.**

**The meeting was adjourned.**

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## **\*\*CHRISTMAS PROJECT\*\***

It was decided at the last meeting to again do Christmas Stockings for the men and women deployed to other countries during the holidays. It would be appreciated if the members could donate bags of candies, including chocolates, to put in the stockings. Since the stockings have to be stuffed, packed and shipped out in November, if those donating items could please bring them to the October Meeting on the 6th. It would also be nice if some Thank You's and Christmas Cards could be put in the boxes. So if you wish to write a note to send, please bring them to the meeting, also. Thank You, Carolyn Hibbs

## **"BATMAN"**

Batman, Dave Murray, was contacted and hopes to attend our Halloween Show. It also happens to be his birthday and he doesn't know what they have planned for his special day.

He will keep me posted as to what he will be doing.

## **MEMBERSHIP RECRUITING**

During TDC's last "Cruise for the Troops" on September 19th, we will have a special area set up to promote our club.

There will be a "Special" to anyone joining from now and throughout our Halloween Show will be paid in full until 2017.

Single Member - \$15.00

Member and Associate - \$20.00

The following story was printed in the Daily Local News by Dave Zeitlin on August 13, 2006.

## Ray Keech Roared into 1920s Auto Racing Lore



I know it's around here somewhere," the man says, as if he's searching for buried treasure -- which, in many ways, he is.

Before long, Tom Keech makes the discovery, stumbling upon the weathered tombstone of his grandfather's brother at Coatesville's Hephzibah Cemetery:

C. Raymond Keech

May 1, 1900 - June 15, 1929

Tom Keech studies the grave, vaguely remembering the fireplace stories and the bedtime tales, the ones that always seemed more like fiction. Sadly, though, there is nothing on this mundane, tiny marker that indicates anything remarkable about Charles Raymond Keech -- only that he lived a life far too short.

But if you dig deeper, you'll discover more: pieces of Ray Keech's legacy scattered across the country. A pencil sketch of his face on the wall of a museum in Indianapolis. A section of grandstand named after him in Daytona. Old pictures and newspaper clippings kept alive, on household mantles and in cedar chests, by different generations of Keechs and possessed currently by Tom, two generations later.

Yet, like the ashen gravestone, the strewn evidence can't possibly do justice to the life and racing career of Ray Keech -- a story so fantastic it wouldn't be believed if it hadn't been told and retold, passed down from generation to generation to generation...

### **ROARING TO FAME**

Before the stock market crashed and the country nearly crumbled, America enjoyed the most colorful decade in its history: the Roaring Twenties.

Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge led the nation through an unprecedented industrial boom. Charles Lindbergh made history by soaring, quite literally, to great heights. And Al Capone -- famously, or rather infamously -- ruled the murky but prevalent land of gangsters.

Sports, too, began to thrive more than ever. A stocky man named Babe Ruth bashed baseballs and drank beer. A former barroom brawler named Jack Dempsey knocked his opponents unconscious to capture heavyweight titles. And golfer Bobby Jones, tennis star Bill Tilden and football icon Red Grange rounded out a group collectively known as the "Big 5" of the 1920s -- a collection of idolized athletes that embodied the age.

In retrospect, this era, more than any other in U.S. history, proved to be the perfect time for Ray Keech to roar into the limelight. He was a man who came from humble, ordinary roots only to capture the imagination of the world by taking advantage of two of the nation's most fascinating new developments: automobiles and athletic entertainment.

The American Dream, right?

In a career that overflowed with prosperity what it lacked in longevity, Keech set the international land speed record in 1928 before capturing the checkered flag at the Indianapolis 500 the very next year -- one of the most extraordinary accomplishments in auto racing history.

"That's unthinkable now," says Donald Davidson, track historian at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Nonetheless, in the decades following the end of his life and career, even the most savvy auto racing followers started losing sight of Keech's accomplishments. And in Coatesville, a hard-working, blue-collar, sports-oriented town where athletes are often worshipped, Keech's legend is, generally, not well-known.

"A lot of fans wonder who on earth Ray Keech was," Davidson says. "In the whole scheme of things, he is one of the more lesser-known (Indianapolis 500) winners because he was only around a short time. He was a bit of a mystery character."

For sports fans everywhere, and especially those in this county, it's a mystery that needs to be solved.

## **FROM FARM TO BEACH**

In the hills of Chester County, on a family farm, inside a white stone house, big dreams were spawned.

Ray could have easily followed the Keech tradition and spent his days farming, or helping out with the family dairy business by delivering milk into East Fallowfield and Modena via horse and wagon. But that life was too ordinary, too slow, too dull. Ray Keech craved more, and automobiles provided the answer.

"He was looking for a little more excitement than what farming offered," says Tom, whose grandfather, Norris, and father, Norris Jr., lived and worked on the Keech farm through the 1950s. "At that time, in the early 1920s, cars were starting to become prevalent, and he began to work on some cars around here."

