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**Racing vs. Religion:
A Brief History of
Occonechee Speedway**

The earliest days of the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing, popularly known as NASCAR, saw a long, running battle between racing and religion, a series of skirmishes and full frontal assaults not far from the buckle of the Bible Belt and only a stone's throw from auto racing's throbbing heart in the ancient rolling hills of the North Carolina Piedmont. It was September of 1947 when the front page of the *News of Orange County* announced that Bill France and four other promoters were planning to build a one-mile oval racetrack just outside the tiny town of Hillsboro, North Carolina.¹ NASCAR itself would not be organized for two more months, ground had not yet been broken for Darlington Raceway, and the racetrack at Daytona was still half beach sand and half coastal highway. The new Hillsboro track would become only the third mile-oval raceway on the Eastern seaboard, just about midway between the other two tracks in Atlanta, Georgia and Langhorne, Pennsylvania. The grandstands were to seat a total of 5,000 spectators.²

On September 5, 1947 France and his partners purchased from Marion E. Holloway the outlying fields of the old Occoneechee farm so they could tuck their new dirt track into an oval bend in the Eno River, where Carolina red clay was packed down over solid bedrock. They even used the straightaways of a horse track that had stood on the site in days gone by, a lasting testament to the age-old human need for speed that far outdates the invention of the automobile. On the 19th of September W. H. G. "Bill" France, Ben R. Lowe, M. J. Dawson, C. F. Powell and Enoch H. Staley signed the certificate of incorporation for the Hillsboro Speedway, Inc. By the summer of '48, the speedway was ready to roll, and on Sunday, June 27, Fonty Flock, who went on to win that year's national championship, took the checkered flag with an average speed of nearly 75 miles per hour.³ Flock and his brothers, Bob and Tim, wasted no time

¹*News of Orange County*, 9/25/47, herein after cited as *News*.

²Greg Fielden, *Forty Years of Stock Car Racing* (Pinehurst, NC: Galfield Press, herein after cited as Fielden.

³*Ibid.*

establishing a monopoly at the track, winning almost every feature event during its first two seasons of operation. Chasing Fonty Flock that dusty day were other drivers who made names for themselves as the pioneers of stock car racing: Curtis Turner, Buddy Baker, and Glen "Fireball" Roberts.

The track caught on like wildfire. Within two years, amid rumors of what would soon become the Korean War, the races at Occoneechee Speedway were attracting 15,000 fans. Most came to see the best and fastest drivers, but like Shakespeare's groundlings, the common folk who showed up more for the circus sideshow than for the play, many locals were drawn to the track by promotional gimmicks. For instance, Wendell Scott, a black man from Danville, Virginia, with little or no backing and a bellyful of courage, competed against racial prejudice both on and off the track.⁴ And Louise Smith was the first (but by no means the only) female entry at the track, driving in the fall race of 1949. She turned out to be more than just fluff, giving the good ol' boys a run for their money.⁵

However, not everyone in and around Hillsboro shared the excitement over this so-called "double feature thrill program" and the rowdy behavior that came along with it.⁶ The lines of battle between religion and racing were being drawn. Already four years earlier, in August of 1946, the Orange County Council of Churches had convinced the county board of commissioners to ban the sale of beer on Sundays.⁷ And by 1950 the local press was giving more and more attention to the dangers of speeding and the horrors of automobile accidents. Most of these wrecks involved the deadly but all too common combination of drinking and reckless driving.

⁴Jerry Bledsoe, *The World's Number One, Flat-Out, All-Time Great Stock Car Racing Book* (Asheboro, NC: Down Home Press, 1975), pp. 228-232.

⁵Ed Sanseverino, *Occoneechee-Orange Speedway, Hillsboro, NC, 1948-1968* (Speedway Spotlight Publications, 1995), p. 1.

⁶*News*, 9/16/48.

⁷*Ibid*, 9/5/46.

In August, 1950, the Hillsboro commissioners, "unanimously expressing alarm over the use of certain streets as virtual speedways . . . moved to apply corrective measures to bring the situation under control."⁸ The town was ordered to put up a stop light and lower the speed limit from 35 to 25. In September of that year, a front page article in the *News of Orange County* reported the local traffic court handing out heavy fines and even time on the chain gang to youths caught racing each other and the police through the countryside. Nearby stood another article detailing the annual increase in deaths and injuries due to car wrecks. Tucked in between was a headline: "Second Race of Season Sunday at Occoneechee." Tickets cost all of \$2 for the infield and \$3 for the grandstands, yet the reporter could not have helped racing's fledgling cause in the eyes of its religious opponents when he referred to the drivers as "speed demons."⁹

In October of 1951, the *News* fired its own volley across racing's bow in an editorial reacting to a recent, grisly automobile accident in which an unidentified convertible, described by an eye witness as "doing all it could," lost control and slammed into an oncoming tractor-trailer truck. Five occupants of the car were killed and two were injured, one seriously. The writer went on to sermonize about the deadly dangers of "speeding and indifference to the serious business of driving."¹⁰ From here it was a small step to connect the furious pace of race cars on the track to speeding sports cars on the highways.

