

THE
Bucyrus
That Was

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That Was

GROWING UP IN
Small Town, America,
IN THE 1950s

Bill Elder

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DEDICATION

To my wife and best friend, Vivian Logan Elder

To my daughters,
Laura Gogis and Lacey Montgomery

To my sons-in-law,
Mike Gogis and Andrew Montgomery

To my grandchildren,
Logan Gogis, Landon Gogis and Ella Kate Montgomery

And to all my fellow Bucyrians
who grew up during the “happy days” of the 1950s

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INTRODUCTION

I was fortunate to grow up during the “happy days” of the 1950s. Having witnessed a few decades now, I believe unequivocally that the 1950s were the best years in the history of our country in which a young boy could come of age. This was especially true for small town boys. I know many people think their era was the best but I, along with many others, am convinced that that decade – the ‘50s – was truly the “golden age.”

This golden age did have its problems. It was certainly a time of oppressive racial prejudice and gender inequities. We also faced the Korean War, the Cold War, with its genuine fear of nuclear attack by the Soviet Union, and the devastating polio epidemic. Many neighborhoods across the nation had boys and girls who limped, instead of walked, to school every day.

Considering all of this, the 1950s were perhaps not as golden as they are often portrayed. If, however, one compares this era with the deprivations of the Great Depression of the ‘30s, the atrocities of World War II during the ‘40s, the social upheaval of the ‘60s, the malaise of the ‘70s, the greed and self centeredness of the ‘80s, the globalization of the ‘90s, or the terrorism, energy and financial concerns of the present period, the 1950s do indeed seem increasingly golden.

I feel blessed to have grown up during this time and to have so many “coming-of- age” memories. After sharing my reflections of 1950s Small Town, America, I will let you be the judge as to whether this era was truly golden.

Part Four

THE TEENAGE YEARS

*“Don’t laugh at a teenager for his affectations;
he is only trying on one face after another to find a face of his own.”*

– Logan Pearsall Smith

LAPPING / CRUISING

When I first saw the movie *American Graffiti*, I could have sworn that it had been based on the heyday of cruising in Bucyrus, Ohio, during the 1950s. Just as is portrayed in the movie, one of the most popular activities in town was driving laps or *cruising*. *Lapping* involved driving the same route around town, especially on weekends, over and over again. We jammed four to six guys into a vehicle – usually one of our parents’ cars. It goes without saying that in most cases, we were not particularly proud of our families’ vehicles since they were usually station wagons or basic four-door sedans – definitely not chick magnets, to say the least. Nevertheless, we eagerly looked forward to this weekend ritual. The official starting point for lapping was the L&K Restaurant. The L&K was located on the corner of Sandusky Avenue and East Charles Street and was one of the town’s most popular hang-outs for local teenagers. Another popular rallying point was Freddie’s Drive-In Restaurant, located on North Sandusky Avenue, not far from the bridge that spanned the Sandusky

River. After leaving the L&K, we started our weekend routine by driving north on Sandusky Avenue, proceeding through the town square on our way to Freddie's Drive-In. Once we arrived at Freddie's, we used the restaurant's parking lot as a pivot point, heading back south toward the L&K. When we reached the L&K, we continued south on Sandusky Avenue until we came to Southern Avenue, where we turned right and made the short drive to Marion Road, again turning right and continuing until that road ended on Sandusky Avenue. Once we had turned left on Sandusky, we drove north until we again reached the L&K. At that point, we had completed a lap. We continued doing laps until we either met some girls or ran low on gas. Most of the time, our nights ended because we ran low on gas. If we saw some friends, especially of the female variety, at the L&K, we called a temporary halt to the lapping, parked the car and went in to socialize with the young ladies. If we did not see anyone, we continued turning laps.

Carole Sitler, daughter of the mayor of Bucyrus at the time, told me in later life how she frequently – on weekends – borrowed her dad's 1957 Buick (with big fins), jamming six or seven of her friends in it to turn laps. She recalls that there were two north and two south lanes (plus cars parked on either side) the entire length of the downtown lapping area. She remembers that she could literally reach out of her car window and touch the car that was beside her whenever she stopped at red lights. Today, Sandusky Avenue handles just two lanes of traffic. What is quite amazing, in retrospect, is that the lapping days saw very few accidents. Carole attributes this to Mr. Alex Kish, the long time driver education teacher at Bucyrus High School. He was truly an excellent teacher who conveyed to

many generations of young Bucyrians the art of driving, enabling them, we presume, to successfully negotiate those tight lanes through countless laps.

