Dan Pierce (DP): It's November 8th and I'm talking to Mr. Gordon Pirkle owner of the Dawsonville Pool Room and foremost historian of Dawsonville racing history. Mr. Pirkle could you talk to me first about what is was like growing up in Dawson County?

Gordon Pirkle (GP): I growed up, well you know, right after the Depression. It was some pretty hard times, course we didn't realize it, everybody was equal, you know, here. And I guess we had better times than most you know. Everybody got by just fine. I graduated from high school in 1955. It was pretty much of a moonshine town then. We had some people done well off of that.

DP: What was that like, kinda growing up? I mean, what was the attitude in the community towards people that did that kind of thing?

GP: Well, you know, they depended on automobiles so it was… Everybody loved cars and everybody had fast cars and they was always working on their cars to make them better. And the same with the racing.

DP: And so was it just the common thing to be walking around Dawsonville and see all these cars coming by.

GP: Oh, yes it was, you know everybody they took pride in their cars. They kept up, well of course the ones that was running moonshine had to keep the cars you know, but it seemed like it just, this was a car town.

DP: It was a car town you said?

GP: Yes.

DP: Were there people in town who kinda specialized in working on instead of hauling or…

GP: Oh yeah, you had two or three garages and they'd specialize in them and course you had a couple body shops, like the (unintelligible) Body Shop right here in town. (unintelligible) some of the moonshiners liked to change the color of their cars pretty often.

DP: So they made a lot on paint jobs, is that what you're saying?

GP: Oh yes, they were pretty busy painting cars.

DP: Well, what about, lets move towards racing. This question I've got, I've heard these stories about people racing in cow pastures, did you ever see that at all?

GP: You that was before my time but I've heard the stories about it. Back in, right after prohibition and we got big whiskey business here in Dawsonville cause we're just 60 miles north of Atlanta and some of those big moonshine guys got to bragging on who had the best driver and they met out here on a Sunday evening and had a makeshift little track out in a big cornfield. They kept doing that on a Sunday evening and crowds began to find out about it and show up and they were betting on those cars. It kinda led into Frank Bruston (misunderstood, misspelled?) who lived 15 miles north of Dawsonville. He'd seen all those crowds showing up on Saturday to watch so he goes to Atlanta and rents the horse track from the Lake Wood Fair Ground and had the first organized stock car race in this part of the country. Course the first (unintelligible) who ran that (unintelligible) was from Dawsonville. The next Sunday (unintelligible) from Dawsonville and they pretty well dominated the race there in the beginning and then (unintelligible) came along and the Dawsonville gang pretty well dominated the early days in racing.

DP: Why do you think that Dawsonville drivers were so good? Cause there are plenty of other people that were in the same kind of business, seems like , but the Dawsonville folks seemed to be extra good. What was their advantage there?

GP: Part of it is the location of it in the (unintelligible). The whiskey trail from Dawsonville to Carolina is pretty curvy and you gotta consider they were driving cars loaded with whiskey which made it harder to drive than just a regular car.

DP: A so just that experience made them that much better.

GP: I think so.

DP: What was the first time, do you remember the first race you ever went to? Where it was and what it was like?

GP: The very first one was over in Gainesville. They had what is now a racetrack at that time it was just a fairground (unintelligible) Gainesville Speedway. Probably the second race I went to was the Lakewood Speedway in Atlanta. They had big races there and we'd always go down there. The Gainesville Speedway was flooded with water when Lake (unintelligible) backed up. (unintelligible) here in North Georgia. Course I went to the Peach Bowl a lot.

DP: What attracted you so much to the racing? What do you remember about those races, what were they like?

GP: Just seeing those cars go so fast and especially in Gainesville, but Lakewood was the same way, the way they could broadside those cars. You know like Curtis Darren (name misspelled or misunderstood?) they could really put them in there, going them turns from crossways.

DP: And just spraying up that dirt and everything it was just a…

GP: Well yeah, it was good back then.

DP: So was that a common thing? Did a lot of folks from Dawson County go down to the races at Lakewood and Gainesville and places like this?

