

SHAKIN' FINFEATHERS DOWN MEMORY LANE

"Smilin', Stylin', and Profilin'" in the 15th Annual Woodward Dream Cruise

by Brian Wright

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Motor City Iron

Hanging around the Motor City (that's Detroit for those with short industrial memories... or at least it used to be) for the greater part of my adult life, it was inevitable this festival would draw my participation. The opportunity has come up before, and from the same guy—one Don McCredie, aka Betty[1]—who recently became a septuagenarian (while I became a sexagenarian... which unfortunately doesn't have anything to do with, like, you know, sex.)

Don, a "poker gang" friend whom I've known for a long time and used to work with, has always been a fan of things collectible... especially automobile items, and especially Ford automobiles. A few years after retirement, he plunked down a few ducats on a restored classic Ford Fairlane convertible, pictured here above right.

The time is 5:00 p.m., Friday night, August 14, 2009, to gather at Haywood's[2] place in the lake country west of the fabled former street-rodding avenue. I put a simple map together to give readers a feel for Woodward's place in the cosmos. Detroit is in Southeast Michigan, and we're actually north of Canada for the most part.

The Woodward on which some of our Boomer generation used to streak up and down stretches between southern Pontiac and 8 Mile Road (ref. the movie starring Eminem and the line in the sand that back in 1974 mayor Coleman Young implied "undesirables" should want to get the heck on the other side of):

"I issue a warning to all those pushers, to all rip-off artists, to all muggers: It's time to leave Detroit; hit Eight Mile Road! And I don't give a damn if they are black or white, or if they wear Superfly suits or blue uniforms with silver badges. Hit the road."

Anyway, Woodward as always been the central spoke in the hub of Detroit and environs, a symbol of the Motor City in its prime time. [It's also the most direct route to leave Detroit across Eight Mile.] The idea of the Dream Cruise started 15 years ago as a fundraiser for a soccer field in Ferndale. The rest is history. And, being crowdaphobic, I'm finally relenting to become part of that history.

"Wow, we really used to ride around in cars like this?"

After we all climb in and start the ride to our destination via the winding roads through West Bloomfield and Bloomfield Township, it dawns on me how unsafe this ol' ride feels. I'm used to driving that Audi A4 I just sold, with all-wheel drive and suspension and tires that would clasp you to the road in the middle of a Kansas tornado. The Fairlane—which was about middle of the pack in handling technology at the time—seems to bounce

around its track. But if we stay off the major highways we should survive. There are lap belts, but these were the days of Unsafe at Any Speed... hard, pointed surfaces everywhere. Look at the sharp edge on that wing window! Yikes.

The guys think I'm acting wimpy, carrying on about "death traps" and telling Don, "Hey, Dude, how 'bout keepin' it under a hundred and twenty, for chrissakes. We hit a bumblebee we'll land in the ditch. I don't wanna crash and burn. I wanna live! I wanna live!"

Eventually I settle down. I tell myself when I was a teenager, except for the convertible part, I drove cars of similar design safety all the time. Thanks to some good breaks and the fact, driving or otherwise, I didn't do any serious drinking (or hanging out with those who did) until 21, I survived. In all likelihood we'll return in one piece tonight.

The Driver emcee of our ride, Herr McCredie, is one of my favorite former Canada-dwellers, a man who without flash or fanfare manages to have gone 70 years in a life that's included skilled wrench-turning, motorcycle racing, ice-skating, engineering, French-Canadian baiting, and Fordophilia... to name but a few. He's also the proud patriarch of a family having three daughters, three granddaughters, and two grandsons in the offspring department. That's the warm, fuzzy part. What he knows, however, about the workings of all the bells and whistles of all the widgets and doodahs he's ever worked on will blow your mind. From 1952 Evinrude outboard-motor propeller design to the vagaries of gramophone stylus materials in the early 20th century, Don's arcane learning is exemplified in a quote I've heard: "Whenever someone special dies, a library closes."

You can see in the Betty photo a sign for a local radio station, WOMC, who is one of the event sponsors. In fact, it's broadcasting down at Duggan's, north of 13 Mile Road.[3] We'll come to them later.

What I'm going to do with this chronicle is keep it fairly simple, walk through the photos I took as a newbie-rookie during this rather warm evening in August. We're coming in from the west and north. The ride to the Woodward starting point in Pontiac is pleasant... and loud. After getting over the sense of imminent rollover and being impaled on a wing window, I start to groove on the wind in the hair—I still have some hair for blowing around thanks to the genetic dice and hair transplant specialists Tessler and Aronovitz of Southfield—and the graceful, wooded curves on the north side of Orchard Lake. Then Don threads the old Ford through my old stomping grounds of Keego Harbor (during Prohibition, the preferred resort town for the Detroit Purple Gang).

