

Barney Oldfield

The Life and Times of America's
Legendary Speed King

Revised, Expanded Edition by
William F. Nolan



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PREFACE

TO THE NEW EDITION

Barney Oldfield is a racing icon, At his prime, just beyond the century's turn, his name quickened the heartbeat of a nation. Crowds cheered wildly when he stood up in the cockpit of his "Green Dragon" and shouted: "You know me, Barney Oldfield!" And indeed they did.

They called him "The Mile-a-Minute Champion"... "America's Premier Driver"... "The Human Comet"... "Wizard of the Track"... and "The Daredevil Dean of the Roaring Road." In 1910, breaking the land speed record at Daytona Beach, he was the official "Speed King of the World."

No driver of his time was more beloved. In the words of artist-historian Peter Helck:

Idolized by tens of thousands... engaged in [a dozen] splintering crashes... suspended frequently for violations of the official ruling... a hippodromer who performed spectacularly... ("wherever I got the sugar"), he was "The Old Master."

I wrote this book about him more than four decades ago and it has taken its place in automotive history as the only published biography of one of the great pioneers of American racing. And although motor cops no longer accost speeders with "Who do you think you are, Barney Oldfield?" his legend is secure. There was no one like him in his day and there's been no one like him since.

Barney Oldfield has been long out of print, relegated to the shelves of automotive libraries and specialist collectors. Therefore, I am genuinely grateful that Brown Fox Books has elected to republish it in this handsome new edition—a cause of celebration for racing fans and history buffs. And very special thanks to Mark Godfrey for his lengthy, painstaking work in gathering the fine period photographs for this new edition. He also designed the layout and provided the photo captions. His contributions are greatly appreciated. No author could ask for a finer editor/publisher.

Barney left us in 1946, but in these historic pages, in the dirt-track dust of motorized battle, the Old Master lives again.

W.F.N.

West Hills, California

July, 2002

Duel in the Michigan Dust

THE MORNING OF OCTOBER 25, 1902, dawned chill and gray over Michigan. The sky was a shifting mass of oppressive, slate-colored clouds, and by noon a gust of wind-driven rain had dampened the mile oval at Grosse Pointe, just east of Detroit. The popular horse track, proudly described by a local newspaper as “the most beautiful in the country,” was originally laid out over a stretch of low-lying marshland bordering the Detroit River, and many spirited thoroughbreds had galloped to dusty victory on its dirt surface. However, on this particular afternoon, the five-mile main event (for the Manufacturers’ Challenge Cup) was not to be contested by four-legged steeds. No, here at Grosse Pointe, before some 2,000 impatient spectators, that awesome turn-of-the-century phenomenon, the automobile, would unleash its frightening speed.

Excitement was in the air. The nation’s automotive champion, Alexander Winton, millionaire founder of the Winton Motor Carriage Company in Cleveland, and the man responsible for America’s first commercially successful motor car, was here to drive his fabled “Bullet,” a machine capable of brutal track speeds in excess of 50 miles per hour. He was certain to vanquish the field, and with a well-dampened track a new record might be in the offing.

To understand properly the avid curiosity engendered by such an event, it must be borne in mind that America, in 1902, was still a land of the horse and buggy. Millions of Americans had never seen an

automobile, and beyond the large cities the auto was all but unknown as a form of transportation. For example, auto registrations for the entire state of New York totaled just 909. Extensive four-wheeled travel was impossible, with only 178 miles of paved road throughout the country. Nevertheless, the auto had definitely progressed beyond the fad stage, and businessmen such as Winton knew that the quickest way to lure potential buyers was to prove a machine's durability and speed in open competition. Therefore, on this gray Saturday afternoon at Grosse Pointe, Alex Winton had his sights firmly set on another racing triumph for the Bullet.

(Scottish-born, Winton was nineteen when he landed in New York, in 1879, and at thirty had founded a bicycle company in Cleveland. By 1896 he put an automobile of his own design on the road, and was credited with the first commercial sale of an auto in the United States, two years later.)

Winton's main competitor in the five-miler was said to be the largest car in Detroit, the powerful Geneva Steamer. With its huge wheelbase, four massive boilers and tall stack, the Steamer dwarfed the low, flat-bodied Bullet, and trackside wagers were made that the Scotsman might well taste defeat at the hands of Bucknam, who was to pilot the big steam-driven vehicle. Only three other cars were entered: Shanks, in the Winton "Pup," White in his own White Steamer and the ex-cycling star Tom Cooper in an odd crimson-painted creation listed simply as "999."

