

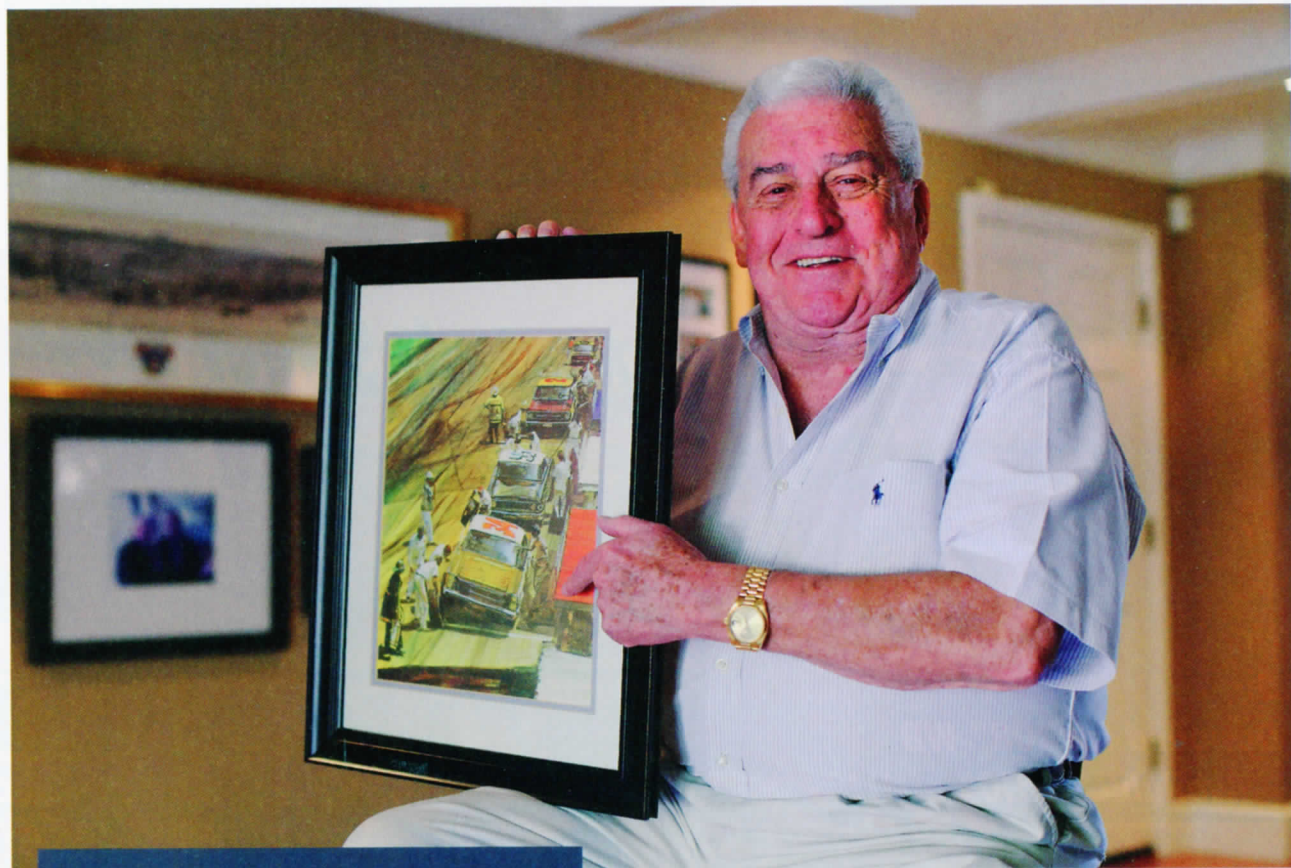
PRESENTED BY:



Ken Clapp

In His Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**



- *Born April 25, 1939 in Oakland, California*
- *A paperboy who rode his passion to become the nation's most prolific promoter, a NASCAR Senior Vice President (retired), and continues as a consultant to NASCAR*

I was brought up east of San Francisco, in Walnut Creek, out in the country. I had a paper route at age eight, and the last stop each day was Duke's Polly Hill Service—a gas station with hand-crank pumps, a beer hall—and a midget and a sprint car. Fred Erickson ran the place. His language was colorful, all the folks who hung out there fascinated me, and I loved talking with them.

MIKE ADASKAVEG

One day a Plymouth sedan with a star on the side and a dented roof sat outside Duke's. I'd read in my paper about a first-ever NASCAR race coming to Stockton, California, on October 7, 1951—and I knew what was going to happen to that ex-police car. I got my dad and mom to take me to the race after church. I have total recall of that huge crowd watching Ben Gregory win it in a 1950 Olds 88. It just stuck with me.

The next weekend, NASCAR was at Oakland and the race was won by Marvin Burke, his one and only NASCAR appearance.

