

Valley Bowl's History

by

Roy Hines

The Chattahoochee Valley has quite a few landmarks, not to mention the storied river itself. We take them for granted until we see them disappear, like the mills that were its lifeblood for a century-and-a-half. Ironically, one of the most prominent symbols of the area's blue-collar heritage would have vanished 45 years ago had not the mill company intervened. The oft-troubled hubbub of recreation and rendezvous, the privately owned bowling alley, had apparently taken its last breath when the head of the mill company told his vice-president to rescue that popular attraction. The VP put his best man on it, who wisely enlisted the extraordinary talents of one man to perform CPR. Thanks to those men, and now to Harry and James Caldwell, maple pins still rattle at Valley Bowl.

Valley Lanes, with its funky décor, opened in the summer of 1962, after great anticipation. It was a really big deal for a post-war generation with free time and the means for entertainment. Even the mill company got excited -- the recreation department offered free bowling classes months in advance.

The timing was perfect, in the dawning of rock & roll and muscle cars. Amusements up and down "the four-lane" (Highway 29) consisted mostly of the Snow Cap, Hungry Boy, and Ayers -- any place that had a parking lot to cruise with glasspacks rumbling, Chubby Checker twisting, and a chick ridin' shotgun. Valley Lanes was an instant hit with its boss parking lot, far-out jukebox, cool pool tables, groovy pinball machines, neat cheeseburgers, and 24 primo lanes.

Joe Fulghum, ex-gridiron star with the physique to prove it, got the job as manager. Mr. Fulghum's business acumen was further demonstrated when he opened the first health club ever known around these parts, in Lanett.

Unfortunately, a shady outfit owned Valley Lanes, along with 17 other alleys. They didn't pay bills on time, if at all, and gained a bad reputation -- probably more than deserved, since rumor begets rumor -- but tarnished nonetheless. Consequently, Valley Lanes closed and reopened 3 times in 4

years, until it finally reached the end of its rope. Some say that was the conglomerate's plan all along -- milk it dry and walk away. Regardless, the bowling alley closed for good in 1966... or so everyone thought.

A delegation of good people went to see Joe Lanier, Sr., President of WestPoint Manufacturing, and implored him to help reopen the bowling alley. The company had a long history of patriarchy, exemplified by its dedication to employee wellness a century before such a policy was glorified. The textile giant built gymnasiums in every town, hired recreation directors, and funded healthy activities for employees and their families. Joe Senior, as he was affectionately known, listened to the envoys and agreed to help. He immediately assigned the project to his vice-president, Richard "Dick" Walton, who knew just what to do. He called in the guy who got things done, Floyd Mann, gave him the charge and backed him to the hilt.

Over in Alexander City, Lewis Truitt had a good thing going. He'd been running his own bowling alley in his hometown since 1960. It was originally a joint venture with the Truitt Cattle Company, owned by his brother Arthur, who operated a Colorado cattle ranch on land once occupied by interned Japanese-Americans during WWII, Camp Amache. Arthur financed Lewis' prospect into bowling and he repaid the grubstake in two short years. Thus in 1966, Lewis had a successful business, a cabin on Lake Martin, and a really good life. Floyd Mann was about to upset that apple cart. He'd grown up with Lewis and knew him to be a good man and a savvy entrepreneur. Naturally, Lewis was the first person Floyd thought of to resuscitate Valley Lanes.

Lewis told Floyd he wasn't the least bit interested. He'd heard of that outfit's troubles and he couldn't see putting money in it he didn't have anyway. But true friend that he was, he agreed to help Floyd find the right person, and that was all Floyd needed to sucker him in. Lewis traveled back and forth several times to help Floyd conduct interviews, but they just couldn't get the situation they wanted. One day, following another unpromising talk, the two friends left Dick Walton's office in West Point and started home. Floyd invited Lewis to stop

by the Holiday Inn for a cup of coffee, saying, "I have something I want to talk to you about."

Over coffee, Floyd told Lewis that Mr. Walton wanted to know what it would take to get him. Lewis thoughtfully stirred his coffee a moment and gave Floyd a proposal he figured would back them off. But Dick Walton called his bluff. The company would buy the building, maintain it, and Lewis would furnish the equipment and own the business. Lewis was a man of his word so he couldn't back out.

Lewis had a "heck of a time starting off". Although under new management, the place's soiled reputation stuck like red clay. Suppliers, once burned, were reluctant to get near the flame a second time; he couldn't get credit anywhere. In one instance, he called Cato Electric for some needed repairs on the refrigeration equipment. The lady said she'd send someone up to figure a price, but he'd have to pay in advance! Lewis asked her to call Bill Cato who he'd had known all his life. In less than an hour, the work was being done.

