

Greyhound Racing in Morehead City

By Walt Zaenker

HISTORY STORIES

Reflections of Pine Knoll Shores

The following article is from the Pine Knoll Shores history blog. For related images, references and more stories about the town's history, go to pineknollhistory.blogspot.com or to the town's website, www.townofpks.com, and click on "History."

Greyhounds, Miss America, drinking, and gambling—now, I've got your attention. But you're probably wondering how I am going to weave those subjects into a story about the history of Pine Knoll Shores. The tale begins a few days back while I was doing research on the history of the Bogue Banks Public Library.

I was flipping through some early issues of *The Shoreline*, which at the time went by the name *Pine Knoll Shore Line*, looking for early references to the need for a library in Pine Knoll Shores. The word "Greyhound" caught my eye since, for many years, my wife and I have had whippets, which are related to greyhounds, so I stopped to read the piece.

The article is not attributed to a specific writer, but the editors at the time were Betty Hammon and Mary Doll, so I'll give them credit for this wonderful piece reprinted below in its entirety as it appeared in the *Pine Knoll Shore Line*, issue 43, November 1976.

LOCAL HISTORY: The interesting house going up at the corner of Beechwood and Sycamore makes use of the wood from the old race track. And we know nothing about a race track in Morehead, so we headed straight for William and Nettie Murrill, sure they would know. It was a dog track where the Carolina Racing Association raced greyhounds. The complex was where Parker Ford now stands. Dogs and trainers came up from Florida when the season there was over. Besides grandstands for the public, there was a clubhouse where the elite could sit watching the races, sending couriers to place their bets. They could sip drinks (brown bagging), but there was no drinking in the grandstands. Both Nettie and William stressed what a nice place the racetrack was, how orderly. Why, they said, you could take your sweetheart there and not worry that anything rowdy would happen. This was a summer time thing. One night Miss North Carolina was crowned there, crowned by Neva Jane Langley who was Miss America. Dividends paid by the track to Morehead City were used to maintain and improve the streets. There were no Powell Funds for road improvements then. Back in 1951 the dividend paid to Morehead City was \$28,000, an increase of \$10,000 over the 1950 dividend. But eventually pari-mutuel betting was outlawed by the legislature, and Morehead's race track became just a colorful memory.

Colorful memories make for good stories, but, as an historian, I am inclined to ask, "How much of this tale is true?" Can any evidence be offered to lend credence to the several points mentioned in the article?

An architecturally interesting house *does* exist on Beechwood Drive. The house has changed owners several times since being built in 1976, and the current owners are unaware of its background.

In 1939, the North Carolina General Assembly authorized a dog track to be opened in Carteret County. That authorization also legalized pari-mutuel betting on the races. In the period of rapid growth after World War II, promoters of tourism in coastal counties saw dog racing as a means of attracting visitors to resort communities while providing a new source of money to supplement the property tax.

Races were held nightly during the summer, catering to beach tourists. A similar act was passed for Currituck County in 1949, and the Cavalier Kennel Club in Moyock opened the same year.

The North Carolina Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that the racing law violated the state constitution by granting a monopoly and giving special privileges to a private entity (the racing association), with the additional argument that the legislature had



Postcard from 1950 showing the greyhound race track in Morehead City—Image courtesy of the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill Libraries

unconstitutionally delegated authority to town voters over a track not located in the town. The city limits of Morehead City at the time did not extend that far west. The General Assembly followed up by repealing the law authorizing pari-mutuel betting.

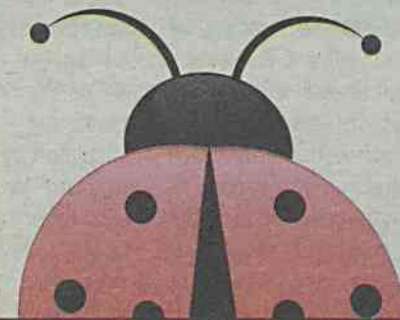
The *Pine Knoll Shore Line's* mention of the common practice of brown bagging led to a review of North Carolina liquor laws that prevailed at the time. In the 1950s, liquor by the drink was not available in any public establishment. Those laws did not start to change until November 21, 1978. The end of prohibition in the mid-1930s was followed by legislation establishing the present ABC system. Beer and wine for consumption on the premises was available, and a private club or social establishment could have a license to accommodate brown bagging, that being the practice of patrons bringing their own liquor, typically in a brown bag. The establishment would provide the glass, ice and mixer—for a price, of course.

The six-year experiment with dog racing came to an end, but during its short life, it proved to be popular, generating considerable revenue for the community, and was the venue for at least one statewide event. The 1953 Miss North Carolina pageant was held there. Miss Winston-Salem, Barbara Ann Crockett, was crowned Miss North Carolina by the then-reigning Miss America, Neva Jane Langley of Macon, Georgia.

The track stood vacant and unused for many years. Longtime Carteret County residents recall the track not being demolished until the mid-1970s. Were large timbers from the racetrack used in constructing the 1976 Beechwood Drive house as the article suggests? The question might be answered if the identity of the architect, the builder or the first owner could be discovered. Research goes on to resolve the mystery.

I realize that the connection between greyhounds, drinking, gambling, Miss America and Pine Knoll Shores may be a bit thin, but the 1976 *Shore Line* article provided an opportunity to bring to light some forgotten fun bits of local history and a flavor of times past.

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