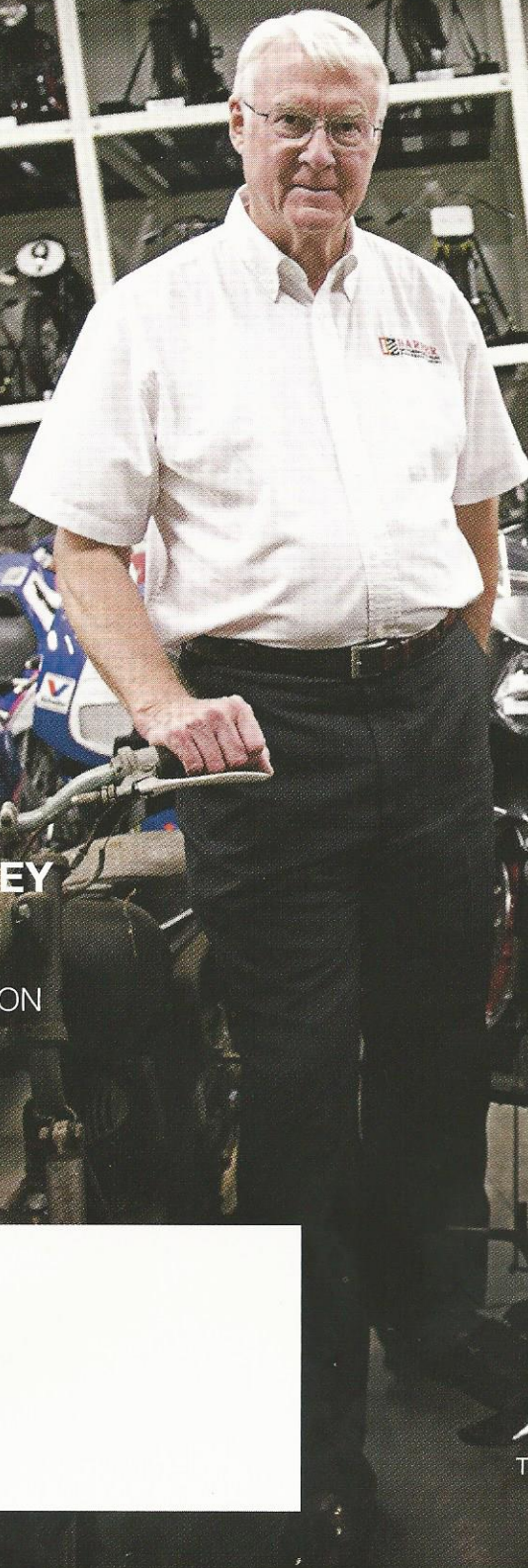


AMERICAN MOTORCYCLIST

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BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

GEORGE BARBER'S
MOTORCYCLE OBSESSION

SPOT SATELLITE MESSENGER

MEMBER BENEFIT

THE JOURNAL OF THE **AMA**



BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

George Barber's Philosophy for His
Showpiece Museum and Racetrack is Simple:
"This Place Has to be a Mecca for Motorcycle People."

Words by Grant Parsons
Photos by Chris Stanford



George Barber has built what is arguably the finest private collection of motorcycles in the world, as well as the country's prettiest racetrack in the hills outside of Birmingham, Alabama. So when he pulls up to a quarter-mile-wide ravine his workers have methodically filled in to create a huge natural bowl, sweeps his arm and says: "That's really going to be something—I don't know exactly what, but it's going to be a good one," you don't doubt it.

After all, everything else in this sprawling complex built by Mr. Barber (*everyone* calls him "Mr. Barber") has built in this sprawling complex has not only been state-of-the-art, but it has elevated motorcycles and racetracks to an entirely new level. Current plans call for a world-class motocross track, which will no doubt be just as impressive.

"There's no point in doing something if you don't do it right," says Mr. Barber, a third-generation dairy owner who now runs an influential real-estate business—and oversees and expands his impressive Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum and racetrack.

