Dan Pierce interviewing H.A. "Humpy" Wheeler

Dan Pierce (DP): This is July 27th and I’m interviewing Mr. H.A. Humpy Wheeler at
his office at Lowe’s Motor Speedway. Well, one of the things that you try to do as a
historian is to get the facts and get rid of myths and one of the first questions I want to
ask of you goes way back and this would just be an impression from you. You knew Tim
Flock well. One of the stories that every book about NASCAR tells is that essentially
NASCAR began when a bunch of bootleggers went out in a cow pasture and raced
around. I’ve traced that story back to Tim Flock telling that story I think to Sylvia
Wilkinson back in the ‘80s.

"Humpy" Wheeler (HW): Dirt Tracks to Glory.

DP: Yeah, Dirt Tracks, great book.

HW: It really was. They really did a great job with it.

DP: But, the only person that I’ve ever seen that is even semi-verifiable is Tim Flock
saying that. What are your thoughts on that?

HW: Well that is part it, but it was much more than that. You’re talking about the how
stock car racing got started, you know, around NASCAR or how stock car racing—

DP: Stock car racing.

HW: Here’s the real story: in the ‘30s the predominant form of weekly racing, or the
predominant form of all racing in general in America was what we call midgets and
sprint cars. That’s what, if you were a ten year old boy and went to the fair to see a race
once a year, that’s what you saw. You saw sprint cars and midgets. There really was very
little racing in the South in the ‘30s because the Depression hit so hard. So the sprint car
and midget racing was prolific, was more prolific even then. Even in the ‘30s and nothing
was prolific in the '30s except woe. But it was primarily in the Midwest, the Northeast and the far West. The Southwest and Southeast there was just no money to do much racing off of. After WWII however when Southern men got out of the South particularly the Carolinas, Georgia and Tennessee for the first time and got to see the rest of the world so to speak, through the military, when they came back they were much more worldly renowned. Their horizons had been expanded significantly and a certain percentage of them didn’t just want to continue to work in the mill or farm. They wanted to do something else. They’d seen adventure and so the soil was ripe for something like stock car racing to come along. After WWII the midget and sprint racing for motors began to branch out cause people had money again and they came down here to. They even built some tracks, one of the most extraordinary tracks built for midget race car, for this type of racing was something called the Robinwood Speedway, that’s one word, in Gastonia. But what happened was, because again there still wasn’t a lot of money in the South, we were still I guess the poorest region in the country, guys wanted to race but they didn’t want to race. They couldn’t afford to race midgets or sprint cars cause all that stuff had to be bought brand new.

DP: Curtis Craft, right?

HW: Curtis Craft, that’s right, that’s interesting isn’t it? But a stunt car was easy cause everything you needed for a stunt car was in a junk yard. So instead of spending $900 you could spend literally $100 to $125 and you were in the racing business. Now, there was one other factor in this and that is, two or three other factors in it actually. Just because of the mechanics of the Fords from about 1932 to 1940 you could make a racing car out of them without doing a lot. Specifically if you add in NASCAR cars when
NASCAR was started and the first rules came out they wanted the cars to have steel tops and Ford didn’t make a car with a steel top until 1937. But the ‘32 to ‘40 Fords had the old V8 flat hand in it, it was fast and had a good transmission, rear end was pretty good on it. Chevrolet did not have those things, the engine wasn’t as strong, they didn’t have a V8 till ’55. They weren’t racing new cars. They raced the prewar cars that would be inexpensive to get and find in junk yards and stuff that was. Ford itself was a major reason that stock car racing got a foothold here. Now there’s a couple other factors, because you had two types of racing then. You had what we called NASCAR organized racing with a rule book and you had what later became known as outlaw racing. Outlaw racing (unintelligible, both Wheeler and Pierce are speaking at once)... That’s exactly right, but the word outlaw didn’t come into the vocabulary that I can recall until mid ‘50s. There were independent organizations before that. So they would race the ‘32 wherever the ‘32 Fords were allowed to race the ‘32 to ‘34 Fords liberated the field. You wouldn’t run a ‘37 Ford against a ‘32 Ford. A ‘32 Ford was lighter and more nimble. But where NASCAR was concerned it was ‘37 to ‘40. Now the important part of that ‘37 to ‘40 in history is that it was also the favorite car of the bootleggers, particularly in Wilkes County. And as a matter of fact, the favorite car, which I have just finished building a replica of, is the ‘39 Ford Standard Coupe, cause the front grill was painted it wasn’t chrome, it was very ordinary looking and it was 100 pounds lighter than the ‘44. A lot of people think they used the ‘44 to haul the bootleg whiskey in and some of them did but the ‘39 if they could find one that’s what they wanted. So obviously because of the federal law that if you were caught delivering un-tax paid whiskey the car was seized, you lost your car. Most of the drivers of the bootleg cars were teenagers because the first
time you got caught you lost the car, course the driver didn’t own it but nobody wants to get caught, you usually got a 1 to 3 year sentence but it was suspended, you didn’t have a record, they don’t do that anymore but that was what they did in those days. The second time you got caught they simply activated the first sentence and that meant about a year and a day you had to come up north to Charlotte if you were in (unintelligible) if it was south it was in Atlanta which led me to (unintelligible). I brought a bunch of these old bootleggers from Wilkes County down here, they brought the cars that survived down here for auto fair and I promised them all a steak dinner. We’re sitting around they start talking about prison, every one of them had been except maybe one. This one guy said, “Well you know if you get caught north of Charlotte you’re going to (unintelligible), you get caught south you’re going to Atlanta. If I was gonna get caught I’d get caught north of Charlotte.” I said, “Why? You know how cold (unintelligible). Atlanta’s warm.” He said, “Yeah, but there was always kin up there.” Strangest thing!

