

# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### Curtis and Bill

When best friends become bitter enemies, it's horrendous. Curtis Turner, NASCAR's most popular driver, and dictator Bill France, NASCAR's founder, started out as perfect foils: France with his bullying creating NASCAR and its stock cars, and Turner, using the wild steering wheel licks he'd mastered while plying the white lightning trade as a boy bootlegger, filling the super-speedways up. They terminated the friendship with Turner trying to rouse all NASCAR into open rebellion, and with France forced to suspend Turner into oblivion.



There was a strong moonshining streak among NASCAR's first generation of racing drivers and Turner started all that. He was France's first and greatest star, and was in all ways so oversized that in his era nobody ever got the full scoop on him. Many are still trying today. Believe it or don't, but here's the latest buzz that certain amateur witch doctors are spinning: Turner secretly had a death wish. In other words, throughout Turner's extraordinary, 46-year-old-life – everything from his broadsliding and showboating; his vast timber fortunes made and lost; his wacko partnership with Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters; his fly-by-night efforts to make stock car racing go pari-mutual, just like the ponies; his breakneck episodes in his private airplane, including the final and fatal plunge into the ground in Pennsylvania, at Punxsutawney, on October 4, 1970 – for his whole mad life Turner's secret agenda was to wipe himself out. Maybe you don't believe this, I don't, but I'm giving it to you straight.

Get born and grow up in the economic ruin of wasted Appalachia, as Turner did, and you faced limited life choices in the sad and forlorn hills. You could read the good book day and night; you could guzzle the region's moonshine day and night; or you could brew and deliver the 'shine day and night, and this clandestine brewing and shipping of toxic liquor was an honorable occupation, older than the Redcoat War of Independence. Aged ten, Turner already found himself in the company of bootleggers, and, because he was big for his age, he got put to work in the wheelhouse of makeshift and ramshackle 'shine cars whose jacked-up rear ends toted 1,000 pounds of fresh-bake payloads.

These were hybrid, wolfs- in-sheep's clothing, street-sleeper bangtails packing the biggest and most radically tuned-up V8 ballbusters going. High-powered sleds hauling high-powered 'shine. Good for maybe 95 mph in low, 115 in second, you name it in high. And here's Curtis Turner, a ripe ten, going into the bellies of such beasts: bashing throttles, batting steering wheels, and, of course, learning the uniquely moonshine-hauling technique of up- and-downshifting gears with his knee.



Turner gave up four years to World War Two, serving in the Coast Guard, but chances are he never grasped who was fighting or why. Not that he wasn't unpatriotic, merely busy.

Occasionally he got loaded aboard an Atlantic gunboat to patrol the shoals and straits of the three-mile limits, but that was secondary to his true gig which, as ever, was moonlighter. This was nuts .Smuggling hillbilly moon onto a military post during war-time was about as maniac as it got. But the mess hall cooks were alcoholics, grateful to barter 'moon for raw sugar. And afterward Turner simply hauled the sweetness back to the family still for the manufacture of more 'moon.

The instant peacetime hit, and Turner was discharged, he went back to the thirsty hills and, with headlights blazing into the night, and big engine wailing ferociously, he again was roaring the turpentine. By now he knew every sleepy alley, tricky hogback trail, switch-backing

**boulevard, and full-tilt four-lane in and out of four moonshine states. Playing all ends against the middle, he also re-invented himself into a charming doll face charmer with girl friends in all of those four states. He truly had the hot reputation. All the liquor gendarmes knew he was, and Turner knew they knew, but he was neither nervous nor scared because they couldn't catch him. Once they did. But via some fast-talking and hoodwinking, he parlayed a stiff term of two years on a chain gang into a minor suspended sentence.**

**Then he went and borrowed a junker to race on a Johnny Reb dirt track – great rooting and gouging and magnificent hippodroming. Compared to Turner, all the other 'Rebs were taking the turns incorrectly. Instead of zooming around them with increased power, they were easing up, and some were even poking at the brakes. Turner, meanwhile, was effortlessly laying down his hottest moonshine moves, spanking the gray, mowing the grass, wielding a diabolic pedal. Winning in a runaway, he went on and anyway, he couldn't make himself stop, until finally he blew up the junker.**

