

Vivian & the Board Track Boys

by Marci Lynn McGuinness



Flagman/Manager of Events, Neil Whalen, wife and silent film star, Vivian Prescott, and Duesenberg driver, Tommy Milton at the Uniontown Speedway board track, 1919.

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This story is a work of fiction inspired by McGuinness's research for her nonfiction books, *Yesteryear at the Uniontown Speedway* and *Speedway Kings of Southwestern Pennsylvania*, 100 Years of Racing History. Many deceased famous people were involved in the Summit Mountain Hill Climbs and Uniontown Speedway board track. Their names are used here, as they put a lot of hard work into these enterprises, and should get credit.

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Dedication

Since 1996, all of my board track racing books have been dedicated to the late Jim Boyd, who entrusted me to research and publish the story of the infamous Uniontown Speedway board track and Summit Mountain Hill Climbs.

I continue this mission, with an eye to making a feature film of the early racing action that coal, film, and auto barons orchestrated in southwestern Pennsylvania.

My pictorial history books show you a chronological overview. In this story, I strive to bring you the essence of the coal and coke boom, and the personalities who rocked this part of the world from 1913 - 1922. Uniontown, Pennsylvania was the wealthiest town and playground in America, imagine it!

The year 2013 marked twenty years of research on this subject for me. It is also the 100 year anniversary of the first Summit Mountain Hill Climb. This story is in honor of the men and one woman, who organized this a feat for our neck of the woods.

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Although I was a famous silent film actress, I was not allowed to ride in my husband's car. Requesting permission would have given the Vanderbilt Cup Racing Commission the chance to turn me down. Luckily, Neil was adventurous. We devised a plan the day we met George Titlow at the Brunot Island Race Track in Pittsburgh. It was his laugh that drew us to the crowd surrounding Louis Chevrolet and Barney Oldfield. As we approached, the men turned toward us. George spoke first.

“Miss Prescott, I am a true fan of your films,” he said. I nodded, smiled.

To Neil, “Great driving today, Mr. Whalen.”

“Call me Neil. If I drove better this crowd would be around me.” They all laughed and shook hands.

“I am George Titlow, and thrilled to meet you both. We will be going to Uniontown in the Marietta brothers railroad car if you would like to join us.”

“Coal country!” I quipped.

“I own the most lavish hotel in Western Pennsylvania, the Titlow,” he promised, bowing to me.

“Please join us. I am at your service.”

Rockwell Marietta said, “He will not take no for an answer, Ma'am. It is the key to his success and ours.”

“We would love to, wouldn't we, Neil?”

“Most assuredly. I know of the Titlow Hotel. We are from Philadelphia where they strive to outdo you.”

George laughed for some time. “Then you will join us?”

Harvey Firestone clapped George on the back. “You do know how to put a party together, George.”

Barney Oldfield came out from the middle of the crowd where he was signing autographs. “Barney!” I called to him. We were old friends. His parents were in the entertainment business and now he was promoting the racing industry on Broadway and in a film. He hugged me, not something men did with women in public during the early 1900's. It would have been more appropriate to kiss my cheek, but Barney was anything but appropriate.

“Well, now, Viv, aren't we the rose among so many thorns?”

He took my elbow and walked me to the train as if we had planned the trip together, but he did not board. Once guests were mingling in the dining area of the rail car, George asked Neil and I to his table. I was the only woman among these powerful, lovely men, except for J.V. Thompson's wife, Hunny. We had met them in New York earlier that year.

"I wish I could drive a race car," I said to George during our conversation about Neil's driving career. "As an actress, you could join Oldfield in one of his films," he humored me. "I was thinking about the Vanderbilt Cup races or at Indy."

He burst out laughing. "I like you very much," he said when he caught his breath.

"Then please call me Viv."

He nodded the affirmative, smiling.

"What is going on here?" Neil asked from my right.

"It seems we are going to find a way to get your wife in a big race."

He looked at us, "Could we sneak her into my car for the Vanderbilt race as mechanic?"

"Now you are talking, man. Of course, through disguise."

He turned to me, "Being an actress, you could do it, of course, but can you do the job? Dispensing fuel is not for the faint of heart."

"Faint, she is not," Neil assured him.

"As a woman of your stature, you may be forgiven after the fact," George smiled.

And so it went. I did dress as Neil's mechanic, dramatically removing my goggles and cap after crossing the finish line in Ormond Beach, Florida. The crowd gasped and officials took us into their office. They were diplomatic and forgiving as George predicted. Although he could not be there that day, he and Neil encouraged me to write to the Indianapolis Speedway for permission to be the first woman to drive on the brick track. I did and I was, after winning many trophies on the sands of Ormond Beach under Barney's tutelage.