During the summer months, many lappers altered the traditional course by turning east onto Mansfield Street and continuing to the edge of town, arriving at Mac-Walt's Drive-in Restaurant. Once there, they would circle that establishment's parking lot (checking it out for girls) and, seeing none, head back to Sandusky Avenue where they would revert to the traditional lapping course.

Gas cost only twenty-five cents a gallon during the 1950s. This seems an insignificant amount when compared to today's prices, but for most of us, it represented a substantial chunk of cash. Whenever we went cruising, the unwritten rule was that each passenger in the car chipped in a quarter to help pay for the night of lapping. The driver, of course, was exempt because he had to cover any cost for gas beyond what the passengers paid. There was frequently some grumbling concerning this expectation, but most of us did the right thing and paid our dues. Rick Paetznick was a championship level grumbler. We learned just to let him gripe about the unfairness of the levy, knowing that he would eventually cough up his 25 cents.

One night John Ehrhart and Filmore Bass set the unofficial lapping mileage record. John had just gotten his driver's license and had been bugging his dad to let him use the family car. Mr. Ehrhart finally gave in but told John that he could drive only within the Bucyrus city limits. Unbeknownst to John, his dad checked the odometer on the car before he handed over the keys. John picked up Filmore and the laps began.

Not wanting to be grounded for life, John was obedi-

ent and did not venture out of the town's city limits that night. Feeling the euphoria of having wheels for the evening, the two young studs drove for five hours without stopping except for bathroom breaks. When John parked the car in his driveway at 10:58 PM (his curfew being 11:00), he sprinted up the stairs to his apartment above his family's business and sat down in the living room, very satisfied with his first official night of lapping. His dad evidently went down to check the odometer immediately after John arrived, and subsequently, stormed up the stairs to confront his son. Once in the living room (according to John), he stated sternly, "I thought I told you not to drive out of the city limits." Stunned at the accusation, John assured his dad that he had done exactly as he had been told to do. "I did not leave the city limits of Bucyrus," he insisted. Mr. Ehrhart then reportedly said, "What do you mean? I checked the odometer and you drove 187 miles tonight. You had to have gone out of town. There is no way that you could drive 187 miles within the city limits of a town with only 12,000 people." After a lengthy conversation, John finally convinced his dad that he was not lying. Mr. Ehrhart subsequently established a new rule: John was not only restricted to the city limits, but he was also limited to thirty miles on any given night.

Prior to John's record-breaking night of lapping, Bill Flock had held the unofficial record of 135 miles of laps in one night. Bill was accompanied by a couple of our classmates – Dave Katterhenrich and Mike Nealley – on the night of his record run. Like John, Bill was subjected to a bawling out by his dad when he returned home. Like John's dad, Bill's father had checked the odometer before letting his son leave in the family car. When the evening was over, Bill's dad asked where he had

gone in the car, and when Bill told him that he had just been driving around Bucyrus, his dad informed him that according to the odometer, he had put 135 miles on the family vehicle that night. That's how we became aware of those records.

While not really guilty of breaking family rules about driving outside the city limits, I'll have to say many of us did stretch expectations a bit with some drag racing – of a sort. The stretch of street between Freddie's and the L&K was mostly flat and straight, the only thing breaking the line being five red lights. While lapping, anyone who happened to stop at a red light at the same time as another car was likely to “put the pedal to the metal” in a race to the next light. To signal a willingness to race, a driver revved up his motor. If there was no clear winner after reaching the next light, then chances were good that the two drivers might agree to take their drag race out into the country for a showdown. There was an isolated section of Highway 98 between Bucyrus and Marion that was perfectly flat and straight – with no interfering red lights – and many of these drag races were conducted there. I've been told that someone even painted start and finish lines exactly one quarter of a mile apart.

At illegal drag races, it was customary for all of the passengers of the two cars to get out of the vehicles. The spectators would then gather around the starting line, one of them often acting as the official starter. Sometimes a small amount of money was bet on the race. Contrary to local legend, however, I never knew of the ownership papers for a car being lost at one of these events. For the most part, the winner just got bragging rights for having the fastest car. Once that was settled, it was back to driving laps for the duration of the evening.

