



The first turn at the former Tar Heel Speedway in Randleman, as it looks today. Scenes from the movie "43-The Petty Story" were filmed here in 1974, 14 years after the track's only season.

Silent Speedways of the Carolinas

Text and photos by Perry Allen Wood

The silent speedways of the Carolinas. All 29 of them. They did not deserve to die, but neither did my dad or your Aunt Agnes or Fireball Roberts. Their time just came and they passed into memory. When the big corporate dollars came in, first as a trickle and then as a flood, it was inevitable. Some of these tracks had little chance to survive and are lucky to have held a Grand National race at all. There are seven one-shot wonders that for a single fleeting day, or night, were the seeds of the mega-sport we know today. The top drivers knew about these races and showed up. Newspapers reported them and the spotlight shone briefly on Harnett Speedway in Spring Lake, N.C. (1953), Newberry Speedway in S.C. (1957), McCormick Field in Asheville, N.C. (1958), Salisbury Super Speedway in N.C. (1958), Spindle Center Fairgrounds in Gastonia, N.C. (1958), Hartsville Speedway in S.C. (1961) and Starlite Speedway in Monroe, N.C. (1966). All have a story to tell, but not all left a trace to see.

For some folks, like me, the former tracks just cannot be forgotten. Not yet. Not while a bony hand still reaches out of a dilapidated ticket booth to take your two-dollar admission at Harris. Not while you can still see the faint outline of the track where Bob Flock out-distanced Gober Sosebee at Occoneechee in the third Strictly Stock Car race ever held. Not while the guardrail in Columbia, part wood and part steel,

still dares Buck Baker to push Lee Petty into it one more time. Not while the grandstands that once held thousands of screaming spectators are still protesting the roots of pine trees that are so big they must have started growing the day after the last fanny left. Not while bullet-riddled light fixtures still stare blindly down pretending to illuminate Herb Thomas in Victory Lane 50-plus years ago. Not while museums still house the actual Hudson Hornets, Olds 88s, Ford Fastbacks, and the uniforms of their brave chauffeurs. Not while one can remember how it was when stock car racing was a child. A wild child!

These are places of unimaginable extremes in emotion, from the sheer excitement of the spectators, the exaltation of the victors, the hilarity of the improbable, the amazement of the unbelievable, to the anger of the cheated and wrecked, the despair of the losers and the injured, and the grief of the friends and family who had their loved ones leave beneath a white sheet. The tales here were perhaps witnessed by you or your neighbors. Cherish the faint, fading arenas where Byron, Rexford, the Flocks, Roberts, the Bakers, Turner, the Pettys, Pearson, the Thomases, Isaac, Paschal, Jarrett, White, Smith, Johnson, Figaro and other great, fading names raced and bled and died.. I will not forget them, and I do not want history to, either.

The Tar Heel Speedway

Randleman, N.C.

It is north of Randleman on Route 220 about four miles past Branson Mill Road where the Petty compound is located and then east on Davis Mill Road. At the sharp left-hander, go straight onto a gravel road and past a sign that reads "Frank Millikan 6223." Beyond Frank Millikan's house is a facility that has not heard the roar of Grand National engines in over 40 years. The rough asphalt of the entrance sprouts weeds from every seam and cracks like the speedway itself. Atop the wall on the homestretch a fence protects nobody as the stands are gone without a trace. It is magnificent in its rundown state, a perfect example of the Silent Speedways of the Carolinas.

A silent sentry stands towering in the brilliant azure sky with a menacing countenance that glares madly through wild shocks of dirty black hair from a pair of clear eyes sunken back into their white sockets. Its tentacles dare victims to come closer at the risk of permanent entanglement. Actually, it is a vine-covered light pole. The pit entrance is a sharp left-hander off Turn Four and is a small oval within the racing oval. A concrete wall runs from the crossover at the end of Turn Four all the way around to the middle of the backstretch. The track is littered with old farm implements, a dead truck and the skeletal remains of some sort of game bird in quiet repose on a tire. The spectator gate in the grandstand fence is at the start/finish line, bound shut by years of vine growth, a portal opening only for those misty night visitors. There is slight banking in the first turn conducive to hard beating and banging, with a hay shed squarely in the groove. The concrete wall is in the side of a hill of fertile Guilford County. The hay shed and another structure at the head of the weed-choked backstretch

bracket Turn Two. Farm implements are scattered down the backstretch, and after another infield crossover the retaining wall changes to wood.

