Junior Johnson Oral History

October 18, 2005

Interviewer: Dan Piece, PhD, History Department Chair, UNCA, Associate Professor

[NOTE: It seems like this tape begins midway through the interview and not at the beginning.]

Junior Johnson (JJ): ... you know people do that in baseball, football, everything. You always wanna be the best in whatever you do and have the best and that's how it comes about and the whiskey business is no different. It was a competitive business.

Dan Pierce (DP): Well, part of that competition I guess, is you're competing against each other 'cause you've got the whole question of making the car go fast. I know a lot of what you did; did you just learn it on your own? Were there people...?

JJ: Well, you learn it through a process of different people like if you've got a Chevrolet or a Ford or a Oldsmobile or whatever you're gonna be working with dealers of that particular car and the availability of high speed stuff they all know where it's at and you know what you want done and you get going on it and you pitch in and do your part and they do their part and it just after awhile it revolves into a fast car. Everybody can't take the blame for one thing or another it's a combination of good mechanics and good machine shops and stuff like that that makes the parts and stuff to create a fast race car or whiskey car. You know I was basically into that kind of stuff myself. I worked on 'em and built 'em and drove 'em and hauled and done everything, so it don't take you long before you know what direction you need to go in to have the fastest car of anybody.
DP: Did people come to you with their cars and say...

JJ: No.

DP: You just worked on your own?

JJ: I just worked on my own and that was a full time job 'cause at one time I was about bigger in the whiskey business than I ever was racing. I had my hands full keeping cars and trucks and stuff running for that kind of thing.

DP: So how many cars and trucks did have at that point?

JJ: One time I remember we had five whiskey cars and two ton half trucks and a couple trucks and trailers. So we was in it pretty good, probably the biggest operator there was in this county at that particular time. But there's a lot of people that made a lot of money and was big operators.

DP: I read one time where you said that the fastest you'd ever been in a car was in a car you hauled whiskey in. I'm just curious which car that was.

JJ: Well, I had an Oldsmobile one time that was real fast, but I had a '51 Ford Club Coupe that I took to Daytona and back then it was running amazing miles down through there. (unintelligible name) was kinda in charge of it and he knew that I had this real fast car and it was all super charged and all that stuff and he wanted me to just run it down through there to see what it run and it was a lot faster than any of the race cars that they had there in the race. Not even any of the modified ones or anything could run with it. I think it was 165 or 70 miles an hour is what they run in Daytona and I had cars that run faster than that.

DP: So how fast did you go?
JJ: I forget now what it was but it’s quicker than I think. Tim Flock won it but we was a good bit faster than he was.

DP: Talking about these connections between bootlegging, moonshining and NASCAR one of the things that’s interested me, we talked about it a little bit before, was how not only the drivers, I guess Well, let me ask you a … I’ve heard some percentages, like in… when you first started driving of the drivers out of say North Wilksborough would be people that were…

JJ: Well, when I first started driving it was a in a ‘39 Ford Coupe that a friend of mine in the whiskey business had, he had a buddy and they decided they wanted build a race car to run in Hickory and North Wilksborough. They wanted me to drive it and it was a ‘39 standard Ford Coupe and they had limitations on them that you couldn’t do but so much. That was sorta the way I started out and as time went along everything started, you know, escalating itself to where I finally ended up in the Grand National which is the Winston Cup or Nextel now. It was a stepping stone from say attitude, sportsman, modifieds; you know what I mean, to the Grand Nationals. So it sorta growed with the moonshiners ‘cause when you went to the racetrack about everybody that was there that was driving in the early days was mostly bootleggers.

DP: Did it work the other way. I’ve kinda been curious about that like Frances like somebody that wasn’t involved in bootlegging but could work on a car and drive pretty fast maybe had a reputation on the highway or went to the racetrack and did pretty Well, did then the bootleggers recruit that person to drive for them? Have you ever heard of that happening?
JJ: I’m sure it happened but I can’t place no one particular person, but I’m sure there was some drivers that did not participate in the whiskey business but to start off with most of them that was in the whiskey business was better than the individuals that never had been used to driving a fast car before he went to the race track.

DP: So that was just a natural thing?

JJ: Well, you learn it in everyday, you had a fast car driving it all the time in the daytime and then at night you hauled whiskey in it so you was in that fast car all the time everywhere you went. And you got used to so it was natural to go race in it.

DP: So you’re actually going slower on the race track.

JJ: Yeah but depending on how the race track was if it was a half a mile or so it was more driving skill but you still need the fast car to win with.

