

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

Nov-Dec 2023, Issue 320

Two from Garth Bryant

Happy Holidays/Christmas to all.

Debra and I were in Sevilla on what would have been our November meeting date and have returned safe and sound, ready for winter projects, holiday season, and Greenville weather.

This newsletter is a combined Nov/Dec issue, not quite making up for a missed meeting but presenting a good opportunity to share local history. In this case, it will be a **Garth Bryant double feature**: this page the most recent Garth work; the second—a work from last year that is timely for Thanksgiving.

Days of Thunder in South Westerlo Garth Bryant

During the Second World War, the very survival of the country was in doubt. Everyone sacrificed, from the millions who served to those who remained home and dealt with strict rationing of food and fuel. When the war ended and the service men came home, everyone was ready for a good time.

Two brothers, David and Thurman “Junior” Bishop, started a business to fill this demand for entertainment. They opened a race track in South Westerlo, NY, calling it Clearview Speedway. For a while it was a huge success. It opened in 1949 and was located where the Blaisdell-White Memorial Park is now located.

By 1949, unlimited fuel as well as car parts were available. Many of the racers were returning veterans. These men had served around the world. Some had learned mechanic skills in the military. Others had faced incredible dangers and came home with a very high tolerance for risk-taking. Others were good old country boys who had learned to drive tractors and trucks shortly after they learned to walk. For all these men, racing cars was a very natural outlet.

Do we know who these men were? A surviving program lists the drivers for one particular night. It lists, among others, the familiar names of Fred Flack, Reg Britton and an entry from Yeomans’ Garage.

Others who raced there over the years are remembered by those who watched the races. Some of these names may still be recognized today. They include Fred Klob, Billy Carelas, Huck Spaulding, Bill Bichteman Sr., “Scooch” Schoonmaker, Howie Westervelt and Greenville legend Jimmy Carelas. I am sure that some readers out there could add to this list and I hope you will.

The track was a third of a mile dirt oval. Guard rails were very low and banking was very limited. As the green flag dropped and the cars raced around the first turn, the noise thundered up out of the valley and echoed through South Westerlo. At the same time, on dry days, a cloud of dust would rise up out of the track and settle over the Town.

Jim Eufemia sold programs there for 15¢ as a boy. He recalls the incredible clouds of dust. The dust was so bad that the name Clear-



Action on the South Westerlo Oval

view almost seems to have been some kind of an inside joke.

My dad also worked there as a high school boy selling concessions. On race day my grandfather would let him off from working in our South Westerlo General store to work at the track. My Grandfather knew my dad could make more money in a few hours at the track than he could pay him for working in our store. This was especially true since a considerable percentage of the Town's population was at the track on race days, not shopping for groceries.

There was one other benefit to having my dad work there. There was usually a drawing for a door prize for one lucky fan. Somehow, my dad worked his way into supplying the prize to the Bishops as long as it didn't cost over a certain amount. In this way a number of difficult to sell items that had been laying around our store for a considerable time ended up the proud possession of some lucky winner at Clearview Speedway.

One of my other relatives also raced at Clearview Speedway. In an era when it simply wasn't done, my Aunt Marilyn Thompson drove a car against the men. The story goes that she talked her boyfriend of the time into letting her

use his car. Apparently, some of those wild-eyed country boys didn't take kindly to co-ed racing and her racing career along with her relationship with that boyfriend ended quite quickly as the damage to his car added up.

Clearview Raceway was open from 1949 through 1954. It drew drivers from considerable distances to race. Drivers from Albany, Middleburg, Ravena, Guilderland, Sharon Springs, Richmondville and Schenectady are all mentioned. The excitement of the racing attracted correspondingly large crowds to watch.

The Bishops owned the property and, for a while, Dave lived in a trailer on top of the hill by the entrance. The Bishops were true showmen. In true entrepreneurial fashion, they were willing to try almost anything to make a buck. Over the years, races were held on both week nights and Sunday afternoons, though not necessarily in the same years. Indeed, there are surviving photographs both before and after lights were installed.