At its newly built best, it is doubtful a fence could hold a roaring Grand National stocker thundering along at nearly 100 miles an hour. Into Turn Three, sections of angled metal drape over the wooden railing that might

around anymore, and four mop tops in Liverpool sat down together for the first time to record. A couple of miles as the crow flies north of Petty Engineering, The Turkey Day 200 roosted on the tight little quarter-mile asphalt oval. Of course there was a catch: a Petty Mayflower gets to win the race. But which one of the trio would it be?



Ken Meisenhelder's Chevelle sits in the pits before the final dirt race at the Columbia Speedway in 1970.

slow a racecar down a little. If not, vaulting or plowing through means a steep drop of 20 or 30 feet to lush pasture, livestock and a sure ambulance ride. The weeds have almost won the war against the asphalt on this end. Sweeping off Turn Four, back past the silent sentry on the homestretch, and your tour of the quarter-mile at Frank's house is complete.

There were some scenes filmed here in that great 1974 Hollywood epic "43—The Petty Story," which starred The King as The King and recently departed Darren McGavin as Lee Petty. It is a fact that three times during the 1963 Grand National season, it hosted 200-lap battles that counted as much as the Daytona 500 in the points race. Here then are the stories of The Tar Heel Trilogy.

November 22, 1962

It was November 22, 1962, and there was good news as President Kennedy announced Cuba's missile bases had been dismantled and the naval blockade lifted. Richard Nixon said that we would not have him to kick

Nearly 4,000 fans stuffed their way in and delayed their Thanksgiving feasts braving the frigid air under overcast skies to watch a plump field of two dozen drivers dish it out for 200 laps, 50 miles, for \$575 in prize money. That is not much bread at any rate. Glen Wood, running one of his last races, took the 12th of his 14 career

poles sharing the front row with Jim "The Illustrated Man" Paschal in a '62 Petty Plymouth. Other souped-up stars on hand driving Spartanburg Iron Indians were defending champion Joe Weatherly in Bud Moore's 8 and David Gene "The Silver Fox" Pearson in Cotton Owen's 6. Also at the table were Ned Jarrett in the Burton-Robinson '62 Chevy 11, Tommy Irwin in a '62 Ford 44, and another pair of '62 Mayflowers for the Petty Boys, Richard and Maurice. When the green napkin waved, the flock flew off and Wood gobbled up the laps as the competition wilted. Jarrett was excused first after six laps with handling trouble finishing 24th and last while Larry Thomas failed to finish the first course with a bum transmission nabbing 23rd. Charlotte's John Hoffman completed a 51-lap career for 22nd and G.C. Spencer retired Floyd Powell's '62 Chevy 18th. Then on lap 173 with a chokehold on the lead, Wood had a flat and chose not to ask for seconds, ending his day in 15th. By the time he would have received new rubber, he would have been too far behind. That



Richard Petty's Plymouth 43 was the pole-sitter at the Aug. 6, 1970, race at Columbia Speedway in South Carolina. Behind it, a brown-shirted Pete Hamilton (Daytona 500 winner that year) talks with Bobby Isaac, who won this race.

moved Petty Plymouth pilot Paschal to the head of the table just before his boss' tranny cooked and Richard settled for 11th. Paschal led the final 27 bites and rolled on the gravy train to victory by basting the competition by two laps. There was no beef as the leftovers went to Weatherly who took seconds, Tommy Irwin thirds, Pearson fourths, and Maurice a rare fifth.