DP: Of course it was Wilkes County!

HW: Yeah, it was. So they didn’t want to get caught, obviously and I’d never heard this admitted, and I know an awful lot of retired troopers, but what I never had them admit was that it wasn’t a real priority for them. It certainly was for the ATU agents as they called that in its day, but I don’t know if the patrol really cared. I’m not sure if you really check the records how much the patrol worked after 11 o’clock at night. I know for years South Carolina and Georgia, Monday through Thursday nights from 11 at night to 6 in the morning the patrol did not work. You were on call at home, if there was a wreck out on 29 or something. So it was primarily the ATU guys that chased them and often in cars that they had seized. So it became a mini industry to hop these cars up and make them
fast. So the very people that learned how to do that, to hop these cars up and make them fast, were drawn to the racing end of it cause they brought an expertise in that the rest of the world didn’t have. They were doing this for a living, making the parts go fast. I’ll give you an example of how it correlated. In ‘46 and ‘47 there was primarily flatheads, V8 flatheads in the Fords and bootlegging and it was exactly the same motor in stock car racing. But that engine did not come into being until 1946 so you weren’t running the engine, some of them did, but you could put a ‘46 to ‘48 mercury engine in that ‘39 Ford, whether it was to bootleg with or not. So it was natural that with what we used to call the NASCAR modified circuit, which was the popular circuit, much more popular than anything else that you’d put the same engine the bootleggers had in it. So, you know, it was kinda a mutual thing about what you did, even wheels sometimes. And then the teenage boys themselves, that drove these cars, they hauled this stuff down gravel roads a lot and so these chases became much more interesting than they would on the paved road. Number one if you were second, you were behind the lead dog you were gonna get a lot of dust on you and second those roads were tough enough to navigate without being gravel, you know. It takes a lot more driving skills on dirt than asphalt. So these kids developed an ability to drive at high speeds, so it was only natural that they would end up in a modified race car. The other thing, and of course the North Wilksborough Speedway was built in the ‘40s, I think it was—

DP: ‘47

HW: ‘47, yeah, ok. Now there’s literally your farmers field that was what I call a saw mill track. You go out and find a farmer, and I don’t know if (unintelligible name) did this, I never got to ask him and he’s dead now, there’s probably somebody could verify
this but... What I call a saw mill track, you go out first of all and you find a piece of land, you go in and ask the farmer, you wanna build a race track farmer? You make him a partner. Everybody in this country knew where the saw mill was in the area, you go down to the saw mill and tell the guy, I want you to help me cause I gotta put seats and I gotta put a fence around the place. They usually didn’t take the saw mill guys as a partner but maybe he helped finance the construction of it. These tracks were built primarily by friends of the promoter, cause nobody had any money back then. The field you’d found, you’d need it to be red clay. If there’s any reason why racing proliferated in the Carolinas and Georgia, you’ll see the old tracks or at least the greatest amount of tracks were right down the old US 29 corridor, from Greensboro on down into Alabama, because that’s where the red clay was. You went too far west you got into black clay, loamy, you went too far east you started getting into white clay and then you get the sand and that doesn’t work as well for racetracks. But red clay worked extremely well. It compacted well and you’d just get a bulldozer and you would build a track with a bulldozer if you had to.

DP: I’ve looked and looked and looked for this quote and I know you said it at some point but something to the effect that the most dangerous man in the South ....