Clearly, "right" is what Mr. Barber has done here. The grounds are park-like. The Armco barriers around the circuit are constantly renewed and dent-free. The tires placed to absorb impact in the run-off areas are new. Fifteen-foot modern-art sculptures of spiders, ants, winged gods and more dot the landscape. More than 42 miles of irrigation piping keep the grounds lush. There are even six cloned trees in one area that will sprout branches in exactly the same places as they grow.

The Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum displays the best motorcycles from a collection of more than 1,200 machines—and growing. The meticulously restored bikes range from a near-priceless Honda RC161 racebike (one of two in existence), to a Bohmerland three-seater, to a world-championship-winning Morbidelli.

The presentation is almost as stunning as the motorcycles. The machines are arranged in a beautiful five-level building in a manner that is simply jaw-dropping. Walk in, and your eyes don't know what to latch onto first, from the towers

showcasing bikes to the expansive displays on every level that mix and match bikes.

While the facility is dripping with his influence, and his name may be on the museum, Mr. Barber tends to keep a low profile. He gives surprisingly few public interviews, although he agreed to meet with *American Motorcyclist* for this story.

"You don't hear of me very much," he admits. "You hear about the museum. And I hope you hear that the museum is in Birmingham. That's the most important thing."

In person, Mr. Barber is a gracious host, clearly proud to show guests around his museum and track. He enjoys not only building what he calls "the Augusta of racetracks," but perfecting the details along the way. He's proud that what he built is bringing people to his hometown of Birmingham, which in turn elevates the city itself.

Mr. Barber is a motorhead whose first experience with motorcycles led to a stint racing Porsches as a pro throughout the South. He amassed 63-first-place trophies by the time he retired to take over the family dairy. He's a passionate collector whose approach includes a refreshingly populist touch—plenty of bikes that may not meet everyone's definition of "classic," but are fondly remembered by longtime riders. Few other museums will display a Laverda Jeta next to a BMW K1100RS, for example. And he's enough of a speed junkie that he takes to his own track several times a week—and can even lap at a pretty mean clip with a minivan full of guests.

But most of all, Mr. Barber comes across as a guy with serious passion for two- and four-wheeled vehicles of speed. On that level, he's an awful lot like the rest of us.



SPOTLIGHT: HONDA RC161

Honda had only entered seven Grand Prix races in its history when it launched the RC161 in 1961, but the growing company put itself on the map big-time with its jewel-like, high-revving 250cc four-cylinder, four-stroke machine. After debuting at Daytona International Speedway, the RC161 went on to win the 250cc World Championship, taking victories in 10 of 11 races. Amazingly, RC161 riders captured the first five places in points, establishing Honda as a player in world competition. The Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum's RC161 was meticulously restored by museum staff.



ON HIS FIRST MOTORCYCLE EXPERIENCE

I was either 13 or 14. I was not allowed to ride 'em, but somehow I talked my mother into letting me buy an old motorcycle just to tinker with.

I got it, and of course it wasn't a week before I had it running. But when my mother saw that burn mark on my leg, that was that. It was, "No more motorcycles."

The bike was an old NSU. I don't remember what kind, but I do remember that the exhaust was on the right side, because I still have a burn mark on my right leg.

ON REALIZING HE WAS A SERIOUS MOTORHEAD

I guess it all started when I was about 21 and went to Italy to a driving school taught by Piero Taruffi, and we drove Maseratis

there for a week. It was a terrific school, with a fantastic course, and Taruffi as an individual was incredible to be around, much less spend a week with.

When I got back, I started racing Sports Car Club of America races with Porsches. I started with a Super 90, then a Porsche Carrera. Then I raced RSKs and 550s with the more modern 904 motor. The last couple of years I was racing a Brabham BT8. But when my dad died in the 1970s, I had to start racing the milk business, which is considerably more dangerous.

