

Barney Oldfield

and the Quest for the Louisiana Purchase Trophy

BY Mark Dill

A CENTURY AGO, ST. LOUIS GRABBED A BRIEF MOMENT AT CENTER STAGE IN THE BURGEONING SPORT OF AUTO RACING. ON AUGUST 29, 1904, THE CITY HOSTED SOME OF THE TOP AMERICAN TRACK RACERS IN WHAT WAS PROBABLY THE BEST-ATTENDED RACE HELD UP TO THAT TIME, ATTRACTING OVER 20,000 SPECTATORS. THIS WAS AN ASTOUNDING FIGURE, CONSIDERING THAT THE DRIVERS, CARS, AND TEAMS THAT BARNSTORMED THE COUNTRY HAD RARELY DRAWN MORE THAN 6,000 PEOPLE TO THEIR EVENTS. BUT 1904 WAS A TRANSITIONAL YEAR FOR THE SPORT, AS IT GREW FROM A PASTIME OF THE FEW GENTLEMANLY SPORTSMEN WEALTHY ENOUGH TO PURCHASE THE NEWFANGLED MACHINES TO A SERIOUS PROMOTIONAL PROGRAM DESIGNED TO SELL AUTOMOBILES.

Daytona/Ormond Beach had hosted its first race the year before, and, in less than twelve months, it had grown into a gathering of industry leaders and New York high society. William K. Vanderbilt raced down the sand to set the mile land-speed record in his Mercedes at 39 seconds flat on January 27, just eclipsing Henry Ford's mark of 39.4 seconds set on Michigan's frozen Lake St. Clair two weeks prior. Ford's choice to set his record run on a frozen lake was evidence of how desperate American manufacturers were to find a decent running surface on which to test their cars. Unlike Europe, there were but a few hundred paved miles of public roads in the entire United States one hundred years ago. This compelled

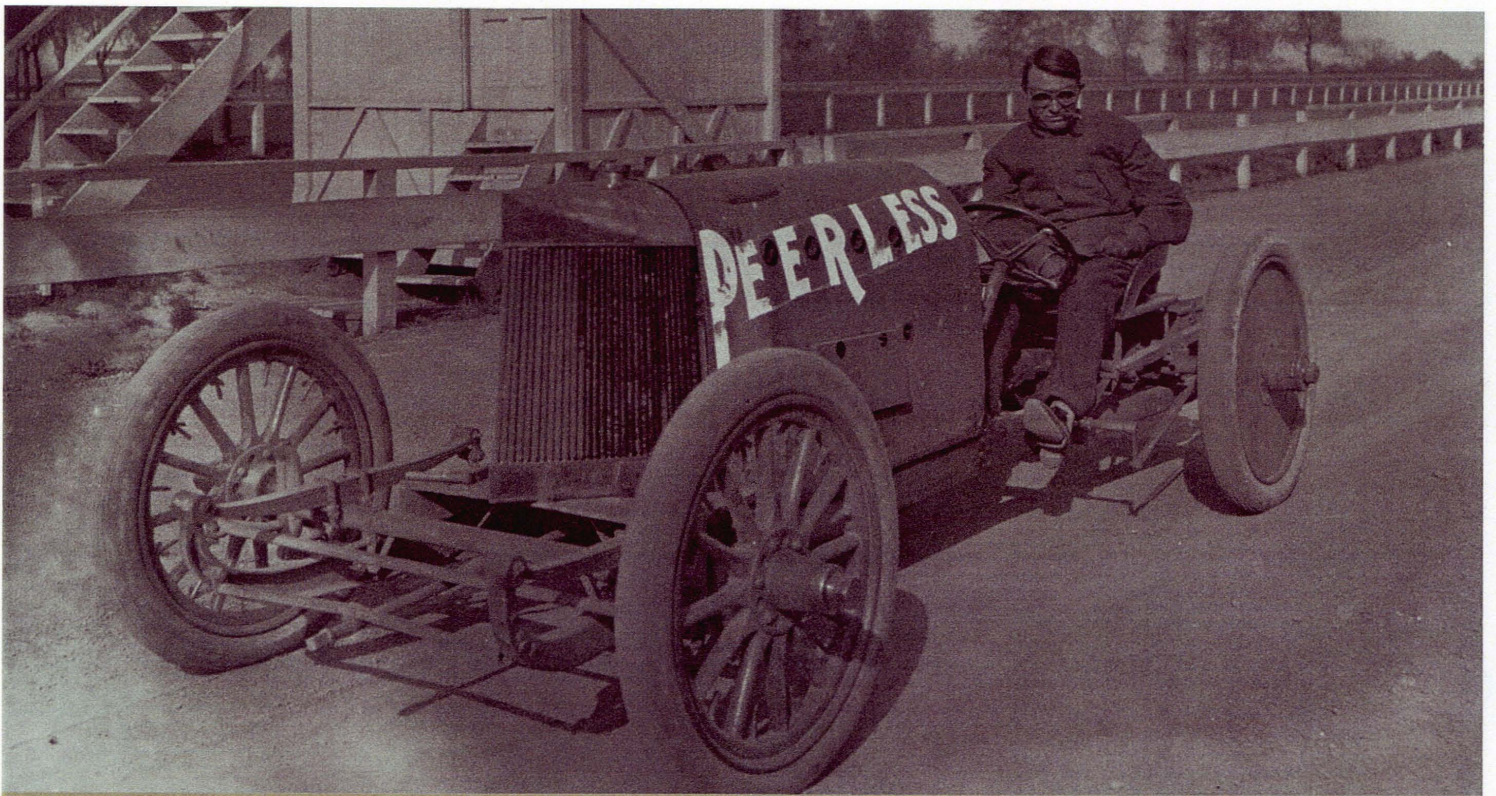
Americans to turn to horse tracks and places like Daytona Beach to find a suitable running surface. The St. Louis Fairgrounds was an attractive venue, and its promoters saw auto racing as a new opportunity to earn revenue.

