

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Go, Speed Racer**

On January 29, 1886, German inventor Karl Friedrich Benz patented his "automobile fueled by a gas engine". Although there were earlier incarnations by other inventors, Benz's design is considered to be the first practical motorcar. This three-wheeled vehicle, with a one-cylinder engine producing six tenths of a horsepower, reached a top speed of almost 10 miles per hour. Speed, right from the beginning, became one of the automobile's greatest selling points.



*First company to sell motorcars in New Orleans (1902), H. A. Testard Bicycles & Automobiles, 341 St. Charles, corner Perdido, photo circa 1910*

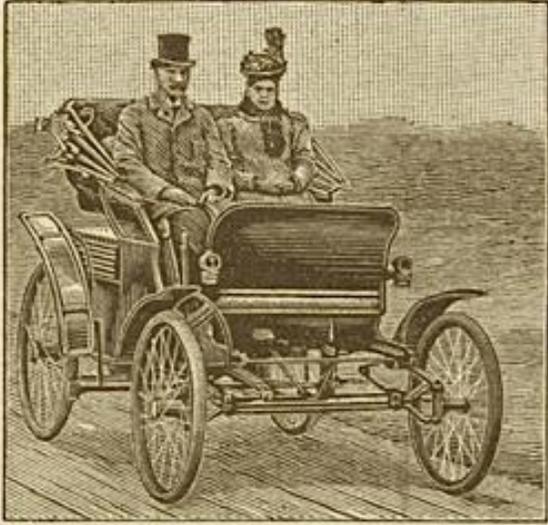
The French auto company Panhard and Levassor sold its first automobile in 1890, based on a Daimler engine license. Germans Gottlieb Daimler and Wilhelm Maybach had patented one of the first

internal-combustion engines in 1885 and developed a carburetor that made possible the use of gasoline as fuel. Peugeot, the next important French automaker, was founded in 1891. By 1903, France's auto production (30,204) represented 48.8% of the world's total that year.

In 1884 Henry Royce founded an electrical and mechanical business and produced his first car in 1904, the same year he was introduced to Charles Royce.

Americans were in on the action early on, as well. In 1893 brothers Charles and Frank Duryea founded the first American automobile manufacturing company, the Duryea Motor Wagon Company in Springfield, Massachusetts. In 1901, Ransom Eli Olds' company produced 425 vehicles, making it the first mass-produced gasoline-powered automobile manufacturer.

**DISPENSE WITH A HORSE**



and save the expense, care and anxiety of keeping it. To run a motor carriage costs about  $\frac{1}{2}$  cent a mile.

**THE WINTON MOTOR CARRIAGE**

is the best vehicle of its kind that is made. It is handsomely, strongly and yet lightly constructed and elegantly finished. Easily managed. Speed from 3 to 20 miles an hour. The hydrocarbon motor is simple and powerful. No odor, no vibration. Suspension Wire Wheels. Pneumatic Tires. Ball Bearings.  Send for Catalogue.

**Price \$1,000. No Agents.**

**THE WINTON MOTOR CARRIAGE CO., Cleveland, Ohio.**

*Early auto ad, Scientific American, July 30, 1898*

Incorporated on March 15, 1897, the Winton Motor Carriage Company, based in Cleveland, Ohio, was one of the first American companies to sell a motor car. In 1899, more than one hundred Winton vehicles were sold, making the company the largest manufacturer of gasoline-powered automobiles in the United States at that time. Scottish-born founder Alexander Winton also raced his cars in competitions.

Henry Ford began building cars in 1896 and in 1903 started his own company. Early in his career, he met a young Ohio-born bicycle racer named Barney Oldfield. At Ford's invitation, Oldfield agreed to test one of two cars Ford had readied for racing and traveled to Michigan for the trial, but neither car were able to start. No matter that Oldfield had never even driven an automobile, he and a fellow racing cyclist purchased both test vehicles from Ford for \$800. Barney Oldfield was on his way to becoming a daring race car driver and automobile pioneer.

