



REAL NASCAR

WHITE LIGHTNING, RED CLAY,
— AND —

BIG BILL FRANCE

Daniel S. Pierce

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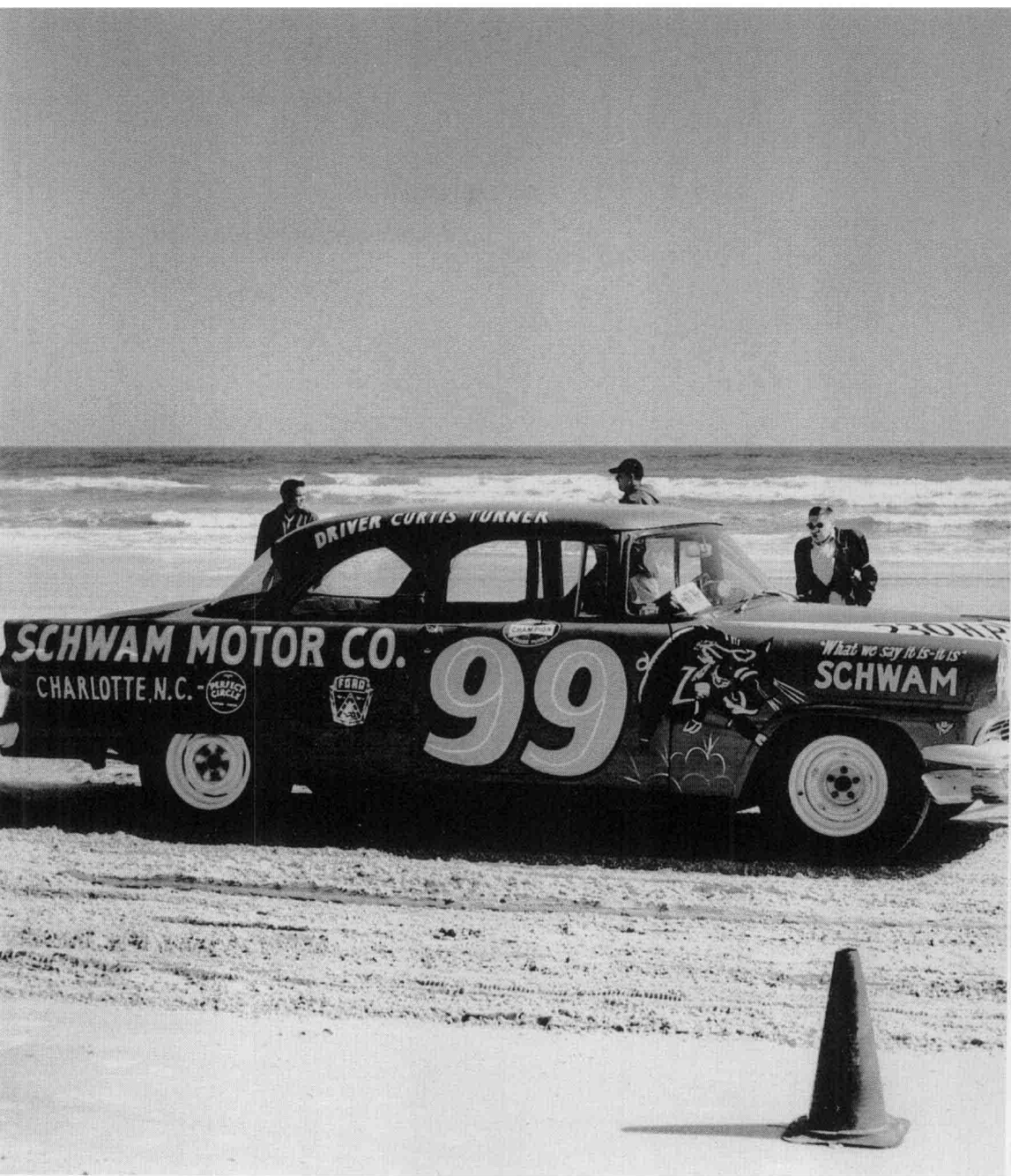