The Alabama Power office flat-out told Lewis they didn't want to be in the bowling business any more! After much haggling, Lewis finally called the main office in Birmingham who confirmed he had a sterling reputation. They called on his behalf and power was restored.

Lewis couldn't get credit with any grocery stores, so he went to West Point Wholesale. He offered cash for the first order if they'd let his chef order as needed and bill Lewis. The manager scoffed at the idea. He told Lewis he'd done business with him before and advance payment was not called for. "Just tell me what you need, Mister Truitt."

Incredibly, West Point Manufacturing's recreation director refused to let Lewis post bulletins in the mills. He was likely still irked by the egg on his face from holding all those bowling classes. Reluctant to go over his head because he needed all the friends he could get, Lewis finally called Dick Walton. In a matter of minutes the director phoned in a change of heart.

Lewis worked out a deal with AMF for the bowling equipment at 10 cents a game. George Nader installed the jukebox, pool tables, and pinball machines,

while Lewis took care of a hundred other details. The bowling alley reopened under the new banner, Valley Bowl, on September 15, 1967, and that's when the real troubles began.

During Valley Lane's dark days, rumors swirled that narcotics were pedaled in the parking lot. Lewis didn't know if it was true, but he soon discovered lots of people believed it and figured it was still going on. He knew better. His brother Moitt continually walked the lot and Lewis regularly made rounds himself. On top of that, undercover cops worked the scene and struck out. Regardless, in the absence of any evidence whatsoever, some local pastors felt called to preach on it. "Those preachers became our worst enemy," Lewis said. "And they really hurt us."

One night Lewis attended a narcotics meeting sponsored by law enforcement and Fort Benning specialists. "It was a very good meeting," Lewis said. But when the last speaker sat down, a renowned preacher grabbed the podium, pounded his fist on it, and set forth his wrath upon the multitudes, "Now what are we going to do about all the dope being sold at the bowling alley?!"

Valley Bowl was under Lanett Police jurisdiction at the time and the chief was on stage. He jumped up from his chair and retorted, "Preacher, Mr. Truitt is sitting right there and he'll tell you like I will, we can't find any evidence of dope being sold at the bowling alley! If you can prove it, you're doing better'n we are! We found only one guy selling pills and they turned out to be Bufferin!"

That didn't deter the crusader at all. Next morning on the radio he railed again. Lewis decided right then to sue him but the recreation director talked him out of it, saying it would be bad publicity. So Lewis called Herman Chapman, the state narcotics agent who'd attended the conference and heard the preacher's admonitions. The grand jury was in session in Lafayette, so Chapman called the District Attorney and they began a plan: And so it came to pass that a deputy was sent forth to the preacher to render him unto the grand jury for his testimony.

The DA asked the preacher, under oath, what evidence he had that dope was being sold at the bowling alley? The preacher frowned, thought a minute,

and denied any knowledge of it. "Well you either lied on the radio or you're lying now," the prosecutor said. "Which is it?"

The preacher chewed his upper lip, dropped his head and answered in a meeker tone than the night before, "Well, I can't lie to the grand jury."

It didn't end there. Another preacher took to the pulpit and the airwaves to lament that his son was abducted at the bowling alley, forced to drink some strange liquid that made him sick, and deposited on the side of the road. But another youngster, who like many others admired Mr. Truitt, laughingly told him the boy got loaded on gin in Langdale, passed out right there, and was never at the bowling alley. Lewis called the chief, who summoned the preacher to Valley Bowl. Cornered, the preacher spun a tale about it being LSD instead, but that didn't hold water either. Lewis pulled him aside and whispered, "If you ever lie about my place again, I'll see you in court."

Six months later another preacher called Lewis demanding to know what he was going to do about dope at the bowling alley?! Lewis put two-and-two together and said, "Preacher, are you a God-fearing man?"

"Yes I am," he said proudly.

"Do you always tell the truth?"

"Yes I do!"

"Will you tell the truth to anybody and everybody?"

"Of course! Why do you ask?"

"Well, I know who told you that lie and I want you to testify to it in court."

"I ain't heard nothin'!" Slam.

Lewis is quick to point out that only a small minority of the pastors caused him any grief. The rest of the reverends had no complaints, and many churches held regular bowling tournaments. Today, churches are among Valley Bowl's biggest supporters. Church groups come from as far away as Troup and Randolph counties to bowl, and to introduce their youth to a healthy sport they can participate in all their lives.

