

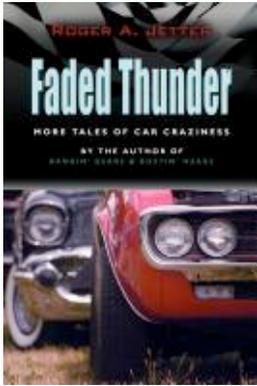
ROGER A. JETTER

# Faded Thunder

MORE TALES OF CAR CRAZINESS

BY THE AUTHOR OF  
*BANGIN' GEARS & BUSTIN' HEADS*





*The late 1960's, the importance of owning a car, muscle cars and hot rods, cruising (a la the movie American Graffiti), drive-ins, drag-racing (street and strip), holiday parties and Denver, Colorado.*

# Faded Thunder

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# **Faded Thunder**

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*Some time ago, several of my “fans” (Okay, okay, three of them!) asked if I had stories about Denver, ColoRODo, after I moved here in mid 1966 and wondered if I had as much “car fun” as I did back home in Iowa/Nebraska. I did (change is hard on a car guy)...so, to answer that question, allow me to share stories of my Denver “car” experiences with you. The date of this story was 1967, I owned a '64 Chev Impala and I worked as a staff artist for a small advertising agency. The rest of the stories that follow are also dated between 1966 and about 1975.*

## **LESSON LEARNED**

It didn't take long to punch the rods thru the tired 283” ...about 10 seconds into the race. I heard it coming...and wham, braaaaatttttt, whooooooosh! Oil smoke poured out the sides of the hood and out from under the car, the open windows filled with the smell of burnt oil. The black trail of used oil stained the roadway as I coasted to the side of the road. I sure lost that race, and 20 bucks. Worse part, this mishap was going to cost me a lot more.

My pal, Kenny, had told me the 283” and a three speed on the column in my '64 Impala wasn't any kind of a racing engine/race car...but what'd I know? I was naïve enough to think it was. It had been good enough for a few races in Iowa and Nebraska!

“Now what?” I mumbled, standing next to the Impala, contemplating the walk back to the starting line where Kenny was waiting. I knew my competition would come back to collect...I'd wait and ask for a ride...humbly!

Kenny'd seen it, heard it, too. “Told you it wasn't going to last,” he said as my ride pulled up next to him. “You guys giving us a ride back to town? Can't hardly get that Chivvy home that way, ya know?”

Denver's South Broadway, in the late '60's, was a ways out of the southern suburb of Littleton (and Littleton was a distant suburb of Denver). Broadway ran all the way down to County Line Road...and

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dead-ended there...wasn't much out there but it was flat enough in places to stage a race...and the cops seldom cruised out there. Once, I'd thought of trading my '64 and I'd test driven a used '66 Corvette out that way...got 'er up to 130, on the speedo, before the Chevrolet salesman riding with me told me South Broadway was "just about to dead end." Good thing he did.

Anyway, Kenny had moved to Denver from Ogallala, Nebraska, about the same time I did. Met him at one of the local drag race venues...prolly Rocky Mountain Dragway northeast of Denver (although I don't really remember) and found out he didn't live far from me. In Nebraska, he'd been the engine/tranny guy of a race crew running an Austin gasser at the Julesberg, CO, dragstrip before he decided to move. We hit it off well...it ended up I could drive a bit better than he...but he could build engines and tune 'em better than I ...it worked out well.

My boss, at the job I had, owned the advertising agency and had a gorgeous daughter named Ginny...her boyfriend's name was Jerry...and Jerry managed several Texaco gas stations around the Denver area, but the best part – Jerry was a gearhead, too...used to get all the fuel I needed from Jerry, at a 'discount' (ha, down a penny or two from about 33.9 a gallon, imagine that!) and always got to use his wash bay whenever I wanted, to keep my '64 clean.

After the race, we were dropped off at my apartment, I called Jerry...he told us to have the Impala towed to the station on East Hampden, he'd take a look at it. Didn't need looking at...all we needed were a few options...and a new engine.

"How much money you got, Roger?" Jerry asked after inspecting the hole in the side of the engine, sure I was going to say "not much," and he'd be correct. I didn't have extra, but I did have a good job...and he knew my boss very well. "Let me see if I can get a 'loan' for you. We'll build a good engine for that Impala."

Sounded good to me...my car wouldn't be down that long then. Little did I know! He ordered a 327 4" bore block from George Irvin Chevrolet on Colorado Boulevard...got a good deal on it and that way we wouldn't have to bore a 283" block...heard those always overheated anyway.

