

Tales of the Famous

As experienced by: Tony Vickio

Lap 1: The beginning

The Tales of the Famous started when I was only 2 years old!

In 1948 we (my father, Nick, my Mother, Rachael and my brother Nick) moved into our new house on Rt.329, just above Seneca Lodge, in Watkins Glen, NY. My Father built the house, basically by himself and with the help of a retired barber from Reynoldsville, who could also lay bricks. Harriett (my wife) and I live here today. With a recent addition (brick) to the house and my Sign Shop, we have room for our two dogs and two cats. Brandy and Quak are the dogs and the cats are named Bina and Bella, (Beth, our Daughter, named them all). Mark, my son, his wife Betty and their new daughter Rachael, have their own house. My daughter Beth, graduated from West Virginia University, "Magna Cum Laude". She is going on to get her Masters.

My parent's house was built on what was to be the First Road Racing Course in the United States. The Start/Finish line was on Main Street in Watkins Glen, right in front of the Court House. From there, the course went in front of the World Famous Watkins Glen Gorge, where it took a 90 degree right hand turn and proceeded up a steep, winding road, which went past Seneca Lodge. At the top of the hill, the road straightens out and ran right past my house. It continued under the old New York Central Railroad Bridge, which was built in 1911 (just past my house), and up the straight section of road for another half mile before it took a sharp right turn, later known as Collier's Corner. (Sam Collier was killed there during a race in 1950). From there the road turns to the left and up a slight hill. Then there was a sharp right hand turn down into a heavily wooded section, and I do mean down, (similar to the "cork screw" at Laguna Seca) into the top section of the Glen Gorge. At the bottom of the twisting, winding road, you crossed the world famous, picturesque, Stone Bridge. This was a famous site for its photos. Right after the bridge, the road turned 90 degrees to the right. After winding through the woods at the bottom of the gorge, the road winds steeply up the other side of Hidden Valley (we called it White's Hollow) and through some "S" turns. This is a narrow section of winding road. On the left, right next to the road, not two feet from the asphalt surface, is a laid up stone wall. On the right is a drop off into the water of the Glen Gorge, protected only by some steel posts with a steel cable attached to them. At the top of the hill was a sharp, off camber left turn. After a short straightaway, there was a sharp right hand turn. The road, to this point was asphalt. Now it turned to dirt! It was now a high speed run on a fairly straight section of dirt road along the top rim of the gorge. The dirt road lasted for about a mile. At the end of the dirt road was a pair of railroad tracks (the same ones that go past my house) that crossed the road at a 90% angle. Here, the cars were at full speed and would get airborne as they went over the railroad tracks! Fifty feet down the road, when the wheels finally made contact with the road again, they were back on asphalt. Now comes the scary part!



Me (in highlighted oval) in 1948. Our front yard was turned into a parking lot.

From here the road starts down a long straightaway. As the road begins its downhill decent off of the top of the mountain, it also starts a sweeping, mile and a half right hand downhill turn back into the Village. As you are coming downhill and driving this long, sweeping turn, Seneca Lake comes into view. It is an awesome sight! At the speed of these cars going down this hill, I don't think the drivers had much time to look at the lake! The long turn finally straightens out and the road now drops down (more steeply) into the village! At the bottom of the steep hill there is a 90-degree left turn (Milliken's Corner. He rolled his car over here, but was not injured)! Remember that these cars didn't have the brakes that a racecar of today has. This downhill section took a tremendous amount courage and trust in your car! If you lost your brakes here, it was NOT going to be good when you reached the bottom of the hill! Now it was straight for a block and then a 90 degree right turn that took you back down Main Street. This was a brick surface for a quarter mile and then Finish Line. The course was almost 7 miles long, and a combination of Brick, Asphalt, Concrete, and Dirt! This was racing! Watkins Glen is truly a piece of racing history.



Race cars speed past my driveway as a Race Official watches (1948)

The road I lived on (County Route 329) was truly a part of racing history! Cameron Argetsinger had a vision of Road Racing in the U.S. and he realized his dream right here in Watkins Glen. Cameron still lives here today. The first race was held in 1948. Because of this, the speed of the cars racing past my house, the sounds of the open exhausts, and inhaling all of the exhaust fumes as the race cars sped by my house when I was only two years old, I have not been quite right ever since! As you will see, all of this has a tie to the rest of the Tales.

