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Barney Oldfield, Jack Johnson, and the AAA

In the early twentieth century, the name Barney Oldfield was a synonym for speed. He was truly the pioneer of motor sports, and a significant hero of the modern industrial age. As a hero he reflected many of the so-called American values: strength, courage, fair play, success, and individual freedom. His was a rags to riches story which added to his public appeal and perpetuated a popular belief that in America, anyone could rise to fame and fortune through one's own merit. Barney Oldfield was the first man to drive a car at a speed of one mile per minute. He was the first man to drive over 100 miles per hour on a closed circuit track. In the Spring of 1910, at Daytona Beach, Florida, Barney Oldfield set the world's land speed record at just over 141 miles per hour. As a barnstorming act, he put on numerous shows at nearly every dirt track in America, and always appeared willing to race anyone anywhere for the right price.

In the Fall of 1910, the heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Johnson challenged Oldfield to a race. Johnson had recently beaten Jim Jeffries, the former champion and personal friend of Oldfield. Having defeated nearly every top white contender, and encountering racial bigotry, Jack Johnson had found it difficult to arrange fights. At that time, it was common for anyone with the means and the interest to purchase an automobile

and enter a race, so it was not unusual to have a person of Johnson's fame interested in a challenge race. Barney Oldfield saw the challenge from Johnson not only as an opportunity to make money, but also as an opportunity to help even the score for his friend Jeffries, and to establish racial superiority for the white race in the area of motor sports.

Automobile racing was a new sport. As far as its acceptance as a sport, it was on the fringes of society, and similar to boxing in that regard. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the American Automobile Association (AAA) took on the role of the major sanctioning body for all forms of motor sports. Besides providing a venue through which manufacturers could test and improve automobile technology, the AAA performed the service of promoting the sport and helping it gain credibility.

Racial tensions were very close to the surface in the early twentieth century. Progressive legislators were working tirelessly to ban boxing in order to keep the black champion from defeating any more "white hopes." The AAA contest board similarly attempted to block an interracial contest from taking place. After initially granting Johnson a license to race, the contest board of the AAA met and rescinded their decision. The AAA refused to sanction the race between Oldfield and Johnson and promised to permanently ban from competition anyone who participated in an unsanctioned event. However, Oldfield was under contract to race and felt obliged to go through with the event. Oldfield won easily, and as promised was banned "for life." The official reason given by the AAA contest board for suspending Oldfield was that he raced in an unsanctioned event against an unlicensed driver.

Although Oldfield could no longer participate in sanctioned events, his popularity did not seem to decrease. While he served his suspension, he still gave driving exhibitions before large crowds and raced match races on his barnstorming tour. About eighteen months later, under different leadership, the AAA contest board voted to reinstate him. Although it was the first time Oldfield was suspended by the AAA, this incident was neither the first nor the last encounter he had with the organization. By all appearances he thumbed his nose at the organization, and its leaders for another eight years.

This paper closely examines Oldfield's uneasy relationship with the AAA contest board, the major sanctioning body of motor sports. In spite of the fact that he was one of motor sport's first outlaws, he was widely embraced as an American hero. As a hero he was a creative pioneer in a new technological society. The society that embraced Oldfield was contradictory, glorifying the machine, and yet still promoting individualism, racially divided, and yet promoting the self-made man. This paper utilizes both primary sources, such as original newspaper accounts, and secondary sources, such as William Nolan's biography of Oldfield, and numerous published articles.