DP: Well, one thing that people haven’t talked about and we did talk about before is that there were a number of these early track owners and promoters who had connections with this. Just to mention or to start with I think (unintelligible name) and Charley Combs and a group of other guys started in North Wilksborough. Can you talk a little bit about that, about why you think they decided to go into the race track business and what the connection may have been between the …

JJ: Well, the connections basically was they was in the bootlegging business, they had the money to do it and back in them days it was not a big thing to check a guy and see where his money came from or nothing, if he had money he spent it. I can name several, like Sluder, at Asheville, Weaverville he was big in the whiskey business. Grafton Burgess, Bill Hicksby, Joe Littlejohn denied it but it was, you know he was a part of that kind of work and other guys in North Wilksborough there was a couple
involved in it that didn’t have a moonshine reputation but most of em did. You can go on and on, take Martinsville VA; Clay Earl was a big time bootlegger so it’s just something that’s never talked about. Some of the guys don’t talk about it but it’s still there. And it’s not no big sin to say Well, I was in the whiskey business because it was either that or you just didn’t have anything.

Break in tape.

DP: We were talking about the track owners. Was Hawkings involved in it?
JJ: I don’t think he was but he might have been.

DP: ‘cause he came out of Spartanburg in the late ’30s and started driving with Joe Littlejohn and stuff and so…
JJ: Well, that relationship, you know, is probably a little out of our territory. Joe Littlejohn was in the background of it, you know, he tried to hide it and a lot of people did do that but he went on into Atlanta and went big time there. (Speaking to someone else in the room) Leonard what was the guy’s name that owned the cars that Tim Flock and them drove there for awhile?

Leonard: Parks
JJ: No. This was the one that was big in the bootlegging business.

Leonard: Raymond Parks
JJ: Raymond’s one of them but there’s another.

Leonard: (unintelligible)
JJ: His wife tried to drive a little bit.

DB: Frank Christie.
JJ: Yeah, Frank Christie, he was big time into it.
DP: I guess Hughbert Westmoreland was…

JJ: Hughbert Westmoreland was never in it, he was more of a mechanic. Now he worked on a lot of my cars. He’s from Burlington; in fact he’s the one that worked on the car that won the first Southern 500. You know he’s still alive.

DP: Hughbert Westmoreland’s still alive?

JJ: Yeah and he’s not all that feeble, he’s just old enough to not be able to drive a lot and stuff like that. His daughter, I run into his daughter, she lives in Winston-Salem every once in a while she kinda updates me on him and all. I keep meaning to go by and see him but you know how something like that is, you just put it off and put it off and then first thing you know it he’s dead. He worked on (unintelligible name)’s race car.

DP: So he was working on liquor cars but he wasn’t in the business himself.

JJ: Yeah, he wasn’t in the business himself. Yeah I don’t know if Bud ever fooled with whiskey or not. I never heard of it.

DP: Joe Eubanks, or…

JJ: I never heard of him to.

DP: ‘cause I think him and Joe…

(unintelligible voice in the background)

JJ: I don’t know.

(unintelligible voice in the background)

JJ: So we had plenty, plenty of people.

(unintelligible voice in the background)

JJ: Grover Sosbey he use to run that kind of business. Roy Hall, Ralph Knight, they was all in it.
DP: Sam Rice.

JJ: I think Sam was in it wasn’t he?

(unintelligible voice in the background)

JJ: There’s so many of them.

(voice in the background): What was the name of that one that got threwed out of the car that one time and broke his leg? Buddy June Ronders (unintelligible). Broke his arm (unintelligible).

JJ: But you know his, I don’t think that the people in the liquor business was the all hundred percent effort of getting racing where it is today but they’re certainly the ones that instigated. France had the idea and they delivered the goods to get it going. France spent several years at Wilksborough with all theses guys. See all these guys had money and he didn’t have no money so he borrowed and got them to spend their money and they had it so they was much allies really.

(voice in the background): France spent the night up here with (unintelligible name). Right down the road there (unintelligible).

JJ: He married a lady over here at West Jefferson and his life basically started here, I don’t know where he come from or whatever but they always say, Daytona says (unintelligible)

DP: I think he’s from up around Washington D.C. and he came down. He was also in business with Charley Combs and Staley wasn’t he?

JJ: Well,…

DP: Hillsborough tribe.

JJ: Right. Well, I don’t think Charley had anything to do with it.
DP: So he had to at least have some pretty strong suspicions about what was going on.

JJ: They had the money and he had the idea, that’s exactly what it was.

DP: And so NASCAR you’d say on the front end pretty much was financed…

JJ: By the bootleggers, yes, in some way they provided the cars and provided money and stuff to get the job done, that’s exactly what was happening.

DP: Well, I heard about the first race you drove in. What was the first race you ever saw? Do you remember that?

