

DESTINATION DIXIE “YEE-HAHHH!”

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On Friday, September 9, old cars flooded into Nashville for the “Heart of Dixie” tour arranged by Bruce and Shar Kile and Mike and Sandy Smith. The hospitality room at the Radisson Hotel soon was awash with Goo-Goo bars, Moon Pies, and CHVA’ers reconnecting with old friends while collecting instructions and paperwork for the week ahead.

The tour leaders made that part easy. When we began our sightseeing activities the next day, all we had to do was *read the book* and let our bodies adapt to Tennessee’s temperature and humidity. With much of first day spent walking through Gaylord’s Opryland Resort Hotel complex with its gardens, waterfalls, and air-conditioned spaces the climate did not seem to be a problem. We were soon to learn otherwise.

Saturday night’s venture to the Grand Old Opry began with an absence of bus transportation. Fortunately, after the buses scheduled to carry our group ended up at the wrong hotel, or town, or state, a shuttle-bus driver stepped into the breach. I am unsure how many people boarded his vehicle for the six-block ride to the Opry, but there was not enough room left in his vehicle to, in the parlance of Tennessee, “skin a rabbit.” And, we got a first taste of what Mike Smith terms “Air you can wear.”

No matter your taste in music, the Opry is a must-see and the two-hour production made a nice start to our week amid Southern Hospitality. After the show, a few of the group managed a visit to the Wild Horse saloon before heading for bed. Probably, our over-stressed tour leaders led them into the place!

Morning brought our first drivers’ meeting with drawings for quilted goody-bags filled with prizes. Our group became two, one called “Grits” the other “Biscuits.” The logic of these names may escape those who have not been on a CHVA tour, but it is enough to say that nobody leaves his appetite for good food at home.

We left Nashville at 9:00am for Wartrace, TN a small backwater village that offered a close-up look at a real “Mayberry” economy. A vintage gas station served as a backdrop for our first photo-op and we ate lunch (in shifts) at the Pick n’ Parlor where local singers and guitarists picked up where the Opry left off.

Next, we toured through Bell Buckle on a meandering track to Bridlewood Horse Farm. The folks there taught us all we needed to know about raising and training Tennessee Walking Horses. (That’s a tough sell to a bunch of car nuts!)

The first day ended when we arrived in Shelbyville. Some of us joined an unscheduled tour of a small, privately owned museum. Our escort was the town’s retired fire chief, a raconteur with a remarkable memory of the town’s history.

Monday the tour took us to Lynchburg. This county seat town offers two major treats (remember what I said about this group and its gastronomic interests). The more famous of the two is the Jack Daniels distillery, but most of us decided Miss Bobo’s (a traveler’s hotel and boarding house since 1867) deserved equal ranking. Again, due to the size of our group, we ate in shifts. While one group dined, the other toured the distillery. Both “experiences” were memorable. Our guide through Jack Daniels was a bib-overalled Jeff Foxworthy while Miss Bobo’s dignified hostess ladled out Southern charm with *Aunt Bea’s* sweet grace.

Full and tired, we pointed our bug-spattered bumpers toward Alabama, Huntsville, that is, and another Radisson Hotel.

After the next morning’s driver’s meeting and gift giving, we drove six miles to the US Space and Rocket Center where most of us took a ride in the mockup space module before once again settling down for food. By 3:00, we were on route to Gadsden, AL. Every one of the group’s lead-foots wanted a good night’s sleep before the next day’s 6:45am driver’s meeting.

Nobody slept late that Wednesday, day five, because it was our once in a lifetime opportunity to drive the Talladega track. We rolled out of Gadsden for the 37-mile leg to the track at 7:00am. Entertainment on route came from a trucker who picked up on our CB conversations. His philosophical discourses on politics, Iraq, and the world at large brightened our morning.

The folks at Talladega made things easy for us. We were soon on the big, banked oval where we terrorized the racing world with 80 mph speeds. That, at least, is the best my ’55 Ford managed. (Keep in mind that it contained three adults and a ton of baggage.) While not all of us were fans of NASCAR racing, this two-lap jaunt was an unforgettable thrill. Later, after a tour of the Int’l Motor Sports Hall of Fame, we had a barbeque lunch and watched

some pro-drivers do practice laps. To say that we were embarrassed about our performances would be an understatement.

Our next stop was at the Blue Bell ice cream factory in Sylacauga where we lined up like little soldiers and enjoyed dessert. Their ice cream was *gooooood*—made it easy to believe their motto: “We eat all we can and sell the rest!” We drove on to Montgomery afterward, arriving in time to enjoy a “California” rush hour with the local populace, most of whom had cut their teeth on dirt tracks. Thanks to the careful directions of our tour leaders, we survived them and, after many turns and twists, arrived at our night’s lodging. We soon discovered that our Holiday Inn was packed with Army troops staging for Iraq plus several hurricane evacuees.

Check-in was stressful for everyone but, eventually, it was accomplished and we settled in and made friends with cockroaches that shared many rooms. Those southern bugs are big enough to drag away a size EEE shoe.

The next morning, our leaders guided us to downtown Montgomery where many of CHVA’ers toured the town on a restored trolley or a 1950’s motorbus similar to the one Rosa Parks was on when she made her courageous stand. Her museum as well as Hank Williams’ captured the interest of many. We spent the entire day touring Montgomery for the city is full of historic places dating back to the Civil War and many that marked the struggle for Civil Rights.

