

YESTERYEAR AT THE UNIONTOWN SPEEDWAY 1919

An excerpt from the book, *Yesteryear at the Uniontown Speedway*
By Marci Lynn McGuinness

The May 21, 1919 Uniontown newspaper announced:
SUMMIT REVELS GET INTO LOCAL COURTS

Saturday Night's Shindig Likely to get
Three Well Known Local Boys into the Courts
PICTURE OF DEVASTSTION

"Police court echoes of the exotic revels of Summit night life may soon be reverberating through the halls and sacred cloisters of Uniontown society if the legal steps taken today by Manager Leopold Heyn of the big mountain hotel are pushed to their logical conclusion."

It seems Heyn pressed charges on three young prominent Uniontown fellows who had been partying in town and decided to see what was happening at the Summit Hotel. The spring races had been postponed because of a steady downpour and a ball was being held. The celebration that was scheduled to begin after the races, started early because of the rainy weather. When these three fellows (all of which were veterans of distinguished service in France; two wore honored wound stripes), entered the Summit lobby, it was so crowded they decided to rent a room and party from there.

While they made their way down the long west hall, they found themselves approaching the exclusive headquarters of the famous speed kings where "beverages of proof were said to have been quaffed in mad abandon as sounds of the joyous evening percolated through the big building."

When the men first joined the race car drivers and crews, things went well. They drank toasts to every driver in the Victory Sweepstakes race which was rescheduled for the following Monday. Then they drank to each and every divisional commander in the Allied Forces. No one could pinpoint the actual beginning of the brawl, but to use the statement "all hell broke loose" is quite appropriate here. Mortal combat was waged throughout the entire west wing. Heavy and ponderous blows were exchanged, and one famous automobile owner claimed that he was kicked while he was down-by one of the local intruders. Furniture was destroyed, eyes blackened, ears gouged, lips swelled, and teeth loosened.

The next day Manager Heyn went to the local magistrate, filing charges.. Because the violators were from respected Uniontown families, their names were not used in the paper, but the speed kings were unimpressed with their lack of manners.

PUNCTURE AT FINISH COST CHEVROLET RACE

Louis Chevrolet and Tommy Milton turned the race into a dead heat between them going over 100mph into the 99th lap of the 100 lap Victory Sweepstakes Race when the Frenchman's right rear tire was punctured by a splinter. The explosion was so loud it was easily heard above the trip hammer engines. At this time Chevrolet was a mere 20 feet

behind Milton's fabulous Duesenberg. Many believed he would have passed Milton had the puncture not occurred, but no one will ever know. Mulford took 3rd and the rest of the drivers were way behind the trio. There was never a time in the race when any of the three pros had more than 200 yards on the other, but Milton took the lead in the 55th and was never passed.

In the 95th lap, Chevrolet uncorked the greatest sprint ever seen on the track since opening day when Hughie Hughes went after Chevrolet just before his accident. Milton knew it was do or die as Chevrolet caught him, but then, a splinter caused a tire to explode on the Frontenac.

The scant crowd of 7,000 watched some of the best driving ever witnessed here and had the great pleasure of witnessing the acrobatic work of Lieutenant Locklear. When he stood on the upper wing of the plane and extended his hands they were sailing at a mile a minute. This was the thrill of the day, as the postponement of the race cut the crowd to small proportions and other than a few slight mishaps, it was a quiet, but beautiful day.

All hoped that the upcoming July 19 race would have fine weather as they would hold the close of the big Welcome Home celebration for the returned soldiers of Fayette County.

Racers left Uniontown for Indianapolis where they would run a 300 mile classic on Decoration Day.

Milton took home \$3,000.00; Chevrolet, \$2,000.00; and Mulford \$1,000.00.

200 Lap Speedway Race to be Held Here on Labor Day

After postponing the July 19 race because of continual downpours and drizzle, it was held before a crowd of only 15,000 - 1,500 of which were soldiers there as guests of the management. Milton won both the first and final heats, running the final at an average speed of 101.17mph. Dave Lewis drove his Meteor to second place, tailed by Red Fetterman's Peerless, and Oldfield's Golden Sub driven by Searles.

