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## Remember When: Bill Awtey

I first met Bill Awtey at Jennerstown Speedway thirty years ago. While competing in the semi late division I made a visit to the Speedway. Since I was a stranger at the track, I decided to strike up a conversation with the driver parked next to me. Over the years I have come to admire this gentleman not only for his efforts as a driver but as one of the best auto racing mechanics in Western Pennsylvania.

Bill and his wife Linda live in Stoystown, Pennsylvania and have two sons, Barry and Brian. Bill has been involved with racing as a driver, car owner, and pit crewmember for over 47 years and honed his mechanical skills working for Scheffel Equipment. .

Bill first started racing in 1958 at Jennerstown after graduating high school. Awtey's first car was 1950 Mercury that he and a friend built which he ran for half a year. His dad and a good friend, Robert Gohn, bought a 1939 Chevy Coupe and built it for Bill. He raced the coupe for several years at Jennerstown when it was a quarter mile track. He recalled a large pond in the infield where they drew water to prepare the track, "the drivers called it the fishpond, if you wrecked and landed in the pond, you were in trouble". Later on, he raced at the old Latrobe Speedway. In 1964, he built a 1938 Chevy Coupe and raced it at Windber Stadium under the Penn Western banner until 1974.

Some of the tracks where he competed included Bedford, Clearfield, Jennerstown, Mon-Duke, Motordrome, Rose Speedway, Schmuckers, and Thunder Valley.

In 1975 he built a completely new car by cutting down 1931 Chevy sedan. He raced it at Jennerstown for two years. The track was sold to a corporation and they did away with the old

six cylinder coupes. He then built a 1957 Chevy to race at Jennerstown on the half-mile track in the semi late division.

He ran semi lates for three or four years until they were eliminated. He then moved up to the late model class but didn't have the money or the means to be competitive. Several years later, the Jennerstown management brought back the semi lates and Bill returned to that division until the track was paved. Bill was the track champion at Jennerstown in 1961 and Bedford in 1980.

Awtey started building engines in 1991. They were running late models and his son Barry was competing in that class. Barry purchased an old Howe car, purchased an engine from Stan Lasky, and had Lynn Geisler recondition it. Barry won the last championship on the dirt track and the first championship on the asphalt when he converted to run the black top.

In 1990, Bill and Larry Hemminger discussed plans to have their sons compete in the new Pure Stock division at Motordrome Speedway. Bill thought this would be a good division for Larry's son, Mike and Bill's son Brian to compete. Hemminger liked the idea and they made plans to start the project over the winter. They built cars for Mike, Brian, Rick Sheeler, and Dave Brunell. Later on, they built a fifth car for Larry to drive.

Brian Awtey won nine features the first year on the asphalt, two track championships, and Western Pennsylvania Rookie of the Year. In 1991 and 1992, Bill won the Northeast Region Gold Wrench Award from NASCAR.

The next season, Mike and Brian moved up to the street stock division. Larry Hemminger won both track championships in the pure stocks. Mike Hemminger won both track championships in the street stocks. Brian finished second at Motordrome and Jennerstown in the same division. Bill feels those years were the most successful.

Ron Conway from Beggs Printing started driving one of the Awtey/Hemminger cars. Dick and Bob Smith, Conrad Presnell, Jim McGonigle, and Dave Dragovich all drove Awtey built cars. He also built engines for most of these cars.

Hemminger built a room adjacent to his business, North Star Equipment in Boswell, Pa. for Bill to use as an engine room. Awtey feels one of the best things that ever happened to him was his friendship with Larry Hemminger. Phil Grubbs, Jason Holder, and Scott Bowman are driving Awtey cars at Jennerstown and Bill Henry at Motordrome each are using Awtey engines.

Bill feels the best part of racing is being with nice, friendly people. The toughest part is keeping the car running and having the money to continue racing. His most memorable moment was the last feature race that his father watched him win in 1962. His most embarrassing moment was the night he was leading the race and the white flag came out. He thought the race was over, backed off, and lost the race.

He first got involved in racing going with his father and some friends as a spectator. Over the years, his favorite competitors to race against were his two sons who have followed in their father's footsteps as drivers.

When I asked him who the driver he would most like to be compared to, it was A. J. Foyt. People assume that he is quiet and likes to keep to himself but nothing could be further from the truth.

Bill is disappointed at the escalating cost of racing and the inability of the tracks to increase purses in proportion to the expense of campaigning a car. When asked if he would do anything differently he said no. He enjoys helping the new drivers and advises them to do their best and do not get discouraged. He doesn't like to see drivers give up. His competitors respect and admire him for his expertise. Bill feels that a good driver should have to build and maintain his own car in order to be as successful as possible.

Bill feels years of experience helped him to develop fast cars. "After working on cars for over 30 years, you are bound to learn something". Bill retired in 1984 but continues to help his son Barry. He is one of the drivers that help us to "remember when".

