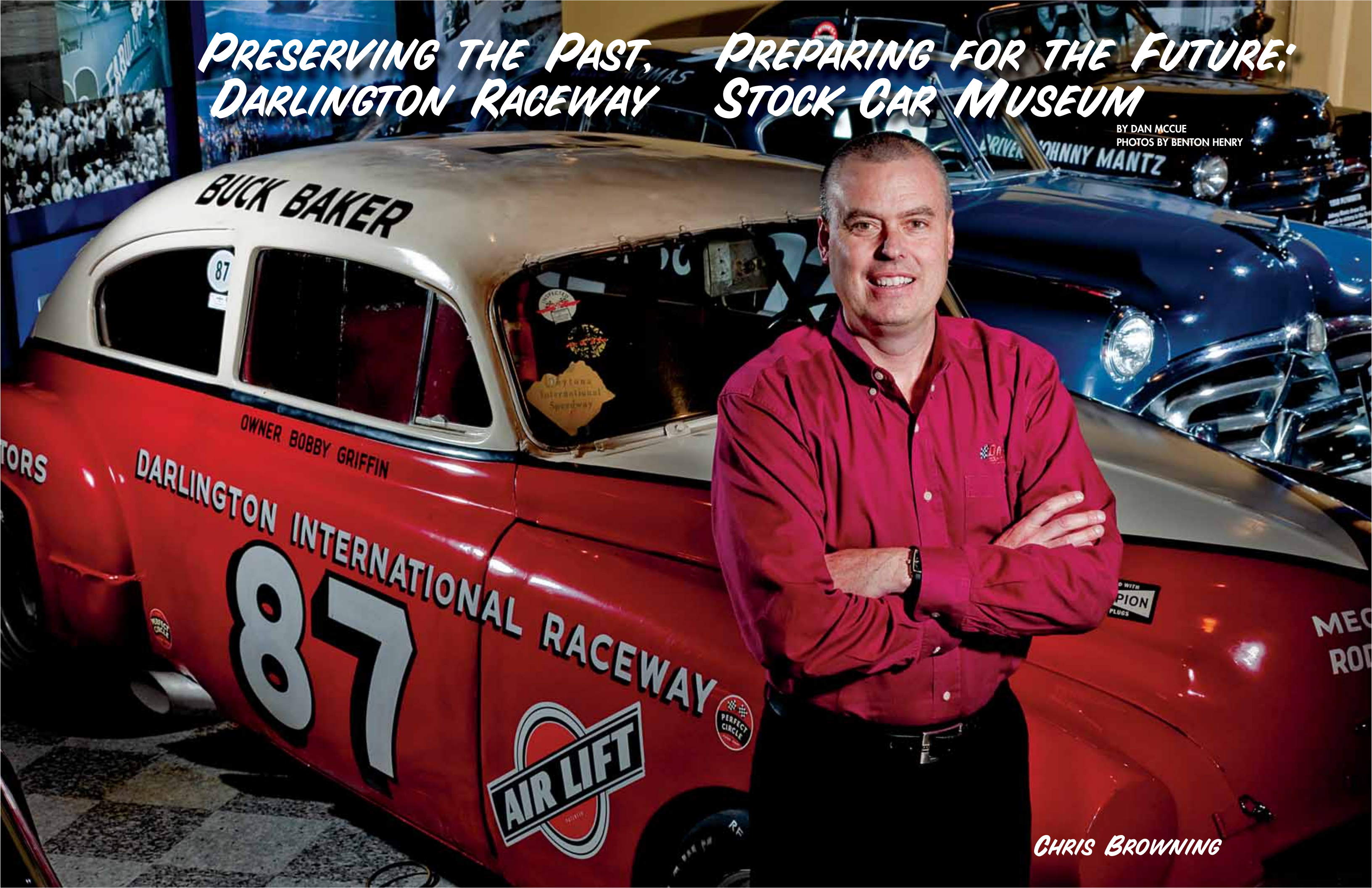


*PRESERVING THE PAST,
DARLINGTON RACEWAY*

*PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE:
STOCK CAR MUSEUM*

BY DAN MCCUE
PHOTOS BY BENTON HENRY



CHRIS BROWNING



Vicky Sanders stood behind the counter of the gift shop at the Darlington Raceway Stock Car Museum, not far from the new display of Danica Patrick merchandise, and offered a rundown of what she described as a typical busy morning.

“We had some people in from the Netherlands, some people in from the northeast, and the flow of visitors was pretty steady,” she said.

“People are surprised when I tell them how busy we are on non-race days, but in the eight years I’ve been here, it’s definitely been true,” Sanders continued. “We get visitors from all 50 states, Canada and the world, and while it’s definitely been less hectic today than on one of our big race weekends, it certainly hasn’t been quiet.”