As I grew older, my whole life changed one day, when a friend of mine, Don Romeo, told me he was going to have his new '72 Corvette pinstriped. I didn't care about going with him until he said, "You might better go with me. I got some beer". "Beer? I'll go!", I said. It was Wednesday night and I found myself sitting in the dimly light wash bay of the local Esso Gas Station. It was owned by Frank Smalley, a local Hot Rodder. The Gas Station was located on Main Street at the North end of town, and just a stone throw from Seneca Lake. The building is still there today, but now it is a used car lot for Clifford Motors, the local Chevy dealer. We were sitting on some old tires, drinking beer and watching Bob Shaw, from Dundee, NY, paint freehand pin stripes on Don's new '72 Corvette. Between sips of my Genesee Cream Ale, I finally paid some attention to what this guy was doing. After watching for a minute, I couldn't believe what I was seeing! "This is so cool! This is unbelievable!" I thought to myself. I actually stopped drinking my beer as I couldn't stop watching what Bob was doing. I didn't want to miss a single

stroke of the striping brush.

He had a long, thin brush and he would carefully dip it some paint and stroke the brush back and forth on a palette to get the paint to the right consistency. Then he would gently place his hand on the fender of the car. While holding the brush between two fingers, he would pull a clean, straight stripe over the rear fender. I actually stopped drinking beer as I watched in total amazement. I vividly remember thinking, "Man, I wish I could do that!" I was mesmerized! After he was finished pin striping the Corvette and while cleaning the brush, I walked over to where he was standing and started asking him all kinds of questions! How did you learn this? How long have you been doing it? How do you do it? I must have been a pain in the ass! Then, to my surprise, he turned to me and said, "Here, go practice!" as he handed me the brush that he just finished cleaning! I slowly reached out and to my amazement, when I touched that brush, I suddenly had a strangest feeling that I somehow knew how to do this! Of course I didn't, but that was what I felt like. The brush felt right at home between my fingers! Almost like I had held it before! That was how I started painting. You could say Bob Shaw started me on a new road that would take me places and meet people I could have never dreamed of! The effect those racecars had on my brain when I was two years old and the fact that I turned out to be a sign artist, naturally led me to letter racecars.

I was practicing and striping everything in sight. The Pin Striping naturally led to trying some lettering. I was just starting to letter things, like my mother's vacuum cleaner (no kidding) and a couple of snowmobile helmets for my friends. One of the first helmets I pinstriped and lettered was for Steve Ely. Steve is a good friend of mine and just about 2 months ago, he brought that helmet to my shop and he gave the helmet that I did 33 years ago. It is now on display in my shop.

At that time I had absolutely no real lettering experience. Then, one night in 1974, at about 9:00pm, there was knocking on the door of my apartment. My wife Kathy and I were living in an upstairs apartment above Bill's Taxi and Hobby Shop on Main Street in Watkins Glen at the time. "Oh no! Who the hell is that?" I said in a low voice to Kathy as I reluctantly get up from my too comfortable recliner. Only one of my crazy friends would come up at that time of night. I opened the door expecting Larry Hurd or Al Waugh. Instead, there were two guys standing at the top of the stairs in the narrow, dark hallway. The hallway light had been blown for a year! I was going to fix it at some point but never got to it! The two men were dressed in strange looking uniforms and holding a large, white (about 2 foot x 4 foot)Thing. At first I thought it's the Police! Looking closer I realized it wasn't the Cops! "Who the hell are these guys and what hell do they want?" I thought.

As it turned out, that night, those men and that Thing would be something that would change my life forever! From that second on I was headed for adventures that I had never dreamed of or could even imagine! As I stood there looking at the Thing, the man on the left suddenly spoke. "Hello buddy. Are you Tony, the signwriter? Some good sport from the track sent us trucking down here to see you. Sorry bout the hour! He told us you are the only signwriter around and you may be able to help us out as we are in a

bit of a bind." He had a very thick, English accent. With a puzzled look, I stared at him for just a second and then back to the Thing they were holding. I couldn't talk! Finally, snapping out of my trance, I said, "That's me! I'm Tony!" At the same time I'm thinking, "What the hell is a signwriter"? Then the taller of the two Englishmen said something that actually put fear in me! I felt myself turn cold, like I had a sudden chill!