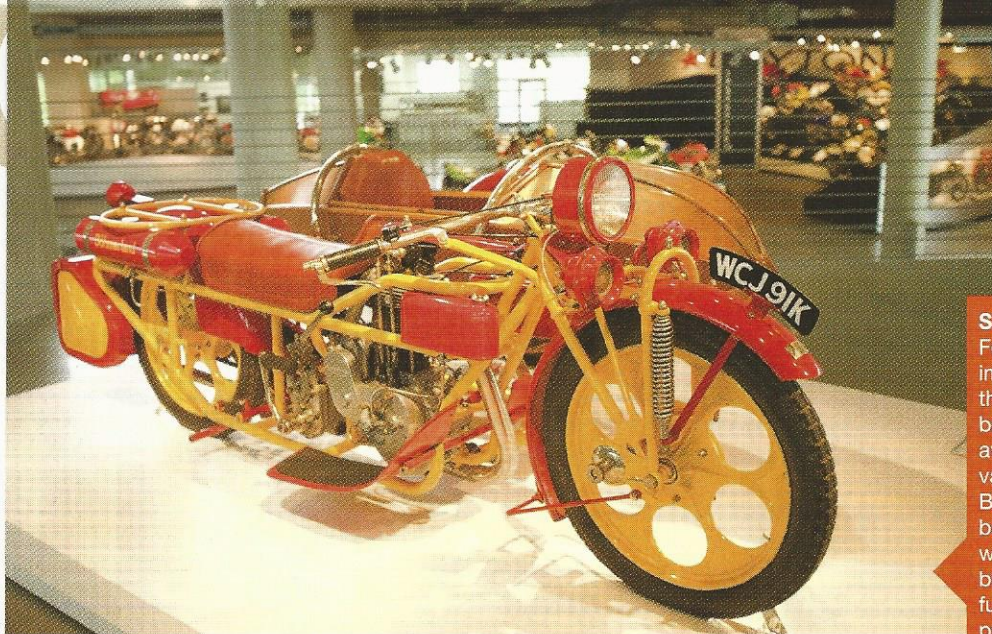
ON RACING CARS

Racing pro, it was a lot different then. When you went to the track, you went to race, and that's what you did. I competed mostly in the South, and then, it was mostly airport courses or cities. We won 63 first place trophies, so that's not too bad. And

(NASCAR great and fellow Alabama native) Bobby Allison called me up one time and said he was going to a road-racing course. He said he didn't know how to drive one, and he wanted me to show him how to do it. I thought that was pretty flattering at the time.

ON HIS OTHER INTERESTS

Barber Dairy started with my grandfather. I was the third white shirt. That's supposedly the one who loses the business, and I'm glad to say that didn't happen. I started running it in 1970, and sold the business about eight years ago. All that time, I developed and sold real estate, and I'm in the real estate business now. That's what I do for a living, and that's what I spend my time doing when I'm not working on the museum.



SPOTLIGHT: BOHMERLAND

Few motorcycles, before or since, have the imposing-yet-whimsical physical sense of the Bohmerland. With its extended wheelbase, passenger seating for three (plus an available sidecar for one more!), and carnival-inspired paint schemes, the Czech-built Bohmerland was made in limited numbers between 1925 and 1939 by Albin Liebisch, who also designed the 598cc engine. The bike, which also featured twin rocket-shaped fuel tanks above the rear wheel, went out of production with the advent of World War II.

HOW HIS OBSESSION WITH MOTORCYCLE COLLECTING STARTED

At the dairy, we had a truck-rebuilding facility for the milk and ice cream trucks. There was a guy there named Dave Hooper who I blame for starting this whole facility. We were winding down the rebuild facility, and they said, "Well, let's restore a few cars before we close it down."

The issue was, though, these guys were truck mechanics. You know, sledgehammers. Big stuff. And they really didn't understand "perfect." So the car restorations really didn't do well. We decided to do something else, and Dave suggested bikes. Well, Dave bought a few bikes, and I bought a few bikes and pretty soon we had a hundred bikes, maybe 200.

And I thought, "Well, with any luck, I could put together the best motorcycle collection in the world, and do it in Birmingham, and have a hell of a lot of fun doing it." But primarily, I thought I could bring people to Birmingham who wouldn't be here otherwise.