From the photo on the right you can see how pastoral the northern end of Woodward is, where it runs through the high-priced spread of Oakland County—Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills, certainly where every auto-company chairman of the board locates at least one of his mansions, and with Cranbrook Institute of Arts, the Birmingham Unitarian Church (actually quite a modest facility where I was married back in the spring of 1975), many other impressive/attractive churches and homes, the green of immense money behind the secluding green of the trees. We don't see too many in chairs this far out. A few.

I can tell immediately, even when we rolled through the southern end of Pontiac, that this pink-orange and white "1956 Ford Fairlane Sunliner convertible with a stock 292 cu. in. V8 and Fordamatic transmission with the Continental tire" is getting admiring looks

from the sparsely arrayed car-lovers on the side of the road. I tell the guys, "I can't believe it's just the car that's getting all the attention, it must be my movie-star looks. Say, Hay, how is it the Queen of England does that thing? You know, the Royal Wave." So I get some training. Royal Wave (slightly rotate vertical hand back and forth horizontally): Don't Cruise without it.

So this is "the Cruise" part ...

By the time we hit Maple Road (15 Mile Road), the crowds are picking up. Maple is the main street that goes through downtown Birmingham. [Back in my Libertarian Party petitioning days in the winter of '83, I pulled a lot of signatures for ballot status off the public sidewalks of Birmingham.] I also note that part of the protocol for watchers is to have their own regular or tricked-out classic vehicles parked by the side of the road. I wonder how many just bring in the cars, then sit in their chairs, watching all weekend.

Now it's prime time. It's see and be seen. So many great looking classic cars (and trucks and other vehicles). Here's an old one on the right; I'm sure Don knows the year and make. I'm basically ignorant of car make and models except for roughly a 10-year period between ages 6 and 16. After 1965, I lost track. But it was simpler in that timeframe: you had GM, Ford-Mercury, Dodge-Plymouth-Chrysler, and the rest, e.g. Jeep, Studebaker, etc. The Woodward celebration is also about paint jobs, labors of love, special things you were doing back in American Graffiti ville.

What's this old one? Looks like a police car. But from another era. A Chrysler cereal box lacking luster. Being in the convertible provides a certain ease of conversation with inhabitants of other vehicles at the speeds we're traveling. I open up a hailing frequency and say, "Hello, officer, how are you. What year?" He tells me 1989. So 20 years ago, the popos of Madison Heights were rolling around apprehending dopesmokers and jaywalkers in grandma's painted couch on wheels.

Below 15-Mile, that's where the traffic gets dense... and remains so through to south of Nine Mile in Fashionable Ferndale. Here's where I learn that more than 50% of the cars on the classic boulevard lack any classic or even performance credentials. McCredie informs me that in recent years the mastodon-sized SUVs are crashing the party like Kudzu vine over a grove of Sequoias. Sure enough, we see several of the male-member-compensatory behemoths, but not so many that it detracts from the event. The photo is typical, around 14 1/2 Mile, four lanes, maybe 20% classic. The others, spectators.

As Haywood points out, convertibles are indeed the only way to fly on these events. Driving inside one of the old muscle cars, like a 1969 Chevelle-SS, you're going to be majorly, physically hot on days this. If it gets into the 90s, well forget it. That explains why so many of the vehicles sit by the side of the road looking pretty. Here's an open-air option for you. —>

Funny, I capture the motorcycle guy in front of a funeral parlor. (!) We're now close to Art Van Furniture, which is a dominant Michigan furniture outlet. It used to resist the Woodward Dream Cruise, but finally came to an accommodation. I'd say so, it's offering a prime 1959 Corvette in a raffle. Which introduces some of the advertising realities of the Big Event. Some good, some not so good.

So here's a montage of various promotional deals, some freelance, some corporate, and one just plain obnoxious.

By the numbers, here's what the images represent:

- 1) "Got Scrap Metal? 877.IRON.MIKE"—I wonder how advertising for scrap metal makes sense around all these restored cars; maybe the owners have some old clunkers back in the garage they want to get rid of.
- 2) "TheDivorceGuy.com (Love stinks? Yeah, yeah.)"—Is this one for men or women, or both? Again, I'm sort of wondering if the message is going to get much traction (forgive the pun) here among the car lovers... which is a "mature" crowd; most people who were going to split up would have done so years ago.
- 3) Duggan's Irish Pub, north of 13 Mile Road—location of some serious partying. Pretty young crowd, methinks—though 'young crowd,' for me, doesn't mean what it used to. It looks like one of the radio stations is camped out here, too, but I don't think it's WOMC.
- 4) Let's hear it for Ford Motor! It's done this for years, apparently, taken over (bought space) for the main drag, Nine Mile Road, through Fashionable Ferndale. We're going to be hanging between Eight Mile and Nine Mile for a short time, before heading back.
- 5) Finally, photo 5 shows you some of the local government/corporate slime factor that tries to horn in on a generally good-natured human event. It's a big screen TV blaring out crap for you name it: shopping malls, old folks' homes, Coca Cola, deodorant...