Others getting their just desserts were Curtis "Crawfish Etouffe" Crider sixth while Bluff City, Tennessee's Sherman Utsman salted away a four-year, 21-race career with seventh after running the first three races at Birmingham, Tampa, and here. Jimmy Pardue was eighth and Sgt. George Green peppered an eight-year career of 116 starts, following the same path to retirement as Utsman, entering the first three events and parking after a ninth here. Tenth was Wendell Scott, and Arlington, Virginia's Jack "Venison" Deniston polished off a two-race career 12th, and Ray Hughes ran the last of seven over two years going home to Asheboro 13th. Columbia's Sonny Fogle launched an eight-race career 17th and Herman "The Turtle Soup" Beam disappointed no one by feathering it around the inside in his '60 Ford for 21st, the last car running only 89 laps behind. The whole blessed affair took 63 minutes. Everybody must have been in a hurry to get home and feast. And for Jim Paschal... well done!

May 5, 1963

The planet was mostly happy around May 1963. Except for a race riot in Birmingham, "Puff the Magic Dragon" was high on the charts, Koufax was fanning 'em and Mantle was launching 'em. Speaking of launches, Telstar II went up, as did Gordo Cooper, the last man to go into space alone ending the Mercury program. "The Dick Van Dyke Show" won an Emmy and

Bruno Sammartino became wrestling champion. On the fifth, Race 22 of the '63 campaign was held at Tar Heel and Richard Petty, being the clever guy that he is, swapped cars with Paschal for this one, not to be fooled twice in his own sandbox. There were only 15 entries and the top two were the same as before. It was déjà vu all over again as Jim Paschal decided to lay back and watch Jarrett pace the field for the opening 130 laps until he had a flat ala Glen Wood in the Turkey Day 200 six months earlier. Paschal inherited the lead according to plan as Ned lost a mile getting fresh rubber. High Point's Paschal cruised away taking 43 to his second win in a row at Tar Heel and sixth straight on the season for a Petty Plymouth. Weatherly was second again, this time in Cliff Stewart's Pontiac 2, because Bud often declined to go to the lesser events. Therefore, for only \$570 to win, Weatherly's main ride stayed parked. However, as the defending champion, Joe got \$675 for second, \$105 more than Paschal. Jarrett improved on his last place last time with third this trip. Jimmy Pardue was fourth, Larry Thomas fifth, Spencer seventh, Wendell eighth, Jimmy Massey ninth driving for old-timer Hubert Westmoreland, and Crawfish 10th. Joe Jones ended a three-year, 12-race career with 11th, Herman Beam did much better this time 12th, and Richard's brilliant car switch backfired as he finished the last man running 13th, 29 laps behind after a fuel pump was replaced. Buck Baker brought his two red 1962 Chryslers copping next-to-last and last for himself and Henry Neil "Soapy" Castles, the only guys who did not beat Richard. As for Paschal's strat-

egy in winning the two races at Tar Heel Speedway is concerned, he took advice in Little Peggy March's number one hit "I Will Follow Him" by running second until the leaders' tires failed allowing him to take both victories. Four grand watched the 62-minute sprint.

October 5, 1963

They saved the best race at Tar Heel for the third and last appearance for 1963 and history. October 5th will be best remembered as the Saturday the Dodgers completed their sweep of the Yankees in the 60th World Series. However, 19 teams showed up in Randleman and a two-man war broke out. The field was star-studded as Fearless Fred Lorenzen parked his pearl-colored Galaxie 28 on the

Track History by the Numbers

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| RACES: | 3 (all in the 1963 season) |
| YEARS OF RACES: | 1962, 1963 (2) |
| WINNERS: | Jim Paschal (2), Richard Petty |
| MOST POLES: | 1 (Glen Wood, Ned Jarrett, Fred Lorenzen) |
| RACE RECORD: | 48.605 mph (Jim Paschal, 1962 Plymouth, May 5, 1963) |
| QUALIFYING RECORD: | 51.933 mph (Glen Wood, 1962 Ford, Nov. 22, 1962) |
| WINS BY MAKE: | Plymouth (3) |
| MOST STARTS: | 3 (Crider, Jarrett, Pardue, Paschal, R. Petty, Scott, L. Thomas, Weatherly) |
| MOST LAPS LED: | 173 (Glen Wood) |
| MOST TOP FIVES: | 3 (Joe Weatherly) |
| BEST AVERAGE START: | 3rd (Ned Jarrett, Richard Petty) |
| BEST AVERAGE FINISH: | 2nd (Joe Weatherly) |