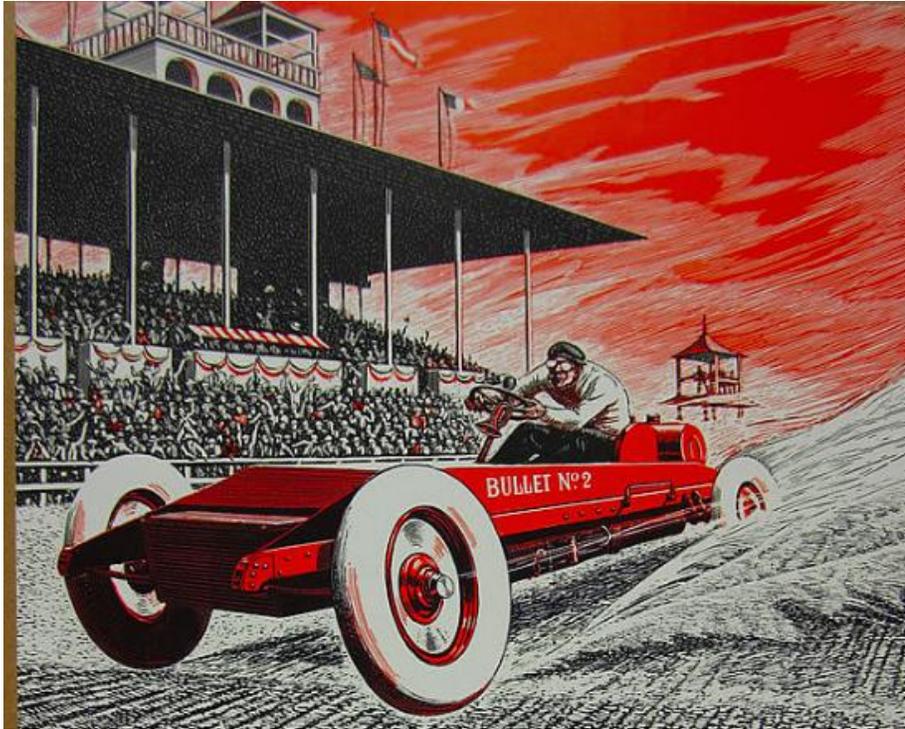


*Barney Oldfield (January 29, 1878 – October 4, 1946), with his signature cigar clenched in teeth*

Oldfield agreed to drive against the current champion, Alexander Winton, even though the young challenger was rumored to have learned how to operate the controls of that car the very morning of the race. Barney was the victor, winning by a half mile in the five mile race. He handled the corners by sliding into them like a motorcycle racer, instead of braking. His win was a triumph for Henry Ford and led the way to both Oldfield and Ford becoming household names.

Barney Oldfield would go on to become the first person to drive a car at 60 mph on an oval track. He raced in two Indianapolis 500 races, in 1914 and 1916. And although he never won at Indianapolis, he was the first person to record a 100 mph lap. Traveling across the country

performing ambitious automotive feats with a flamboyant style and his trademark cigar clenched in his teeth, Barney became the inspiration for a generation of Americans. Parents would proclaim to their children as they ran through the house, "Who do you think you are? Barney Oldfield?" Years later in an *I Love Lucy* episode, entitled "Lucy Learns to Drive," Ethel comments, "Oh, pardon me, Barney Oldfield."

