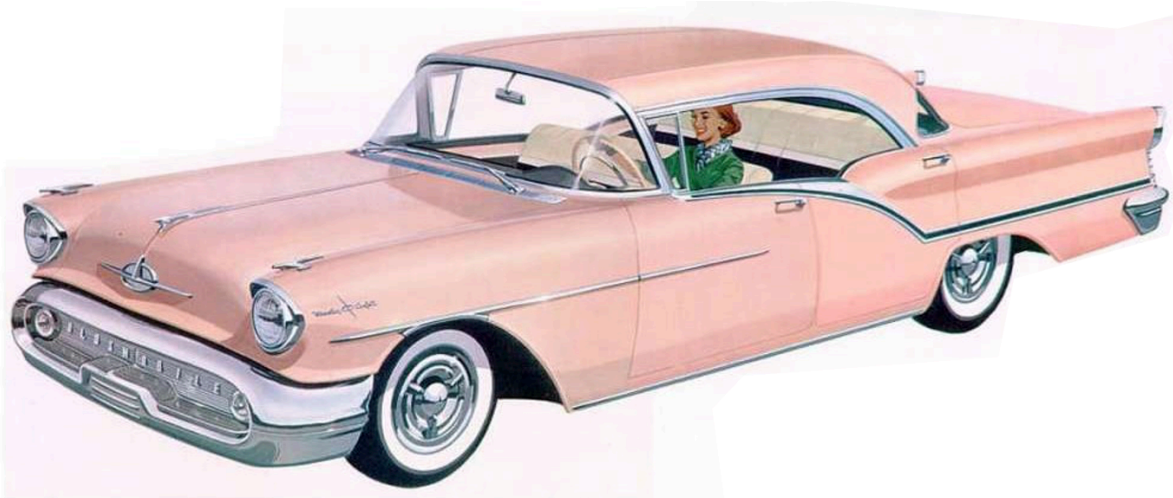


The Night I Beat Frank Nelson in a Car Race Down the River Road on Fir Island

I got my driver's license at sixteen, but I had limited access to my parents' fifty Plymouth even though by then they had a new '57 Chevy. One evening after Darlene was married the folks took the Chevy to an upholstering class. I was instructed specifically *not* to take the Plymouth that had been dad's work car after they got the Chevy and before he got the pickup. Well, ... I took it. I had called to tell Jerry Mullins that I would pick him up and then we headed out toward Conway where we encountered Frank Nelson in his pink '55 Oldsmobile. We decided we would go out to the Nelsons to play some basketball – notwithstanding Jerry was crippled with polio. Frank said he would race me to his farm and I knew what that meant: I had ridden with Frank as he gunned it from highway 99 over the tracks and the eighth of a mile to the end of the main street in Conway where there was a fire station that you would collide with if you did not negotiate the right hand turn. Frank had mastered it. You're heading straight for the building and then bam, the inertia is pushing you toward the driver as he twirls the wheel sliding around to the several hundred-foot leg of the route before you encounter another right-angle turn, left this time, to make it over the narrow bridge on which passing truck mirrors click each other as well as bridge structure. I know this from later when I drove pea vine truck.



what Frank's pink '55 Olds looked like

So on his invitation to race, I hurriedly jammed the Plymouth into gear and headed for the fire station. I made the turn and the next one in front of Frank. At the end of the bridge was another right angle to the right to get off onto the Fir Island river road (rather than proceeding straight across the island toward La Conner). Of course the river road along the dike was curvy following the river, but in this instance, it was doubly treacherous because they had just covered the road with about two inches of pea gravel to prepare it for resurfacing. So I slid around the curves with Frank right behind me unable to pass, and so, I beat him to their farm.

We played some B ball and then Jerry and I got back in the Plymouth, heading back the way we had come. Elvis was singing Jail House Rock – the first time I had ever heard it – as I started to

slide uncontrollably toward the dike. I cramped the wheel to the right and just before we hit the dike the car came back around, heading now to the right side of the road. I saw that there was no fence there and just coasting out seemed to be the best of bad options. But there was a ditch, and my wheels were still turned as far as they would turn. As soon as they hit the ditch we flipped and landed top down in a freshly plowed field. I was lying on the shattered windshield. I looked for Jerry; the seat had fallen down so that I couldn't see him lying on the back window. When I finally heard him say, "Vaughan, you will never speed again," I was rather thrilled at another best of bad options. But we couldn't get out; the car doors were buried in the mud and the back window of the Plymouth only rolled down halfway. Finally we got out through a front window and started walking back to Frank's. Frank's father, Grant, came to look at the car and decided there was nothing to do but turn off the lights which were shining up at about 30 degrees into the night sky.