HW: Was a race fan with (unintelligible, bulldozer maybe?). Cause he’s gonna figure out how to build a track and so all those things came together. Now you see that if we’d had sprint cars and midgets, we’d still have all these race tracks cause they were easy to build, if we had had a lot of people racing them. But if there had been a ban against stock cars, like you couldn’t race in stock cars, we would have had racing here but it wouldn’t have been nearly as prolific cause just a few people could afford those kind of cars. So
the sprint car and midget promoters lost out on this. The stock car promoters won it and often they were one and the same. They might have started off wanting to promote midgets and sprints. So when that happened it divided the racing, it began the schism that divided racing in the United States, between open wheel Indy car type racing, sprints, and midgets against stock cars. And it’s still going on today. So how much did the bootleggers really have to do with the formation of stock car racing in relation to Tim’s quote? There’s a certain element in his quote that’s true cause there were times when the bootleggers all went out to some dirt track and went racing around it. I don’t know of one particular instance that that happened, it just makes sense. They had these fast cars, they liked to bet and say my car will outrun yours. Now what they don’t tell you is how many times they raced each other on the roads.

DP: Yeah, I think there was a lot more of that going on.

HW: There was a lot more of that going on than we probably realize. Cause you’d bang your fenders up in all that (unintelligible). So there’s certainly an element in there and would NASCAR have started without the bootleggers? Yes. Would is be as far along as it is today? Probably not too far, but they did have the technology for the cars early so that was definitely a help or a plus.

DP: Let me ask you a question related to that. This is something we talked about when I had lunch with (unintelligible), this is about the early track owners, something that stood out to me, early track owners and promoters. You had people like Joe Littlejohn and (unintelligible) and Charley Combs and Hawkins and Clay Earls and Jean Sluder and Grafton and Ralph Burgess. Let me ask you a question first, before you get to that. Do you know who the, I bet David Allison, Doug Stafford introduced me to him, and he said
that the guys that came and started that had the money or whatever, to build he old
Charlotte track, their name was Stokes. The paper said Harvey and Pat Charles, do you
know?

HW: No, I don’t. I never did—

DP: What his story is is that these were a couple of bootleggers out of Stokes County,
came down, knocked on the door and talked to his mother and said, “We wanna build this
track. Would you let us build it, with partnership and everything like that?” He said his
dad came home and his mother said, “They’re gonna build a race track here.” That’s how
it started, but I’m sure you’re familiar with a lot of those names but it seems to me that
there’s a real bootleg, moonshine connection with those early track owners. Have you
thought about that or...?

HW: Oh yeah, I mean I’ve heard all that. And I knew most of the people you’re talking
about there and were they bootleggers or (unintelligible)? From what I’ve heard some of
them were. Why did they want to have a race track? They were adventurous people,
knowing them like I know, Grafton and Burgess and Stanley and those guys, they were
definitely adventurous people. They might have opened a mercantile store out in the
country but they might have more fun running a race track. Plus you could make money
with it, not a lot of money but for those times and those periods you could and you didn’t
have to get a franchise from anybody to do it. If you had the IQ to go out and the
salesmanship to talk somebody out of some land and the saw mill out of some lumber and
borrow some grading equipment, if you didn’t have any already, you could build a track.
That’s easier than going and trying to open up a Ford dealership, or a jewelry shop or
something like that. And there were so many of them, I mean, no one will ever be able to,
it would be wonderful if we had a chronology of all this, of when these track were built after ‘46. Of course some of them were fair ground horse tracks that turned into race tracks, but I’m talking about the pure race tracks that were built. I mean I know from being active in it the mid ‘50s and late ‘50s how many places you could go from right here on a Saturday night, or Friday night or Thursday night. Just it seemed like every town had a track in it. I mean there’s tracks nobody today would even have heard of like, this is in South Carolina, there was a Cowten (misspelled/misunderstood?) Speedway near the battlefield. (Unintelligible) matter of fact how strange this is, a guy has a business and behind it is the old track and if you go down there you can see nothing has been built back there but you can see, if you know what you’re looking for, the tracks there. But there’s no grandstands or anything else. I went down there and took a soil sample cause I wanted to find out what kind of clay that was. This guy didn’t know there had been a race track behind there. Well it had been closed since 1960 I guess, but at one time on a Friday night it was a gunfight ok coral. Everybody who was anybody who raced, it was outlaw racing but lots of NASCAR guys raced down there and most of them raced under assumed names, like Bobby Isaac was Walt Drome (misspelled/misunderstood?).

PIERCE laughs

HW:  Ned Setser was also Walt Drome.

DP:  Favorite alias.