On October 8, just six weeks after the St. Louis meet, Vanderbilt organized the first of his famed Vanderbilt Cup contests. It was destined to remain the biggest annual American race until the inaugural Indianapolis 500 in 1911. Mr. Vanderbilt's race ran on some of the best public roads in the country on Long Island, New York, and eclipsed the St. Louis affair in attendance, with crowd estimates in excess of 25,000.

As host to the World's Fair from April 30 to December 1, with exhibition halls dedicated to machinery, met-

allurgy, manufacturing, and electricity, it was only natural for St. Louis to host these exciting new machines that could travel a mile in a minute. All the technology must have teased the imagination of a new generation of Americans who were transitioning into urban life and imagining the possibilities of the new century. There was no greater example of humankind's advances than the automobile, and the men that tempted fate racing them at mile-a-minute speeds were a curiosity.

No driver had won more acclaim for his track-racing accomplishments than the best-known racer of the day, Barney Oldfield. While his nerve has never been questioned, many racing historians insist Oldfield's skills at self-promotion were far more impressive than his driving abilities. He worked



Barney Oldfield's skill at driving was more than matched by his skills in promotion. The fame he gained through his contract with the Peerless Company provided him with his famous racecar, the Green Dragon, as well as opened the door to advertising contracts with companies like Pepsi and Firestone. Photograph courtesy of the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.

with advance men who would plaster broadsides around town in the days and weeks leading up to his exhibitions. When he arrived, it would be in a gaudily painted railroad car reminiscent of a circus train. Little boys would run alongside it and stare in amazement at the great Barney Oldfield who had come to their town.

Oldfield was a pop-culture phenomenon. He burst into prominence in October 1902 when, at age twenty-four, he drove the creation of then-obscure engineer Henry Ford to victory over the most noted American driver at the time, Alexander Winton. Winton, a Scottish-born immigrant, was the founder of one of the first commercially successful American car companies, Winton Motor Carriages, based in Cleveland. The following

June, at the Indiana State Fairgrounds, Barney drove Ford's big car to the first ever mile-a-minute on a closed circuit track. In those days, a mile-a-minute was an amazing barrier, and his legend was launched. At about that time, Ford was seeking investors to found Ford Motor Company, and Oldfield's exploits were a huge boon. Years later, when the two met with Indianapolis reporters during the Depression, Ford said to Oldfield, "It could be said you made me and I made you." Oldfield, who had lost most of his fortune in the economic downturn, quipped, "Yeah, but I did a lot better job of it than you did!"