**Watching Turner most attentively was Bill France, who afterward invited Turner to ditch the 'moon and climb into stock car racing, which France was just inventing. France was a racing zealot come south to Florida from a northern slum, and so far had failed at everything he'd tried, most recently pump jockey of his own dirty garage in Daytona Beach. Destiny, however, had him ticketed to become father of stock car racing, so France got busy signing up Mason-Dixon's fastest ridgerunners as his first Nascar drivers.**

**Turner was sensational. Making action happen, he raged low and buzzed high, ripping up**



**NASCAR tracks. Only rarely did he condescend to occupy the normal racing groove and never, ever permitted wolf-packs of lapped traffic to fragment his efforts. He shaved but didn't slam opponent coachworks, and vast wrecks trapping dozens became, for Turner, minor skirmishes to weasel through unscathed.**

**Turner raced as though he still was tooling a sled full of white lightning with the alcohol fuzz at his bumper. He loved showing off. Say, for example, that he had all his opposition smothered by full lap. He'd next make a bogus pit stop to permit everybody to get their lap back, just so he could catch up and lap them all over again. Or maybe he'd show up at a race without a ride, then proceed to strap himself inside the worst and slowest crotch he could locate, so he could take it to warp velocity and win the match just by over-driving the corners.**

Grandstands were rubbing their eyes in disbelief, and southern throats were growing hoarse from all their cool rebel yells for Turner. But Dixieland-penny-a-liner newspaper



hacks were as yet NASCAR illiterates, and Bill France coveted their approval and attention. So he sold Turner to them as the equivalent of some antique club-and-ball icon with a girl's name who'd swatted a few homers in his time. It was France's masterstroke, and the making of Turner. Adoring Turner, the hacks became the paparazzo of NASCAR racing, and all their idolizing ink set Turner aflame. Ego flying high, no longer did he win by his customary lap's advantage; now he was taking off

on victory binges which saw him lapping entire fields three or four times.

When and where Turner and France bonded, really bonded, was during the 1950 Mexican Road Race, Mexico's first of five, and the only one running north to south. The most monster road-racing marathon off all time – five days and 2,000 miles of soaring double lane blacktop undulating up, down, and over the tall peaks of jagged volcano chains – Mexico comprised thousands of deathtrap curves minus guardrails, without offering compensating medics, ambulances or even medical insurance.



One hundred and twenty-five entrants from five different mainlands, grappling a dozen different marques, took the bait and entered the inaugural, among them Turner and France. And the finest set of wheels France could promote for Turner and himself was a Nash six-cylinder, an eyesore four-door hippo resembling an upside-down bathtub. The poor old bulbous washbasin wasn't designed to handle what Turner had in store for it; had no idea what was about to hit it. Nor, for that matter, did any of Mexico's other 124 entrants have a clue of what was going to strike them. And the same held true for every burro, chicken, head of cattle, and all the trigger-happy soldiers confronting spectator mobs flanking both sides of the hungry roadway.

Turner opened his big bag of moonshiner tricks and licks and blasted off on a standard risk-seeking expedition. Immediately he started cutting down on every corner on howling tires, hanging screeching lefts and rights, cresting blind hills flatout without caring who was coming, screaming straight into impossible double-hairpins edged by buildings, massaging the bathtub steering wheel while downshifting gears with his knee.

He played patty-cake against adobe walls with bodypanels and fenders, blew out tires that he and France had to get out and change, and terrified and burned down whole pueblos. Once, looming up without warning, came a long eroded boulevard of bumps and potholes seemingly guaranteed to overturn the bathtub and trap Turner and France inside. Turner never hesitated. He pointed the bellowing bathtub straight at all the danger, and, instead of flipping over, the bathtub, dancing fiercely, disappeared accelerating faster still.

