

Bonnie and the Gray Ghost

by
Jim Sayles

The testosterone driven obsessions of young men in Abilene, Texas in the late fifties and early sixties were football, fighting, hot rods, rock and roll, and girls, not necessarily in that order, and if you saw the movie, “American Graffiti”, you have a snapshot of the way it really was.

The legal driving age at that time was fourteen, which was a huge mistake, and, shortly after my fourteenth birthday, after obtaining my drivers license, my dad bought me a green and white 1955 Chevrolet Sport Coupe.

That very same day I picked up Butch Conley, and we drove out to the Jones County ranch to play “Mexican Road Race” on the wide caliche oilfield roads. On one corner I drifted out of control and hit the bar ditch with the front and rear tires at the same time.

The bar ditches, cut by a maintainer blade, were at least eighteen inches deep, and, upon impact the door sprung open and the car bounced out of the ditch about three quarters of the way up on its side as it continued to slide across the gravelly terrain.

I was thrown out, rolling across the ground in a thick cloud of dust, seeing the car skidding across the dirt after me with Butch hanging onto the steering wheel for dear life as blood ran down his face from a broken nose.

Butch was certain that the car was going to roll, and he couldn't see me in the cloud of red dust that enveloped both of us.

When the dust cleared and we realized that neither one of us was dead or seriously injured, we examined the car. Both left side tires had been busted off the rims, which is what probably prevented the car from rolling over on top of Butch and me at the same time, mingling our youthful blood with the red west Texas dirt.

We walked out, and I called my dad from the truck stop on US 277 north of Abilene. When he picked us up I told him that we had a blowout, but, after seeing the vehicle the next day, he didn't buy that story. The Sport Coupe was parked in the driveway, and I was not allowed to drive again until I returned to Abilene after spending my Sophomore year at St. Stephens Episcopal School in Austin (which is another, but related, story).

The summer after my sophomore year of high school at St. Stephens, Ned Butler's dad was planning on selling his 1957 J2 Rocket Powered V8 Oldsmobile, and, because my mother drove the same year model Oldsmobile with the same V8, but not the J2 Rocket Power package, Ned had a brilliant idea.

Ned's dad and my mom were both out of town, so Ned suggested that we take the manifold and triple two barrel carburetors off his dad's car and put them on my mother's car so we would still have a hot J2 Oldsmobile to drive.

Our assumption was that neither his dad nor my mother would know the difference.

I agreed, and, after we purchased the necessary gaskets and gasket goop, he pulled the manifold and carburetors off his dad's car while I did the same with my mother's car. Then we switched, and he linked up the J2 system on my mother's car while I linked up the single two barrel carburetor on his dad's car.

When we were finished, we weren't satisfied. My mom's blue and white Oldsmobile didn't look “hot,” so we got two inch front and rear lowering blocks and lowered my mom's car.

My mom had hidden the keys to keep me from taking it out on an unsanctioned drive, but I had been experienced at hotwiring cars and rolling back the mileage on the odometer from the age of twelve, so that was not a problem for us.

For one whole day Nancy Sayles had a hot-looking J2 Rocket Powered V8 Oldsmobile, and Ned and I looked forward to a future of driving a big, fast J2 Oldsmobile around town.

Then she came home.

As she walked around her car in the garage she thought to herself that she must have a flat. But none of the tires looked low. She decided to drive the car down to Skipper Stowe's Humble station on the corner of Leggett and South 7th Street to find out what was wrong with her car.

When she stepped on the gas the engine roared like a jet with the sound of fuel and air being sucked down into the engine. At the same time, her rear wheels peeled out, leaving black strips of rubber for fifteen feet down Leggett Drive.

After she pulled into Skipper's station she said, "Skipper, there's something wrong with my car. The engine roars when I put my foot on the gas pedal, and the tires squeal and smoke."

Skipper popped the hood, and, after having a look, he said, "Well, Nancy, what did you expect? You have a J2?"

"I damn sure don't have a J2," she answered in a fury.

"Well, I don't know what to say, Nancy. You have the triple two barrel J2 configuration under the hood."

"I don't understand. That's not what I bought. And what about the tires? My car looks like it has a flat, but none of the tires are flat?"

Skipper looked under the car, and he had a slight smile on his face when he said, "Nancy, someone has put lowering blocks on your car."