Thus, on the edge of Pennsylvania Dutch country, with Amish neighbors frowning, Keech drove trucks while working as a mechanic in a local garage. Soon, in the early 1920s, with greater fame and faster speeds on his mind, Keech entered the world of dirt track racing, often traveling to a site in Pottstown to compete with close buddy William Guldin.

While Guldin eventually gave up dirt track racing -- a pre-World War I sport that became widespread during the 1920s and '30s -- Keech embraced it. And by 1927, only four years after he unleashed his competitive racing exploits, Keech broke the track record at Langhorne.

In 1928, after graduating to board tracks and moving to Philadelphia with his wife and child, Keech caught the attention of wealthy Philadelphia manufacturer Jim White, who built a car called the "Triplex" -- a beast of a machine equipped with three aircraft engines -- that he hoped would be powerful enough to break the coveted land speed mark. After watching Keech's aggressive driving style, White knew he had a man talented and courageous enough to crack the record -- a distinction that had been held by Europeans for many years.

According to a document obtained from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Keech was "titillated by the chance for quick fame," and immediately accepted the thrilling, albeit frightening, proposition to race for the land speed record at Daytona Beach, Fla.

Now, keep in mind: Driving an automobile over 200 mph in the 1920s was only slightly less dangerous than sky-diving without a parachute -- and Keech wasn't immune from hazards. During a practice run at Daytona in February 1928, Keech suffered serious burns on his leg when a water hose broke and sprayed him with scalding hot liquid.

But the fearless Coatesville native chugged forward, powered by steel nerves and a crazy concoction of a vehicle that racing rival Wilbur Shaw called "the ugliest thing I've ever seen on four wheels."

On his first attempt at history, Keech set the American record at 201.1117 mph despite using only two-thirds of the Triplex's power. Two days later, on April 22, with the kinks in the car apparently fixed, Keech blasted across the beach at eye-popping speed -- and it appeared to all in attendance that he had shattered the international record held at the time by England's Sir Malcolm Campbell.

Only one problem: In a bizarre and maddening twist, a Daytona official announced that the timer had not functioned properly, thus nullifying Keech's masterful run. At this point, according to accounts from the scene, the typically composed racer lost his cool, hollering at the official to "make damn sure the apparatus is working this time because I'm going right out on the course and do it again."

And so Ray Keech -- seething but focused, red-in-the-face but determined -- got back into the mighty Triplex, roared over the sand in Daytona and delighted the jubilant crowd with another exhilarating run.

There were no mistakes this time around. The record was his.

## **" THE GREATEST SPECTACLE IN RACING"**

A national hero after driving an automobile at the ungodly speed of 207.552 mph, Keech next turned his attention to the Midwest: The fastest man on earth wanted to be crowned Indy 500 champion.

In May 1928, during his first crack at the nation's most prestigious auto race, Keech finished in fourth place -- crippled, again, by leg burns caused by a leaky fuel line.

In the following months, however, Keech firmly established himself as a speedway star, winning races in style and gaining popularity as a bona fide American sports hero.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the Indianapolis 500, as well, started to grow in stature at this time. For its 1929 race, the famed Brickyard experienced an enormous crowd, a brand new sound system, its largest band ever and scorching weather.

"The grandstands were hot. The 2½-mile brick speedway was baking. The audience of 160,000 sweltered," the story in that month's issue of Time Magazine read. "But around and around the track droned 33 little automobiles, each driven by a man cool of nerve and body, competitor in the annual 500-mile Memorial Day motor race at Indianapolis -- longest, most racking of U.S. motor contests."

Of the 33 competitors, only 12 finished. One driver was killed in a horrific accident. Others narrowly survived death in a large pileup -- a tragic yet all-too-common occurrence of pre-modern racing.

"No one," Davidson says, "was exempt from bad accidents in those days."



But gallant as always, Keech motored toward the finish line, completing the race with a solid if unspectacular average speed of 97.583 mph. By no means was it a glorious run, but it was good enough to beat the next competitor by six whole minutes, garner a paycheck of \$40,000, and stamp another accolade on his growing legacy.

On the home front, the former Coatesville farm boy was showered with praise. An article from the May 31, 1929, issue of the Daily Local News reads: "With a record-smashing crowd of 160,000 viewing the spectacle, Ray Keech, daring 29-year old driver of Philadelphia, bounced his tiny eight-cylinder racing creation over the finish tape a winner. ..."

A burgeoning phenom, Keech was the face of auto racing. He puffed on a smoke after emerging from his winning car, and on the morning after his championship he appeared in cigarette ads in newspapers across the land.

Alas, Keech's tenure as Indianapolis 500 champion turned out to be the shortest of any other winner. It lasted 15 days.

## **THE FINAL RIDE**

The last of the board tracks in America, the Altoona Speedway -- where two other Indianapolis 500 winners had already lost their lives -- was a literal death trap.

"The board tracks were extremely fast and steeply banked," Davidson says. "Speeds were phenomenal, and there were a lot of single-car accidents."

According to multiple newspaper accounts, Keech felt a twinge of self-doubt and dread prior to start of the June 15 race in Altoona.

"I'm afraid of this track," Ray told his wife, Saddle.

