

A LABOR DAY TALE

Labor Day weekend usually marks the official end of the beach season, though I love the beach best in October when it's not 95, but still pleasant under the sun and warm in the water. But from ages 13-21, my beach trips ended before August 15, when football practice began.

This will be a short tale as I don't want to labor too hard or long on Labor Day. Other memorable beach trips, such as the one with our family and Aunt Nig, Mike & Pat, or the many with Bill Carr and, when he became of age, Harry, and later, Chris Pappas, will have to wait for another day.

I think it was Labor Day weekend of 1965, it could have been '66, and I had to go to pre-season football camp at Camp Carolina in Brevard, a fit topic for another story, and missed out on one of the most memorable, not only for the regalers but also for the regalees of the stories thereof, beach weekends ever enjoyed, or maybe more accurately, endured by the beach crew. Bill Carr, Harry, and Billy Stilwell, an unusual selection as my replacement, ventured down to the Grand Strand in the never ending but never successful attempt to act cool enough to attract or even to get the attention of members of the opposing team, i.e., girls. Actually, I've never been told of their possible success in that endeavor on that trip which may very well have resulted in some success since the most uncool amigo, me, wasn't there to hinder the operation. Boys, I hope ya'll hit home runs, or at least got on base, whether by base hit, error, fielder's choice, walk or hit by a pitch, it doesn't matter how, just that you got in scoring position.

Billy Stilwell was a year or two younger than Harry, a Matthews Baptist product, the son of Bruce and Doris, two of my favorite Matthewsites, and brother of Barry, who, Barry, that is, went on to great achievements in the entertainment field in NY, maybe tv or movie production. Billy, if I recall correctly, died tragically when he fell off his roof in Atlanta. After Doris died, Bruce married the sister of my cousin, Nancy Head's husband, Ed, whose last name I've completely drawn a blank on, and whose funeral brother Bill and I attended in Chapel Hill a year or so ago.

Since I was not along, the rest of this story is based on its retelling over the years by Harry and Bill; consequently, they should be telling this tale. But alas, Harry's busy this weekend marrying off his son, David to Katherine Slauenwhite, a Canadian whom he met while they were both teaching in Seoul, Korea, in Salem, Mass, which brother Bill and his beautiful wife, Sylvia (hope Sylvia's presence didn't draw too much attention away from the bride, nor for that matter, Bill's away from his nephew, the groom or his brother, the best man) are attending; and there's no telling how Carr's disposed this weekend, probably throwing a hook in the water from his dock, pontoon boat or kayak on Lake Lanier, Ga, officiating at the wedding or funeral of a member of the VFW for which he's chaplain, or just enjoying this Labor Day of his golden years with his beautiful wife, Jan and his sons, Bracken, David and John and their families, probably with salmon or halibut caught on his last Alaskan fishing trip this summer with Bracken and grandson, Dylan (or Dillon, as in Matt) on the grill.

At some point the trio of beach combing Lotharios, whether to celebrate their success or forget their failures, remembering that they were going to be driving thru Darlington on the way home, decided it would be a good idea to indulge in the ultimate southern redneck rite of passage, spending the night in the infield of the Southern (or maybe the Firecracker) 500 at the Darlington Motor Speedway, akin to passing thru the pearly gates, or even a higher honor these days, entering the golden gates of Mar-a-Lago, for the ilk mentioned heretofore. Once again, I think Mom's Mercury Meteor was their ride, probably the only stock vehicle on those hallowed grounds. They had only enough \$ to buy a big can of pork and beans and a ticket to the infield.

One can only imagine the spectacle! Hundreds or thousands of cars, trucks (of all shapes and sizes; pickups, flat beds, maybe even tractor trailers), motor homes (if they existed in those days), campers, motorcycles, maybe even ox carts, whatever would hold the most beer and their imbibers. I can see, hear, smell, feel and taste it as I try to write what it must have been like. I haven't read Dante, but I expect his vision of one or more of the levels of Hell would probably come close to describing the scene in the infield at Darlington.

I wonder how they opened, much less ate, the beans. Surely they didn't have a can opener. A knife, screwdriver, or implement we used to stick in an oil can to pour the oil? Did each have a spoon or fork or did they share one? Not even a piece of loaf bread to go along with the entree? Anything to drink, even water, and what to drink it out of? But I guess if one's going to gorge on beans, there's probably no better place than the infield at Darlington where the resulting sounds and other emissions, a la Blazing Saddles, will blend in with the surroundings.

There were some yahoos close by who drank all night and were so passed out the next day that even the roar of the race couldn't rouse them. I don't know how much our trio slept or how they decided on the sleeping arrangements but one slept in the back seat, one in the trunk and one under the Meteor (that had to be Stilwell, the youngest-surely Bill and Harry could outfox him). I don't know what he put on the ground, maybe newspaper, which is what they covered with against the night chill. Hope the differential didn't leak. It was a good thing they were young for many reasons, not the least of which was having young kidneys, bladders and prostates. I've never heard the toilet facilities discussed, even if they existed. I'm sure the infield grass, sparse though I feel sure it was, was well watered and fertilized by overburdened elimination systems.

A tunnel permitted vehicles to enter and exit the infield even while the race was going on. I don't think they stayed for the whole 500 (or maybe it was just 300; don't think anybody ever had a 400). I know if I'd been there I'd have lobbied hard and voted against staying for more than 10 laps. Watching, hearing, and smelling cars going round and round in a circle, or ellipse, I guess it is, has never sounded like fun to me, nor do I consider it a sport, where the spectators live for blood and gore, unlike the genteel game of football, where the fans enjoy watching the graceful ballet-like movements of the participants with not a speck of red on their necks, only triangles of cheese or norsemen helmets on their heads and literature painted on their bare chests, and where approval is shown with polite applause.

All I can say for that memorable Labor Day is, wish I had been there, just as I wish I could have been at David and Katherine's wedding. May their life together be sublime. Harry, please pass along my sentiment to them, though I'm not sure I want a professional writer like David reading my drivel.

Best of Labor Days to all, Tom