



# Ben Krasner

*It takes a steely, innovative man to look at a baseball diamond and envision a racetrack, but Colorado entrepreneur Benjamin Krasner did just that.*

Lakeside Amusement Park was built by brewer Adolph Zang on the northwest side of Denver and opened to great fanfare and excitement in 1908. It was purported to be the "Coney Island of the West" by the *Denver Post*. It was originally created in the Beaux Arts style, derived from the Chicago World's Fair and featured the Tower of Jewels, at the time the tallest structure in Colorado.

The fun lasted for Lakeside Amusement Park well through the Twenties but by the mid-Thirties, the park was struggling. While the park was looking for new ownership, a Russian immigrant from Binghamton, New York, had set up shop as a concessionaire at Lakeside in 1917 and had been saving his money to purchase Lakeside. In 1935, Ben Krasner, together with his partners, purchased the amusement park and immediately set out to make some serious changes.

First, the park got a complete makeover in the popular art deco style as Krasner employed respected architect Richard Crowther, who had just completed work at the Golden Gate International Exposition Fair in San Francisco, to implement the facelift. Crowther was quoted years ago in an article by Stuart Leuthner on [Americanheritage.com](http://Americanheritage.com) as saying "Denver was much more traditional, but Mr. Krasner wanted the park to be modern. I always felt Mr. Krasner himself was very conservative, but he understood the amusement business and realized the park needed a new look."

Part of this \$25,000 total renovation included turning the ballpark into a temporary race track. Krasner staged a trial midget car race there the first year he owned the park. In just three years, though, with midget car racing's popularity sweeping the nation, Krasner finally converted his baseball field into a race track in 1938. It would be a fifth-mile dirt oval and he had to enlarge the grandstands to 5,000 seats to hold the large crowds filling into his new addition to the park.

In May of 1939, Lakeside was paved and Krasner's newest attraction was off and rolling. At the time, Lakeside competed with Tom Holden's Merchants Park, which was another racetrack built in a baseball stadium. But, in September of 1939, Merchants Park on the south side of Denver closed due to the competition from the American Automobile Association (AAA) sanctioned Lakeside. Racing at Lakeside Speedway was put on hold in mid-1942, during World War II, as was all auto racing in the United States. But, when the war ended, things really got going for Lakeside in 1946.

The race track was enormously popular in the Fifties and continued to host midget car racing. Krasner also forged an agreement with the Colorado Auto Racing Club (CARC), which promoted roadster and modified stock car racing. Meanwhile, the Rocky Mountain Midget Racing Association (RMMRA) was also using Lakeside as its home base. For years, it was midget car racing on Saturday nights and the CARC program on Sunday nights. With special events on holidays and often on Wednesdays, Krasner kept giving the people of Denver all the auto racing they wanted, and they came in droves, sometimes with over 10,000 people attending.

As an amusement park owner, Krasner knew how to entertain, and he worked hard to keep the cars coming to Lakeside. He even helped owners fix their cars and paid appearance money to bring in big stars. Lakeside became the stopping off point for drivers heading west or heading back East.

The track itself drew attention because of its unique shape. It was very short, but wide. Reports had turns three and four banked much higher than turns one and two, and it also had a slight incline on the front straightaway.

The Krasner family continued to host auto races and run Lakeside Speedway. Relatively late in life Ben and Miriam Krasner welcomed a young girl named Rhoda to their family. Ben Krasner renamed the lake on the property for her and Lake Rhoda continues to be an attraction at the park.

Ben Krasner, born in Russia in 1889, passed away on August 8, 1965, but the park stayed in the family. In

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just a few years, Rhoda became General Manager. Auto racing continued at the park until 1988, when an accident with a modified mini-stock killed a 26-year-old spectator and injured 12 others. Rhoda made the painful decision to cancel all auto racing events at the track and released this statement to the *Rocky Mountain News*: "Our decision to eliminate auto racing was a painful one and was based on extensive considerations and consultation. Our judgment was not based solely on this summer's accident, which, by the way, was the first and only spectator fatality in the track's 50-year-history."

The core of Lakeside Speedway still remains on the site and Krasner's amusement park continues to entertain families and friends from Denver and around the world. It remains in the Krasner family and recently celebrated 100 years of business with a celebration in 2008. Ben Krasner, and his daughter Rhoda, were both inducted into the Colorado Motorsports Hall of Fame in 2006.

*By Justin Zoch*

*Photo Credit: Krasner Family Collection*