

The Story of the I-500

By: John Kenn (as part of the official I-500 History)

Welcome to a race that was conceived by the viewing of a 1968 Camaro in an auto dealer's window. The idea came in the late winter of 1968 when several local businessmen were sitting in a local restaurant having coffee. Across the street in a Chevrolet dealer's window was a new Camaro, that emblazoned a painted job which noted that this model would be the pace car for the 1968 Indianapolis 500. Discussion about the car soon turned to one member who was an early snowmobile fanatic and the question was asked can your snowmobile run 500 miles.

Now consider this was Sault Ste. Marie in the dead of winter. There was lots of snow and cold weather but very few tourists, a business that the community thrived on. Motels and restaurants were in their hibernation state and down state visitors could be counted on one hand. Out of the discussion about 500 miles and a snowmobile, there came an idea from the auto dealer, why not have a race patterned after the Indy 500 but just for snowmobiles.

Fast forward a half a year. By this time, the I-500 Committee had been created, land owned by City of Sault Ste. Marie was acquired for at track and plans were drawn up by an engineer from the US Corp of Engineers. The site chosen had one been the ammunition dump for Fort Brady and later Camp Lucas, both US Army reservations. It was flat, had a good amount of room, but it had three problems—three solid concrete ammunition bunkers. Enter the National Guard and soon two of the bunkers were nothing but broken concrete. Work progressed well into the fall. Contacts were made and lights suddenly appeared, as did fencing and even a couple of former motel cabins for race control. Work crews seemingly appeared from everywhere, even several work crews from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario found their way to the potential race track.

By late fall, the word was out—the track would soon be finished and it featured a one-mile enclosed oval with super elevated high bank turns. Entries for time trials that year were done in advance and each machine and driver had only two attempts to make it around the track four times. A total anticipated purse of \$3,200 was announced. The Indy 500 had been contacted for copies of their rules as there were none at that time for snowmobiles. The backers were flying by instinct and hope they had a winner.

January 25, 1969 was the announced start of time trials. The official timer lay in the back of his pickup truck with a series of stop watches and a propane heater. For the next week, machine after machine attempted to run the four laps and eventually 47 did qualify, the top qualifier with a speed of 57.1. Several days were taken off to again groom the track, as they raced mostly on snow.

Race day was February 8, 1969. A most famous day for all the UP as this was the first day the Mackinaw Bridge fare went from \$3.50 to \$1.50. One Detroit sports writer raved about all the local activities and in his Saturday morning article wondered if any machine would make 200, let alone 500 miles. The race began at 10 a.m. and some 13 hours and 42 minutes later, a very tired Ski Doo with Dan Planck of Davidson at the helm finally crossed the finish line. By the

time he finished, only 26 machines were running and they had gone a total of 13,891 miles. Everyone was tired, the race officials who found the remaining bunker was the only place to get warm in the 16 degree weather, the lap counters who spent well over half a day on two school buses and in a flat bed truck, and over 10,000 spectators. A new race was born.

By 1970, the word was out and professional drivers started to make their appearance. An overwhelming crowd showed up as there were reports of motels being filled as far south as Gaylord. As they say, the rest is history.