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TO MADISON AVENUE: A CULTURAL  
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**Ritual, Folklore, and Cultural Mythology  
of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series**

Stock car drivers, like the horsemen of the American West, occupy a special place within American culture. Just as frontier scouts and cowboys have become a romanticized part of our national history, Winston Cup drivers have become symbols of the character traits that Americans admire. The meaning of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series, and its role in the world of professional sports, must be analyzed, interpreted, and treated as an important component of life in the United States.

Culture, according to Clifford Geertz, "denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (89). These symbolic forms "serve multiple purposes," depending on the cultural meaning that needs to be transmitted (113). Each symbol has a specific "function" based on "a people's ethos . . . and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are" (89).

Geertz uses Balinese cockfighting as an example of the way symbols, and their culturally constructed meanings, function. The sport is highly symbolic and ritualistic, and its actions serve as a means of interpreting Balinese beliefs and experiences. Geertz explains:

What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life, lifts it from the realm of everyday practical affairs, and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance is not, as functionalist sociology would have it, that it reinforces status discriminations . . . but that it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function . . . is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves. (448)

## 110 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

These cockfights synthesize a variety of motions and behaviors in a way that reflects Balinese society. The cockfight combines what Geertz calls "themes"—"animal savagery, male narcissism, opponent gambling, status rivalry [and] mass excitement," and it binds them "into a set of rules." These rules create a "symbolic structure in which . . . the reality of their inner affiliation can be intelligibly felt." By examining such cultural rituals, a person should be able to "see a dimension of his own subjectivity" (449-50).

NASCAR Winston Cup racing is such a cultural ritual. It addresses the nature of American society—a society occupied with automobiles, technology, consumption of material goods, and competition. Those who participate in the sport are folk heroes and media celebrities; they are professional athletes and daredevils. The Winston Cup stock car driver is considered fearless, intuitive, physically adroit, and emotionally cool. Like the scouts who tempted death along the Great Plains, NASCAR drivers tempt death on high-banked ovals at speeds of better than 200 miles per hour. There is little difference between dodging bullets along a trail in Wyoming and dodging concrete walls along a straightaway at Daytona; both have the power to stop a man quickly and permanently.

What makes the stock car driver so unique within American culture is his ability to use and manipulate technology. This is not unlike the frontiersman who gained acclaim for his abilities to shoot, hunt, track game, and ride. Whereas the majority of Americans climb into their cars for their daily commute to work, the Winston Cup driver climbs into his car to try and defy principles of physics and engineering. The stock car driver tries to test every aspect of the 3,400-pound machine under him: its engine, its handling characteristics, and its durability. While the daily commuter worries about spilling coffee on his dress clothes, the NASCAR driver worries about keeping his car on its wheels. As Rick Mast, driver of the No. 75 Remington Arms Ford, put it:

you're more worried about . . . what you can do to make the car better. The very instant you get in trouble, when that baby goes wrong, then you feel like you're going 200 mph, or more like 2000 mph. Those cars are made to go in one direction and when they aren't going in that direction, you get scary wind noises, the wall flying by, tires squealing, you know it's not going to be good. But you don't think about that, you just react when it happens. ("Rick Mast Chat Session")

Because their talents transcend average human ability, NASCAR Winston Cup drivers are considered heroes. They do something that most of us can only think about. We drive every day, but our arena is the

highway, the city street, the crowded parking lot near our office. Stock car drivers, like the frontier heroes of old, challenge their environment and test themselves against the unknown. The rest of us simply stand by to observe and admire. These brave men become the subject of our conversations as we dream of their talents and tell stories about their accomplishments. Admirers of such men elevate these individuals to folk hero status. They become symbols for our society and our lives; they set the standards that we wish we could follow.

Folk heroes often come from the ranks of professional athletes. Even touring entertainers like Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley followed this pattern—their talents in the horse ring earned them many admirers who followed their exploits and paid to see them perform in person. As sports turned professional and became more recognized as popular entertainment, athletes became a central part of our culture. Athletes soon became the focus of our popular folklore as Americans began to swap stories about the lives, talents, and accomplishments of these newfound celebrities.

One professional athlete to take his place within American popular folklore was Barney Oldfield. Oldfield—the first professional race car driver in America—was a man of rural heritage and working-class upbringing, yet his name became synonymous with fearlessness (or recklessness, depending on how you define such things) and the sport of automobile racing. His father was a veteran of the Civil War, and his mother was the local blacksmith's daughter. Berna Eli "Barney" Oldfield was born, according to Homer C. George, "of sturdy but humble farming parentage, in a little loghouse three miles from Wauseon, Fulton County, Ohio" (Oldfield 18).

George's allusion to Oldfield's birth in "a little loghouse" projects a strong image of traditional American life. As history reminds us, a loghouse was home for many of our nation's heroes. Such modest beginnings are a breeding ground for excellence and a classroom for determination according to the American experience. Oldfield's family heritage and childhood upbringing follow this historical stereotype closely, as do the lives of such national folk heroes as Daniel Boone and Abraham Lincoln. Personalities like these, the great heroes who shaped America, are often perceived as the products of simple rural environments, which instill in them a work ethic central to the basic philosophy behind individual success.

For Barney Oldfield, like other American heroes, success came through hard work. His personal history seems to have been torn from the pages of a Horatio Alger story. Like Alger's characters—who achieve respectability and success through their dedication to honesty,

## 112 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

sincerity, strong morality, and the sweat of their brow—Barney Oldfield “struggled upward” persistently to earn national honor and recognition. As Homer George wrote of Oldfield:

At the time of his birth, January 29th, 1878, his parents were struggling under the burden of a mortgage, on a quarter section of poor farmland which yielded meager returns for their toil. For eleven years, Oldfield remained on the home farm, living the slow, laborious life of the farm youngster of that period, rising at dawn to do the chores, little dreaming that fame and fortune were waiting for him in later years. (Oldfield 18)

Oldfield’s dedication to helping his family fit the mold found in today’s NASCAR Winston Cup mythology. Such loyalty to family and community are strong traits in the image of stock car racing, and Oldfield set the stage for the drivers who would follow him decades later.

What made Oldfield a folk hero was his common, even lower-class upbringing. A public school dropout, Barney Oldfield made his living by pursuing his dream of being a bicycle racer. It was a gamble but a gamble he was willing to take. This, in and of itself, made Oldfield a hero to some. Here was a man who followed his dream, even though his father believed racing bicycles was “a fool’s game” (Nolan 29). Barney Oldfield threw caution to the wind, his feet upon the pedals and rode into sports history.

Barney Oldfield’s accomplishments made him the subject of public discussion and amazement, in part because newspaper reporters followed his career closely. The media trumpeted his 1910 Daytona Beach record in great detail, thanks to the efforts of Oldfield’s press agent, William Hickman “Will” Pickens. The Alabama-born Pickens had been working with Barney since 1904 as his “advance man,” setting up racing dates and handling public relations for the Ohio hero (Nolan 71). It was Pickens who carefully crafted Oldfield’s public image as a fearless competitor. At a race in Dallas, Texas, on a cold and windy December afternoon in 1909, Will Pickens showed the crowd his driver’s tenacity by seeing to it “that Oldfield’s hands were dramatically pried loose from their ‘frozen’ position on the steering wheel,” even though the driver had waved to his fans as he crossed the finish line to win the event (Nolan 97).

