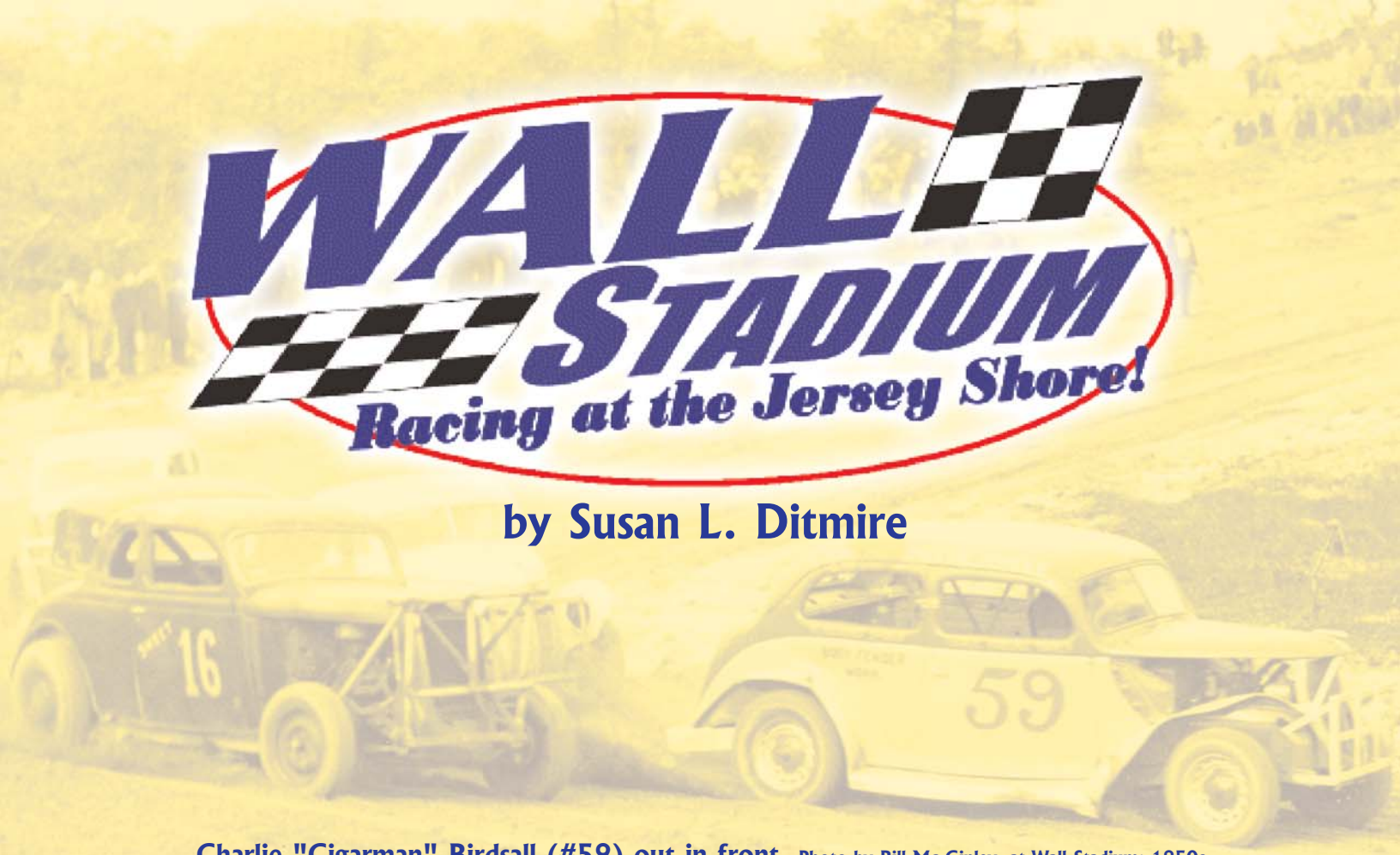
WALL STADIUM
Racing at the Jersey Shore!

by Susan L. Ditmire



Charlie "Cigarman" Birdsall (#59) out in front. Photo by Bill Mc Ginley, at Wall Stadium; 1950s

Wall Stadium is New Jersey's oldest asphalt oval track in operation and was the only asphalt racetrack in the Garden State at all until the opening of New Jersey Motorsports Park in 2009. Sixty years of cars racing around the Speedway in Wall Township NJ–it's quite a record!