I do remember a storied drag race that took place between John Ehrhart and Bucyrus High School sports legend Herb Jones. It was 1958 and John's dad had just bought him a brand new Studebaker Golden Hawk. The small vehicle had a very powerful engine with exceptional pick up. Herb's dad had bought him a top-of-the-line 1956 Chevrolet Belair. Although Herb was a few years older than John, they had always been good friends. As young men tend to do, they both got to bragging about how fast their cars were. This boasting persisted on for several weeks until John asked Herb to put his money where his mouth was. John was willing to bet twenty dollars that his car would beat Herb's in a quarter mile race. The competitive Herb was not one to back down from a challenge. Twenty dollars was a lot of money back in 1958, but both guys were very confident and agreed to the showdown.

They went out to the usual drag racing section of Highway 98 and marked off the usual quarter mile distance. I think that both cars had very powerful engines, but the difference was that John's Golden Hawk was much lighter. John edged out Herb in a very close race and ecstatically accepted Herb's twenty dollar donation to the John Ehrhart's Golden Hawk gas fund. After all these years, Herb still has a hard time accepting the defeat of his beloved Chevrolet Belair.

A former football teammate of mine, Nick Vasil, once told me a humorous but revealing story about what happened to him after a night of drag racing in Bucyrus. Like most of us, Nick's only set of wheels when he was a teen was the family car. He was feeling his oats one night, revving up his engine at every red light in town, burning rubber when the lights changed from red to green, and racing to the next red light. He

was feeling pretty good about his car's performance when he called it a night and headed home to meet his 11:00 weekend curfew.

When he arrived, his dad was waiting for him. As soon as he sat down at the kitchen table for a pre-bedtime snack, his dad asked him if he had anything to tell him. Clueless, Nick said that he didn't. Then his dad told him that one of the members of the Bucyrus Police Department had called to inform him that Nick had been burning rubber at every red light in town and drag racing from light to light. After bawling him out, Nick's dad grounded him indefinitely.

I think this incident epitomizes how things were in Bucyrus during the 1950s. Rather than formally ticketing Nick for reckless driving, the officer simply called his father. The police officers knew the local teens by name and were well aware that informing their parents of whatever their kids were doing out of line would resolve the problem. Usually, in fact, the punishment dealt out by parents for these minor offenses was more severe than any action that might have been taken by the police. I have pondered this and finally come to realize that involving the parents was actually a great way to rein in the teenagers. I can recall numerous examples of the police handing out this type of justice during my growing up years in Bucyrus.

One such incident began on a night when Bill Flock and Jerry Hancock were cruising in Jerry's 1955 Ford Crown Victoria, all decked out with bubble skirts and lake pipes. They were feeling pretty good about themselves when they spotted a policeman coming up in the lane next to them. The two young studs decided that it would be a hoot to give the police-

men a “shot of their pipes.” With this in mind, Jerry backed off just as the cop pulled alongside them. About one block later, another policeman pulled the two hot rodders over and instructed them to follow him to the Bucyrus Police Station where the policeman placed Jerry under arrest and impounded his car. I assume he was arrested for showing disrespect to a police officer. Jerry had to call his dad to come get him.

Unfortunately for Bill Flock, his dad was friends with a number of local police officers and often hung out with them at the station. As luck would have it, his dad was actually sitting at the station shooting the breeze when the two loud muffler offenders were brought in for questioning.

Once Bill saw his dad, he knew he was in for big trouble. Trying to get a jump on the situation, he protested, “I haven’t done anything wrong. I was just riding in Jerry’s car.” The Captain on duty that night looked at Bill for a few seconds and then asked, “Where is your car, Flock?” Bill said that it was at home, and Bill’s dad nodded in agreement. Without hesitating the Captain then said, “Give me your keys.” Bill protested, saying, “Captain, I haven’t done anything wrong,” to which the policeman replied, “Don’t worry about it. I am sure that I can come up with something. You come back in a week and I’ll return your key.” All the while, Bill’s dad was simply observing the interplay between his son and his policeman friend, occasionally nodding as if in agreement. According to Bill, the whole situation was a great incentive to respect police officers and authority figures in general. It was tough walking everywhere for a week, Bill remembers, but having to do so definitely reinforced the lesson. The local police officers clearly had unique and effective methods for dealing with the teenag-

ers in Bucyrus during this era.