"My Anna is very proud of you," George told me in a telegram. We had met and became friends at the Titlow Hotel during that first visit. Neil and I invited them to Philadelphia for a weekend in the city. They accepted, and we showed them a grand time. It was 1912. Two homes, seven children and several businesses kept them tied to Uniontown. The coke boom was in full force there. Neil and I had car dealerships in both Philadelphia and New York. We lived well, but as he eased out of race car driving, we were yearning for new adventures. It seems that each time we met George, history was made.

"You must be our guests for Old Home Week, Vivian," Anna insisted. "George is in charge of entertainment. It will be grand. He is throwing an elaborate parade, has a bi plane pilot hired to fly above us, and is setting up a short race track."

We stayed in a suite on the second floor of the Titlow Hotel for three days. Watching George in action was quite a treat. I always wanted to film him. He was against that idea, but treated us like royalty, giving us a grand tour of the coal and coke region. It was all so exciting, the mines, the coke ovens, the barges shipping it all to Pittsburgh. It was also a sharp contrast to the elaborate parade he threw, which rivaled big city events. Pittsburgh Brewing's six horse team led their Old Home Week Princess to the balcony of the McClelland House Hotel where she was crowned and presented with a diamond ring! George seemed to know everyone who was top of their line. Politicians, businessmen, adventurers, newsmen, they were all there.

The drag race track drew thousands of spectators, with Charlie Johnson of the nearby Standard Garage wowing crowds. They were yelling, "Speed King," at him. George waved him over to us. As soon as we were introduced, with Charlie kissing the back of my hand, he and Neil walked to his garage with their heads together. George watched the men as they crossed the National Road. "What is it?" I asked him. He smiled, took my arm, and we followed them. It was that day when George began organizing the Fayette Automobile Club and annual Summit Mountain Hill Climbs.

George, Charlie and Speed Save Uniontown

"What a view, George," Harvey Firestone smiled, standing on top of Summit Mountain with his 'Firestone Tires' banner hung across the finish line. Twenty five thousand people lined the treacherous 3-mile hill for the 3rd annual Summit Mountain Hill Climb. Men were sitting and standing on telephone

poles, signs, and hillsides. The Summit Hotel was filled past capacity inside and out as the first motorcycle in history, a Flying Merkle, topped the knob.

Anna and I were sitting in George's car. The men were standing in the hot sun. As the Charleroi boy and his motorcycle made it successfully over the mountain, the feat was so exciting that Dr. Van Kirk, who was standing next to George, fell dead of a heart attack. Earlier that day, a nineteen year old boy was killed during practice. It seemed AAA changed the red flag to mean "All's Clear" when it always meant "Danger," unbeknownst to the Pittsburgh driver. He died in George's arms.

Then, Uniontown's fastest driver, Charlie Johnson, beat Indy 500 winner, Ralph DePalma. Charlie's ego inflated immediately while George was heartsick over the deaths. He called a press conference to berate the AAA for not alerting all drivers of the flag change.

Charlie spoke against George's remarks and broke away from his long-time mentor, even forming his own auto club. It was awful. Charlie still frequented the Titlow. George still backed Charlie's race cars, but they did not talk.

So, George was planning the biggest hill climb race the area had ever witnessed for spring 1916, bringing in all professional drivers. The Playa del Rey board track in California had burnt. The Brunot Island dirt track in Pittsburgh closed up. George went after his friends in high places, and so did Neil and I, to make this a national event. DePalma meant to beat Charlie this time. He said so in the newspapers. The challenge was set. Uniontown was at a fever pitch of excitement. You could feel it in the air.

Just days before the race, the state transportation department outlawed the hill climb. We had all just been to the wooden track in Brooklyn. Charlie, with his new auto club behind him, George included, collected money from coal barons, film executives, and auto moguls from all over the country. By now, George's friends were Charlie's friends. The two men still did not speak, but worked alongside each other to organize a money making track.

J.V. Thompson, local banker and coal baron, was going bankrupt, taking dozens of millionaires with him thanks to Henry Frick and J.V.'s ex wife. The town that reined as the richest in the country, wobbled financially. George and Charlie saw a chance to keep the boom going. Neil and I helped them. We were having the time of our lives. Could see what could be. We kept a suite at the hotel full time for years to come.