Though it had not yet been tested under racing conditions, this unique automobile posed a solid threat to both Winton and Bucknam. Its monstrous four-cylinder engine promised to deliver almost twice the horsepower of the Bullet—75 against 40, and its rigid ashwood- and steel-plated chassis was stripped of all nonessential weight. However, handling the machine at speed was a serious problem, and brute strength was required to operate the heavy iron control bar. Due to the unyielding frame, any sizable chuck hole would pitch the entire car into the air, necessitating emergency action at the tiller. Also, since the stark machine lacked protective bodypaneling, its driver was subjected to a continuous oil bath from the exposed crankshaft.

As the race was about to get under way, Winton, a dapper mustached man in spotless attire, climbed into the high seat of his *Bullet* with a confident smile. He waved a gloved hand to the crowd as a spectator shouted: "We're betting on you, Alex. Make 'em eat your dust!"

Then Winton noticed that Tom Cooper was not in the bucket seat of 999. Instead, a husky youth with a shock of dark hair above his goggles sat nervously in Cooper's place.

"Who's that?" Winton inquired of an associate.

"Some kid named Oldfield. I hear this is his first race. Don't worry about him."

Winton nodded, more confident than ever. Since Cooper had been foolish enough to send a novice against veterans the potential threat of 999 could be disregarded.

Oldfield, trailing the other cars, seemed unsure of himself as the group rolled toward the starting tape, but as the flag snapped down he immediately shot ahead, sweeping around the first turn with a clear lead over a startled Winton. Although taken by surprise, the Scot fought back. After the first blistering mile his *Bullet* began to close the gap, steadily overhauling 999. The canny champion was proving his skill and speed, and it seemed that another important race would be added to Winton's victory string.

Glancing back at the onrushing *Bullet*, Oldfield set his jaw and opened the throttle. The red machine leaped forward with a deafening blast from its four exhausts. Sliding the turns in the same wide-open manner, dust pluming up behind him, Oldfield held the lead.

Winton was dropping back.

Skimming along, scant inches from the stout wooden fence encircling the track, the youth maintained full throttle, fighting the big car around the turns in a series of vicious slides.

By the third mile, with the *Bullet*'s overstrained engine misfiring, Alex Winton was finished for the day.

The other competitors had never threatened—and as the contest neared its finish the highly touted *Geneva Steamer* was soundly beaten; *Bucknam* had been lapped by 999. By the end of the fifth mile, as he boomed under the flag, *Barney* came within a few feet of

lapping the third-place runner, Shanks in the Pup.

An oil-grimed Oldfield had decisively won his first auto race. His time was 5:28—five minutes, 28 seconds—and he had covered the second mile in 1:04.8 for a new record.

Perched on the shoulders of the jubilant crowd, waving enthusiastically as photographers exploded flash powder in his face, Barney realized that he had tumbled Alexander Winton's speed crown into the Michigan dust. His life, from this day forward, would be filled with the unmuffled thunder of racing engines and the frenzied roar of crowds shouting for speed.

That victorious Saturday afternoon in late October of 1902 marked the beginning of a legend, a legend that would carry Oldfield's name to every town and city across the vast United States, a legend that would help to popularize the automobile in America years ahead of its time.

Death by Bullet

AFTER HIS RECORD-BREAKING dash at Indianapolis, newspapers across the United States were hailing Oldfield as “America’s Premier Driver,” and he was asked to give his impressions of just what it was like to travel at such a harrowing pace.

Under the headline “Going A Mile A Minute!” Barney was quoted in lurid detail: “You have every sensation of being hurled through space. The machine is throbbing under you with its cylinders beating a drummer’s tattoo, and the air tears past you in a gale. In its maddening dash through the swirling dust the machine takes on the attributes of a sentient thing . . . I tell you, gentlemen: no man can drive faster and live!”

Oldfield’s press agent elaborated on the dangers inherent in mile-a-minute speed: “Wind resistance is something awful. The chest of a driver is forced in, and his pumping plant must be marvelously strong to resist the tremendous pressure in order to inhale sufficient air for the performance of its functions. Average lungs can’t overcome the outward force and the result is like strangulation. Blood rushes to the head, temporary but complete paralysis of mind over body occurs and instantly the driver loses consciousness and control.”

