



1905: A race car roars by the Bretton Inn in Ormond Beach. Beach racing was the brainchild of the Ormond hotel managers as they created an attraction for winter tourists. Their success attracted competition from the larger community of Daytona, which attempted to seize control of the event in 1905. While Daytona's rich heritage of motorsports traces its roots back to these pioneering days, Ormond asserts its own claim to history with the trademarked phrase, "The Birthplace of Speed."

SHORESPEED

ORMOND-DAYTONA BEACH : AMERICA'S NATURAL SPEEDWAY

STORY BY: Mark Oill • PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF: Ormond Beach Historical Trust

Before America had Speedways.....the unique sands of Ormond-Daytona

Beach reigned supreme as the best place for pioneer racers to push their cars to the limit. For a brief but fascinating eight-year stretch, a mixture of steam, electric and gasoline-powered automobiles raced up and down the then remote shores of Volusia County, Florida, in some of the biggest race meets in the country. But the construction of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, with its state-of-the-art brick running surface and convenient location to automobile manufacturers, turned the nation's eyes to a more modern style of racing. The beach race meets faded away, and many big names of the series became heroes of the Indianapolis 500 (some, like Ray Harroun and Ralph DePalma, won it). Today, as the Brickyard 400 celebrates its tenth anniversary, the stars of a sport born in Daytona have found a second home at the only speedway with the history to date back to those pioneering days.

Off the final corner of Daytona International Speedway, a giant banner adorns a huge section of grandstands with the name, "Oldfield," blazoned from one end to the other. While the designation means little more to many fans than a convenient way to locate their seats for the Daytona 500, the marker is a vestige of the pioneering era of auto racing. Long before the first Daytona 500 in 1959, long before NASCAR was founded in 1947, even well before Bill France organized the first Daytona Beach stock car races in 1936, pioneer racers such as Barney Oldfield sped down the beach and thrilled fans in some of the biggest races in the country.

EVERY WINTER FROM 1903 THROUGH 1910,

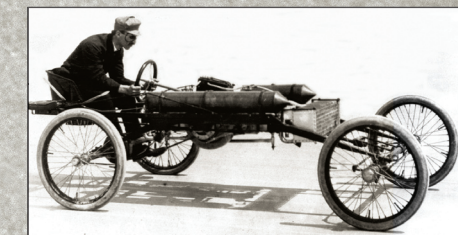
Ormond-Daytona Beach was the stage for speed contests for different types of automobiles. Rival companies promoted the advantages of gasoline engines, steam power or electric motors. The nine-mile stretch of hard packed sand along Volusia

County's beaches was the best proving ground in the world. The unique concentration of quartz in the sand from Ormond and well south of Daytona creates an exceptionally hard surface when dampened and then dried in the sun. "The Automobile," one of the top automotive trade publications of the day, raved about the venue 100 years ago. Strange as it might sound today, they called it a "speedway" and said, "Nowhere in the world can be found a race course on which the driver of a mile-a-minute automobile can feel a greater sense of freedom and security."

Drivers at the first meet in 1903 quickly learned how hard the special sands of Ormond are. Previously incredulous that sand could ever produce anything but a rutty surface they would have to plow through, they soon found it was so hard their wheels spun. The two most prominent drivers, Alexander Winton, founder of Cleveland Ohio's Winton Motor Carriage Company, and Horace Thomas, an engineer for Oldsmobile, devised

traction solutions. Winton carved notches into his tires, and Thomas wrapped cloth around his with rope. But the sand offered additional benefits. Cool and damp, it lengthened tire life. Also, the blinding dust drivers were accustomed to on horse tracks and public roads was nonexistent on the beach.

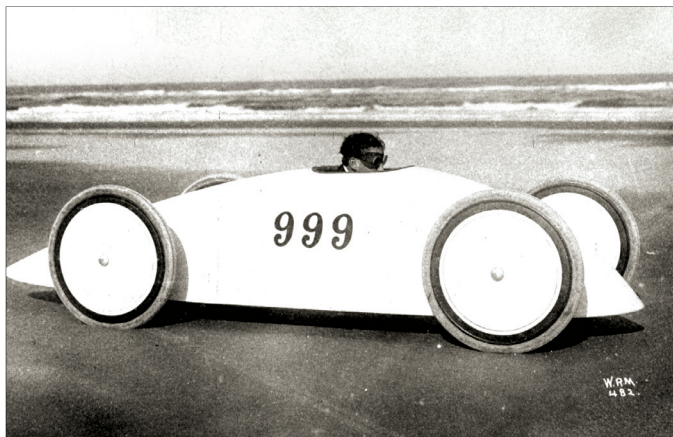
The event would have been a bore to modern day fans. Only a handful of cars and a couple of