Sixty years after opening as the first paved track on the stock car circuit, Darlington Raceway retains a unique allure among even casual race fans. An analysis compiled for the track two years ago pegged its annual economic impact at \$54 million – and that’s for a facility that hosts but two nationally televised event a year: the annual Southern 200 and Southern 500 which are run Mother’s Day weekend – and that’s rarely had more than 14 full-time employees.

“While people love the sport of stock car racing, and obviously follow individual drivers, for many of our visitors the race track itself is a draw,” Sanders said. “They want to see it; they ask how big it is and why its egg shaped rather than a simple oval.”

Nearby, meanwhile, a woman perused the Tony Stewart merchandise.

“We organize everything by driver, so if you want your [Dale Earnhardt] Jr. stuff, you head over there,” she said, motioning toward the back.

“Your Jeff Gordon merchandise is over here,” she said motioning to her right.

“But nothing, absolutely nothing, outsells our Darlington track merchandise,” Sanders said.

Chris Browning, Darlington’s president since 2004, smiled as Sanders uttered the last sentence, but said he long ago stopped being surprised by that fact.

“Darlington is steeped in history and tradition,” he said as he walked toward the metal gate that separates the gift shop from the museum proper. “It might sound like my bias is showing, but I honestly believe Darlington is at the top of the list when it comes to stock car racing. The place is simply unique.”

HISTORY AT ITS FASTEST

For those who don’t know the history, Darlington Raceway was born of the imagination of Harold Brasington, a local businessman who returned home from the 1933 Indianapolis 500 with dreams of building a superspeedway of his own, a place to hold “big-time” stock car events if –Brasington rightly believed “when” – the then fledgling NASCAR race series caught on.

Legend has it that most thought Brasington was crazy when he spoke of carving a mile-and-a-quarter track out of peanut and cotton fields just inside Darlington city limits. Some even took to calling the plan “Harold’s Folly.”

Undeterred, in the fall of 1949, Brasington himself led a modest crew in the laying of the track, often operating a bulldozer and grading equipment himself.

Although his original plan was to create a true oval, Brasington did make one concession in pursuit of his dream: he acceded to landowner Sherman Ramsey’s wishes that his nearby minnow pond not be disturbed.

As a result, the west end of the track (turns three and four) was narrowed, an accommodation to a farmer’s penchant for fishing that created Darlington’s distinctive egg-shaped design.

The following Labor Day weekend 25,000 spectators - more than twice the number anticipated – crowded the track to watch Californian Johnny Mantz win the very first Southern 500.

Mantz, whose winning car is among the prized collection of vehicles now housed at the Stock Car Museum, averaged a “blistering” 76 miles per hour that day. Today, following the track’s most recent repaving, the average speed on race day is closer to 185 miles per hour.

But it wasn’t speed that won the day. Mantz, who started dead last among the competitors, had arrived at Darlington armed with a “tire strategy.” Most of his competitors had never raced on asphalt before and ran out of tires long before the six-hour race was through (many, in fact, bought tires off the cars of spectators just to keep going); Mantz alone realized that standard car tires would never stand up to the strain of the race, and put truck tires on his car instead.

A bit of trivia: It was Mantz’s only NASCAR win. He died at the age of 54 in a 1972 car accident near Ojai, California.

Fast forward 60 years, and Browning could not appear to be more thrilled standing in a room amidst not only Mantz’s 1950 Oldsmobile, but also cars driven by such racing legends as Richard Petty, Cale Yarborough and Mark Martin.

“The odd shape of our track really created a big challenge for all these drivers, and in a sense, they became our biggest ambassadors, because they’d go from place to place, talking about just how tough and challenging it was,” Browning said.

An industry veteran who came to Darlington from North Carolina’s Rockingham Speedway in the aftermath of the Ferko lawsuit, the antitrust case that led to a major restructuring of NASCAR in the early 2000s, Browning said it’s important not to forget the past while trying to chart one’s course for the future.

That’s one reason he brought back the Southern 500 name a few years ago after it had been retired for a brief period. It’s also why he’s created events like the now annual Darlington Historic Racing Festival, which each September affords fans the chance to meet legendary racing personalities, watch exhibition laps by historic race cars, and collect memorabilia.



Johnny Mantz’s 1950 Oldsmobile

Today, Brasington’s “folly” seats 62,000 and typically accommodates another 6,000 in its infield during the Southern 500. It not only plays host to the high profile Sprint Cup Series, but also the Nationwide Series (essentially stock car racing’s triple A league), and for the last three years, NASCAR’s World Truck Series.

“The idea is to get as much use out of the track as we can, while creating the maximum amount of excitement and interest,” Browning said. “In addition to the races and events that focus on the cars, the drivers, the crews and so on, we’re also constantly using the track for civic events.”