It all began in 1949, when Thomas and Jennie Nicol became fascinated with car racing and began exploring the possibility of opening a track of their own. They traveled to many East Coast race tracks, studying the designs and finding inspiration for layouts before Thomas settled on his design. The racetrack would be on 55 acres in Wall Township. Thomas owned a local construction company and was able to make use of any down time the crews had to build the raceway.

When it was finished in the spring of 1950, they had a one-third mile oval with 30 degree banking in the corners and 16 degree banking on the straights. This high banking was a key of the design and allowed high speeds on the short track. Their design included a grandstand on the straight-away in a bowl shape in the excavation.

On Memorial Day of 1950, dirt track racing began at Wall Speedway. It was the beginning of many seasons of racing and a much loved family venture that would continue for the rest of the Nicol's lives. (See the accompanying story of Charlie Birdsall, one of the early racers.) During the 1950s many local dirt tracks were built in New Jersey and all over the country. The drivers and tracks began to organize into racing groups and championship circuits.

NASCAR Comes to Wall

Some time in the early 1950s the Wall Speedway was evidently paved. By the time the NASCAR Convertible Series held a race at the track on July 14, 1956, it was already listed as a paved oval. Racing in this early NASCAR event was Glen Wood of Wood Brothers Racing, one of the racing teams that began to emerge in the sport. Unfortunately, he lost his brakes and did not finish the race.

In 1957, The Garden State Classic was established. At first, it was a 300 lap race, in the early 80s it was changed to 200 laps, and today it consists of a 150 lap race. Regardless of how many laps, however, it is still quite an endurance race on the one-third mile track.

Thomas and Jennie were always looking for ways to improve the cash flow and make use of the racetrack and stadium seating beyond auto racing alone. In 1957 and 1958, the New Jersey Sharks, a professional football team, played games on the infield.

In 1958, the NASCAR Strictly Stock Series (now Sprint Cup) was held at Wall Speedway on July 26. Jim Reed of Peekskill, New York was the winner. Better known to modern race fans, Petty Enterprises had two cars finish in the top 10 places. Lee Petty, who finished fourth, raced in 50 of the 51 races for 1958 and won the first of his three championships. Richard Petty (Lee's son) finished ninth. It was Richard's first year racing in the series, he was 21 years old and raced nine out of fifty-one races that year.

In 2003, NASCAR racing returned to Wall with the Whelen Modified Tour Race on June 29, 2003, which was won by John Blewitt III. Two other Whelen Modified Tour races were held on June 26, 2004 (won by Reggie Ruggerio) and May 6, 2007 (won by Jimmie Blewitt–brother of John)

The Blewitt brothers were well-known and respected in racing circles, so the community was shocked when in August of 2007 John Blewitt III was killed during a race at Thompson Speedway in Connecticut. A memorial was held for him at the Wall Speedway for family, friends and fans. It was announced at the 2007 Turkey Derby that the Speedway would retire John's number 76.

The Turkey Derby and Changes

Thanksgiving of 1973 was sunny and warm, and the story goes that Jennie looked around and said, "We should be having a race today!" The next year, The Turkey Derby had its start. It was a very popular race for drivers and spectators alike–it allowed everyone to have just one more race before the long, quiet winter.

Thomas Nicol died in 1994, but Jennie continued running the track, until she her death seven years later in 2001. In 2002, Tucker Nicol sold the track to Dale and Glen Creamer, Joseph Sanzari, Tim Shinn and Fred Archer. The new partnership upgraded the concession area, replaced the wooded guard rails with steel and added a one-fifth mile inner oval for go-kart racing and other scale car races.

Abruptly in 2008, the Creamer family announced that the race season was canceled with no explanation given. Sadly the track sat empty for the summer of 2008. However, Jim Morton a former track operations manager could not imagine Thanksgiving Weekend without a stock car race, so he rented the raceway from the Creamer family to hold the 35th Annual Turkey Derby. Jim was encouraged by the large and supportive turnout for the annual Derby and decided to rent the track and hold the 2009 Race Season, including the Turkey Derby. He again organized and ran the season for 2010, but on September 3, 2010 he could no longer afford to keep the track open.

