

Hot rods rule, OK?
The highest
evolution
of automotive art
returns with the
roadsters to ...

Beach Street

'He's broke right now. Real broke. But everytime he looks at his car, he's happy.'

— Taz Nelson

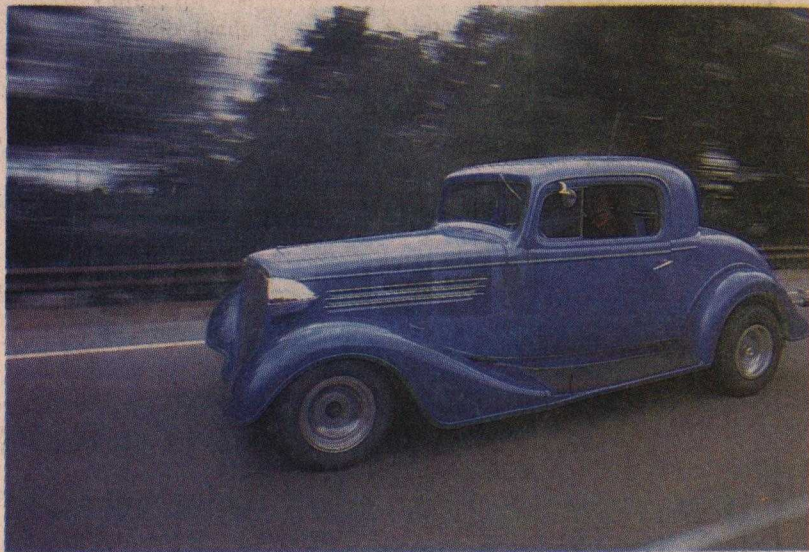
By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel Staff Writer

NO ONE forgets his first car, drunk, and loves — and for some all three went together. It is part of growing up in America. One of the seminal images of our era will be a hot rod roadster cruising down the road.

Every neighborhood has at least one guy who works on cars, who spends all of his spare time pulling them apart and putting them back together. Whose true love and passion is expressed in the curve of a fender, the flair of a tailpipe or the polish of a paint job.

They're the the ones whose garages are lit late into the night with the glow of acetylene torches. Whose "projects," the partially refurbished shells of cars, spill out into the yard. The ones who polish chrome beyond reason and shake the neighborhood when they turn on their machines.

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Photos by Bill Lovejoy

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It is a lower-key love for most habitual mechanics. Les Kinney develops his cars as a hobby. The family car is a four-door '55 Belair, polished to perfection.

"I bought it when an old gal died a year ago," Kinney said. "It had 64,000 miles on it."

The total investment on Kinney's Belair is \$2,300, which beats buying a new Toyota. His garage, however, qualifies him as a serious home mechanic. Taking up all of the usable space is the shell of another '55 Belair and a dusty '60 Corvette he has had since he was 18.

The background blurs as Bobbie Nelson takes her '34 Buick coupe for a cruise, above. Right, another coat of polish. Classic cars are a labor of love for Les Kinney.

and find new things, but I think that people try to recreate good times."

During the revival, the hot-rodders will go on "poker" runs, where they are given directions to follow. At five checkpoints, they are given poker cards and at the end of the drive the best hand wins.



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"It is a labor of love," says Taz Nelson, who drives a '23 T-Bucket Ford he built from the ground up. "We take these cars that Detroit has sold to people who don't care about them, who have left them abandoned with rust holes. We take the basic body parts and update them and put these things back on the road."

Back on the road in style. The process of converting a rusting skeleton of a car into a roadster, however, is one that often spans years.

"There's plenty of guys who live in their garages," says Bobbie Nelson, the wife of Taz, who drives a blue '34 Buick coupe hot-rod to work. "We just built a house. It has a six-car garage with living quarters attached."

The cost of producing a hot rod usually is determined by how much money the owner has. An average top-end roadster can cost \$15,000 to \$30,000, which doesn't include the time involved.

"The high end is as much as you can dream up," says Taz Nelson.

He tells the story of one local hot rod builder who had everything he could pull off his car chromed and 24-carat-gold plated.

"He's broke right now," Taz Nelson says. "Real broke. But

perhaps they're going home where they are given directions to follow. At five checkpoints, they are given poker cards and at the end of the drive the best hand wins.

"I work on them between building fences, painting the house and chasing the kids," Kinney says.

Estimates on the number of serious hot-rod aficionados in Santa Cruz, those who build their own roadsters, range from 100 to 500 and more. In Santa Cruz alone, there are three car clubs, the Streetsters, the Clockers and the Santa Cruz Street Machines. The culmination of the local hot-rod scene is the annual Beach Street Revival, which occurs Saturday and Sunday with 400 cars entered.

