



## TAR HEEL HISTORY

# King of the Hill

*More than a car race, the Chimney Rock Hillclimb brought together fans from all walks of life who gathered to cheer on their favorite “weekend warrior.”*

BY BRYAN SULLIVAN

In 1902, the magical beauty of Hickory Nut Gap enticed Dr. Lucius Morse on horseback to Chimney Rock. More than 50 years later, that same mystical lure may

have also beckoned its park manager, Norman Greig, to sanction the first Chimney Rock Hillclimb, a race that would run 50 more times and become an important part of auto-

racing legend in North Carolina.

Hill climbing is a branch of motorsport where drivers compete against the clock to complete an uphill course. It usually provides good spectator access and viewing of the action. While the sport is very competitive, it also has a friendly atmosphere and attracts male and female competitors of all ages.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF (THIS PAGE) CHIMNEY ROCK PARK, (OPPOSITE) TED TIDWELL

## Perfect paradox

Hill climbs have existed for as long as cars have raced. To race a sports car of any kind is challenging enough, but to race up a steep hill on a narrow mountain road with switchbacks is an undertaking considered by many to be less than sane. The race's motto quickly became "Chimney Rock scares me ... and I'm fearless."

The park and race were the perfect paradox right from the start. Wildlife and visitors share the park year-round. This natural wonder would be transformed by thousands of race fans, lining the road up to the Chimney Rock to get a glimpse of one of the legendary hill climb racers.

The hill climb ran twice a year — in the spring and fall. In 1975, inclement weather ended the fall race. The length of the course also evolved through the years. The first races were 2.7 miles, had 18 turns, and one mandatory stop approximately halfway up. In 1960, the trek was reduced to 1.9 miles and 13 turns; the dreaded halfway stop was eliminated. In 1976, safety issues cut the course down to 1.8 miles.

The hill climb consisted of three main components: the fans, the workers, and, of course, the drivers who were competing for the title of "King of the Hill."

## 'There's only one'

The fans spanned generations and consisted of people from all walks of life who attended year after year. "It was a bizarre collection of people, many of whom had little in common aside from sports cars, who were brought together for three days in the North Carolina mountains," says Heyward Wagner, a fan and volunteer who never missed a race.

All of the drivers valued the importance of safety first. According to Wagner, the rules for spectators were simple: "Only cross the road immediately after a car; never turn your back; and always make sure there's something solid between you and a car." Fans lined the turns, and no spectator was ever injured.

Susan Coleman, Wagner's mother, was the communications coordinator for the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) event. Her sons would walk through the woods to the top

"These fans were not simply spectators," says Mark Farrell, an import auto technician. "They got involved in many aspects of the race. I did everything but race a car."

Gene Burns, a fan turned driver, explained that his first involvement with the hill climb was in 1957. "One of the guys at Lee Edwards High School (now Asheville High) entered his car in the hill climb that year," Burns says. "It was a Volvo sedan. Word got around, and a group of us went to cheer him on. It was after the third car passed that

I knew this was something I was going to do one day; I didn't even have my driver's license at the time." After that, Burns attended every year until its end.

The hill climb's organizers and workers included staff from the park and the SCCA and many volunteers. Roger Minnick took over as chair of the race for the SCCA in 1973. That year, entries were low, and, after much reorganizing, the number of entries

increased and so did the number of fans. According to Minnick, the crowd totaled somewhere between 5,000 and 7,000 spectators.

"The Chimney Rock Hillclimb was more than an SCCA event that pits fast cars against a mountain," says Mary Jaeger-Gale, vice president of marketing for Chimney Rock Park. "It was an annual spring gathering of friends and families at a treasured North Carolina site. The camaraderie was contagious. Drivers, pit crews, fans, and workers were all engaged, all part of the magic. There was a spirit about the event that brought people back to the mountain year after year. For those who participated, the hill climb created a



**Start your engines:** The hill climb's starting line attracted a wide variety of cars, including a Bobsy-Porsche (above) and a Mini Cooper (opposite).

and catch rides with drivers when they came back down, waving to the crowd.