The Turkey Derby 2010

The matter of the 2010 Turkey Derby remained in question until a press conference on October 23, 2010. One of the track co-owners, Timothy Shinn, announced that John Blewett Sr. of Howell, NJ and Don Ling of Brick, NJ–both members of longtime shore-area racing families had agreed to run the 37th Turkey Derby and the dates were set for Friday and Saturday, November 26 and 27.

The 37th Annual Turkey Derby was an absolute success! The stands were full of spectators (see picture below) and there were more then 200 drivers. A good time was had by all, despite the cold temperatures. In addition to the Derby there were more than thirty other events over the two days of racing.

Jimmy Blewett was the winner (see pictures on the next page). There was a bit of booing that took place on the awarding of the trophy. Apparently some folks thought that there was a bit too much bumping in the race. Others thought that it went on with all the front runners in the race. One thing that always happens after a race is lots of "what-if" conversation. It was probably just as true in 1950, when the racing began.

Although Ryan Truex, younger brother of Martin Truex, Jr., finished 8th in the Derby, he already has a bright future in racing. You can watch him in next years NASCAR series. Keep a close eye on him, Wall Speedway and New Jersey, may well have nurtured the 2011 rookie of the year.

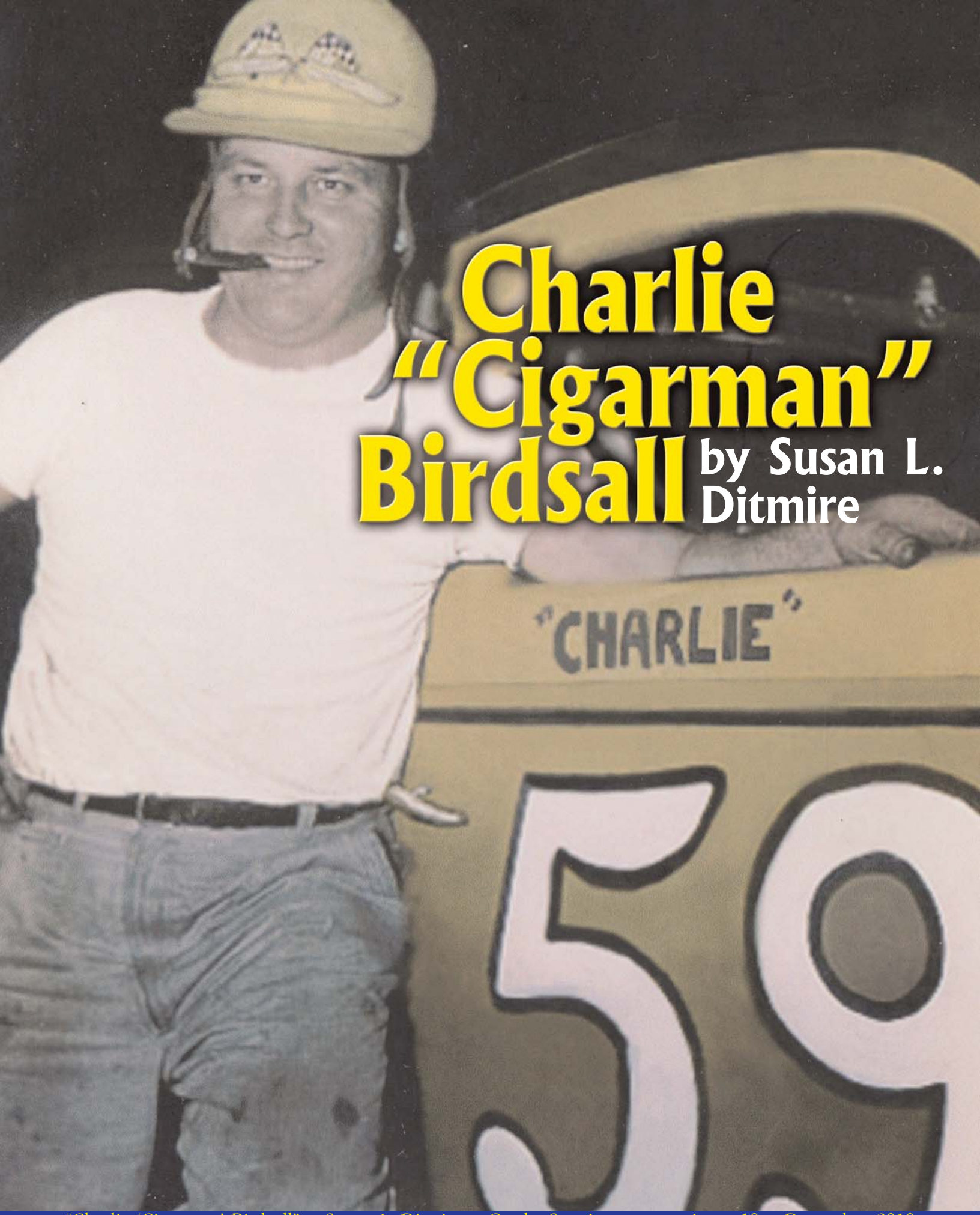
Will there be a 2011 season, or has the last chapter of Wall Stadium history already been written? Since the Turkey Derby was well attended by drivers and spectators, perhaps someone will step up and make it a sixty-one year tradition of racing. Let's keep hoping, it could happen!

