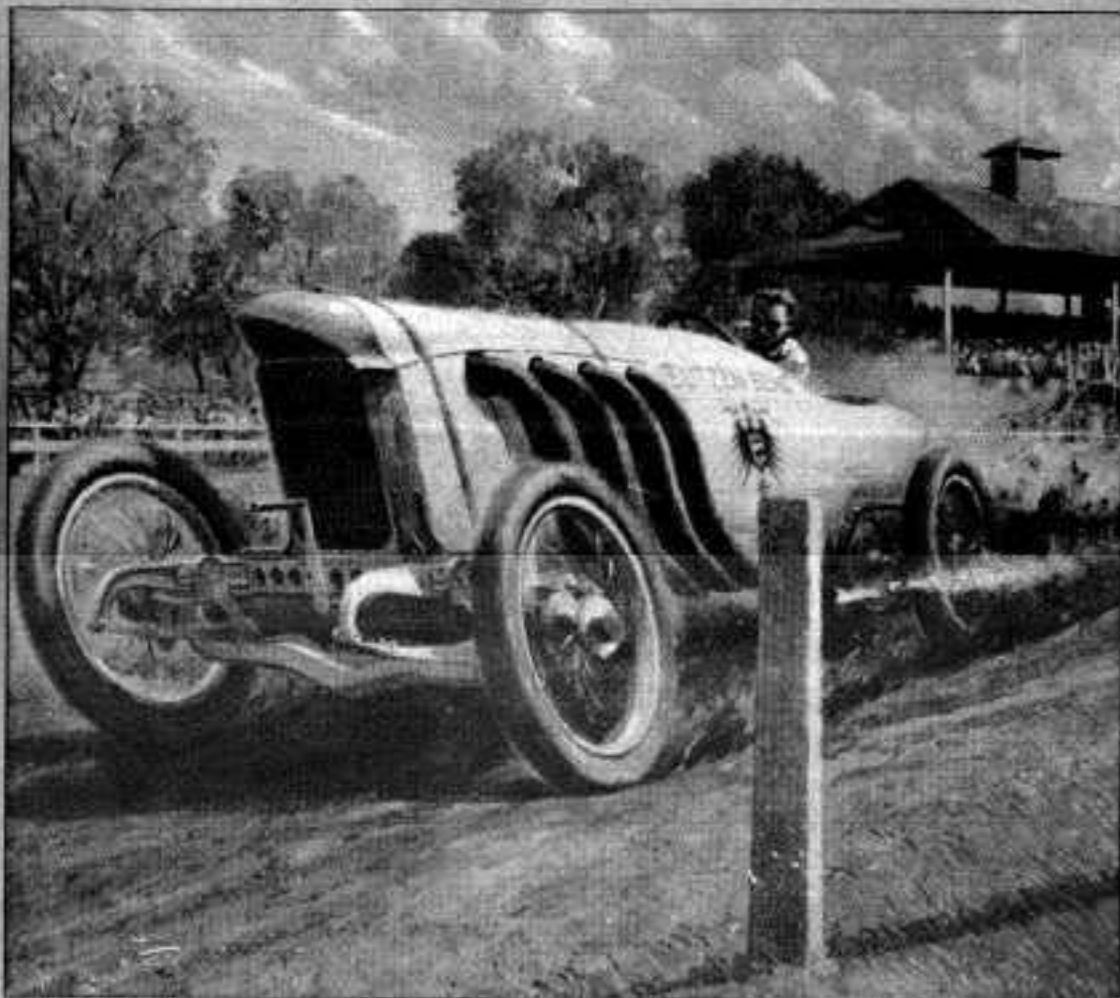


Wauseon Chamber of Commerce presents

Barney Oldfield Day

Downtown Wauseon — Wauseon Plaza

June 4, 1988



Fulton County

Expositor

Oldfield and 999

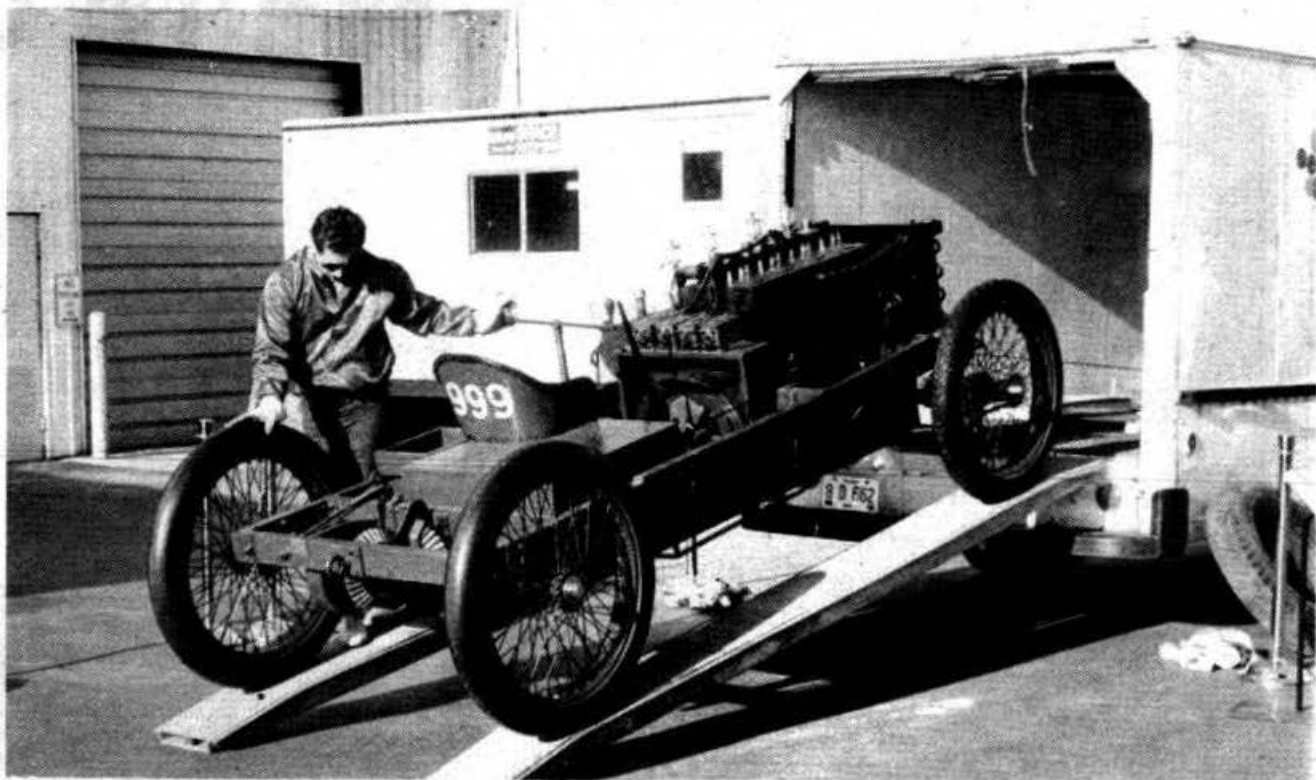
A memorable man and a memorable car

By Bill Auda

Doug Wolfgang or Jeff Swindell might be nothing more than a receding cloud of dust on the horizon if LaVerne Nance or C.K. Spurlock even thought of a white ash wood frame for their house-car rides. But there was a time when the most famous name in racing was more than happy with a chassis made of exactly that — 2 x 6 white ash.

Berna Eli "Barney" Oldfield was the name. He went from the obscurity of 1902 bicycle racing to the international fame of auto competition, aboard what was then the Ford house car — an unruly beast known as the No. 999. Actually, No. 999 was two separate cars, owned by one Tom Cooper, a wealthy bicycle racer and Henry Ford's partner in the fledgling Ford Motor Company.

Ford was convinced, perhaps by Cooper, that his fortunes and those of his motorcar company were tied directly to his success on the race tracks of the times. It was possibly the earliest of the "Win on Sunday, sell on Monday" philosophies. Ford himself had driven in, and won, a total of one race, and it was more than enough to convince him that his calling was on the technical end of things, as opposed to the bugs-in-the-teeth portion of the new endeavor. That the No. 999 car and the Arrow were unreliable and a handful to drive may have had a lot to do with the fact that Henry bowed out as the driver of what was, in effect, his own racing team. Cooper, with the help of mechanics Spider Huff and Harold Wills, was left to do with the



