

NASCAR executives who wear expensive suits and occupy fancy corporate suites prefer to portray modern stock car racing as a sport inhabited by squeaky-clean role-models promoted by slickly produced TV coverage.

But that is a departure from racing's hardscrabble early days, when moonshine was just as important as gasoline in fueling its growth, according to an event Saturday at Mount Airy Museum of History.

Rex White, a retired competitor who recently was inducted into the NASCAR Hall of Fame, was the guest of honor for the occasion — which included a racing roundtable discussion and other activities — but one could argue that moonshine had equal billing.

"I didn't like the stuff — I never was a whiskey drinker," said White, 85, who in 1960 won the points championship in a series that was the precursor to today's Sprint Cup Series. He is now the oldest-living champion of NASCAR's top division.

White said the influence of moonshine was hard to ignore in racing's early days, which flowed like a river through drivers and other key figures in racing — and even spectators.

"The biggest fight I ever saw at a track was at North Wilkesboro," he said of a venue that was part of the NASCAR circuit for years.

"There was probably a thousand or two (people) fighting in the grandstand," White of the alcohol-fueled conflict.

The cars on the track kept running unencumbered as the drivers witnessed the melee in the stands — until someone threw a bottle through the windshield of Bob Welborn's car.

Finally the crowd was brought under control. "But that was one heck of a fight," White said.

This was part of a culture associated with racing's beginnings, NASCAR expert Dr. Dan Pierce told the audience gathered Saturday at the museum. Pierce, a history professor at the University of North Carolina-Asheville and author of the book "The Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay and Big Bill France," said those controlling the sport today can't deny its moonshine heritage.

Pierce said drivers, track owners and others were part of that culture, to which White agreed.

"A lot of them were good honest people," the retired champion said. He pointed out that those in the illegal liquor trade also had a lot of money, which gave them prominence during the hard times the country was going through.

"It was something people had to make a living," Pierce, the author, said of moonshining.

Many fans are aware of how pioneering drivers such as Junior Johnson cut their teeth running moonshine on the back roads of North Carolina and transferred those skills to the track. But that was equally true of people who ran the sport, including track owners.

There is the question of why bootleggers would want to build a racetrack, Pierce said, and the answer was simple.

“People who make moonshine and make a lot of money have a problem,” the author and professor explained. “What do you do with the money?”

Depositing large sums of cash in a bank would draw the attention of the authorities, Pierce said, and keeping it stashed somewhere could invite trouble. He cited a long-ago incident in Wilkes County in which men with sub-machine guns infiltrated a place where a poker game took place and stole \$17,000.

“It was a dangerous thing to have a lot of cash around.”

White recalled one establishment from those days where money was hidden in a jukebox. “You know what that building is now?” the racing legend said. “A church.”

Given the risk of such practices, some involved in moonshining saw having a track as a legitimate enterprise to funnel money through.

That included some of the sport's founding fathers, Pierce said, including Clay Earles, who opened Martinsville Speedway in the late 1940s, and was known for having a framed set of brass knuckles on his office wall.

"They ought to name one of their races the Bootlegger 500," Pierce said of the two Martinsville tour dates on the NASCAR schedule, because that activity enabled the track to be developed.

The late Enoch Staley, longtime owner of North Wilkesboro Speedway, also was in the illegal alcohol business, Pierce said.

Staley had a "day job" driving a truck for Coble Dairy, the NASCAR historian related. "But he would deliver liquor in his trucks as well."

Even NASCAR co-founder Bill France Sr., himself a former driver, was linked to the liquor trade. "Bill France knew a lot of bootleggers," Pierce said, and would have had to be aware of the side business many of those who he dealt with often were involved.

"You could actually make more money hauling liquor than you could racing," said Pierce, who marvels at how NASCAR rose into a prominent sport from such humble beginnings.

"It's amazing how a bunch of people not given much credit by society were able to do this."

But Pierce says that those who run the sport today should be capitalizing on the present status of moonshine — including the emergence of a popular television show and the production and advertising of legalized moonshine, which is "going crazy."

"If I could give NASCAR a piece of advice, I would say embrace this culture," he said.

Veteran Recalls History

White participated in Saturday's roundtable discussion with Jerry Hatcher, a longtime NASCAR official who was a flagger for races, and Steve Ramey, who heads the Richard Childress Racing Museum.

During his championship run in 1960, White won six races, and in his career scored 28 wins, took 36 poles and finished in the top five in nearly half of his 233 starts in NASCAR's elite division.

The NASCAR pioneer, who responded to questions from audience members, said the youthful Kyle Larson is among his favorite racers today. "I think he's going to be a good driver."

He also commented about Danica Patrick.

"For a woman, she's doing great," White said with a smile, pointing out that she is now ahead of her team co-owner, Tony Stewart, in the point standings.

"She's got good equipment," he said, which allows Patrick to run well at times.

"You've got less chance of being in a wreck the closer to the front you can be," White said.

He also relayed the story of his last days in racing, after one audience member asked White if he knew that the end was near.

This was in 1965 after White had built some Chevrolet Chevelles to race in Mexico.

White recalled Saturday how he went about 90 feet down the side of a cliff in a desolate area during one road-racing event, while riding with a Chevelle owner who swerved to miss two cows in the way.

"I had a broke back — I couldn't move," he said.

On that side of the road, no one came to help. "They just put a candle out where you went off," the veteran remembered.

Two hunters finally came by and pulled him up the embankment, but this did not lead to visiting a treatment facility such as the infield care centers of today's tracks.

"It was 24 hours later when I got to a hospital, in Mexico City," White said.

But he was able to heal up and win Sportsmen races afterward, including one about 10 weeks later in North Carolina — while still wearing a brace.