This change in schedule was apparently necessitated by New York State's decision to enforce its Blue Laws in 1951. These laws made certain commercial activities illegal on



Steeplechase in South Westerlo

Sundays for religious reasons. In 1951 auto racing was added to the list of prohibited activities. Left with no other choice, the Bishops installed lights and started racing on Wednesday and Saturday nights.

To make the shows more exciting, fireworks were shot off after the racing. This encouraged fans to stay for the whole show and, of course, concessions were available for sale the entire time. Flip Flach recalls that, in the spirit of putting on the best show on nights when the racing wasn't exciting enough, they would pay Jimmy Carelas \$10 to roll his car over during a race.

Jimmy had a junk yard that provided an endless supply of junk cars he was willing to wreck. For Jimmy, earning \$10 to roll a car was a lot easier than beating 15 other racers for what was probably a \$25 first place check. These staged wrecks weren't necessary very often as the surviving newspaper articles are full of reports of spectacular pileups, some of which delayed or canceled racing as the cars were untangled and dragged away.

How popular were these races the Bishops were promoting? One surviving newspaper article claims a crowd of 5000 fans for a Wednesday night race. This number would be about equal to the entire population of the Towns of Westerlo and Greenville combined in 1950. The article claims that it took an hour for

the parking lot to empty. I would be hard pressed to come up with another event in the history of the Town of Westerlo to draw a crowd this size.

The Bishops also tried other sporting events to draw a crowd. Recently discovered photographs provided by Don Powell show a large crowd watching a steeplechase horse race being run at Clearview. Before I started researching this article, I had never heard one person mention this event.

Now that the pieces have come together a little. Junior's son Bruce does remember his dad at one time owned a race horse. Bruce remembers the horse being a not very talented nag. Don White who lived right above the track was also involved in harness racing. I believe his stable was more successful.

It would seem that a number of local residents were involved in horse racing of some type and very likely used the track for training purposes on days when there was no stock car racing. It is possible that this group was involved in organizing these steeple chase events. Flip Flach recalls seeing at least one of these races and we have the pictures, so it definitely happened.

Nonetheless, steeplechase seems a very odd entertainment event to promote and it is possible that the steeplechase races were run in combination with other types of horse racing. Perhaps there are others out there who know more about these races.

In another attempt to broaden their entertainment business, the Bishops hosted professional wrestling at the track. This was much more successful and these events continued for a considerable time. The ring would be set up and the touring pros would come to South Westerlo and put on a show.

These pros were the biggest names in wrestling at the time. It would be like the WWE coming to South Westerlo. These shows were apparently quite popular. With unlimited seating available along the hillside, the crowds

the wrestlers drew in South Westerlo were larger than what they drew in many other indoor venues in larger cities.

All of these events, of course, required programs for the spectators. In addition to the 15 cents they charged, the Bishops sold advertising in the programs. Advertisers included Jiggs Shell Station in Westerlo. In those days Jiggs could be reached by simply dialing 2412 on your rotary phone.

Also, advertising was William Kerslake and Son, wholesale distributors of Schlitz, Black Horse and Utica Club beer. This Ravenna based company's ad would seem to indicate that race fans could get an ice-cold beer at Clearview Speedway as they enjoyed the racing.

Two other advertisers were Jenkins Service Station in Ravenna and Emil Bush Plumbing and Heating in Oak Hill. Bush's, it seems, were the proud purveyors of Meyers Water pumps and Youngstown Kitchens which would seem at least to me to have very little to do with stock car racing. While I have a faint memory of hearing of Jiggs, I personally have no memory of any of these other businesses. Perhaps there is someone out there who still remembers them.

Pine Lake Manor – 100

Serendipity reared its head one pleasant fall day past when I was showing calendars at PLM. A stranger, now known as Craig Schwab, was within listening range. Telling me he was a long-time visitor to Pine Lake, he confessed to authoring a centennial account of not only his memories of the joy his resort stays have brought him but also a cultural and historical overview of the century in the US.