When I sent "Uncle" Carl Lammle a telegram about the new board track, he was building Universal Film Studio in Hollywood. He just moved his production company west from New York, but I knew he would want in on this. Henry Ford and Tom Edison were with him when he received my note. It was the three of them who came up with the idea of the annual Universal Film Trophy for the big race. Laemmle said, "I have a silversmith who can craft you a masterpiece the world will not forget, faster than they can build that track."

He was wrong. Charlie Johnson and George Titlow worked furiously, getting the track built in two months time. It took a week longer to craft the trophy. Most of the men who were now racing cars, started by racing bicycles. These early Speed Kings included Charlie and old friend, Jack Prince. Jack was now designing the wooden race tracks. This evolved into the fastest auto racing anywhere. So, we all invested in getting the mile and an eighth board track built and promoted in record time. Those who had planned on attending the canceled hill climb were more than ready to see the country's newest wooden track, sitting in the most beautiful part of Pennsylvania.

We got rained out over Thanksgiving when the Preliminary Opening Race was scheduled. It was December 2nd by the time conditions became plausible. The men were both on edge and full of themselves. Anna and I spent much of that week at their Stone House in the mountains. The countryside became increasingly celebratory as the drivers, crews and cars arrived. Special trains brought thousands of spectators from major cities. Drivers were doing practice runs up the mountain.

Neil had driven at Indy for three years, so it was no trouble getting all the top drivers to the new track. Fred and August Duesenberg, Louis, Arthur and Gaston Chevrolet, Tommy Milton, Ralph

DePalma, Hughie Hughes, Frank Galvin, they all came to win the Universal Film Trophy. It was worth \$3,000. and the top cash prize was \$1,000.

I still give thanks that Anna and I stayed in the box seats off the grand stand during that first Universal Race. Hughie Hughes initially gave a special performance in his 12 cylinder Sunbeam. We twirled our parasols and waved at the cameras, until the Hoskins team of Hughes and Galvin hit each other on the track. Hughes ended up in the infield. We could see George running to him, pulling him out of the car. The crowd cheered as Hughes waved to us all. He was uninjured. They walked quickly to the press stand but Galvin had lost control. We could see him barreling toward them. Poor Anna! She screamed George's name as the car hit Hughes. Charlie dove on George, saving his life as Galvin plowed into the press stand. It collapsed with over a hundred people tumbling and screaming. Louis Chevrolet won the race, unaware of the horror that was going on. We could see Hughes and several of them were dead, and many injured.

A Universal Film cameraman ran in to film it all up-close, but was removed from the property by security. He did return after things calmed down. Universal filmed all the races through the years, playing the movies at the Lyric Theatre downtown, including what he shot from that day.

The race went on and in May, the grand opener brought in Barney Oldfield and his Golden Submarine. He was so famous that tracks worldwide paid him \$4,000. just to show up. He didn't have to race, but he did. Here he arrived in his own special railroad car, hauling the first race car with a roof. It was built by Miller and Offenhauser in Los Angeles. The Duesenbergs stared at it for hours. Men climbed all over it as they unloaded it.

It was a great Grand Opening day in 1917. No injuries occurred. A young unknown, Billy Taylor, won the big race. Uniontown was on the map as an internationally competitive racing town now. The Titlow Hotel, Summit Inn and 16 more Uniontown hotels were enjoying remarkable profits. Everyone who had a room to rent to visitors, did so. George said they baked 900 loaves of bread that day, and served more rye than on the hotel's grand opening day when 1500 attended and the drinks were free.

It was such fun, but I was thankful for Anna. She was really the only woman friend I had in the area. I was usually with Neil, surrounded by his racing comrades. It was an enviable position, I know, but Anna and I would get away from the fray and hide at the Stone House for spells of time, to recharge. Being a celebrity helped keep the complaints down from other females and the men about my presence. I was privileged to do things women were "not supposed" to do in those days. Our investment of money, time, and contacts helped, too. Neil ran the show as manager of events and flagman. George handled the entertainment, again bringing in bi planes to wow the crowds between races. Charlie charmed investors, spectators, drivers, and sometimes even me.

He worked very hard to get the track open and running. He offered his garage to several competing drivers, just like he did for DePalma the year before. Charlie was dealing Packards now, too. George had financed the business several years ago. I did not know the details, but watching the men bring the town out of a bust situation from J.V.'s bank collapse was quite something. Over forty five thousand people filled the town, many of them wealthy. All businesses were thriving. The downtown streets bustled. Theaters filled, some were showing my films.

George was a family man, although his Vice Presidency of the National Hotel Association took him to every large city in the country, speaking before powerful peers. Charlie had never married, but always had a lassie on his arm, oftentimes, each arm. He had a way with people. A true salesman.