That connection, long since made by law-abiding local citizens, became public in April of 1956. The Sunday race crowds had increased steadily, and the winnings had grown from \$1,000 in 1949 to \$4,600.¹¹ At a time when Senator Eugene McCarthy was stirring up anti-Communist Red Scare hysteria, the Reverend W. I. Conway, pastor of the Gospel Baptist Tabernacle, declared war on the local racing enthusiasts. Going

⁸Ibid, 8/17/50.

⁹Ibid, 9/16/50.

¹⁰Ibid, 10/18/51.

¹¹Fielden.

before the county commissioners to protest the construction of a smaller racetrack which promised to feature Sunday "jalopy races" only a half-mile -- about the length of a straightaway -- from his church sanctuary, Rev. Conway branded such racing as "legalized murder."¹²

Conway gained a sympathetic hearing at the board meeting, along with a loud amen from a *News* editorial citing "highway racing and the mania for speed which seems to possess many of our generation." Because the planned races would allow only amateur drivers in older model cars, the writer said, "We would point the finger of shame at such irresponsibility." Whether or not he realized it, the editorialist's closing words echoed the fears of many Americans expecting an imminent Communist invasion of our shores: "We appeal to our public officials, we appeal to public opinion to take a firm stand for sanity and smother this menace to our safety and that of our neighbors before it gains further foothold in our midst."¹³

Such anti-racing fervor soon gained momentum when Presbyterian minister Rev. C. H. Reckard (pronounced "wreck hard") joined the fray. "We have not done right by our children," he wrote in an April, '56 *News* op/ed piece, "we have allowed two racetracks to be constructed in our community, the least concern of which is the disruption of our Sundays and the worst a stimulation of our young people to excessive and daring driving and the exposing of them to public drinking and gambling."¹⁴ So there it was, a trinitarian axis of evil: recklessness, intoxication and gambling -- and all on the Lord's day.

The next month, Rev. Conway opened the doors of his Gospel Tabernacle to host a "mass meeting" which turned out to be a kind of anti-racing revival service. As he had done before the commissioners, Conway once again drew a connection between

¹²*News*, 4/5/56.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid*, 4/24/56.

"the present highway accident trend" and "the racing mania." The *News* ran its report of this meeting just beneath a photograph showing the proper and acceptable role for young men: a line of Boy Scouts in full uniform emblazoned with merit badges.¹⁵

The total attendance at the church meeting came to around 100 souls, while the new Jalopy Race Track's first event just the Sunday before had attracted "a crowd estimated from two to three thousand." Conway formed and spearheaded the Orange County Anti-Racing Association and set as its goal the banning of Sunday racing through legal means. Their zeal was stymied, however, when the County Attorney advised the board of commissioners that it had no legal right "to levy a license tax on [racing], nor could it limit or ban races without special legislation." And so the board took no action on the matter.¹⁶

Meanwhile back at the speedway, the show must go on. The following Sunday, Mother's Day no less, Buck Baker beat Lee Petty, Fireball Roberts and 29 other drivers to win the 100 mile Grand National late model race in a '56 Chrysler 300B before 8,000 cheering fans. His reward? \$1,100. Only 17 cars managed to finish the grueling race. The Reverends Conway and Reckart might have wagged their finger at the "one bad mishap . . . Dick Beaty of Charlotte, in a '56 Ford, rolled his car. He was not seriously injured." And they could not have been happy with the article's closing statement: "Baker received a special trophy afterward from Miss Fay Collins, a pretty Hillsboro girl, plus a rewarding kiss."¹⁷

By March of 1957 the North Orange Ministerial Association, formed in part to fight alongside Conway's anti-racing league, took their crusade to the state level by petitioning the North Carolina Legislature to preserve "the tradition of a peaceful and restful Sunday which has its roots in our spiritual heritage." Despite their efforts,

¹⁵Ibid, 5/3/56.

¹⁶Ibid, 5/10/56.