Barney Oldfield, not unlike other athletic figures, became a folk hero to millions of Americans. He was an ordinary man who possessed extraordinary skills—skills that were accentuated by the fact that he could manhandle and manipulate this new thing called an automobile. Oldfield used automobiles to defy laws of physics and science; he traveled faster than anyone in history and lived to tell his story. While the

majority of Americans still used horses and buggies, Barney Oldfield was using tomorrow's marvel of technology today.

Barney Oldfield was America's best known race car driver, thanks to the efforts of Will Pickens and the interpretation of Oldfield's life and accomplishments through the repetition of American popular culture and modern folklore. Many people create heroes by identifying with a person who reminds them of themselves, and they assign specific qualities to this person that separates him or her from the mediocrity of their own everyday life. Most everyone drives a car, but not everyone can be a Barney Oldfield, even though he was a "regular" person like the rest of us—he earned a living, was a husband, a son, and personable despite his fame, fortune, and celebrity status. As Dixon Wecter has explained, "the major idols of America have been men of good will. . . . No hero must announce that he is infallible. He must be greater than the average, but in ways agreeable to the average. . . . he must keep his personal modesty, his courtesy toward the people who gave him that power" (11).

Heroes, whether they are sports figures, politicians, or some other socially significant individual, exist in two separate spheres. As the age-old dilemma of history goes—what people did and what we say they did are often two different things. Such is the nature of folklore; an emphasis on people—the "folk"—makes it a circumspect way of gathering data about important topics. The advantage of human fallibility is that it opens doors to us regarding the *why* and *how* certain people are remembered as folk heroes, which is often more important than the issue of *who* is considered a hero in the first place.

Examples of this are not hard to find. Christopher Columbus was remembered as the man who "discovered" America, and praised as such, yet we now know the details of his travels. The "facts" about Columbus and his journey in 1492 are different than the "fiction" that has been committed to public memory. Atrocities toward the Arawaks who encountered Spanish explorers have been conveniently overlooked. Even Charles Lindbergh, the first to fly across the Atlantic Ocean alone, can be interpreted in two distinct ways: he was the "Lone Eagle" in 1927, but he was also recipient of the Order of the German Eagle in 1938. As Dixon Wecter puts it, "the Lindbergh legend had been stamped with a swastika" (441). At some point, these memories, these "facts" and their varying interpretations, or "fictions," have become part of our history. Ordinary people remind each other about these stories, these events, these famous people, and the tales get revised every time they are retold. The revisions come from our culture, from the things we consider important at any particular time in our lives, and these revisions color our history until it is time to tell the stories again.

## 114 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

Winston Cup stock car drivers, like other professional athletes, become folk heroes because they spend most of their careers—and personal lives—under a media microscope. The general public learns far more than it rightly deserves to know. Regular consumers of sports news learn where athletes live, how much money they make, details about private affairs, and explicit information regarding the not-so-private ones. Professional athletes become news items away from the field of competition, especially given their wealth and social status. They can also earn column inches and airtime for a lapse in personal judgment, as the New York Yankees's Dwight Gooden and the St. Louis Rams's Lawrence Phillips can demonstrate.<sup>1</sup> Such is the situation for a man or woman making millions of dollars each year from playing a game in front of paying audiences.

We buy seats to stadiums and arenas, we thrill to the exploits of an individual participant, we find ourselves fascinated with a player, and we search out more information about the player-turned-person. By learning intimate details about the athlete's life, we can then associate ourselves with him or her; we compensate for his or her athletic ability by learning about the athlete's faults and foibles. Michael Jordan thrills us with his ability to slam dunk a basketball, but he also pacifies us with the knowledge that he was once cut from his junior high school basketball team. Suddenly the legend seems more normal, more mediocre. Suddenly the professional athlete seems like us, a revelation introduced from within the society we live in.

Societies utilize folklore and storytelling to enhance the mystique of revered figures like professional athletes, often exaggerating or highlighting less well-known events to enhance their public images. Baseball fans and historians argue over the semantics of Babe Ruth's "called shot" in 1932, but regardless of its historical accuracy, the tale has become a metaphor for Ruth's personality and demeanor. Drinking and womanizing aside, the stories about Babe Ruth—or Barney Oldfield, for that matter—become more than retellings of historical facts. The stories we tell about sports heroes reaffirm who we are as fans and citizens, and who the hero is as an entertainer and a cultural symbol.

Many stories serve as a means of explaining an individual's greatness. Sheer talent is rarely enough; there is often some life experience that affects the creation of a sports hero. Such is the case with Junior Johnson, whose tenacity on the racetrack was formed, according to sports folklore, from years of doing battle against federal agents on the backroads of North Carolina. Racing lore also credits Johnson with originating the "bootlegger's turn," a move used during races when a car gets spun in an opposite direction.<sup>2</sup> Whether Junior Johnson created such

a move or not is left up to debate. What makes this an important issue is that it has become a part of NASCAR folklore—a story told across generations of racing fans—and Johnson has become a legend in the process. Legions of stock car followers learn these stories, interpret them, and take from them the cultural contexts they consider to be most important at that particular time.

Stock car racing is a fertile field for the creation of such folk legends. It is a sport that thrived on word-of-mouth in the years before mainstream media accepted it as a major force in American athletics. Stories circulated from dirt tracks throughout the country by way of garages and schoolyards, over gas pumps and barstools. The exploits of local drivers who battled for glory at shrines like Darlington and Daytona became part of auto racing lore. As those drivers—men like Tim and Fonty Flock, Curtis Turner, Red Byron, Lee Petty, and Junior Johnson—worked their way from dirt to asphalt, their stories reflected some of the issues emerging from NASCAR's infancy. Moonshine haulers became athletes, recognized names throughout the country, and their stories—now a part of NASCAR folklore—addressed the culture from which they came.

This recognition even transcended lines of race, as in the case of the late Wendell Scott. Scott, a moonshine hauler from Virginia, became the first African-American to drive in the NASCAR Grand National division. During his career, Scott won one event—a 100-lap dirt track race in Jacksonville, Florida—on December 1, 1963 (Fielden 2: 243). He became nationally recognized after Richard Pryor played him in the 1977 motion picture *Greased Lightning*, which emphasized Scott's driving talent, bootlegging background, and the racism he encountered while working his way up to the big time.

Despite Wendell Scott's Grand National career, few minorities today are involved with the Winston Cup Series. Much has been made about NASCAR's "whiteness" and the fact that the sport has few minority fans. However, one African-American, John Gordian, is a volunteer member of Ricky Rudd's pit crew, working on the Tide Racing Team Ford Thunderbird. Currently there are no African-American drivers in the Winston Cup Series. Willy T. Ribbs, the first African-American to drive in the Indianapolis 500, was offered a ride for the World 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway in 1978, but the ride was rescinded after Ribbs failed to show up for two practice sessions. The Ford ride reserved for Ribbs was then given to Dale Earnhardt for his fifth Winston Cup start (Fielden 4: 219, 232). Felix "The Nighthawk" Giles, the first African-American to win the Baja 1000 off-road race, has considered moving into NASCAR competition. In 1996, Giles considered qualifying for a Craftsman Truck Series event in Las Vegas, but failed to make

## 116 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

the starting field ("Elliott Leads"). Because race trucks and stock cars are similar in structure, running at Las Vegas would have been a natural launching pad for Giles to move toward the Winston Cup Series.