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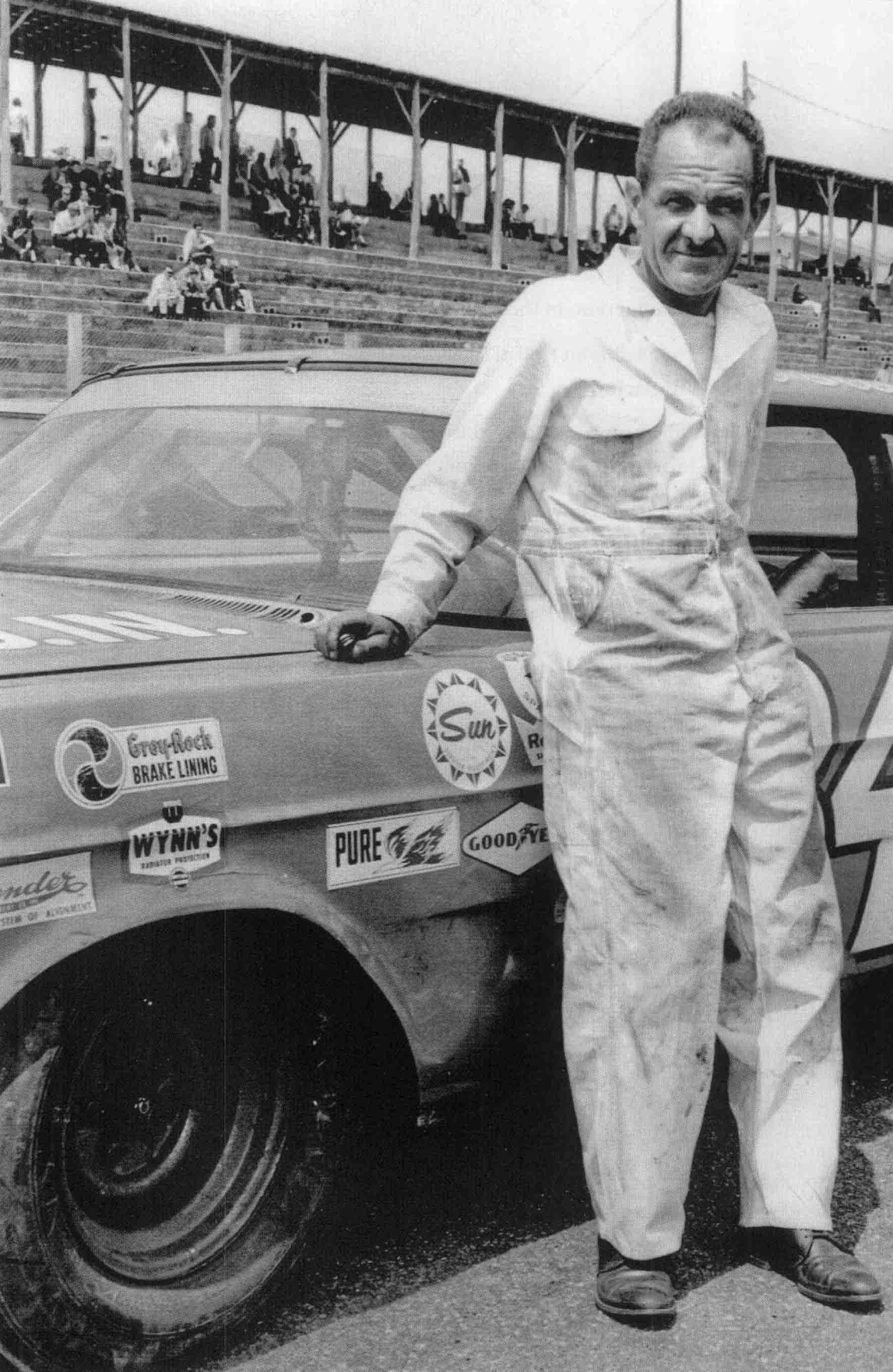
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For Don Good