"Beach Street addresses an era," Taz Nelson says. "In the '50s, they took '32 and '34 Fords and took off the fenders, channeled the frames, pulled the chrome off, recessed the tail lights. They really did outrageous body work, and in that era if you didn't have that, you were nobody. If you had to drive your mom's '56 Chevy, that was nowhere."

Taz Nelson, who went to high school in San Jose, had a reworked '55 Ford pickup.

"I was a somebody," he says.

"In Santa Cruz in the '50s and '60s," Bobbie Nelson remembers. "There wasn't a whole lot to do. We're reliving an old memory, and maybe that's not supposed to happen. You're supposed to let go

where they are given directions to follow. At five checkpoints, they are given poker cards and at the end of the drive the best hand wins.

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Heaven is the whole boulevard when you're 16

IT DIDN'T look like much, but it was just enough car to get me in trouble. It was a little red Shelby Mustang with one orange fender, parked on the side of a broken-down, used car lot. There were plastic flags snapping in the breeze and a salesman's hut with plywood over the broken windows.

The Mustang sounded sweet. The muffler was blown, which gave it just the right earthy rumble. It had a hole in the floor where you could see the ground. There were oily rags in back where the seat had been torn out. I bought it on the spot for \$300.

I was 15 and the car was going to solve a lot of problems.

For months I had been stealing my mother's car while she was at work. I would cruise up and down the coast with my surf buddies. At lunchtime, or before she got off, I would race back with the car.

The only problem was that I couldn't always park it where she left it. Most of the time, I put it within a couple of spaces up or down the block, hopefully on the same side of the street. She would come out of her office and have to walk around to find where she had left her car.

"Are you taking my car?" she asked me after finding the engine still clicking from cooling down and the gas gauge on empty.

"No," I said. "I don't even have a license yet." (I was not the type of teen-ager that made parents proud.)

ISIGNED the papers for my first car. There was only one problem. I couldn't drive a stick shift. The man at the lot gave me a quick lesson.

I put my elbow out the window, blew the horn and lurched out of the lot feeling like a million bucks. The car stalled in the

middle of the street 20 feet from the lot. It rolled backward as I restarted it. I put it in gear and it lurched forward and stalled.

By the end of the block I was starting to get it wired. I found that by keeping it floored, I stalled less.

Stop-and-go traffic was a whole new challenge. I triple-stalled in intersections. Lights turned from green to red. Men in cars laughed. Women moved out of the way. I mastered a triple lurch start by pumping the clutch.

I jerked my way home for 10 miles feeling pretty cool when the car was moving.

Soon I figured it out and started doing a lot of driving. The neighbors put locking caps on their gas tanks.

NOW THAT car could really move. It made telephone

poles look like pickets on a fence. It made the highway lines burst and stutter in the night.

It had a shudder at 80, smoothed out at 90 and had a sickening drift and wallow over 100.

I would drive 40 miles up the highway, turn around and drive back. I spent nights steaming up the windows while overlooking the ocean and necking. (My wife claims I couldn't steam up the rear view mirror.)

The end came on a rainy Thanksgiving night when I wrapped the car around a telephone pole. Rain ran red over the crumpled fender and bent in the highway light. I took off the surf racks and walked home.

No one thinks he is so immortal as a 16-year-old kid with a car, though now I realize that innocence is a most ephemeral thing.

— JOHN ROBINSON

Beach Street

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There also will be "spoli" parties where a punch that resembles anti-freeze is mixed in a bathtub.

Previous Beach Street Revivals have featured "loud mouth rallies" where people sit in chairs and do their best imitation of a car changing gears. This probably takes place well into the spoli party.

There are, however, some pressing questions, beyond recreating an era. These would be: Why spend so much time on a car that is of such limited use? Are the cars really fast? And what about those fuzzy dice hanging from the mirror?

"Most people will stand back five feet, put their hands in their pockets and drool," Taz Nelson says, "and that makes me feel good. To have somebody come up and say 'wow!' It's a love, a hobby and an art."

As for the cars going fast, there are stories that the hot-rodders still meet up the coast Friday nights.

"You bet they're fast," Taz Nelson says. "There is one guy who has an alcohol-burning, blown Chrysler engine that nothing on the street can keep up with."

But perhaps of most interest: Why do they hang fuzzy dice from the mirror?

"Hey you've got to have dice," Bobbie Nelson says. "What would a hot rod be without dice? I mean what would an old couple's car be without a dog with a bouncing head in back?"