

The Disguised Dragon (Hot Rod) by Frank Ball

Here is an Alpine experience I have not shared with many people. This is in part because I don't share my experiences a lot, but mostly because it has been buried under a good deal of mental debris since 1947.

As a Grossmont High School Sophomore, I shared a dream with many of my classmates. That dream was to build a street roadster. The image you get from the term *hot rod* may be less fuzzy than *street roadster*. In those days the term Hot Rod was sort of uncool but now, fifty years hence, I say "A rose by any other name..." I had a better shot at accomplishing this dream of mine than most of my friends. I was already part owner of a car, which was responsible for much of the vehicular terror rampant in Alpine at that time. (My brother Newt and I had owned a semi-operational but unregistered '29 Chevy since I was in the sixth grade, but that is another story). Besides being in partial ownership of a car, I ran with a crowd in which I was the youngest member. This provided me with mountains of inexpensive advice.

The car, of which I was part owner, was far too humble a basis for the car of my dreams and was not in contention. There were many pieces of older vehicles at my disposal, and from these I could learn to make most of what I needed. One thing I could not hope to make was the body. It was socially dictated that the body must be the front half of a '27 Model "T" Touring Sedan. The same body was used to produce the Model T pickup. Though an impressive supply of these were made in Detroit by Henry Ford, and a fair share of them came to Southern California, most of them had already been used to build street roadsters. There was only one left in Alpine. When I found out where it was, I understood why it had not been nabbed.

On South Grade Road about half a mile East of Lamb's Corners, the Findel family had a neighbor to the west, Mr. Castro. He lived alone, minded his own business and had very little truck with kids. This made him a prime candidate for distortions of image in the minds of the Alpine population under eighteen years of age. In my recollection of him, I am not sure of the line between fact and fantasy. As I recall, he was a lean, sun-baked Portuguese with roughly five large, irregular teeth. No one, known to me, had ever been close enough to him to count teeth, but about five is what it looked like from forty feet away. He was a giant goblin fifteen feet tall. His proximity was so clearly perilous that when youngsters would encounter him shopping in Wilson's Store they would always wait until he was gone before venturing in the door. Short peeks in the

windows were safe enough if you didn't look like you were looking, but not if he was close to the window.

When I was told there was a '27 T body at Mr. Castro's place, the meaning of the word dilemma took on striking new dimensions. It was about two months before I came to terms with the reality that I must enter Mr. Castro's property, without a gun in my hand, and ask if I could buy that "T" body. I could think of no reason why anyone would do it for me, so I finally walked that interminable quarter mile down a straight dirt road with nothing to hide behind. I was alone, of course, because I was the only one I knew with this measureless motivation. This endeavor was by far the scariest thing I had ever done, voluntarily or by mistake. As I approached Mr. Castro's yard, my worst fears were realized; he was there, then commenced a convoluted discourse. English was not his native language. It was mine, but no one would have known it as the dense anxiety was playing havoc with messages between my brain and vocal cords.

The object of my quest was in plain sight, right there in the front yard, engaged as a tenement for chickens. It waited tantalizingly, as I resorted to a mixture of stammer and sign language to negotiate its release. For many reasons, not the least of which was surprise, Mr. Castro could not gain the foggiest concept of why I could possibly want his hen house. In spite of that, a deal was struck. To me, it seemed to take an eternity. I have forgotten the price; it isn't what was on my mind. In fairness to Mr. Castro, (I'm sure I owe him a lot of fairness) he could not have been more agreeable. The chances are it didn't cost me any money, but if the price had been a thousand dollars I would not remember.

A period of many months transpired before the rubber hit the road. I narrowed the body a few inches. I had to find or make or buy many components. I had a special short and thick radiator built. The first engine was a flat-head Ford V-8 with someone's discarded street cam. A '32 Ford transmission and Model A differential were used. The frame was made from Model T side rails with Model A cross members. For \$5 a month, my brother and I bought a 500 amp Hobart arc welder from a woman newly widowed by a motorcycle accident.

I put together a car that showed a good deal of potential. It had a wheelbase of only 80 inches and weighed only 1400 pounds. It was fun to drive but there was more development to accomplish. In time I built a fresh engine from a '47 Ford V8. It was bored a quarter inch, had a Mercury crank giving it a stroke increase of a quarter inch. The block was ported and relieved (treatment to make the flat-head engine design breathe more freely at higher RPM.) I put on cast aluminum Edlebrock heads and matching three-carburetor manifold. I installed a Winfield racing cam with Lincoln valve

springs. Somewhere I acquired four Kelsey-Hayes after-market spoked wheels for a Ford.



About that time, an abandoned airstrip at Paradise Hills was beginning to be used clandestinely for acceleration competition by kids with cars like mine. During the Second World War the Navy built the strip for pilots to practice carrier landings. It later became Paradise Drag Strip and since then, a housing development. A high-school friend of mine, whose pride and joy was a '32 Ford roadster, invited me to show up at the strip. I'm sure he expected he would bring in another car he could beat. The contest was repeated several times with the same result. That result made me very happy but was less than satisfactory from his point of view. I was looking through a high-school annual recently when I came across a hand-written entry by this friend.

“Here's to a fine lad with a shot rod he thinks is a hottie but it is really a clunk.”

This entry was made a few weeks prior to our meeting at the drag strip.

As Paradise Drag Strip became an organized entity, I got more interested in joining official competition with my roadster. In fact it was just about the most excitement I had ever had with a car. At its best in 1951, a couple years after high school, my car was able to win the trophy for “fastest time of the meet” three times in one summer. Using fuel composed of methyl alcohol and nitro methane, it would reach 110 mph in a quarter mile from a standing start. It may not sound like much by modern comparisons but in 1951 it was very competitive.