

*Me and daddy and my uncle, we took her home and tore her down,  
Checked her out real good and cleaned her up and bored her out.  
Took out all the seats, pulled the carpet off the floor,  
knocked out all the glass and we welded up the door ...*

*See, it ain't about the money, or even being number one.  
You gotta know when it's all over, you did the best you coulda done.  
And knowin' that it's in you, and you never let it out,  
Is worse than blowin' any engine or any wreck you'll ever have.*

*It's anybody's race out there and I learned to run my own.*

*-The Drive-By Truckers, "Daddy's Cup"*

## **DRIVING WITH THE DEVIL: Southern Moonshine, Detroit Wheels, and the Birth of NASCAR**

**By Neal Thompson**

### **CHAPTER ONE - "*NASCAR is no longer a southern sport*"**

The old man has seen a lot. Sometimes too much. Police in his rearview mirror. The inside of jail cells. Friends and family lowered into the ground. Race cars carving deadly paths into crowds. He's seen stacks of money, too - some coming, some going.

Those visions, those memories, all link into a story. The *real* story.

The old man sits behind his orderly desk sipping a Coke, almost as if he's waiting for someone to come through the door and ask, "Tell me what it was like." It is the start of the twenty-first century, but he is dressed in the style of an earlier era: white shirt and narrow black tie, a gray jacket and felt fedora on a nearby hook - the same uniform he's worn since FDR's first term, except for summers, when the fedora is swapped for a straw boater. Raymond Parks is a creature of habit. He doesn't need to be here each day. With moonshining profits earned as a teen, he bought liquor stores, then vending machines, which funded real estate deals and other sources of income (some legal, some not quite). Far from his squalid youth, Parks is worth plenty, more than he could have imagined. He's sold off most of his empire - the houses, the land, the night clubs, the vending machines, and all of his liquor stores except one. Still, he arrives each morning to putter around the office, make phone calls, check his accounts.

Next door, customers trickle into the one package store Parks has kept, the one he's owned for two-thirds of a century. They buy flasks of Jack Daniels and fifths of Wild Turkey from a brother-in-law who has worked for Parks since World War II. Even now, it's an ironic business for a tee-totaler who - as a so-called moonshine "baron" and "kingpin" - used to make, deliver, and profit nicely from illegal corn whiskey. Outside, crews of Georgia road workers jackhammer into his parking lot, part of a road-widening

project that brings Atlanta's Northside Avenue closer to the bespectacled old man's front door each day.

Parks is 91, though he looks two decades younger. In his twilight years, this office has become a sanctuary and the place he goes to rummage through the past. The room contains the secrets of NASCAR's origins. On cluttered walls and shelves are the dinged-up and tarnished trophies and loving cups, the yellowed newspaper articles, the vivid black-and-white photographs of men and machines, of crowds and crack-ups, which tell part of the story of how NASCAR came to be.

Take a look: one of Parks's drivers is balanced impossibly on two right wheels in the north turn of the old Beach-and-Road Course at Daytona; the wizard mechanic who honed his skills juicing up whiskey cars poses on the fender of a 1939 Ford V-8 coupe outside his "24-Hour" garage, wearing his trademark white T-shirt, white pants, and white socks; a driver stands next to his race car in front of Parks's office/liquor store in 1948, a dozen trophies lined up before him and Miss Atlanta smiling at his side.

Parks is proud of the recent photos, too. It took many years for him to return to the sport he abandoned in 1952. When he did, NASCAR stars like Dale Earnhardt - his arm affectionately around Parks's shoulder - embraced him as their sport's unsung pioneer.

There were good reasons he'd left a half century earlier, dark secrets like prison and murder, greed and betrayal, the frequent maiming of friends and colleagues, their innocent fans, and the violent death of a young child. Parks keeps a few mementos from that chapter of the NASCAR story tucked neatly inside thick black photo albums, home also to faded pictures of whiskey stills, war-ravaged German cities, and a sheet-draped corpse being loaded into a hearse.

The corpse had been Parks's cousin and stock car racing's first true star. He had been like a son to Parks. The day after his greatest racing victory, just as his sport was about to take off, he died. As usual, moonshine was to blame.

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Except for Violet - the most beautiful of his five wives, whom he married a decade ago at the age of eighty - Parks is often alone now. He survived his previous wives and his lone son. He outlived all the racers whose careers he launched, including his friend and fellow war veteran, Red Byron, who, despite a leg full of Japanese shrapnel, became NASCAR's first champion. He outlived Bill France, too, his wily friend who presided dictator-like over NASCAR's first quarter century. A handful of racers from the 1940s and '50s are still kicking around, but none of the major players from those seminal, post-Depression days before there *was* a NASCAR. Even Dale Earnhardt, the man who brought NASCAR to the masses, is gone, killed at Daytona in 2001.