“OK, what else do we need?” I asked, hoping we wouldn’t have to spend a bundle. He and Kenny conspired on what to build, with my insistence on using parts of my 283”, or so I thot. The crank was still good, but we’d need a new set of rods and pistons...“How much?” Kenny came up with a pair of 2.02 ‘fuelie’ heads (the biggest available at the time)... “OK, how much for them?”...and Jerry sent them out to have them cc’d and ‘pinned.’ “How much was that again?” A Duntov cam was ordered along with a set of solid lifters. “How much? Ouch.” I was not liking spending all this money...wondering how much of a ‘loan’ I’d have to repay. “Are we close to being done?” They wanted dual fours...“How much now? Wait, this is my daily driver,” I said, “the four barrel manifold and quadra-suck carb off the 283” is going to have to do (eventually, a Carter four barrel found its way onto the engine).” I think they both wanted to go “gas” class racing with my ’64...and prolly would have if my ad agency boss hadn’t finally questioned the amount of the loan. Saved me...the deduction he was going to have to take from my check every week was fast approaching more than I was getting paid. That ended it. By the time the build was done, Jerry and Kenny had spent way too much of my ‘loan’ money, but I had a built 301”.

“Sure, it’s a street engine, you just need to run Ethyl in it.” Kenny said. Didn’t leave much money for rent or food...but the engine sure did run hard. The only other thing that bothered both of them was the ‘not-a-race-car’ 3-speed on the column. “With that much engine, you really need a 4-speed. I think I can find one relatively cheap,” Kenny offered.

“Relatively” always cost me more than I expected, so did “How much?” after the fact. A 2:20 low Borg-Warner came with a Hurst Competition Plus shifter...I liked that. “...and before we put that in, we’ll need an NHRA legal scattershield. I think we can get an Ansen, used, from Bandimere or F & M.” Little did I know - but I was learning -- that an 11” clutch and pressure plate was next - “to make it hook.” *Hmmmmmm, I’m thinkin’ it’s a full-on race car.*

I’d put on the blackwalls and five spokes right after I got to Denver and with the Impala jacked up high, it was looking good, sorta looked like a gasser. Cruising the ’64 up and down 17th, 16<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> streets,

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the solid lifters echoed off the tall buildings, it even sounded like a gasser. But, that really didn't scare anyone...just because it sounded mean, didn't mean it ran... found that out more than once...and I was always getting challenged...with the stock rear end, the car wouldn't launch and usually fell on its face.

"We need better gears, at least 4:11's," Kenny said. "How much is that?" I asked. We ended up with 5:13's, in a Posi-traction. My daily *was* a full-on drag car.

C/MP was the class ...as in 'C/Modified Production', NHRA's class...wouldn't fit in the "gasser" class...too close to a stocker and no engine set-back. But, in the eliminations, which I made a few times, I had to run up against gassers. A gasser I didn't have and always got passed about halfway down the track.

Weeks later, with the 5:13's installed, it became a real terror on Denver streets. Won every street race, except one notable...I was heading home one hot Friday night...playing hardtop, all the windows down...alone, with nothing but Jay Mack on KIMN radio coming thru the speaker and the sounds of the lifters rattling off the houses and buildings. I'd just cruised The Scotchman on Federal and The Paper Tiger on Wadsworth & Colfax...and was heading east on Colfax. Kenny had a date, I didn't...so I went cruising on my own. I was lost in the V8's tune when I heard the rumble of dual exhausts and a tranny downshifted next to me. I glanced over... '64 Ford Galaxie, light blue fastback hardtop. Four guys in the car, all looking over at me. The driver goosed the Ford and it jumped, then dropped back, even with me.

Four guys...me, alone...race advantage mine...not going to be fair, but if he insists...he did, after a couple more jabs of the throttle, the Ford jumping back and forth, I motioned him an okay.

I'd hoped for a red light as we were approaching Federal Boulevard ...wanted to go at him from a standing start -- I HAD that advantage! Not to be, the light turned green before we got there so I slipped the 4-speed into second. I hated rolling starts but there were no traffic lights after Federal and the Colfax Avenue viaduct was downhill...a rolling start it would be. My '64 roared as I let out the clutch. To my surprise, he was already in second...and nailed it. The Ford literally shot half a

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length ahead of me...my Impala pulled hard trying to gain it back. I slammed third without lifting off the gas about the same time he did... the 5:13's were winding up my 301" quickly and I'd gained a door on him. I hit fourth hard and he shoved his into fourth...and simply 'walked' the door length I'd gained on him up to his rear bumper.