ON HIS COLLECTION'S RAPID GROWTH

I started collecting maybe 12 years before we did this museum. It's come quickly—a lot faster than I initially wanted to go. Back in those days, you'd see a collection of five or 10 motorcycles, and if you didn't buy them, they'd go to Japan or leave the country to wherever, and you'd never see them again. These days, it kind of comes to us. We're careful about what we buy. We have what I call "patient money."

I wanted to build the best motorcycle collection in the world. I say that now, and nobody hits me with a stick. All the journalists tend to agree. So I really think we probably have the best motorcycle collection in the world, and it's here in Birmingham. And that was the idea.

WHY MOTORCYCLES ARE MORE FUN TO COLLECT

An automobile is a beautiful paint job and a set of hubcaps. A motorcycle—and this is what drew me to them—you can look at something like the front wheel and the suspension and see how they evolved. You can look at the brakes and see how they evolved. That's just fascinating. Even now, when I walk through the museum, that's the kind of thing I look for.

HOW HE CHOOSES MOTORCYCLES

We buy the bike of the year. We buy the bike that has any new innovation. I'm not so much into the older bikes as (Executive Director) Jeff Ray is. He knows them backward and forward and upside-down. I think he knows where the value of every bike in here is sitting right now.

My fascination is with the race bikes. Racing history is very important when we start looking at bikes. We raced for years before we built the museum (with the Barber Dairy vintage race team). Then we got so busy with the museum that the racing just stopped. My guys brought me seven national titles, so that's pretty good. Competition, once it gets in your blood, you can't get it out.

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Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum



Darrell McCalla



SPOTLIGHT: MORBIDELLI V8

Italian industrialist Giancarlo Morbidelli made his fortune in the woodworking industry, then built racing motorcycles that won four world titles in the mid-1970s. By the 1990s, he was looking for a new challenge, and producing the world's first V8 sport-touring motorcycle became his obsession. The prototype bike that resulted was technologically impressive, sporting an 847cc, 32-valve, liquid-cooled, 90-degree V8 engine with shaft drive, but early styling hamstrung the project. By the time the styling was revised, as with this version, the project was deemed too expensive to produce, making this one of few motorcycles like it in the world.

A Unique Approach

Barber Museum Covers The Entire Motorcycle World—And Then Some

The Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum is unlike any other motorcycle museum you've ever visited in one important way: It showcases all kinds of machines from all eras—including bikes that some may not consider "classics."

And that, says the museum's Executive Director Jeff Ray, is exactly the point.

"It's interesting because the most popular bike in the museum is not necessarily the most valuable," he says. "This week, the one everyone asks about may be a Honda 305 Dream. Maybe next week it's a Yamaha SRX. You just don't know, so you have to put them all out there. This is not a museum just for road racing. It's not just a museum for street bikes. It's a museum that represents all of motorcycling."

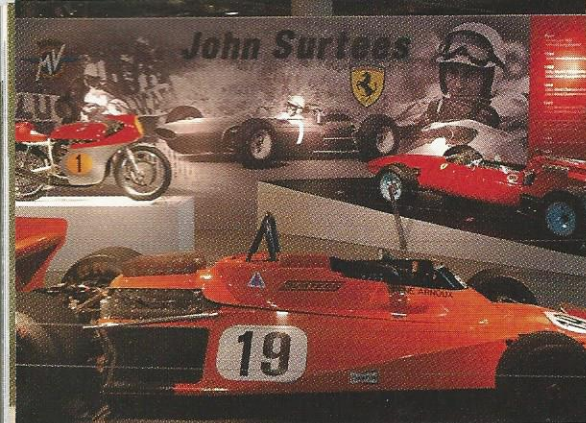
That's why you'll see bikes like a mid-1980s Honda Nighthawk, a Kawasaki EX500 or a Yamaha FZ750 lined up next to an MV Agusta, a Manx Norton or a Bohmerland. It's a lineup that's easy to create when you've got a collection of 1,180 bikes, with new ones arriving practically every week, Ray notes.

"The big question we always get is: 'Do you have one of these,'" Ray says. "And they typically ask for one of three reasons: Either it's the bike they had when they were younger, and they want to see it again. Or it's the bike that someone in their family had. Or it's parked out in the parking lot, and they want to validate their choice of motorcycle."