The noise blotch of Number 5 brings up the fact that in any literary rendering of events like this, readers/viewers don't experience the sounds... or the smells, tastes, or touches for that matter. For the most part, our Cruise provides pleasing input to these other senses. The Fairlane itself is the source of once common sounds, such as the low, throaty V8 hum. It also sends up faint aromas of gas, oil, occasional driver-and-passenger flatulence :); then the long heat of the evening lifts the tar smells of the road, along with tire and even brake-lining odors, from the procession.

Wheels down in Ferndale

And food. In Ferndale—from the Ford spread—the scent of barbecue and other grilled meats, breads, and whatever else wafts through the air. Let's park and grab some grub, at the pub, bub. [We're on a partial mission to check in with one of Haywood's offspring, then I want to get a shot of my old Wayne State University digs while it's still light. Both dwellings are only a block or so away from Woodward.]

Conveniently, here on the west side and south of Eight is a fast food array including Wendy's and McDonald's. Betty pulls into the Mickey D's and catches the eye of someone managing the distribution of parking spots to classic-mobiles. There's a spot next to the Cougar, and she'll let us set it down there. Apparently, this is the custom: business establishments, especially fast food emporiums make several of their parking spaces available to bona fide Cruisers like us.

Here's a view of the Bettemobile from the rear. Check out the so-called Continental tire. It seems to me the Fairlane was too small a car to warrant the relatively ornate spare tire-and-wheel enclosure that most people associated with big ol' Lincoln Continentals. Who knows how the automotive executives made their decisions back in the day. [Today, I'm sure Ford has to file 12 boxcars full of environmental impact statements and lube up (satisfy) hundreds of government officials from the ADA to Homeland Security to install a doorknob (i.e., we'll never see a Continental tire like this again).]

Also, in NE the corner of the McDonald's parking lot, Don recognizes the tow truck that starred in the movie Cars. But what's this? Now that we've finally landed, we can gaze at the scenery. I wonder whether she has anything to do with the tow truck. Girlfriend, daughter, aspiring actress? Tow Truck Girl seems to wear more than my mandatory maximum of tattoos; if I get closer will I see a nose ring? Nice geometry, probably best appreciated at a distance.

Across the street we eye a brew pub, none other than Woodward Avenue Brewers. I've heard of them. There are never enough brew pubs in a community, and I've lamented before on these pages the loss of some good ones. We cross the street without benefit of a crosswalk, learning that this particular brew pub has been rented out by a private party. Bummer. We go next door to a highly casual establishment called Sneakers Pub instead. We sup cool ones, very good quality and appropriately priced, and would have perhaps dined there, except for Haywood reporting on his cursory view of the kitchen. Fine with me, I'm a regular connoisseur of the Wendy's Dollar Menu, so we'll catch the grub part of our foot-travel excursion over there.

But we really like the friendly atmosphere, out here on the veranda... watching people. [Someone has epoxy-cemented quarters to the sidewalk, and it's a hoot to see one in ten stoop over to try to pick them up. Moderately cruel in a funloving way.]

The "friendly atmosphere" thing...

I'm glad we landed down toward the Eight Mile boundary. Remember, Eight Mile Road serves as a psychological boundary as well a physical one. On the Detroit side, the city is largely dying[4], while the Northern suburbs—Ferndale, in particular—are holding out better. Up the street toward Bloomfield Hills, where the corporate-booty machine predominates, you see a lot more 'beautiful people' looking to be seen... and a loss of the sense of community or neighborhood. At least that's my impression.

Here in the Ferndale[5] "buffer zone," first of all there are fewer people. Being allergic to crowds, I find it pleasant to be able to patronize a restaurant/bar (at a large festival event) without feeling part of a Roman Catholic fertility experiment: "Let's see how many human beings can stand side-to-side and nut-to-butt before panic sets in." [I believe studies have shown that in states where population density is lower, people tend to appreciate one another more.]

And everyone is so cheery and friendly. Not a hint of rudeness in the service, you feel special, or at least enthusiastically "invited." Other patrons and passersby were conversational and warm, as well. Pretty good mix of ebony and ivory. Then if you're an exhibitor or a Cruiser, you have a bond with all your car-loving kin. When we return to the Wendy's /McDonald's side, Don spends what seems like half an hour talking shop with this other (1957) Ford owner: "Does your mechanic's manual tell you that to change the timing chain you have to stand on your head and whistle Dixie once, or twice?"

