

IT'S RACE DAY! THE ORANGE CRATE DERBY

Three thousand spectators roared as the race cars sped down Brownsville's steep Union Street Extension hill!

It was July 4, 1947. A Brownsville version of the widely known Soap Box Derby was underway, but the cars in this race were not built of soap boxes, and the race had a different name.

It was called the Orange Crate Derby. The day before the big event was scheduled to occur, a Brownsville *Telegraph* reporter described what would take place.

"Eighteen youthful Barney Oldfields will streak away in their race for the championship of the Brownsville Optimist Club's first annual Orange Crate Derby. The event, the first of its kind ever sponsored in Brownsville, will provide residents with unusual entertainment. Racers will run in heats, and winners of heats will compete in the final race. The motorless, boy-made racers will move from the starting line by gravity."

A reader perusing the *Telegraph* report might have been led to believe that the homemade race cars would gently coast down the street, using only gravity as a propellant, until one of them glided across the finish line first. In truth, the speed and potential for accidents in these races was much greater than might be inferred from the *Telegraph* description.

One of the boys who participated in the race was Hiller native Harry Hackney, who now resides in Tampa, Florida.

"Those cars were practically unsteerable," Harry told me. "No kid could control his car. We just aimed the car and hoped for the best. In the nationally telecast Soap Box Derby race, the course is perfectly straight, yet some of those cars drift clear out of their lanes. Union Street in Brownsville is not straight, and we discovered that the secret to winning was to avoid steering your car. As soon as you moved the wheels, you created drag that slowed you down."

Harry's fellow competitors in the 1947 Orange Crate Derby, according to the *Telegraph*, were to be James Chalfant, Emidio "Medio"

Pasqualucci, Eddie Horwatt, James Terringo, Donald Gue, Jim Turturice, Rudy Turosik, Donald Turosik, Gerald Allen Jones, Eddie Labin, James Brown, Robert Bakewell, John Raymond, Robert Eicher, Nelson Horner, Robert Black, and Pete Stephenson.

What was at stake in these races?

Besides pride and bragging rights, numerous prizes were offered. The top award for the winning racer was to be a “completely equipped bicycle contributed by the Brownsville Hardware company.” Matty’s service station would award a radio as second prize, and Coulter’s hardware store put up a Flying Dutchman for third.

The Orange Crate Derby was “the first endeavor by the recently organized Optimist Club,” said the *Telegraph*, and to make sure the event would be a success, other merchants also pitched in. The official judges for the races were Mrs. Wilbur Jones, Dr. R. A. Mulligan, William V. Winans, Burgess James Forsythe of West Brownsville, and the Rev. E. J. Keifer.

Drivers of the cars were instructed to have their “autos” at the site one hour before race time, reported the *Telegraph*, so that the judges could “inspect the vehicles for appearance, safety and design. Progress of the heats will be announced through a public address system.”

In the weeks before the big race, the competitors went to work constructing their race cars, which were supposed to be built by the boys with guidance by their parents. Harry Hackney recalled the preparations he made for the race.

“Practically no kid alive ever built a car himself,” Harry declared. “He or she may have contributed a lot to it, but it was nearly impossible for a fourteen-year-old kid with limited knowledge and few resources to construct a winning car.

“I started this car by myself. I had no materials from which to construct a car, no place to build a car, no tools, and very little knowledge, but I didn’t let that worry me. ‘Things will work out,’ I figured. I traveled five miles out to my uncle’s farm and rummaged through the barn until I found a 2-by-12 board long enough for a base, and somehow I shaped it into the form of my racer.”

Some parts of the car came directly from the national Soap Box Derby program.

“The wheel and axle assembly was official Soap Box Derby equipment,” said Harry, “and was supplied by the sponsor. The gold wheels were ten dollars, and the better-grade red wheels were twelve dollars. The race sponsors were not permitted to use the Soap Box Derby name and it was renamed the Orange Crate Derby, but we did get the official wheels, axles and rule book. The Optimist Club even took all the drivers to Pittsburgh to see the semifinals of the official Soap Box

Derby there.

"I remember that the rubber would not stay on those wheels we got," Harry continued. "The rough roads soon caused chunks of the tire to fall off, denuding the whole wheel rim and leaving a steel rim that folded over. After the derby, I coasted around in that racer until all the rubber was gone from the wheels, then I sold it to another kid for a dollar."

Harry's work on his racer soon attracted his family's attention and plenty of advice.

"I was progressing as well as could have been expected, given the lack of materials, tools, ability, time and space," Harry recalled. "After a few days, my uncle dropped in to see what I was doing, and he began to lend a hand. I didn't feel I needed any design advice, but soon another uncle was inspecting the project, and I found myself hindering progress. Then I had to have some welding done to the axle to attach a pivot and steering means. Soon I was an outsider, trying to catch a glimpse of my car.

