

FRIDAY NIGHT FOG

By
Lad Moore



It wasn't a ritual; we just did it the same way every time.

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My first car, a used Chevy, had a deep well in the trunk floor opposite the hole that the spare tire was anchored in. The well was sectioned off from the tire area, almost like a double sink. There was no carpet in the trunk, only a thick rubberized coating with a spattered finish. It was very similar to undercoating, which in fact it might have been. The compartment floor had two fist-sized metal ports with covers, each retained by opposite-facing screws. Removing one screw on each allowed the covers to pivot much like a damper on a stove. In designing that little cargo hold, the genius of Chevrolet

Engineering had created a world-class ice chest. Swinging the covers aside only slightly, the water from the melting ice would drain through the hole and out onto the pavement. The area could house eighteen quart bottles of beer—a favored container size so as to reduce the number of trips to the trunk. In deference to the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, it was like a never-ending trek down what we called the “amber brick road.” We never ran out of beer in the course of a double feature at Capri Drive-In Theatre.

In the months void of football, our group of five made it a practice to go to the Capri two or more Friday nights per month, leaving other weekend nights for cruising with dates. We met at dusk, parking all cars but one. In order to shave theatre admission costs, three of us would ride in the host car, and two others, always the smallest, concealed themselves in the trunk with the beer.

Once again, Chevrolet Engineering was on mark. On the driver’s door panel, there was a small spring-loaded button that caused the interior lights to come on when the door was opened. Not a good thing when accessing the trunk in the dark theatre lot. By removing one of the screws in the button housing, a spare door key could be attached which would serve as a pivoting arm. One could depress the button and swing the key shank down and block the button hole, thus temporarily disabling the light switch. As a third gift, Chevrolet designers made the trunk light fully accessible so that the bulb could simply be removed for the evening.

The guys in the trunk lay prone on a canvas oil-tarp covering the ice, and remained quiet as if holding their breath. They also had to observe a couple of special rules. One, the drain ports must not be opened when in line at the ticket booth so that Mrs. Lucht, the owner, wouldn’t notice an odd pool of water. She was already “hip” to the scheme of stowaways, a practice too common for the five of us to claim we invented. There was also the rumor that it was not beyond Mr. Lucht to randomly ask to open and inspect the trunks of cars that sat too low in the rear. He never checked mine. I figure it helped for me to be wearing my Uncle Penny’s “Jesus Saves” ball cap when Lucht walked around the car—a guaranteed passport. Had he ever asked to see the trunk however, the plan would be to swerve out of the ticket line and barrel through the grounds and exit the theatre at high speed—fast-enough that he couldn’t tag my license plate. I was glad it never happened. In such a bumper-car scenario, I would surely have taken out two-dozen speaker posts and a couple of Plymouths in the daring escape.

The second rule for those in the trunk was known as Dino’s Law of Fairness. Trunk boys were to respectfully abstain from opening a quart early, thus protecting from a bottle-count imbalance. Not only would it be unfair to get a head start on consumption, it would be a breach of ethics, morals, and an asymmetry of mathematics. Therefore, the code was broken regularly.

Most movies ended around eleven. The night air was sometimes accompanied by an early dew, which was appropriate to the Budweiser fog in our heads. By today’s rules, if stopped, the driver would be whisked behind bars for intoxication. But in the more whispered days of “wine and roses,” it wasn’t uncommon to get a patrolman’s finger-

wagging lecture and a police-car-escort back home. That is, if such tests of the leniency weren't too repetitive. The officer's knowing your dad from Lions Club and Methodist Men only got you a couple of passes at best.

This particular night we left the theatre without remembering much about the films, anticipating the evening's finale yet to come. The palms of our hands would begin to sweat with just the thought of the next adventure.

We drove across town to Wiley, the black college campus. As close as it got to anything resembling a contest between the races, there was something of a harmless ritual in our town that was passed down from year to year. It was called "Ringing Wiley's Bell," and was a marked celebration of the passage of adolescence akin to the worship of emerging body hair. In the near-center of the college campus, there was a platform that housed a large cast bell—an edifice that held some significance to the school's history. Knowing that it was revered by the students, the challenge was simple: Get close to the bell—close enough to hit it with a hurled object, and make it sound a thunderous note. Then would follow a hasty getaway, because the students would be pouring out of their dorm rooms in protest. Legend was that any captured bell-ringer would be tossed alive into the tar pit—a giant bubbling asphaltum supposedly located in a dense wooded area on a Wiley professor's farm. The pit reportedly housed skeletons of long-extinct mammals that white-kid's bones could easily be mistaken for. But the risk was worth it. A kid who was credited by witnesses as having rung Wiley's Bell would be whispered about in the hallways, and would always command a crowd in the cafeteria. Sometimes, lunch-tray deserts would even flow to the honoree as offerings. Yep, ringing the bell was almost as cool as being able to mimic the Elvis lip-curl.

The empty beer quarts were called "dead soldiers," likely because they lined up so neatly across the trunk of the car, forming a somber line of the fallen. In the quiet of night, we grabbed the bottles by the neck, throwing them like grenades at the bell. In many tries, not once did the bell chime, and not once did we even hear a bottle break on anything. We accused each other of deliberate mis-throws out of fears surrounding the tar pit. To dramatize just the courage of the effort, we sped off in a ribbon of black rubber as if we had scored and were being attacked by the entire student body, each brandishing a petrified mammal leg bone. The truth was less glamorous. In several attempts at this life-threatening activity, we never saw a single student on campus. Having better sense than we, they were sound asleep.

The final Friday night stop was at The Steakhouse, a twenty-four-hour time-weathered restaurant on the west end of US Highway 80. Each of us always ordered the same menu item because there was no worthy competition—nothing could beat the special. For \$1.15 you could get "The Maverick," consisting of a dinner salad with Thousand Island dressing, lard-limp fries, and the heralded hubcap-sized veal cutlet with white gravy and Texas Toast.

Friday's after-midnight dinner always went down well and cleared most of the lingering Budweiser haze. After an exchange of belches and other friendship-pardoned noises, we

paused for parting handshakes and backslaps under the yellow bug lamp on the cafe porch, then dispersed into the East Texas night.

We already knew from the previews. Capri would soon be showing *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*, back-to-back Jimmy Stewart nail-biters. And afterwards, if the “dead soldiers” were up to another muster, there was always The Bell.

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The author’s latest short story collection, “Riders of the Seven Hills” is now available at traditional booksellers along with his previous works, “Tailwind” and “Odie Dodie. Signed copies may be obtained by contacting the author, [pogoranch@yahoo.com](mailto:pogoranch@yahoo.com)