GP: Oh yeah we'd go from Dawsonville with several car loads. (unintelligible) most of the drivers (unintelligible).

DP: Well, lets talk about some of the folks who have helped to make Dawsonville and Dawson County famous in terms of racing and just kinda talk about what your memories of them are or what you heard about them. We can start with Raymond Parks, can you talk about him some?

GP: Raymond Parks (unintelligible) he won lots of races (unintelligible) then Nascar came along in '48. Raymond won the first Nascar sanctioned race ever held. Then he won the first championship which was modified, (unintelligible) organized Nascar in 1947. Well the first race was in February in '48 and it was gonna be strict (unintelligible) you had to have brand new cars. And that was too close after the war and they didn't get enough cars to run they way they wanted to the first year so they just ran modified. Ray won the very first modified race and then won the championship. The next year in 1949 they run the first, they call it strictly stock now but the same thing (unintelligible) and Raymond's car (unintelligible) won the championship. Raymond was part of a (unintelligible) point system. The points went with the driver and Raymond in his day was a (unintelligible) cause he always entered at least three cars in every race. He had two drivers that always was running for points and the third driver would be (unintelligible) Raymond himself could see out there. I know one time in Langhorne Pennsylvania he was running up near the front and (unintelligible) had problems and

Raymond came in the fence and they let Red take his car over so Red could get the points. And that happened another time, I think it was in '41 that (unintelligible) before the point system and I know Raymond won a race driving (unintelligible), Bill Branch Senior.

DP: When was the first time that you met or remember knowing about Raymond Parks?

GP: I think as far back as I can remember, you know.

DP: Was he kind of a local hero in Dawson County?

GP: He was a hero yes. He came from Dawsonville and he went to Atlanta when he was young (unintelligible) down there. But he always had a suit and tie on, that hat on, his shoes always shined. And he always drove (unintelligible).

DP: So did he come to Dawson County much or you just saw him at the races?

GP: Yeah, I'd just see him at the race. He still (unintelligible) Dawsonville though, this was his home for sure, his hometown, (unintelligible).

DP: Well lets talk about Lloyd C. What do you remember hearing about him or did you ever know or see Lloyd C.?

GP: I was only (unintelligible) years old when Lloyd got killed. But I heard my Dad, I heard lots of people talking about what a good driver he was. I used to hear them talk about when Lloyd got killed they (unintelligible) had it in the funeral procession and everybody's talking about what a shame (unintelligible) was. Well when I come on and starting looking at pictures and you know everything is just black and white it just looked like a black and white car to me, I didn't realize they had (unintelligible) and had it

restored back to the (unintelligible) condition and put it in the hall of fame (unintelligible) that is the most beautiful '39 Ford I ever seen (unintelligible) really comes out in it.

DP: Doesn't quite show up on the black and white photos back then though.

GP: Oh it didn't show, it didn't do it justice and show what the real car looks like (unintelligible) museum up by City Hall in Dawsonville now.

DP: Was that something that as a kid, did you kind of play Lloyd C., or was he that kind of famous in the area?

GP: I think you'll laugh at this little story. When I was in grade school I went to a little school kind of out in the middle of the woods. We played in the woods more then we did in the playground and like most kids around at that time was playing cowboys and Indians we was playing (unintelligible). We would you know choose to be Roy Hall or (unintelligible) and everybody wanted to be Lloyd C. or (unintelligible) and we'd have to pick on somebody to make them be the revenuers. We'd take these little old sticks and we'd run through the woods with a tin can and the "law" would try to take that away from us. We made a game out of it. I always wanted to be (unintelligible name) if I couldn't be (unintelligible name) I wanted to be Lloyd C. or (unintelligible name). (unintelligible) there was a number of drivers that came from Dawsonville at that time.

DP: And so that was a game? That's great, that's gotta be a unique experience. Well what about Roy Hall? What can you tell me about him? I know he was there for a long time in Dawson County.

GP: Yeah I can remember Roy a good bit. Roy was the Dale Earnhardt of that day. He was a (unintelligible). He went out to win. He could just drive the wheels off a car.

DP: But Roy, I guess he never could quite get over kinda the outlaw kind of a deal.