"Finally on the day before the race, it came time for a test run. Those wheels were faster than anything I had ever experienced before. They were 'greased lightning.' My first test run was on Rush Run Hollow Road towards the river, a gentle grade that follows the creek. My family chased me in the automobile as I went down the slope faster and faster, struggling to maintain control. I finally reached the bottom of the grade, having logged one shaky, erratic mile at the controls."

Then disaster struck when Harry took one too many practice runs.

"As darkness was settling on us," Harry said, "there in front of me loomed the steep hill coming down from Alicia-Maxwell Road. 'Let's try that one!' I suggested. That was a big mistake.

"I started down the steep grade and the car began to edge a little to the left. I over-corrected, it drifted right, I over-corrected again, and swerved to the left. Soon I was weaving from one side of the road to the other, completely out of control, and I could see my uncle at the bottom of the hill, running from one side of the road to the other trying to get out of my way.

"When I got to the bottom at a high rate of speed, I plowed right through the high weeds into a large boulder. I flew out the right side of the car as the rock crashed through the front of the car. For some reason, the fact that the car has a brake did not occur to me when the car was out of control. This is a common reaction of novice racers.

"Jimmy Turturice, another of the contestants, nearly killed his old man on Telegraph Road during trials. They careened off the road and up into a field, and Jimmy's father, who was straddling the back axles, went

flying over Jimmy and tumbling through the cow patties.

“I was not hurt,” Harry remembered, “but my car was in ruins and the next day was race day. The axles were bent and had to be straightened with an acetylene torch. This took the temper out of the steel, so I was not allowed to sit in the car because my weight bent the axles. Needless to say, even though my pre-race test runs were a disaster, there would be no more practice for me. We couldn’t risk bending the axles any more.”

Derby Day, Friday, July 4, 1947 dawned bright and sunny, and Harry and the other contestants gathered at the race site for inspection of their vehicles by the judges. As they assembled, Harry sat down gingerly inside his Car #4 long enough to have his picture taken.



Fourteen-year-old Harry Hackney sits in his Car #4 near the top of Union Street Extension hill, awaiting the beginning of the first annual Brownsville Optimist Club Orange Crate Derby on July 4, 1947. Harry’s father, Graham Hackney, is waving to the photographer. The entrance gate to Redstone Cemetery can be seen in the background.

“I believe it was Mario Antonucci who took the picture,” Harry recalled. Antonucci operated a photography studio in Hiller at the time. As soon as the picture had been taken, Harry got out of his fragile vehicle to spare the axles any further strain.

The staging area was at the top of Union Street Extension, directly

across the old National Pike from the entrance to Redstone Cemetery, which can be seen in the background of the photograph to which Harry referred. Also visible in the photo, standing behind Harry's car and waving, was Harry's father, Graham Hackney, proprietor of Hackney's Dairy Bar.

"In the picture, the boy sitting on the ground behind my dad was Jimmy Chalfant," Harry noted. "He was assisting Car #3, operated by Eddie Horwatt and sponsored by Matty's Garage, which was judged best looking and best built car in the race. Jimmy Chalfant drove Car #1, sponsored by Springer's Hardware."

Before Harry could participate, he needed to locate a critical piece of protective gear.

"Helmets were required," Harry remembers, "and I could not find a helmet. I borrowed a really old, beat up helmet from Edward Jolly."

The luck of the draw was not kind to Harry, and for his opponent in his first heat, he was pitted against Eddie Horwatt's Car #3. Harry was definitely the underdog against Eddie's handsome racer.

When it was time for the preliminary heat between Harry and Eddie to begin, both racers pushed their cars to the starting line at the top of Union Street Extension. The moment to put cars and drivers to the test had arrived!

***THOUSANDS LINE UNION STREET COURSE
TO CHEER ORANGE CRATE DERBY RACERS***

On July 4, 1947, the Brownsville Optimist Club hosted the town's first annual Orange Crate Derby, a race in which motorless race cars that were built and driven by teenage boys careened down steep Union Street in a series of preliminary heats to determine a champion.

After constructing the vehicles to specifications outlined by the national Soap Box Derby organization, the boys assembled with their racers at the staging area, located at the top of Union Street Extension. It was approaching the hour for the races to begin. One of the competitors that day, Hiller native Harry Hackney, still recalls the excitement of Race Day.

"In my first heat," Harry told me, "I was matched against Car #3, which was driven by Eddie Horwatt. In the judging before the race, Eddie's car was declared the best-looking car in the competition. My car was Car #4, and I won the heat, much to the surprise of most folks.

"The finish line was right in front of the Horwatt porch on Union Street. His family watched in dismay and the stunned spectators gasped



Harry Hackney crosses the finish line on Union Street hill, winning his first heat in Car #4. Harry was eliminated in the next heat by Car #2, driven by Medio Pasqualucci.

in disbelief as an inferior car coasted straight as an arrow to victory.”