Yet, despite these dramatic declarations, Barney smashed his own record late the following month at the Empire City track with 999 in what was to be his final race in the famous car. *The Automobile* vividly summed up this run: “. . . Then Oldfield, with a roar like unto a passing comet, skidded around the far turn and flashed past the howl-

Oldfield took the Bullet to California the following month—establishing three new dirt-track marks in Denver on the way west—and wheeled around the track at Agricultural Park fast enough to shatter his own mile record.



Barney left nothing to chance, and explained his technique of passing on a dirt oval: “The first thing I do before a race is to watch the way the wind carries the dust. If I see that it holds to the upper turn I do not try to pass a man at that point, but hold to the lower turn where it clears better.”

The American Automobile Association (formed in 1902), in its role as the governing body of auto racing under the astute chairmanship of A. R. Pardington, had authorized the east coast of Florida for a prominent week-long speed meeting, beginning in late January of 1904. The affair was held on the 15-mile sweep of Ormond-Daytona’s glass-smooth beach, affording drivers the rare opportunity of full-speed motoring. W. K. Vanderbilt and Barney Oldfield shared star billing, and photos of both men were hawked on the sand by energetic pitchmen who received “fifty cents a throw” for Barney’s smiling visage.

The Winton Bullet was the only American-made car entered in the contest for the Mile Championship. The first heat went to Vanderbilt’s 90-hp German Mercedes; Oldfield took the second, nosing out Vanderbilt in the third and final run to the tape. He went on to capture the initial heat of the Five Mile Championship also, coasting over the finish with a broken crankshaft, which eliminated him from further competition.



As Barney’s fame grew, so did his appetite for high, wide, and handsome living, and the boy from Toledo pulled out all the stops. Now addicted to Havanas, Oldfield ordered his stogies in 2,000-lot boxes, and casually handed out five-dollar tips to wide-eyed waiters

A head-on view of Oldfield and 999. Note the exposed valve train (with an overhead cam at this point) and the modified finned-tube radiator. AMATEUR ATHLETIC FOUNDATION OF LOS ANGELES



Barney moved from the Ford built cars to the Winton Bullets in August 1903. Most of these appearances were at dirt oval tracks including Grosse Pointe, Michigan, where a blown tire put Oldfield and the Bullet into a catch fence. A spectator who was watching from atop the fence was fatally injured in the accident. AMATEUR ATHLETIC FOUNDATION OF LA

A challenge race pitting Oldfield's Benz against Ralph DePalma's Fiat was cancelled at the last minute, but Oldfield made use of the timers at Daytona Beach, and on March 16, 1910 a successful bid for a new land speed record was made with a run of 131.724 mph. Official international recognition was denied however, as the sanctioning body had just decided two way runs would be required.

PHIL HARMS COLLECTION



The camera captures a dramatic moment as Barney deals with a mid-corner blowout. To add to the foreboding element, the 200-hp monster was rechristened the "Blitzen Benz." Outlawed by the AAA in 1910, Oldfield finished the season with a racing tour of Mexico. The Benz was campaigned by Bob Burman in 1911 after its return to the US.

AMATEUR ATHLETIC FOUNDATION OF LOS ANGELES

Acknowledgments

Writing is supposed to be one of man's loneliest professions, and it's true that the full-time author must endure many hours of solitude at the typewriter in order to transfer his mental images to paper. But when he steps away from his machine he finds a friendly, receptive world awaiting him. Everyone seems genuinely interested in what he is trying to accomplish, and if help is requested it is immediately forthcoming. Certainly this has been my experience in assembling data for *Barney Oldfield*.

I traveled through several states to gather up the missing threads of Oldfield's life, and in every city I visited the response to my search was rewarding and heartening. Time, material, photos and memories were freely shared and, in each instance, I was freshly spurred on to finish the project. It is quite doubtful that this book would exist today without the help and encouragement of the following unselfish individuals. My warmest thanks to every smiling face I met along the way.

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To George Hill, Barney's riding mechanic (and a fine competitor), for a valuable afternoon's conversation about the fantastic 1914 Cactus Derby.

To Earl Cooper, one of the sport's greatest champions, for a similar afternoon. With his wife, Jane, he relived numerous scenes from racing's golden age.

To Al Waddell sports editor for the *Los Angeles Times* in Barney's heyday, for his vivid recollections of Los Angeles as it once was, and for the generous use of his personal collection of photos and race programs.

To Hank Kawalec, who often accompanied Barney in business and in pleasure, for his co-operation in filling out the picture of Oldfield's later years.