NASCAR's fans are predominately white, a fact that Bill France, Jr., has acknowledged with wonder. "Why don't more [African-Americans] come?" France has said, "I can't give you a good answer for that." There's no game plans to keep minorities away. . . . We would like to see them as competitors and certainly as fans. We don't have a problem with a black driver or black team" (qtd. in Knotts 58). Opening new Winston Cup markets—especially in large urban areas within reach of new facilities, like the California Speedway near Los Angeles and Quad-Cities International Raceway Park near Chicago—might be the catalyst to attract minorities as fans and participants. Breaking NASCAR's ties to its traditional Southern identification might be enough to get a culturally and ethnically-diverse audience involved in the sport. A driver like Wendell Scott, moonshiner-turned-folk-hero, proved the liquor business was an economic necessity that crossed racial barriers.

The outlaw element of stock car racing derived from these early days of NASCAR. These "outlaws" were already the subjects of regional folklore: Curtis Turner, a teenaged liquor-hauler-turned-lumber-tycoon, and Junior Johnson, arrested by federal agents while standing guard at his daddy's still. These stories reflect a variety of cultural elements central to life in the American Southeast, primarily aspects involving self-reliance and personal economic survival.

Junior Johnson serves as the best example of these rough-and-tumble days. A native of Wilkes County, North Carolina, Johnson's days of running moonshine were the subject of an essay written by Tom Wolfe for *Esquire* magazine in 1965 titled "The Last American Hero is Junior Johnson." Wolfe describes Johnson as "a country boy . . . who learns to drive by running whiskey for his father . . . one of the biggest copper-still operators of all time. . . ." A career behind the wheel of a legitimate stock car made Johnson "a famous . . . driver, rich, grossing \$100,000 in 1963, for example, respected, solid, idolized in his hometown and throughout the rural South" (72). Johnson, who served a ten-month jail sentence in Ohio because of his family's bootlegging business, eventually earned 50 NASCAR victories before retiring to become a stock car builder and team owner (Thigpen 55). Following the 1995 Winston Cup season, Junior Johnson sold his stock car enterprises and retired from racing all together. Despite this change, Johnson remains the southern folk hero Tom Wolfe "discovered" over 30 years ago.

Hollywood and American popular culture immortalized the legend of Junior Johnson by translating his story onto film. *The Last American*

*Hero*, a 1973 motion picture by Twentieth Century Fox, presented the saga of Johnson and his family's moonshine business in contemporary terms. "Junior Jackson" hauls the corn liquor made by his father and winds up discovering stock car racing, eventually becoming a winning driver on the national circuit. The boy from the mountains makes good, and leaves bootlegging behind to find his fortune in professional sport—not unlike Wolfe's version of the real-life hero from the Brushy Mountains.

The regional strength projected by NASCAR racing history—its ties to southern culture and folklore—creates a stereotypical depiction of drivers. This image exists even though many of the first successful stock car drivers were natives of the North and Midwest. Because of this depiction, a perspective of stock car racing has been produced that applies to these distinct regional stereotypes. The modern-day sport of Winston Cup stock car racing is tied to a rural, southern past, yet it exists as a part of corporate America. It is corporate America that utilizes stock car racing as a "vehicle" for marketing and promotion, using traditional, mythic images of drivers as a means of generating consumer activity and loyalty.

The rural, southern nature of Winston Cup stock car racing is responsible for America's initial conception of drivers and their place within the domination of professional sport. Some of the earliest stock car racers, according to folklore of the rural South, were men who hauled moonshine through the mountains of North Carolina during the 1930s and 1940s. They faced arrest and imprisonment if caught; this provided them with the inspiration to make their automobiles the fastest and strongest available.

Stock car racing in the 1940s was "a game of cops and corn." Moonshine runners had fast cars, as did the federal alcohol tax agents. Wheelmen either went straight and left the bootlegging business, got sent to prison, or ended up dead from a chase. All of them lived by a code of honor, a "law of the West," meaning that those runners who were caught did their time according to the law (Petty, *King Richard* 47). Folklore of the South represents these men as noble renegades who were willing to pay the price for their illegal practices when—and if ever—caught.

Once again, popular culture capitalizes on this folklore through the use of film, where the stories of these "noble renegades" may be recreated and retold. The film *Thunder Road* (1958), which has been raised to cult status, and more recent productions, like *Moonshine Highway* (1996), continue to weave heroic tales of the American South. Hauling moonshine is seen as honorable work among the families who populate the backwoods and mountain clearings.

## 118 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

In *Moonshine Highway*, the future of bootlegging is summed up in one word: racing. In 1957, a mechanic named "Hooch" Wilson tells his moonshine-running friend, Jed Muldoon, that liquor haulers are using their talents on the race track. "They make money, those racers," Wilson says in the film, "get more all the time. Crowds . . . they love it. See all those good ol' boys drivin' sideways, door-to-door about 140 [miles per hour]. That's the future, boy . . . racin."

Early stock car races were held on the backroads of rural North Carolina between two men who decided to see which one had the fastest car in that particular area. Such "wheelmen" as these quickly gained a following as local racing heroes, whether they competed on or off of the track (Petty, *King Richard* 41). These early challenges expanded onto the dirt horse-racing tracks of southern fairgrounds, where several moonshine runners could race each other without fear of getting caught by authorities. What the moonshiners wanted was an opportunity to test their driving abilities at an equitable venue. Each ran independently when on the roads hauling corn liquor—the main objective there was to not get arrested. Bragging rights were hard to settle without head-to-head contests, and fields of cars were unable to run effectively at night on the backroads. It was not until 1949 that these amateur race car drivers had a chance to compete against each other—and other skilled competitors—under regulated and lawful conditions.

The first official NASCAR Strictly Stock event was held on June 19, 1949, on a 3/4-mile dirt track at the Charlotte Fairgrounds (Fusco 40). A driver had to run under NASCAR regulations, which stated that cars were to be "new model," or no more than three years old and of showroom quality. This meant the cars were to be entirely stock, except that headlights could be taped over and hub caps and mufflers removed (Petty, *King Richard* 65). For moonshiners, this was automatically a step backward since they drove cars modified to outrun the law. Moonshine cars were not "stock," even though they were used on open roads, and so deemed illegal according to NASCAR. In this new "Strictly Stock" division, victory would be based on the skills of each individual driver, not on the modifications of his car. This race marked the beginning of what is today known as the NASCAR Winston Cup Series.

Glenn Dunnaway, from Gastonia, North Carolina, won this first event, only to be disqualified after a post-race inspection discovered that the rear springs of his 1947 Ford had been altered by the addition of wedges (Fusco 40). These wedges were placed between each leaf of the springs to reduce shifting of the car's weight. Wedges made the car ride straighter which, in turn, made the car faster through the corners. This old bootlegger's trick, done to the winning car by Hubert Westmoreland

who owned it and hauled moonshine in it, failed to meet NASCAR's regulations. As a result, the official winner was declared to be Jim Roper, from Great Bend, Kansas, who finished second to Dunnaway in a 1949 Lincoln (Fielden 1: 9).