So Frank said he would take us home. Since Jerry lived in Avon Frank took us up across Fir Island over the North Fork Bridge and across the La Conner flats with their humps in the road where it hopped over the sloughs. He drove 120 miles per hour such that the tape speedometer on that make of Olds buried itself on the right side. The car actually became airborne over some of the humps and Jerry was terrified. (He missed a couple of days of school with diarrhea I think.)

Then Frank took me home. God! Obviously, I knew the folks would have been worried and then angry. I got out of the car and went in. I did not want Frank following me, but he did. He always found a way to embarrass me more than I would have been otherwise. So, I had to act tough, especially with Frank right there. So I announced to my wide-eyed parents like the smart-assed teenager I was, "I rolled the car!"

My dad never ever used profanity, but he turned white with rage. He turned around and walked into his bedroom and got his coat; then off we went to Fir Island in the Chevy. Frank, of course, getting there much before we did. Dad and Grant and Frank and I all went down to where the Plymouth was situated and determined that getting it out of there was a project for daylight.

So the next morning bright and early dad took me to Fir Island in his pickup – so, yeah, I guess he did have a pickup by then for his work. Grant brought his tractor, and they turned the car over and pulled it back onto the road. The top of the car was caved in, and the windshield was granulated into little pieces about a quarter inch or less to a side that were loosely held to some sort of plastic sheet just a few inches higher than the hood.

Dad had a tow chain about ten or fifteen feet long for hooking the car to his pickup. He handed me some goggles that I have no idea where he got. I then negotiated the pea graveled river road with no visibility behind the canopy on dad's pickup, totally terrified with pieces of windshield flaking off in my face from the wind.

The car got hammered back to its approximate shape and a windshield was installed. I had one mangled car pretty much to myself from then on – not that I didn't have some pretty strict guidelines.



Dad when we gathered in loose hay for the cow with the disrespected '50 Plymouth

It seems as though I should say some more about Frank Nelson, his parents Grant and Clydie, and his sister Beverly: Frank was a free spirit. One time he and Gale Pierce and I had been up at a reservation in Watcom county to buy fireworks. We got a bunch of two-inchers that were very powerful. After we got back to Frank's place on Fir Island, Grant was working away on a fence using a post hole digger. As we were walking behind him on the driveway, Frank says, "Watch this," as he lights a two incher and drops it right behind his dad. Grant kept working away even after the firecracker went off with a bang. He didn't flinch or change stride in any way; I guess living with Frank would make you that way. When He was done with the hole, he reached down to get the post and said, "Well, it looks like it's almost the fourth of July."

On another occasion when I was in my rocketry phase, Frank and I went to a dump and got some aluminum tubing. We packed it with gun powder to constitute a pretty substantial rocket. We stuck a dynamite fuse in it and then we drove out to the back forty in the old '38 Chev to where Grant was busy plowing. He was at the far end of the large field, so we drove out to the middle of the field and stuck the rocket in a sewer pipe we had brought along for a launch tower and dug it into the soft ground, lit the rocket, and drove off to the edge of the field to watch. Grant was obviously interested in what the white smoke was all about and pulled a 'land' – meaning he skipped a bunch of rows so that he would drive right by the rocket. But the rocket got stuck so it just melted the aluminum and smoked away without lift off. At supper time Grant asked what we thought we were doing out in that field. I can't remember Frank's smart-ass remark, but I know there had to have been one. On one occasion when I was out there, I remember Frank telling his mom, "You are halfway to a hundred and you have so much to learn."

Frank was tough – he came in third in the State in his division of wrestling – and he was a lady's man. One time he ran off with Lyle Erickson's girlfriend while we were all at the party that Lyle had at his place when his girlfriend was staying at Lyles. And then there was my sister-in-law who had a hard time resisting younger men. She gave Frank a go -- much to the chagrin of his girlfriend (and later wife).

I only saw Frank cower once and it was on the occasion of the only time I had ever heard Grant curse. Roger Van Batavia had hired me to help him haul rocks from a quarry out on Fir Island. We drove over to Nelson's farm where Roger picked up Grant's truck and then we proceeded to load and unload it at Roger's on a couple of trips before returning the truck to Nelson's farm. We had just got to the driveway when we noticed the flames shooting up on the river side of the dike near their grainary. Roger stopped the truck, and we got out and headed over the dike to see what was happening. Frank and Alan Wright were standing around laughing near the old '38 Chev that was fully consumed in flames. They had obviously poured a considerable amount of gasoline on it and lit it ablaze. It was only about ten or fifteen feet from the wooden grainary and just as we were seeing what was going on, Grant arrived at full speed. He was swearing! That was the key. Frank had crossed a red line. He swore at Frank to "get away from that car before the gas tank explodes!" and then on and on about the stupidity of lighting a fire next to the grainary, etc. etc.

Frank and Alan were both tearing down the dike to escape the wrath they had unleashed.