and in memory of Wayne Good







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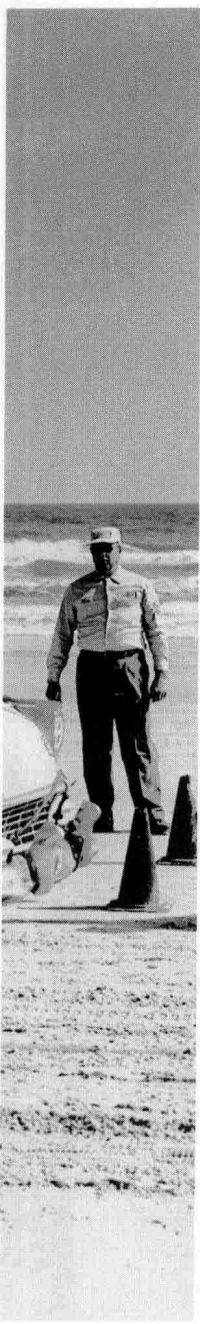
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Introduction

In the Beginning . . . There Was Bristol

I grew up within earshot of the Asheville Speedway—or “New Asheville” as it was generally called in my childhood years—the local bastion of stock car racing. Like most Ashevilleans who were not race fans, I considered the Friday night races noisy nuisances and the people who frequented the track rednecks. My opinion of racing and race fans did not change appreciably over the years, not even when my potluck roommate at Western Carolina University and soon-to-be best friend, Don Good, turned out to be a die-hard stock car racing fan whose fondest memories were of weekends spent camping with his truck driver father, Wayne, in the infield of the Charlotte Motor Speedway. Indeed, I doubt whether I ever saw more than a few minutes of a televised race, and I knew little about the sport other than having a passing knowledge of the on-track exploits of Richard Petty (I did grow up in North Carolina) and Darrell Waltrip (I happened to be teaching school in a town near Waltrip's Franklin, Tennessee, home when he was winning championships in Junior Johnson's car in the 1980s).

All of that changed on August 27, 1994, when Don, now a college professor and administrator, convinced me to go with him to the night Winston Cup race at Bristol Motor Speedway. As a southern historian—and also as an individual in his late thirties who had quit trying to run from his red-neck roots—I felt I owed it to myself to see at least one race, so I agreed to go. Unbeknownst to me, the race Don had invited me to attend was, and still is, generally considered the most exciting race on the NASCAR circuit and the toughest ticket to acquire. It is hard to describe what I encountered on that August night. I was astounded by the sight of all the souvenir trailers around the track and the obvious loyalty of the fans, almost all attired in colorful T-shirts and hats announcing their allegiance to a

favorite driver. The strange mixture of smells was equally overwhelming: an olio of carnival food, sweat, exhaust fumes, burning rubber, and high-octane gasoline.

At the time, the track held 70,000 or so fans, and it was jammed; even the grassy bank at the exit of the fourth turn was full of folks sitting on blankets. I lost count at more than one hundred as we climbed the seemingly innumerable steps of the new aluminum grandstand on the backstretch near the entrance to turn three. The rows of brightly colored team race car haulers—painted to match the paint job on the cars—parked in the infield added to the carnival scene. As the race neared, my anticipation grew when the crowd rose and a pastor delivered an invocation. After the invocation, Lee Greenwood sang “God Bless the U.S.A.”—I cannot count the number of races I have been to where Greenwood sang this song—and the national anthem, and the fans roared their approval of an earsplitting flyover of air force jets in tight formation. The excitement of the fans intensified as the cars lined up on pit road and someone gave the command “Gentlemen, start your engines.” I did not anticipate how loud the cars would be; in fact, I could barely communicate with Don over the unmuffled roar of the engines. The pace car pulled out onto the track followed by the brightly colored race cars, waxed to a high sheen to reflect the track lights. Seemingly all 70,000 fans inside the track rose to their feet in anticipation of the green flag.