Top: 2010 Turkey Derby winner, Jimmy Blewett, with Warren Alston, Wall Stadium's starter.

Below: Some of the "bumping" as racers compete for position.

Right: Will the success of the 37th Turkey Derby usher in a new era in this historic NJ raceway?

Photos courtesy Mike Petrucci, Editor, RaceProWeekly.com



Charlie "Cigarman" Birdsall

by Susan L. Ditmire

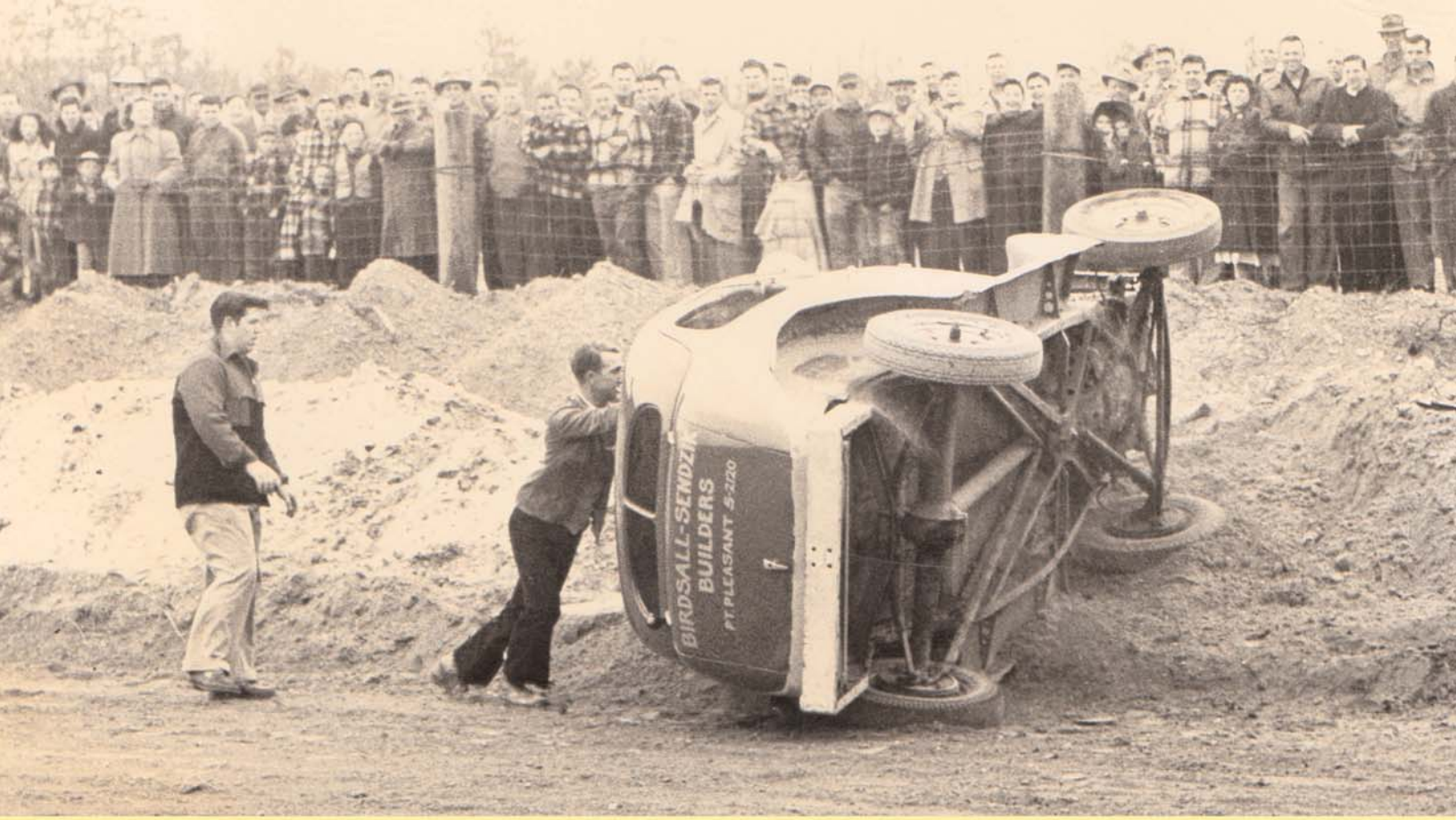
Charlie Birdsall, like many men who came back from World War II, set about trying to make a living for his family. Before the war, he had been an avid musician, frequently playing his stand up bass at jazz clubs in New York City–but now he needed to support a wife and family. Like many generations of Birdsalls before him, however, working with wood seemed to come naturally. He and his brother, James, started Birdsall Brother Builders and went to work. He was living in the Wall Township area and probably came in contact with Thomas and Jennie Nicol during construction projects. It is no doubt that he knew about the building of Wall Raceway. He must have seen it as an opportunity for fun and entertainment and Charlie began racing in the early 1950s.