Early moonshine-runners-turned-stock-car-racers were deemed by rural southern fans heroes because they symbolized a challenge to the oppressive federal agents who jeopardized their household income. Bootlegging, in the days before NASCAR provided wheelmen with a legalized venue, was part of a cottage industry that dates back to the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. Then, as was the case during the 1930s and 1940s, the moonshiners found themselves harassed by federal agents who demanded the farmers and mountain men pay taxes on the alcohol they distilled.

There was only one difference between the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 and the making of moonshine during the early years of the 20th century—the Whiskey Rebellion occurred in Western Pennsylvania near what is today the city of Pittsburgh. This historical fact addresses the cultural myth of moonshining—that it was a business limited to the southeastern states. Our common understanding of bootlegging is that it was a southeastern activity. That is the “fiction” of American history.

During the post-colonial period of American history, Western Pennsylvania was a rugged and primitive landscape populated by trappers, hunters, scouts, and Indian tribes. According to historian Thomas P. Slaughter:

The vast majority of poverty-stricken people in the western country were not town-dwellers . . . most frontiersmen sought to scratch a living from the environment in which they lived. . . . With the exception of Indian corn, their crops were those of medieval England—wheat, oats, barley, rye, buckwheat, flax, and hemp. Their ploughs showed no improvement over those of ancient Romans. . . . The new curved moldboards that Thomas Jefferson and others were experimenting with had not yet arrived in western Pennsylvania. Harrowing was done by dragging thornbushes across the fields. Farmers planted corn “Indian fashion,” scattering seeds over unploughed land. (70-71)

Some crops, like wheat, managed to prosper occasionally, despite the lack of agricultural technology along the western frontier. Such “periodic excesses,” mixed with “the scarcity of hard cash in the West,” and an increase in the “non-agricultural population of the region” fostered reliance on a barter-based economy (Slaughter 71). A variety of items could be used for barter, including beef, flour, ashes, wheat, oats, and whiskey.

## 120 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

Making whiskey served two needs along the Western Pennsylvania frontier: it was a product in demand within the frontier community, and it could be used as a form of currency within the barter system (Slaughter 71). Of whiskey's two uses in Western Pennsylvania, we can argue that perhaps its greatest benefit to settlers was its power to dull the senses. As Slaughter has written:

The capacity of most stills was less than 100 gallons and provided little more than was necessary for home consumption. . . . Even with the benefits of rich soils and large quantities of local whiskey to numb settlers against the cold, the work, the fleas, and the prospects of annihilation by Indians, life in the western country was a delicate balance between dearth and excess. Settlers lived both physically and psychologically at the edge of subsistence. (71)

The frontier population lived free in the wilderness, despite the horrors and dangers that lurked within the woods around them. These people were "fiercely independent," and they "demanded total liberty . . . to trade in markets wherever they could be found, and to spend the meager profits of their labors as they saw fit" (Slaughter 72).

Ratification of the Constitution put a stop to the frontiersmen's independence as the federal government excised control over all its people, even those living far from the halls of government in Philadelphia. A national Constitution affected everyone in the United States, even those living on the edge of total wilderness who had had little contact with organized law. The primary point of contention was in regard to taxation, especially the taxation of whiskey. Whiskey on the frontier was mainly for personal use, commercial use was "only a secondary function of distillation" (Slaughter 73). Refusal to pay taxes on whiskey pitted frontiersmen against the federal government in a struggle between the control of the government and the freedom of the individual.

This was the spirit that drove the Whiskey Rebellion toward its violent fruition in 1794. The frontiersmen believed in personal freedom, even if it meant battling their own government. Distilling whiskey was an act of survival, not a luxury to be taxed. Over 12,900 federal troops from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia, and more than 7,000 frontiersmen from Western Pennsylvania, clashed in this struggle. President George Washington led troops West in an attempt to stop the frontiersmen (Slaughter 3). By the end of 1794, the insurgence had been put down. The federal government was victorious, despite the frontiersmen's disregard for authority (Slaughter 72).

The debate over excise taxes on whiskey stretched southward from Pennsylvania down through North Carolina and Georgia. People living

in western North Carolina were subject to the same concerns over the power of the federal government as people in Western Pennsylvania. John Sevier, a Congressman from North Carolina during the era of the Whiskey Rebellion, saw what he considered prejudices against the tax (Slaughter 99). He felt that the people of North Carolina could probably ignore the law. The recognition and acceptance of these ideological and economic prejudices was the foundation for moonshining as it flourished during the first half of the 20th century.

Much of the frontier post-colonial ideology remained intact. As Alex Gabbard has written:

In the isolation of the mountains, some would say protection, laws and their enforcers tended to get lost on the (sic) way to the mountaineers. . . . These people had their own respect for the world they lived in. . . . Theirs was, by virtue of the demands placed upon mere survival, a simple life. A man was not measured by what he had, he was measured by who he was, and what outsiders might regard as a mean streak among some of them was, in fact, the last vestiges of the spirit of independence that had been the formative basis of this country. (7)

This was the "spirit" that possessed many families throughout the Southeast to distill their own whiskey. The need to live a life of independence, matched with the political and economic pressures of the 1920s and 1930s, caused many farmers to forsake their crops and lean toward a more lucrative, if illegal, industry.

Families made and distributed homemade corn liquor as a means of quenching the thirst for alcohol created by Prohibition, like excise taxes on whiskey, yet another piece of legislation from the federal government. "It was either make moonshine or starve," Junior Johnson once said, "Back in the '30s, it was that desperate" (Gabbard 33). Outlaws because of economic necessity, moonshine runners were numerous across North Carolina and throughout the entire South. As Tom Wolfe writes:

some nights there were so many good old boys taking off down the road in supercharged automobiles out of Wilkes County, and running loads to Charlotte, Salisbury, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, High Point, or wherever, it would be pretty hard to pick out one [particular moonshine runner]. ("Last American Hero" 72)

It is ironic that while the bootleggers ran modified cars as a means of transporting moonshine, their actual race cars were regulated to remain completely stock. Apparently a mechanical advantage was more

## 122 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

important when trying to outrun the federal agents and a possible prison sentence. In the world of stock car racing, it was a matter of every driver racing for himself. Even Junior Johnson, once he retired from moonshining, had to trade in his "supercharged Oldsmobile engine" for a totally stock Oldsmobile Eighty-eight in 1955 to run the young NASCAR circuit (Fusco 46). Even a cultural icon like Junior Johnson—the "Last American Hero"—has to follow the rules.

These icons are the manifestations of cultural myths, the "stories taken from history" that Richard Slotkin refers to in his book *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*. These stories, or narratives, have what Slotkin calls a symbolic function central to the society that has created and remembered them (19). Such symbols help us to define American society. They help us to define American society while providing us with a foundation for understanding who and what we, as a population, are.

Cultural myths, as defined by Richard Slotkin in *The Fatal Environment*, are "stories, drawn from history, that have acquired . . . a symbolizing function that is central to the cultural functioning of the society that produces them." They operate as part of our cultural "language," serving as an "encoded set of metaphors that may contain . . . all of the essential elements of our world view" (16). Such myths project images that reflect basic values within our society and reaffirm certain ideas or notions important to our ideology. These cultural myths, therefore, transform "secular history into a body of sacred and sanctifying legends" (19). Our cultural myths give us something meaningful from history to believe in—we are what our history says we are. The sport of stock car racing revolves around legendary men and machines, while projecting many cultural myths that are important to an understanding of what it means to be an American.