She looked at him strangely, and then, with fire coming out of her brilliant blue eyes and her ninety-five pound frame tensed like a mountain lion before it pounces on the prey, she said, "Jim Sayles and Ned Butler!"

We stood at attention and were given one hour to put everything back the way it was, but, of course, it took much longer.

Later that summer before the start of my Junior year in high school I finally took possession of the Chevrolet Sport Coupe again, because my mother was tired of driving me to and from my job as a lifeguard at the Abilene Country Club.

The Sport Coupe had a column stick shift and a 265cc V-8 engine, but I quickly changed that configuration, putting every penny I had from my summer job and my school year job as mail clerk for Grissom's Department Store into my ride.

I was influenced by a couple of young mechanics who had a small garage on the southeast side of town. Dean and Vernon were drag racing enthusiasts, and their own drag racing machine was a Class "C" long rail dragster. But they had a Corvette 283 cubic inch engine with twin four barrel carburetors that they had bored and stroked to 327 cubic inches with a hot 3/4 race cam they had built for a street rod, and I worked out a deal with them to have that engine installed in my Sport Coupe.

After installing the engine, they explained that the torque would be too much for the stock rear end, so they installed Traction Masters on the rear axle.

The Sport Coupe was fast, but I wanted it to sound hot, too, so I installed Edelbrock exhaust headers, glasspack mufflers, and a "Lakes Plug" exhaust bypass that could be opened

for off street racing to send the exhaust straight through without muffling, as flames shot out the sides of my car just behind the front wheels.

As soon as I could afford it I had louvers cut into the hood for better engine ventilation, the chrome removed, and the car painted metallic gray.

None of this, of course, was done with my parents' knowledge or consent, and, before the paint job, they were none the wiser. But when I pulled into the driveway one day in the "Gray Ghost," the deed was out in the open.

I told them about the paint job, and, because it was a youthful, masculine identity issue and I had spent my own money on it, they accepted it without further parental consequences.

They didn't know how fast it was, though.

Abilene had a dragstrip, but there was also an illegal drag strip out on Ranch Road 707, east of FM 89. Yellow stripes were painted across the highway exactly one quarter of a mile apart, and that's where everyone in the Abilene area went late at night if they were challenged to a drag race.

Sheldon Perry, a big, friendly, Pillsbury dough boy, two years my senior, drove a 1957 Chevrolet Sport Coupe with a 283 cubic inch fuel injected engine. The car was painted bright, metallic purple, and he called it the "Purple People Eater."

My first drag race in the Gray Ghost was against Sheldon Perry in his Purple People Eater late one Saturday night, and the flames from my exhaust lit up Sheldon's face while his big, goofy grin turned into a wide-eyed look of shock as I pulled away from him easily.

I had fourteen moving violations my senior year of high school, mostly speeding or contesting for speed, including one race with Terry Butler down North First Street. We both got a ticket, but Terry got off by wearing an Abilene High School letter jacket and batting her big, angel eyes at the judge.

Fortunately that was before the points system, or I would not have had a drivers license for most of my senior year in high school.

The Dairy Delight was our social hub, much like the malls are these days, except that we could cruise the Dairy Delight in our cars with our girlfriends sitting as close as they could get to us. And those of us with muscle cars that rumbled noisily as we idled round and round the Dairy Delight enjoyed a special status.

But, like any other social hub, the strutting sometimes erupted in violence, and, other than the flagpole at Abilene High School, the Dairy Delight was where most of our fights took place, with the most memorable fight of all taking place between the local bully and champion dirty street fighter, Jerry James, and a kid named Ronnie Schuchard.

Jerry James at 250 pounds looked a lot like Popeye's antagonist, Bluto. He was a small town street fighter who enjoyed pulling over cars full of Air Force enlisted men from Dyess AFB and then beating the crap out of the whole car load.

Ronnie, on the other hand, was a good-looking kid with a constant, friendly smile on his face and a wiry, 165 pound athletic build who would eventually be a brother in the bonds at the Deke house and a professor of English at Emory University.

On Friday night Ronnie left the Eagles football game early to take his date home, and he had agreed to meet some friends at the Dairy Delight on South 14th before going bowling.

He was sitting on the fender of his 1950 Ford coupe waiting for his friends to arrive when Jerry, for no apparent reason, got out of his own car and came over toward Ronnie with four of his friends circled behind him like a cowering pack of jackals behind the alpha wolf.

