



Bobby Ward



Photo Credit: Tony Martin

by Tony Martin

The ballad of the "Arkansas Traveler" was penned in the 1840s telling of a city slicker's travels and encounter with a banjo-playing hillbilly. The tune was the official state song for a while and the name was adopted for Arkansas' minor league baseball team.

The legend of the modern-day "Arkansas Traveler" concerns a southern gentleman, who turned heads as he wheeled his iconic number Mee2 into victory lanes all across the continent. Bobby, whose balding, bespectacled appearance didn't quite match that of a typical sprint car driver, claimed 369 feature wins, including many in major championship events, in 14 states.

Bobby R. Ward was born on June 30, 1935 in a one-room kerosene-lamp-lit log cabin in Bee Branch, Arkansas, which is about forty miles north of Little Rock. Bobby had three sisters and, while times were tough, the tight-knit Ward family was tougher. Eventually they moved to Shirley, Arkansas.

Bobby's racing career began in drag racing on a remote strip of land near his home. Says Ward of those days, "W.A. Humphrey owned a body shop, and we got to be friends. He had a Ford, and I had a Chevrolet and we started drag racing. That got me interested in racing."

Bobby quickly jumped onto the dirt ovals with a '34 Ford coupe, partnering with fellow racer W.A. Humphrey, in 1955. Humphrey was a former midget car owner, and one of his fellow owners had a simple numbering system for his cars, ME1, ME2, etc. So W.A. and Bobby decided to add another "e" and the "Mee2" car was born, an iconic number that Ward used his entire career.

Ward's mechanical prowess and skills behind the wheel became more evident as the cars progressed from stock cars to modified stock cars. He earned the 1957 Arkansas State Championship in an early Mee2 modified.

He continued to win in the supermodifieds at races around his home state until he was bitten by the traveling bug in 1963. Reading about the big Southwestern Supermodified Championship at Amarillo, Texas, in Chris Economaki's "National Speed Sport News," the Arkansas Traveler decided that it was time to take his show on the road. At the time, the Amarillo event was thought of with the same respect as the Knoxville Supermodified National Championships in Iowa.

Although he won several season titles at I-30 Speedway and other tracks in the state, his absence began to show with his nomadic schedule. Bobby reasoned that "racing with the best in different parts of the country would advance my learning curve. You're only as good as your competition. I figured that running fifth to tenth was doing good in someone else's backyard."

It seems that no one told him that taking home the hardware and cash might not sit well with all the local combatants. Bobby won the Labor Day classic in Amarillo three times - 1963, '64, and 1968. He would have four titles but a flat tire in '67 relegated him to second place. And this was against many of the country's best. Ward says, "the race was primarily supermodifieds but that changed for the '68 race when caged sprinters made up the majority of the field."

It was there that he befriended Kansas City's Kenny Weld, who won the Amarillo race in 1965 and '66, and who was to become a major influence on Bobby's career. "Kenny's travels set the stage for what I was about to do," he reflects. The Arkansas Traveler moniker was adopted in '67, copying that of the state's baseball team.

The late '60s saw Ward wander into Weld's territory, often times with great success. It was into the hotbed of KC racing that Bobby chose for his area of battle, despite the talent-laden fields he would challenge. One of the area's finest was Ray Lee Goodwin, who approached Ward one night at Olympic Stadium after he broke a Jacob's ladder which was being welded back into usage. "Don't you reckon that ought to be fixed?" asked Bobby. To which Ray Lee replied, "Nah, that's not necessary. Nobody's ever passed me as fast as you just did."

Goodwin says today that the Arkansas Traveler was the only guy he ever saw get paid to visit with family. Translated, that points to the fact that Bobby's in-laws lived in nearby Independence, Missouri, and Bobby was given tow money by promoters to race in the area. Similarly, Kenny Weld was rewarded with cash for his travels to race in Arkansas. Kenny would complain to Bobby during one of his early visits, "I came down here with the hot set-up, and you just waxed us!"

Goodwin says today, "I have nothing but good thoughts about racing with Bobby. To rub wheels with him meant you had to catch him. I got lots of calls from fans at the time wondering how I was letting some guy from Arkansas come up here and beat me in my own backyard."

Bobby capped his Kansas City racing record with a win in the 1969 National Short Track Championship at Olympic Stadium.

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As a witness to Bobby's likable manner, while enroute to winning his first Amarillo title, he was approached and invited to race at Albuquerque on his way home by Albert "Buddy" Taylor and Johnny Capels. In doing so, Bobby won the Duke City Race-A-Rama and eclipsed Capels' 16.32 track record with a time of 16.26 seconds. He was later victorious in the New Mexico State Nationals and the third leg of the Western Fall Roundup.