1903: Oldsmobile engineer Horace Thomas in Ransom E. Olds' "Pirate" racer. He lost a one-mile drag race to Alexander Winton in the Winton Bullet.

motorcycles were entered. The program was mostly a series of single car, straight-line speed runs, and nobody exceeded 60 miles per hour. None of the drivers were professionals, although Alexander Winton, a Scottish-born immigrant, represented the United States in the biggest race in the world, Europe's James Gordon Bennett Cup, and was probably the most famous American driver of the day. It was the age of the gentleman sportsman, which meant the drivers were either professionals wealthy enough to purchase automobiles, or executives and engineers of the companies that produced them. Only two events in the three-day meet offered wheel-to-wheel competition. One race was for stock cars, where three amateurs – two of them physicians – ran Oldsmobiles more as pageantry than contest. The headliner was a match between Winton and Thomas, which Winton won after giving the Oldsmobile a 50-yard head start. In an age when most people still thought of speed in terms of how fast a horse could run, this was great stuff.

1904: This typical vantage point from Ormond Beach provides fans and officials a view of the start of one of the events. Fields for events were rarely more than a half dozen cars.



1904: This car is the Baker electric "Torpedo Kid," perhaps the most famous of the beach racing electric motor cars. While the steamers had their day, the electrics never excelled. The aerodynamic design looks advanced for 100 years ago, but the body was made of wood and the hubcaps were stretched canvas.

THE APPEAL OF ORMOND-DAYTONA

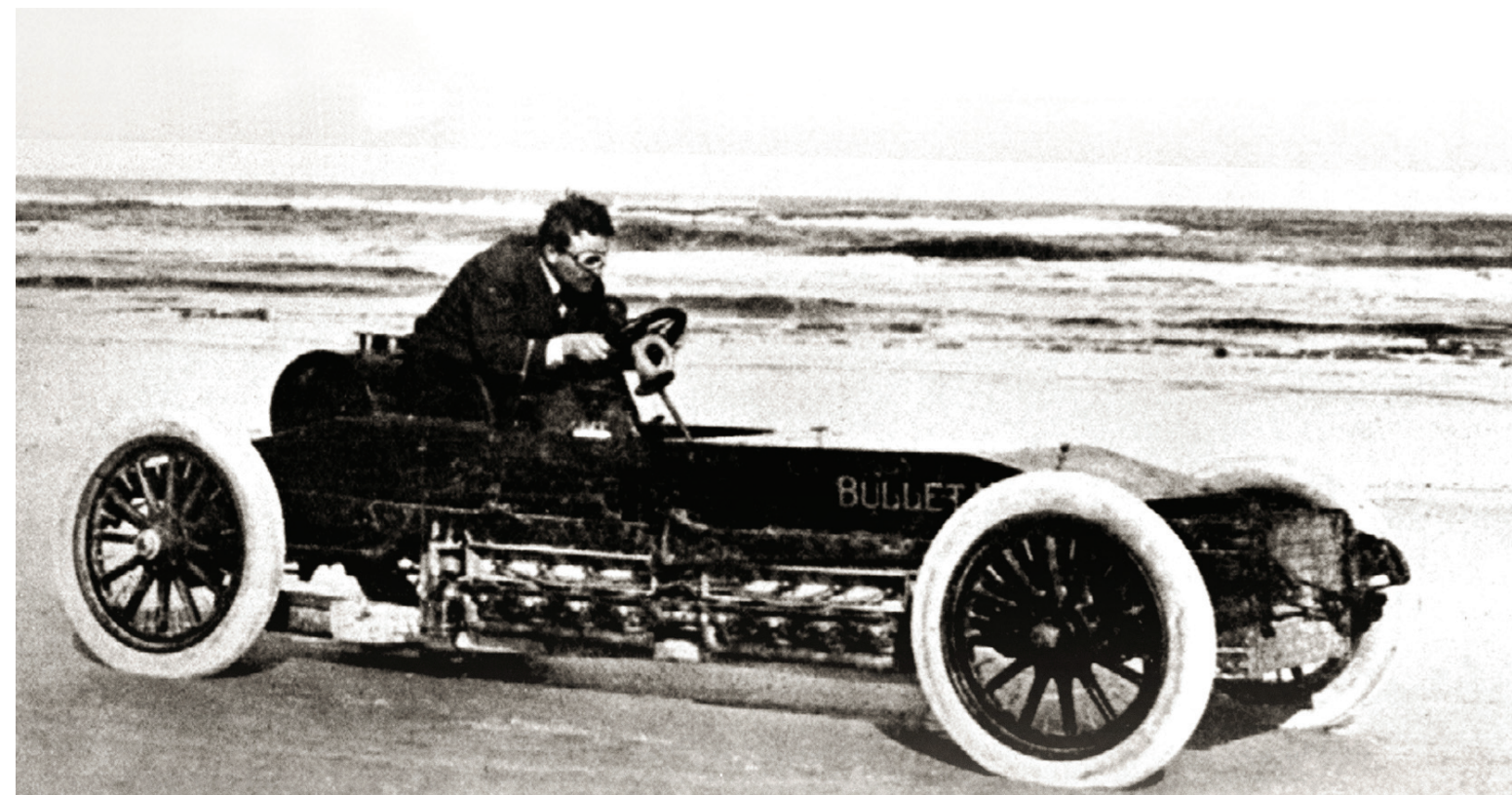
as a speedway grew dramatically, and the 1904 event attracted a host of New York high society and leaders of the automotive industry. Held in late January, the event followed the major automobile trade show at Madison Square Garden, and special trains packed with dignitaries traveled for days to the remote beach community.

