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Film Review

***Hoppin' Rattlesnakes: Oral Histories of Beach Racing in Volusia County, 1903-1958.* 2014. Halifax Historical Society. DVD. 49.55 min.**

Produced by Preston Root, Buz McKim, Fayn LeVeille, Len Lempel and Eric Breitenbach; written by Len Lempel and Eric Breitenbach; directed by Eric Breitenbach.

Frank J. Wetta, *Lecturer/Senior Fellow, Kean University, NJ*

The current promotional website for Volusia County, Florida tells potential tourists that "Driving on the beaches of the Daytona Beach and New Smyrna Beach areas is a Volusia County tradition dating back to the early days of the automobile. For years, beachgoers have enjoyed a leisurely drive on the wide, hard-packed sands." And then it adds: "Please be a responsible beach driver by driving only in designated areas and observing the speed limit." Well, there was a time in

the first half of the twentieth century when no one who drove on the beach observed any speed limit. In fact, they were out to win races and break speed records. Beach racing was a wild, unregulated adventure that attracted a league of outlandish characters ranging from former moonshiners who learned to drive fast to avoid federal and state agents to millionaire English playboys.

"Hoppin' Rattlesnakes" (a reference to the rough, unregulated surroundings of the improvised beach race track) is an engaging and informative documentary that recounts the fascinating story of these early days of car racing. In Daytona Beach, on the east coast of Florida, pioneering men (and a few women) drove everything from jalopies that reached a "blistering 82.4 mph" to the "Bluebird"— a 10,000 pound, forty-foot mechanical behemoth that reached a speed of over 272 mph. The cars were powered by everything from electricity to steam to gas. Two V-12 airplane engines propelled the "Sunbeam Silver Bullet." Another, "The Triplex," was powered by three World

War I surplus plane engines. One racer had a telescopic sight installed on the cowl of his "Golden Arrow" so he could control the car and keep it from running diagonally. After seeing this film, one can assume that if they could have conceived of atomic power some of these daredevils would have tried adapting it to their cars.

Almost no one at the time seemed to care about the safety of the drivers, especially the drivers themselves. An improvised safety feature on some cars consisted of a "safety belt" tied to the floor mounts of the front seat. There were no fireproof driver suits. "Mad" Marion McDonald, who is interviewed in the documentary, kept a jackknife taped to the dash to cut himself loose in case he was trapped in a burning car after an accident. As for the audience? There were no protective fences, no guard rails. Fans lined up along the edge of the sandy track to get the best views, something inconceivable in our safety-obsessed, lawsuit-inclined society. True, these drivers often seemed to lack common sense, but they were free spirits, risking life and limb to pursue their passion (in fact, one driver was literally torn apart in an accident). Consider also the story of

the handsome, illiterate boy "genius," Frank Lockhart, dead at 29 years old in 1928 in a crash caused by cheap tires, a sharp sea shell, and personal recklessness.

This documentary captures more than the history of a sport, it also reflects on an America that has been largely lost. In those days engineering geniuses often designed their own cars and then drove them at breakneck speeds. On the dangerous beach and dunes of Daytona these drivers raced for the sheer fun and thrills—almost no one in those days made any real money—a \$200 purse was a big deal. The days of multimillion dollar salaries and lucrative corporate endorsements lay in the future. At best, most of the drivers might eke out a living. (According to *Forbes*, the ten highest-paid NASCAR drivers in 2013 made over \$170 million. Dale Earnhardt, Jr., for example, earned \$25.9 million in 2012.)

At the heart of the film are the interviews with some of the surviving early drivers, now in their late 80s and 90s, as well as their colleagues, friends, and family members. These talking heads (including Vicki Wood who had the talent, audacity, and courage

necessary to break into a “man’s sport”) provide viewers with an intimate sense of the freewheeling character of the sport. Further, the film is enhanced by a running commentary by Buz McKim, a born raconteur and historian of the NASCAR Hall of Fame, who provides viewers with a score of authoritative, often amusing anecdotes about the drivers, their cars, and the times.

The film cleverly includes scenes from the MGM cult movie about moonshiners and fast cars, *Thunder Road* starring Robert Mitchum. The Hollywood film was released in 1958 at the very time that the sport in Daytona was being transformed into an organized, and, some might say after seeing this film, a domesticated, less interesting, if much faster sport.

It was inevitable that the corporate world would eventually take over the sport and bring the wildness to an end. By the close of the 1950s, the pioneering days of beach racing were over. In their place, William Henry Getty "Big Bill" France Sr. (1909 – 1992), an early pioneer himself, transformed the sport into an organized, extremely profitable form of

mass entertainment—the family-owned NASCAR company (the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing). Beginning in the late 1940s, France saw the need to move the sport to the next level. He was, no doubt, an entrepreneurial genius—the Andrew Carnegie of auto racing. Yet, the rise of NASCAR ended the glory—if chaotic—days of racing cars on the beach. Too bad.

“Hoppin’ Rattlesnakes,” enhanced by a bluesy original score by Scott Velazco and Joseph Breitenbach, is the product of a team of very talented filmmakers. One hopes they will consider other features about Florida’s rich history.

Everyone interested in the state’s history, economy, culture, and race relations in general or the history of American car racing in particular should see this delightful, often exciting documentary. It tells a great story about technology, showmanship, outlandish personalities, entertainment, and that irrepressible urge to drive fast.