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## **And the story begins...**

**By Dusty Luthy**

**The Daily Record**

It all began in the winter of 1982. Bill Willard had been chewing on the idea of building a racetrack for a great while.

"He wanted to build a racetrack where he could come and watch the races as much as anything," said Bob Willard, Bill's youngest brother.

"I can remember goats grazing on that area. A beautiful valley through there, it was ideal for a racetrack," he remembered. "We were surprised when he started it, but once Bill started something, we knew he was going to complete it."

Bradley Willard the oldest of Bill and wife Louise's six children, said the conditions of other speedways played a large role in his father's decision to build a track. "Every time he would go to a racetrack, no matter where it was at, he'd make a comment, 'Boy they really do a good job of keeping their bathrooms clean here,' or 'the parking lot was fixed where you could get in and out of.' He was looking at details like that 20 years before he even decided to build one," he said.

Randy Mooneyham, current track promoter, was with Willard at the conception of the track and was the speedway's first promoter. "Well, Bill was a very honest, hard-working person," said Mooneyham, who is from Republic. "He just liked racing: that was his hobby. He really enjoyed it, liked speed. Bill liked fast cars. and he told me when came up here to build Lebanon, He wanted to build one of the best tracks in the country and that's what he did.

"Bill and I became acquainted because I owned the speedway at Monett and he came down to watch the races one time and I think he enjoyed it." said Mooneyham. "My part was good and he said he wanted to do something bigger and better and that's what he did.

"He did all the buildings and provided all the facilities and I did the promoting for the first six or seven years," he said.

Mooneyham and Willard parted ways when Willard wanted to change the track to asphalt and become NASCAR sanctioned in 1989. "There was absolutely no hard feelings," Mooneyham said. "He wanted to go asphalt racing and I wanted to go dirt-track racing. My business had always been promoting dirt tracks, and I always had a good following. It worked out good for both of us."

Bill was a 1946, 16-year-old graduate from Stoutland High School. He played baseball and basketball with the school team and played baseball with the local town league on the team from Sleeper. He also did some hobby boxing at the Shrine Mosque in Springfield during his short college career.

After a long life filled with life's passions, Bill died May 27, 2002 of heart complications.

Mooneyham then took over management of Lebanon I-44 Speedway and Bolivar Speedway, Bill's other racetrack in 2003, changing both tracks back to their original heritage of dirt.

Bob, who also enjoys a good stock car race, remembered his brother as being an "avid racing fan" all of his life. "We went to the races a lot together, starting back in the '60s at the fairgrounds, watching Larry Phillips," Bob said. "We saw a lot of races together, went to the Lake, raced down there.....that's when Bradley (Willard) started racing some. We went to Bolivar some."

Bob admitted that he was amazed at what the speedway could accomplish in an evening. "I remember when they started in the 80s and it was a dirt track, and I guess what hit me initially was the unbelievable crowds," Bob said. "We're talking bid crowds, four or 5,000 people, and I expect there were some races where there were six to 8,000 people."

Mooneyham knows that I-44 Speedway is a gem of a track. "I think the town of Lebanon is very fortunate to have the facility like the I-44 Speedway," Mooneyham said. "It's a track like you can see in bigger cities. "It's one of the nicest tracks itself in the whole country," he added.

"My job is just to have good shows every week," Mooneyham said. "Take it and make the business grow and make sure we have good racing. And good racing to me is starting on time and being done by 10:30 or 11 o'clock. "That's one of the reasons Bill wanted to hook up with me, because he liked the way I did my shows. And that's what he wanted. He and I both agreed from day one that a two-and-half or three hour show was the only way to go."

Bob agreed that Bill only wanted to see a good show.

"Bill was the type that he would rather lose \$10,000 and see a good race than make \$10,000 and be a bad race," he said. "Foremost, he was a racing fan."

Bill could also see a success in the men who drove his tracks.

"Bill helped a lot of race drivers through the years," Bob said. "A lot of them. First and foremost is probably Jamie McMurray. Bill was very supportive of what Jamie did. He followed his career closely. He couldn't have been more pleased with what he saw. But there's other people he's helped along the way. He was always for the underdog, if you would, the guy struggling."

Bob said he believed that Bill might have said that Jamie McMurray was one of his favorite drivers. Bradley initially said his dad would have favored Larry Phillips, but couldn't decide who he might have like more: McMurray or Phillips.

"We drove all over the country to watch Larry Phillips race," Bradley said. "Most people think that Dad didn't like him, but my dad just thought the world of him." Bradley went on to say that the race wasn't about favorites for Bill. "Dad liked them all," he said. "I mean, my dad loved that sport."

On June 9, 1989, eight days after he found out his wife, Sandy, was pregnant with their third child, Bradley had a severe accident on the racetrack, breaking his neck and ending his racing career.

Bradley said one of the most exciting race he has seen come to the speedway were the National Dirt Racing Association series races in the mid '80s. He said the NDRA could be easily compared to the World of Outlaw Series dirt track races. Bradley made the feature for two of the races, finishing in the top 10 in one of

the NDRA features. “That was a huge deal,” he said. “You couldn’t find a place to park on the outer road even.”

Bob said drivers Phillips and Ken Essary used to put on the most entertaining shows at Bill’s speedways. “Larry Phillips and Ken Essary used to have tremendous races on the dirt track,” he said.

Who did Bob think was the best to drive at the speedway? “I’d probably say Larry Phillips. Although Ken Essary in the ‘80s was right there with him. The outsider that came to town would be Billy Moyer, and probably the smoothest was Billy Moyer,” said Bob.

Talking with Bradley, one can see that his dad was his hero. “The only thing I ever wanted to do was work with my dad,” Bradley said. “That’s why I didn’t pursue baseball. That’s all I wanted to do. “I knew I wanted to work with my dad, it was that simple,” he said.

Although a very successful businessman in the Lebanon community for many years, Bradley said profit was not a goal for his father. “Money was not what drove my dad, just the race, the thrill of getting something done, the work, the having something to do today,” Bradley said. “That’s what drove him.”

And memories drive others, too. “I think about Bill a lot,” Mooneyham said, “especially when I’m at Lebanon. We think about things he’d like to see...well, he did a ton for this racetrack and this community and you think about things. You wonder once in a while if he his smiling or frowning. Hopefully most nights after the races he has a smile on his face,” he said.

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## **In his own words:**

“I was sitting in a coffee shop one day and some boys who had been racing at another place came up to me,” Bill Willard said, from his track office. “They said, ‘Why don’t you build one?’ So I told them I would think about it.”

Willard, who owns Willard Construction company, gave the idea some thought.

“We had some road construction equipment that wasn’t busy at the time and some land that was just sitting there,” Willard said.

The deeper they got into the track construction project, the more Willard and his workers realized they may have bitten off more than they could chew. But instead of ditching the project, Willard decided to go all out.

“When I got into it I saw it was a lot bigger of a job than I had thought,” he said. “I decided there was no reason to just swim halfway across the pond, so we decided to build it like it should be. It was on a spur of the moment deal.”

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