Lewis served as an MP in WWII. He was a Judo instructor and experienced in law enforcement, so he knew how to handle people. He never

had to use his skills at Valley Bowl; he only had to convince troublemakers he would, and his ice-cold stare took care of that. In addition to hiring security, Lewis wisely recruited two ruffians as informants. Turned out he never had any more loyal allies than Jimmy Earles and Rodney Liner. They miraculously appeared whenever Lewis faced trouble, and headed off any rumbles they got wind of. Security pros like Jimmy Poe were Lewis' muscle, while those two were his eyes and ears.

Things got progressively better. AMF offered Lewis the bowling equipment at a bargain price, although a small fortune to Lewis. But it was too good to pass up. He went to Jack Keith and borrowed \$60,000 – the equivalent of \$216,000 today -- tightened his purse strings, and paid it off in only five years. Under Lewis Truitt's outstanding leadership and smart business moves, the pariah became a prince and Valley Bowl emerged as one of the top lanes in the league.

Lewis could now indulge in his specialty, drilling bowling balls. He was simply the best. He had the ace Brunswick machine and people came from all over for his skill. Of the hundreds of balls he bored, the most challenging one was for a lady from Columbus with two thumbs on her bowling hand.

Many of us have fond memories of our days at the bowling alley during its early years. Oddly, one that stands out in my mind is drooling over Curtis Sims' gleaming blue Corvette in its usual parking space near the door, looking like it was doing 120 just sitting there. I'd watch Curt drive off, hear that powerhouse roar and know how it felt to watch a Cape Canaveral blastoff. Heck, I drove a '53 Ford Station Wagon in puke green. Envy is not a strong enough word, and Curtis didn't even know I was alive.

Allen Hendrix, Valley's venerable City Planner, hung out there too. It was one of his stops on his cruise from the Snow Cap in Langdale to the one in Lanett to the Bowling Alley and back again, as was the custom of the day. Allen particularly remembers the bowling alley's slot car track. Racers could build their own customized cars from an array of components to compete. Allen spent a whole summer building a highly detailed Mustang. "It usually got beat," Allen said. "But man it looked good doing it!"

Lewis Truitt retired in 1990, after 23 years of keeping his promise to the company, and vice-versa. He turned his attention to his other passion and went fishing "from Canada to Key West." One of his favorite fishing holes was the Suwannee River, but his favorite quarry will always be Lake Martin bass. For all you Lake Martin fishermen out there, eat your hearts out. Lewis knows all the best spots and he marked them on my map.

Rodger Brand bought Valley Bowl after Lewis retired. Later, he took W.A. and Wynette Williams as partners and eventually sold his share to them. After Wynette passed away, W.A. struggled for a couple of years trying to run it by himself and finally sold it to the Caldwell brothers, James and Harry, in 2005.

Right after accepting the company's offer, Lewis recognized he had a jewel in the President of the Bowling Association, a very capable young man named James Caldwell, a fixture at Valley Bowl since 1962. **Thus James has the distinction of being associated with Valley Bowl as long as anyone.** "No one ever loved Valley Bowl more than James," Lewis said.

Until 2005, Valley Bowl was James' avocation, his real job being a Computer Room Supervisor with West Point. Free Trade was already eroding that once-great company -- and scores of others -- forcing them to downsize more and more. James' position eventually got caught up in Washington's madness and he was thrown in the briar patch. Now he could turn all his attention to his true passion

Unlike James, Harry had never been interested in bowling; he was more of a silent partner. Nevertheless, a couple of years ago he decided to see what all the fuss was about. Like so many others who've given this great sport a shot, he got hooked. Recently, he bowled his first 600 series, a remarkable achievement in such a short time. "It was very exciting," Harry said. "The more I bowl, the more I like it. My goal is to be the oldest guy in the USBC to bowl 300."

"Bowling's great," Harry added, "But the most pleasant surprise I've had is interacting with all the people who come in here. They're the best."

Bowling has a long and rich history. It is one of the most popular sports in the world and its ancestry traces back to 3200 BC. (No. James wasn't there

then.) Today, the sport is enjoyed by 100 million people in more than 90 countries. It's not as costly as golf, has better weather than fishing, and offers good clean fun for the whole family. Warning: It can get addictive, extremely competitive, and make fools out of perfectly normal people. James could write a book.