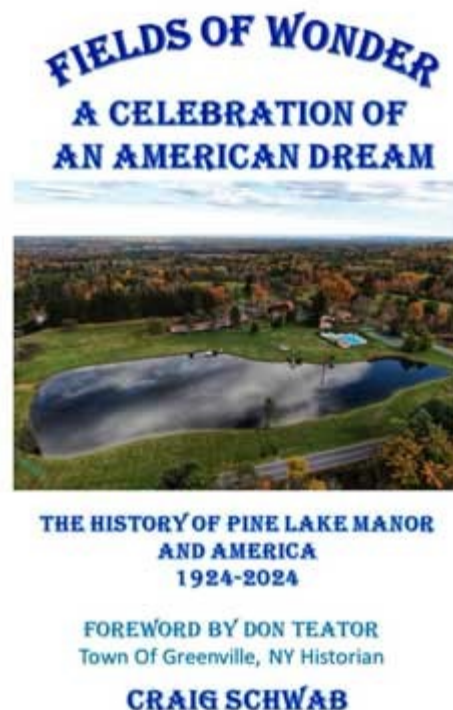
Our conversation led to Craig giving me a copy to proofread and suggest additions, leading to me writing a foreword.

The book is available on **Amazon**.

[Fields of Wonder: A Celebration of An American Dream: Schwab, Craig: 9798866161454: Amazon.com: Books](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B098866161)

How did Clearview Speedway end? In those days there was no such thing as zoning or noise ordinance. In 1954' Tom Blaisdell, who lived across from the track on the other side of County Route 401, had enough of the noise and the dust and bought the Bishops out. He shut the track down and that was the end of the Days of Thunder in South Westerlo. Years later the land would be donated for the Blaisdell-White Park. The Little League ball fields were built and whole new generations of South Westerlo residents and their kids would find their sporting entertainment there.

Today only the historical marker remains to remind us that something special once happened at the park. The memory of Clearview Speedway fades as fewer and fewer of that generation remain. But, for a few short years, the engines roared and the dust flew as the Greatest Generation celebrated life after doing their part to save the world.



Stories My Grandfather Told Me

By Garth Bryant

After a career with the A&P Grocery Company my grandfather, Alexander Bryant, Sr., moved to the tiny hamlet of South Westerlo in 1941 and went into the General Store Business. Over the next 53 years he, along with my father and later myself, grew this business into the single largest volume independent grocery store in upstate New York.

Thousands of people worked for us and tens of thousands shopped in our stores in those five decades. I have already written an in-depth history of these events.

Now I would like to share one tiny little insignificant story my grandfather shared with me. This true story in some ways more closely demonstrates what life was like for my grandfather running a store in South Westerlo in the 1940s. It also says a lot about what a gentleman he was that he could tell it with laughter and good cheer. For those of you who knew him, I am sure you would understand.

Part of running a general store in 1941 was store credit. Customers were allowed to pick up their goods without paying for them. There was a large ledger book kept in the store where each customer's account was kept. I still have the last edition. People would come in and charge their weekly shopping. Some people who lived close to Town would come in daily and sign for as little as 2 or 3 cents for a newspaper or a soda.

In theory these accounts were supposed to be paid up at month's end. In reality, this was the end of the Great Depression and many of our customers had very little money. People would come in and pay as much of their bill as they could. Some people even traded eggs and other farm goods to pay off part of their bill. People back then were very prideful of doing the right thing and almost all tried to keep somewhat up to date.

One time, one of Grandpa Al's customers skipped town without paying his bill. I believe it was thirty some dollars. This seems like a tiny amount today but it has to be remembered that Al's total income in 1942 was just a few thousand dollars. Thirty dollars was a very big deal back then. Somehow, he learned that the customer had moved across the Hudson River to Columbia County. He decided to go and collect his money.