Winton was convinced, too, and he hired Oldfield as one of the first factory racing professionals. Barney went on a tear, visiting California for more match race wins and setting new

records for various distances. When he beat William K. Vanderbilt in their only head-to-head confrontation at Daytona in January 1904, Barney had struck a decisive blow for professionals in the sport. A falling out with Winton over his off-track barroom brawling adventures opened the door for a contract with the Peerless Company. Their car was the Green Dragon, and the name seemed fitting for this colorful character who would eventually become the first celebrity to endorse the soft drink Pepsi in 1909. Oldfield's face was plastered on billboards and magazines with the quote, "A bully drink ... refreshing, invigorating; a fine bracer before a race." He would make many endorsements in his career, including the line, "My only life insurance is Firestone tires." He



Barney Oldfield was a star in the early days of automobile racing. In 1902 he first gained fame by defeating the most noted American driver of the day in an auto designed by the then unknown Henry Ford. Photograph courtesy of the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.



Oldfield cushioned his teeth against the constant vibration of early auto racing with his signature cigar. Unimpeded, the vibration caused pain and, occasionally, chipped teeth. Photograph courtesy of the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.

blazed a trail that seems a right of birth to many athletes today.

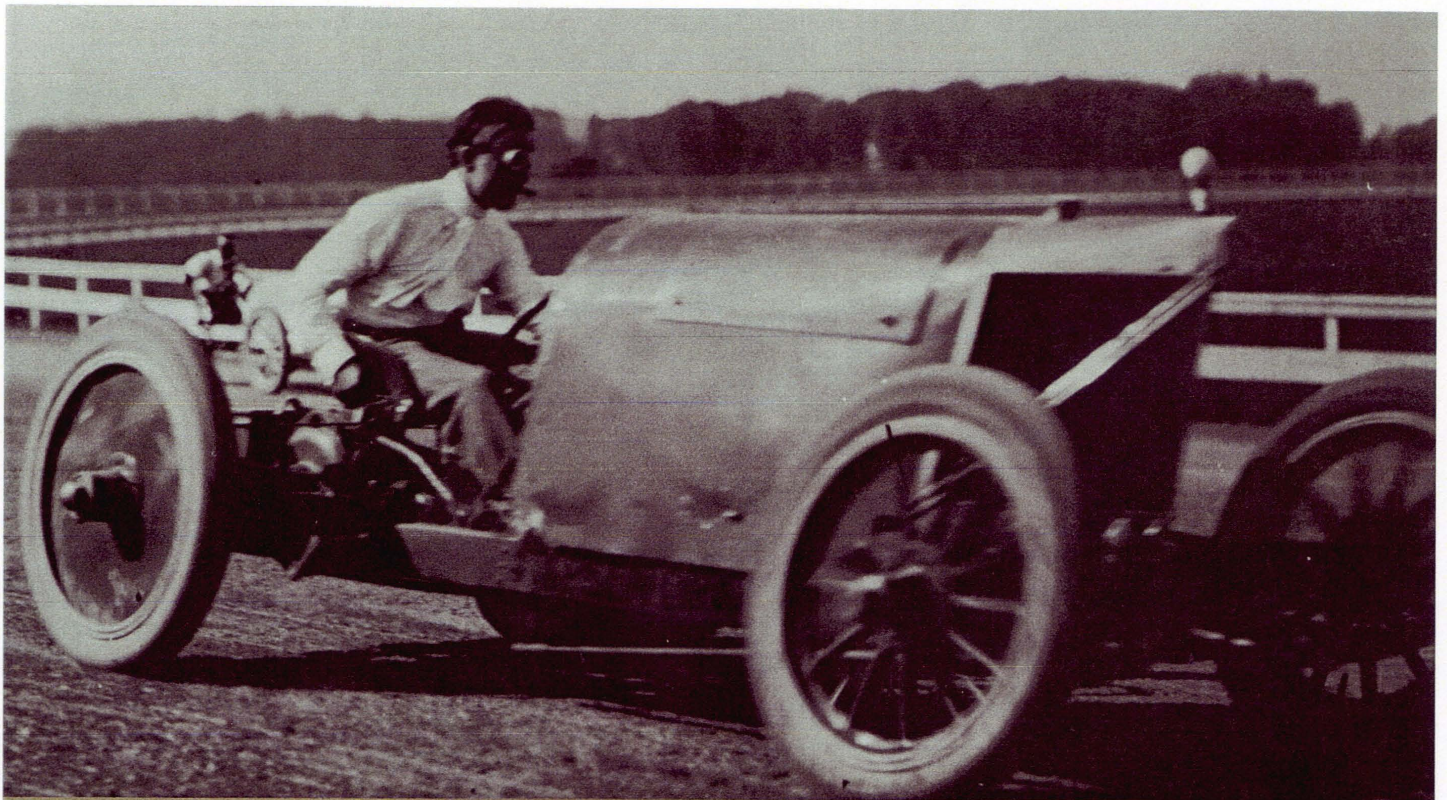
It's easy to imagine the anticipation when Barney arrived in town in late August for the St. Louis race. The Louisiana Purchase Trophy was a ten-mile challenge cup for all types of cars. Oldfield loved nothing more than to get a rise out of the crowd. He wore an all-new forest green driving suit for the occasion, complete with a green leather helmet, both matching the color of his car. Barney's signature was a cigar he called his "cheroot," which was almost always clenched between his teeth. A year earlier, he had suffered his first major accident, crashing through the fence at Grosse Pointe, Michigan, killing Frank Shearer, a spectator who had unwisely sat on the outside rail for a better view. Oldfield's

