

## **Fleming Island Outlying Field - Home of Thunderbolt Raceway**

*By Archives Specialist Vishi Garig, a service of Clerk of Court and Comptroller Tara S. Green*

After WWII, an enterprising group of individuals with the literal “need for speed” realized that the Navy’s old **Fleming Island Outlying Field** would make a great dragstrip. They were former North Carolina racer Stump Burch, local Lincoln Mercury dealership owner Ben Zellner and Ed Taylor who taught auto shop at Clay High. These men were the original organizers of the raceway.

Following a little tree cutting, the banking of berms to protect drivers and fans, the installation of a Christmas tree starter light, the throngs of fans and drivers soon put Clay County on the drag strip racing map. Pine trees and sugar sand made up the landscaping.

Lines of cars would que up to get in the track surrounded by a pine forest. One such fan was Mike McInnis:

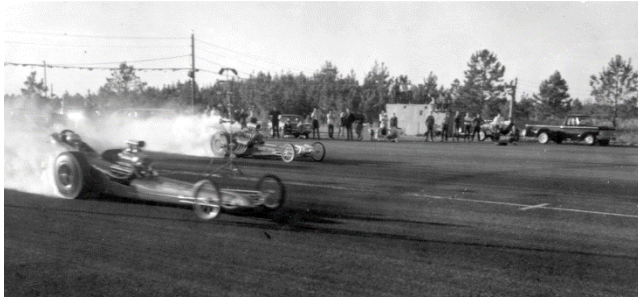
“I got interested in cars and started reading every car magazine I could get my hands on about 1962. (I was 11),” he wrote. “I started reading about drag racing and started bugging my dad to take me to a race. We were on the south side of Jacksonville late one Sunday afternoon, and I started seeing numbers of cars (mostly flat towed) coming back from a day at the drags at nearby Thunderbolt Dragway. I heard an advertisement on the Jacksonville radio station WAPE, the Big Ape, 690 on the AM dial, stating that Eddie Schartman and the Air Lift Rattler would be match racing with Shirl Greer in the Tension Dodge at the Thunderbolt Dragway, under the lights on Saturday night. “

“Never has a more intense bit of lobbying taken place than that which was done as I promised my dad anything just to get him to take me,” McInnis recalled. “Well, he finally broke down (as dads often do; I have four sons of my own) and took me and a buddy over there. Thunderbolt Dragway was just a part of an old abandoned military airfield complex south of Jacksonville on the way to Green Cove Springs. There were no guardrails as I recall, and the main lighting other than a few bare lightbulbs strung between poles in the 'pits' was an old Army surplus searchlight mounted on a trailer and directed down the track behind the starting line. I was in drag race paradise. Along with quite a large crowd, we were standing right at the edge of the designated dragstrip within probably 20 or 30 feet of the cars as they staged and blasted off into nitro nirvana. I have never been the same. The details of other things that happened that night are fuzzy, but I do remember being there. If memory serves me correctly, I think Greer beat Schartman two out of three. About a month later, we went back (I think my dad even liked it, though he never let on) to the same track and saw Arnie Beswick take on Shirl Greer. “

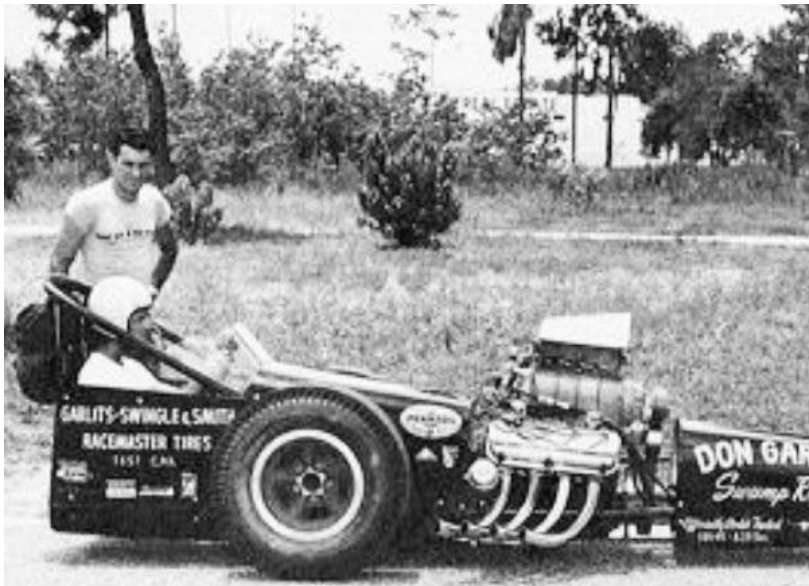
Other famous Top Fuel racers like Big Daddy Don Garlits, Connie Kalitta, Chris Karamesines, Don Prudhomme, Stan Mizell (NHRA Hall of Famer) Bobby and Harry Fermier and Pete Robinson all raced at the track. The track was NHRA certified.

George Hammock and Homer Green are credited with bringing the dragstrip to prominence in the 1960’s. Green handled the technical end of the track (announcing and timing) and Hammock was the promoter and operator.

In 1969, the business was sold to Connie Roberson who kept it open into the 1970's. The actual property was owned by the Clay County Development Authority and they later sold it to A.I. DuPont, who declined to renew Roberson's lease. The site of the former track is now Thunderbolt Elementary.



Former Clay County Commissioner Ronnie Robinson was a racer back in the day.



Big Daddy Don Garlits

Eddie Schartman and the Air Lift Rattler.



THIS CAR HAS BEEN OFFICIALLY TIMED  
ON CHRONDEK TIMERS AT  
**Thunderbolt Raceway**  
"NORTH FLORIDA'S FINEST DRAGSTRIP"

*BUMP* *10*

ELAPSED TIME 1301

TOP SPEED 109.35

**DRAG RACES**  
**THUNDERBOLT RACEWAY**  
U. S. HIGHWAY 17 GREEN COVE SPRINGS, FLA.  
SUNDAY, MAY 6, 1962  
Benefit —  
**FLORIDA SHERIFF'S BOYS RANCH**  
Approved By —  
FLORIDA SHERIFFS ASSOCIATION

<b>ADMIT</b>	ADM. _____ \$2.06	Gate Opens
<b>ONE</b>	S. TAX _____ .07	11:00 A. M.
	FED. TAX _____ .12	
	<b>TOTAL _____ \$2.25</b>	

Florida Sheriff's  
Boys Ranch  
**Drag Races**  
May 6, 1962  
**Thunderbolt**  
**Raceway**  
U. S.  
Highway 17  
Green Cove  
Springs, Fla.

