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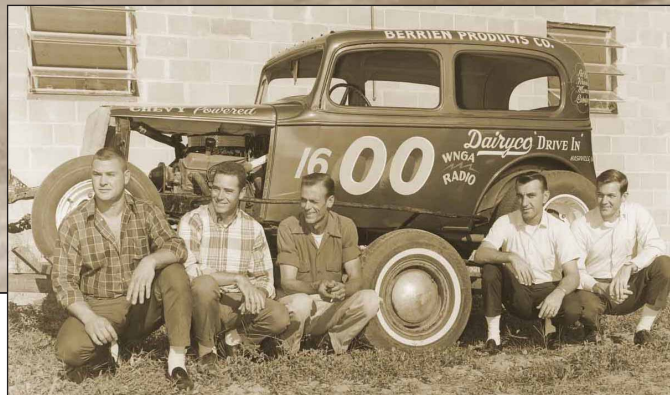
OLD BERRIEN

Newsletter of the
Berrien Historical
Foundation

Volume 7 Number 2

Summer Quarter 2025

DIRT TRACK RACERS



If you are born and raised in South Georgia, you are likely to have red clay in your blood. My wife, Linda Jones Shaw, spent the first 14 years of her life, being toted from one dirt track to another by her parents who made every Saturday night between April to November, dirt track racing night. And the track that she remembers most was Thunderbowl Speedway in North Valdosta.

Dirt track racing was known in the 40s and 50s by some as “Jalopy” races, but by the 1960s the term “Stock Car” racing was used more affectionately.

The Thunderbowl was a 3/8 mile oval dirt track that drivers simultaneously raced each other for 30 laps on

the main event. The track was first opened in 1959, then took a brief hiatus when Valdosta 75 Speedway opened in 1962. But when Valdosta 75 closed in 1967, Thunderbowl reopened.

On a Saturday evening in April, 1968, Nashville’s local photographer, Jamie Connell, attended the season opening of Thunderbowl racing. Connell was there to photograph most of the contestants, and possibly to sell portraits of the drivers and their cars. Among those competitors were drivers from northern Florida, to south-

Harvey Jones (6) and Sam McQuagg (90) lead the pack down the backstretch at the Thunderbowl Speedway, photo by Earl Powell. Inset photo: Berrien County racing team, left to right, Cordell Futch, James Colburn, Prentice Bracewell, Paul Nix and Earl Powell.

western Georgia—including Nashville and Ray City.

Drivers were often part of a racing team which usually consisted of the car owner, a sponsor, and the builder of the car. One of the best known builders of dirt track racers in those days lives right in Nashville, Georgia—Jimmy Griffin. His ingenuity and skill put Nashville on the racing map.



*Jimmy Griffin,
Racecar Builder-Owner*

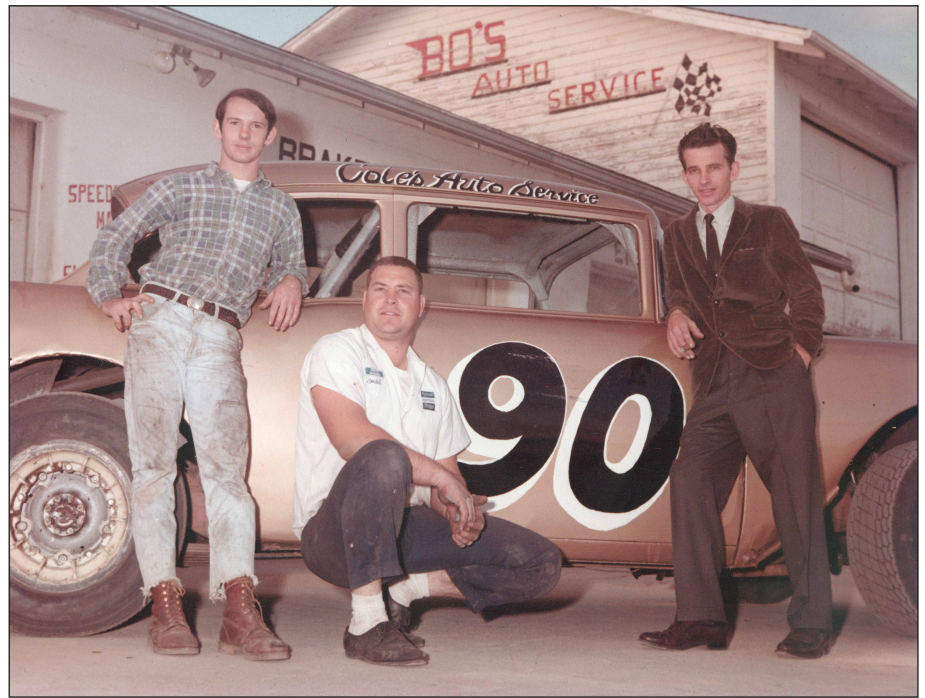
In an interview by racing historian Mike Bell, Jimmy Griffin shared his memories of how dirt track racing got into his blood.