Perhaps the biggest news out of the meet occurred the first day. William K. Vanderbilt, Jr., millionaire scion of one of America's richest families and founder of the famed Vanderbilt Cup auto race on Long Island, New York, set the world's land speed record in his 90-horsepower Mercedes. His mile run

of 39 seconds, about 92 miles per hour, eclipsed the effort of Henry Ford in one of his original Ford race cars at 39.4 seconds. Racers of the day were so desperate for smooth surfaces, Ford made his mark on Michigan's frozen Lake St. Clair January 11.

Just as interesting as Vanderbilt's run, was how it was recorded. A major drawback of beach racing was that they always were in a race with the encroaching tide. While the Florida East Coast Automobile Association had electric timers, they were cumbersome and had to be moved following events of different lengths. When it came time for Vanderbilt's record run, it was obvious the tide would consume the speedway before they could





1904: Barney Oldfield in the Winton Bullet II he drove to victory over William K. Vanderbilt.

set up. The American Automobile Association interceded with a recognized stopwatch method that was used in Ford's run. Eight men with stop watches gathered at the starting line. They all started their watches at the same instant. With the watches running, three of the men were driven to the finish line. Vanderbilt took a flying start, traveling from a mile further north on the beach before reaching the start line. The timers there stopped their watches as he crossed. When his 2,000-pound, aluminum Mercedes hit the finish line, the three timers there stopped their watches. Average times were taken at each point. The average time at the start was subtracted from the average time at the finish, and the elapsed time for the mile was determined.

Vanderbilt was the star of the meet. He set seven speed records for distances of 1 to 50 miles, firmly establishing the beach's reputation as a top-tier speedway. He won six competitive events, the biggest a 50-mile contest over a 10-mile stretch of sand with turning points marked by fifteen-foot wooden ladders. But the most interesting contest was the battle for the one-mile competition speed record. The big buzz among the thousands of on-lookers was the brewing confrontation between Vanderbilt and the professional Alexander Winton had hired, Barney Oldfield. It would be the only time the two would meet in head-to-head competition. It was the toast of New York high society versus the son of a penniless dirt farmer; it was a European machine versus an American creation. The focus

on social standing was overt, evidenced by three events restricted to "gentlemen operators." In the end, Oldfield prevailed, setting the new competition mile record from a slow rolling start at 43 seconds. His victory was probably a product of a willingness to run flat out over rippled sections of the sand the locals called "washboards," that actually bumped the heavy cars into the air at 90mph. The next day, after winning a heat for the competition five-miler, his crankshaft broke and the car had to be shipped back to the factory. But the significance of his victories was not lost on car companies, who gradually hired more professionals in ensuing years.

1905: Louis Ross (left) designed and built one of the first steam cars to succeed on the beach in 1905. To his right are William K. Vanderbilt and his Mercedes. Vanderbilt, the hero of 1904, had a poor outing in 1905 and never returned. Ross set the new mile land speed record at 38 seconds.