HW:  Wait, Ned Setser was Walt Drome, Bobby Isaac wasn’t Walt Drome, I don’t know what Bobby’s moniker was, but anyway that’s what… There’s just so many of these tracks that we’d never, it’d be hard to even figure out where they all were. Another
one was famous or infamous, whatever you want to call it, was the Kings Mountain Speedway. (Unintelligible) on Sunday afternoon they couldn’t start till 12 o’clock cause of the blue laws. It was red clay but it had a lot of mica in it. It was real slick, I remember that. That track was probably just there four or five years and it left. A lot of them didn’t last a long time. A lot of them were closed because they were nuisances; I use that word with quotes around it. People just didn’t like it. Some people didn’t like the noise, the dust, the clientele, the fights, all the things that went along with dirt track racing back in those days.

DP: Talk about the attraction of racing, particularly to blue collar folks at that time.

HW: Well, you know what got the South moving was the automobile. And so like the rest of America everybody to a great degree had a fascination with the automobile, because it was new and even in 1946 it was new, I mean by civilization standards. And there were plenty of people in 1946 that when they were born there was no such thing as an automobile. It was an escape. It was a way to get out of the drudgery of what the South was in those days and what North Carolina was. We were in a very, WWII was in black and white but so were the post war years. People were still working in the mills and farming, lots of farming, and it was just tough living, which we Scotch-Irish people just love to be miserable. So we need to go to places to be miserable, we seek them out, like Northern Ireland. Have you read *Born Fighting* yet?

DP: No, huh-uh.

HW: You have got to read that book. Let me diverge on it a minute. You of all people have got to read this book. Let me tell you how strong this book is. My daughter read it and called me up and said it changed her life. She sent me a copy and she sent a friend of
mine David Hill, who is the President of Fox Force who is from Australia, a copy. He calls me one Friday and asks me, “Have you read the book?” “No, I haven’t read the book.” “Damn it read it this weekend, I’m calling you back, two o’clock Monday, we’re gonna talk about this book.” Well I had it, it was just you know how you do, and I couldn’t believe it. I said, how could I let this damn book sit here? He gave it to Rupert Murdock who’s also an Australian and Scotch-Irish and read it and he said it changed his life. What it is is the first book I have ever read on the impact of the Scotch-Irish culture on America, but primarily the South. And it’s just all these things that I had been going through in my life with all these people, these Scotch-Irish people, which included a lot of relatives. Now I understand why they behave the way they do. It’s great, I’ll just give you one little hint of what, you know…Scotland was totally cut off from Britain by a British wall, you know for centuries, and so the cultures didn’t mix. They were the same people but the cultures didn’t mix. And then in Scotland there is nothing there, you can’t grow anything in Scotland. So it’s just a very difficult place to make a living and then those people moved to Northern Ireland which is just as bad, it’s just an extension of Scotland, just move the land bridge over or something I guess. When they migrated to Australia or America, you know in America most of them came to Philadelphia as you know and they came down that Scotch-Irish migration. Why in the hell did they go up in the freaking mountains? The worst place you could go to make a living in those days? Where are you gonna find a flat place to grow anything that’s not gonna get flooded, you know once every five years or so? But they did, they just reveled in hardship and then they floated out of the mountains down into the piedmont to work the mills and then drive stock cars. On the cover of Born Fighting …
Wheeler is looking for the book.

HW: (Unintelligible) I sent it back to them. Ok, at any rate. A guy named Webb wrote it. On the cover of *Born Fighting* is Ronald Reagan, George Patton, something else and four stock cars racing on the fourth turn. I don’t know what track it is. It just explains it all.

DP: (Unintelligible) I have a connection to that somewhat. I did my masters at the University of Alabama (unintelligible) wrote a book called *Cracker Culture* that really hits those same themes about those connections between—

HW: *Cracker Culture?*

DP: *Cracker Culture*

HW: I can remember that. At any rate, back to this... that’s a long winded explanation—

DP: And making liquor too.

HW: And making liquor too, that’s right; we knew how to do that. That’s the only thing they could get out of Scotland.

DP: You were talking about the attraction.

