

Resident used to race stock cars

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By Bob Turner

Spruce Creek South resident Buddy Pearce raced stock cars on dirt tracks in the 1940s, long before NASCAR made the sport a household word. The walls of his den are decorated with just a few of the many black-and-white, 8-by-10-inch glossy photos that document his racing days.

He said he began racing stock cars at age 14 at local tracks in the Pittsburgh, Pa. area, winning a fair number of races. He was driven to the track by members of his pit crew since he was too young for a driver's license.

In 1960, Buddy moved with his wife to West Palm Beach, where he opened a small restaurant. A customer who knew Pearce from "Up North" came into the new establishment and approached Buddy, saying, "We have to get you a car out there for this speedway."

He was referring to a race track that recently had been built in the area. Pointing to a photo of himself racing the "Orange Blossom 100," running second to Bobby Allison from the "Alabama Gang" who went on to NASCAR fame, Buddy said, "This was the fastest high-banked, 'S'-asphalt, half-mile track in the United States – The Palm Beach Fairgrounds Speedway!" He then pointed out others in the photo, including Red Farmer and Donnie Allison. They all were bunched in a tight turn.

A large trophy dominated one corner of the room. Early fans of stock car racing might recognize some of the names engraved on small plaques attached to the ornate fixture. As I read aloud the names of those destined for the Hall of Fame, Buddy told me how the trophy found its way to his home.

It seems the town fathers were under pressure to eliminate stock car racing at the fairgrounds as the sport was perceived by some to be noisy and dirty and was thought to be distracting from the dignity of the town. Consequently, the track was demolished.

According to Pearce, workers assigned to clean out a shed came across items they considered to be valuable memorabilia. They were shrugged off by the person in charge, who told them, "I do not care about that. Get rid of all the junk. Put it in the Dumpster."

At 10 that evening, Pearce received a phone call from a car enthusiast living in Jupiter who had retrieved some of the artifacts. "I went up there that night, and he gave me that trophy. It was all broken apart and I restored it," Buddy said.

At a recent reunion of drivers and pit crews, including the Hall of Fame Allison brothers, Pearce related how the earlier decision to demolish the track was discussed with people currently associated with the West Palm Beach Fair.

They told him, "This could have been Homestead."

He chuckled when he said, "They missed the boat."

He was asked if he would consider selling the piece back to the West Palm Beach Fairgrounds. The trophy remains secure at his SCS home among Buddy's other mementos of his days as a stock car race driver.

Pearce has another love – restoring Model A Fords. He is president of the Heart of Florida Model A Restorers Club. Of the many he has restored, his pride and joy is a 1932 model, which, after restoration, is close to 100 percent authentic.

He has won the highest award in class from the two national antique automobile clubs, AACA and VMCCA.

"It is a very good hobby. It is the cheapest hobby you can get into, because once you buy a car, and as long as you take care of it, it will always be worth more money," Pearce said.

Gesturing toward the beauty in his garage, he said, "This car is worth twice as much as I paid for it 12 years ago. And I have had \$10 million worth of fun out of that car!"

When Buddy offered, I jumped at the chance to go for a ride in one of Henry Ford's masterpieces. People stopped whatever they were doing to wave, as we drove by. Buddy enjoyed sounding the wolf whistle at the ladies.

If you see him driving around, ask him to tell you a few tales about the rumble seat.



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Buddy Pearce, Spruce Creek South resident and president of the Heart Of Florida Model A Restorers Club, removes a speck of dust from his prize-winning 1932 Model A Ford. Buddy is a former stock car race driver, who competed at the West Palm Beach Fairgrounds track with the Allison brothers and other Hall of Fame drivers.