GP: Roy was probably more of an outlaw than any of them. You know, they all hauled whiskey and they tried to ban them from racing in Atlanta at one time and all that, but Roy he got involved in (unintelligible). He was wilder than the rest of them. I think that might be the reason mainly why they dropped him for a driver and took like (unintelligible) Baron and Bob Brock (names misunderstood and/or misspelled), mostly cause Roy was in jail a lot. He was more wilder than the rest of the guys that drove back then. He was a real likable person and a real handsome guy. The crowd went wild over Hall when he was racing. I know one time they was gonna bar him from racing in Atlanta, but the crowd said "We want Roy Hall, we want Roy Hall" so they let him in anyway.

DP: I guess what was it? About '49 or '50, he had a bad wreck and that kinda ended his career. What did he do the rest his life? I'm just curious about that?

GP: He sold cars, in Atlanta. He stayed on in Atlanta. Mostly he sold used cars. He tried coming back in racing but he never could get a good deal after that.

DP: What about a little known person out of Dawson County that people don't know about that you told me about last week. Bernard Long. Can you talk about him?

GP: Yeah Bernard Long he (unintelligible, maybe says "won in Daytona") in 1941. Only time I know he raced (unintelligible) he finished second in Lakewood. He went down and I think he took his regular (trip?) car down and entered it in the race in July of 1941 and won the Daytona race. It was a '39 Ford and he had # 9 on it (unintelligible) fifty years later (unintelligible) won the July race and the number in the # 9 Ford.

DP: Was there a connection do you think? Was that intentional on Bill's part running the 9, or…

GP: Oh it just so happened that Bernard picked number 9, I don't know why he did or why Bill ended up with number 9. But they won the same race fifty years apart.

DP: What happened to him after that? Did he just lose interest or…

GP: Well the story goes that he won 400 dollars winning that race, which back in the early '40s that was a lot of money. He came back and bought him a (unintelligible) whiskey still. He was just a liquor hauler then and he wanted to become a wholesaler and he made lots of money in the whiskey business. Most people got started in liquor and then got into racing but he got started in racing and then got into liquor. Course before he was hauling whiskey but this put him into being a big wholesaler.

DP: I guess he was just making too much money.

GP: Yep.

DP: Speaking of that…

GP: He lived here in Dawsonville. He was a (unintelligible) I got to know him (unintelligible).

DP: One of the things I'm kinda getting an idea about is that WWII was a really good time for the whiskey business. Have you heard much about that? Do you know much about that in terms of Dawson County?

GP: Yeah it was real good but it was hard cause they rationed sugar and rationed gasoline and lots of the boys that was driving was in the war. There wasn't that many young drivers left here. Some of them, the one that was left, had been caught so many times that wouldn't take them into the service (unintelligible) record. But it went on, there was a big demand for whiskey down in Atlanta. But it made it harder to do and I think that the Dawsonville crowd was more up on it than most people cause they knew

how to get the gas stamps. There got to be such a big group up here they even had ships bringing sugar from Cuba and then transporting it up to Dawsonville.

DP: Was that to avoid the sugar rationing?

GP: Yeah, yeah.

DP: That's wild.

GP: That was a big handicap cause it takes a lot of sugar to make whiskey. And with the rations and stuff it was hard to just go around and get that kind of quantity of sugar to make your batch of whiskey. But they found a way around it.

DP: So you think that the reason Roy Hall wasn't in service was just cause he had such a long record?

GP: Yes, uh-huh.

DP: Well what about Gober Sosbey? Talk about him some.

GP: Oh, Gober he's really my biggest hero I ever had in racing cause he was a show man more than anything else. If he was in a race you was gonna see a good race. He put on a good race and he knew how to (unintelligible). He won (unintelligible) but he don't have to set no record in Nascar (unintelligible). He'd race for the money and he'd make good money all the (unintelligible). And tell (unintelligible) why they'd pay me enough (unintelligible) to Birmingham that if I went there and (unintelligible) I'd make more money going to Charlotte, cause he went where the money was at. Course that upset Bill France and he didn't like that. He was always (unintelligible) for Nascar but he knowed he had to have him back to get the crowds.

