

Soap Box Derby RACER

On July 23, 1938, Herbert Joseph Garelick, age 14, sped down a hill in St. Paul's Highland Park, finally winning the city's Soap Box Derby competition after failing the previous two years. Herbert, whose father was a carpenter, had learned to use power woodworking tools by the time he was in seventh grade. With these skills he built the racer that carried him over the 600-foot distance in 25 seconds. The next day the *St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press* reported on its front page that Garelick was "hunched in the seat of his little streamlined chug, his steel helmet tipped over one ear" as he coasted to victory in a "fairly close finish."

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Champion Herbert Garelick posing with his medal and trophy, minutes after winning the St. Paul soapbox derby, July 1938

For his efforts, the young racer received a \$50 wristwatch, suit of clothes, gold medal, and, the *Pioneer Press* reported, “the coveted . . . trophy, and a trip to Akron, Ohio—all expenses paid—to compete with hundreds of other youths in the national finals August 14.” (The runner-up, Paul John Breckman, won a bicycle, gold medal, bat, and ball.) The newspaper, which sponsored the competition along with the Chevrolet Motor Company, repainted the car for the national finals, prominently displaying the words “St. Paul Dispatch Pioneer Press.” In Akron, Garelick and his soap box were eliminated after finishing third in the twenty-sixth heat of the preliminaries.¹

Fifty-eight years later Garelick was inspired to donate his chug, trophy, and steel helmet to the Minnesota Historical Society after visiting the History Center exhibit *Communities* in which

his old neighborhood, St. Paul’s West Side, was represented. The car was tucked away in the attic until Garelick’s own children discovered it in the 1940s. Through the next decades it was a favorite toy for his two sons and nephew, who pushed and rode it around their neighborhood. In 1962 Garelick moved it to his St. Paul Park manufacturing plant where it had been stored (and occasionally played with) ever since.

The racer, still advertising the *St. Paul Dispatch Pioneer Press*, is in very good condition, having suffered only minor damage to the exterior. With photographs and newspaper articles, the helmet, and trophy, it captures some of the hope and excitement still possible in the depression-era 1930s: “Every Red Blooded Boy Should Take Part in It! It’s Easy to Make a Soap Box Derby Racer and It Doesn’t Cost a Cent to Enter! Get in and Get Going Now!”



Garelick cruising toward the finish line in Highland Park

¹*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 24, 1938, p. 1, Aug. 15, 1938, p. 1.



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