

Shelby's Folly and the Riverside-to-Riverside Madcap Midnight Mambo

• Ol' Shel called the other day. Remember Ol' Shel? That curly-haired east Texas chicken farmer who raced in striped bib overalls and cowboy boots. That gangly Prince of American road racing in the fifties who won Le Mans for Aston Martin in 1959. Ol' Shel sweet talks better than P.T. Barnum. As Leo Levine said, "Remember the first time you met him? He had you laughing inside of two minutes and after five you were his buddy." Billie Sol, they called him. Formally he was Carroll Shelby, the man who made the Cobra and the Shelby Mustang.

I had just finished reading Mel Nichol's Lamborghini Convoy piece when Carroll called and the two things put me in mind of being at Riverside ten years ago or maybe more, with the Woolly Mammoth and the Shebys-Folly Riverside-to-Riverside Madcap-Midnight-Mambo. That was a convoy too, only not the sort you get into if you have a choice.

The Woolly Mammoth was L. Mandel in those days. Now I hear he's merely Woolly. The Woolly and I went to Riverside to cover the Times Grand Prix, a Laurel and Hardy team. We shared a room at the Ramada Inn and Friday evening Shelby came around with the keys to his grandest folly: a blown 427 Shelby Mustang, with a gear as long as Tall Sally and enough muscle to make Arnold Schwarzenegger seem like Woody Allen. He threw me the keys and said he wouldn't need it for a day or so and I saw the Woolly's face fall into the breast pocket of his seersucker.

I waited an hour after "last orders." By then, I thought, the Officer would be booking the boozers downtown and not aggravating us serious motorists. It was drizzling lightly when I snapped the lapstrap on the aircraft harness and eased Ol' Shel's folly up the Box Spring Grade on Highway 60, and headed into the desert towards Indio. In the headlights, four lanes beckoned like wet lips and the Folly's supercharger sucked that cool, damp air. It was enough to make your marrow stir. You had to hand it to Ol' Shel, I thought; he always went for the fences.

Beyond the lights of town, with nothing but sand and sage to fall into, she plucked me like a snuggie and launched me like Col. Stapp into the desert and I needed every lane I could get my hands on. She was quick as the Vicar's daughter to a hundred, but the real magic came between a hundred and when the nose started to get airborne, which happened at 135-140 mph. It was annoying to have to lift with fifteen hundred revs in hand.

But we did a nice dance, Ol' Shel's Folly and I. With the road slick as slippery elm and she hanging onto the lip of the precipice by the tip of her pudgy paws, we went lunging into the damp night, a black panther, a phantom Helicon for my youthful imagination. I've had many good rides and this was as good as any.

Sixty miles out, maybe more, I turned around.



BY CHARLES FOX

*Some things are worth
doing time for*

The drizzle was getting worse. I stopped under the overpass, unbuckled and got out to clean the windshield carefully. And all the while the hounds were panting after us.

Then we led them home. The best of it was down Box Spring Grade, towards town, through fast, fast sweepers, one after another, gobbling two hundred feet a second of guardrail, unraveling in the headlights like toilet paper at a ticker-tape parade. I giggled with glee at Ol' Shel's wickedness, at the impudence of the man.

With the lights of Riverside I slowed and drove into town with a most satisfied feeling and that 427 burbling like a motorlaunch. I even let a car down the offramp ahead of me. It was the first I'd seen all the way home. It crawled to the STOP sign and paused there for an eternity. Home, the parking lot of the Ramada Inn, was a hundred yards away.

Now they had me. Twisting down the offramp like X-fighters descending on the Death Star, red lights popping, sirens howling, flashlights splashing. An officer rapped on the window with the snout of his long-barrelled .357 Magnum. They handcuffed me and put me in the front seat of their black and white Dodge. It smelled hot. They sauntered back to the Folly and popped the hood and I watched them, standing there in the drizzle falling through the light of the street lamp, staring in admiration.

On the way downtown the cop who was driving said, "You were runnin' her pretty good." He was a thin, older man.

I nodded.

"I been workin' this mountain seventeen years," he said, "and I never seen anyone come down the mountain that fast before."

"That's Ol' Shel's personal car," I said.

"We'll look after it," the driver said. "You drivin' in the races tomorrow? You that English driver?"

"You mean Jimmy Clark," I said.

"You know Ken Miles?"

"I knew him," I said.

"Jesus," he said enthusiastically. "I was

called when he was killed out there at the track, testing that Ford. It was a mess."

"I'd as soon not talk about it," I said.

At the court house they charged me with reckless driving and took me for a mug shot and fingerprinting. I protested. "I haven't been convicted of anything," I said.

The trustee advised me to clam up. "They was after you more than an hour," he said. "We were listening to it on the radio here."

The other officers involved came in to see what they'd been chasing. I was a star, at least until I woke the Woolly up with my phone call. It might have been easier to wake Tutankhamen. The Woolly arrived 45 minutes later looking like a bear in December. But he arrived.

They wanted to send me up for 30 days. I wrote the judge an eloquent letter allowing as how I was a professional tester working on a tight deadline. The judge reduced it to \$500. It was no small price for a Midnight Mambo, but then they don't care much for speedy citizens in this country. The official view of morality is prudential. Mel Nichols reports that this has now spread to France. Sadiy, the French think they're catching up, I'm sure.

Shel only built one other Folly. "They didn't balance out as well as the 289," he said when he was called. He was up at the Sonoma State Fairgrounds, I think he said. Watching Mr. Parrot race. Mr. Parrot is his Appaloosa. He's the fastest Appaloosa anyone ever saw, unbeaten this year. Trust Ol' Shel, I thought.

He was on his way to Africa, he said. He has a land and cattle company in the Central African Empire, old French Equatorial Africa. He also owns all the hunting rights there. CAE, as he calls it, is run by his buddy Jean Bedell Bokossa. Bokossa was a veteran sergeant in the French Army. A hard man. He's been getting mixed publicity lately over his cutting the ears off twice-convicted thieves. On December first, Bokossa is going to make himself Emperor.

Shel has a tie-in going with UTAE Airlines which flies tourists down to a sort of Treetops Hotel beside the Bangi River to watch pygmies feed bananas to wild gorillas. Sometimes he takes the Shah of Iran hunting. He uses an elephant gun David E. Davis, Jr. gave him. Not much elephant around Manhattan. "I usually shoot a baboon or two on the way home," Shel says. "The natives like baboon meat better than they do human even."

He's hedging his bets these days.

"The West is everywhere," he sighs. "You drive down a dirt road in the middle of the jungle and there's a black teenager walking along in platform shoes, a Bruce Lee T-shirt and a transistor radio up to his ear." Probably listening to WABC, I thought. Even in Darkest Africa.

Meanwhile, the Woolly lurks in Reno. And the officer who nailed me is probably driving a desk and telling his kids about the night Folly went down the mountain. Just like me. ●