Harry’s upset victory in his first heat gave him a surge of confidence that he could win the competition.

“I thought I had just beaten the best car in the race,” Harry recalled, “and I told myself, ‘Just steer straight and don’t wreck and you’ll have the trophy.’”

Harry’s dream came to a quick end. In his second heat, Car #2, driven by Medio Pasqualucci, whose family operated the Barr House in Brownsville, eliminated Harry’s Car #4.

“His car edged mine by inches,” Harry said. “By then, the axles on my car were really sagging. If only I could have gotten to the starting line without wrecking my car in Rush Run Hollow.”

He added jokingly, “After all these years, I am still making excuses!”

Harry won a fishing lantern for his effort.

“I never used it again after the battery went dead,” he observed ruefully. “The battery cost too much.”

During the elimination heats, there were occasional mishaps, as might be expected in any race.

“There were spills and thrills aplenty,” reported the *Brownsville Telegraph*, “as several of the would-be Barney Oldfields skidded and crashed into the side lines, and at least two of the miniature automobiles somersaulted after passing the finish line.”

Gerald Allen “Herky” Jones, who was another participant in the race, described some of the methods used to enhance the safety of the race.

“Each car had a brake,” Gerald explained, “consisting of a board in the bottom of the race car. The board was hinged in the front and held up with a spring similar to the type used to close a screen door. There was automobile tire tread nailed to the bottom of the board, and the driver could ‘brake’ his car by pushing the brake down onto the pavement under his car.”

Each time a car whizzed across the finish line, its excited driver would jam his foot on the vehicle’s primitive brake. Sometimes it stopped the car.

“The course started where Lunden’s Flower Shop is now located,” noted Gerald Jones, “and the finish line was on the second level spot on Union Street hill, just before the third, longer downhill stretch to the intersection with Coal Hill Road.”

When a car flew across the finish line and showed no signs of slowing down, a “backup” system was used to stop it.

“A canvas tarp was stretched across the road,” Gerald described. “If a racer didn’t get stopped, it would roll onto the tarp and men would hold the downhill side of the tarp up in the air, like an aircraft barrier, to stop the car. I believe it was used several times.”

Despite the dubious reliability of the cars’ brakes and the canvas backup system, just one significant injury occurred on race day.

“Only one serious accident marred the event,” reported the *Telegraph* the next day. “James Bennett, 12, son of Mr. and Mrs. Reagan Bennett, Fifth Avenue, North Side, suffered a fracture of the right ankle when struck by a racer operated by L. Edward Labin. One wheel of the [Labin] vehicle became loose and the car crashed into the Bennett youth and two others on the sidelines. The Bennett boy was the only one hurt. He was taken to Brownsville General Hospital in the police ambulance.”

It was an exciting day for racers and spectators alike. The Boy Scouts distributed programs for the event and had a first-aid squad on the scene. Firemen from the three Brownsville companies and borough police were on hand to control the huge crowd. When the time came for the final championship heat to be run, spectators jammed the starting and finish lines and the hillside overlooking the race course.

The driver of the winning car in that championship heat, which was run with an estimated 3,000 cheering spectators looking on, was none other than “Herky” Jones.

“Gerald Allen Jones,” reported the next day’s *Telegraph*, “piloted his streamlined racer under the checkered finish flag in front of opponents in five heats yesterday morning to cop first prize in the first annual Brownsville Orange Crate Derby under the sponsorship of the Brownsville Optimist Club. Placing second was Jimmy Terringo and tying for third place honors were Robert Eichar and Medio Pasqualucci.

“Robert Tunney [no relation to the author], Optimist Club president, said the event was very successful. He announced that all those who competed in the derby would be guests at the dinner meeting of the club Monday evening at the Monongahela Hotel.”

Even the contestants who did not succeed were rewarded.

“Every entrant received no less than two prizes,” reported the *Telegraph*, “such as scout knives, theater tickets, footballs, baseball glove, roller skates, pocketbook, etc. Prizes awarded by Burgess Stuart and their winners included Gerald Allen Jones, first, bicycle, National Pike garage; James Terringo, second, radio, Brownsville Hardware; Robert Eicher, Flying Dutchman, Brownsville Police, and Medio Pasqualucci, \$5 certificate, Karts, tied for third place.”

Other prize winners included James Terringo, best design, pen and pencil set; Robert Eichar, safest racer, and Edward Horwatt, most attractive racer, Matty’s Service Station, both wrist watches.

The Orange Crate Derby drew eager participation by the young contestants and their mentors, widespread support from the town’s merchants, and enthusiastic cheers from excited spectators of all ages. It was a wonderful example of good wholesome hometown fun, another nostalgic gem from Brownsville’s “good old days.”