After abruptly leaving the sport in 1952, Parks watched in awe as NASCAR evolved into something that was unthinkable back in those uneasy years before and after World War II. In the late 1930s, at dusty red-dirt tracks, a victor would be lucky to take home \$300 for a win - if the promoter didn't run off with the purse. Now, a single NASCAR racing tire costs more than \$300, and a win on any given Sunday is worth half a million.

Over the years, a few hard-core fans, amateur historians or magazine writers have tracked Parks down. They stop by to scan his photographs, to tap into his memories of the rowdy races on red-clay tracks, the guns and women and fist-fights and white liquor, the

days before NASCAR existed. Most days, he works in his office alone, or with Violet by his side. He is the sole living keeper of NASCAR's true history, but his memory is fading, and Violet frets about that. In his tenth decade, Parks - the ex-felon, the war veteran, the self-made millionaire and philanthropist - has finally begun to slow down.

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The "sport" that Parks helped create became a multi-*billion* dollar industry. It evolved from rural, working man's domain into an attraction - often an obsession - for eighty million loyal fans. Today's NASCAR, still owned by a single family, is a phenomenon, a churning money-maker - equal parts Disney, Vegas, and Ringling Brothers - and the second most popular sport in America, with races that regularly attract 200,000 spectators. No longer a second-tier event on ESPN2, races are now televised nationally on NBC, TNT and FOX, and in 2007 will begin airing on ABC, ESPN, and other networks, part of a TV contract worth nearly \$5 billion.

With the help of sophisticated merchandising, marketing, and soaring corporate sponsorship, NASCAR continues growing beyond the South, faster than ever, becoming more mainstream by the day. NASCAR's red-white-and-blue logo is splashed on cereal boxes in supermarket aisles, on magazine covers, beer cans, clothing, even leather recliners. Try driving any major highway, even in the Northeast, without seeing NASCAR devotions glued to bumpers. Recent additions to the list of \$20-million-a-year race car sponsors include Viagra and, reflective of NASCAR's growing female fan base, Brawny paper towels, Tide and Betty Crocker. In a sign of NASCAR's relentless hunger for profit, it even rescinded a longstanding ban against liquor sponsors to allow Jack Daniels and Jim Beam to endorse cars in 2005.

In 2004, NASCAR's longtime top sponsor - cigarette-maker RJ Reynolds, which had been introduced to NASCAR in 1972 by a convicted moonshiner - was replaced by communications giant Nextel. That \$750-million deal symbolized not only the sport's modern era but the continued decline of the South's ideological dominance of the sport. As Richard Petty has said, "NASCAR is no longer a southern sport."

Today, NASCAR's fan base has found a happy home in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Dallas, Kansas City, and Chicago. Plans are even afoot for a racetrack near New York City. Most fans are college-educated, middle-aged, middle-class homeowners; nearly half are women. At a time when some pro baseball teams play before paltry crowds of a few thousand, attendance at NASCAR events grows by ten percent a year. Average attendance at a NASCAR Nextel Cup races is nearly 200,000, three times bigger than the average NFL football game. The sport's stars are millionaire celebrities who appear in rock videos, date supermodels, and live in mansions. When Dale Earnhardt died, millions of Americans wept, as did Parks, who was there that day in 2001 when Earnhardt slammed into the wall at Daytona. The prolonged mourning for Earnhardt - the sport's Elvis - opened the eyes of more than a few non-NASCAR fans.

As NASCAR's popularity continues to spread, the sport is becoming a symbol of America itself. But how did NASCAR happen at all? And why? The answers lie in the complicated, whiskey-soaked history of the South.

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It's safe to say few of today's NASCAR fans know the name Raymond Parks, nor the monkey named Jocko, the busty pit-road groupies and brash female racers, the moonshining drivers named Fonty, Soapy, Speedy, Smokey, Cannonball, Jap, Cotton,

Gober, and Crash. Nor the two intense, freckled friends named Red, one of whom came up with the name NASCAR - the "National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing" - and the other of whom became the sport's first champion. And its second.

Unlike baseball and football, which celebrate their pioneers and early heroes, most of the dirt-poor southerners who founded stock car racing have died or retired into obscurity. There is no Babe Ruth or Ty Cobb, not even an Abner Doubleday. A few NASCAR names from the '50s and '60s might still resonate among hardcores: Junior Johnson, Curtis Turner, Fireball Roberts. It's occasionally noted that Richard Petty's father, Lee, and Dale Earnhardt's pop, Ralph, were aggressive, dirt-smeared racing pioneers. But, despite the many books that have proliferated during NASCAR's recent rise to nationwide popularity, the names of Raymond Parks, Red Byron, Red Vogt, Lloyd Seay and Roy Hall rarely appear in print.

Maybe that's because of NASCAR's dirty little secret: moonshine.