DP: Did he own the Cherokee Garage or was that just a sponsor of his?

GP: He was part owner in it (unintelligible) building and everything, but that's where (unintelligible).

DP: A lot of people like Bernard Long and Gober Sosbey kinda had a history in the whiskey business and than they moved into legitimate business. How did that work?

GP: (unintelligible) I mean most of them boys they was type that wanted to do good and when the whiskey business kinda went away they found (unintelligible) and done well in life.

DP: Yeah it seems like it's kind of a great success story with a lot of these people that really did start off, what some people would consider kinda rough, and then course Raymond Parks is probably a great success story there I guess.

GP: Yeah

DP: On that case. What about Legs Law? I heard some about him.

GP: Legs was more of an outlaw than he was a race car driver. He loved to, you know, race the revenuers. He just loved to be in a race. He raced off track a good bit. He was a good driver, but he was more known for being out on the highway. And Legs he stayed in and he just (unintelligible) he built on up, when he was on up in the (unintelligible).

DP: Oh gosh.

GP: Away from it.

DP: He just couldn't get away from it.

GP: Yep.

DP: Do you know why he was called Legs?

GP: His long legs and his ability to outrun the law.

DP: Oh, ok.

GP: Cause they never could catch Legs cause he would jump out of the car and run.

DP: Who else was…

GP: Can you hold on just a second?

DP: Yeah, yeah.

Break in tape

DP: Well who else was important in Dawson County in terms of that early period in racing? Was there anybody else that was…

GP: Well Junior Tatum raced and he was real big in the whiskey business. Buster Anderson. There was a number of them that didn't do it for a career they just went out and done it.

DP: So did you ever race any yourself?

GP: No I never did get to race. I owned a few race cars later on. I wanted to but I just didn't have the equipment to do it when I was young enough to do it.

DP: We talked a little bit before about the service station and the phone. That's a great story, can you talk about that?

GP: Yeah, there was this service station near town. It was open twenty four hours a day back in the '40s or the late '30s and early '40s. Dawsonville didn't have no phone service, Standard Telephone Company had the charter for the telephone but it wouldn't (unintelligible) if they put it in it. So somehow they got the (unintelligible) to run a line from Sykes County down here. They brought the line as far as they could and when they brought it down here to Dawsonville the first phone they put in was a pay phone in the service station. I think they got ten or fifteen people around town to guarantee a dollar or two a month which was the minimum to put it in. But they never did have to come up

with the money cause that thing it took in the change because it was a pay phone and it was the only phone. The old whiskey haulers depended on that phone to know when they needed to come down or whatever. They hung around that station so it was open twenty four hours a day. I know that over in Gainesville they've got the history museum over there. They've got a whiskey still and they show that station saying that it was the first station in the country that stayed open twenty four hours a day. And a lot of service stations are doing that now.

DP: Well I guess that was just a part, probably their heaviest business was late in the night, lots of times I guess on a …

GP: Yep. They did more work at night then they did in the day time.

DP: Did they also work on cars there at that station or just pump gas?

GP: They'd service them, they'd change tires and all that. Pumped a lot gas there.

DP: Well speaking of working on cars, we talked some about Red Vogt and you talked about the way he'd set up a car. I'd never heard that before. Can you tell that story?

GP: Yeah, you know if you wanted (unintelligible) Vogt Red had his shop in Atlanta. If you wanted him to build a car to haul whiskey he wanted to know if you was coming down number 9 or down the (unintelligible) drive or if you were hauling into South Georgia or where ever. He built a engine that (unintelligible). You know, like they do now they (unintelligible) an engine for Martinsville that works for Charlotte or Atlanta. He did that back in the early '40s.

DP: So he just had it figured out. That's kind of an amazing person there.

GP: He was. He was (unintelligible). He was genius back in those times.

DP: Did he ever come to Dawsonville? Or Dawsonville came to him I guess.

GP: No. Yeah, they all come to him. He was like (unintelligible name) we'd see him in Dawsonville but he's so busy cause he's doing engines for several top teams now. And Ray was pretty similar to that.