The Colfax Avenue viaduct is about ten or so city blocks long - on the eastern side it drops to ground level. The drop was coming quick and there was a traffic light at the bottom...I was sure it'd be red, but until you got close you couldn't see it. The Ford wasn't quitting...he had the race won, but I wasn't about to go flying thru a red light when I couldn't see if anyone was coming from either direction...I backed off and let him go ahead. By the time I traversed that last block, the light was red...he'd obviously made the green and was nowhere to be seen.

I headed on home, thankful we hadn't put any money on the race...

It took months, but I finally got the 'engine loan' paid off and some time later moved on to a new job. Kenny ended up getting married, Jerry married the boss' daughter and I got engaged. The '64 got sold and I got "out" of street racing...for a while.

Oh...and the title of this story - "Lesson learned"? ***Your pals can talk you into just about anything.***

## **EPISODE THOTS**

When you move from one state to another, you need to establish contacts all over again...I knew a bit about cars, but didn't know that much about them when I left Iowa and Fremont, Nebraska, especially working on them and maintaining them...my old '57 Chevy six cylinder didn't need any maintenance...check the gas and fill the oil...the car never failed me, as a daily driver...or in a race. I didn't need to know how to build a small block Chevy engine, all I needed to know was that it ran...and ran hard. I didn't need to know how to make a '60 Plymouth Sonoramic Commando engine run, nor how to overhaul its dual carbs, I just needed to know that when my pal Sam (the owner of the Plymouth) slammed the throttle down, I needed to hang on for the win.

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But, when I broke the engine in the '64, I was at loss as to where to go to get things done...if it hadn't been for Jerry, or Kenny, I'd still be floundering around. Jerry took the lead in getting things done...he knew the right people at George Irvin Chevrolet (long gone nowadays), right there on Colorado Boulevard - one of the bigger dealers in Denver at the time...and a short phone call later and we had a bare block...at a discount no less and we were on our way to a very strong "street" car...and that was something EVERY gear head had to have in the late '60's.

## HISTORY'S HEADY DAYS

*"History never looks like history when you are living thru it." John W. Gardner*

When I was in high school, History Class was a requirement... history, at that time, was dinosaurs, conquerors, pyramids, Europe, Greeks, Romans, volcanoes, Atilla the Hun (always wanted to add that name somewhere in a story -- scratch one more off the list of "achievements"!), WWI (and more times than not -- WWII), communism, Galileo and some guy named Michelangelo...history was something that happened many, many, many years ago. History was always the past. History was not an everyday occurrence.

Little did I know that my life, in the future, would be turned into "history."

Took me all of two hours to find and land a job, with a small advertising agency once I arrived in Denver. The agency needed a staff artist...truth be told, anyone off the street would have been hired if they knew what the working end of an X-acto knife was (and if you don't know what an X-acto knife is, and/or HOW it was used in an ad agency, go Google it). Suffice to say, my portfolio full of fashion illustrations, B & W still lifes and rubber-cemented pasted-up ads got me in the door...

I got the job.

I hadn't packed much into my '64 Impala cuz I figured on heading back to Iowa, if...and when...I secured a job. I didn't even need what I'd brought along...

I went to the YMCA, rented a room, tossed my stuff in and headed for 'home'...10 hours away (keep in mind that in 1966, I-80 was not finished all the way across Nebraska and a lot of the trip was still on two lane Highway 30), to get the rest of what I'd need for my new life

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in ColoRODo. I had three days to get there and back to Denver in order to start my new job on Monday morn.

I had no idea what to expect in an “advertising agency”...being freshly graduated from Commercial Art School in Omaha, Nebraska. Each day was a new experience...we did design work for the PGA (Professional Golfers Association)...Bill, my boss, played a lot of golf...so, we landed a major PGA event...and Bill liked rubbing shoulders with moneyed people so we developed the annual programs, ads and signage for the event. I got to illustrate greens - as in: 18 holes of greens, looking down on them from above, with the length in yards shown from the Tee and all the hazards, for the program. We also did advertising for Lloyd’s Furs (moneyed people) as Bill’s gorgeous wife frequented Lloyd’s regularly. We did the signage, logos, ads and brochures for Denver’s newest housing – condominiums – “The Villas” in Lakewood...across from the new shopping mall Villa Italia (razed some years ago)...again, moneyed owners...we pioneered some local advertising for a new credit card making the rounds...it was called “Visa” and we did the advertising for several banks around Denver. But the one business I really got excited about was Sid Langsam’s CDR...as in Continental Divide Raceways...we handled all the advertising for him...heady stuff for a 23 year old “youngster.” I even got to design one of their logos and used it for a long time. Of course, worse part of the job -- I was *forced* to be at all the races every time they were held, usually once a month while the other race tracks ran weekly. I was *forced* to watch history happen...after all, it was MY job.