The sport's distant, whiskey-fueled origins are usually wrapped into a neat, vague little clause - "... *whose early racers were bootleggers...*" - about as non-committal to the deeper truth as crediting pigs for their contribution to football. Today, if the fans know anything about NASCAR's origins, they might know the name Bill France. The tall, megaphone-voiced racer/promoter from D.C. deftly managed to get himself named NASCAR's first president in 1947, then eventually bought out the organization's other top officers and stockholders to make himself sole proprietor of a sport that became his personal dynasty. France is often referred to as NASCAR's "founder," which is oversimplification bordering on fiction. Largely forgotten from the NASCAR story is this: Bill France used to race for, borrow money and seek advice from a moonshine baron and convicted felon from Atlanta named Raymond Parks.

According to the minutes of the historic 1947 organizational meeting in Daytona Beach at which NASCAR was born, France envisioned an everyman's sport with "distinct possibilities for Sunday shows ... We don't know how big it can be if its handled properly." Many people over the years - including, right from the start, Raymond Parks and the two Reds - have argued that France did *not* handle things properly. NASCAR certainly succeeded far beyond anyone's wildest post-war expectations, thanks in large part to the moonshiners who were its first and best racers. But France held a deep disdain for the whiskey drivers who nurtured NASCAR's gestation and its early years. He worked hard to distance his sport from those roots, and was not above blackballing any dissenters, as Parks and both of the Reds discovered.

In striving to create squeaky-clean family entertainment, to the point of downplaying NASCAR's crime-tainted origins, France buried the more dramatic parts of NASCAR's story beneath the all-American mythology he preferred. Efforts to portray stock car racing as a family sport continue to this day. In 2004, Dale Earnhardt Jr. was fined \$10,000 for saying "shit" on national television; he declined to apologize, saying that anyone tuned into a stock car race shouldn't be surprised by a four-letter word. And in 2006, just before the Daytona 500, NASCAR President Mike Helton told reporters in Washington (Bill France's hometown) that "the old Southeastern redneck heritage that we had is no longer in existence." After a backlash from fans, Helton backpedaled, saying NASCAR was "proud of where we came from." Despite the lip service, in its reach to a wider audience, NASCAR seems to be losing its vernacular and, in the words of *The Washington Post*, "shedding its past as if it were an embarrassing family secret."

Bill France, for better or worse, commandeered stock car racing, declared himself its king, appropriated its coffers and history, leaving the real but untidy story behind. He transformed an unruly hobby into a monopoly, then rewrote the past.

This book, therefore, is the previously untold story of how Raymond Parks, his moonshining cousins, and their four-letter-word-using friends from the red-dirt hills of North Georgia helped create the sport that Bill France ultimately made his own.

In the South, where the Great Depression infected deeper and festered longer than elsewhere, there were few escape routes. Folks couldn't venture into the city for a baseball game or a movie because there weren't enough cities, transportation was limited, and the smaller towns rarely had a theater. There were no big-time sports, either (the Braves wouldn't settle in Atlanta until 1965, and the Falcons a year later). It was all cotton fields, unemployed farmers and Depression-silenced mills, mines and factories. But if you were lucky enough to have a nearby fairgrounds or an enterprising farmer who'd turned his barren field into a race track, maybe you'd have had a chance to stand beside a chicken-wire fence and watch Lloyd Seay in his jacked-up Ford V-8 tearing around the oval, a symbol of power for the powerless. But Seay's racing career would get violently cut short by his moonshining career, and World War II would interrupt the entire sport's progression for nearly five years. It wasn't until after the war that southern racing, helped by an unlikely hero with a war-crippled leg, regained its footing and momentum. The rough, violent years of 1945 through 1950 would then unfold as the most outrageous years of NASCAR's colorful history.

For those who were a part of it, who saw it and felt it, it was incredible.

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This is not a book *about* NASCAR. It's the story of what happened in Atlanta, in Daytona Beach, and a handful of smaller, southern towns before and after World War II. It's the story of what happened when moonshine and the automobile collided, and how puritanical Henry Ford and the forces of Prohibition and war all inadvertently helped the southern moonshiners and their gnarly sport. NASCAR historians can tell you who led every lap of every race since the organization's first official contest was won in 1948 by a man named Red Byron. But they can't - or won't - say much about what happened in the decade before that. If Abner Doubleday allegedly invented baseball and James Naismith created basketball with peach baskets and soccer balls at a YMCA, then who created NASCAR?

The answer: a bunch of motherless, dirt-poor southern teens driving with the devil in jacked-up Fords full of corn whiskey. Because long before there were stock cars, there were Ford V-8 whiskey cars - the best means of escape a southern boy could wish for.

*Tell about the South. What's it like there?  
Why do they live there? Why do they live at all?*  
-William Faulkner

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