car splintered the fence, struck the poor man, and continued down an embankment to leave Barney with chipped molars and abrasions. After that, he always cushioned his teeth with a cigar to curb the pain of constant vibrations.

The site of the meet was the St. Louis Fairgrounds horse track, described by a top trade publication of the day, *The Automobile*, as being "picturesque, a bucolic setting surrounded by trees." Today, the site can be found at the northwest corner of Natural Bridge Road and Grand Avenue. The site was a fifty-acre tract of land purchased by the city for \$50,000. The location was ideal for the fairgrounds due to its proximity to the waterworks. A landmark water tower remains on Grand Avenue. Horse rac-

ing became popular, and an impressive horse track was constructed in 1885. The first auto race was held there in 1902, but the 1904 race was its biggest event yet. A mixture of automobiles and horse-drawn carriages filled the clubhouse lawn and the stables. The grandstand was packed to capacity, and every box was taken.

For today's race fan, the meet would have been a frightful bore. There were nine events, none involving more than five competitors. One was a three-mile exhibition by the Green Dragon. Another was an exhibition run of a police wagon, which required more than three minutes to cover a mile. Counting the police wagon, there were only ten vehicles running, and all but two produced no more than twenty-four horsepower.



During Barney Oldfield's nearly two-decades-long racing career he set land-speed records, was among the first to win a race on the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and was crowned "Master Driver of the Universe." Photograph courtesy of the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.

Webb Jay, the winner of the second event, the five-mile Anheuser-Busch Trophy, drove a ten-horsepower steam engine car, a product of the White Sewing Machine Company. In an age when most people still thought of speed in terms of how fast a single horse could run, this was great stuff.

Nothing was more fascinating to them than Barney and his Green Dragon. According to Don Meyer, a veteran vintage car racer who competes in exhibitions today, the car that Oldfield raced in St. Louis was Green Dragon II. It was an in-line eight-cylinder car producing 120 horsepower. It was easily the most powerful car at the event, rivaled only by A. C. Webb's Pope-Toledo. One of the cars that Meyer drives today is Green Dragon IV, the last of four driven by Oldfield.

