



alliance

A birminghambusinessalliance PUBLICATION

► Barber Motorsports Park

Driving research and recruitment
in Birmingham's economic
development efforts

(pages 18 & 22)





BARBER MOTORSPORTS PARK

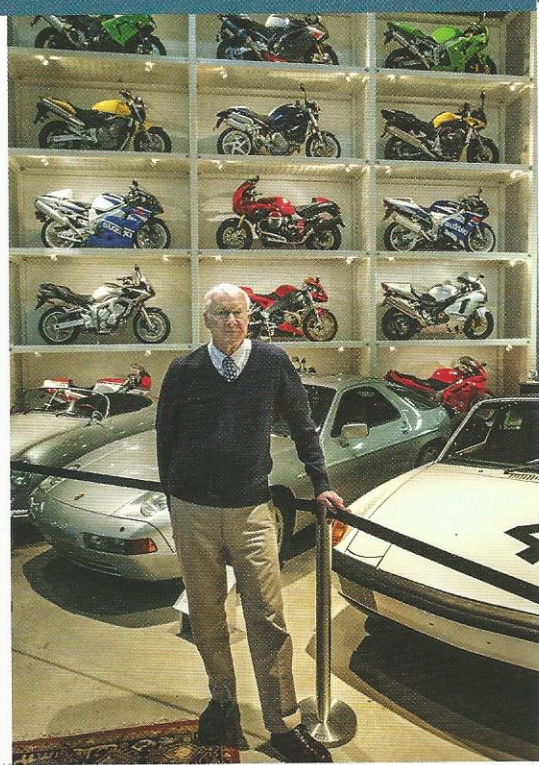
What began more than 10 years ago as a project to showcase a private collection of vintage motorcycles has, today, turned into a world-renowned race track and one of Alabama's secret weapons in economic development.

By Cary Estes

George Barber doesn't strap on the racing helmet and hit the track in a revved-up Porsche the way he often did back in the 1960s. But Barber continues to live life in the fast lane through the multipurpose racing facility that bears his name: the **Barber Motorsports Park** (BMP). And he is taking the entire Birmingham region along for the ride.

More than a decade after BMP opened in eastern Birmingham in 2003, Barber still has a spring in his step and pride in his voice as he drives around the 740-acre park and lovingly shows off his creation to a visitor. The centerpiece of the park is the 16-turn, 2.38-mile road racing course that is the site of several international events each year, highlighted by the Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama IndyCar race (to be held this April). The property also is home to the sprawling **Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum**, which holds more than 1,200 motorcycles and race cars dating as far back as 1902, as well as the only Porsche Driving School in the United States.

Residents of more than 50 countries stepped onto the BMP grounds in 2013, making the facility a true global attraction. Two-thirds of the visitors to the museum come from out-of-state, and as many as 75 percent of the fans at some of the races hail from outside Alabama. The popular travel website **Trip Advisor** ranks the park and museum as the No. 1 attraction in Birmingham, with 97 percent of the respondents giving it a ranking of either "excellent" or "very good." Even comedian and motorcycle enthusiast Jay Leno has paid a visit.



Top: Vintage motorcycles displayed at the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum in Birmingham. Bottom: George Barber originally built the museum to house his collection of vintage motorcycles.



Indy car race day at Barber Motorsports Park.

officials recently were trying to promote the sale of county bonds to out-of-state financial institutions, they used BMP as a selling point for what the region has to offer.

"It has that kind of 'wow' factor that really changes people's minds, and does so in a significant way," said Rick Davis, senior vice president of economic development for the Birmingham Business Alliance. "When you start to consider the level of individual who attends the events at Barber – particularly the Honda Indy Grand Prix – these are people who have a high business acumen. What better way for Birmingham to make an impression on those kinds of people than to have them here in town and show him that facility. It tells them, 'This is what Birmingham and central Alabama has to offer. This is what we can do for your company if you come here.'"

BMP already has had a transformative effect on the nearby Exit 140 off Interstate 20. The exit was underdeveloped when the Motorsports Park was built. Since then, **Bass Pro Shops** has opened a 150,000-square-foot facility that includes a museum, an art gallery and a conservation center. On the other side of the interstate, the **Shops of Grand River** is a high-end outlet mall

that is merely the first phase in what primary developer **Daniel Corporation** envisions as eventually being a 6,500-acre commercial and residential area. It is unlikely that either of those facilities would be as big and broad as they are – if they had been built at all – without the

"It's bringing people to Birmingham who otherwise might never come. That is what's exciting to me. It's really beginning to be an important showcase for people to show off what is happening in Birmingham"

— George Barber,
Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum

When Barber was asked about all the attention BMP has received, he smiled and said, "It's bringing people to Birmingham who otherwise might never come. That is what's exciting to me. It's really beginning to be an important showcase for people to show off what is happening in Birmingham."

The former dairy magnate said he never anticipated the facility would become so popular. Initially he simply wanted to build a place to hold his growing collection of vintage motorcycles, which he began accumulating in the late 1980s. Then he decided to add a small track for testing. That quickly evolved into a larger track that could actually hold official races.