A replica of the car that helped make Barney Oldfield famous, Old 999, is unloaded at Wauseon Ford. The car, which Oldfield drove at one mile a minute—the first to do so,

will be on display at Wauseon Ford throughout Barney Oldfield Day. The dealership is located across North Shoop Avenue from Wauseon Plaza.

cars as he pleased, and what he pleased was to hire Oldfield and send him into the fray against Alexander Winton — the same Winton that Henry had bested the one time he raced.

Oldfield ran his and No. 999's first race on Oct. 25, 1902 — a 5-miler at the Grosse Pointe, Mich., mile dirt oval. He won the race with a time of 5

minutes, 28 seconds flat, while his closest competitor, Winton, dropped out after 4 miles with a misfiring engine. Other than testing sessions, that was the last outing for the car in 1902, but 1903 was going to start early and was full of promise.

Starting as early as the weather allowed, Cooper and Oldfield went on

tour with a vengeance, barnstorming their way through the Midwest and Northeast, running the cars against each other anywhere they could gather a crowd. In June alone, Oldfield set a one-lap, closed-course mile record at Yonkers, N.Y., and then got under the one-minute barrier at the Indianapolis

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There's plenty to do and see during event

If you are in Wauseon on June 4, there will be plenty of things to see and do, as the city celebrates Barney Oldfield Day.

Each year, the county seat of Fulton County honors Oldfield, a native of the Wauseon area, who became famous for his race car driving exploits. A whole series of events and specials have been planned by the Wauseon Chamber of Commerce and local merchants for the day.