I almost forgot about the long distance races Charlie took on. He was quite famous around the country now for beating DePalma, but that last run from the Uniontown Elks to the Baltimore Elks made him a household name, like Oldfield and Ford. He was a big name now and meant to use it.

J.V.'s bank had just gone down, taking many area businessmen with it. Johnson's customers were not paying him on time if at all. He was getting into financial trouble because of this trickle down, and there was a warrant out for his arrest. He needed a co pilot for the road race, but his Speed King antics had scared off many of his friends. The sheriff agreed to ride with him, and did, with the warrant in his

pocket. The Baltimore Elks had a grand welcome for the men, but nothing like Uniontown. There was a circus in town, so when they arrived home after just over 11 hours driving time, they were put up on an elephant and run through the Elks front door. Charlie fell off. This was his last hurrah as a race car driver. George paid his fines behind closed doors, and the men built the nation's fastest race track.

Being a silent film actress, people were used to me just smiling and batting my eyes. This art has allowed me to listen to many a high powered conversation between the major industrialists of our time. Neil loved this benefit. It was like being married to an inside stock trader, he always said. I was very often the only woman among dozens of men, drivers, mechanics, sponsors. The Duesenberg brothers, the Chevrolets, all the teams helped each other get their cars right. Then they raced against each other with all they had. It was a proving ground for early auto racing, and an awful lot of laughs, too, even with World War I on.

Neil was having the time of his life but he did get called to service for a short time. The national newspapers covered every race. He ran the show, and what a show it always was. In 1919, the Duesenberg team of Tommy Milton and Jimmy Murphy set 52 AAA speed records. By then, a lot of the early mechanics were drivers, the best in the world. The rivalries were interesting, too. DePalma and Oldfield didn't care for each other over a Ford sponsorship. Murphy pulled away from Milton, then became the first American to win the French Gran Prix. And George's ethics were rubbed more raw each year as Charlie's ego expanded.

In 1920, 50,000 spectators filled the stands. It was the biggest race in America that year. Afterward, Charlie promised to use the proceeds to repair the track. There were holes big enough for the local boys to put their heads up through from under the boards! An illustrator drew the scene for the newspapers. George was enraged. During a photo shoot for a new Black & Decker compressor, over 100 men gathered around the Duesenberg team cars. I got in the picture. It was a wonderful time, except that I also witnessed an exchange between George and Charlie. After 5 years of silence, they spoke. Well, George spoke.

"We need to act immediately and get this track repaired. The town depends on it," he said leaning very close to Charlie's face. They locked eyes. The Speed King nodded affirmatively.

I wondered if anyone else saw or heard this. I could not look away. They were behind the crowd. The camera's flash went off several times before Charlie walked away, meeting up with a young, beautiful woman.

I had never had a brother, so being a part of, and watching, the interaction of the Chevrolet and Duesenberg brothers, was such fun to me. Louis loved Gaston, Henry and Arthur dearly. It was obvious. He was designing Gaston a new race car as a surprise. In the pits all the race teams worked hard, laughing, building parts as needed, sharing insights, making history. Uncle Carl brought several rail cars filled with actresses, crew, friends, and family from L.A. to every race. There were fabulous parties before, during and after the races.

George was right to be after Charlie, as it turned out. I never understood why the Uniontown Speedway Association entrusted most of the financial responsibility to the charming cad, but they did. Senator Crow was their lawyer. They had a treasurer and all, but I often witnessed "investors" walking into the box office, pocketing a handful of cash from one of the full wooden barrels, and going about their day. They were wildcat times, and we all paid the price for playing more than working at our beloved track.

The day before the 1922 race, KDKA radio interviewed Barney, Jimmy Murphy and many of the drivers for the first time. The Uniontown Speedway Association also filed for bankruptcy. The owners of the property pulled the lease out from under us, but Charlie quickly stopped their action. The race went on. Had I paid better attention, maybe I could have stopped him. Charlie was dressed casually, with sun glasses, and no suit jacket or hat that last race. We all knew he was under stress, but no one was aware of his plan. The signs were there, though. He lost weight and was on edge. After the race, he disappeared.

It was Uncle Carl who used his connections in Cuba to locate Charlie. He had taken the money from the last race, and went into hiding. Weeks later, Senator Crow died. His procession passed by the deserted track. We watched as a poor family pulled boards from "Death's Curve", on our way to the cemetery. George sold his beloved Titlow Hotel in the midst of Uniontown's depression and prohibition saying, "You can not run a hotel without spirits." Rockwell passed on that same year.