"And I knew that to get people from all over the place to come to Birmingham, Alabama, to see a race, the track was going to have to be beyond good. It was going to have to be world-class," said Barber, who estimates he has invested more than \$100 million into the facility. "The whole idea just grew step by step."

The **Greater Birmingham Visitors & Convention Bureau** calculated that from 2003 through 2012, BMP had an economic impact of \$1.17 billion, including the generation of \$95 million in state taxes and \$27 million in local taxes. But the true influence of BMP on the region goes well beyond those numbers. The facility helps elevate the image of the Birmingham area, especially among people who have never visited the region before. For example, when Jefferson County

presence of BMP.

"The Motorsports Park has become an example of Birmingham's innovation and leadership and development. It sets the bar for others to follow," Daniel Communities President John Gunderson said. "Certainly



The Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum overlooks the track on Indy car race day. Photo credit: Dennis Lath

that was the case at the (Exit) 140 interchange when (Bass Pro CEO) Johnny Morris came in with his initiative. The quality and scale and innovation that George put into the Motorsports Park set in motion Johnny's vision of what Bass Pro could do.

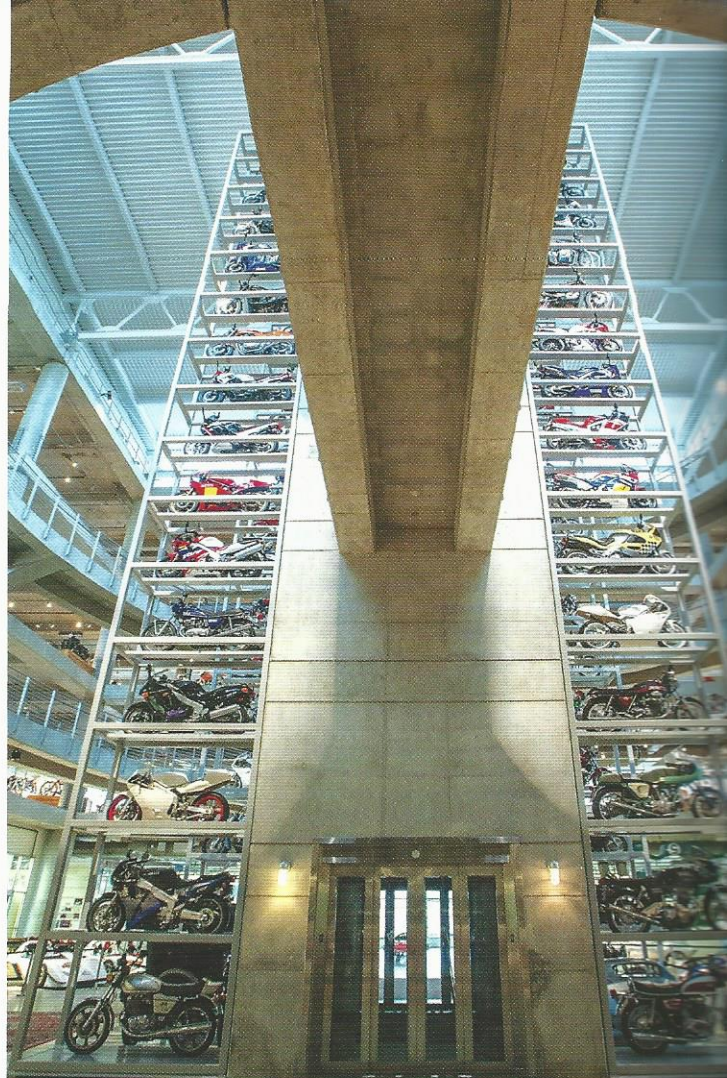
"It was the same thing when we did the Shops at Grand River. Instead of doing a regular strip mall or retail center, the Motorsports Park made us say, 'We have to create a best-in-class asset. We're going to make a retail presence.' A lot of times that mindset starts from the vision of somebody who wants to do something that's bigger and better – an innovation – and that's what George did."

And Barber is not done yet. Plans are in place to construct a motocross track on the property that will be used primarily for training and testing. Once that is finished, probably by early next year, Barber wants to build a 30-foot wide enclosed bridge – complete with glass floors – that will extend across a section of the track from one end of the museum.

In other words, there is still plenty more to come at Barber Motorsports Park. And that, in turn, can lead to plenty more to come for the Birmingham region.

"I tell people that this place is a tool that they should use to help the city and the state," Barber said. "Corporations can bring people here and show them what we're doing in Birmingham. I want people to use this place to bring attention to Birmingham." ▶

Cary Estes is a freelance writer living in Birmingham. He can be reached at cary@esteswriting.com.



Vintage motorcycles displayed at the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum in Birmingham.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS



CAHABA GRAND
CONFERENCE CENTER

PLAN YOUR SUMMER BUSINESS EVENT NOW,
CALL FOR AVAILABILITY AND SPECIALS.



GALAS | BUSINESS MEETINGS | CONFERENCES | TRADE SHOWS | SEMINARS | RECEPTIONS

27,000 SQUARE FEET OF SPACE | FREE PARKING | 3660 GRANDVIEW PARKWAY | BIRMINGHAM, AL 35243 | 205.443.6767 | WWW.CAHABAGRAND.COM