Charlie taking the checkered flag

Charlie Birdsall, came to be called the "Cigarman" because of his cigar smoking habit. Thanks to the local pharmacist, Charlie, in his car number 59, delighted his fans by blowing blue smoke out of the exhaust. Along with his cousin, "Pee Wee" Hulse, Charlie raced at Wall Stadium and other local oval tracks in the 1950s.

In 1958, a crash interrupted Charlie's racing career, and while at home convalescing was diagnosed with a rare strain of tuberculosis. He was hospitalized for nearly a year. The illness ended not only his racing but his livelihood as a carpenter.

While recovering, he maintained his interest



Not one of Charlie's better days!

in car racing, and discovered a new career. On a trip to a racetrack on Long Island in 1961, Charlie found that the Wildfowler Decoy Company was for sale. With the encouragement of his wife, Pat, he bought Wildfowler and moved it to his home in Point Pleasant, New Jersey.

Decoy making was in Charlie's genes you might say. "Birdsall was the fourth generation of a Barnegat Bay family that included several carpenters, decoy makers and watermen," wrote Richard Cowan and Richard LaFountain of *Decoys Magazine*. Jesse [Charlie's great-uncle] had been the captain of a coastal schooner...Eugene, Charlie's grandfather, was a blacksmith and gunsmith. Eugene moved first to Toms River in 1883 and then moved again to Loveland Town (now Point Pleasant) in 1890. Charlie's father and uncles were all decoy makers in the tradition of great-uncle, Jesse Birdsall." With the help of family and friends, Charlie, still smoking his cigars, continued making decoys under the Wildfowler name until his retirement in 1977.

He never lost his love of racing and his daughter, Patti, remembers that on Sundays, they would all pile in the car and go to racetracks in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware. He always had a Harley and one time owned five of the motorcycles, both street and dirt bikes.

In 1977, Charlie sold Wildfowler Decoys and retired to Florida, where he joined a 16-piece jazz band called "The Second Time Around."

Charlie "Cigarman" Birdsall died in 1986 at age 66, after a full life of music, car racing, decoy making, family and back to music. As his daughter says, "Charlie could fit into a turkey shoot as well as a banquet." I can imagine that he must have been an avid fan at the "Turkey Derby" at Wall Stadium.

Charlie's daughter, Patti Birdsall Gamble, was kind enough to share her memories and some of her personal pictures. Patti's husband, Thomas Gamble, an avid hunter and decoy maker himself, purchased Wildfowler Decoys in 2004 and continues to ply the family craft in Jensen Beach, Florida.