Now, back to lapping. The main goal of driving laps was to meet girls. More often than not, however, my buddies and I went home at the end of a night without achieving our goal. One time, though, I was picked up by a girl who herself was out lapping. Late one afternoon, I was walking with a friend down Sandusky Avenue in the downtown section. We were surprised to see Mary Kay Calhoun drive up in her parents' car and come to a stop at the curb right next to Struble's Drug Store. We were further surprised to see that it was Mary Kay behind the wheel because she was several grades behind us in school, and we were not even aware that she had a driver's license. She came to a screeching stop, then asked, "Hey, you wanna go for a ride?" Not being guys who'd ever turn down a ride with a pretty girl, we said yes, grinning widely, I'm sure. Before we climbed into her car, my buddy and I got into a brief dispute about who was going to ride in the shotgun seat. After winning the argument, I clambered into the seat next to the front passenger side window. Most cars in the '50s had bench type seating in the front rather than the more modern two seats with a console between. For this reason, it was a big deal to get the seat next to the window instead of having to sit crammed up in the middle. In retrospect, I don't know what I was thinking because being jammed up next to a pretty girl is not all that bad. Anyway, we both hopped into her car and Mary Kay started her laps. Since none of the cars during the 1950s had seat belts, we just shut the door and Mary Kay took off.

As we headed north on Sandusky Avenue, Mary Kay honked the horn and waved at various people that we knew. After cruising through the downtown area, we had the choice

of turning around at Freddie's Drive-In Restaurant or going a little farther down the street to a new turn-around point in the parking lot of a recently-constructed medical center (on Gaius Street near the hospital). For some reason, Mary Kay chose the medical center for her turn-around. What we called the *medical center* was in reality no more than a small strip mall that housed a doctor's office and several other related businesses. It had a relatively large parking lot for its customers that covered about one half of a block. In the middle of the parking lot was a good-sized drainage dip. When Mary Kay slowly turned into the parking lot, she looked over at us and said, "Feel how the car goes airborne when I drive through that drainage dip! She then pressed down on the accelerator and took off. We had to be going at least 35 miles per hour when we hit the dip. Just as she had told us it would, the car floated up in the air when we came off the dip. When we returned to the pavement, however, Mary Kay lost control of the car. Being an inexperienced driver, she made the mistake of hitting the gas pedal rather than the brake. We later estimated that we must have been going 40 miles per hour as we headed in the direction of the doctor's office. Mary Kay never took her foot off the accelerator as we crashed into the brick wall, partially caving it in. Fortunately, since it was 5:30 PM, no one was in the office. Despite not having seat belts, the three of us survived the spectacular crash with only minor cuts and bruises.

We climbed out of the car to determine the extent of the damage. We knew we had to call the police. Since there were no cell phones in those days, one of us walked to a pay phone not too far away and reported the accident.

The first thing on the policeman's agenda was to de-

termine whether Mary Kay had a valid driver's license. After the officer peered at her license, he began laughing and said, "You've had quite an eventful day first day as a licensed driver, young lady!" Clearly, that was an understatement.

After getting her license back from the policeman, Mary Kay walked over to where my buddy and I were standing. We noticed that the gravity of the situation was sinking in. She looked at both of us and said, "My parents are going to kill me. I have destroyed the family car. I'm going to be grounded for the rest of my life." After getting the last word out, she promptly fainted and was out cold by the time she hit the ground. It took us a minute or two to revive her, and after she regained her senses, our next problem was to find a way to get home. We certainly did not want to ask the officers to drive us home in the police car. Mary Kay decided it would be best if someone took her home too, so she could explain the accident to her parents in person, and they could make arrangements for a wrecker service to extract the car from the medical center's wall.

Neither my buddy nor I wanted to call our parents to come get us since we did not want them to know that we had been involved in such an accident. Instead, we called a mutual friend. All in all, it ended up being a pretty exciting day for two guys who had, just a few minutes earlier, been walking down Sandusky Avenue minding their own business. It was also the first and last time that I allowed myself to be picked up by a girl who was driving a car. I never did learn whether or not Mary Kay received a life-time grounding for the incident.