As Jerry kicked the tire and fender of the Ford his face flushed with a rage of his own making, and he taunted Ronnie while his gang egged him on and did their own name-calling. Ronnie suddenly had that pit of the stomach grip of fear that comes when you know something really bad is about to happen and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it.

With adrenaline pumping in his veins he looked over his shoulder one last time in the hopes that his friends had arrived, and then, knowing that he had to get in the first punch on the notorious Jerry James, he spun full force off the fender to hit his antagonist with a roundhouse right that knocked the big man down.

Jerry got up quickly, swinging and kicking, and the two were tangled up all over the asphalt on the front side of the Dairy Delight as people got out of their cars to watch and shout.

Jerry finally took Ronnie down, and, while holding Ronnie down with a knee in his chest he began clawing Ronnie's face with his long, dirty fingernails.

Ronnie realized with horror that Jerry was trying to disfigure him, and a super-surge of adrenaline turned Ronnie into a wild man as he not only managed to get Jerry's 250 pounds off of him but broke Jerry's thumb in the process.

From that moment forward, in a fight-for-your-life fury, Ronnie wailed on Jerry James as the big man became lodged underneath him between two cars.

Ronnie's own friends had to pull him off of Jerry, and later, at the bowling alley, Ronnie was so high on his surprise victory over Jerry James that he bowled 215 for the first and only time in his life, even though his right hand was swollen and sore.

When Ronnie woke up the next morning bruised and aching, a byline of the Abilene Reporter News said: "Gang Fight Being Probed Here: An Abilene teenager was treated at Hendrick Memorial Hospital Friday night for a broken thumb following a reported gang fight at South 14th and Barrow Streets. The matter was turned over to Juvenile Officer J.T. Sparks."

Ronnie was moved to return to the scene of the fight Saturday morning, and, in the only other car there, Jerry James was slumped down on the passenger side with his arm in a cast from hand to elbow.

He, too, it seemed, had returned to the scene of his surprising defeat.

Ronnie walked up casually to their car, and Jerry, in a malicious tone of voice, said, "You got lucky."

Ronnie answered immediately, with a tone of confidence in his own voice, "It was your dirty fingernails, scratching like a girl, that got your thumb broke and your ass whipped, Jerry James."

A few years later Jerry James made the "Most Wanted" list for a string of bank robberies he and his gang had committed. The FBI had a tip that he and the gang were holed up in the Phoenix area, and they had a stakeout at the only store in Phoenix that sold the brand of nylon underwear that Jerry liked to wear.

Jerry James, the notorious outlaw from Abilene, Texas was busted six weeks later as he purchased his nylon underwear, and he finally went to prison where we all knew that he belonged.

On the day of my high school graduation I opened the Lakes Plugs muffler bypass on the Gray Ghost and burned rubber up and down North 6th Street with flames shooting out from under my car, honking and shouting and door drumming with all the other seniors who were now out of high school.

The next day, my sister, Martha, who would be a sophomore that fall, asked if she could borrow the Gray Ghost to take some friends to Baum's, a much calmer drive-in social hub than the Dairy Delight.

"Be careful," I said as I reluctantly handed her the keys.

An hour later I got the news. All went well until they were ready to leave. As she started the car a backfire under the hood caused a fire. I had an extinguisher mounted on the passenger side, but she didn't know how to use it much less how to open the hood.

The fire-breathing, rubber-burning, romping-stomping Gray Ghost burned to the ground as though it had been given a Vikiing funeral, and all the fire department could do was hose down the smoldering pile of twisted metal and molten glass.

It was one of the worst set-backs of my young life.

My dad finally had a quiet victory, and he used the insurance money to buy me a Chevrolet Corvair, a rear engine, VW Bug wannabe, and the worst wind up toy of a car that was ever built.

Ned and I called it "El Spongu", because the accelerator felt like a sponge, and the lawnmower motor could barely push it up to the speed limit.

My masculine, muscle car identity was at an all time low.

Eddie Boykin and I lived next door to each other at that time, and my apartment behind the main house was just across a concrete block fence from his room. We provoked each other with constant bottle rocket attacks, but it was all in fun.

Eddie's older brother, Jim, had motorcycles, sports cars, and racing cars, and Eddie grew up fast in Jim's footsteps.