Have you ever had someone tell you they were so afraid at one time or another, they felt the Blood drain from them? Well it's true! It does drain! My hair started to turn cold and from there, the chill went all the way to my toes! "We are from the race racetrack and we spilled some bloody fuel on the rear wing of the car and it seems to have removed most of the bloody writing. We were told you are the only chap around that can replace it." he said. As I said, I had never done any real lettering, just fooling around with a couple of snowmobile helmets for my friends and such. Here is something from a real race car and it needs real lettering. I can't do it! Being totally honest with them, I said, "Well I don't know who would sent you down here, but I'm just getting started at sign painting. I'm really new at this. I'm sorry but I don't think I can do this for ya! As a matter of fact I can't do it!" "It can't be that bloody hard! The signwriters in Europe just splash it right on there! Can you come to the track and do it tomorrow? We really don't want to leave the wing behind. It's sort of important!" he said. Before I could stop myself, the words just came out! I didn't want to say it, but it was like my damned mouth was out of control! My jaw was moving and I couldn't stop it! It was like I was standing behind myself and watching myself say it! "I, I guess so. I'll be there." I stammered! The taller of the two said, "We are in the front part of the garage, car number 24, Graham Hill's car." Who was Graham Hill? Graham Hill was the Formula 1 World Champion! My FIRST, actual paying lettering job would be for a Formula 1 World Champion Grand Prix driver! This can't be! I was stunned! The two men turned and waved over their heads as they turned and slowly walked down the dark steps carrying the "Thing". Half way down, one of them hollers, "See you tomorrow sport!"

I went back inside and fell back into my over stuffed easy chair. My arms stretched out on the armrests and my fingers clenching the padding. I tipped my head back and starred at the ceiling. I groaned out loud! Kathy said, "Who was that"? I said, "You won't believe it! I don't know what the hell to do! I can't believe it! What the hell did I just do?" I told her the story and she said, "Are you going"? I said, "I told them I would be up in the morning. I don't know what to do. I can't letter that wing! I don't know how to do that kind of painting. I'm going to look like a fool! Why the hell did I tell them I'd do it! That was really stupid!" Kathy said, "What do you have to put on it?" I suddenly realized, I don't know! I didn't ask! I guess it didn't really matter! If I can't letter, it doesn't matter what it says! Needless to say, I didn't sleep much that night! I was a wreck!

I was at the track at 7:30 and the two guys who were at my apartment last night recognized me and whistled while waving a hand up in the air and motioning me over. "Oh no! They found me!", I thought. I was hoping that maybe they wouldn't be there and could just leave! "Shit!" I mumble out loud. I walk over and put my brand new, brown, metal Craftsman Toolbox (I used it to carry some paint and two brushes. 34 years later, I

still use the same box!) on the work bench that is off to the left of the beautiful Formula 1 race car. They bring the rear wing over and lay down some clean, gray, shop rags on the metal work bench and gently lay the wing on them.

The tall guy proceeds to tell me what they want. One word, no outline (thank God because I don't really know how to letter, how the hell do they think I'm going to outline something). They wanted a big, red, EMBASSY! Looking at the wing, I could still see the ghost shadow of the old lettering. I don't like having to paint two "S"s though! Especially, when they are side by side. With that ghost shadow, maybe I can pull this off! Man, am I nervous! I actually felt sick to my stomach.

The Garage at the Race Track was packed with people as it was Formula 1 Weekend at the Glen! I'm thinking, "Can't I just go hide someplace and do this?" I must have had the saddest look on my face one can imagine! I DID NOT WANT TO BE HERE! I jumped as the tall guy suddenly said, "Here, I'll clean the wing for ya Sport. You can do your sign writing right here." Oh God, it's getting worse! I looked around to my left, then to the right. Everybody was watching me! They all wanted to see what I was going to do! I really didn't want to be here right now! I was feeling worse! There were hundreds of people lined up at the fence looking at the World Champion's car and ME! Without question, this was the worst day of my young life! How the hell did I get into this damned mess. I know how! It is obvious! It's my "MY BIG MOUTH!" Little did I know that this day was going to be the turning point of my life!