"They helped park competition cars at the top, met many drivers, and learned a lot about sports cars and their preparation. It was definitely their favorite weekend of the year," Coleman says.

Rick Gambill admits that he skipped his brother-in-law's wedding to attend. "People get married all the time, but there's only one hill climb," he says. Gambill took part in the race from 1970 to 1995 as a fan, driver, and announcer.

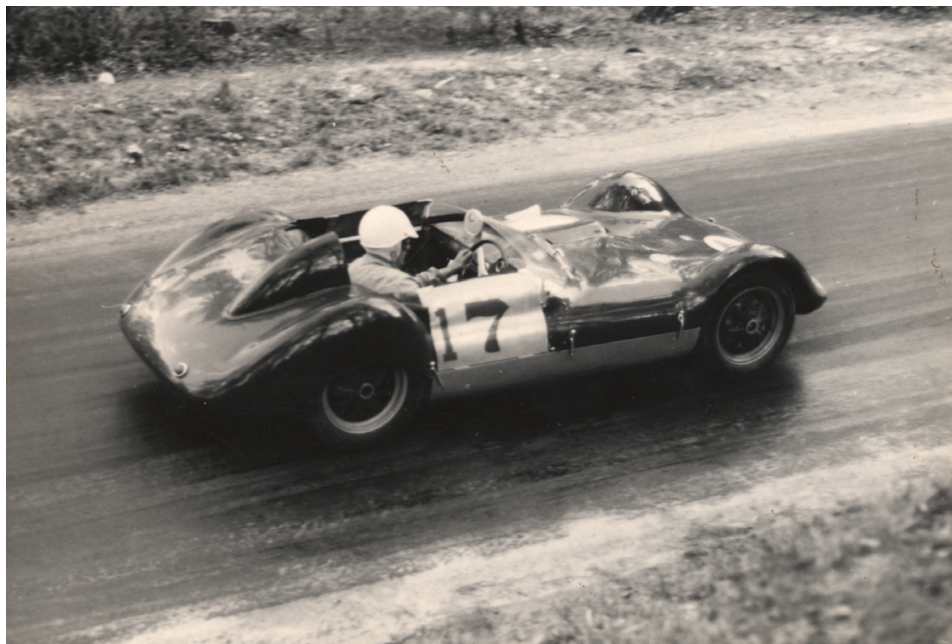


connection with Chimney Rock Park and with each other that will forever live in their memories.”

### Straight to the top

The drivers ranged from racing legends to regular guys, also known as “weekend warriors.” There were notable personalities throughout

In the 1960s, an Augusta, Georgia, native, Ted Tidwell, started to dominate the race. Tidwell competed for 17 years. In the spring of 1960, he won first overall with an Elva MK5. Tidwell soon turned to the Porsche for its speed and handling and achieved his second overall win in a Porsche Super 90 in 1963. His love



**Ted Tidwell competed for 17 years and won first place overall driving his Elva MK5 in the spring of 1960.**

the race's history, and 16 drivers dominated the overall wins.

Phil Styles of Burnsville was crowned the first “King of the Hill” in 1956. He won while driving a hand-built Glasspar with a time of 4:16.9 and beat a field of 48 cars, including Jaguars, Alfa Romeos, and Austin Healeys. Styles won five more times.

affair with the Porsche continued into 1964, when he imported the favorite car of his career — the Porsche 904 GTS.

“In 1964, I paid \$5,000 for the car,” Tidwell says. “It later sold for \$500,000.” During Tidwell's years of competing (1958 to 1975), he won six overall titles and set nine course records.

“We raced for the love of it, and there was nowhere else like Chimney Rock,” he

says. “It'll always be special.”

In 1971, Harry Ingle appeared on the scene and won the overall category that year and the next. He was in the high-power era of the Zink Formula Vee, where he proved his prowess with a one-seater that was a title grabber.