Judge Frank Rosboro warned Fetterman for jockeying Searles on turns and stretches, but Oldfield filed no complaint. Rain threatened all day, but never spilled over. This threat kept thousands away, and the management proceeded to plan a Labor Day super thrill race.

FLAMES ROB MILTON OF DESERVED RACE VICTORY

At the Third Annual Autumn Classic Uniontown Speedway Race, fair weather predominated. For the first time that year, the scheduled race was not postponed because of inclement weather. The last two post-war races saw small crowds, but the Labor Day event was a smashing success. Attendance was estimated at 28,000. Total receipts came to \$79,000.00 with speedway profits of \$50,000.00. Total motor cars in attendance were close to 6,000.

Frontenacs won three of the top four spots as Joe Boyer grabbed the big money. Roscoe Searles came in 2nd with Chevrolet and Mulford just behind him in their Frontenacs. Then came Dave Lewis, Art Klein, Toland Nicholson, and Wilmer Monahan.

On the 190th lap, Tommy Milton's Duesenberg burst into flames as it left the Death

Curve. He turned the car around, moving the flames away from him, and slammed into the inner guard rail. He burnt his hands, feet, and face escaping and tumbled over the rail into the infield as \$20,000.00 worth of fine machinery went up in smoke.

Throughout the race Milton out-drove Chevrolet and Mulford, but toward the end Milton was running on 7 cylinders after breaking a connecting rod when one wheel dropped into one of the holes on Death Curve. He knew the risk he was taking, but prayed he could cross the finish line before the race car had all it could stand. The dead cylinder filled with gas. Backfire from the exhaust set the car on fire and Milton's first run was over.

Gaston Chevrolet had been driving the Frontenac that won the race, but was replaced by Joe Boyer when he came into the pits to reshod the Frontenac.

Vivian Prescott, motion picture star and wife of starter Neil Whalen, attracted much attention and was hailed to have the grandest costume among the distinguished in the boxes.

The Braender tire held the best record for endurance as Mulford's set lasted through Sheepshead Bay, Tacoma, and Uniontown.

Milton's mechanic, W.D. Kessler fell in love here and married Miss Gladys Bean of South Beeson Avenue. When he was not on the road, Uniontown was now his home. While Milton and Kessler had their wounds and burns dressed, many of the "fancy" ladies showed their emotions and were quieted down with much difficulty.

It was this year that the wooden track began to deteriorate, boasting holes the size of man holes. Repairs were planned to have the track in ship shape for the spring of 1920.

The track was hailed as the greatest in America.

Milton spent two months in the Uniontown hospital and it is legend that he was quite a flirt with the female employees there, forever flattering and joking with them.

Denny Hickey, Dawson Racer

On April 28, 1909 Denny Hickey, 19, won the Championship Fayette County 13 Mile Marathon Race at Stillwagon-Marietta Park in Connellsville. He was born in Dawson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Hickey. As a young teenager, he was a friend of Sarah B. Cochran's niece. Mrs. Cochran, wife of Dawson's famed coal and coke baron "Little" Jimmy Cochran, bought herself a car in the early 1900's. At this time she knew no one who had driving skills, but Hickey had been chauffeuring her carriage. Mrs. Cochran's niece suggested that she ask Hickey to learn to drive her new car. She did just that and Hickey proved to be more than up to the task..

In the Memorial Day Indianapolis 500 of 1919, Dawson born Denny Hickey drove the "Stickel" to take 9th place in the first big race to be run after World War I ended. The #59 Hudson, owned by Connellsville Hudson dealer, Augustus Stickel, covered the 500 miles of brick track in 6 hours, 13 minutes, and 57.24 seconds. After 10 (2 1/2 mile per lap) laps, his car moved to 24th place and by the time he ran 80 laps, he had reached 13th place. During the last 10, Hickey gave all the 6 cylinder had and pushed on to make history. His average speed in that race was 80.22mph. Hickey had been trained in the car racing field by Earl Porter and entered in his first races by Burges J. McGill.