When the green flag flew, the decibel level jumped tenfold. I had never heard anything like this assault on my eardrums in my life. Now I understood why people around me were wearing earplugs. Bristol Motor Speedway is a particularly loud facility, as the grandstands completely enclose the .533-mile track, which in turn sits in a bowl in the surrounding hills. You could literally feel the sound. After 5 laps—of a total 500—I knew I would never last the race without earplugs. Fortunately, the ends of the strap that I had on my sunglasses fit into my ears perfectly and muffled the sound. When I later asked Don why he did not warn me about the intense noise, he told me that he believed you had not really been to the races unless your ears rang for two or three days afterward. I will say I have chosen to forgo that particular racing pleasure.

Comfortable now with my improvised ear protection, I settled down to observe the sights in front of me. Television coverage provides no real sense of the speed of these cars. Although the average speed (mph) of the cars at Bristol is only in the high 120s, they were a blur as they made laps at a little more than fifteen seconds. The action on the track was intense;

in fact, one of the attractions of Bristol is that there is pretty much a guarantee that someone will wreck, or be wrecked, and the yellow caution flag will be brought out at least every fifty laps. Cautions are good because they give you a brief respite from the noise, and the excitement builds once again as the cars bunch up for another green flag start.

As fun and visceral as the racing was, it was almost as fun watching the fans around me. I had been a student at one time at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill and had witnessed extreme fan intensity in the Carmichael Auditorium student section as one of Dean Smith's teams battled the hated Lefty Driesel–led Maryland Terrapins on national television. I had been a graduate student at both the University of Alabama and the University of Tennessee and had seen fans foaming at the mouth at any number of football games. I thought I had seen the pinnacle of rabid fandom when I attended a University of Kentucky basketball game in Rupp Arena. I thought I had seen it all, until I went to my first NASCAR race. In particular, I will never forget the guy sitting about five rows in front of us—an unbelievable number of beer cans scattered at his feet before the race even began—who stood up every lap for 500 laps and saluted Dale Earnhardt's car with an extended middle finger.

Rusty Wallace won the race by little more than a car length. I was worn out but had learned a lot in that first session. I learned that when it came to Dale Earnhardt, there was no middle ground—you loved him or you hated him—although in all honesty I had yet to form a strong opinion. I learned that this new kid Jeff Gordon was pretty good and had a neat-looking car, what with the rainbow colors that my kids would come to love. I learned that while the stars of the day—Darrell Waltrip, Bill Elliott, Dale Earnhardt, Rusty Wallace, Harry Gant—had lots of fans, NASCAR fans were pretty democratic and even Mississippi driver Lake Speed, the unfortunately named Dick Trickle, and Dave Marcis, the journeyman driver from my hometown of Asheville, North Carolina, had their followings. Indeed, one of my most vivid race memories is of a guy in 1995 at a Bristol race wearing a blue hard hat with a can of Spam—Lake Speed's sponsor at the time—epoxied to the top. I learned that there was a lot more to stock car racing than rednecks driving in circles; not only was it exciting, but there was a lot going on out there for the thinking person, like pit strategy, tire stagger, and loose or tight cars. I guess the most important thing I learned was that stock car racing was a heck of a lot of fun.

Needless to say, my first taste of the exciting racing, overwhelming noise, and overall carnival atmosphere hooked me. Not a year has gone

by since that 1994 race at Bristol that I have not attended at least one race in NASCAR's top division. When I am not at a race, I usually watch it on television or tune in to it on the radio. I well remember almost wrecking myself on I-26 returning to Asheville from Columbia, South Carolina, during the 1999 Bristol night race when I listened to the radio announcers describe the action as Dale Earnhardt put Terry Labonte into the wall on the last lap to win the race. I started going to local weekly races at the Asheville Speedway, which were almost as fun and exciting as—and a lot cheaper than—the Cup races. I mourned with thousands of other western North Carolina race fans when the owner sold that grand old track and the city turned it into a park in 1999 and with millions around the nation when Dale Earnhardt died in 2001. One of the first things I do every day is go to Jay Adamczyk's Website—www.jayski.com—to check out the latest NASCAR news and gossip. I have to admit it: yes, I am a NASCAR fan.