Cultural myths are a common part of television broadcasting since they touch on the symbols and ideals held by a viewing audience. Olympic gymnast Carrie Strug, who limped to victory under her own power after being injured at the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta, created not just a picture of athleticism but one of determination and courage under adversity—cultural input that stimulated the minds and emotions of an acculturated audience.

Because Winston Cup races are broadcast live on national television, it is essential that cultural symbols and images are made a part of the television coverage. It provides a means by which the networks involved can have an impact on the largest number of viewers possible. Giving the audience culturally significant images is the best way that programmers can capture—and maintain—a large and loyal national

audience. Some of these images include close-ups of flags (both American and Confederate) and women and children (symbolic of family in a male-dominated sport).

Hundreds of millions of television viewers watch Winston Cup races on TV each year. Such huge numbers demonstrate the effect that television coverage can have on a national scale. Just as popular television shows can affect the behavior of viewers, as in clothing styles, hair styles, or colloquial language, it is possible that cultural symbols can also be projected upon a national audience for their acceptance and acquisition.

Baseball is usually referred to as the quintessential mythic American sport, conjuring images of pastoral splendor played out under warm, sun-filled skies. The game has been adopted as our national pastime, based on criteria that reflect and interpret American culture. Baseball acquired its mythic significance by representing specific nationalistic qualities. According to sport historian Allen Guttman:

The easy answer is that our national game is peculiarly American, fitted to American conditions and to the American character. As early as 1866, an observer of American pastimes wrote, "It is a game which is peculiarly suited to the American temperament and disposition. . . . From the moment the first striker takes his position, and poises his bat, it has an excitement and vim about it. . . . There is no delay or suspense about it, from beginning to end." (*Ritual* 95)

The reasoning behind baseball's acceptance as America's national pastime is that, like America itself, the sport is a product of the natural landscape. Baseball serves as a symbolic bridge between the American wilderness and the American city, the place where man conquers nature and brings control and civilization to the unsettled land. Baseball, as a game, was meant to be played outdoors. A piece of ground has to be marked off with base paths, a batter's box, a pitcher's mound—the landscape has to be physically altered through human intervention. The land is used by man for man's benefit—a natural resource suddenly impacted, changed by the culture living upon it. Such a view, however, has been deemed paradoxical. Annette Kolodny regards man's use of the natural landscape as "the essence of the pastoral paradox: man might . . . win mastery over the landscape, but only at the cost of emotional and psychological separation from it" (28). This idea of nature being bettered by cultural agency, despite its vast array of interpretations, remains a part of our national collective imagery.

Henry Nash Smith highlighted this point, writing that "The image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society . . . became . . . a collective representation, a poetic idea . . . that defined the promise of

## 124 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

American life" (Smith 123). This "poetic idea" is the mythic quality of baseball; it represents America's connection to the landscape, while symbolizing the promise of individual and communal achievement.

However, even a sacred pastime like baseball has a two-sided history. There is the "fact" behind baseball: the quantitative element that involves wins and losses, batting averages, earned run averages, home runs, and runs batted in. Baseball, like other parts of our culture, also has a qualitative side: the great men and moments that embody the spirit and the ideology of the game. This is what can change with time and society—the "fiction" of the game that is interpreted according to what our culture feels is socially significant. Abner Doubleday's role in the creation of baseball has been pretty well refuted by sports historians, even though his name is a part of the game's cultural mythology—he is more "icon" than "individual."

This debate between historical "fact" and historical "fiction" is especially strong within the realm of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series. Heroes are defined by the things they have accomplished and by the images they possess. Interpreting history in these two ways has been a prime component in stock car racing, not unlike what Will Pickens did for Barney Oldfield's racing career at the beginning of the 20th century. This seems especially true given the fact that race car drivers, like Oldfield and the men who run stock cars today, are often identified by the public in two distinct ways. There is the driver as racer, and the driver as celebrity/spokesman. Barney Oldfield was the first to test these waters; today's Winston Cup drivers are swimming in them every day.

Certain stories about folk heroes are better if told in regionally relevant terms. For example, when Jeff Gordon won the inaugural Brickyard 400 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway in August of 1994, the news media emphasized his ties to the Midwest. Here was a 23-year-old from Indiana excelling in a sport born and bred in the American South. No matter that Gordon had been running stock cars since 1991, winning in Grand National and Winston Cup competition at tracks like Daytona and Charlotte; what mattered most was that a young man from America's Heartland had won a stock car race at the nation's most revered speedway. As Steve Waid put it in the *Winston Cup Scene* of August 11, 1994, "The favorite son of Pittsboro, Ind., the driver they call 'The Kid,' becomes part of auto racing lore by winning the first NASCAR Winston Cup race ever run at the venerated Indianapolis Motor Speedway." Ironically enough, the national media got so caught up in Gordon's win, many in the press neglected to say that Jeff Gordon was really a native of California, spending the early years of his life near Vallejo (Berggren, "Gordon" 26). His move to Indiana came because it was where a 13-year-old could

purchase and drive a sprint car. From there, Jeff Gordon moved into NASCAR racing.

Identification with region is important in the creation of folk heroes. This, as we have seen, is how NASCAR's popular southern stereotype was formed in the first place. Labeling someone by the region from which they come generates connections with other social and cultural ties, and these too are often turned into stereotypes. Just like American culture stereotypes New York urbanites as loud and crass, Californians as laid back and superficial, and Texans as boastful and wealthy, American culture also stereotypes people from the Midwest. This is why Jeff Gordon's win at Indianapolis in 1994 was so socially significant, despite his origins out West.

The Midwest has been stereotyped in American popular culture as a quiet, rural environment where people dedicate themselves to their families and communities. This dedication often comes through personal sacrifice—sacrifice powered by the character trait of personal responsibility. Jeff Gordon received criticism following his Brickyard 400 win because of this issue. It was a situation that blended business and community with a healthy dose of responsibility. Through it all, Gordon's dedication to his "roots" were questioned by people who had watched him grow physically, emotionally, and professionally.

Jeff Gordon had agreed to make a personal appearance at Tri-County Speedway, a quarter-mile dirt track in Haubstadt, Indiana. It was one of the tracks where Gordon earned experience during his climb to stardom, the place where his legend began. The deal was for Gordon to appear at the local speedway on the day following the inaugural Brickyard 400. Had Jeff Gordon been an also-ran in the Brickyard, he would have made the appearance easily, but Gordon was anything but a back marker. His win made him an overnight sensation, and his appearance schedule suddenly got busier and more involved.

Jeff Gordon, in Victory Lane at Indianapolis, suddenly found himself obliged to attend a special post-race celebration at Walt Disney World, a duty that forced him to miss the Tri-County appearance (Bourcier, "Gordon" 44). Gordon was a champion between his home and a hard spot—he had an obligation to the Haubstadt racetrack, but he also had an obligation to NASCAR, the organization behind Gordon's entire livelihood. As Bones Bourcier put it:

You probably know what happened next: on the afternoon when a few thousand fans converged on tiny little Haubstadt, their hero, Jeff Gordon, winner of the first stock car race ever held at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, was riding alongside Mickey Mouse in a theme-park parade a thousand miles away. Suffice

## 126 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

it to say that the disposition of many a Tri-County spectator did not exactly match the weather in Orlando, which was sunny. (44)

Jeff Gordon made the decision he felt was best, especially in relation to the scope of both events. It would be easier to reschedule the Tri-County appearance than it would be the Disney World parade. For NASCAR's sake, it was important to capitalize on the immediate post-race rush of press attention. Wait a week for the Disney World event, and another Winston Cup race would be in the national media spotlight. Regardless of rationale or reason, the Haubstadt affair "turned into a giant public relations headache, providing endless fodder for the letters-to-the-editor pages in the trade papers. Folks who had traveled from far and wide to . . . chat with Jeff Gordon, blasted him to bits for not showing up" (Bourcier, "Gordon" 44).