This decision came with a few problems. First, he didn't own a car. Second, he worked every day except Sunday, and on Sundays Al went to church. Nonetheless he was determined to collect this debt.



Al and Pearl Bryant, 1973, during a hot dog giveaway at the Greenville store.

One summer Sunday after church he borrowed a friend's car and headed out. He took the Athens Ferry across the Hudson River and drove to the address he had been given. As soon as he pulled in, Al knew his task was hopeless.

The man was living in a rundown shack in obvious poverty. He came out into the overgrown junk-strewn yard and shook my grandfather's hand. He said, "Al, I am sorry to have run out on my debt but I don't have any money. All I have is these two mangy turkeys that are scratching in the yard and you're welcome to them if you want them."

My grandfather said, "Well, I can see you're having a rough time and I appreciate your offer. So, throw them turkeys in the back seat of the car and we'll call it even."

My grandfather was obviously not a farming man. The turkeys fought and pooped all the way home. The fights occasionally spilled over into the front seat. In between fights, the turkeys took turns perching on the back of the front seat with their wings flapping for balance.

I can't imagine what the drive was like. By the time he arrived home his friend's car was full of feathers and turkey poop. My grandmother took one look and said "Al you don't know anything about raising turkeys. You're not leaving them here and I'm not cleaning that car."

Desperate now, he had to come up with a new plan. Another customer of his had a farm nearby. I may be wrong but I believe his name was Chet. He arrived at Chet's farm and made him a deal. "Chet, you raise these two turkeys and we'll each eat one for Thanksgiving"



Early days at Bryant's Store in South Westerlo. Pictured: Pearl and Al Bryant, Emily Rehm, Skip Hynes, and John Courts.

Al offered. Chet agreed and the deal was done. Al went home and spent the rest of the afternoon scrubbing his friend's car.

Every week Chet would come into the store and give Al an update. "Them turkeys are growing like weeds." and "Them turkeys are really putting

on the pounds." and "We're going to eat good this Thanksgiving Al."

As summer turned into fall, the glowing reports continued. The two men enjoyed these conversations and Al started to look forward to his Thanksgiving dinner.

Shortly after November 1 of that year, Chet came into the store. His normal country boy smile now a serious frown. "What's wrong, Chet?" my grandfather asked.

Chet took a deep breath and replied, "Al I got bad news for you, your turkey died."

Such was life as a store keeper in South Westerlo in the 1940s.

This true story was told to me by my Grandfather when I was a young boy. In high school I turned it in as a writing assignment in Mr. Volmar's English class.

I don't know how many of you out there had Mr. Volmar for high school English in Greenville, but I know it's a lot. I wouldn't presume to speak for all the rest of you but I found him to be a "bit" of a tough grader. He somehow managed to be unimpressed with the uninspired work I routinely handed in.

This story though he liked. He wrote "shades of Mark Twain" on the top of the paper. I never forgot that and still think about it when I write today.

Notes:

Calendars: Last call, available at Kelly's, GNH and Library.

The calendar sales season is nearing its end, and our local history 2024 calendar sales have achieved admirably. A thank you goes to the three establishments for allowing public display and sales. Please, when you visit these establishments, thank the owners and staff for their help. Over half the calendar sales happens at Kelly's, a circumstance for which GLHG is especially appreciative.

And I am starting on the 2025 calendar. If you have any ideas that you think appropriate for the calendar, please forward your idea and/or photo.

Another avenue of local history info is through

Facebook pages:

- Greenville Local History Group
- Greenville NY (Greene County) Community Page
- Greenville Central High School Friends
- Greene County History

Another regular source:

PorcupineSoup.com

Fourteen segments of the **Carrie Ingalls Diary** have reprinted my 100,000 word summary of Carrie's 1,000,000 word (FB, Porc)

Winter projects

I hope to cajole/persuade/nudge everyone willing to do so to partake in a winter project of your making: some recording of local history. I will prepare some ideas for the Jan-Feb newsletter.