Another notable driver, John Finger, originally from Hickory (he now

resides in Greenville, South Carolina), first appeared on the scene in 1964 in an Austin Healey and began his ascent to the top. The soft-spoken car dealer holds the most overall wins of any driver at Chimney Rock with 12 total. He proudly displays these and many other trophies at his Mazda dealership.

During his hill climb years, Finger tried many engine combinations and chassis types. He then ran the revolutionary Mazda rotary engine from 1979 to 1984 and began the record-breaking streak he's famous for today.

“My favorite thing about the Chimney Rock competition was in building the right car to run the hill,” Finger says. “It could be sunny at the bottom of the hill and raining and cloudy at the top. You had to have the perfect hill climb car to win.”

These types of custom cars were referred to as “Hillclimb Specials.” Finger ran for Team Mazda for many years and is still passionate about racing today. He continues to compete as a semi-professional in vintage racing. He remains most passionate, however, about Chimney Rock.

“Out of all the races I've participated in, the Chimney Rock Hillclimb was the most challenging,” Finger says. “From the first to the last competition, I always drove to win.”

After Finger's long reign as hill climb king, Mike Green stole the crown in a Chevron Mazda in 1985. While Green and Finger are friends and colleagues in the auto industry, they remain fierce competitors.

Green shaved Finger's previous time of 1:49.719 to 1:46.239, captured five overall titles, and set many records that still stand today.

In 1989, Jerry Kieft from Ashland, Ohio, assumed Green's title. Green, Kieft, and George Bowland battled for the title between 1990 and 1995. In 1991, Green won the title for the last time, and Bowland won his first and only overall title in 1993. He then lost his title to Kieft for the last two hill climbs; Kieft went into the record books as the final victor.

“Running a hill climb race such as Chimney Rock was very much like downhill skiing,” Bowland

says. “The conditions of the course were continually changing, and it was you against the clock and the course.”

Women were also competitive drivers, but a woman never held the crown. In 1957, Julie Cook from Weaverville was the first to burn rubber in her beloved MG.

The very popular Smokey Drolet ranks at the top of the female competitors’ list as does Wanda Cecil, who holds the fastest title. In 1993, she broke the two-minute mark and is still an active competitor in SCCA events today.

Jack Baumgardner of Mansfield, Ohio, and his 1964 Mini Cooper were a constant at Chimney Rock. He ran the same car for 30 years and made the most appearances.

“I’ve gone up this hill more than any other person in this crazy race. I know that hill pretty well,” Baumgardner says.

“When we returned home, the time we lived was either before or after Chimney Rock. We lived to return and to race that hill and see old friends.”

“IT WAS A BIZARRE COLLECTION OF PEOPLE,  
MANY OF WHOM HAD LITTLE IN COMMON  
ASIDE FROM SPORTS CARS, WHO WERE  
BROUGHT TOGETHER FOR THREE DAYS  
IN THE NORTH CAROLINA MOUNTAINS.”


— HEYWARD WAGNER,  
FAN AND VOLUNTEER

### **Winding down**

Chimney Rock Park was transformed from a place of natural tranquility into a wild race weekend from 1956 to 1995. The hill climb kicked off the park’s spring season. The park’s true mission from its start was to provide visitors a chance to see

North Carolina natural beauty up close. The Morse family took an oath to preserve and protect the amazing land and all it has to offer

for both wildlife and visitors. People who arrived at the park not knowing that the hill climb was under full swing were disappointed. Todd Morse, general manager and park president, says, “The park and hill climb were always at odds with each other.” Safety and liabilities also became a factor.

Still, Morse admits ending this event was one of the hardest things he’s had to do as president of the park. The hill climb was like a family reunion for those involved. Nothing outside of the race mattered to them during those magical, heart-pounding, and memorable racing weekends. 

*Bryan Sullivan lives in Weaverville.*