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Bowling Green Stock Car Racing

Jonathan Jeffrey

Western Kentucky University, jonathan.jeffrey@wku.edu

Larry Upton

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INTRODUCTION

Bowling Green, Kentucky, founded in 1798, is a beautiful Southern city nestled adjacent to the Barren River and set amid the undulating foothills of south-central Kentucky. Long before Bowling Green was known as the home of Western Kentucky University, the General Motors Corvette assembly plant, the National Corvette Museum, and the birthplace of Duncan Hines of cake mix fame, the town forged a progressive but not aggressive attempt to become a community of consequence. The Civil War hampered this progress, but the march quickened after the difficult years of Reconstruction. Transportation was always an important component of this growth. Over the years, Bowling Green enjoyed access to good roads, river traffic via steamboats and barges, rail service on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, and, by the late 1930s, a developing airport. This transportation infrastructure placed Bowling Green on solid footing to benefit from the economic boom after World War II. Interestingly, transportation remains a theme for the city today. Besides the Corvette's allure and the city's presence on one of America's most heavily traveled interstates, Bowling Green is the home of Beech Bend Park, where racing and other automobile-related events are held on a regular basis, bringing tens of thousands of guests to the community. This photo journal documents all types of racing at Beech Bend Park, with stock car racing being the fan favorite in the late 1940s and 1950s. Beech Bend Park is known to many as an important component of Bowling Green's emergence as a high-speed entertainment center.

Until recent years, stock car racing was a Southern sport. Those who partook in this sport were so-called rednecks and moonshiners—at least that was the image promulgated by NASCAR in its early days. Today the stock car racing craze has exploded nationwide, and the sport downplays its moonshiner roots. That early rustic image may have been an advertising ploy, because it certainly was not the foundation for stock car racing in Bowling Green. Numerous stock car racetracks popped up in the vicinity of Bowling Green and Nashville after the end of World War II. They were owned and promoted by businessmen looking to capitalize on the nation's pent-up demand for entertainment after 15 years of Depression and war. Furthermore, people had money to spend, and no excitement competed with racing the family car.

The stock car drivers came from diverse walks of life far removed from the hillbilly or moonshiner element. In Bowling Green, for example, there were young men such as Tommy Smith, the son of a business owner and inventor, who went on to graduate from Georgia Tech and become a millionaire businessman; Marshall Love Jr., the owner of a photographic studio; and Larry Graham, a descendant of Kentucky's honorable Judge Asher Graham, who became an U.S. Air Force officer during the Korean War, later relocating back to Bowling Green as a local businessman and farmer. Hugh Porter Causey, the young man who built the first stock car in Bowling Green, continues to this day to operate an auto wrecking business in the city. Lattney Upton, another car builder, was the great-grandson of Elijah Upton, a hero at the Battle of the Thames in the War of 1812 and the progenitor of a prominent farming family in Richardsville, Kentucky. Most, if not all,

of the local drivers came from solid family backgrounds that had no link to the mythologized moonshine racers of NASCAR fame, a reputation that seems to have attached itself to anyone who raced stock cars on dirt tracks in the sport's early days.

In 1941, an enterprising man named Charles Garvin purchased a gently rolling section of land covered with beech trees located about 2.5 miles northeast of Bowling Green. The property, being used at the time as a dairy and farming operation, was situated in a big U-shaped bend of the Barren River. Its proximity to Bowling Green, combined with the cool shade of the beech trees and the quiet solitude of the slow-moving river, had made the area a camping and picnic haven from the long, hot days of summer since the 1880s. Locals have always called the place Beech Bend, and the name itself denotes peace and serenity; however, the stock car racing fever would soon change that, at least on Sunday afternoons.

Garvin saw the potential for more than just camping and picnicking. He soon renamed the area Beech Bend Park, charged 10¢ admission, and initiated the gradual development of a complete amusement park. The first addition to the camping and picnicking activities was a live pony ride. A swimming pool in 1947, pavilions for dancing, and a large Ferris wheel quickly followed. Eventually, Beech Bend became one of the largest amusement parks in Kentucky.

On a summer day in the mid-1940s, three teenagers from Bowling Green, brothers Elmo and Wayne Guy and their friend Billy Hudson, headed their motorcycles toward Beech Bend. At the gate, Garvin collected his usual 10¢ fee, and the boys roared their motorcycles through the park's dirt roadways. Entering a large meadow near the Barren River, the boys ripped through the grass and weeds, racing each other in a large oval, which gave them an idea.

When Elmo, Wayne, and Billy returned to the front gate, they asked Garvin if they could make a flat racetrack for their motorcycles in the meadow. Billy Hudson, whose father was the head of the Warren County Roads Department, said that he could get access to a road grader to carve out a track. Garvin quickly agreed but told the boys that they had to do the work. Garvin soon teamed up with Raymond McClard, the local Harley Davidson motorcycle dealer and a Bowling Green politician, and staged their first motorcycle race in 1946.

Garvin and McClard did not know it yet, but the real entertainment dollar in the years following World War II was going to be in stock car racing. Bowling Green was not yet on the racing map, but stock car racing was already taking root in towns throughout the region. Hugh Porter Causey, a young, local garage owner and car lover, decided to build a stock car that he could race in nearby Russellville and other surrounding towns. Going a step further, McClard tried, with limited success, to promote a track outside the town on the Russellville Road. Clearly, momentum was building.