Then on October 21, 1951, the Indy cars came to San Jose. Imagine seeing Tony Bettenhausen wave his hand to the crowd like a cowboy as he roared the Belanger number 99 across the line. Going to the pits afterwards was like Disneyland. Little did I know that I would end up with all the rights to that track for 40 years.

My dad was a serious and successful entrepreneur. He did get hooked on racing—for a while—and we went to indoor and outdoor races a lot. We met Bob Barkhimer and his partner Margo Burke, the promoters. I was particularly drawn to Margo, who became like a second mom. She taught me about business, and I remember whispering I'd like to work for her someday.

In 1954, at 15, I carefully crafted a fake ID and mailed it to Daytona with 10 bucks on a whim. I was amazed when a NASCAR Grand National Mechanic's License came back in the mail. I started crewing on cars, seasoning my hair with white Old Spice talcum powder, and never shaving after Wednesday. I was doubly motivated because of the cute girls hanging around.

A year later we won the NASCAR West Championship with Danny Letner. I worked with others, too, like Hershel McGriff [NASCAR West champion and four-time winner in what is now called the NASCAR Cup Series]. I got pretty good with an air gun and my knee pads. Those went to good use one time in 1956 when we ran the Southern 500. I changed 27 tires and was a week late returning to school.

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Quote Worthy

"Maybe the first lesson in driver development should be don't cry in the pits."

Karl Fredrickson, Speedway Illustrated, April 2008

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

In 1958, I had my first crew chief job on a former Holman and Moody car driven by Bob Keefe. The Riverside 500 was particularly memorable. Bob got into a bit of a bar brawl on Wednesday night and was still in jail during qualifying. There was little alternative but to make myself look like him. I donned the helmet, stuck a cigarette in the side of my mouth, and out I went. I was 41st of 43. Fortunately, Bob was released at 6 a.m. on Sunday, and we finished fifth.

Along the way, I had been watching Bob Barkhimer and Margo Burke build up a consortium of 22 tracks. Ultra-connected, it was no surprise they became acquaintances of Bill France Sr.

In 1950, Bill Sr. told them Bill Jr. would be stationed at California's Moffett Field and asked Bob and Margo to show him the ropes of West Coast racing. Three years later they all shook hands, and Bob and Margo became NASCAR West. Big Bill had a dream of "NASCAR, sea to shining sea."

Meanwhile, my parents, hard workers, worried my air-gun exploits wouldn't lead to much, and they sat me down for a family conference. I have to admit I could see their point. I joined the Navy. When I came back to Northern California, I married and went to work in Mom's high-end clothing store.

I was still into racing, but now with a family, I was also interested in money. In 1966, I did a deal with West Coast Speedway in Vallejo, California, to promote a stock car race, helped out by iconic journalist Gordon Martin. We advertised a guest contestant, George Follmer, the ultra-popular road racer. July 30 was the hottest day in 20 years, the race was terrible, and Follmer just didn't get the dirt. But the place was packed, and I made a saintly \$17,000.

Then Gordon Martin introduced me to a group opening Sonoma Raceway. I joined as a consultant and ran some Indy car, NASCAR West stock car, and funny car events. I came to know Roger Penske and that crowd. Those relationships only expanded afterwards when I joined *Auto Week* as a marketing manager.

I was still promoting short tracks in 1966 when Bill Sr. invited me to Charlotte for a talk. I knew Margo had set it up. Bottom line, on December 31, I bought out Bob and Margo's racing operations, which had pioneered NASCAR in the West. Bill Jr. and I—and our families—became great friends. I was honored not long after when the Frances sent young Brian out to live with us for a year to learn racing and the culture of the West.

I traveled a great deal as a NASCAR Vice President to New York City, Detroit, Japan, and Australia, developing relationships that advanced NASCAR's worldwide reputation.

Meanwhile on the West Coast, I owned or leased and oversaw 19 tracks, with 41 full-time employees and over 200 part-timers. Our lead venue in California was San Jose, which from 1978 to 1992 drew an average crowd of 6,000, with 107 cars pit-side. We also ran AMA national motorcycle events on the San Jose mile for 18 years.

Along the way, I believe I have promoted over 4,800 single-day events, perhaps the most of anybody. I still have all kinds of business activities, but have kept a hand in racing even after retiring from NASCAR in 1999.

The outlook for major racing is exciting. But I also think that we are looking at a crisis in California short-track racing, and I want to do something about it whenever I can to make the situation better for everybody.

Many short-track promoters today don't understand anything beyond their own neighborhood. They don't comprehend marketing and networking. If there is one thing I have learned, it is to continually reach out. There are well-heeled people who want to see racing succeed. Maybe five percent of all promoters understand that.

As a NASCAR consultant I would like to continue special projects and my pet rock is the West Coast Stock Car Hall of Fame.

I've been very blessed and have had a great ride through life. I've got three great-grandchildren and all my friends. And my wife, Dee, and I sure love our kitties. 🐾