I had been jealous of Eddie since the seventh grade when he rode up to Lincoln Junior High on his Doodle Bug Scooter. I wanted a scooter, too, and later, a Cushman Eagle, but my parents were adamant. No scooters and no motorcycles, ever. They were too dangerous.

I loved hanging out in the driveway behind their house as Eddie or Jim did wheelies up and down the driveway, but there wasn't a hope in hell of Jim Sayles ever having a motorcycle.

My sophomore year at the University of Texas I met a guy who owned a 650cc BSA Golden Flash motorcycle, and, after he let me ride his motorcycle a couple of times, he told me that he knew about a 1959 Triumph Bonneville that had been rebuilt for road racing by the Triumph team mechanic in Fort Worth. The bike now had 750cc engine, a 12.5 to 1 compression ratio, a racing clutch, and a hot, hot, hot racing cam. The top speed of a stock 1959 Bonneville T120 was 110mph. This one had been clocked at 135mph with the street sprocket and was supposed to do 150mph with the road racing sprocket installed.

The new owner had ridden it a few times and had become fearful of it. He wanted to sell it for \$500.00. It wasn't as fast as some of the "crotch rockets" being manufactured these days, but, in the fall of 1961, it was the fastest street legal vehicle on two wheels or four in Austin, Texas. And I wanted it.

A few weeks later Davis Scarborough, one of my dad's close friends from Abilene and the father of fellow Dekes, Charles and Frank Scarborough, pulled up next to me in his black 1952 flathead Mercury at a stoplight on Guadalupe. I didn't see him, but as he glanced at me, he thought, "That looks like Jim Sayles. But it can't be. Hal would never let him have a motorcycle."

When the light turned green I roared across the intersection doing a wheelie. As Davis caught up at the next stop light he stared intently. "That is Jim Sayles!"

Just then the light turned green, and I did a wheelie across the intersection again before I burned rubber in second gear, dashing between the cars to disappear from Davis's sight in the distance.

That night I got a phone call from my dad. There wasn't a whole lot he could say, because I bought the motorcycle with my own money. So he just said, "Be careful."

Ed, the wild man, Muse, a daredevil extraordinaire, was my roommate that semester. Ed was up for anything dangerous. He was a trick skier, like Jim Tutt, and he would climb anything or dive off of anything in sight.

"Bonnie", as I named my motorcycle, taught me how to ride, much like a greenhorn cowboy learning to ride on the wildest mustang stallion in the herd, and when I took Ed for a run, we were doing 65mph down Enfield Road as I passed a car. At the same time another car pulled out of the driveway coming toward us.

As we popped between the two cars I felt the handlebar being jerked violently, and we emerged in front of the car I was passing with a chunk of rubber missing from both handlebar grips.

"Just take me on back to the apartment," he said calmly. "I'm not going to ride with you ever again."

Anyone who rides motorcycles aggressively has taken some serious spills. The first time I dropped Bonnie the back tire slid out from under me as I went around a hairpin caliche curve with my girlfriend, Beverly, on back. Fortunately she was agile enough to climb up on top of me as we went down, and she was unhurt.

Some time later on after Ned Butler and I chased jackrabbits in a wheat field one night I hit a blank angus heifer out on an unlit caliche road. I laid the bike down before I hit her, but the heifer and I both got up bawling and limping.

Then there was the incident that Ned had the most fun with. We normally loaded our motorcycles in the back of my high water Chevrolet 4x4 truck using a 2" x 8" plank. One would push the bike up from the back while the other pulled the bike up using one of the tie down straps.

I was convinced I could ride the bike up the ramp and skid to a stop before hitting the back of the cab.

Ned grinned and said, "I don't think I would try that if I were you."

I got halfway up the ramp, but hadn't applied enough power. As I fell over off the ramp it was like a slow motion scene from a "Jackass" movie.

Mad and determined, I hit the ramp at speed the next go around and slammed into the back of the cab, knocking the window out of my truck as I nearly went over the handlebars.

I loaded my motorcycle the hard way from then on.

Ned went over the handlebars of his motorcycle, too, out in California as we were cruising the streets of Laguna Beach. Ned spotted a couple of cute girls walking down the street in bikinis. He didn't see the VW Bug in front of us when they stopped, and he slammed into the VW hard enough to ride halfway up the back of it.

Everyone on the street, including the two girls, knew what had caused the wreck, and we all had a good laugh.