Many upset with Gordon felt it was because he "had forgotten where he came from, that he had changed," comments that offended the young driver because they suggested his "roots" meant nothing. Jeff Gordon responded to their opinions in an interview, being quoted as saying, "Nobody knows how much I do remember where I came from. There have been a lot of people who helped me get where I am. Those people who truly helped me get here, they know how much that means to me. They know I haven't forgotten them" (qtd. in Bourcier, "Gordon" 44).

Such emotional response from a community says something about their notion of social responsibility. When neighbors need our help, it is our inherent responsibility to offer assistance. This is part of the Mid-western rural stereotype. Like all forms of stereotypes, the character traits are assumed and assigned, based loosely on a highly generalized interpretation of the people and region involved. Nevertheless, Gordon's trip to Disney World was interpreted by some as being non-communal—something not done in a close-knit society like that of the Midwest, despite his commitment to NASCAR, a major international sanctioning body with its own obligations to corporate America.

Today's NASCAR drivers are marketed and promoted by major corporations, and the corporate image projected is often the one turned into contemporary folklore. Take, for example, the image of Dale Earnhardt. His father, the late Ralph Earnhardt, was a peer of Curtis Turner and Junior Johnson; his rough-and-tumble reputation made him a successful and revered driver throughout the Southeast. Dale grew up in this environment, watching his father beat and bang against the best of them on his way to a NASCAR Modified championship. Dale Earnhardt knew that he was going to be a race car driver like his father, and that is precisely what he became.

Dale Earnhardt's climb to championship status, however, was a tough one. The stories of his struggle used to be part of the man's personal history, part of Earnhardt's personal narrative. Failed marriages, working a variety of day jobs, and living in near poverty while trying to make it as a stock car driver were all stories of Dale Earnhardt's life experiences. Now those stories are a part of Winston Cup folklore, reflecting the challenges, hardships, and sacrifices required of a national champion. Look at Winston Cup racing, and you find stories of the obstacles all drivers had to clear.

Stories of challenge and hardship like these have circulated throughout the grandstands and garage stalls, many carried by the media and interpreted by those who hear or read them. Personal narrative is the fuel that drives the wheels of emerging folklore, and the lessons we learn from such stories make up the fabric of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series. Many times these stories will conjure up images that stock car fans will identify with, providing them with a connection that brings the spectator one step closer to the sport.

One aspect of NASCAR Winston Cup racing fans can identify with is its emphasis on nicknames. Using nicknames projects an air of familiarity, of being an insider and knowing things the "average" fan does not. "Nicknames," Dixon Wecter wrote, "show the informality of our hero-worship" (13). Hence, Harry Gant becomes known to fans as "Handsome Harry," David Pearson becomes "the Silver Fox," and Richard Petty—even before earning his 200 career victories and seven Winston Cup titles—becomes "King Richard." Other nicknames Americans consider popular, according to Dixon Wecter, are those "that suggest homely origins," like Bill Elliott's recognition as "Awesome Bill from Dawsonville" (14). Nicknames can also have a sarcastic or critical connotation, again as a means of showing intimacy with the sport. This explains how a history of aggressive driving can earn Ernie Irvan the moniker "Swervin' Irvan," or Jimmy Spencer the name "Mr. Excitement." In cases like these, the nicknames usually come from within the sport—often dubbed by fellow participants—and are introduced to the public through the media.

Nicknames also show the evolution of a driver's reputation with fans. A driver's image with his peers or the fans is often reflected by his nickname, and that nickname will change as his attitudes do. The evolution of Dale Earnhardt makes a good example. Earnhardt, at one point in his career, was known as "Ironhead" because of his implied stubbornness, a trait that supposedly caused him to generate accidents. As Earnhardt matured as a driver, his nickname changed to "the Intimidator," because of his effect on his opponents. When GM Goodwrench became Earnhardt's

## 128 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

primary sponsor in 1988, he became known as “the Man in Black” because of his team’s new color scheme—a label that reflects a Western “outlaw” image, not unlike the image of legendary country singer Johnny Cash.

Throughout his career, however, Earnhardt became recognized for more than his nicknames, positive or negative. Dale Earnhardt also became known as a symbol. The notion of Dale Earnhardt as cultural icon began during his relationship with Wrangler Blue Jeans, his primary sponsor from 1981 through 1987, in a series of magazine advertisements based on traditional American character traits. These print advertisements presented Earnhardt as more than a stock car driver; they presented him as a symbol in American cultural mythology.

One advertisement from 1981 referred to Earnhardt as “a born perfectionist.” The photographs show him at work, his Pontiac leading the field into a banked corner, and at rest, polishing a restored 1938 automobile. At the bottom of the Wrangler advertisement is text that addresses Dale’s character—his desire to be the best. “On the track,” the ad copy declares, “Dale won’t settle for second place. Off the track, he won’t settle for second best.” The advertisement focuses on Dale Earnhardt’s drive for success and achievement, a quality admired in American culture. Wrangler even applies its company slogan—“One Tough Customer”—to Earnhardt, using it at the very bottom of the page. Thematically, this print advertisement identifies an important cultural trait and personifies it through the image of Dale Earnhardt.

Another Wrangler advertisement using Dale Earnhardt as a cultural symbol is one from 1983 featuring Dale and two of his children. This print ad focuses on Dale’s emphasis on self-reliance, and the role individualism has played in his life. “My daddy would help me when I needed help,” Earnhardt is quoted as saying, “But he didn’t hold my hand,” says the Wrangler advertisement. The children, one of Dale’s sons and one of his daughters, are sitting in front of him, and the copy continues with Earnhardt’s view of parenting American-style: “My daddy encouraged me to be my own man. And that’s how I hope to raise my kids. I want them to learn self-confidence and independence.”

These distinctly American character traits—ones rooted in the spirit of the men and women who traveled West to settle the frontier, are then related to Earnhardt’s success. The 1983 Wrangler ad copy continues: “Confidence and independence—Dale shows the stuff champions are made of every time he climbs behind the wheel.” We should not be surprised at such platitudes of American individualism, especially in an advertisement for blue jeans, a piece of quintessential American clothing. Once again, Dale Earnhardt represents a critical component in the shaping and defining of the American character.

Another component of American character is hard work. This is the stuff of Horatio Alger, Jr., and his inspirational tales of "luck and pluck." Wrangler saw these same qualities in Dale Earnhardt during the 1983 Winston Cup season, when Dale was driving a Ford Thunderbird for Bud Moore. Wrangler created a print advertisement to address the work ethic inherent in not only Earnhardt, but in all Americans who wore blue jeans. This Wrangler advertisement of 1983 pictures Earnhardt working out on a universal gym—this at a time when stock car drivers were just acknowledging the benefits of physical training. The text is to the point: a strong work ethic makes for a successful and admirable American. "Bud Moore has a great crew working on the car," the driver explains, "But when it comes to keeping Dale Earnhardt in working condition, I've got to depend on myself. And it takes a lot of discipline and perseverance to work out as often as I have to."

