



Johnny Thompson, 91, stands in his Live Oak garage next to a Ford Flathead-V8 from the early 1930s. Thompson talked his way into a racing job by describing achievements elsewhere that couldn't be verified. He had to borrow a helmet and learned to race by following the car ahead of him.

LEGEND BEGAN WITH A BLUFF

Johnny Thompson, desperate for a job, walked on a track and never looked back

By Susie Bryan
For the Times-Union

Johnny Thompson's racing career began with a few lies and a borrowed helmet.

"After the war, we had about four or five years when things were hard ... due to the fact that the shipyards closed ... and all these people were on the street looking for a job," said Thompson, 91. "Plus all the servicemen were out looking for jobs. ... And this [one] Saturday afternoon, I was looking through the want ads for a job, any job. ... I needed a job. And I saw an ad for the Milford Brothers. They needed a race driver for the next day, Sunday afternoon," Thompson said.

After seeing the ad, Thompson drove across town to the garage and body shop to meet with race car owners, the Milford Brothers. This is where Thompson's confidence and charisma took over.

"I walked up there. ... They were

roasting oysters and working on the race car. So I walked in and said, 'I understand you're looking for a race driver.' And they said yes, and of course they wanted to know my background. I told them that I was a midget champ in California, and I was a champ in Houston, Texas, racing hot rods — anything away from Jacksonville. I'd never even walked across a racetrack before, let alone been in a race car. But they believed me and said, 'Meet me at the race track tomorrow afternoon.'"

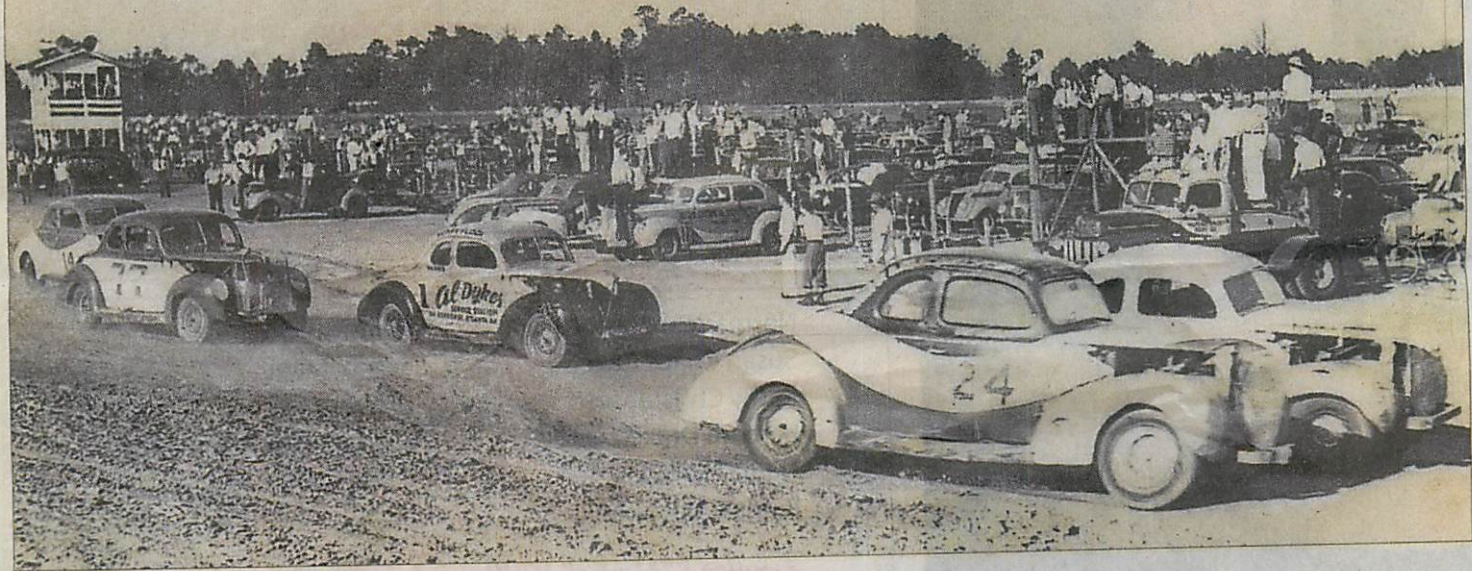
Thompson said he remembers going to Jacksonville's long-gone dirt track, Speedway Park, without so much as a helmet. He had to borrow one and needed help figuring out how to buckle it. He learned to race by following the car in front of him. He finished third in his first heat race, second in the consolation race, and sixth in the feature. He left the track that day with \$40 in his pocket.

After that first race, it wasn't



"I didn't race because I wanted to go fast," says Johnny Thompson, shown in 1949, "I went out there to beat you."

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Johnny Thompson is pictured racing in car 77 at Speedway Park at Lenox Avenue and Plymouth Street in 1949.

THOMPSON

Continued from F-1

long before Thompson's career took off. In Jacksonville, he became a local hero. The racing at Speedway Park was frequently covered by the local papers, which said in June 1950, "There's no stopping Johnny Thompson." This was the same year he won a track record 12 consecutive races.