George and Anna visited us in the city occasionally, but we never returned to Uniontown. Other tracks opened and closed. We stayed out of the business end of them, just watching and enjoying the thrill. George, always the adventurer, flew over the Himalayas with Lowell Thomas.

Louis Chevrolet died penniless. Fred Duesenberg passed away a few weeks after his crash while doing a speed test on Route 30 near the Jennerstown, Pennsylvania racetrack, in 1932.

Charlie returned to Uniontown in 1940 with a wife named Edna. His family called her "crass." At the opening race of the New Bryson's Uniontown Speedway, which was built in the infield of the old board track, Charlie spoke, dedicating the facility. George was in the crowd with his daughter. Using his cane, he moved as quickly as he could toward the officials booth. George had been living in a nearby town for several years. This was the first he knew of Charlie's return. The men had words when they met outside the booth.

Two days later, George had a massive heart attack in his lawyer's office. He was livid about Charlie's return to Uniontown. Charlie started a small brewery, paid his workers in worthless scrip, took off to Oklahoma, and struck oil. Neil died that year, too, but I have my memories.

About the Author



Marci Lynn McGuinness is the world's expert on the Summit Mountain Hill Climbs of 1913 – 1915, and the Uniontown Speedway board track which ran in Hopwood, Pennsylvania from 1916 – 1922. Twenty two years of research, two books, three hill climb celebrations and a screenplay later, McGuinness is focused on securing a producer for her film, *Speed Kings*, inspired by this story.

McGuinness is the author of 35 books, many on southwestern Pennsylvanian history, including her in-progress volume, *Laurel Highland Legends*, to be released autumn 2015.

More books by Marci McGuinness

Laurel Highland Legends (TBR 2015)
Murder in the Vineyard (2014)
Pam's Cooking (with Pam Bendishaw - 2013)
1915 Uniontown "Summit Mountain" Hill Climb Program Reprint
Murder in St. Michaels (4/2013)
Ohiopyle, That Little Town, WWII (Lillian McCahan & McGuinness) (2012)
Speedway Kings of Southwestern Pennsylvania, 100 Years of Racing History (2011)
Yesteryear at the Uniontown Speedway (1996, 2nd Edition 1997, 3rd Edition 2008)
Official Program U.S.A. Speedway, 1916 Reprint (1996, 2nd Edition 2009)
Message of the Sacred Buffalo (June 2010)
Hauntings Of Pittsburgh & the Laurel Highlands (October 2009)
Gone to Ohiopyle (September 2009)
Murder in Ohiopyle & Other Incidents (Summer 2009)
Butch's Smack Your Lips BBQ Cookbook, (Spring 2009)
Yesteryear in Ohiopyle and Surrounding Communities, Volume III (2008)
How to be a Working Author/Writer (2005; 2nd Edition, Fall 2008)
Chesapeake Bay Blue Crabs (2004)
In it to Win It (2001)
The Explorer's Guide to the Youghiogheny River, Ohiopyle and SW PA Villages (2000)
Along the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, from Cumberland to Uniontown (1998)
Stone House Legends & Lore (1998)
Yesteryear in Smithfield (1996)
Yesteryear in Masontown (1994)
Yesteryear in Ohiopyle and Surrounding Communities, Volume II (1994)
Yesteryear in Ohiopyle and Surrounding Communities, Volume I (1993)
No Outlet! (1993)
Incidents (1992)
Nanny's Kitchen Cookbook (1991)
Natural Remedies, Recipes & Realities (1986)
The Deerhunter's Guide to Success...from the woods to the skillet (1985)
Natural Remedies (1984)
Unforgettable Poems for Everyday People (1984)
What's Happenin' Around Ohiopyle (1981)

More Publications by McGuinness

Around Ohiopyle Map & News July 2009-present (annual)
Around Ohiopyle Magazine (2008)
Tying the Knot Magazine (2007)
St. Michaels/Tilghman Coupon Booklet (2003)
Yesteryear Calendar series (1990's)
Yesteryear Press (Newsprint Magazine-5 times a year) 1992 - 2002
Speak Easy Digest (Early 1990's-quarterly)
Naturally Yours Newsletter (1980's)

Movies/Scripts

Speed Kings screenplay based on Yesteryear at the Uniontown Speedway board track (2010)
Murder in St. Michaels screenplay based on mystery, Murder in St. Michaels (2005)
Yesteryear in Ohiopyle - The Movie (1990's)

Stories

The Mystery of the ohiopyle Hotel
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