

Vivian & the Uniontown Speedway Board Track Boys  
by Marci Lynn McGuinness

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This story is a work of fiction inspired by the author'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 the Summit Mountain Hill Climbs and the Uniontown Speedway board track. Their names are used here, as they put a lot of hard work into these enterprises, and should get credit. I also combined a few facts from two of the hill climbs, for the “short” story's sake.

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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 coal, film, and auto barons orchestrated here in southwestern Pennsylvania.

My pictorial history books show you a chronological overview. In this book, I strive to bring you the essence of the coal and coke boom. Uniontown was the wealthiest town and playground in America.

2013 is 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 woman who orchestrated such a feat for our neck of the woods.

# Vivian & the Uniontown Speedway Board Track Boys

by Marci Lynn McGuinness

Even though 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 the 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." I nodded, smiled. "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's 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 mine. 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 film. He hugged me, not something men did with women in public during the early 1900's. Being who we were though, no one gave pause. It would have been more appropriate to kiss my cheek. Barney was anything but appropriate.

"Well, now, Vi, 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.

"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 as, I am sure, he rolled several earlier conversations on the subject through his mind. "Is there a way we could sneak her in 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. 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.

“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 new car dealerships in both Philadelphia and New York. We lived well, but as he eased out of race car driving, and me, out of acting, we were yearning for new adventures. It seems that each time we met George, history was made, and so it went this visit.

“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 fourth floor of the Titlow Hotel for three days. Watching George in action was quite a treat, making me want 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 enormous parade 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 followed them. It was that day George began organizing the Fayette Auto Club and annual Summit Mountain Hill Climbs in his mind.

## **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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 a Charleroi boy and his motorcycle made it successfully over the mountain, the crowd was so loud that Dr. Van Kirk, who was standing next to George, fell dead of a heart attack. Earlier that day, a Shaffer 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 head grew while George was heartsick. He called a press conference to berate the AAA for not alerting all drivers of this change.

Charlie spoke against Titlow'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 the Speed King's race cars, but they did not talk.

So, George was planning the biggest 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 Summit Mountain Hill Climb a national event. DePalma meant to beat Charlie this time. He said so in the newspapers. The challenge was set.

Just days before the race, the state transportation department outlawed hill climbs. 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. 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 Films 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 Films Trophy for the big race. Henry told him, “I have a silversmith who can craft you a masterpiece the world will not forget, faster than they can build that track.”

I can see the men laughing, but Henry was wrong. Charlie Johnson and George Titlow worked furiously, getting the track built in 2 months time. 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 designing wooden bike 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 the state.

We got rained out over Thanksgiving when the Preliminary Opening Race was scheduled. It was December 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 excited as the drivers, crews and cars arrived. Special trains brought thousands of spectators from major cities.

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 Films Trophy. It was worth \$3,000. and the top cash prize was a \$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. 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 just missed him and hit Hughes, then the press stand. It collapsed with over a hundred people tumbling and screaming. Louis Chevrolet won the race, unbeknownst what horror was going on. We could see Hughes and several of them were dead, and many injured.

A Universal Films 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 train car, hauling the first race car with a roof. Built by Miller and Offenhauser in Los Angeles, the Duesenbergs stared at it at the train station. Men climbed all over it.

It was a great day. 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, drinking for free.

It was such fun. I was so 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 knew, but being a celebrity helped keep the complaints down from other females and the men. 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 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 twenty five thousand people filled the town, many of them wealthy. All businesses were thriving. The downtown streets bustled. Theaters filled, some showed 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 men. 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 forgot to mention 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. Just after Johnson beat DePalma on the Summit Mountain, the Elks, of which he was a member, sponsored a road race for Charlie to drive the dangerous trek from Uniontown to Baltimore. He had a name now and meant to use it.

J.V.'s bank had just gone bust, taking down many area businessmen. Johnson's customers were not paying him on time if at all. He was getting into financial trouble because of this trickle down, and a 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. The Baltimore Elks had a grand welcome for the men, but nothing like Uniontown. There was a circus in town, so when the men arrived after just over 11 hrs 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 are used to me just smiling and batting my eyes. Therefore, I have listened to many a high powered conversation between the major industrialists of our times. Neil loved this benefit. It was like being an inside stock trader. I was very often the only woman among dozens of men at the track, drivers, mechanics, sponsors, track personnel, spectators. 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.

Neil was having the time of his life. The national newspapers covered every race. He had the most important job at the track. Flagman. 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 here. 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 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 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," George 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 brothers 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 barrels full, and going about their day. They were wildcat times, I suppose, and we all paid the price for some 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 in history. 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.

It was Uncle Carl who used his connections in Cuba to locate Charlie much later. He had taken the

money from the last race, and went into hiding. Weeks later, Senator Crow passed away. His procession passed by the deserted track. We watched as a poor family pulled boards away, as we headed 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 soon passed on.

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

Louis Chevrolet died penniless. Fred Duesenberg, while doing a speed test on Route 30 near the Jennerstown, PA racetrack, a decade later.

Charlie returned to Uniontown in 1940, with a wife named Edna. His family called her "crass." At the 1940 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. Charlie started a small brewery, paid his workers in worthless scrip, took off to Oklahoma, and struck oil.