HW: Yeah, so there’s something primeval about racing also. There’s something we haven’t identified in the pleasure spots of our brain that likes this. Americans, first of all they like big things, they like heavy weights, they don’t like feather weights, sports fans. They like stock cars cause they are big, they don’t like Indy cars anymore cause they’re little, that’s my story I’m sticking to. And they like the NFL, they don’t like soccer, even though it’s the most popular sport in the world. They want the unexpected, racing has that, the wreck or the sudden pass or whatever it is. They want to be able to see
everything. They want it right in front of them. Don’t put that car on a road course cause he’s going somewhere and he’s gonna do something over there I can’t see, and I’m suspicious when I can’t see anything. So it’s all there right out in front of you and I think that also there’s a lot of transference from the people in the grandstand to the drivers. And I know when I was running, operating dirt tracks myself and I’d look up there in the grandstand and I’d see that it was, back in those days it was like the Robinwood Speedway, which I ran, which we talked about earlier, you look up in the grandstand and everybody would have… The men would have a white tee-shirt on; cigarettes rolled up here, and had wide-legged blue jeans on… Which I noticed that Jimmy Johnson is now promoting for Levi and thought I’ve got to tell him next time I see him, “You know you’re not embarking on anything new that was here long before you got here, before you even thought about, before you’re father was born”. White socks, and black vulture oxfords. That’s what every one of them wore in the grandstand almost. Well they lived a really black and white existence in that mill. They went to work at six, got off at two or the wife got off at two; they went to work at two. It was just a tough tough existence. They may not have had a car, probably in the fifties they did cause they couldn’t have gotten out to the track unless they’d ridden with somebody. But they didn’t drive it a lot; they couldn’t afford to, even at 25 cents a gallon. These guys down on the track could drive all they want to. If a guys going too slow for them they just knock them right off the road. They could just do things car and with their life that these people in the grandstand couldn’t do. So I do think there is a lot of subconscious transference that you don’t really have maybe in some sports, except maybe golf or tennis or something like that, maybe boxing. And it was colorful, the cars were colored. The good promoters back in those
days always made sure they had the cars looking good, as good as they could. And they didn’t care what the drivers looked like. They want the cars to look good. Sometimes they went to an extreme, I remember this one car they called the Easter Egg cause it was so many different colors. So it was colorful, it was interesting and nobody minded if you took a drink. People forget about that, that we were primarily in a dry society, all the way up and down that old highway 29; you couldn’t hardly find anything to drink anywhere. But you come out to the track and you wanna take a drink you could, on Saturday night. And it was a place you could go with your wife or girlfriend, even though she might get dust in her hair. Night races, women came. I don’t remember seeing women, very very seldom in the daytime, when they had a race in the daytime. They wouldn’t come in the day. Now the dust might have had something to do with that, although back in those days the good promoters prided themselves on how little dust they produced. Much more so than even now, today. It was easier to keep a dirt track back in those days cause the tires were narrow. These tires they’ve got on these dirt cars now today are just ferocious on trying to keep dust down. At any rate, I’d say all those things combined, plus the promoters were colorful people that knew how to promote. They knew the basics of promotions and that is getting to the people. I can remember guys dropping leaflets out, you know they’d have you in jail if you did this now but you’d go over in Belmont they’d drop leaflets. As a kid I thought that was the greatest thing in the world that was mail for me from heaven. We’d run out there and grab it and see what it said and they would drive cars through the mill villages with speakers on top, hawking the race: Friday evenings and all day Saturday, come on out to the track. And they always got in the papers in those days, the weekly papers anyway in these little towns. They all got good publicity there
cause they knew how to work the newspapers, much better than the baseball team did, even though the newspapers covered baseball better. So people knew about it in general and admission prices were very reasonable, dollar and a half, two dollars, kids under twelve were always free in those days. That meant anybody under fourteen was free cause you wouldn’t argue up there in front too much as long as somebody was paying there. So it just all came together, it was a fun thing to do. There’s one other aspect of it too and that is not a lot of things in 1946 happened in the night time. A lot of baseball fields weren’t lit, a lot of football field weren’t lit, matter of fact no college football fields in 1946 were lit. They’d begun to light some high school stadiums but most of your short tracks were lit and it was neat to go to somewhere to see those kind of lights. Even though we take it so much for granted today, in those days outdoor lighting just was not common place. It’s like people looking at the signs today, the old 1950 motel signs that say: ice cold air conditioning. You wouldn’t dare put that up today. So I think all those things kind of came together and produced the need or want to go out there. Plus you might see a good fight too.

DP: (Unintelligible) Speaking of promoters, I know he doesn’t give many interviews but do you know much about Brut Smith’s promoting in the ‘40s—

HW: Oh, Lord yeah. No, I know a lot about it cause I remember him as a promoter and I was—

DP: Cause there is very little out there about those days of just—

HW: Yeah, he came from outside of Oakborough (misspelled/misunderstood??) in Stanley County. His daddy had a farm, what my mother would call a dirt farm. When he was 18, when he got out of high school he was the youngest of eight. When he got out of
high school, very smart, he went to work in the mill. No, he went to work in the mill in his last year in high school. He found out that was definitely something he did not want to do, just like I did. So he opened a used car lot up in Concord when he was eighteen. That worked pretty good, he got some cash money going and he leased, I forget the first track he had. But any rate, he leased a race track and started to build it up pretty good. He kept doing better and so he leased more tracks. See by that time a lot of these tracks, this is in the late '40s, some of the tracks had been built and a lot of times they would go broke after they were built. It was just too much of a front end load. And the guy might not be bank (unintelligible) but he had it and he wasn’t gonna run another race on it cause his wife, “You lose anymore money on that, don’t come home.” And so he would lease it out. And that was really the way to do it, that way you didn’t have to build the dog gone thing. So then he got prolific. He started having racing everywhere he could, South Carolina, North Carolina. And that’s when he ran head on into Bill France. In 1949 when NASCAR was founded, he was, I think he ran some NASCAR races, but no I know he ran some NASCAR races, but he didn’t think that was the way to go so in 1950 he started his own NASCAR.