As you go through the earlier chapters in this book you will see that Hickey was a

contender in many races at the Uniontown Speedway. His love for cars grew, but after 1919, he got married and had a family, hanging up his racing goggles. He opened Hickey's Brake Service on Crawford Avenue in Connellsville January 15, 1926.

Daughters Mary Louise Clemmer and Anne Hickey of Connellsville remember their father as a man with a great sense of humor. A good old boy from the old board track, he taught his children to drive, sold cars, worked as a mechanic, and became foreman for the Fayette County Department of Highways. His life's work involved motor vehicles and he shall always be remembered as Fayette County's own Speed Demon.

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The National Prohibition or "Volstead Act" began midnight January 16, 1920, outlawing intoxicating liquors with an alcohol content over 5%. There were concessions for medicinal, sacramental, and industrial purposes and for fruit and grape beverages made on your own property for home use. Smuggling, distilling, fermentations, and brewing became legend. Speak easies, bootlegging, and organized crime grew rapidly, making the government corrupt at all levels. Prohibition lasted 14 years, during which our Fayette County mountains and foot hills joined in the above mentioned past times with great zeal. Although none of the articles mentioned this, I would say that was the end of selling beer at the Uniontown Speedway, but as you will see, the law did not stand between the people and their thrills.

The Headline of the Daily Standard June 19, 1920 read:

SPEEDWAY CROWD IS BIGGEST EVER CARS AND DRIVERS ARE FIT

The morning before the race, papers referred to it as the "longest, classiest, and probably the best automobile race ever run on the Uniontown Speedway." The weather was perfect and advance ticket sales were by far the heaviest in history. Roads were "black with cars" as thousands poured into the city. Street cars were jammed all day long looking like "sardine carriers" and the special trains run from Pittsburgh and all branches in the southwestern area of the state were due in at 1pm full of "speed bugs for the big whirl".

Sixteen cars and drivers were all fit and ready to run with Ralph DePalma having clocked unofficially the night before up to 106mph in a test run. He was reported to have been smiling broadly when seen that night.. Milton and Mulford were the common favorites as fans suspected their cars would hold out longer than the Italian's in the grueling 225 mile/200 lap grind. Gaston Chevrolet, Jimmy Murphy, Roscoe Searles, and I.P. Fetterman were here to show their skill, and Denny Hickey still had his following. Predictions were, that the average speed could be 90mph if the planked surface could stand the horrific strain.

Milton Holding Victory at Speedway BUT ONE SMASH-UP IN 225 MILE SPEED CARD

June 21, 1920 Morning Herald: "Tommy Milton, world's title holding speed pilot, put his second mark on the Universal Trophy cup Saturday afternoon at the Uniontown Speedway by winning the fifth Universal Trophy race, a 225 mile event, making the distance in two hours, twenty-two minutes, forty four and thirty six hundredth seconds at an average of 94.9mph. This was Milton's second consecutive Universal Trophy. If he wins the next one it is his to keep permanently.

Murphy, O'Donnell, and Fetterman followed the winner marking the first time in history for a team (Duesenberg) of drivers to take all top spots. Cash prizes were \$5,000.00 for 1st, \$3,000.00 for 2nd, \$2,000.00 3rd, \$1,500.00 4th. Ralph Mulford, Benny Hill, Joe Thomas, and Roscoe Searles finished in that order for \$1,000.00, \$750.00, \$500.00, and \$250.00.

Fifty thousand race fans witnessed as Wade Day Morton rounded the Death Curve on the 180th lap, turned a somersault, and rested against the guard rail. Mechanician Arthur Kaemp was thrown clear of the wreck and into the soft soil of the infield. Morton was held in his seat by the steering wheel. Kaemp was taken to the hospital and treated for brush burns, but both fellows faired uninjured otherwise.