DP: Now I know Red sold and worked on lots of liquor cars and also law enforcement. Do you know if Bob Osookee (misspelled or misunderstood?) did he do the same kind of thing?

GP: I assume. I don't know. I remember one time (unintelligible) asking him about "Hey you build engines for the bootleggers and the government, which one do you prefer to deal with?" and he said "Let me tell you it this way, when I build an engine for the moonshiners they always pay me cash right then. If I build one for the government I have to wait on the check.

DP: So they were gonna get the best for sure. But I that was good business for them.

GP: Oh yeah.

DP: Good cash business. You've got kinda of a gap there, a pretty long gap where Dawsonville really early on is *the*, well gosh it's just kinda the birth place of just about all the top drivers came out of Dawsonville. But then you've got this long period when Dawson County is not much heard from in the racing ranks and then Bill Elliot comes along I guess what …

GP: Yes, we had lots of drivers but they never did get far. They didn't get past the local tracks around here, you know. I'll be (unintelligible) lots of them raced that didn't (unintelligible) like at Woodstock and (unintelligible) and places like that. But we didn't have nobody to make the big time till Bill come.

DP: Well what was the difference with him do you think?

GP: His dad, George. You know, he was always in the racing business. He had a parts business that come around to the tracks and sold racing parts. And George was a car owner. He was (unintelligible) different people. Like (unintelligible) Stephens from Dawsonville drove for him. Oh, (unintelligible) Henley (unintelligible). And then when he put Ernie in a car first and Ernie didn't (unintelligible) and he went on and Dan tried it a little bit and then Bill was the youngest and he come along and he really liked it. And he just went farther with it.

DP: So the Elliots go back pretty far in Dawson County history.

GP: Oh yes, yes, they go back to (unintelligible) Dawsonville. And on both sides of Bill's family. His mother was a Reese and they go way back to (unintelligible) from Dawsonville. They was some of the first people in Dawson County and they helped to found, you know, like (unintelligible) involved in.

DP: And then they, I guess became fixtures there for awhile there early in Bill's career. I guess they were kinda like Dawson County fixtures there weren't they?

GP: Yes and then of course in the early days of Nascar racing they were (unintelligible) cause (unintelligible) had a dealership, the Ford dealership. They moved it to (unintelligible) the country when they started consolidating schools they bought this grade school and he moved his dealership into that school. They had two rooms in that school where Ernie built engines and built race cars in it and they kinda started out from that. In the early days it had the (unintelligible) Ford on it and lots of the very first races Bill won (unintelligible). And they'd say Bill Elliot from (unintelligible) Georgia and that'd aggravate me, I thought well…

DP: (laughter)

GP: But after he got in Nascar (unintelligible) they couldn't (unintelligible) without saying Dawsonville, Georgia.

DP: Well talk a little bit about the pool room, how that started and how it became kind of a Nascar icon in lots of ways.

GP: Well, I've had the pool room for quite a while. I think I got it in '66. I've been in the coin operated amusement business for awhile and I had the pool tables and the pin balls and the jukebox and all that. And then (unintelligible) they wanted to get rid of it and I bought it then. But back in those days there wasn't that much racing but I was such a race fan, I had (unintelligible) pictures up of (unintelligible), Roy Hall and a good bit of stuff up of Gopher Sosbey in there and of course Raymond. Then when Bill started in the early or the mid '80s when he won all them races it seemed like every week we'd have a group of reporters in town trying to find out about Bill Elliot and his home town. And people would say "Well, have you been over to the pool room? They've got lots of racing pictures on the wall." Early in the (unintelligible) store and (unintelligible) sold some of that stuff and they showed that doing the (unintelligible) and Bill won that race but they cut away and showed the pool room and it kinda snow balled after that. Any time there was any reporters or TV crew they'd head to the pool room and then we done live shows out of there and done lots of, you know, if Bill had announcements to make or something then they'd do a news release out of the pool room.