¹⁷Ibid, 5/14/56.

including local minister Dr. Charles Maddry's portrayal of local racing as "endangering life" and a "desecration of the Sabbath," the county board remained unmoved.¹⁸

Holding firm to their convictions, the ministers won a decisive battle by enlisting the aid of State Senator Edwin S. Lanier, who along with the help of Representative John W. Umstead, gained passage of a bill banning Sunday racing in Orange County by the state Committee on Cities, Counties and Towns. In April the county board finally but reluctantly approved the measure, which also stipulated age limits for drivers (no one under 18) and forced track owners to obtain expensive casualty and liability insurance for both racers and spectators. Violators would be subject to fines or imprisonment.¹⁹

Bill France, a savvy politician in his own right and, according to the *News*, "the automobile racing czar who has promoted his NASCAR sponsored tracks into a reported million dollar enterprise," went before the anti-racing ministers to plead his case for a compromise that would postpone the institution of the ban and "limit the races to certain specific Sundays during the year." His words fell on deaf ears, however, as the ministers insisted that their primary motive was "preserving the sanctity of the Sabbath."²⁰

There is no public record, but one suspects that at this point France must have done some behind-the-scenes lobbying, turning his considerable skills of persuasion on the members of the county board. Less than a month later, three of the four commissioners who had approved the anti-racing bill flipfopped, reversing that action in favor of France's proposed compromise. And what an ingenious proposal it was: to hear France tell it, was willing to cut back his operation to stage only four races per year at each of the two tracks, but in reality he would salvage half the local racing

¹⁸Ibid, 3/7/57.

¹⁹Ibid, 4/4/57.

²⁰Ibid, 4/11/57.

season.²¹ His efforts turned out to be in vain. Within a week and despite the backsliding board of commissioners' recommendation in favor of France's compromise, the Sunday race-ban bill in its original form had passed the state Senate with almost no opposition and become law.²² The Hillsboro campaign of the war between religion and racing was over, and the Christian soldiers had won.

Or so it seemed. The popularity of stock car racing continued to flourish, and by 1961 France had announced plans for a new 3/4 mile asphalt track complete with "all modern conveniences and a large concrete grandstand." What's more, just four years after losing the battle between Christian ministers and racing promoters, by 1961 France's track was once again staging its races on Sunday.²³

This development was no doubt due as much to a lack of enforcement on the part of police as to any amendment in the law. After all, on the national scene, despite recent incidents like the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and the imminent standoff between President Kennedy and Russian Premier Krushchev over the installation of nuclear weapons in Cuba, Senator McCarthy had been humbled by his own self-righteousness and the worst of the Red Scare was over. America's postwar nerves had finally begun to settle down.

But there is one intriguing historical footnote that might shed some light on this change in the attitude of the local authorities: That same year Bill France sold to the town of Hillsboro four acres of prime property, just up the Eno River from his speedway, for the construction of a sewage treatment plant. And among the perks France received for his efforts were free water and sewage taps at the track.²⁴

It seems the devil's work is never done. Two years later, above an advertisement for Dewar's White Label Scotch Whiskey, the *News* ran an article, accompanied by a

²¹Ibid, 5/1/57.

²²Ibid, 5/7/57.

²³Ibid, 10/19/61.

²⁴Ibid.

large photograph showing a sultry, "leopard-skin coated" Jayne Mansfield riding around the Orange Speedway in the pace car and signing autographs for wide-eyed fans. The writer's closing words only served to confirm his righteous brethren's worst fears: "The crowd of 15,000 was estimated by racing officials to be split about evenly in attention to the visiting guest of honor in the judges' box and to the 150-mile Grand National Race."²⁵

At least in part because of the resistance of the local religious authorities, France finally gave up on Occoneechee/Orange Speedway. In 1968 he shut down the operation and moved his considerable resources to Alabama, where he had bought an 1,800 acre site forty miles east of Birmingham, not far from the Cosa River.²⁶ There he built the biggest and fastest NASCAR track of them all: the Talladega Superspeedway, a 2.66 mile, kidney-shaped and asphalt-coated behemoth where in the very next year the speeds and the crowds far outdistanced any ever reached at Occoneechee. In fact, the old Hillsboro track would fit in the infield at Talladega with plenty of room to spare.

Despite its current place of pride as the fastest growing spectator sport in America, the mammoth NASCAR dynasty Big Bill France went on to build might well learn a lesson here. As multi-millionaires build newer and faster speedways to take advantage of huge metropolitan markets in or near our nation's urban centers, smaller venues like the one at North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, now a ghost track on its way to slipping back into the earth like the Occoneechee/Orange Speedway, are being left quite literally in the dust. Yet it was on the shoulders of short tracks like these that NASCAR was built, and the France family, which still owns and runs their scion's racing empire, seems hellbent on letting go its roots in pursuit of the Almighty Dollar. Granted, several of the current tracks boast buildings full of old race cars and other

²⁵Ibid, 3/14/63.

²⁶Fielden.

memorabilia, but why not invest in living museums set down on the very land where those pioneers first strapped on their helmets and fired up their engines? The tourist dollars alone would pay the bills, and we would all be the richer for it.