

Photo of the Month

C. Jimmie Carter, a Buick, and an icy Lake Atalanta



C. Jimmie Carter breaks through ice in his Buick
Lake Atalanta, Rogers, Arkansas, January 1940
Neg. # N016347
Courtesy of Sam Wood

An old Eskimo proverb states that “you never really know your friends from your enemies until the ice breaks.” For C. Jimmie Carter, the ice that broke below his feet on January 21, 1940, or I should say his tires, brought many “friends” out in the cold to witness the event. And as James Hales wrote, “there was one event that shadowed him every day of his life and fortunately, or unfortunately, will probably be the memory that first comes to mind when the name C. Jimmie Carter is mentioned – the great car skate on Lake Atalanta...”

Carter contributed much to the growth of the poultry industry and the development of aviation in Northwest Arkansas, but he was also known for his colorful and adventurous personality. And these tendencies to engage in antics played out quite well on the frozen surface of Lake Atalanta. On that cold and fateful January day, the temperature only reached a high of twenty-one degrees, with a low recorded at two degrees above zero. For local residents, this created a perfect ice skating surface. But for Carter who claimed to have been a pilot, bronco buster, wrestler, judo instructor, etc., traditional ice skating must have seemed a bit tame.

According to a newspaper account of the time, the “C” in C. Jimmie was believed to stand for “Crazy.” As such, Carter decided to drive out to the lake, along with his friends Ray Rogers and Buddy Whitlow, and soon discovered that the ice would support his new Buick – at least at first. A Rogers Daily News story from January 22, 1940 retold the events of Carter driving on the lake. According to the story, “...it was so much fun gunnin’ ‘er and then slapping on brakes and going into a spin that would have made Sonja Henie dizzy that he just couldn’t find a quitting place. Finally something happened – no one seems to know just what – and C(razy) Jimmie and his two pals...and a nice Buick sedan crashed through the ice of Lake Atalanta.”

Carter’s Buick being recovered from the lake is pictured at right in a photograph provided to the museum by Sam Wood. “It was great fun,” according to the Rogers Daily News story, “for the hundreds who gathered along the shore Sunday afternoon to watch the work of recovering the automobile from the icy water. Good-natured banter and wise-cracking kept the shivering crowd in an uproar and C(razy) Jimmie was having most fun of all.”

In 1965 the Rogers Daily News again retold the story, which had remained part of local legend twenty-five years after the fact. Breaking through the ice that day seems to have cemented his place as a genuine character and a prominent part of the Rogers community. Carter claimed that he simply wanted to enjoy the ice even though he couldn’t “ice skate like most people.” And although the reminders and jokes were always good natured, he believed that he would have to leave the country to escape being associated with the event. Looking back on that day, Carter offered some advice to anyone who might consider such a stunt – “I don’t advise it!”