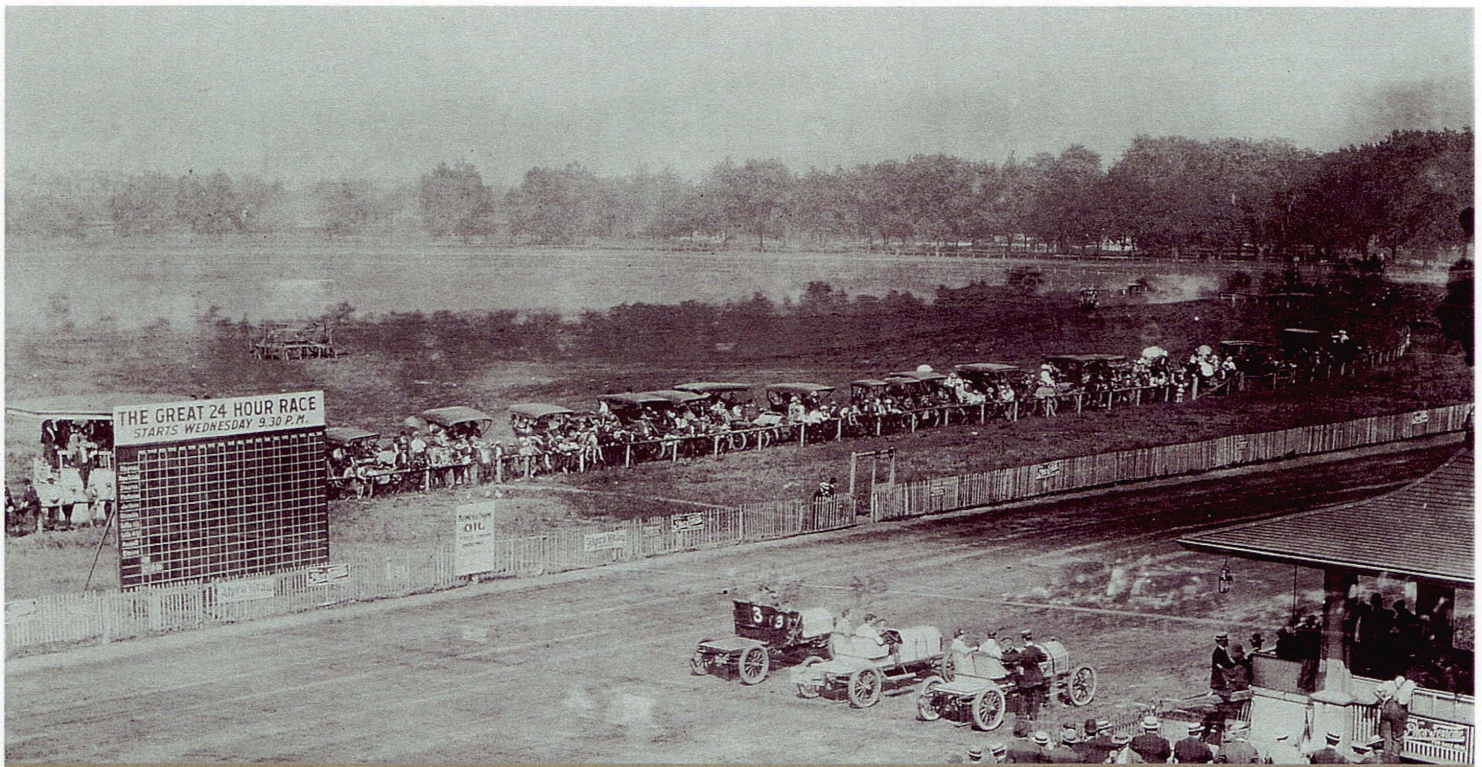
"These cars were very dangerous to drive," says Meyer. "The handling characteristics were terribly imprecise. It required a lot of bravery and a very delicate hand. The car was best on dirt tracks, where you could slide around, but Oldfield had to be an outstanding driver to accomplish everything he did with those cars."

Conditions on the track were treacherous. The soil was dry, and the cars kicked up so much dust it was difficult to see. Although race organizers suggested dampening the course to curtail the dust clouds, the contestants objected, fearing that the water would produce mud and dangerously slippery conditions. Oldfield's three-mile exhibition run was completed in three minutes and fifteen seconds, well over his typical mile-a-minute

pace and evidence that conditions were less than ideal.

Unfortunately, the event is best known for a tragic feature-race accident that involved the star driver of the meet. It was late afternoon, at about 4:30, and the drivers of the two biggest machines, A. C. Webb's Pope-Toledo and Oldfield's Green Dragon, were locked in a wheel-to-wheel duel. As they blasted through the second corner of the second lap, Barney pulled alongside his rival to complete a pass. The drivers disappeared into a dust cloud, obscured from the sight of fans in the stands and from each other. The dust clouds in those early races could be blinding; drivers literally saw nothing.

According to Donald Davidson, chief historian for the Indianapolis



The Fairgrounds Park automobile racing track was the site of the infamous 1904 Louisiana Purchase Trophy event. During the feature race Oldfield hit a fence and lost control of the Green Dragon. He totaled the car, killed two spectators, and landed himself in the hospital with a bad head wound and several broken bones. Photograph, 1907. Parks, MHS Photographs and Prints.

Motor Speedway, these situations were far too common. “Through the years, I talked to many drivers, and heard the same frightening tales,” says Davidson. “Henry Banks, who drove midget racers in the 1930s, talked about looking straight up at the sky to try to see telephone poles or tree tops, just to get a reference point. Nobody came in, though, because that was how you made your living.”