In a sense, the embracing of new events – particularly fall events like the historic racing festival – stems from the same antitrust suit that led to Browning’s arrival here. Prior the 2004 settlement, Darlington played host to two Sprint Cup races a year, including the Southern 500 every Labor Day.

In NASCAR’s settlement-mandated realignment, the Labor Day slot was assigned to a California track, and Darlington got the Saturday night before Mother’s Day. It also got one less Sprint Cup race, leaving some with the mistaken impression that Darlington was in decline.

“There’s a lot more going on here that people realize, and in a community as economically depressed as Darlington, having these events, and having a museum that draws a consistent flow of visitors are really big plusses,” he said.

SEEING STOCK CARS AS SPECIAL

As a race executive and an unabashed fan, Browning sees the specialness of the Stock Car Museum on many levels.

“I always say to people, you can go to other stock car museums, but where else can you find the nation’s oldest paved superspeedway right outside the back door,” he said. “The history of our sport is right there.”

“And then you stand in a room like this, and you can literally walk the evolution of the modern race car,” Browning added.

The building was originally the Joe Weatherly Stock Car Museum, with the name being one of the changes following a major renovation and expansion in 2003.

Weatherly, a colorful character known as much for his penchant for practical jokes as for his no-holds-barred driving style, won races at Darlington in 1960 and 1963. As in the case of the track itself, it was a visit to Indianapolis – this time by Weatherly – that got the ball rolling for the museum.

Weatherly, a stock car man through and through, was no fan of Indy car racing, but was impressed with the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum. He brought the idea for a similar museum for stock car racing to Bob Colvin, then Darlington raceway’s president, who immediately embraced it.

Weatherly died in a crash in 1964, but Colvin saw the project through to completion, opening the museum on May 2, 1965.

Although it’s open – and fairly busy – year round, six days a week, Browning said attendance

tends to peak in the summer, when people traveling to and from the beach on Highway 151 “slip off the highway to stop in for a look.”

A few steps from Mantz’s car is the most-winning car in stock racing history, a 1956 Ford convertible, which won 22 races in a single year racing in the convertible series, and three more races, including the Southern 500 – with a top welded on.

Across the hall, in the middle of a row it shares with the car Junior Johnson built for Cale Yarborough for the 1980 national season – a winner of six of 31 races and more than \$537,000 – is Richard Petty’s 1967 Plymouth. Sporting its trademark blue and the number 43, the car won 10 races that year.

And lest one forget the peril involved in the sport, the next room features Darrell Waltrip’s 1991 Chevy Lumina, which rolled eight times in the ‘91 Pepsi 400 at Daytona. Footage of the crash plays in an endless loop on a nearby monitor, with the track announcers describing it as one of the most fearsome crashes in stock car history.

Waltrip walked away. The museum presents the wreck as a tribute to stock car safety.

In the rear of the building visitors can find the National Motorsports Press Association Hall of Fame, filled with photos, memorabilia and interactive exhibits showcasing the sport of NASCAR racing and the personalities including Petty, Waltrip, Johnson, Earnhardt, Neil Bonnett and a host of others.

Browning said the museum, as well as the \$20 million in improvements that have been made to the track itself in recent years, are all intended to meet or surpass the expectations of race fans and customers.

“That’s particularly important in today’s world, where we are competing against venues that are a lot younger than we are,” he said.

Browning wouldn’t hazard a guess as to the value of the collection in the museum—a collection that includes not just the cars, but several incarnations of racing engines, memorabilia and trophies – but described it as “huge.”

Ironically, one of personal favorite areas of the museum is the display case featuring “Illegal” items race teams fashioned to give their driver a leg up on the competition. Many of the items are large metal gears and the like that have had interior portions drilled or cut away to lighten them. Others are fashioned from aluminum instead of steel for the same purpose.

Most surprising of all is a “spare” gas tank that was mounted under the dash board of the car Frank Lorenzen drove in the 1966 Old Dominion 500. The extra tank held between two and three gallons of fuel, giving him a 10 to 12 mile advantage over other drivers and reducing his need for pit stops.

“Back in the day, skirting the rules was a common practice,” Browning said with a chuckle of appreciation for the ingenuity on display.

One might ask themselves, ‘How’d they get found out?’ Browning said it was an age-old fault of human nature.

“A lot of times it was due to a slip of the lip,” Browning said. “A member of the crew would say something to a member of another crew, and that guy would rat them out.”

ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS OF NEW GENERATIONS

“When people come here I think most have the most basic questions at the top of their minds, like ‘how fast do the cars go?’ ‘How old is the track?’ ‘Who’s won the most races?’ And ‘How big is the track? The answer to the last question is 1.366 miles,” Browning said.