Normally mild-mannered, Bobby would on occasion become a bit peeved at the actions of his competition. That was the law of the land at the rough-and-tumble Arkansas burlings in the '60s. After an on-track wheel-banging incident at I-30 in 1969, a member of Johnny Suggs' crew confronted Bobby and crew, even though the incident was minor and no positions were lost by either driver. As a result, the defending track champ (Ward) was banned from competition even though no punches were landed. "That was one of the best things to happen to me," Ward quips.

It was off to Riverside International Speedway in West Memphis on Saturday nights for the resident of Conway. There, Bobby would tie Clarence "Hooker" Hood's record of twelve straight victories enroute to the track championship in 1971. Before he attained the title, Ward was involved in altercations with both "Swingin' Sam" Swindell and his young son Sammy. No harm was done in either, and things were quickly patched up. In the first incident, he and Sammy exchanged unpleasanties. In the later incident, Bobby tackled Sam in the infield after being pelted with a clod of mud after crossing the finish line first. Ward no doubt disagreed with such gross misuse of the track's highly-touted gumbo. "Before I could even take a swing at Sam, we were buried by a group of bystanders," he explains. Such was the manner in which disagreements were settled at "The Ditch" in those days.

About that time, Bobby traveled to McKenzie, Tennessee, to purchase his first sprint car from Les Hill and Jack Elam, as Hilbilt was the chassis of choice in the Mid-South back then. Bobby stayed on, and he and Jack worked side by side in building the machine. Jack had previously welded up one of Ward's Amarillo-winning cars. Bobby resided with Jack while the construction was being completed. Today, Jack credits the Arkansas Traveler with producing some of the most extensive and effective advertising his products had ever received. "Bobby was a great mechanic and driver. He put on some very exciting performances of driving, but never seemed to be as good when driving someone else's car."

Bobby concurs that much of his success was due to his working on the car, as it boosted his confidence. No crew chiefs were required on the cars Bobby owned. Alongside him in his travels, Bobby was often accompanied by the Arkansas Travelette, better known as his wife Pat. And while school was out for the summer, their two daughters, Bobbilue and Sheila, would accompany them to distant races.

Bobby was a four-time winner of the Arkansas State Championships at the Benton Speed Bowl. In 1965, he won 27 times in 33 starts. 1969 was a banner year for Bobby as he tallied 36 "A" Main victories. One of those was the National Quarter-Mile Championship at Marshall, Missouri. In '70, he won the 100-lap Riverside Speedway Sprint Championship at West Memphis, as well as the Race of Champions at Jefferson City, Missouri, and the Jayhawk Nationals at Topeka, Kansas. In 1972, Ward won the inaugural 75-lap Rose Bowl in Tyler, Texas.

Whenever the seat was empty in the M.A. Brown-owned, Bruce Cogle Ford-sponsored, blue and white J&J number 44 sprint car, Bobby Ward was often the driver sought. Chuck Amati, Rickey Hood, Norman "Bubby" Jones and Sammy Swindell had all driven the car at times.

In the fall of 1973, Bobby was to occupy the seat during the western swing as Jones was unavailable. Before heading west, the Arkansas Traveler wheeled the car into victory lane at West Memphis in the second of two 50-lappers, sharing the overall victory with Dick Gaines of Indiana. Ward was relegated to the role of spectator, though, for the Pacific Coast Nationals at Ascot Park in Gardena, California, as Jones was back behind the wheel. "The Ohio Traveler" Rick Ferkel won the event while demonstrating the use of "humper" drag tires on sprint cars. Bubby Jones finished second in that memorable 50-lap event. The Arkansas Traveler saw the whole thing and probably turned a wrench or two.

Bobby "officially" retired in 1974, selling his car to Memphis, Tennessee's Bobby Davis, Sr. However, he continued to drive occasionally for Davis after that. Throughout his career, Bobby's soft-spoken southern ways and exciting drives to the front, along with his forays onto many of the nation's best drivers' home turfs, made him a fan favorite. Said Bobby recently, "I tried to race everyone just like I would want him to race me. I didn't always win, but I knew it was important for me to try and finish each race. I think in order to enjoy our success, we've got to put forth effort. The races that I enjoyed winning the most were those I really had to work for."

Today, Bobby and Pat Ward live in Greenbrier, Arkansas.