During my tenure at the agency, 1966-1969, I watched history being made in the form of Alan “The Kid” Bockla and his front – engined Double A rail (called Double A Top Fuel and “rails” long before NHRA changed the labeling) ripping off a new CDR record of 216.34 mph in the quarter... unheard of at that date and Mile high altitude. I got to watch a field of 18 Top Fuel cars on Sunday, August 20, 1967 and I got to see history made at every one of the “High Altitude Nationals” CDR held. It *was* my job. I watched “Kansas John” Weibe attempt the CDR records several times while taking on local faves, the Kaiser Brothers in their top fuel car...or Brown & Butkovich flog their AA rail against Rice & Williams’ rail. I cheered local guy,

Ron Leslie, in his “427” SOHC engined rail...and then again in his “777” Comet or “High Country Cougar” funny car(s) – one of the few drivers around Denver that campaigned two drag cars at the same time. I agonized when locals Guzman & Dekker’s “Assassination” funny car team battled it out with out-of-towners that thought they could take down a local guy...just wasn’t happening. Later the Guzman & Ward “Assassination” team would, and could, get their funny car way out of shape screaming down the quarter against the competition...but...I watched that history being made after I was done with my advertising job those Sunday mornings. My job was to stand at the entrance as fans drove in and ask questions about our advertising: *Did our ads get you here? How far did you drive to get here? What do you like about CDR? Dislike?* Usually the price of admission was the sore point...it was all of two bucks back then...yep, two dollars per person...parking at CDR was free. History was being made, I was in it... and there are times I wish I was still there...!!!

Of course, my own “hot rod”...and I use that particular term loosely since it really wasn’t a “hot rod” in 1967-‘68...more of an early muscle car... sat parked off to the side of our tent. It sported the latest hot item – gray five spoke mag wheels. The car was raised up, high - sixties-style gasser stance. Everything under the car was painted white, including the wheel wells ...and more than once I had to prove it wasn’t a “farmer’s car” even though it still sported Iowa plates.

On the sides of the top, just above the chrome trim separating body and top was lettered “Gangrene” cuz the car was painted Pontiac Verdoro Green. I’d mounted the requisite tach on the left side of the dash -- not on the column like was ‘normal’ back then and the engine of choice was a built 301” SBC. If you remember in the last story, you’d know we’d used a 327” 4 inch bore block and a 283” crank, 10:5 to 1 pistons, Duntov solid lifter cam, 2:02 heads - cc’d - with pinned rocker studs, Hooker headers, aluminum riser and Carter 4 bbl. A Borg-Warner 2:20 low T-10 four-speed, Hurst Competition Plus shifter, 11” clutch and PP, Ansen scattershield and a 5:13 geared Posi rear-end. Inside the trunk was a set of mounted cheater slicks...for ‘emergencies’... and truck driveshaft-sized exhaust exited in front of the rear wheelwells. It was a “gasser”... for the street (ran C/Gas in

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AHRA and C/MP in NHRA) and it was my “daily”...even cruising on Denver’s 16<sup>th</sup> Street.

Funny thing about those pipes...they were cut on an angle, were a full 5 inches in diameter, painted black and exited in front of the rear wheels. I had many a guy pull alongside me and ask “What’re you running for an engine with those huge pipes?”...and just as many turn down a street race after seeing them. After my friend, Kenny, and I had built the engine...he decided we needed some “impressive” pipes. He hauled home a huge truck driveshaft and we cut it in half, swedged the ends to mate to the stock exhaust pipes, welded ‘em up and hung ‘em. It looked sinister... and sounded wicked good.

For those of us brave enough to drive our “gassers” on the street, we had several drive-ins to visit on a Friday or Saturday night, including Denver’s famous Scotchman on Federal Boulevard. I could always find a street race there. Kenny and I would make a huge cruisin’ loop...from Denver’s 16<sup>th</sup> Street - three lanes wide, one way, approximately 12 blocks long to Arapahoe where we’d turn, go back up 15<sup>th</sup> and start all over again. The small downtown “loop” would take anywhere from an hour to over two hours, depending on traffic. Friday and Saturday nights it was bumper to bumper and we’d start with a full tank of “Ethyl” (premium) fuel... once we’d made the “loop” -- to the Scotchman, the Paper Tiger on Wadsworth, the A & W on South Broadway and Taylor’s on East Colfax, we’d be down to less than half a tank of gas...the 5:13’s in the Impala could suck some serious gas (Ethyl) fast...of course, putting a foot into the carb to “keep it cleaned out” didn’t help either and the whole big loop would consume about three hours. We’d go thru two full tanks of premium fuel a night...but, at 33.9 cents a gallon, the fuel took precedence over the beer that kept us going.