So fast was the gutless bathtub rocketing that its six pathetic cylinders were wheezing – everything only a nickel away from violent disintegration. Yet for all four opening days Turner had been saving himself and the bathtub for the furious fifth and final day, high up in the attitudes, when the marathon veered across barrier mountains and then serpented into the volcano belt, where Turner had the red hots to unleash all the ridge-runner tricks he'd picked up when he was urchin throttle-master hauling the moonshine over the tops of the Blues and Shenandoahs.

By the start of the fifth day, France, riding shotgun, had by now experienced four days of utter terror, but that had been at sea level. Now the high mountains were coming, and France, who now had had enough of Turner's wheelmanship, decided to bail and leave Turner to battle the coming tall craters solo.

Turner had been running a hot third, but by the start of the fifth day wheel and tire emergencies had dropped his bathtub far behind. But France, who knew how to pull strings, commandeered for Turner a second bathtub that was barely half an hour out of the lead. A distance of 171 serpentine and high-attitude miles separated El Ocotal from the finish at

**Tuxla, and Turner and his new bathtub hippo attacked. An hour or so later, wheezing and oscillating wildly, Turner's replacement bathtub burst free of all the dead craters and arrived at the finish first, with Turner the Mexican Road Race's winner, But because of a breech of the rules, Turner got hosed out of what should have been his greatest triumph. So, he and France had nothing else to do but return to Dixie to promote NASCAR.**

**Invent and bootstrap a white lightning hero, and then make him your best friend, and you may regret it, which France began to do. Turner had become France's franchise, far more famous and more influential than France himself; so, should anything bad happened to him because of all his hard-racing, happy-go-lucky partying, and heavy drinking, then NASCAR itself would be history.**

**Yet Turner was even more dangerous than France realized. He was more, far more, than a moon-man with mania in his throttle toes - he was caught in timber delirium and visualized himself a white lightning profiteer. This went back to Turner's hardscrabble childhood, when he'd possessed a passion for rolling woodlands - pine, gum, mock, weeping willows, all the saplings that fertile Piedmont was perspiring with. Turner fancied himself becoming a sawmill baron denuding the lush treelands so he could launch a vast construction commonwealth of real estate mega-development. He imagined Curtis Turner deluxe mobile home parks, Curtis Turner shopping malls, even Curtis Turner super-speedways, and, though he didn't realize it, this last would be what capsized his friendship with France.**

**NASCAR was growing, accelerating, and spreading all across the deep south. Founder France was becoming tyrant and dictator France, a fact noticed and envied by Turner. So, in addition to his making-the-crowd-go-crazy-race-with-his-white-lightning-racing, and wanting to play a larger role in the explosive growth of NASCAR, Turner set out to create and construct, smack in the middle of stock car-racing' heart, Charlotte, North Carolina, his very own speed emporium.**

**It was going to be jumbo-sized and high-banked, with custom lighting and sound, private suites, the works. It flopped. After kiting lots of checks and fim-flamming many a non-collateral loan, Turner ran out of funds. Desperate for financial help, he panhandled a national labor union, whose secret agenda, it was alleged, was the organization of France's NASCAR members. Much more physically intimidating than Turner, and a far tougher man, Big Bill France realized - too late - the mistake he'd made, putting a sword in a bootlegger's hands. A labor union! To France, that would be like turning NASCAR over to Jimmy Hoffa.**

**It was 1961, and France and Turner dueled for possession of NASCAR all summer long. They accused and counter-accused. Trying to mobilize drivers, Turner hit all of NASCAR's**

haunts conducting dog and pony shows. France in turn denounced Turner as a gold brick charlatan. During one mass rally, France lost it, really lost it. After roaring that any unionists attempting to disrupt NASCAR would meet up with trouble in the form of trouble of himself and his loaded hogleg, he angrily brandished the hogleg for all to see. But Turner continued infuriating his founder anyhow. At another tense rally, France, while in the middle of tongue-lashing his audience into compliance, whipped out some Turner propaganda, then mocked that if it was such a good deal, he'd sign up himself. An explosion of laughter went up when Turner, who'd been standing outside, next to an open window, reached in and handed France a pen.