As the 1940s drew to a close, Garvin and McClard believed that the time had come when the public was ready to support stock car racing in Bowling Green. They promoted their first stock car race at Beech Bend in 1948, the same year that witnessed the birth of NASCAR. Aware of Hugh Porter Causey's interest in racing and the fact that he had built a race car, Charles Garvin called Causey and asked him to help assemble a group of people willing to build stock cars and support racing at Beech Bend. Causey was soon running advertisements on radio and in the local newspaper, the *Daily News*, inviting interested parties to contact him. He also used his own extensive network of mechanics and car aficionados to help him. According to Causey, "Pretty soon it seemed like everybody in Bowling Green was building a race car."

Charles Garvin and Raymond McClard, supported by key men like Hugh Porter Causey, organized the Bowling Green Sporting Association to sponsor the races. Garvin also improved the one-third-mile track by adding a pit area, flagman's and official's booth in the infield, concession stands, and a grandstand. Before the first race, Garvin even announced that he was going to build a roof over the grandstand for the comfort of the fans. By mid-year 1951, all was ready.

The first race was announced for Sunday, August 5, 1951, with time trials beginning at 1:00 p.m. and the first of eight races scheduled to begin at 2:00 p.m. Admission was set at \$1 for adults and 50¢ for children under 12 years old. The schedule called for four heat races, each consisting of six cars racing eight laps; an Australian pursuit race, in which cars line up single file (slowest in front to fastest in the rear) with cars being eliminated as they were passed; a consolation race; and an undisclosed special event in addition to the feature race. To insure that they had a good field of cars, Garvin and McClard sent out invitations to drivers competing at neighboring tracks.

In an interview with the *Daily News*, Raymond McClard identified the local car owners and drivers expected to participate in the inaugural event as the following: Causey and Reynolds Garage, Tommy Smith, driver; Mayhugh Motor Company, A. W. Nolan, driver; Wingfield Auto Service, Marshall Love Jr., driver; and Wright's Welding and Machine Shop, Elmo Guy, driver. McClard stated that several other businesses committed to participating that first Sunday included Wallace Motor Company, Cohron Motor Company, Upton's Garage, Tunk's Garage, Burch's Golden Tip Service, and Dixie Garage.

The first race at Beech Bend Park was a resounding success. An overflow crowd of 2,500 people watched a field of 19 cars put on an exciting show, including five crack-ups, two of which were spectacular rollovers with no injuries. People from out of town dominated the events beginning with Elmer Tapp of Owensboro, Kentucky. He set the first time trial record at 25.3 seconds around the one-third mile dirt oval, with an average speed of 47.43 miles per hour. Bowling Green drivers Billy Hudson, driving for Mayhugh and McReynolds Motor Company, and Elmo Guy, driving for Wright Machine Shop, were the only local winners, winning a heat race and the Australian pursuit race, respectively. The unexpected high fan turnout prompted the Bowling Green Sporting Association to announce that racing would continue each Sunday afternoon until the onset of bad weather. The promoters also announced that they would construct an addition to the grandstands to accommodate larger crowds.

As the season wore on and the crowds became more enthusiastic, the racing brothers, Elmo and Wayne Guy, became the local drivers to beat. Elmo became the local favorite by finishing near the top each week to the more experienced out-of-town drivers. Finally, on September 30, 1951, Wayne Guy surprised Elmo by becoming the first local man to win the feature race; he made it a clean sweep by also winning his heat race and the Australian pursuit race that same day. In a 2003 interview, when asked what he liked about stock car racing, Wayne replied, "I just liked being there! And I always wanted to beat Elmo!"

With the weather changing, the Warren County championship was scheduled for October 14, 1951. This race would be open only to local drivers. According to the local newspaper, Wayne Guy was the designated "marked man" due to his surprising triple win two weeks earlier. Elmo Guy was also mentioned as a top choice to win. As it turned out, Elmo Guy was the Warren County champion, and Larry Graham was a close second.

On October 21, 1951, Beech Bend Park held the last race of the season, which was billed as the Regional Championship, with all drivers welcome. The championship race was extended to 25 laps. The Bowling Green Sporting Association announced that for the first time trophies would be presented by a special guest of honor, Miss Kentucky 1951, Dottie Nuckols. Again Elmo and Wayne Guy were considered the local favorites to cop the championship.

In races prior to the Regional Championship, however, another local driver, Larry Graham, a 22-year-old student at Western Kentucky University, had been making a move toward the top. Graham had missed out on traditional sports in his youth due to a bout with polio, so he viewed stock car racing as a chance at a level playing field. Graham had raced Raymond McClard's "The Thing" a few times but was looking for something with more power. Lattney Upton, owner of the Upton's Garage No. 22, was looking for a driver. Graham knew the car had lots of power but considered the 1938 Dodge with the 1936 Cadillac V-8 something of a Rube Goldberg setup. It was a car out of the mainstream and had never been a winner; however, Graham decided to give the car a try.

Les Williams broadcast the race over local radio station WLBj. In spite of all the out-of-town competition, the race was dominated by Elmo Guy, followed by Wayne Guy and Larry Graham. These three held off the field as the race approached the 20-lap mark when, suddenly, Elmo Guy got a flat tire. He continued to race but was losing ground as Wayne took over first place with Graham in second. Although Graham was pressing him, the race appeared to be a cinch for Wayne Guy until, with two laps to go, Wayne met Elmo's fate as a tire went flat. Larry Graham vaulted past him to victory lane. Beech Bend Park's inaugural season was over.

The fan excitement and support was so overwhelming that stock car racing at Beech Bend became a fixture until drag racing surged to the fore 10 years later. During the early 1950s, crowds of 7,000 became common as Garvin continued to expand the facilities.