Speaking of the mix of brothers and sisters, also in the McDonald's parking lot are these two absolutely mint-condition, gorgeous '55 Chevys. I snap the picture on the right, then walk around admiringly. The family man is preoccupied with his twins, but I believe it's his brother (outside the picture to the left) gives me some chat time. They've honed these esthetic marvels for the previous decade or so, winning "show" awards. Looks like they'd win at the track, too, but I doubt anyone races these objects of art.

A glow sets in. These are the fellow humans I've been speaking of as worth saving from the Alien Space Lizards and Pod People, then moving forward.

Departure and reflections...

Well, it's time to pack it up and put the 15th Annual Woodward Dream Cruise in our rearview mirrors. First over to the old abode (on Chesterfield—an east-west street one block north of Eight Mile), where I snap a photo that's almost too dark to make out. Memories flood over me now of this rental place where I first smoked pot, drank copious quantities of beer—my sister tells me (because I actually can't remember) that I stacked the beer cans with the intention of constructing a shed—, discussed Randian-libertarian politics into the wee hours, and attended engineering classes at Wayne State from time to time.

Speaking of classic vehicles: Back in these Ferndale days, in one of my more awesomely brilliant moves of youthful exuberance, I purchased this "show bike," a 1967 Harley Sportster, handpainted by Yosemite Sam. [I spoke of it briefly in my previous story on selling my "Free State Audi A4."] What motivated me to jump into motorcycles in such a flashy manner—and a cycle with Harley's still relatively badass reputation—was that I had read this book: *Hell's Angels: A strange and terrible saga*, by Hunter S. Thompson. [There's a reason why men in their late teens and early twenties are prime candidates for joining the military; young, dumb, and full of... impressions.]

Anyway, this bike was beautiful. It was back before gas station self-serve. If the attendant even suspected, when handing me the fill nozzle, that a cell from his hand had sloughed off on the top of my candy-apple red fuel tank, he'd fall to his knees in profuse apology. Well, a slight exaggeration, but the bike stood out dramatically. It also was hell to start up in the morning. We lived on a lot with a driveway that sloped to the road. Many's the day, after half an hour sweating to kick-start the beast, I would put the motorcycle in second gear, roll it down the driveway, and let out the clutch. Of course, if it didn't start then, I was in real trouble.

Sorry, I went off there. So many stories, not enough time.

I'm thinking now of the connection between my Sportster experience and Don's Fairlane in the Dream Cruise... and all the other classic cars. [Forget about the start troubles for my bike; basically, I didn't have the time, money, smarts, or temperament to keep it running properly.] My motorcycle and these Dream machines in their day were closer to the road and closer to their riders. When you climbed on the Harley or drove the convertible, it was a physical effort... one you enjoyed, but still effortful. Driving was experience.

Like playing real football vs. the Madden NFL video game.

So here I am in reverie over the way we were, as boys and men in the "Time of Woodwarding." The Bettemobile rolls out of my old college-era neighborhood now, west on Eight Mile, picking up the John C. Lodge and out toward the lake country. The Lodge is an Expressway; Michigan speed limit is set at an irrationally uniform 70 mph. The Fairlane is up to it, but Don steadies her at an even 65. I've been here before, in my youth, but seldom in a convertible. It's amazing the decibel level on the exposed ear in the middle of a modern urban expressway; not what you expect from the '50s sales brochure.

As we roll over the hills northbound on Middlebelt, I notice the temperature varies 5 to 10 degrees, cooling considerably in the valleys... a big plus to the driving-experience balance sheet. We sit around back at Haywood's place, out on the deck, discussing cars and affairs of the day, how the Tigers are doing, government health care, the Second Amendment.

A Dream Cruise properly done.

[1] A group of six guys has been playing poker for going on 25 years now, and going up north in Michigan once a year for a long weekend. The cabin belonged to one of our guy's parents. One morning, Don pulls a coffee cup out of the cupboard, not noticing that what's imprinted on the cup is "Betty," the proprietor's mother. So we say, "ha ha, you're Betty." (Pretty childish, eh?)

[2] Not his real name. Also a good friend whom I appreciate prefers not to be identified publicly... though he did some extremely cute things.

[3] A simple feature of Detroit-area road layout is that major East-West roads are laid out at one-mile intervals starting (I think) from Michigan Avenue that intersects the center of downtown Detroit. The mile roads are often given alphabetic names.

[4] I have my theories as to why large predominantly black cities are suffering disproportionately in relationship to older white neighborhoods and suburbs. Hint: it doesn't have anything to do with race. (Rather: systematic abandonment of the Sacred Nonaggression Principle.)

[5] Ferndale, which has a reputation of being gay-friendly (i.e. tolerant), is a poster child for the kinds of cities advocated in Dr. Richard Florida's book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

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