Occasionally, we’d get sidetracked...a “race” would materialize. If it was a serious race, with money on the side, we’d pull off on some side street, pull the slicks out of the trunk, put ‘em on and go meet the other guy. One of the passengers would hold the money until the winner was decided...I only lost one street race in a couple of years of cruisin’...and that was to a ’64 Ford Galaxie, with four guys in the car.

I have no idea what engine he was running, but I lost...and I was alone in my car.

16<sup>th</sup> Street “ended” at the viaduct crossing I-25 - known then as “The Valley Highway.” Back then there was a traffic light at the bottom of the viaduct - that was the starting point, up and over, ending at a very sharp left turn onto 30<sup>th</sup>. There were more times than I can count that skid marks went up over the curb, left from someone that didn’t make the corner. The viaduct was the place to “open ‘er up” on the way to The Scotchman. It took a while, but the cops eventually caught on...they’d wait at the far end of the viaduct where no one leaving the light could see them...we’d open ‘er up, wind ‘er out, or race someone over the viaduct...and it was all over then...“speed contests” got your license pulled and the car impounded right then and there.

If that wasn’t enough trouble for us car guys, Denver’s most famous cop: Buster Snider made our business his business. Ours was cruising Denver’s 16<sup>th</sup>. Buster didn’t like any of us, he wrote more tickets than any other cop in Denver... if a car was lowered -- ticket. Dual exhausts -- ticket. Too many people in the car -- ticket. No inspection certificate in the window -- ticket. Beer in the car - uh-oh - you were done for the weekend...maybe even a couple of weeks after you paid the ticket. I think he felt he was “cleaning” up the city...or something like that anyway. As usual, it didn’t faze many of us, we were right back at it the next weekend.

Whether any of us believed it, history was being made day in and day out around Denver ... those were great days, and every generation writes their own history...we made ours on the streets and in the heady days of early drag racing - the movie, American Graffiti had nothing on us. Believe it or not, even today, every day in our lives is a history-making event...and history has a funny way of sneaking up on all of us.

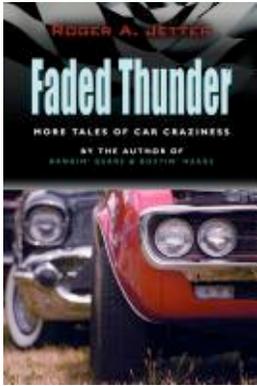
## **EPISODE THOTS**

What goes around, comes around, right? Although the “gasser” look nowadays has changed somewhat...the lines have been blurred simply because it’s been over 40 years since that look was popular, but that ‘look’ is back –check any car mag these days.

Back when I was roaming the streets of Denver in my “gasser”... it wasn’t jacked up too high in the front nor did it have a straight axle under it, but the ’64 was higher than most, level all around, the tops of the five spoke rims were even with the top of the rear wheel well...it had a lot of ground clearance and of course, the huge pipes exiting the sides, just ahead of the rear wheels, were intimidating.

Something else intimidating - I was still a bit belligerent back then and like any “youngster”, didn’t like authority or convention cuz I had to be different – I painted my car green when red and black were popular, I had a name lettered on the sides when no one else was doing that and most everyone ran around with a gold colored school name (college –like Colorado State University or Colorado School of Mines) name stuck in the rear window. I didn’t go to college so I had to make my own up...I went to Meininger’s Art Supply store and purchased some of those individual gold letters and stuck them in the back window...mine read “Colorado State Prison” ...needless to say it got a lot of looks!

Even today I’m somewhat of a non-conformist...my cars have been Green, Dove Gray, Pearl White with brown flames, Teal & White two-toned, Mint Green Pearl with Magenta scallops, Blue, Purple over Lavender, and Champagne...and I seldom follow a crowd.



*The late 1960's, the importance of owning a car, muscle cars and hot rods, cruising (a la the movie American Graffiti), drive-ins, drag-racing (street and strip), holiday parties and Denver, Colorado.*

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