Jimmy was born in Nashville in 1939. He graduated from Berrien High School, and married Gladys Holbrook a couple years later.

"I saw my first race at the Thunderbowl in Valdosta, said Jimmy. "Then several of us got together and built a 1947 Ford coupe, which turned out to be the #00 car of Manuel Gaither and Bo Cole. They later became the service department for Martin Motors in Nashville. Bo split off and built a 1932 Ford, again a #00 that Earl Powell drove.

"Me and Clabe Chapman and Manuel Gaither bought a 1934 Ford #16 out of Hawkinsville. Tried our venture with racing, but when the driver C.L. King didnt show up, Manuel said he would drive it; went down the back straightway and into the stands. Didnt hurt the car much but he had some brain damage and that ended his career. On disability after that."

Most of the dirt track racers were driving Ford flatheads. But Jimmy was a Chevrolet man, and he wanted Chevy fans to have someone to root for, so a couple months later he went over to Dunn's Speedway in Baxley, to watch a race on a Sunday afternoon, gathering



Another racing team pictured above left to right: Wade Lang, owner, Cordelle Futch, builder, and Bo Cole, mechanic and sponsor.

ideas and information or whatever.

"I bought a 1934 Chevrolet body for \$75. Complete car! Was driveable! Wound up buying three '34 Chevrolet bodies three years in a row. With that Chevrolet, I made it look like the other cars on the track. I got acquainted with C.L. King who had wrecked his car, and borrowed his motor, transmission and rear-end and put it together and painted it blue with #60.

"Folks around town donated some tires. Decided we needed wider rims, so we cut two rims to make one. We made everything, had a total of \$250 in the racecar. We went off to the races—no trailer, just a tow bar. Very first night we ran was at the Thunderbowl. C.L. was our driver, and won the race. Out-ran Harvey Jones. We might as well as shot Elvis. We killed the Flathead King."

Monday morning Jimmy got a call from the J.C. Cowart, Thunderbowl owner. Jimmy confessed they had run a 261 C.U. 6 Cyl. but they needed 268 or 272 to be legal. Cowart said "You got it" and changed the rules so he would be legal. He told Jimmy they put on such a good show he wanted them to come back. Jimmy bent a lot of rules that caused new rules to be made.

"It was nice to give the fans a Chevy to root for and they did, we had a very good following. Made him a lot of

money."

With the success of #60 on the track, with C.L. King as the driver, Jimmy decided to build a better car—a lighter car that became the blue Chevrolet, #160. He had been watching the driving of Earnest McDonald and felt he was pretty good but never had anything decent to drive. Jimmy gave C.L. the choice of which car he wanted to drive. C.L. chose the older car because he knew what #60 would do but didn't know about the new #160 performance. So Earnest got the new car and did a lot better than C.L. always finishing a couple places ahead of C.L. and #60.

Jimmy followed that car up with another light weight and another #160. Those Chevy six cylinders had a lot of torque and were tough to beat. Their team ran at Jacksonville, Albany, Hawkinsville, Pavo, Baxley, Waycross, Patton, Valdosta and Lake City.

Jimmy decided to quit racing in 1967, spending more time at home and involved in the Nashville community, with the Fire Department, the Jaycees and the Berrien County Recreation Park. But he left a legacy of racing innovation and know-how that will be remembered by dirt track fans for years to come.



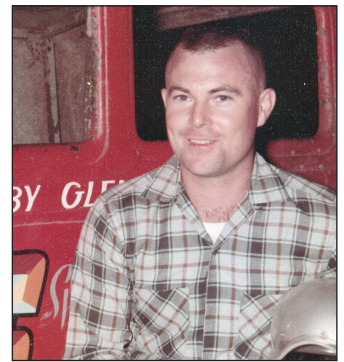
6 Harvey Jones



21 C.L. King



41 Ernie McDonald



66 Sputter Regans



48 Gene McDonald



00 Earl Powell



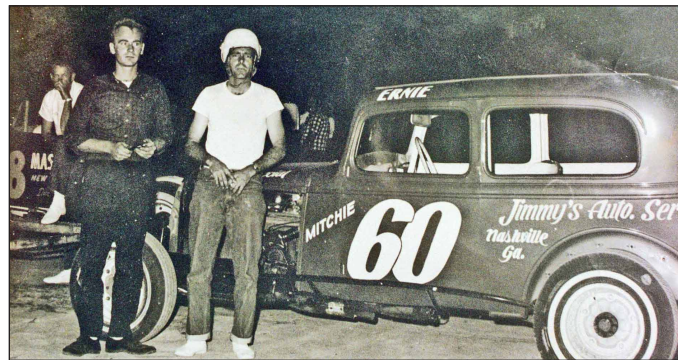
68 Preston Driskell



3 Charles Futch



24 Aubrey Holley



Jimmy Griffin and Ernie McDonald with original #60

These driver photos were just a few that photographer Jamie Connell snapped at the April, 1968 race at the Thunderbowl Speedway. These and all the other photos he took are now on the website of the Berrien Historical Foundation—berriencounty.smugmug.com

Thunderbowl continued to schedule races through the 70s, 80s, and finally closed down for good in 1999. It spanned five decades, and provided racing excitement for local fans and teams alike. In 2009 a Thunderbowl reunion was held to honor the passing of Hall of Fame drivers, Harvey Jones and Sam McQuagg.