To Earl LeMoine, veteran member of the Wheelmen of the Past Century, for data relating to his specialized field of cycling.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■
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I also wish to express my gratitude to many helpful individuals at the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, the Automobile Manufacturers Association in Detroit, the Hall of Records in Toledo, the Los Angeles Public Library, and the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free-Press*.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■
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Appendix 1: Compiled by Phil Harms

BARNEY OLDFIELD'S NON-CHAMPIONSHIP CAREER PERFORMANCE

Winning elapsed time given in hours, minutes, seconds, and hundredths of seconds.

Date, Track Name–Type	Race Dist Miles	Car	FP	Laps	Time	Speed	Race Type
1902							
25 October							
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	5	Ford 999	1	5	0:05:28	54.88	
1 December							
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	1/5	Ford 999		1	0:01:01.2	58.82	Record attempt
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	1/5	Ford 999		5	0:05:20.0	56.25	Record attempt
1903							
30 May							
Yonkers, NY–Empire City dirt oval	5	Ford 999	1	5	0:07:02.2	42.63	Match Race, Heat 1
Yonkers, NY–Empire City dirt oval	5	Ford 999	1	5	0:05:31.0	54.38	Match Race, Heat 2
Yonkers, NY–Empire City dirt oval	1	Ford 999	1	1	0:01:01.6	58.44	Record Run
21 June							
Indianapolis, IN–St. Fairgrounds dirt oval	5	Ford 999	1	5	0:05:17	56.78	
Indianapolis, IN–St. Fairgrounds dirt oval	5	Ford 999	1	5	0:05:04	59.21	
4 July							
Columbus, OH–Driving Park dirt oval	1	Ford 999	1	1	0:00:56.4	63.83	Exhibition
Columbus, OH–Driving Park dirt oval	10	Ford 999	1	10	0:09:54.0	60.61	Exhibition
25 July							
Yonkers, NY–Empire City dirt oval	15	Ford 999	1	5	0:05:09	58.25	Match Race, Heat 1
Yonkers, NY–Empire City dirt oval	15	Ford 999	1	5	0:04:55	61.82	Match Race, Heat 2
Yonkers, NY–Empire City dirt oval	1	Ford 999	1		0:00:55.8	64.52	Record attempt
29 August							
Columbus, OH–Driving Park dirt oval	1	Winton Bullet #2	1	3	0:03:10	56.84	
Columbus, OH–Driving Park dirt oval	10	Winton Bullet #2	3	1		Broken rear axle	
4 September							
Cleveland, OH–Glenville Driv Trk dirt oval	15	Winton Bullet #2	1	5	0:05:04	59.21	
5 September							
Cleveland, OH–Glenville Driv Trk dirt oval	5	Winton Bullet #2	1	5	0:05:23	55.72	
7 September							
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	5	Winton Bullet #2	2	5		Finished	
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	5	Winton Bullet #2	3	5		Finished	Man. Chall. Cup
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	5	Winton Bullet #2	1	5	0:05:46	52.17	Match Race
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	10	Winton Bullet #2	1	10	0:12:19	48.71	
8 September							
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	5	Peerless Green Dragon	1	5	0:05:00	60.00	
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	15	Peerless Green Dragon	2	15	Finished		
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	5	Peerless Green Dragon	1	5	0:05:00.0	60.00	
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	15	Peerless Green Dragon	2	15	Finished		
9 September							
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	5	Winton Bullet #2	2	5	0:05:22	55.90	
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	5	Winton Bullet #2	1	5	0:05:15	57.14	
Detroit, MI–Grosse Pointe dirt oval	10	Winton Bullet #2	2	6		Blown tire, wrecked	
3 October							
Yonkers, NY–Empire City dirt oval	15	Winton Bullet #2	1	15	0:14:35.0	61.71	Free-For-All
6 November							
San Francisco, CA–Ingleside dirt oval	10	Winton Bullet 120 #2	1	10	0:11:00.2	54.53	Free-For-All
7 November							
San Francisco, CA–Ingleside dirt oval	5	Winton Bullet #3	1	5	0:05:41.8	52.66	Under 1801 lb
San Francisco, CA–Ingleside dirt oval	10	Winton Bullet	1	10	0:10:19.2	58.14	Open Event
8 November							
San Francisco, CA–Ingleside dirt oval	10	Winton Bullet #2	1	10	0:09:51.2	60.89	Free-For-All
San Francisco, CA–Ingleside dirt oval	1	Winton Bullet #2	1	1	0:00:56.0	64.29	Exhibition Time Trial

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