DP: The NSCRA or…?

HW: Yeah. Which got going …

DP: And that was with Sam Numis?

HW: I don’t know if Sam Numis was involved in this, Sam Numis primarily was sprint cars with fairs and also maybe the mile tracks. Atlanta was one place in the South that you could run sprint cars and open wheeled cars and make some money, cause it had a more diverse population say than Charlotte did. But knowing Bill France like I knew him
and knowing Bruton like I know him... We probably wouldn’t be here today; no we would be, because they would have been such formidable opponents that it would have split everything. But I have a feeling somewhere down the line they would (unintelligible) both of them would have would have said ok let’s join forces and try to do this thing together. But Korea called and he knew he was gonna get drafted so he joined the army or air force. So that cut...that stopped his (unintelligible). That’s exactly what happened. And by the time he got out it was like ‘53, or close to ’53. When he came back he didn’t start another (unintelligible) cause NASCAR was already really strongly entrenched because 1950 to 1953 was a tremendous growth period for NASCAR and so he just started running NASCAR races.

DP:  (Unintelligible)

HW:  Well he competed as a promoter against Bill France quite a few times but nothing like it was before, before the Korean War.

DP:  (Unintelligible) they had good tracks and they were real, that’s something no one has written about really that this was a real. I mean it wasn’t inevitable that NASCAR became and that it was gonna be the (unintelligible). I’d never heard that about Korea. Well let me ask you about another individual I think you commented on, kind of a shady character or I wouldn’t necessarily say shady but kinda in the shadows in the early history of NASCAR and that’s Pat Versaille(misspelled/misunderstood??).

HW:  Oh yeah I knew Pat well. Well Pat really wasn’t shady. Bill France always needed a strong right hand person and he had a knack of knowing where to get them.

DP:  Who other than Versaille?

HW:  Well he had—
DP: Was Joe Littlejohn, did he play that role?

HW: Not really, Lynn Cooper who had been in the AMA, had run in the American Motorcycle Association, later on Bill Gassaway, just pretty strong individuals, and eventually his son Billy. But Pat Versaille brought something to racing that was needed at the time. He had come from a carnival circus background as the front man and nobody in those days knew how to promote better than those people. They were masters of it, came to town once a year, they came back usually the same place. The advance man would go in there two to four weeks ahead of time and set things up. He wasn’t there when the circus came, he was up at the next three stops later. He’s the once that greased everybody up to make sure it wasn’t any problem getting elephants out on the road and there’s gonna be plenty of publicity and in his spare time he hammered posters to the wooden telephone post. Which is another great way of communicating; the only people who know how to do that today are real estate agents. So Pat was a master at all that. And so they brought him into NASCAR. He knew everybody across the country. He had contacts everywhere. He just knew people everywhere he went. He and I started off we had a stormy relationship to start off with but later on he sort of took me under his wing. I learned a lot from him. But he was a carnie type promoter. We don’t have any of those people left today. They were so good at what they did and he was so good. You couldn’t do it if you weren’t great, you’d die. The circus would die, you know. Any rate, he had Pat over there as his right hand guy.

DP: So that was when he was moving out—

HW: That’s when he was moving out. He had Daytona Speedway. Pat came in in the 1950’s but he really helped a lot in the 1960’s. He died in the mid 1960’s. In that 1960 to
1964 period when the so called Super Speedway Era began, he was right there with him the whole time.

DP: Well, moving on in terms of your career, after your college days of promotion you moved into working for Firestone. Talk about that some about the role. There's been a lot written I guess about the role maybe of the auto manufacturers in the 1960s. How did the tire manufacturers—