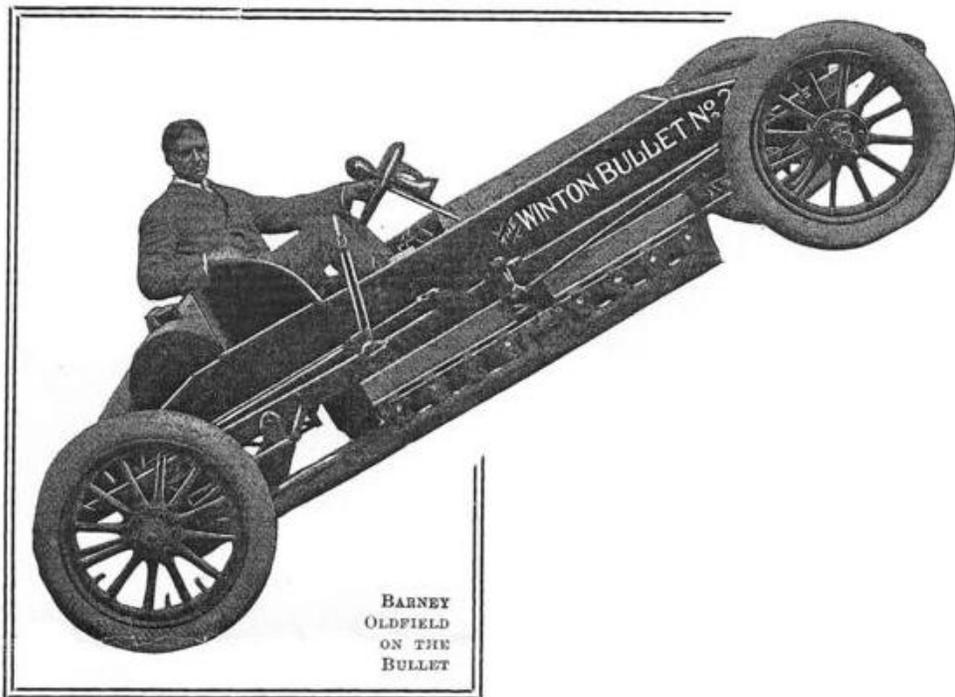


*Barney racing Winton Motor's Bullet No. 2 around the track*

After having defeated Alexander Winton in a Henry Ford car, it wasn't long before Barney was racing cars for Mr. Winton. Oldfield toured the country in Winton's Bullet No. 2. On March 23, 1904, he was in New Orleans hoping to break his own 55-second mile record on the Fair Grounds race course. While at the Grunewald Hotel, "Oldfield was the center of attention," reported the *Picayune*, "for dozens of small boys, who gathered about the entrance waiting for a chance to get a look at the champion."

"King Barney" arrived at the Fair Grounds on Saturday, March 26, 1904, and his "Bullet No. 2 was then hauled upon the tracks with the owner seated upon the machine," according to the *Picayune*. "He was greeted by round after round of applause."

Sadly, Oldfield failed to break his own 55-second mile (world's record at the time) on an elliptical track. He did it in 57 seconds (although the official time was 58), which was nevertheless "the fastest mile ever run in New Orleans by any kind of a machine," reported the New Orleans *Item*. Not only that, he absolutely captivated the crowds.



*Barney posing on his Bullet No. 2*

The following day (Sunday), he competed against "Dare Devil" Hauseman on Sunday in a five mile race. The *Item* called it "a farce, but the crowd did not seem to mind". Hauseman was no match for the champ.

In 1904, there were only 50 motorcars on the streets of New Orleans, but by February, 20, 1911, reported the New Orleans *Item*, there were an estimated 1500 to 2000 driving around the Crescent City. People were buying into the idea of the freedom and speed that an automobile provided.

Barney Oldfield made his last attempt at racing in 1932. The future now belonged to younger drivers, even to those who didn't have a driver's license quite yet.

In 1933 Myron Scott, an Ohio newspaper photographer, organized an impromptu makeshift motorless car race for 19 boys in Dayton, Ohio. Before the advent of corrugated cardboard boxes, wooden crates held all sorts of products, including soap. Before being used to construct gravity driven mini-cars for young drivers, the soap box was used as a raised platform upon which one could make an impromptu speech or deliver a political oration. Besides being fashioned from soap boxes, these homemade gravity driven race cars were also built from orange or apple crates, sheet tin, baby-buggy or rollerskate wheels, but grew more sophisticated over time, with newer materials such as aluminum and fiberglass.

# Soap Box Race Near Interest At A High Pitch

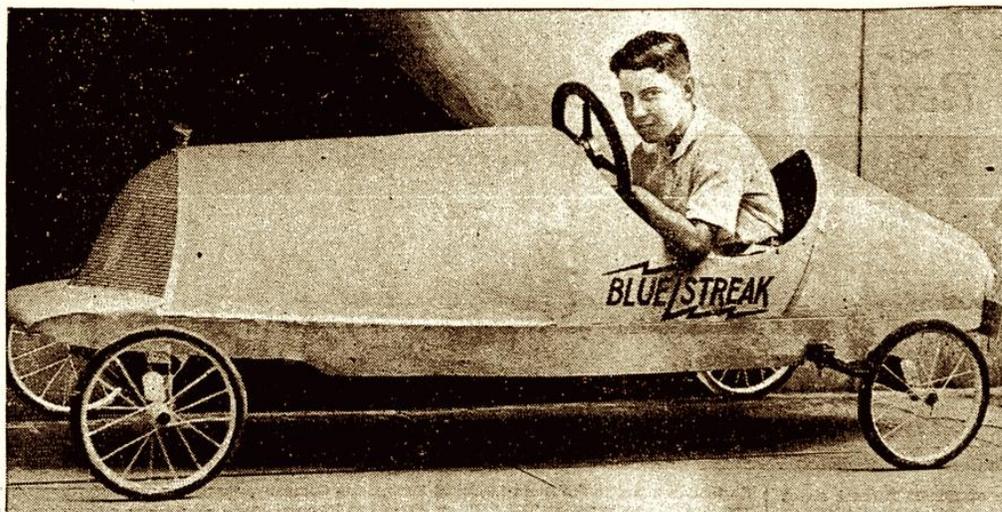
*1934 Headline in the Item-Tribune*

There was so much interest in this initial event that Scott made arrangements for an All-American race to be held in Dayton, Ohio, August 19, 1934. This was the very first Soap Box Derby, and New Orleans was going to need a young champion to compete. The city would have its own Soap Box Derby trials to determine who would make the trip. But where would they find a hill in this extremely flat city? Monkey Hill would be entirely too small for that many cars.