After the first hundred laps Gaston Chevrolet and Roscoe Searles were sure contenders for first place, but during the 118th, Chevrolet retired his Frontenac because of a "wounded engine." Searles, driving a Monroe for Louis Chevrolet went to the pits in the 119th, but the time lost giving the machine a "once-over" cost him his spot at the top. Art Klein's engine "gaspd for breath and died" when he was 200 yards from the tape, 7th place his by 2 laps. This is funny today, but I assume it was not amusing to the men at the time, as the mechanic (with numb legs from the long hard ride) tried his best to dash to the pits for a can of gas as Klein attempted to push the Frontenac to the finish. As this scene progressed, Joe Thomas passed them and took their coveted prize.

I.P. "Red" Fetterman took 4th place by running the 200 lap race at a steady pace of 91mph with no stops. Joe Thomas lost 4th place to Fetterman when he ran out of gas on Death's Curve. When he returned to the track, Searle was in the same predicament. During the 159th lap, the fastest pit work in the history of the track was set when Milton's crew changed his tire in nine seconds.

Before the Autumn Classic of 1919, the race days at the speedway consisted of not only the two main races, but several heats and championships. Last year's 225 mile race proved to the management that spectators wanted the big races for the big money and that is what they intended to offer. For the first time in the speedway's history, the grand stand was filled to total capacity. There was not a seat left to be had. Uniontown had

never known such crowds in the history of its life. Estimated profits for the Uniontown Speedway Association was estimated at \$90,000.00 with estimated receipts at \$125,000.00.

At this point, the wooden track was filling radiators and injuring drivers with splinters. The half of the track used most needed resurfacing badly and it was estimated the work would take \$100,000.00 and a full two months of labor. Both Ralph DePalma and Tommy Milton suffered cuts and sores from the flying wooden pieces, DePalma's stuck behind his elbow. Drivers left town a few days after the race, heading to Tacoma for the July 5th extravaganza. They were assured by speedway officials that if the track did not get a complete working over, it would definitely be more than adequately repaired for the next big race.

After the race, 126 boy scouts were on hand to direct the heavy traffic and help assure safety to fans. "All roads led to the Summit" after the race as a victory party ensued to celebrate the greatest day of the Uniontown Speedway thus far.

Out of the twelve races held there at that time, eight had been postponed because of rain. The speedway association began insuring the weather with Chisholm & Kunkle who would have paid the association \$30,000.00 if it had rained for the race. This seemed to work, for the rain ceased and all went well.

The headline September 7, 1920 read:

Milton Wins Speedway Crown Before Local Crowd

Papers reported that a record breaking crowd packed the speedway for 1920's Autumn Classic. Milton gave his fans a show cracking the track record by averaging 96mph in his mighty Duesenberg. There were no injuries, and the tree limbs that usually blocked the score board were bare.

By winning this 225 mile race, Milton fixed himself as number one among American speedway drivers. Gaston Chevrolet came right behind him with his May 1920 Indy 500 win. Milton, Murphy, and O'Donnell ran the first hundred laps as if their Duesenbergs were tied together with a string. Hearne was thought to be the fastest driver of the day and if he was not forced into pit stops so often, would have taken the money. Gaston Chevrolet was ridiculed when he side-swiped Waldo Stein's Monroe toward the end of the race. Stein finished the race minus his right brake band which he lost in the crash.

Positions, cars, and prizes were as follows at the finish:

1st, Milton, Duesenberg, \$5,000.00; 2nd, Murphy, Duesenberg, \$3,000.00; 3rd, Hearne, Revere-Duesenberg, \$2,000.00; 4th, O'Donnell, Duesenberg, \$1,500.00; 5th, Chevrolet, Monroe, \$1,000.00; 6th, Miller, Duesenberg, \$750.00; 7th, Stein, Frontenac, \$750.00. Ralph DePalma was put out of the race the day before because of a broken piston. The Italian speed king has had a run of bad luck at the Uniontown track from the beginning.

Milton had been working on a new race car and promised crowds that he would be running his Duesenberg motor on a Frontenac chasis the following year. "Watch me next year," he told them.