The day's activities will begin at 9 a.m. as the registration opens for cars and trucks to be displayed. There will be special gifts given to the first 100 cars registered, and free dash plaques

will be given to each entry. Also, registration begins for the door prizes to be given away every hour throughout the day.

Things hit full stride at 10 a.m., when the displays of antique cars, street cars, muscle cars, trucks and new cars open, both in the downtown area and at the Wauseon Plaza. Also beginning at 10 a.m., the arts and craft show will open at both locations, a skateboard demonstration will be held downtown and the open house at McCord Corp. will begin.

From 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., a small kids remote control car race will be held downtown. From 11:30 a.m. to 4

p.m., one-eighth races, which are remote controlled as well, will be demonstrated at the plaza.

From 12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m., there will be a three-wheel race for kids downtown.

At 2 p.m., the Wauseon Community Band will perform downtown.

At 3 p.m. there are several events happening. Plaques will be awarded to the first place winners in the 10 classes of vehicles. The 50-50 drawing will be held and there will a karate demonstration downtown.

Also featured throughout the day will be sidewalk specials at both the Wauseon Plaza and downtown. There

will also be activities at Depot Park, located just west of the Wauseon Chamber of Commerce building.

To make getting back and forth from the Wauseon Plaza and downtown easier, a shuttle bus service will be available. This will allow you to park your car once, but still get to see all the action and demonstrations.

A special feature of this year's Barney Oldfield Day is the display of Old 999. The replica of the car Oldfield drove to fame is on display at Wauseon Ford. Having arrived in Wauseon on May 1, the replica will be returned to the Henry Ford Museum after the day's events.

Oldfield stops Johnson in challenge race

It is October of 1910. The Philadelphia A's and their manager Connie Mack are basking in the glory of having defeated the Chicago Cubs four games to one in the seventh World Series. Martin Sheridan has just set a world's record of 142 feet, 2 inches in the discus event. And Barney Oldfield, who had established a world's automobile speed record of 131.724 mph in March, is preparing to meet Jack Johnson, heavyweight boxing champion of the world since 1908, in the new sport of motor racing.

One would expect an Oldfield-Johnson race to generate excitement as a Battle of Champions. In addition to this idea, the notion of a symbolic conflict emerged: the first black heavyweight champion versus the white speed king. Thus the contest seemed to many another confrontation in the ongoing racial struggle in America. This match also influenced the development of the emerging sport of motor racing, whose organization was in 1910 guided by the American Automobile Association. Not a few people were concerned that a contest involving the world record-holder and a rank amateur was a threat to the progress of the growing sport.

It soon became known that Johnson had raced in private contests in southern California during the winter of 1909-10 and had been a strong competitor against well-known drivers. It was after these races that Johnson issued his first challenge to Oldfield. But the latter turned him down because, according to The New York Times, Oldfield had "previous engagements and the objection to racing a colored man."

Although Johnson continued to challenge Oldfield to the point of taunting him, the racing champion ignored every opportunity. Johnson then dared Oldfield, Ralph DePalma or George Robertson to race him for \$5,000. In early fall, Oldfield accepted this challenge, most likely because of the money involved.



Barney Oldfield and his wife Bessie Goodby Oldfield, are shown above in the famed 'Lightning Benz.' During his career Oldfield raced many cars. Among them Fords, Plymouths and the famed "Peerless Green Dragon."

Oldfield wrecked the "Peerless Dragon" in a race in St. Louis, Missouri where he was seriously injured and two spectators were killed

After rain forced two postponements, the Oldfield-Johnson race was finally run on Oct. 25 at the Sheepshead Bay Track in Brooklyn, N.Y. A racially mixed crowd of 5,000-7,000 people saw a match that was, by all accounts, very boring. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle called the race a "miserable fiasco"; the New York Sun described it as "a burlesque affair that was not even amusing"; and The New York Times emphasized the "ridiculous ease" with which Oldfield won. In the first heat, Oldfield beat Johnson by a half mile. In the second one he scored another easy victory, though by a lesser distance. He ap-

parently slowed down for the benefit of the motion picture photographers.

The ease of Oldfield's victory raises several questions about him. First, why did this great showman—he had often allowed complete unknowns to defeat him in the second heat to add excitement to the third and final one—go for two straight wins in this particular race? Second, why was Oldfield so concerned about the quality of the films that would emerge from the contest? Finally, since Oldfield had brought the 200 hp Blitzen Benz with him to Sheepshead Bay and driven it in a race against time between heats, why didn't he use this car in the race

against Johnson?

Oldfield himself touches on the first question in his statement to the press on the eve of the contest: "I did not enter into the race against Johnson for gold or glory," he said, "but to eliminate from my profession an invader who might cause me trouble in a year or so if I ignore him now. If Jeffries had fought Johnson five years ago when the white man was in his prime, he would not have had to return to the ring and suffer the (July 4) Reno defeat."

The most revealing aspect of Oldfield's statement is in his reference to the Johnson-Jeffries fight.