“Then, believe it or not, we have a lot of folks who have literally been coming here since the track opened and enjoy reconnecting with its, and their, collective history. And then of course, there’s the hardcore race fan, who knows everything and feels like visiting the

track and visiting the museum is something of a rite of passage,” he said.

One question Browning fields from those outside the racing community and its fans is just what makes the sport so popular?

“Honestly, I think a big part of it is it’s something that everyone can relate to... I mean, we can all relate to driving a car, and as a kid, getting your license and getting behind the wheel is something you quite literally live for,” he said.

“The other thing is our athletes, our drivers, are still very much approachable, and our fans can relate to that too,” he said. “And the other thing is our stars are all competing against each other week after week. It’s not like in other sports where your team might play a championship team one week and an also-ran the next. So I think that helps to keep you engaged.”

But even racings dedicated fan base couldn’t insulate Darlington Raceway from the impact of the Great Recession.

“We certainly felt the downturn, and honestly, I’ve yet to run across a business, small or large, that didn’t,” Browning said.

“This time last year [February, 2009], we saw a pretty significant dip in our corporate business,” he continued. “The good news is this year we’re getting calls about those folks coming back and even calls from corporate groups we hadn’t heard from in the past who are interested in group ticket purchases, hospitality sales, chalets and suites, and sponsorships.”

While that activity has been encouraging, Browning said individual ticket sales still seemed soft as of February 2010, but he remained optimistic.

“Right now we’re still eight weeks out from the Southern 500 and what we’ve learned from Daytona this year is that you really don’t start seeing tickets move until you’re at about the six week out mark,” he said. “Fans are waiting a little longer to buy their tickets, but they are buying.”

“That said, it’s probably way too early to make any conclusions about what will happen this year. After all, as we speak, we’re just two weeks into the season,” he said.

Up to that point, perhaps the biggest news in the sport was the arrival of Danica Patrick, who made her Nationwide debut at Daytona, where she crashed mid-race and finished 35th, and then struggled in California the following week, finishing 31st.

As Browning spoke, Patrick was slated to compete in one more NASCAR race, at Las Vegas Motor Speedway, before returning to full-time IndyCar racing for the spring. (She would ultimately collide with a car driven by Michael McDowell on the 83rd lap of the Sam’s town 300) Patrick’s next NASCAR race is not scheduled until New Hampshire at the end of June.

“To me Danica’s involvement in NASCAR is a huge positive,” Browning said. “The television numbers for the races she has competed in were unbelievable, and she’s a star in the IndyCar series, so she comes to NASCAR with a ready-built fan base.

“Given that the top three revenue streams for tracks like Darlington are television, ticket sales and sponsorships, her coming over to stock cars could be huge,” he said.

FANTASTIC FUTURE FOR RACE FANS

Browning said recent developments, such as the announcement that NASCAR’s truck series will return to the track on August 14, are in line with his goal to meet fan expectations while also trying to improve the facility and its offerings.



Inside the Darlington Raceway Museum

“Our fans asked us to bring that series back because they felt, and we agree, that the challenging nature of our track is a perfect fit for the rough racing the series offers,” Browning said.

“I mean, that’s a key to making this a success as a business and as entertainment and as a sport, you have to keep improving the facility and what you do in it, but at the same time, you have to do it in such a way that we still look and feel like Darlington.

“It’s a balance you’re always looking to strike, and it’s always a challenge, because you’re trying to maintain what makes you special while also trying to find the next generation of fans,” he said.

Ironically, Browning said one of the most exciting developments in meeting that challenge for Darlington was the 2006 Disney/Pixar movie Cars. The character of “Doc Hudson,” the mayor, judge and head doctor of the town of “Radiator Springs,” and just incidentally voiced by actor and race car enthusiast Paul Newman, was “based” on the car Johnny Mantz drove at Darlington.

“We welcome a lot of school groups to the museum, and I remember we had a group of kids in shortly after the movie came out, and they saw his car here, and were like, ‘There’s Doc, look there’s Doc!’ And you could see how excited they were, and then they moved on to another car and you could see the ideas clicking in their heads.

“That was a really good day and a very hopeful sign for the future,” Browning said.

Not far from where Browning was speaking, Vicky Sanders was speaking with another pair of customers, who were looking at a display that included, among other things, a cookbook entitled “Pit Stop in a Southern Kitchen”, by Martha Earnhardt and Carol Gordon Bickford, and the “Jeff Gordon Coloring and other Activities” book.

“Hey, where are you from?” Sanders asked as she engaged them in excited conversation. “You don’t sound like you’re from around here.”



The Fabulous Hudson Hornet on display at the Darlington Raceway Museum