Barney lost his bearings and swung too wide, colliding with the fence. His car dashed through the enclosure, splintering over one hundred feet of rail. The Green Dragon destroyed itself against one of the large oak trees that lined the course, casting its driver aside like a rag doll.

The dust cloud was so thick that all of this happened while fans were

anxiously trying to sort through the flying dirt, expecting Barney to emerge at full tilt, in hot pursuit of Webb. Several seconds passed before people began to see the devastation.

As was all too frequently the case in the early days of racing, spectators failed to appreciate the danger they put themselves in for the sake of seeking the ultimate vantage point. A police patrol had warned people along the fence to clear the area. Obviously, the warning went unheeded. On the way to the oak, the Green Dragon struck two men, killing them both. John Scott, the track’s watchman, lost both legs and died instantly. Nathan Montgomery, a stable hand, died after reaching the local hospital. Oldfield was far luckier. His head grazed a tree limb, giving him a nasty scalp wound,

and he broke a few ribs and fractured an ankle.

From the Missouri Baptist Hospital, Oldfield said, “I will never ride in another race. This is my last, but I may ride in exhibitions. The track was not the best—the banking was too low, permitting the machines to skid and raise clouds of dust, thereby obscuring our vision. The accident is deplorable and lamentable.”

Throughout his career, Oldfield was given to fits of retirement. More than anything, his ostentatious lifestyle of diamond rings, floor-length seal-skin coats, boxes of Havana cigars, and generous tips compelled him to return to the one thing that gave him more earning power than anything else: stomping on the accelerator of a racecar.

His most unusual adventure in retirement came some sixteen months later in January 1906 when he took a stab at acting. Barney, a friend of world-champion boxer Jim Jefferies, followed the retired pugilist's lead to Broadway, where the fighter had taken on the role of Davy Crockett. Barney devised a special effect that included running his replacement Green Dragon III on a treadmill. It worked well and was used in the 1906 play *The Vanderbilt Cup*, starring stage sensation Elsie Janis. But Oldfield, who was never given a speaking part despite his constant badgering, soon grew bored with the tedium of rehearsals and returned to racing.

The self-doubt revealed in the quote from his hospital bed was evident at Brighton Beach in October, where he was noticeably hesitant in charging the corners. He was soundly beaten by a couple of European drivers and confessed his fears to reporters. "I lost my nerve completely out there," he said. "I guess I was still thinking about St. Louis."

In typical Oldfield style, he redeemed himself at Empire City within just a few weeks. He took on the same European drivers that he had lost to at Brighton, bet \$5,000 on himself, and won convincingly. Admiral Dewey, America's hero from the Philippine insurrection, was at the event and bet on Barney as well. By the end of year, he held every track speed record for one to fifty miles. These were the stories that built his legend, and, while several drivers during his day compiled superior career records, nobody had his flair for publicity. Among his many crazy stunts, late in his career he barnstormed county fairs with aviator Lincoln

Beachey, "racing" the pilot's biplane with one of his big racecars.

Just as important, and more substantive, nobody else spanned the time period Barney did. No other driver racing in 1902 survived this brutal age of the sport and continued to race until 1919, when Barney finally retired. Throughout that time he gave the sporting public many memories. There was his 1910 world land-speed record run on Daytona Beach, when he ran his two-hundred-horsepower chain-driven Mercedes Benz to an astounding 131.723 miles per hour. Other high points were his victory in one of the first races ever run at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1909 and his fifth-place finish in the 1914 Indianapolis 500—easily the best of any American. He won the 1914 Cactus Derby, an excruciating 671-mile off-road endurance test from Los Angeles to Phoenix, and was crowned "Master Driver of the Universe." He was a bitter and worthy rival to the era's greatest driver, Ralph DePalma, nearly defeating him in the 1913 Vanderbilt Cup.

While Oldfield's 1904 stop in St. Louis was tragic and painful, it served to strengthen the legend of a man who could cheat death when so many others fell victim. It perpetuated an image that he was too tough to die—an image he profited from until the end of his life. He was as big a national celebrity as any sports figure today. Long after he retired, and even after his death in 1946, a well-worn quip of traffic officers stopping speeding motorists was, "Who do you think you are, Barney Oldfield?" ■

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