HW: Well in the 1960s there were five companies in racing and that was it, of consequence. There was Pure Oil Company; there was Firestone which has been in racing longer than anybody. They went back to 1909. First Indy race was run in 1909. The first Indy 500 wasn't run until 1911. But Firestone had been continuously in racing throughout the whole period of time. Goodyear came in in 1957 that was their first year. Then there was Ford and then there was Chrysler. In NASCAR there was the period of what we call the factory wars of 1964 to 1970. We had Firestone and Ford versus Chrysler and Goodyear. More money was poured into racing collectively in one year than had been poured into the entire history of it, by the manufacturers. There wasn't any need in those days for a so called sponsor. If you had a factory deal that's all you needed. So it was a vicious battle. It also turned the racetracks into a lot of carnage. We had a very very difficult period of time there where speed outran safety. It seems to crop up every 30 some years. I hope we've learned enough lessons now to learn what to do. Any rate, of course the very people that poured the money in to ignite the speed ended up solving the problems that the speed created, Firestone with the fuel cell, Goodyear with the inner line (misunderstood/misspelled??). Ford and Chrysler engineers helped a lot in the safety aspect of how the cars were built. That was the most prolific period in racing history, that
1964 to 1969. One other thing was going on there that a lot of people miss. In 1964 when I went to work for Firestone and primarily my job was Indianapolis cars. Indianapolis racing was way up here and stock cars were way down here. I mean Indy drivers (unintelligible) taxi cab drivers (unintelligible). Of course Bill France was fighting that all the way but the introduction of the rear engine car in Indianapolis changed everything. That is so under, people just don’t look at that as a...they think that the reason stock cars so popular is cause we’ve got better promoters or we have got more companies behind it and people know the drivers more. That’s not the reason. When that rear engine car came in it knocked the American race drivers right out of the picture, eventually to a great degree. The old sprint and midget stars moved up to what they called the “big car”, the Indie Roadster, Watson Roadster. And when we lost those roadsters, the big cars, for the little lay down European born and bred Indy cars that is precisely when it started to change because again look at the American public, they want big things. So you know when we get real cocky about what we’ve done as an industry, NASCAR, the success may simply have to do with the size of the car. You know, cause you build race tracks to run races on, you don’t really care what kind of races you run on them, it’s jus the ones that make the most money and at one time Indy car racing made more money than anything else. So Rusty Wallaces and Jeff Gordons and Tony Stewarts and all those guys 40 years ago would have been in Indianapolis today if the things were just like they were then. So that had a lot, a huge amount to do with it and of course then you see the period of 1964 to 1969 the rear engine car opened it up and said, “We’re gonna open the door for you now, Bill France has been fighting the Indy 500 and Indianapolis cars the whole time, he even tried to start a circuit of his own, it didn’t work. Now we’re gonna open the
door for you and see what you can do.” Well that’s all they had to do is crack the door and they started building speedways, bank speedways, and they started the factories jumped in and the introduction of America to NASCAR really started in 1964 when those four things came together, Firestone, Goodyear, Ford and Chrysler. And they just pumped money into it until they couldn’t see straight and of course 1969 and 1970 everybody left except for Goodyear. So we entered a period of time then that was hazardous to our health and if RJR (misunderstood/misspelled??) hadn’t come along we wouldn’t be where we are today.

DP: What was your job specifically—?

HW: I went to work there as a public relations manager for the racing division. So I did the PR for the Indy cars and NASCAR and later on the (unintelligible) and what we called the prototype sports cars. In the late 1960s I moved back down here and became the field manager for NASCAR tires and the southeastern PR director for Firestone.

DP: So that was an indication of the shift that was going, do you think? Your—

HW: It was my indication. I wanted to get back here cause I missed the stock cars. I could see where Indy car racing was headed and I think that I really had a clear view of what was gonna happen. So I wanted to get back to where the oil was pumping or where it was going to pump.

PIERCE laughs

DP: Well, what about the tire testing during that time period…?

HW: Well it was prolific and the tire testing was so prolific by both companies that it accelerated the careers of drivers so fast, like Marlon Gray and Hale Yarborough and Lee Roy Yarborough and Buddy Baker and young guys really could come up fast because
they just got thousands of miles of testing which you just don’t do anymore. So I remember when Buddy Baker got his first ride of consequence. I think we ran him two thousand miles down at Daytona in November and December so when he came down there in February he knew every square inch of that track and he knew where he could go and where he couldn’t and everything else and so he was so far ahead of the rest of the young drivers. And this went on for a four year period. You had prolific testing, primarily by the tire companies but also you had testing by the automobile companies. A lot of it was joint but it accelerated the mechanical ability that stock cars had to put on a better show cause they lasted longer. They became much more durable because of all this testing. Today the stock car today is a direct result, direct result, of what happened in the 1964 to 1969 period. The car today is not changed much from that day as far as geometry and stuff is concerned. I mean, it’s pretty much the same.

DP: Is this 1964 Chevy (unintelligible) they still use...

HW: Oh yeah, , you know somebody knew what they were doing back in those days.

DP: What about the danger? I mean I know some people were killed in tire tests and stuff like that.