JJ: I think it was North Wilksborough, no it wasn’t either, it was Mount Airy.

(unintelligible voice in the background)

DP: Oh the Mount Airy track?

(voice in the background): Yeah

DP: Is that the track that’s still running, is that the same one?

JJ: No

(voice in the background): They only run one race there (unintelligible)

DP: Oh, ok.

(unintelligible voice in the background)

JJ: Yeah I like that. You know somebody’s got (unintelligible) Mount Airy.

(unintelligible voice in the background)

JJ: Yeah I had the original pictures (unintelligible) Mickey Finn(unintelligible voice in the background)

DP: Who owned that track? Do you know?

JJ: Bill Sires and two other guys in there with him. He did the construction work on it, Bill did.
DP: Were they in the liquor business too?

JJ: I don’t know.

(voice in the background) They drove up in there (unintelligible) I ain’t never heard it mentioned.

JJ: I don’t know if they was or not.

DP: I think that’s where Curtis Turner first raced, I think.

JJ: Yeah, oh yeah. Turner, (unintelligible names), Glen Dunaway,

(voice in the background) Bob Smith. What was that one that shot hisself or (unintelligible).

(voice in the background): I believe Johnson put it on the news.

(voice in the background) Glen Wood and all them come up, you know, along about that time.

(voice in the background)

DP: I think I read that Clay Earls sold Glen Wood his first car that he started in. What do you remember about that first race, that you saw?

JJ: Whose car was that Paul Brooks done?

(voice in the background)

JJ: Was it?

(voice in the background)

JJ: He’s a Ford dealership guy that had a son and his name is Junior Logan and my brother, they was big buddies and they fixed the car for Paul Brooks to drive in that first race?

(voice in the background): He finished third, didn’t he?

(voice in the background): He would have done better but (unintelligible)

JJ: What kind of car was he driving?

(voice in the background): An old convertible thing.

JJ: It was a, it had a (unintelligible) too. I remember it had two or one soft spots right out through the trunk about that big.

(unintelligible voice in the background)

DP: Well, when you saw that first race did you think, this is something I wanna do or...

JJ: No, I didn’t have no idea. I was just a snotty nosed kid then. I went over there with my brother, that’s how I got over there. But I remember them things was running and people was sitting up on the bank and they’d slide off down the bank, you know.

DP: It’s amazing more people weren’t killed in those early years.

JJ: Well, it didn’t have no damn guard rail or nothing. Pits was right on the side of the race track, he could just run down through there and kill a bunch of people.

Voices talking in the background

DP: Well, why do you think it was so popular in this area? Racing, I mean that first race they had at North Wilksborough had like ten thousand people or something. There weren’t but like thirty thousand people in the county at the time.

JJ: I think it’s the excitement of the fast cars and race drivers (unintelligible) to the people ‘cause it was like you were seeing heroes and that kinda stuff. It was absolutely a big thing to talk to one of them race drivers. It was something that the women got into more so then the men.
DP: The women enjoyed it more you think?

JJ: I don’t know if it was that or just to see like some body that was established as a hero or something of that nature, or what it was. And it’s still pretty much that way, there’s a tremendous amount of women goes to races. You wouldn’t think that that’s the case but there’s more men into football and baseball comparable then they is women and it’s reverse with the race.

DP: Psychological there or something, I don’t know, you’d have to look at it.

JJ: I think it’s more about how in some ways they can relate to it, this car that they can relate to. That they don’t have any relation to something like football or something of that nature.

DP: Well, when you first started driving I think your brother came and got you out of the field, the story goes and you went down a ways to North Wilksborough and then that kinda started things, did that …

JJ: Well, Millard hauled whiskey, this shithead right heres hauled whiskey, he’s got run off from cars and wrecked cars, damn wonder he’s living.

(unintelligible voice in the background)

JJ: It was all what everybody did around here.

(voice in the background): Everybody within a hundred square mile around here thinks racing started (unintelligible)

DP: Well, in a lot of ways it did. In some ways, you know, so maybe…

(voice in the background): They’d done (unintelligible) that track down at High Point and around Charlotte and Lakewood. But everybody thinks it started in Wilksborough.
DP: Well, if you look at it in the perspective of NASCAR itself, you know I think that
gave France a big boost right there when they did so. Well, Greenville did really well, in
‘46 and then when they came up here it just went crazy; then of course Clay Earls
opened Martinsville right after that and then they opened a track in Charlotte. Those
Charles brothers opened the next year in Charlotte. And then I think the next year Sluder
opened the Asheville Speedway and the next year Burgesses and wasn’t Charley Combs
on that bill too with hickory.

JJ: (unintelligible name)

DP: Yeah.

End of tape