1905: The Stanley Steamer with Louis Ross at the wheel (right) easily outran E.R. Thomas and W.K. Vanderbilt in the Mercedes (left) and H. McDonald in the Napier (center).



THE 1905 AND 1906 MEETS WERE THE ZENITH

for this era of beach racing. In 1905, a total of 42 cars ran 28 events over seven days. In 1906, the event was even bigger, attracting a full contingent of European entries, including Fiat, Darracq, Napier and Mercedes. In one of the most bizarre victories in the history of auto racing, Walter Clifford-Earp drove his English Napier for 63 of 100 miles on a bare, right wheel rim to not only win the race, but also set the speed record for the distance.

These years also marked the high point of the rivalry between steam and gasoline powered engines. Proponents of gas-powered engines viewed the steamers with disdain, and labeled them "freaks."

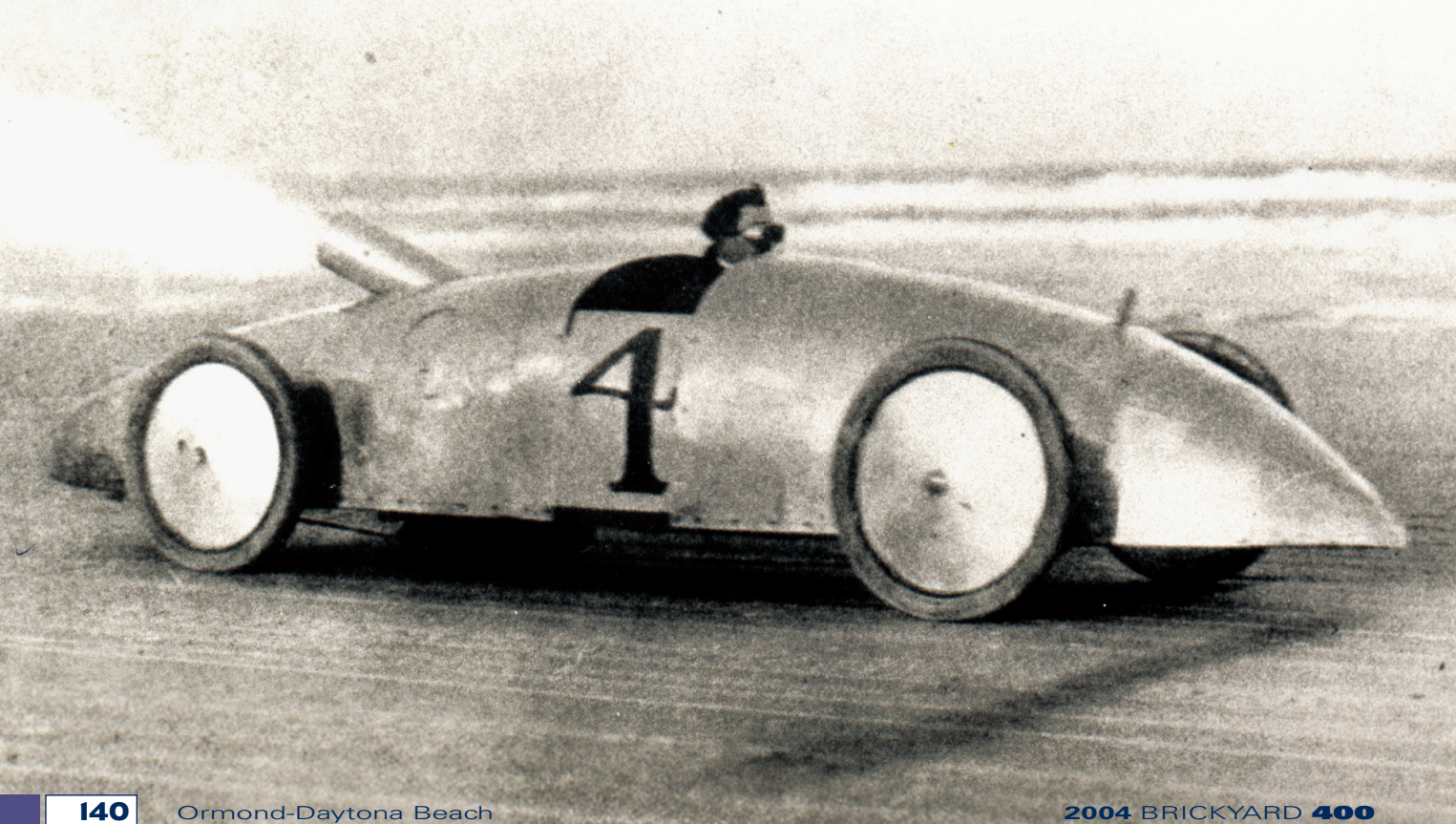
1905: Louis Ross set a new mile record of 38 seconds in a twin engine steam car of his own design.