For Ray, who's worked for George Barber for 19 years, the job of executive director of what has rapidly established itself as one of the world's most impressive collections of motorcycles is a continual learning experience.

"Just like with restoration work, the history is interpreted—all you can do is research the history and interpret why they made the choices they did when they built these machines," he says. "You can learn something new every day if you just open your mind."





HIS LONG-TERM MUSEUM STRATEGY

Would I buy one of everything? Oh, hell yes, if I could. But that's a little out of my reach, so you have to be a little selective. You also have to build something to put them in. We're getting a little crowded here, and that leads me to my next dream. I want to build an 80- to 100-foot-wide crossover above the track, and then build another facility inside the infield that connects to it. We do need the room, and I think it'd be quite spectacular to have the walkway over the track.

In building this, we were guided and directed and pushed because of the terrain of the land. It tells you what it wants to do. We've moved 1.6 million square yards of dirt to build the track and the museum and now the motocross track.

This is not just a big old building with motorcycles in it. It has a soul. When you're in here and you walk over to the window

and you see motorcycles or Porsches go by, you feel the whole place come to life.

ON HIS MOTORCYCLING HEROES

John Surtees. No question about it. He's the only man alive to win (world) championships on two wheels and four wheels. He's a champion off the track, as well as on. In fact, I just talked to him. He sent an e-mail this morning. He'll come here every year or so and drive a Ferrari, or an MV.

Watching Surtees ride... Well, it's like this. I'm not a fan of ballet dancing, but when Mikhail Baryshnikov comes on stage, you know you're looking at something pretty spectacular. When John

Surtees pushes the bike off, and pops down on it to start it, and then swings his leg over it and takes off, you know you're seeing something special. Even to see him ride today, you know you're seeing something special, even if you're not a fan of the sport. It's like when Michael Jordan comes out on the court, you know you're seeing something.

Another guy who's meant a lot is Giancarlo Morbidelli. What he did racing—and we have his actual race bikes he used to win the title—is amazing winning (125 GP) world championships as a privateer team (in 1975, '76 and '77 with riders Paolo Pileri and Pierpaolo Bianchi) is really something.

All That And A Few Rare Cars, Too

Lotus, Ferrari Also Represented

The Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum is more than just a palatial home to all things motorcycle. It also houses a few historically significant cars. After all, as a former auto racer and motorhead, George Barber has spent plenty of time behind the wheels of various go-fast cars.

His museum houses an impressive—

and growing—collection of Lotus racecars, along with exotica including John Surtees' 1964 championship-winning Ferrari, which happens to be the only Ferrari to race in a color other than red, thanks to a spat between the factory and Surtees.

And most days you visit, there's a fair

chance that you'll find new Porsches circulating the racetrack as part of the Porsche Driving Experience school, which is based at the track.

"You look out, and you see the track, and cars or bikes going around on it. It really adds another dimension," Mr. Barber says.



Photos Courtesy the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum



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ON THE BIGGEST THREAT TO MOTORCYCLING TODAY

The main threat I see is the lack of the general population's knowledge of bikes. In Europe, almost everybody started their life on some kind of scooter or motorcycle or something, so they understand the rules of the road, and they know there are bikes around. Americans don't really have a feel for that because most people haven't ridden them before.

I think the Hells Angels started it off badly, and I think a lot of people still have

that Hells Angels image. And that leads to people on the road not giving motorcycles and motorcyclists the respect they need. It's really not ignorance as much as it's just a lack of knowledge. And that hurts us.