I was feeling more ill if that was possible! You have to realize, not only is this my first job, but I have to do it in front of people...lots of people! Oh well, I don't think they have a gun! They can't shoot me for screwing this up. What can they do? Not pay me? Oh God! I didn't even think about money until now.

I struggled with the layout, and even with the ghost shadow to go by, the letter S is hard enough to paint, but two of them side by side? The pencil layout looked close, so I broke out the #7 Dick Blick Camel Hair brush and a 4 oz. can of Bright Red One-Shot lettering paint. Man! Was I nervous! I never felt so alone in my life! I wish I could just puke and get it over with! If there is such a thing as a panic attack...I had it!! I was half way through, just starting the letter A when a tall, lanky man from the team walked over. I could see him out of the corner of my eye. His hands were clasped behind his back, and he moved really slow as each movement was calculated and deliberate. He slowly leaned over my left shoulder. He was dressed in expensive looking dark slacks, a tan sports jacket and a dark green turtle neck sweater. "Must be the Team Manager", I thought to myself. He was a very classy Englishman. "Why is he standing there, looking over my shoulder?" I thought to myself. Without saying a word, he quietly studied my progress. He bent down lower and close to the side of my head. Then, in a low (so no one else could hear), English accented voice said, "You know, there's a signwriter in Europe that uses just the tip of the brush, in a sideward motion to square off the corners of the letters. It seems to make them crispy looking! It has a tendency to make the letter look better. I think the Team Owner just might like that a little better. Let me try to show you what I mean. I think I can do it as I've watched signwriters do it this hundred times."

Holding his hand out, he said in a real low voice, "The brush please!" I handed him the brush, and I moved aside. He stepped closer to the bench and bent over the wing. I sheepishly looked around him to see if anyone was watching. Man, was this embarrassing! On the letter A, he tried to show me the technique of how to square the corners of a letter. After making the stroke to form the side of the letter, he would move the brush in a sideward motion to make a sharp corner at the end of the brush stroke. He said, "I'm not a signwriter, but in Europe, I watch them do this all the time. This is something like the sport in Europe does it. Do you see what I'm trying to do?" As he straightened up, I straightened up at the same time. I and looked at the letter A and it did look better. He handed the brush back and I said, "I'll try it. Thank you for the lesson man!"



The “Grahm Hill” Formula 1 car that I lettered in 1973. Notice the rear wing. The car was at a Vintage Race in Watkins Glen. My friend, Chris Melon was the Crew Chief on the restored F1 car.

He didn't stay to watch me. He just smiled, turned and walked away. I tried to do what he showed me and to my amazement, it worked. As a matter of fact, it looked great! I learned something from a guy that was not a signwriter! That showed me how much I didn't know! “I have to practice this when I get home!” I thought. Finally, I finished my first paying lettering job! I stood back and looked at the finished product and to my

amazement I could actually read it! Then I realized my back hurt! They were happy, at least they acted that way. I went home totally exhausted! I was mentally drained! The good part was.....I had a crispy \$20 dollar bill in my pocket and I learned a new (to me) lettering technique! When I got home Kathy said, "Well? How did it go?" Smiling, I held up that crispy \$50 dollar bill and said, "Holy Christ it was scary! But look! I can make money! 50 bucks! I look back on that day and realize the guy that showed me how the signwriter in Europe squared off a letter, knew I sucked! He was politely trying to help me! He was a real gentleman. I wish I knew his name.

From that point on, through the 70s and early 80s, when the Formula 1 cars came to town, I was in great demand! I was actually getting better at lettering and I would do some sort of lettering most of the Formula 1 racecars that raced at Watkins Glen. Back then, they had one sponsor if any. Mostly, the cars had a simple white circle with a black number in it. Sometimes it was numbers and the driver's name. I got so I could paint numbers on the cars really fast. I would paint the number (black) first and then carefully paint the white circle around the number while it was still wet. This saved a day as I didn't have to wait for the white to dry to put the number on. I worked on the cars of Jim Clark, Graham Hill, Jody Schecter, Mario Andretti, James Hunt, Jackie Stewart and just about every other Grand Prix Driver of that time. I have a list and it is long. One job stands out. It was for Jody Schecter. His son, Tomas, is driving in the IRL (Indy Racing Series). I met Tomas at Nazareth in August of 2004 and told him of the old days at Watkins Glen and of me working on his father's car. He was impressed! The story goes as follows:

Jody crashed in practice and new body work had to be on the car. All they needed Jody's name lettered on it. His name on the old car was *JODY*, at a slant, on the sides of the driver cowling. I lettered that on the new car as close as I could to the old one, which was lying on the floor by the wall. I was just starting to clean my brush when Jody came by and saw it. I was kind of proud of the job I did and was expecting a "good job" from him, when in fact, he started hollering! He was pointing his finger and frantically waving it back and forth. In a very loud voice he said, "No, No, No, not right... not right! Not slanted enough! Take it off! (Waving his hand in front of himself) Get it off there!" He turned and stormed off! He caused a big commotion! People were drawn from around the garage area to the car by all the hollering. The crewman were looking at each other and back at me! I didn't know what to do. I held my arms out and shrugged my shoulders. They were as shocked as I was! This was an embarrassing moment to say the least.

I took a rag and some thinner and wiped the still wet paint off. Just as I got the paint off, Jody came back with his helmet which had *JODY* painted on the sides. I thought he was going to show me what the angle of the slant he wanted on the sides of the car. To my surprise, and everyone else's, he put the helmet on and got into the car! He slid down into the cockpit, put the steering wheel on and sat as if he were driving the car. We all looked at each other in amazement! In a muffled voice from inside the helmet, and at the same time pointing to the name on the side of the helmet with his left forefinger, he said, "Slant, like this! Just like this!" This drew a hell of a crowd as he sat there, in the car with his helmet on looking straight ahead while I lettered the car! When I

was done, he got out of the car and took the helmet off. He looked at the helmet, then the car and back to the helmet. There was total silence! Not one of the crew said a word as we all stood motionless and silent. He smiled and holding the helmet down to his side by the chin strap, he quickly turned and walked away without saying a word! I looked around and entire crew and we started laughing at the same time That had to be quite a sight..

The one thing that bothers me to this day is that back then I never took any pictures. Sometimes I would go to the track at night, after the garage was closed and do my work. This was great! No one was in the garage except me, a guard and a big, gnarly German Sheppard attack dog! I was scared of that damned dog! I didn't trust it! When I arrived, I would scratch its nose and after I walked away, I would look back and it would be glaring at me! It would put goose bumps up the back of my neck! The fun part of working nights was, after I was done working on a car, I would sit in it! I have sat in some of most famous cars in the world! Ferrari's, Lotus, McLeran, you name it, and I've been in it! Getting paid was even better! I was so new to this, I was never sure of what to charge! One time a Team Manager, a short, heavy set guy in a suit, said as he opened a black leather briefcase, "What do I owe you sport?" I thought, \$5 or \$10dollars would be fine. I was really tired and that day without thinking, I said, "Just give me what you think its worth". I wanted to get home so I just left it up to him. What an idea! I would get 5 times what I would have charged! They carried Travelers Checks, usually 50s or 100s and they would normally say, "Got change for a fifty?" I would say, "Nope! I don't have any money on me!" They would rip off a Travelers Check and hand it to me! Holy Cow! Now I see what the signwriters in Europe were charging! Life was good! Sometimes, after I was paid, the team would take me to supper with them at Seneca Lodge. At times, the whole table didn't speak a word of English, so I just smiled and nodded a lot. They were probably saying, "Look at that dumb ass down there, thinking he's a signwriter! He outta see the guys in Europe paint!" I didn't care, the Black Angus Steak sure tasted good!

In the late '70's, Formula 1 added the Japanese Grand Prix to the schedule. Watkins Glen used to be the last race on the schedule until then. The cars would stay at the track for a week after the race at the Glen., The crews would stay and get them ready to ship to Japan. I would go up during that week and letter some of the cars that needed changes. Teddy Yip, a Japanese Shipping Tycoon, owned two Formula 1 cars. He told me he wanted them lettered in Japanese for the race in Japan. He drew the layout on a sheet of paper and I carefully lettered cars. He was happy with the result. Sometime after that, I was in the Ten Limited Tavern having a cold Genesee Cream Ale and a few of us were talking about lettering that Formula 1 car in Japanese. Someone said, "Hey Vickio! Since your lettering is now going all around the world, you gotta be World Famous!" That's how I got the nick-name, "World Famous"!