Friday, we set off on the 80-mile drive to Warm Springs, Georgia and FDR’s Little White House. Food once again played a part in permanently affixing this historic site in our minds. The nearby Bulloch House served meals buffet-style with fried green tomatoes and fried apples among the offerings.

On Saturday, most of us took the tour’s final outing to Tuskegee, home of Tuskegee University, the George Washington Carver Museum, and the former training base of the “Tuskegee” Airmen. The museum for that WW II group was not yet complete, but a wrong turn led us to an old aircraft restoration facility at the old airfield. And, while there, we were treated to a skydiving exhibition. Meanwhile, back in Montgomery, several ladies who chose to avoid the Tuskegee drive sans air-conditioning toured a flower nursery. No doubt, some of them smuggled some plants out of Alabama. Let us hope none were Kudzu.

The final banquet made a pleasant evening for all. The food was delicious, the company grand, and the catering service better than expected.

“Kudos” to Bruce, Mike, Char, and Sandy for this “Heart of Dixie” experience. Their cheerful leadership through thick (“air you can wear”) and thin (what most of us will never be again) stood up to a real stress test.

Thanks as well to those who drove “old iron.” Distance, heat, and age meant added risk to your participation. Several cars did suffer problems but, by my count, all of them made it to Montgomery.



Pit stop along I-41 north of the turn to Bell Buckle, Tn. McCartain’s 64 T-Bird, Flanagan’s ‘66 Mustang, White’s 55 Pontiac, and Quatros’ ‘56 Ford



Norm and Bird White at Huntsville’s US



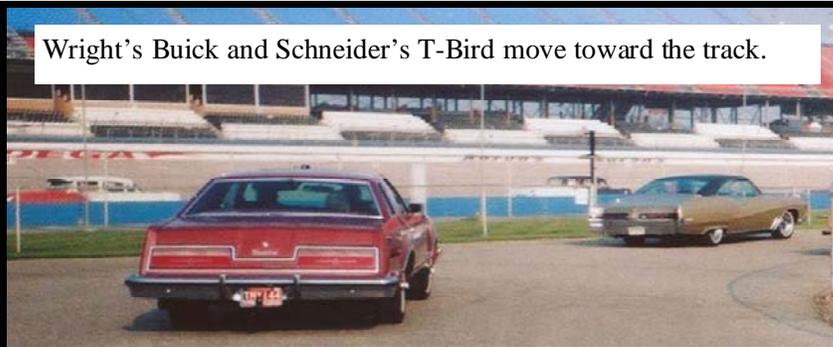
Approaching the Talladega entry gate... photo of Paul and Rosemary Schneider’s ‘78 T-Bird taken from BK Showalter’s ‘55 Ford.



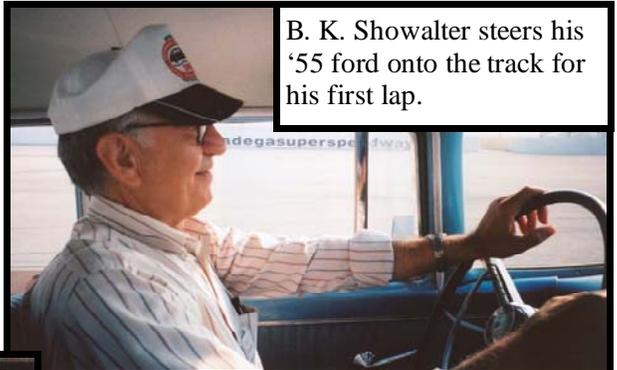
Entering the tunnel that leads to the infield, pits and track.



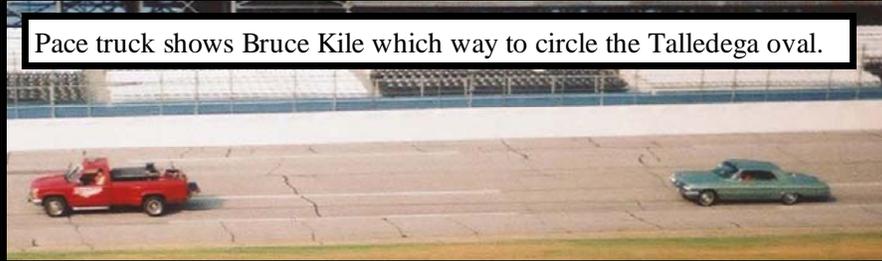
On the infield area at Talladega



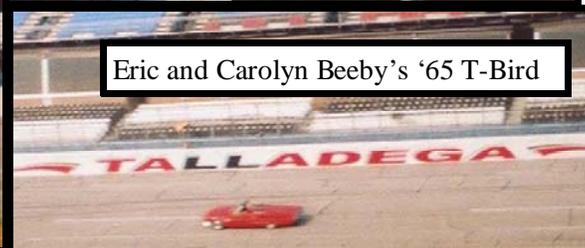
Wright’s Buick and Schneider’s T-Bird move toward the track.



B. K. Showalter steers his ‘55 ford onto the track for his first lap.



Pace truck shows Bruce Kile which way to circle the Talladega oval.



Eric and Carolyn Beeby’s ‘65 T-Bird



Harold and Claire Bracket’s ‘39 Ford drafts the Kile Buick



Clovis Heath running all alone in her ‘65 Ford