The company's text once again, as it did in the earlier advertisements, celebrates Dale's dedication, stating that "Dale shows the stuff champions are made of. . . ." This is an expression of Earnhardt's personal fortitude and his strict work ethic, not unusual in a man who has already been identified as a "born perfectionist" just two years earlier. Since the audience already knows of his belief in self-reliance, seeing Dale working out to become a stronger stock car driver puts the "rugged" in his symbolism as a "rugged individual."

Individualism was the focus of a later print advertisement done by Wrangler during its tenure with Dale Earnhardt. In 1986, after Earnhardt had been hired to drive for Richard Childress, Wrangler created an ad that blended a number of cultural images central to the recognition and interpretation of American character traits. A picture of Earnhardt and Childress flanking country singer Willie Nelson was at the center of the advertisement, all three men wearing Wrangler caps and Nelson with his index finger pointing straight up in the air. Earnhardt and Childress are supporting Nelson's hand as if in a sign of solidarity. The ad copy reads: "Wrangler Jeans and these three men have a lot in common. They're all authentic, down-to-earth and hard working. They have a lot of fans in common, too, and their fans stand for the same values."

The association of these men—two stock car racers and one country singer—is a direct appeal to people who identify with either of the two occupations. Since country music and stock car racing are kindred spirits, the shared audience provides Wrangler with more bang for its advertising buck. This advertisement does, however, address another aspect of American hero-worship, that being our culture's fascination with rebels. In the words of Dixon Wecter, "The American temper has a marked sympathy for rebels, non-conformists, and cross-grained dissenters" (25).

## 130 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

Willie Nelson is a perfect example of Wecter's statement; his reputation is that of a noble outlaw. "The outlaw movement" in country music, according to Patrick Carr, "was 'about' all sorts of things. It was about style and image: Willie [Nelson] wanting to drop all pretense" (32). Here was a man who charmed both fans and critics with his music, yet angered some Americans by his failure to pay taxes. Nelson, like Dale Earnhardt, is a "lovable rogue," a hero whose "mores . . . may vary with his times" (Wecter 484). Wrangler wanted its customers to identify with these men—men who were "authentic," not just celebrities. The identification of fans with personalities like these is important since consumers recognize men like Dale Earnhardt and Willie Nelson as independent thinkers. Shaking the status quo is what Nelson did to the staid world of country music, and what Earnhardt did (with Childress's help) to the old guard of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series. The ad's tag line, "A legend in jeans," says it all. These three men are just that—legends in jeans who represent the traditional "down-to-earth" spirit and work ethic of the American character.

More recent advertisements present Dale Earnhardt in a slightly different light, perhaps as a commentary to his maturation as a husband, father, and a race car driver. Stetson hats, one of Earnhardt's secondary sponsors, ran a print advertisement on the rear page of *Stock Car Racing* magazine in March of 1994, to mark his sixth Winston Cup title in 1993. The ads showed Earnhardt wearing a black Stetson and holding the championship trophy. Despite no revealing text, the ad's intent was clear—Dale Earnhardt, like the frontiersman, had conquered the toughest territory in America, the 17 speedways of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series.

While browsing in a NASCAR collectibles store in Ohio, I came across another testimony to Dale Earnhardt's role as a symbol of American individualism. In a rack of T-shirts, I found one marketed for Earnhardt with a Western motif—the silhouettes of cowboys on horseback. On the back, the shirt read "Cowboys and Engines," an obvious attempt at connecting the iconography of Dale Earnhardt and the cultural mythology of the American West.

Earnhardt's role as an American folk hero has even been used in television commercials. One ad for the Chevrolet Monte Carlo, shown on TBS in October 1996, features Darrell Waltrip—himself a NASCAR legend—sharing a story about Earnhardt with Terry Labonte and Jeff Gordon. The commercial shows Gordon sheepishly asking Labonte if he finds Earnhardt "intimidating," a reference to Dale's popular nickname. When Labonte mentions Dale's black Monte Carlo, fitting Earnhardt's image, Waltrip admits, "But remember one thing, when he first started, his car was pink."

"Pink?" Gordon asks naively, in disbelief. With an advertisement like this, Dale Earnhardt is perceived of as a legend, the subject of stories, rumors, and racing history. Jeff Gordon and Terry Labonte, in their own right, are depicted as young and in awe of their predecessors—even though both are former Winston Cup champions. What separates Earnhardt from Gordon and Labonte in this commercial is the mystique of his character, the popular image of Earnhardt as the "Man in Black." This is the stuff folk heroes are made of.

The image of Dale Earnhardt is also symbolic of attitudes within America. Ed Hinton wrote about "the general surliness of our society, a public with an attitude that mirrors Earnhardt's attitude" ("Attitude" 71). This, according to Charlotte Motor Speedway's president and general manager H.A. "Humpy" Wheeler, might explain Earnhardt's appeal to a larger, more casual racing audience:

"Earnhardt is the resurrected Confederate soldier. . . . Where [Richard] Petty was always compliant, Earnhardt will stand his ground and say, "I'm not going to do that." And the people who love him are the people who are told, every day, what to do and what not to do, and they've got all those rules and regulations to go by. That just draws them closer to him. (qtd. in Hinton, "Attitude" 71-72)

Earnhardt's attitude toward the Winston Cup lifestyle makes him a symbol of individualism in a sport where following sponsors' (and NASCAR's) orders is expected. The rebellious nature of Earnhardt, a reminder of stock car racing's other free spirits, Curtis Turner and Tim Richmond, provides race fans with a model to emulate—at least subconsciously—in times of personal and occupational stress and uncertainty. In this sense, Dale Earnhardt is much more than a Winston Cup driver and media celebrity; he projects cultural meaning through his behavior in the world of professional sport. He is a central figure in the history of NASCAR and its evolution into one of America's most popular spectator sports.

The history of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series in and of itself is expressive of numerous issues: development of the automobile, Prohibition, labor organizations, advertising, and mass media to name a few. More important, however, the sport of stock car racing expresses other, more deeply rooted elements of American life. It is an activity that operates as a text—a guidebook that embodies some basic rules for American living and some fundamental ideas that help us cope with the responsibilities and problems of American civilization.

Rituals, in and of themselves, are celebratory acts. Frank E. Manning, in his book *The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contempo-*

## 132 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

*rary Cultural Performance*, identifies celebrations as having four "central features":

First, celebration is performance; it is, or entails, the dramatic presentation of cultural symbols. Second, celebration is entertainment; it is done for enjoyment . . . however much it is tintured, consciously or unconsciously, with ideological significance or pragmatic intent. Third, celebration is public. . . Celebration socializes personal meanings, enacting them on the street, on the stage, in the stadium. . . Fourth, celebration is participatory. (4)

The act of celebration involves two elements—play and ritual. An act of play has license to alter our social order, while a ritual regulates and maintains the social order we know (Manning 7). A sport like bullfighting is highly ritualistic, symbolizing the inequality of the struggle between man and nature, and has its origin in the religious ceremonies of ancient Crete (Guttmann 29). The ritual of bullfighting reaffirms a social order—that man is superior to animals—and regulates interaction between the two species by permitting the man to taunt, stalk, and eventually kill the bull he is facing.