pole with archival and hometown favorite Richard Petty to his right. Weatherly had Bud's Mercury third beside Jarrett's Bondy Long Ford in row two with Pearson's Dodge 5 and Bob Welborn's Petty Plymouth 42 behind them. Sprinkled on back were race winners Paschal seventh, Darel Dieringer ninth, Pardue 11th, Scott 12th, Buck 14th, and Daytona 500 champ Tiny "The Big Fisherman" Lund 18th. A line-up worthy of a bigger venue and \$550 first prize rumbled under green for 200 laps on a cool fall afternoon. Lorenzen scooted away to a solid lead as fighting broke out just behind. Jarrett and Pearson went into the first turn on the first lap and the inside lane moved up. David got inside Ned and applied the chrome horn. In 1963, cars really had chrome. So David put Ned in the concrete and it took Jarrett's crew several laps to get his Ford race-worthy. This is also the 51st race of a 55-event season, and chances are nerves and patience were in short supply all through the field. It took about 90 laps or so, then Gentleman Ned was a gentle man no more. He drew a bead on The Fox (he was not "Silver" yet) and returned the favor in spades. On lap 107, Pearson was neutralized as he chased the fleet Freddy,

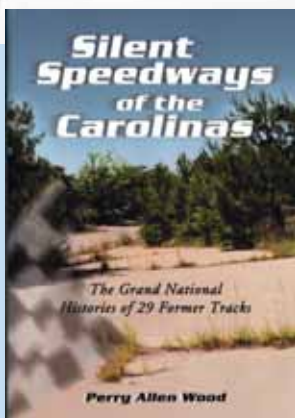
and Cotton's demolished Dodge was done for 14th. A war of words ensued afterwards, but it was no big deal. "Gentleman" Ned was a misnomer anyway as the drivers and some fans knew what the press did not write. Lund dropped out for 17th and two-time Tar Heel winner Paschal, now driving for Cliff Stewart, had tranny trouble for 16th. Finally giving his family and friends something to shout about, Petty slammed past Lorenzen on lap 160 and beat—you guessed it—Weatherly to the checkers by just a few ticks. Welborn was third, Dieringer fourth, and Lorenzen fifth, although he lost the rear end and parked with six to go. Baker finished sixth, Massey seventh, a battered-but-game Jarrett ninth, and youngster J. D. McDuffie tenth. Others were Pardue 12th, Scott 13th, Crawfish 15th, Thomas 18th, and Roy "The Wild Injun" Tyner 19th and last. Lorenzen made a rarer-than-rare very short track appearance during that historic season when he became the first Grand National driver to win over \$100,000. Of course, the \$275 he won here really

did not help much. Fred's rear end ills and Petty's "It's my yard!" rule finally took over, and Richard won a race there. Petty Engineering won all three, but Freddy must have lost a bet to have even raced there in the first place.

Three races, 600 laps, 150 miles, and \$1,725 paid out to the winners. Tar Heel Speedway was all done in one season. But when darkness blankets the rolling hills and meadows north of Level Cross, that monster-like light standard comes to life beaming down so Weatherly, Scott, Pardue, Lund, Thomas, Dieringer, and old Buck can strap in and bang away. With the holiday race and the intimate crowds, it is the place to race after hours on Thanksgiving. 🕒



The author skipped class April 8, 1971, to watch practice at Columbia Speedway and meet The King Richard Petty.



Perry Allen Wood grew up in Spartanburg, S.C., and became a stock car racing fan at age 3½. Today he is a senior investigator for Wachovia. In the late 1990s he began researching the "dead" speedways of the Carolinas. It became a passion of his that produced a new book. "Silent Speedways of the Carolinas" not only describes these once-lively racetracks—all 29 of which held at least one Grand National event—but also recalls the races, the characters and the cheers of the times. These excerpts are from the book's preface and the chapter on the Tar Heel Speedway of Randleman in Randolph County, reprinted from "Silent Speedways of the Carolinas: The Grand National Histories of 29 Former Tracks," ©2007 Perry Allen Wood by permission of McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, www.mcfarlandpub.com. The book is 308 pages with 151 photos, a bibliography and index (\$35 in softcover).