HW: Well, yeah, some people were killed in tire testing. Jimmy Perdue was killed up here in a Goodyear test and Billy Wade was killed in Daytona. Bobby Marshall was killed in an Indy car in (unintelligible) in a Ford test. Most of the deaths were during races though or practices, not so much testing. It was much more controlled in certain ways. But the fatalities that existed between 1964 and 1966 in particular could have brought us to our knees and did really bring us to our knees. Fortunately we got out of it and it became relatively safe again.
DP:  (Unintelligible)

HW:  Yeah, those guys all retired early. I mean Junior was 34, Freddy was 34, and Ned wasn’t much older than that. But they’d made enough money to live on and they didn’t like what they were seeing, they never would admit that, but I don’t blame them a bit.

DP:  Do you ever look out this window, think back to Robinwood Speedway and say how in the world did I get here?

HW:  No, I look at it as nothing different. There’s nothing different. You still gotta sell tickets, you gotta have clean bathrooms, you’ve got to have clean seats, you got to take care of the competitors, and you gotta get the thing ready. And in a certain sense a week at the Robinwood Speedway in those days was just as rough as a week before the 600 here, maybe rougher physically cause I did a lot of the stuff myself. And there’s more zeros at the end of every thing, including the bills.

DP:  Right.

HW:  But that’s why I like to see young people get experience at short tracks. It’s one of the reasons why we have a very prolific short track program here. It helps us train our young people coming up.

DP:  (unintelligible) Tuesday night...

HW:  Yeah, we had a good one last night.

DP:  That’s a great thing. Well, my best friend would never forgive me if I didn’t ask you about Bobby Isaac and your relationship to him.

HW:  Well I just loved him to death. He and I were quite different. He was kind of brought up in a saw mill and here I was going to Belmont Ave. prep school in the day time and trying to learn Latin and coming home and working on a carburetor, on an old
flat head Ford in somebody’s garage in a mill hill. So I could relate to him but what I liked about Bobby was that he had to educate himself. He did not know how to read and write early. He learned to read and write as a race driver.

DP: So that is true? Cause I heard that story and I didn’t really... About him hiding because he didn’t want some one to ask him for an autograph or...?

HW: No, I don’t think that. No, I think that story got started when his first car owner stopped to eat at a restaurant (unintelligible). But Bobby was smart. I don’t know that he ever went to school. I don’t know that he did or didn’t but he’s...

End of Side A

Beginning of Side B

HW: Yeah, he was a heck of a race driver, but did things his own way. I mean that deal with Talladega; I’ll never forget talking to him after that. I mean, that happened completely and then one day he walked in to my office. See he never raced after that, he never raced with NASCAR racing after that.

DP: After the Talladega?

HW: After Talladega, that was it. I believe that’s right. Well, anyway he quit cup racing and began to race at Hickory Speedway where (unintelligible). So one day he walks into my office and says, “You always wanted a Rolex.” He says, “I want you to buy my Rolex.” Well look on the back of it.

Pierce is looking at the watch.

DP: I’ve heard about this watch! That was one of the questions I wanted to know if you still—
HW: I said, "I'm not gonna buy that watch from you. For Christ's sake, Bill France gave that to you in Talladega." He's the only factory driver that (unintelligible). So he walked up to my desk and put the watch in the drawer and walked out of the room. About forty-five minutes later I get a call from Thompson Stone saying "Bobby said you're gonna pay his bill over here."

Wheeler and Pierce laugh

HW: Bill was exactly (unintelligible). But when he died, I was up there not too long after he died and I got Linda his wife and I said, "I wanna give you this watch back." And she said, "No, he wanted you to have it." But what he wanted to do was get rid of everything in his house that said Talladega on it. He didn't want anything to do with it.

DP: Cause he felt bad about it or...?

HW: You know, race drivers in those days were so superstitious. It was just something, he never, you didn't get everything out of him. When he died there was a lot about him people will never know and even those close to him like I was. But that's what it was and he just wanted to get that away from him. That scared the hell out of him. And I took his (unintelligible) did somebody? Well, he thought so, so whatever happened, it manifested itself in some way that he believed it to be true. He didn't pull off there because he didn't have courage. I've seen him in too many different situations (unintelligible). But he was a breed that we won't see again.

DP: Is that part of the tragedy of modern NASCAR?

HW: Well, it is, because you got to corporatize these guys today. They not only gotta be able to drive a race car but they got to be able do all the other stuff that you gotta do.

DP: Sell the sponsored car.
HW: Yeah, and that’s not a good thing. Maybe it’s helped us in a lot of ways, yeah, but it’s kept some of the better characters from showing up.

DP: I won’t keep you any longer, I sure appreciate you’re time.

End of tape