Other Berrien drivers were competitors through the years, including Arch Clark, Herbert Browning, and even Fay Gaskins in the Powder Puff events.

Today, the only indication of the old speedway is the pit entrance sign at the north end of the track that still proudly marks "Thunderbowl Speedway..... Where the Big Boys Play!"



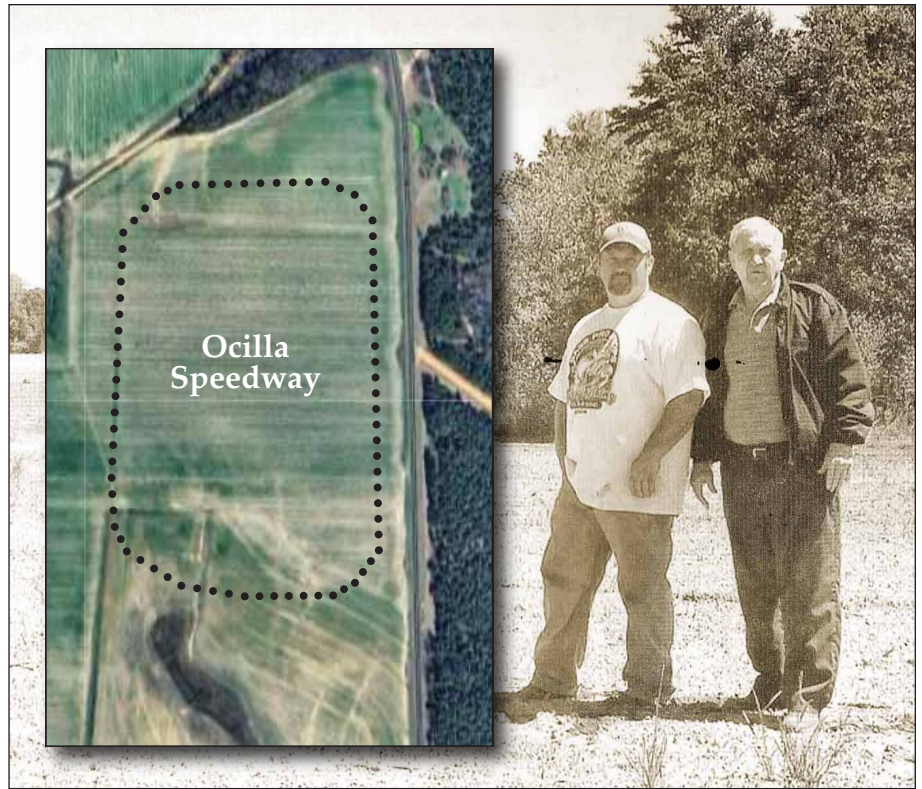
Thunderbowl Speedway from the air in 1993 (left) and the remains of the track in 2015 (right). Today the oval has disappeared all together among many home sites.

Though Thunderbowl Speedway attracted most of Berrien race teams after it opened in 1959, prior to that time another racetrack opened up in 1950, just two miles north of Gladys on US Highway 129. It was located on the west side of the road on an open stretch of cultivation that occurs right after crossing Reedy Creek. It was right across from the intersection of Green Road and Highway 129.

A close look at the black soil in one particular field will reveal remains of red Georgia clay. That's the remains of the Ocilla Speedway, built by Marion Buddy Green, Sr.

It was a 3/8 mile track, which was built, maintained and run by Mr. Green, and drew racers from as far away as Atlanta and Tallahassee. It proved to be a popular and exciting track for racers and race fans in the area.

However in just a few years an accident at the track made Mr. Green nervous about his liability, and decided he didn't want to risk the possibility of losing everything and closed the track.



Marion Allen Green and his father Buddy Green, standing at the end of the front stretch, with trees and ponds in the background as they were in the early fifties when the track was in operation. It was Buddy's father who started the track.

ICONS IN JEOPARDY

On April 17, 2025, at the Berrien Historical Foundation quarterly meeting, members viewed a video presentation titled "Our Icons in Jeopardy". The video revealed the failing conditions of Berrien County's most iconic historical structures—The Old County Courthouse, The Old County Jail, and The Doughboy Monument.

The video was also shown to members of the Nashville-Berrien Rotary Club, and followed by an encouragement by BHF member, Nick Lacey, in hopes the members would address the condition with city and county government leaders, and urge them to create a plan to "preserve first, then restore in the future" these historical icons.

On May 6, Nick Lacey made this appeal to the County Commissioners as well. We will see what response comes from these leaders.



The Old County Jail was really beat up by Hurricane Helene in September 2024, as evidenced by the two window frames and brick work blown out completely.

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BERRIEN HISTORICAL
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