Many people will remember fondly the many years the Soap Box Derby races were held on the Wisner Overpass next to City Park, but the first race there was not held until 1956, just after the Wisner Overpass was newly completed. The reader may be interested to discover that the first local Soap Box Derby was raced on the lake uptown incline of the St. Claude Avenue bridge over the Industrial Canal.

THE ITEM-TRIBUNE, NEW ORLEANS, SUNDAY, JULY 1, 1934

## An Entry And Prizes For Soap Box Derby



*New Orleans' first Soap Box Derby winner in 1934,  
Charles Armbruster, in the "Blue Streak"*

The first Soap Box Derby in New Orleans was held under the auspices of the New Orleans *Item-Tribune* and the Chevrolet Motor Company. In later years, the New Orleans Recreation Department (NORD) was also one of the sponsors. The winner of that first Soap Box Derby was to be given a free trip with all expenses paid by the All-American Soap Box Derby in Dayton, Ohio, and awarded a large silver loving cup from the *Item-Tribune*.

115 boys signed up locally for the big racing competition held July 1, 1934. An industrious thirteen-year-old paper boy named Charles Armbruster, of Valence Street, (No. 112 on the list), named his racer the "Blue Streak," after the famous edition of the *Item*. It must have brought him good luck. With no motive power of his own, but with a steering wheel and brakes, Charles coasted to victory.

"I think that I have a pretty good chance of winning the All-American Soap Box Derby in Dayton," Charles said. "The racers that I managed to nose out in New Orleans were good and I think that since I was able to win here I ought to be able to win in Dayton."

As for his trip to Dayton, he explained, "Believe me I am going to be leaning out of the railroad car window seeing all of the sights of the country."



Charles was "soundly kissed," not only by his mom, Mary Armbruster (shown above), "but by a number of pretty girls as well," before leaving for Ohio to compete in the All-American Soap Box Derby, reported the *Item*.

Sadly, Charles did not win the big race in Dayton that year, having competed with boys from cities all over the United States. The national winner in 1934 was Robert Turner of Muncie, Indiana, who put together his racer from, of all things, the wood from a saloon bar.

In 1935 the All-American Soap Box Derby was moved from Dayton to Akron, Ohio, because of its central location and hilly terrain, and has remained the race's home to this day.

In October 1944, ten years after his big local win as a Soap Box Derby racer, Lieutenant Charles Armbruster of the U.S. Army Air Corps was a newlywed. He married Antoinette Menendez, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph C. Menendez. During World War II, he flew 44 missions with the 321st Group 445th Squadron in the Mediterranean Theater and received a Certificate of Valor for his courageous service to his country. Charles was once again a hero.

On July 16, 1956, less than two month's after the Wisner Overpass was completed, fifteen-year-old Otto Potier was the winner. The Soap Box Derby continued on the Wisner Overpass until the early 1970s.



*Racers speed lakeward off the Wisner Overpass in 1956*

The 1955 derby, the year before, had been held on the Franklin Avenue Overpass, and prior to that on the Broad Street Overpass (1953), the Elysian Fields Overpass and the St. Claude Avenue bridge across the Industrial Canal.

“In a soap box race of glittering Mardi Gras colors,” reported the *Picayune*, Richard Scheaffer of Chalmette “roared across the finish-line first” in 1967’s derby at Wisner Overpass.

In 1971, girls were allowed to join the boys in competing in the Soap Box Derby races across the country. *NORD*, the *States-Item* and Chevrolet were the the New Orleans Area sponsors of the Soap Box Derby held on July 17, 1972, at the Wisner Overpass, open to boys and girls 11 through 15 years of age.

Meanwhile, Charles Armbruster had become the father of three daughters, Toni, Alison and Connie. For over 32 years he traveled around the world as a Quality Control Executive for Standard Fruit and Steamship Company (later Castle and Cooke, Dole Foods, Inc).



*Charles Armbruster in later life*

Charles died peacefully at home in 2011 at age 90. His wife, Nettye, and three daughters remember him lovingly. Daughter Connie Armbruster Quave told me this interesting bit of information:

“Did you know, my Dad invented the banana box?”

Seems that during his time with Standard Fruit, he designed corrugated boxing containers for fruit transport that are used to this

very day. One can check this out:

Charles C. Armbruster, "Events Leading up to the Development Of Standard's Boxing Program," 20 Apr. 1960 [copy], Harvard University, Baker Library, Henry B. Arthur Papers, "Retailing and Demand, 1964-65."

From young soap box racer to courageous pilot, from soap boxes to banana boxes, a beloved father and spouse, Charles Armbruster was truly one of New Orleans champions.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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"Go, Speed Racer"  
Ned Hémard  
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