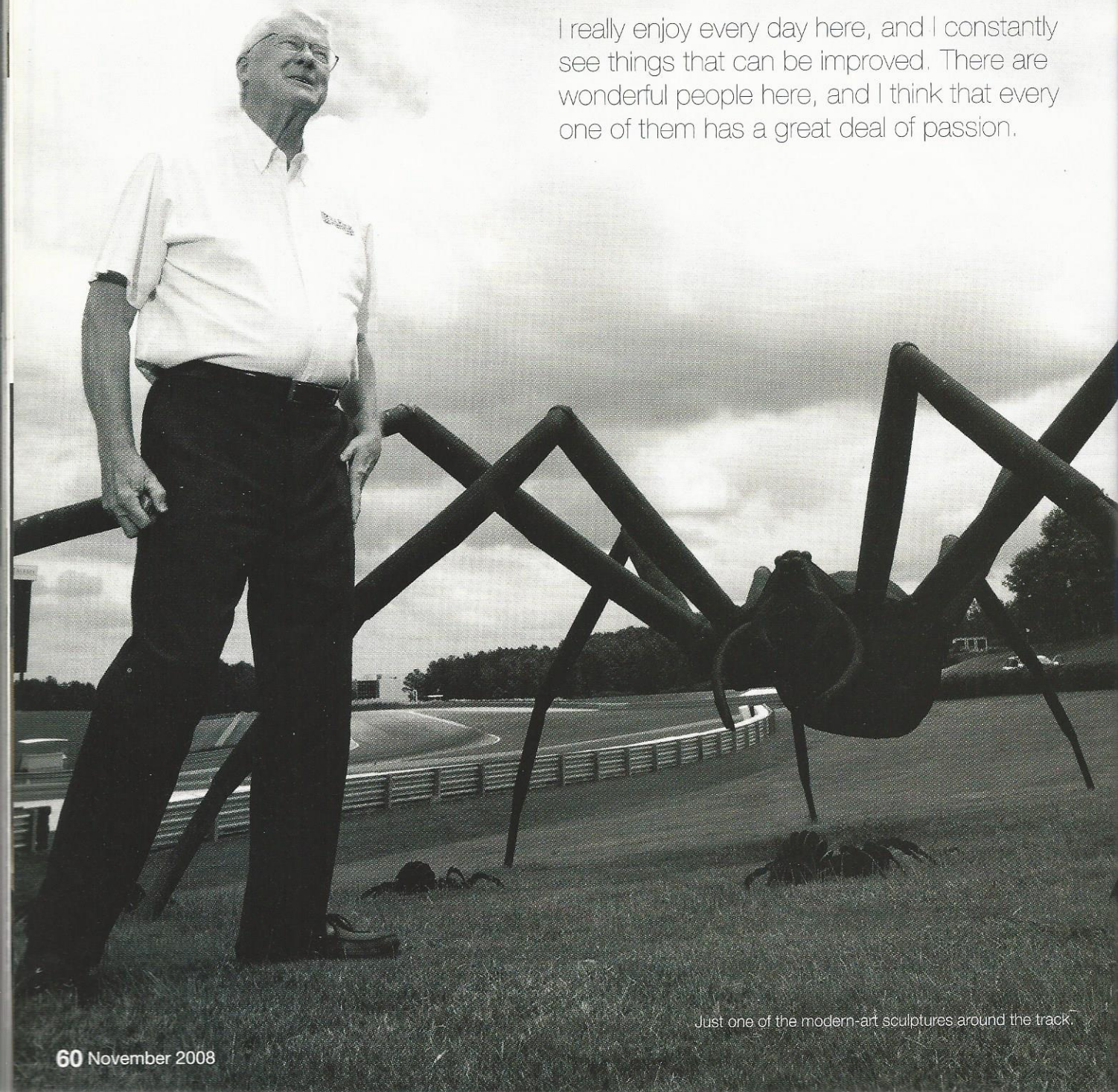
ON HIS PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

I really enjoy every day here, and I constantly see things that can be improved. There are wonderful people here, and I think that every one of them has a great deal of passion. You almost

have to fall in love with the piece of equipment you're working on, and I think they do. You can have all the money and the concrete in the world, but if you don't have the people, you don't have anything.

The dream now is to do this expansion across the track, but beyond that, I don't know. For me, this place has to be a mecca for motorcycle people. Whatever happens in the motorcycling world, we ought to be doing it, and doing it better than anybody else.

I really enjoy every day here, and I constantly see things that can be improved. There are wonderful people here, and I think that every one of them has a great deal of passion.



Just one of the modern-art sculptures around the track.