One of the signature parts of the ritual of lapping was the *horn blow*. When you saw a carload of people that you knew,

you always gave them a quick beep with your horn. One of my classmates, Vonnie Pirnstill, told me how her high school English class tried to explain the significance of the horn blows to one of the most popular teachers at Bucyrus High School, Mrs. Bess Ward. Mrs. Ward taught English to many generations of students during her tenure at BHS. She was, hands down, the best teacher at the school, as well as being a very cultured and dignified woman. One day Mrs. Ward asked Vonnie's class why there was so much horn blowing on Sandusky Avenue from 7:00 PM until late at night on weekends. She lived with her husband in a very attractive house on Walnut Street, just one block from the lapping thoroughfare. Anyway, some brave soul in the English class took it upon himself to enlighten Mrs. Ward about the intricacies of lapping and horn blowing. After explaining what lapping was all about, he told her that the beeping of the car horns was just a way for one carload of teenagers to say hello to another. After thinking about this bit of insight, Mrs. Ward said that she was glad to learn the details of lapping but that she could do without all of the beeping because it kept her awake at night. Without further ado, I'm told, she proceeded to give the class a lecture on dangling participles.

Fancy mufflers were a much sought-after commodity for any self-respecting male lapper. Just thinking about the mellow sound produced by these mufflers when lappers went through their three or four speed gear shifts brings sweet memories. Vonnie told me that her boyfriend (and future husband) had a four speed 1956 Chevrolet. Although she lived several blocks from Sandusky Avenue, she could invariably hear her boyfriend two or three minutes before he arrived at her house

to pick her up for a date. She had learned to recognize his shifting patterns and the sounds of his mufflers. Many of us could identify the sounds of our friends' cars.

According to Vonnie, the girls of that day enjoyed lapping as much as the guys did. She said that her dad would, on occasion, let her use the family vehicle for that purpose. Her family's car was not what one would call a *happening* vehicle; nonetheless, she was happy to have access to the light green Ford station wagon. She said that she and her girl friends would turn laps until almost all of the gas was gone, then pool their resources to get enough money to buy one more gallon. This allowed them to do their final lap, driving from the L&K Restaurant to Freddie's Drive-In, making the u-turn and then driving back through town one more time before calling it a night.

The parents of one of Vonnie's best friends, Sue Haller, owned a big pink and white Cadillac convertible. According to Vonnie, Sue's mother would not let her take the classy vehicle lapping; she supposedly considered that activity too forward and unladylike and did not approve of girls' attracting attention to themselves in such a manner.

Bill Flock told me that a group of girls frequently asked to use his car to go lapping. Bill had a part-time job at Clady's Drug Store and usually parked his car on Sandusky Avenue in front of the store while he was working. Whenever some of our female classmates – Bonnie Burwell, Bonnie Taylor, Sharon Heinlein, or others – spotted his 1951 Chevy, they came into the drug store to beg Bill for use of his car. Taking into consideration that these young ladies were all good looking and popular, he usually gave in to their sweet talk and turned over the keys. Being a card-carrying teenager, I am sure he nev-

er thought about the potential insurance and liability problems that might have occurred if there was an accident. The girls always rewarded Bill's generous nature by washing his vehicle and purchasing a few gallons of gas before returning it.

Madeline McKinley and some of her friends added a different twist to their lapping experience. They often got together for a night of cruising, and when they spotted some friends, would pull up next to them at a red light. Then, the passengers of the two cars would hop out of their respective vehicles and switch places, proceeding with their laps in the company of another driver.

Madeline indicated that they always made at least one stop at Freddie's Drive-in or the L&K on their cruising adventures. After ordering cokes and hamburgers, they would sit and talk, sometimes for hours. Since Madeline is only five feet tall, her feet didn't (and still don't) touch the floor, and she notes that these long sits in the booths of the two eateries were not always comfortable.

MY FIRST ADVENTURES IN THE WORLD OF DATING

Since I was not allowed to attend dances or movies, I did not have what you would call a *stellar* social life during my high school years. As if this list of taboos was not a big enough social hurdle to overcome, I was also the second-youngest kid in my class. I started first grade when I was only five years old, not turning six until December 17th of that year. This meant that I was just sixteen years old for the first half of my senior