Motorcycles were still on the outlaw side of "Fonzie" cool in those days, but the girls liked cruising around on the back of a big, throaty motorcycle (forbidden by their parents, of course.)

One girl I dated after meeting her at a Deke-PiPhi social (and a few Dekes are going to know exactly who I am writing about) went on a pleasant Saturday afternoon cruise with me. We had dated for a couple of weeks and were on the verge of getting serious, but the imp of my perverse humor got the best of me.

A winding median separated the boulevard in front of the Kinsolving dorm, and the broken down curb on one curve made a perfect ramp for jumping across the twenty foot median, landing on the other side facing the oncoming traffic as I deliberately allowed the back wheel to spin me around under power to go with the flow of traffic.

This was not really a dangerous trick in terms of traffic, because I could see whether or not there was actually any oncoming traffic before jumping. But why I thought my date would get a big thrill out of it I will never know.

As I hit the ramp she screamed and dug her long, fake fingernails into my side so hard that they left bruises. We flew through the air with the front wheel slightly elevated, landing perfectly on the other side, and I laid the bike over with power to the rear wheel to burn out in a half circle in the opposite direction.

My date was sobbing uncontrollably, and I was suddenly clouded with guilt.

"I'm sorry," I said over my shoulder. "I should've told you that we were going to jump."

"Just take me to the dorm," she sobbed.

"I'm really sorry."

"Just take me home," she sobbed again.

As she got off the bike I could see the wet circle in the crotch of her jeans.

I felt really bad about that, and afterward I tried phone calls, notes, and even flowers. But she never spoke to me again, and she was conspicuously absent from the next Deke-PiPhi social.

I don't know what made me do it, but the first time a police car hit the vizbar and siren as I sped down Lamar at 60mph, I decided to make a run for it.

I knew all the streets within a two mile radius of the university really well, and I led the police car on a merry chase. In the middle of the block, on the street that paralleled Pearl Street, the street that the Deke house was on, I turned up a driveway to reverse direction across someone's yard as the police car screeched to a stop to turn around. I was a full block ahead of them by the time they got the squad car turned around, and I was two blocks in front of them when I turned up the alleyway behind the Deke house.

When they drove up the alley, I was out of sight.

From that moment on I knew that I couldn't be caught unless I laid the bike down going around a corner or had a wreck of some kind. Nor could they read my license plate without being really close behind me.

They did get close to me, especially the motorcycle cop that chased me three different times, but when they were really close I was always going the opposite direction with about double the acceleration they had.

Finally, I was parked at a service station on North Lamar when the hefty, donut eating motorcycle cop pulled up next to me while I pretended nonchalance as I fueled my Bonneville.

We recognized each other as though we were old friends.

He got off of his motorcycle casually, removing his helmet and his gloves, and in a non-threatening tone, he said, "I'm not going to chase you again, son. You'll eventually have a wreck and hurt someone else or hurt yourself. And I don't want that. But as fast as you are and as good a rider as you are, you ought to take your need for speed to the track.

"Otherwise, you're eventually going to get into some serious trouble."

That was a pivotal point for me, and, although I never got a ticket on Bonnie, I was no longer a blatant outlaw, cop-baiter either.

When Bonnie developed some mechanical problems out in California I sold her to a friend who was willing to spend whatever it took to make Bonnie well again.

Ned was still planning to go to Australia with me at that time, and we both bought new motorcycles to ship over to Australia. Mine was a Triumph Bonneville, of course, "Bonnie #2."

But Ned eventually opted out on Australia and went back to school at UTEP, and, at the end of summer in 1965, I flew to Australia while Bonnie went by sea.

The restless, reckless days of speed and power were over. After six months I sold Bonnie #2 in Australia in favor of a Toyota 4x4 that allowed me to chase wild bulls and water buffalos across the outback wilderness of Crocodile Dundee country.

Many years later, I pulled up to a stoplight in Austin, Texas in my economical hybrid Toyota Camry next to a young man wearing a red bandanna, shades, and a leather coat as he sat astride a sleek silver and black Harley, and I felt a twinge of nostalgia as I remembered what it was like when Bonnie carried her reckless, young rider just as hard and fast as he dared to go.

Then the light turned green, and the Harley raced across the intersection with a throaty roar after leaving a streak of rubber on the pavement next to me.

I hesitated and then eased into the intersection and shook my head slowly as I muttered softly to myself.

"Idiot!"