While I enjoy the racing on a personal level, I also became keenly interested in and fascinated by the history of the sport. The outlandish stories of the antics of early stock car racers immediately attracted me and compelled me to look deeper into the sport. Stories of Lloyd Seay and Roy Hall hauling liquor from Dawsonville, Georgia, to Atlanta one night and winning races at Lakewood Speedway the next day in the same car; of Fonty Flock winning the Southern 500 at Darlington Speedway wearing Bermuda shorts and argyle socks; of his brother Tim racing with a monkey—named Jocko Flocko—in his racecar; of discovering the colorful women racers in NASCAR's top division in the late 1940s and early '50s, Sara Christian, Louise Smith, and Ethel Mobley; of Curtis Turner doing any number of outlandish things including landing his airplane on an Easley, South Carolina, street on a Sunday morning so a buddy could go to his house to resupply their depleted stock of liquor; of Buck Baker discovering that the beer he had poured into a douche bag to sip on during a race had turned to pure suds after a few laps; of Richard Petty winning seventeen races in a row; of tire-iron fights, wild parties, and any number of like antics.

I also learned of the courage, toughness, utter fearlessness, and legendary cool of NASCAR's great champions. The first champion in NASCAR's top division, Red Byron, had a custom-built stirrup bolted to his clutch pedal to hold his mangled left leg—the result of a B-24 bomber crash during World War II—in place. The best drivers in the early days of the Darlington Raceway, knowing it was the fastest way around the track, regularly slapped the metal guardrail with the right rear quarter panel of their

cars as they exited the turns, creating the legendary “Darlington stripe,” a badge of honor for the gutsiest drivers. David Pearson, perhaps the coolest of the cool, demonstrated the ultimate in composure when he kept his car engine running to limp across the finish line at 20 mph to win the 1976 Daytona 500 after Richard Petty had clipped his front end and wrecked them both in the last turn of the race. Three years later, fans across the nation watched amazed as Donnie Allison and Cale Yarborough came into that same turn on the last lap of the 500 beating and banging and wrecked each other, allowing Petty to win the race. Cameras quickly panned from Petty’s victory lap to a brawl in the infield, Yarborough versus Donnie and Bobby Allison, who had stopped to check on his brother. Fans, and the participants, still argue over who was at fault.

I also became fascinated by the culture that surrounds the sport and by the passionate loyalty of its fans. Stories abound about the lengths that fans will go to demonstrate their love for the sport and their loyalty to its heroes. Two incidents that occurred in my hometown of Asheville, North Carolina, will suffice to communicate the passion that many, especially in the Piedmont South, feel for this sport. In 1999, knowing that he would soon die, James Carver made an interesting request of his family. “I want to be brought around the track. Promise me when I die, you’ll have them take me around.” The track of which he spoke was the Asheville Motor Speedway, where Carver had spent many happy hours during his fifty-two-year life. As a child, he had walked two hours to the track despite the confinement of leg braces, the result of a bout with polio. One of eleven children in a working-class family, he could not afford a ticket but would sit on the bank outside the track and cheer for local favorites Boscoe Lowe, Bob Pressley, and Jack Ingram. When NASCAR’s top division came to town, he eagerly watched his heroes Richard Petty, Junior Johnson, and David Pearson. As an adult, he never missed a race. He knew he could never emulate his heroes and race around the narrow track, beating and banging door to door with other young men, but he could vicariously experience the sense of freedom and excitement by watching and cheering. As reporter Susan Reinhardt observed: “He followed the races as if they were his calling.”

When Carver died of a massive heart attack, family members convinced speedway and funeral home officials to honor his last request. Family and friends gathered in the grandstands and stood as a car bearing checkered flags on each side pulled onto the track. A black hearse carrying James Carver’s remains followed, and a stock car with its throaty roar provid-