This was a term of the day to describe cars that had no basis in standard road use, and were designed solely for the purpose of speed.

This moniker was particularly meaningful to the steam cars because those in the beach races didn't run more than five miles. The requirement of carrying large volumes of water to boil for pressure meant they were limited in the ground they could cover without stopping. Also, according to Jim Merrick, Chief Archivist at the Stanley Museum in Kingsfield, Maine, horsepower ratings on steam cars are next to meaningless. It was hard to calibrate horsepower because it varied based on the amount of pressure in the engine. Merrick also explains that they had a huge acceleration advantage. Like locomotives, their pistons drove

power directly to the wheels, generating high torque for immediate acceleration without wasting time shifting gears. The Steamer "freaks" had the "unfair advantage" for the publicity-generating short distance land speed record runs.

The ultimate steam car success story came from the shops of the Stanley brothers in 1906. Their car, with a wood and canvas body shaped like an inverted canoe, set the mile world land speed record with driver Fred Marriott at the wheel, at an astonishing 127.660mph. The record would stand for four years. Aerodynamics played a big factor in the design of the body. The Stanleys devised a wind tunnel of sorts, dragging prototype body designs behind a trailer to get a feel for wind resistance. Unlike most other cars of the day, this one's engine





1905: Sam Stevens in his 90 horsepower Mercedes. Note the chain drive to the rear wheels.

was in the rear. Negative feelings were so strong against the steamer, one competitor tried to set fire to its wooden body with the heat of his exhaust and was subsequently suspended from the meet.

Frustration with the steamers and a date conflict with a major industry trade show in Chicago led to a sharp decline in entrants for 1907. By the time speed trials began, only four cars were entered, and three were Stanley Steamers. A huge accident that destroyed the primary Stanley car and seriously injured driver Fred Marriott soured the Stanley's enthusiasm for speed runs. When the organizers shifted their focus to distance races for 1908 to advantage gasoline burning engines, the influence of steam disappeared.

Despite moving the race meet to March, subsequent events failed to attract an increase in entries.

Nonetheless, contestants continued to rack up various types of speed records for amateurs, stock cars, motorcycles and 100-to-300 mile distances. The motorcycle culture that still exists today in Daytona traces its roots back to these early days where brands such as Hercules, Indian, Orient and Clement set the pace. Most successful of all was Glenn Curtiss, destined to become a famous aviator, who was the star of the show in 1907. He recorded an amazing and disputed time of 136.364 mph, even faster than Marriott's steamer. The V-8 motorcycle is on display today at the Glenn Curtiss Museum in Hammondsport, New York.

Despite dwindling entries, the lure of record setting continued to attract big names. The list of drivers included all-time greats such as Vanderbilt Cup winners Auguste Hemery and George Robertson, as well as future Indy 500

drivers Oldfield, Ralph DePalma, Ray Harroun, Lewis Strang, and David Bruce-Brown. In fact, the construction of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway hastened the demise of the events. The Brickyard provided a high-speed proving ground with excellent spectator vantage points the beach lacked. The last beach hurrah came in 1910 when Oldfield destroyed the Stanley Steamer record with a run at 131.723mph in his 200 horsepower Mercedes-Benz. After a hiatus of a few years, land speed record runs continued until the mid 1930s, when the cars became so fast the beach wasn't long enough to stop. Land speed runs shifted to the Bonneville Salt Flats, and Bill France stepped in to promote stock car races on the beach in 1936.

Today, Ormond Beach hosts annual remembrances of the pioneer days with vintage car exhibitions and a festival. Next year's event will be January 28 and 29 and will re-create record runs from 1905. Despite falling into the long shadow cast by Daytona International Speedway, Ormond Beach asserts its claim to history with the trademark, "The Birthplace of Speed." ■

1910: The last hurrah for the pioneering Ormond-Daytona Beach race tournaments. Barney Oldfield, the most famous American driver of the day, finally eclipsed the Stanley Steamer land speed record set in 1906 with a new mark of 131.723mph.