"Why don't you withdraw?" she responded.

"If I did, they would call me yellow."

Immediately before the race, the frightening foreboding had not faded -- and Keech asked childhood friend Chester Groff to do him a favor: "If anything should happen to me today, look out for my wife and kid."

For most of the afternoon, the Indy 500 champion appeared dominant, in control, flying around the Altoona track at speeds both swift and safe. Through the first 150 miles, Keech had broken every track record -- and built a sizable lead over the pack.

But on the 121st lap, Keech's premonition became reality. A racer in front of him, Bob Robinson, spun out after swerving to avoid a hole in the boards, and Keech -- who was prepared to lap Robinson -- swerved to try and avoid contact.

Now, Keech had already proved himself to be quite resourceful in the face of danger -- even off the track. Two years earlier, upon returning from the York Fair races and passing through Downingtown, Keech plowed through a thorn hedge while attempting to avoid two people who had stepped off a trolley -- and ultimately needed to perform some heady maneuvering to steer clear of an incoming midnight express after landing on a Pennsylvania railroad track.

But on this day -- with his wife and son in the crowd at Altoona, with friends and family cheering him on -- Ray Keech had no such luck, falling victim to the perils of the board track.

After veering sharply to the right to avoid Robinson, Keech struck the guardrail with tremendous force and was hit head-on by the car driven by Cliff Woodbury. Reports from the scene state that Keech's demolished car struck the guardrail again and flipped over several times before bursting into flames.

But by then, Keech had already been thrown from the car.

The other drivers could not avoid him.

In a Coatesville Ledger story printed four days later, Josephine Winnai, a close friend of Keech's wife, shared her account of the dire afternoon: "Ray was thrown out and was crawling along the board track towards the infield when another car struck him, and before they could get stopped there were four cars in the wreck. One of the hardest things was to see the others coming and not be able to get them stopped."

At first, Keech's wife could not be convinced -- or maybe she just did not want to believe -- that it was her husband who was killed in the wreck. But after accompanying Winnai to the stretcher, where the deceased driver lay, she sadly identified her spouse.

Ray Keech -- onetime land speed record holder, reigning Indianapolis 500 champion, beloved husband and father -- was dead at 29.

Back in Coatesville, two days after the Altoona disaster, approximately 3,000 people passed through the Keech farmhouse to pay their respects -- including throngs from the tight-knit racing community, many of whom were banded together by their feelings of fear and remorse. The next day, more than 600 people gained entry to the funeral at Hephzibah Baptist Church, where a large floral reproduction of Ray's racing car that bore his No. 2 loomed over the ceremony while family members wept and laughed and wept some more.

"Charles Raymond Keech had come back to sleep among the hills of home," the Ledger's story read, "his early death, the cost of the fame he had won for his name and native county."

## **LASTING IMPACT**

Through the years, as time passed and memories faded, Ray Keech's legend subsided, almost to the point of being a footnote in racing history.

His land speed record was broken just 10 months after he set it. He never got the opportunity to become a multi-winner at Indianapolis or try again to set the speed record -- both feats that would have surely booked his place among the fraternity of all-time greats. And all those who once saw him race have since passed on themselves, taking their trackside stories and memories with them.

"The family, of course, knows," Tom Keech says between the church where Ray was raised and the grave where Ray was put to rest. "But other than that, not too many people are aware of it. It's not something that's been well-publicized."

Yet, if nothing else, this is a story that has always, and will always, bond the Keech family.

"My father didn't get overly excited about a lot of things," Tom says of his late dad. "But you could tell that this was something that excited him. You could count that every Memorial Day, he'd have the (Indianapolis

500) race on WCOJ listening to it, no matter what work he was doing. That was always a staple for that particular day. In all the years I knew my father, I can say that he didn't have that feeling about anything else."

And that feeling -- one of wonder, reverence and family pride -- will never evaporate.

This past Memorial Day, longtime East Fallowfield resident Jim Sisk -- inspired by a former fifth-grade teacher, Vernon Hershey, who often brought his class to Keech's gravesite -- organized the inaugural Ray Keech Gravity 500 Soapbox Derby, in which kids raced and designed old-fashioned automobiles.

Tom Keech was there to support the event with his son, Tom Jr., whose car won the design contest. The tribute to Ray was special for both generations of Keechs, each of whom knows well the fantastic, hardly believable tale of their uncle -- the intrepid Coatesville man who just wanted to drive cars.

"Got to die some way, some day," Ray Keech was once quoted as saying. "I never give a thought to the dangers of racing."

That's it, really. Except if you ever crave more information about Coatesville's fastest man, look up the final results of that ill-fated race in Altoona. The one where Ray Keech was declared the winner -- posthumously, gloriously -- in his final ride on earth.

## **CLASSIFIEDS**

If you have an item to sell or a specific item you are looking for and would like to place an ad on Top Dead Center Motor Club's website please submit it to [tdcmotorclub.com](http://tdcmotorclub.com) or you may send it to:

**Top Dead Center Motor Club  
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