Jacksonville's Speedway Park opened in 1947 at Lenox Avenue and Plymouth Street. The track hosted historic drivers. It was closed in 1973 and is now the site of an apartment complex. Thompson has a difficult time thinking about what has become of the track he used to race on. He visited the site to see what it looks like now. "When I drove around and came back out to the gate, I was fighting tears in my eyes, knowing what we used to have and what they have now," he said.

RACING ADVENTURES AWAY FROM HOME

Thompson's racing career spanned eight states and two countries. He competed frequently in tracks across Georgia and South Carolina and even took his car — he preferred to drive Fords — to the famous Daytona Beach races, where he raced with legends such as Lee Petty, Glen Wood, Fireball Roberts and Buck Baker. He spent some time in 1951 in Canada. This change of scenery was simply due to "the adventure of just going out away from home," Thompson said.

The idea of adventure and excitement is one reason Thompson fell in love



Local racing legend Johnny Thompson with a race car in 1950 at Speedway Park.

with racing. However, he said he believes racing is "... up here," pointing to his head, "and not all guts and nerves. It is about understanding the car."

Thompson said he holds a special place in his heart for dirt tracks and dirt track racing. He believes "real" racing is on dirt. "It takes a dirt track to race, on, to have competition on." He calls the racing of today on paved tracks "interstate driving."

"I've always said, and still say, racing today is not the speed that you run. Running at 200 miles an hour around that track is not racing. Competition between two drivers is racing. I raced and drove with determination to win. I drove because I like to drive with somebody that is running next to me. ... I like to bang the fenders."

"I didn't race because I wanted to go fast. I went out there to beat you. And I did it almost every time."

CONQUERING STUNT DRIVING

Competition and determination fueled Thompson during his racing days, and they still do. But holding seven track records at Speedway Park and countless race wins wasn't enough for Thompson; he had another realm of the racing world to vanquish: stunt driving.

"I started stunt driving because it was different from racing and I wanted to be able to conquer [it]. I had already conquered the racing, and I wanted to get in a stunt car because I wanted to see what kind of a driver I could be in there. I turned out to be as good as anybody else," Thompson said.

His stunt driving days began in 1953. Thompson says they never knew what type of track or condition they would be driving in and had very little time to prepare for a performance. "You've got to have the

skills to drive wherever you are at."

Stunt driving shows are made up of anywhere from one to four cars driving over ramps, going sideways up onto two wheels, jumping over other vehicles, and many other creative ways to entertain the audience. Thompson said he has done it all when it comes to stunt driving.

"I have done what they call 'low skis'; that's where the ramp is elevated so high and you go over as fast as you think you can hold it on two wheels, 40 miles an hour or 60, it's up to you. I've also done what they call high skis. High skis is where you get up onto two wheels as high as you can go, as long as you can go. And of course I've done the ramp-to-ramp jump also."

Thompson literally took his stunt talents all over the world, including as far away as South Africa.

'IT IS WHERE I CAME FROM'

There is no doubt that Thompson has done it all. Although he retired as a deputy constable in Jacksonville, his heart and soul have always belonged on a track. Thompson has a lot he can look back over and think about. After winning countless races, traveling the world, and receiving numerous recognitions, there is really one thing that stands out most to Thompson about his career: how much he overcame.

"What racing and why racing means so much to me, is not exactly what I accomplished in racing, as it is where I came from to racing," Thompson says. "I was born and raised back in the Depression Days, when times were hard everywhere to everybody."

Thompson was born on Sept. 9, 1924, in the small town of Inverness, Ala. As the oldest of nine kids, he had a lot of responsibility growing up. After failing the sixth grade for the third time, Thompson quit school. He went to trade school at 17 and worked in welding at a shipyard during World War II.

"I ... went to school barefooted with frost on the ground. I wore overalls with patch on patch and patch on patch and that patch had a hole in it, because there was no money to buy clothes. I went to bed many a night on cornbread and butter-milk. That was supper. ... A lot of nights I went to bed with nothing but parched peanuts, ground up in an old hand food chopper with cane syrup made up into a candy ball. That was supper."

Thompson was frequently laughed at and

made fun of at school for his appearance and the conditions in which he lived. "I have always believed ... and my racing career was born mainly from this, was determination. I didn't let no education stop me. I didn't let this, 'well, I was raised in the country, I don't know nothing,' I didn't let that stop me. I saw you out there doing it, I can do it. If you drive a race car, I can drive one. If you can win a race, I can win one. I lived ... on determination. ... That's what makes me proud of what I am and who I am."

From growing up in a cotton patch to traveling around the world for racing and stunt driving, there are two words Thompson uses to describe himself: honest and determined. He raced in an honest way, believing it was better to lose than win by cheating. He has been invited to inaugurations of governors and has had lunch with mayors. He has set track records and has literally beaten the best of the best. He has stunt driven as nearby as the Westside and as far away as South Africa.

After all he has done, Thompson sometimes thinks back to the adversity he faced at school and compares it with everything he has been able to accomplish. "I was laughed at at school because I had a biscuit with fatback in it, when everybody else had a peanut butter and banana sandwich, you know ... so they laughed at ya. But I would like to put my life up against theirs. Sure would."

Susie Bryan is a recent graduate of Jacksonville University.