On January 31, 1980, Leon Weathers had drawn a crowd. He was rolling strike after strike and you could cut the air with a knife. He was on his way to 300 and nobody dared breathe. Just then the phone rang and James instinctively reached over to get it, never taking his eyes off Leon. It was Leon's girlfriend, Cynthia Shockley.

"James, I need to speak to Leon."

"Well, uh, now is not a good time, Cynthia."

"What? Why not?"

"Leon's bowlin' for a perfect score. If you hurry, you can see it." With that, James robotically hung up the phone, still mesmerized by the drama unfolding before him. Leon Weathers bowled the first 300 at Valley Bowl 18 years after it opened. Cynthia made it in time. Leon's picture is still on the wall.

Another Leon (evidently guys named Leon like to bowl) and a war hero was also a fixture at Valley Bowl. His story doesn't involve bowling, per se, but illustrates some of the crazy things bowlers will do. Leon shot a deer and for what seemed like a good idea at the time, he and his hunting buddies took it to his house and put it in the bathtub. Turned out the deer wasn't quite dead. It came to, bolted out of the tub and commenced to wreak havoc throughout the house, with Leon's plus-sized ma-in-law in hot pursuit, clad only in her nightgown, wielding a broom and screaming like a banshee. Leon also shot the famous deer statue at Pete's Puppy Land in Wadley one night, but that's another story.

James, Troy Harville, Kay Pippen, and Betty McAllister stopped by a café in Griffin on the way to a tournament. They took a booth and couldn't help but overhear an older couple urging a younger couple to be more devout. The story of Jonah and the whale came up and the younger man adamantly proclaimed, "It has done been proved a whale can't even swallow a basketball!"

There was a silent pause, an audible sigh of frustration, and the old man said, "Now whar in the world would Jonah git a basketball?"

Leroy Rampey (Leroy, Leon. Odd isn't it?) was a terrific bowler even though he was minus one finger. As luck would have it, he got another one mashed in a car door. Lying on a gurney about to have the flat part taken off, Leroy pleaded, "Doc, will I be able to play the piano?"

"Well, Leroy, you should. You'll still have most of that finger."

"Well, that's good," Leroy sighed. "I never could play it before."

Ted and Bobby (no Leroy or Leon?) took bowling very seriously. They were the ultimate competitors, ragging each other constantly. One night Ted needed only the 10-pin to defeat his archrival, and he was already crowing. Unbelievably – because he was very good – he missed. Ted went in shock while Bobby rolled in the floor. Ted didn't utter a word. He stormed out the door and struck out home, madder'n a grizzly with a toothache. He stomped and growled all the way from Valley Bowl to his house, two miles away... at which time he realized he'd left his car at the bowling alley.

Lewis and James will argue who rolled the fastest, hardest ball. Lewis says it was Dan Washburn. James sticks by Felix Snider. With all due respect to Coach Washburn, James might be right. "The 7-10 split is the hardest spare there is," said James. "You have to roll a rocket. In nearly 50 years, I've seen only three people do it: Hugh Hood, Bobby May, and Felix Snider.

"Felix was here a few weeks ago, but he'd hurt his back. Tough luck for him but we dodged a bullet there. We don't encourage people to see how hard they can bowl."

Since taking over Valley Bowl, James **and** Harry moved away from tournament oriented to family-friendly. "Harry and I decided in 2005 if our 90 year-old mother could come in here and not be embarrassed, then we got it right. This is one of the safest places you can bring your whole family to. We won't tolerate anything less. Keeping Mothers Happy is our slogan, in honor of ours."

Daniel's in Fairfax is famous for its historic hamburgers, which offer a welcome change from the chains. There's another place that hasn't changed the

way they cook either, but not as many folks know about it. Valley Bowl still makes cheeseburgers just like they did in the sixties. They still shape the patties by hand and cook them the same way on the same grill. They will knock your socks off.

Lewis recently celebrated his 90th birthday. He still resides in Valley, where he's fussed over by his devoted daughter, Wanda. Not long ago, he joined the area's WW II vets on a sponsored trip to Washington DC, to visit the memorial to the greatest generation. Lewis was due; he went ashore at Normandy D-Day plus 15, served through France, participated in the Battle of the Bulge, and was serving in the Pacific at war's end.

West Point Manufacturing and all its successors are gone, but Dick Walton, Floyd Mann, and Lewis Truitt's testament to trustworthiness still stands, with its original sign to mark the spot. Valley Bowl provides a secure, smoke-free, and fun-filled environment for all. James and Harry guarantee it. Stop by and step back in time. And be sure to check out Leon's picture on the wall while you're waiting on your cheeseburger.

End