Things kick up a notch! I'm now working as a structural draftsman at Shepard Niles Crane & Hoist Corp. in Montour Falls, NY. It's about 2 miles from Watkins Glen. My sign painting had turned into a great part time business! When I was not at work, I was painting something. I was lettering all types of cars at the track. Formula 1, Indy Cars, Prototypes, Sports Cars. If it raced at the Glen, I lettered it! The one thing different

about lettering racecars at The Glen, it's always in front of thousands of people! This cured my shyness!

One day I got called to the track at 8:00am, race morning to put a last minute sponsor on Paul Newman's (yes, the actor) car. When I arrived, the Datsun 240Z was on Jack Stands with the engine was running. They were warming it up to go out as soon as I finished the lettering! Do you think they were pushing me? Paul sat next to me in a chair and we talked about racing while I painted. Hundreds of people were watching. One woman even fainted! He would talk racing all day if he could. Finally he said, "Well, I've got to go to the John." He motioned over to two men standing by the fence in front of the car. They came over and Paul got up from the red nylon folding chair. They escorted him out the overhead door. This emptied the garage! I thought as I was painting, "That has to be a pain being that famous that you can't even go to the bathroom alone!"

At the same race I had another "rush" job. Rick Mears and Johnny Rutherford were teamed up driving a Porsche Carrera. I had just finished painting the sponsor on the right rear quarter panel and Mears and Rutherford were standing right by my work bench where I was cleaning my brush. With a sly smirk on his face, Mears said, "Hey! Is that (paint) going to stay on? It isn't going to blow off is it?" They were getting ready to go out and the paint wouldn't be dry yet. I said, "Do you think you can go fast enough to blow it off?" He was leaning back against the bench with his arms folded across his chest. He leaned over sideways, real close so no one else could hear and whispered, "Not in this piece of shit!" Apparently he didn't like Porsche! They didn't win!

Working at the track got me used to working while people watched. No problem working in front of crowds now. One of the most valuable things that came from the early years working at Watkins Glen International was meeting important people from other tracks and companies! I will tell of these contacts as they come along. Most of them turned into being very good friends. One of my early acquaintances was Dick Hahne. He was the Operations Manager at Daytona Speedway (he is now Vice President). When he visited Watkins Glen racetrack during the first NASCAR race at Watkins Glen in 1986, he would find me and ask questions about the signs. I would take him down to the Mechanics Club (a small private club) in Montour Falls for Hot Dogs at lunch time. He loved those hot dogs! He still asks about them today!

In 1982, I left my job as a structural draftsman at Seneca Engineering in Montour Falls, NY and opened a sign shop in Ithaca, NY. The shop was working out well when a job became available at Watkins Glen International. It was for a Graphics Design position. After much thought, I left my sign shop in Ithaca, and went to work for Watkins Glen International as their Graphics Design Manager. One day, out of the blue, my boss, Matt Matusicky (more on him later) came into my office and said, "Dick Hahne just called form Daytona and wants you in Talladega (Talladega Superspeedway in Alabama) to do some signs before the race". I said, "What the hell are you talking about! Are you kidding me? I ain't goin' to Talladega! NO WAY!" I suddenly had a flashback and got the same feeling that I had when the two men were at the top of my stairs many years ago! PANIC! Seems their sign painter was trying to get more money and was holding out

just before the Talladega race. Dick remembered me from the trips up here and now he had an Ace in the Hold. My boss said to go, so I guess I was going! Watkins Glen International wanted me to take the Pace Car down (a new, bright red Thunderbird Super Coupe), as it would be good advertising. So, the following week I was, reluctantly and all by myself, on my way to Alabama.

This will start the **Tales of the Famous**. All of the "Tales" are true even though some will leave you scratching your head while others will make you laugh. Talladega Superspeedway in Alabama is a great place to start the Tales of the Famous!

Lap: 2
Off to Talladega

©