All the fighting concluded in a court room in Daytona Beach, NASCAR's headquarters, and Turner's trial lasted a fast one or two days. Libeled a sick turncoat who wanted to put stock car racing in bed with the racketeers, Turner had France toss him over the side and barred from any more racing.

Turner was broken. He wanted to ask France, "Hey Pops! Are you sure you're throwing out the right bootlegger? The bootlegger who raised hell the length of Mexico with you? The bootlegger who made NASCAR?" Yes, France was sure. He could really hate. And his reach was long. All memory or mention of Turner was prohibited within France's dominion.

Nobody down south dared to go to bat for Turner, not even Dixie's paparazzo, but one merchant of snake oil promoted a swindle pitting Turner against a lineup of tomato can drivers. France's banishment of him notwithstanding, Turner and his reputation remained potent. An oversized audience converged on a farce of ten cars, including a trio of heaps dragged off an iron lot just that morning. Turner got issued the worst of the three, then had to abandon the rip-off with mechanical indigestion while laps and laps in the lead; his disappointed audience abandoned ship with him.

Quarantined from the NASCAR south, Turner sought racing in other climes. Hearing about a monstrosity hill climb – Pikes Peak – in the latitudes and longitudes of the western Rockies, he thought it it sounded like the old times of moving the 'moon across Appalachia, or even making a fast blast up-and-down the volcano belts of Mexico. So he aimed his private plane west and aced the Rockies on his second try. Next he hit a fairgrounds speedway in the land of

**Abraham Lincoln for a fast taste of single-seater jousting on the dirt. He set a fast lap practicing but made a mistake in time trials, trashed his lap of qualification, and missed the show; humiliated, he was out of there so fast that nobody could yell Hey Turner, wait, we've got another car all ready for you!**

**Then Turner became one of stock car racing's first drivers to try to race in the Indy 500. He caught the chair of a swollen Dracula ridiculed as "the python that swallowed a piano;" this Dracula was so horrible it needed airbags, and Turner saved his own life by clobbering the wall before he could get lapping fast.**

**Following four more empty years, Turner's and France's rapprochement occurred in 1965. Turner still had the hots to race Nascar late-models, and France needed color to make up for the season's Chrysler boycott, which was damaging his gates. So at Charlotte's glittering new super-speedway, the facility that Turner had tried and failed to erect, and that had landed him in all his trouble, his first victory, by coincidence, almost occurred - or perhaps France scripted it that way.**

**Afterward, at Daytona, Turner hurled a late-model to NASCAR's first three-mile-minute lap, heralding the supersonic age of stocker racing. Turner's involuntary retirement occurred not long afterward. After orchestrating a series rolling flips the length of a football field, and crash-landing in a horrifying heap, he couldn't find rides anymore. Nobody in NASCAR wanted to be responsible for killing Curtis Turner. Actually, Turner was long over the hill: his long punishment had cost him his white lightning chops.**



**Turner couldn't race any more, but he still could fly his private plane, and this became his downfall. He was such a star birdman that probably he fantasized that he could fly backwards. Perhaps he could have, but he was running lots of risks. At last he ran out of miracles and aviated straight into the ground, a mishap attributed to a tank of poisoned petrol, a case of the d.t.'s, or just simply white lightning piloting.**

**In size and amount of respect conveyed, Turner's burial attested to all the friends he'd made, in and out of NASCAR. Formula 1 lion Gurney sent a floral wreath; and speed king Thompson, Mexican Road Race builder Stroppe, and Cobra inventor Shelby all offered profound tributes and condolences. One of the most unexpected mourners at Turner's funeral was Bill France, who took the opportunity to**

name Curtis Turner the greatest racing driver he'd ever seen, probably the greatest one ever. It was the correct call – just delivered too late.