DP: How'd the siren…

GP: Oh, I was just gonna say the siren helped bring (unintelligible). I lived down out in the county and we used the have an old siren at the (unintelligible) fire station and just the people that was close could hear it. Well they put in a new system there in '83 from

(unintelligible) there in Dawsonville they could call any of these other stations and trigger it all and let people know. So they took the old siren down and (unintelligible name) helped to put the new one in and he gave it to me cause I was gonna fix a burger system in my poolroom up there with it. And we was all sitting around, back then we didn't open on Sunday, we'd just come up there and we had a TV in the back room of the shop there and we'd watch the racing and we realized Bill was gonna win that last race of the season in (unintelligible) Riverside. So me and the boys that was sitting around said "We gotta celebrate, what are we gonna do?", some one said "Lets drive around the court house the wrong way blowing the horn.". I looked over and seen that siren and it just had two pigtails sticking out of it and I got a (unintelligible). By the time they got that ready, Bill (unintelligible), and I flipped it up and set it out the door there (unintelligible) Here come a deputy sheriff come by and wanting to know what was going on. We said, "Bill Elliot won the race!" (unintelligible) still wanting to know what's going on. I said "Bill Elliot won the race!" , 'bout the third time he come in there he said "What? You can't get this cut off?" and I said "Heck no, we're celebrating! Bill Elliot won the race!" I kept it on for probably forty-five minutes that day, just about burnt it up. And then when he won the next race I went ahead and had it fixed up. In '84 we just set it out the door, the same way. We plugged it up (unintelligible) won so many I went ahead and mounted it up over the pool room and it's been there ever since. And it went off at every major race he's ever won and most (unintelligible). In the early days we couldn't find out, late at night and that we didn't ring it, but from '87 on up ever (unintelligible) he ever got we sounded it. So the people back then like on a Thursday evening or a Friday evening they'd hear the

siren and they'd say "Well Bill Elliot's (unintelligible)" and if it went off on Sunday they'd know Bill Elliot's won a race.

DP: I guess Indianapolis what a couple of years ago was the last time the siren went off? Was that the last one?

GP: I think it is.

DP: Yeah.

GP: And you know he had that big gap of not winning (unintelligible). I think he was down in (unintelligible) when he won that race down there and (unintelligible) the bells going ringing over the pool room. And I know (unintelligible) from Atlanta called me and he said "That ain't no bell, that's a siren, ain't it?" And I explained what it was (unintelligible) "It's a siren", like I would say it, you know.

DP: The correct pronunciation then right? Well, anything else you can think of that I need to know about Dawsonville and Dawson County racing and those connections?

GP: Well Dawsonville was known for it's moonshine but that was just mostly in the South here and especially when Bill came along. (unintelligible) they raced in Indiana , the raced in Pennsylvania, New York you know. But it didn't make the news like it did when Bill came along. Bill was the one that really put us on the map. He was the one that really put the (unintelligible) on the map.

DP: A lot of the reporters that came around when Bill started winning, were they surprised that the history was so deep there in Dawson County?

GP: (unintelligible) I probably played a part in that cause I was so proud of the history of racing (completely unintelligible) When Nascar first opened, you know.

DP: Well I think partly too, you've got Nascar trying to run away from those roots too a little bit. Do you think that's true?

GP: Yeah. I think, you know, Bill Jr. when he took over he kinda wanted to make Nascar a major league sport and he did but he thought this redneck moonshine stuff was bad, he tried to sweep that under the rug. He thought that kinda drug it down. But you can't change history because. Like you wouldn't want to take George Washington's picture off of the dollar bill now that you found out he used to own slaves, you know. It's history and it needs to be told as it is.

DP: Well that's what I'm hoping to do.

GP: Appreciate that very much.

DP: Well I sure appreciate you Mr. Pirkle about how you've kinda kept everything going there and preserved all this stuff. You're a treasure and very much appreciated by historians for sure. I won't take anymore of your time. I sure appreciate you sharing with me…

GP: Oh, no problem, any time. Feel free to call me.

DP: Well I sure will and I wanna come back and visit again, cause I sure had a good time down there. Thank you very much.

GP: Looking forward to…

DP: Oh, one other thing. I need to get your address so I can send you a release, I wanna put this in our archives here at the university.