In this sense, a Winston Cup stock car race is an example of ritual. NASCAR creates a "social order," then "regulates" the behavior of those competing according to protocol. Race cars are inspected by NASCAR officials, declared legal (or illegal) for competition according to written rules, allowed to practice and qualify at certain times of the day, and policed during the race by officials representing the governing organization. Teams that fail to qualify by making a fast trial run are allowed entry into races by NASCAR based on the number of points the car owner has accumulated. These provisional starting spots demonstrate the social order created by NASCAR. Car owners who have earned more points than their competitors are given preferential status by the governing body and allowed into a starting field, while owners whose cars have struggled throughout a season are told to go home if their qualifying times are not fast enough. The social order of NASCAR rewards past success, and puts unsuccessful teams at a lower level of consideration.

Throughout all of this, a ritual is followed at each Winston Cup event. An order of ceremony is maintained, not unlike that of other professional sporting events. Drivers in a particular race are introduced to the fans, the National Anthem is sung or played, there is a ceremonial call to action (usually "Gentlemen, start your engines!"), and there is a victory celebration where the winning team is cheered by the spectators and greeted by members of the media. Given the dangerous nature of automobile racing, a prayer for safety is often included as part of the

opening ceremonies. Through all of these ritualistic customs, we can see the dominant force at work behind the scenes of stock car racing. The cultural symbols are obvious, especially given the religious and political emphasis within American society.

According to Frank E. Manning, "When those who control celebration are also those who dominate the social order, there is a tendency to ritualize that dominance in order to sustain and legitimize it" (7). The ritualistic pattern of Winston Cup stock car racing serves as an example of Manning's theory. A pre-race prayer is not unusual in a nation where Christianity is the dominant religious force. The National Anthem is common at the start of many events in America, a country founded on the principles of patriotism. Maintaining ritualistic practices such as these helps to legitimize the dominant social order.

"Ritual," says Manning, "is a metastatement of truth, delivering a moral critique of society, an understanding of what ought to be" (22). Winston Cup racing, in this way, appeals to the desires of its fans, giving them symbolic actions that contain all-important cultural meanings. *Sports Illustrated* writer Ed Hinton asked Humpy Wheeler why Earnhardt has become so popular with NASCAR's national base of fans. Wheeler explained:

I think everybody in the country is angry about having to drive in urban areas. They hate the traffic with a passion. Earnhardt drives through traffic too. And he won't put up with anything. He's going to get through. And that's what *they* (the fans) want to do—but they can't. So Earnhardt is playing out their fantasies. (qtd. in Hinton, "Attitude" 71)

Dale Earnhardt symbolizes an American motorist's anger over urban traffic. The cultural meaning projected by Earnhardt tearing his way through door-to-door, bumper-to-bumper speedway congestion is heart-felt by an audience who will curse crowded highways during rush hour on their way to work (and while trying to leave the speedway parking lot once the race is over). The competition of Winston Cup stock car racing "defines, dramatizes, and thereby renders meaningful, central frustrations of the audience" (Manning 12).

Competition, in terms of mobility, is the key to life. The most elementary form of competition is the simple foot race, pitting individuals against each other for the honor of being considered the fastest, or the one with the greatest endurance. A contemporary ancestor of such racing is the marathon, named after the city in Greece from where a messenger carried news on foot to Athens. In this situation, running was a means of communication, to send and receive messages during the Persian War.

## 134 From Moonshine to Madison Avenue

Today its function is as a community event, especially in large cities like Boston or New York, where thousands of citizens participate on a variety of competitive levels, from the professional to the novice. Because transportation by foot was the first means of travel, it is no great surprise that foot racing would be an initial form of competition.

As human beings developed alternative means of transportation technology, so too they developed alternative forms of competition, again with an emphasis on speed and endurance. These new types of racing also placed importance on handling and stability, important when negotiating tight corners around pylons or course markers. A large part of early spectator sports history concerned such events as these, especially during the era of the Roman Empire. This era was the time of the great coliseums—the Hippodrome resembling the modern speedway used by automobiles today.<sup>3</sup>

No matter what the means of transportation, the same basic focus for competition holds true: people are obsessed with speed. These earliest types of sports competition, when compared to sports seen today, have remained essentially the same over the centuries. The vehicles for movement have changed dramatically—even when studied over the course of the past century. What has not changed is that basic aspect of competition—the spark of conflict that rises when an instigator levels a challenge against an opponent. It becomes a matter of ego versus ego, of person versus person.

The non-competing public finds a role to play as spectators. Their place is near the playing field, but not directly on it. It is their duty to serve as an audience, showing praise, support, or disdain while awaiting the possibility of a tragedy that will lift the competition into the arena of sheer spectacle. In ancient Rome the spectacle was chariot racing within the confines of the track; in 20th-century America it is the superspeedway at Daytona or Indianapolis where modified automobiles run on the “ragged edge” that separates disaster from victory, riches, and fame. The victor becomes a hero.

Americans raise individuals to heights of national recognition and try to emulate them. In some cases, we are inspired by figures who have achieved something that we ultimately want to achieve ourselves, as in the case of a movie star or a professional athlete. In other cases, we admire people whose lives and personalities reflect our own.

Automobile racing, in general, is a sport of personalities and machinery. It is a sport of almost limitless variables. The driver is the figure at the center of the team, even though his or her role is actually fairly secondary. Today’s stock car drivers work with high-dollar contracts and press agents. Media attention is constant, with newspapers,

magazines, television, and radio all muscling in for a piece of the sport. Stock car racing used to be a matter of family and community; today it is a matter of a family being associated with Fortune 500 companies and CEOs. Sponsorship has become the key to racing success, as all too many independent drivers have learned the hard way.

The subculture of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series lives off deep roots. Its legions of fans are legendary and seriously loyal to drivers, automobile manufacturers, and sponsors. These are the people who purchase the tickets and the T-shirts, the caps, and the collectibles. They write letters to racing publications when they feel their driver has been wronged. They buy personal messages to offer support and/or praise when their driver needs a pat on the back. These are the people who comprise the backbone of Winston Cup stock car racing.

NASCAR and its many racing teams recognize this fact. Stock car drivers realize that fans make it possible for them to race for a living. The sponsors realize that fans will buy their products, with almost blind loyalty, simply because of their Winston Cup connections. This is the reason why stock car drivers still give their autographs for free, while "mainstream" athletes charge for their signatures at card shows or memorabilia exhibitions. Stock car drivers realize that fans make their race cars go 'round, that dedicated and happy fans make the NASCAR Winston Cup Series a real force within the realm of professional sports.

Media exposure has helped stock car racing evolve into a true professional sport. Putting the races—and the racers—in front of a national audience has given the Winston Cup Series a release from its Southern heritage. NASCAR racing has, from its earliest days, attracted competitors from above the Mason-Dixon Line. Some of the sport's first drivers came from places like Defiance, Ohio, and Great Bend, Kansas (Fielden 1: 7). In spite of this, history convinces us that stock car racing thrived on people based in the American Southeast. Such is the impact of cultural mythology.