

# The Tribune



ANGELO ROSE / TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Members of the former Road Angels gang show off the cars in which they cruised through the lot of the Villa Capri diner in the late-1950s. From left are Jim Morell, Tom Maroon, Rich Pica, Jim Klee and Jack Costa.

## Cruisin' for a memory

### Road Angels to ride again in South Side

By Tom Kahriger  
HOMETOWN CORRESPONDENT

The huge, black, chrome-laden cars harken back to a time when things were much simpler.

When a dispute between two guys was more likely to be settled in a vacant lot behind the Acme than in court.

When most everything was paid for in cash rather than with credit.

When words like drugs, cocaine and controlled substance weren't part of the daily news lexicon.

When vivid memories of the good times in one's youth could be meticulously maintained, buffed and shined for decades and, occasionally, rolled out of the garage and taken for a ride.

Jim Morell can recall the day in 1960 when he shelled out \$125 for his first car — a '51 Ford. He was 16 and had spent many months working at the Nay Ang Bingo Hall to save up for the purchase.

Jimmy Klee, the city's deputy police chief, remembers the long hours he worked as a dishwasher in the mid-1950s to buy his first car — a '58 Chevy Sport Coupe. It cost \$300.

But Tommy Maroon's car was the one to beat — and not many \$100. A '52 high-performance Chevy. He paid \$1,950 shortly after it rolled off the assembly line.

Today, each man is in his mid-50s, but each still possesses that first car he bought.

"You couldn't replace these cars today. It's like a good gun to a hunter or a good fishing rod to a fisherman," said Maroon as he showed off the flawless body of his 37-year-old hot rod.

"For many of us, it was the best investment we ever made," added Klee.

Morell, Klee and Maroon were part of a gang known as the Road Angels whose members parked their cars seven nights a week outside the Villa Capri drive-through diner, which was located at Meadow Avenue and Moosic Street, on the present site of Flannery



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Jim Klee sits in the rumble seat of his 1958 Chevy Sport Coupe, which he drove in the late 1950s. Klee is one of many former local car-gang members who will gather for a reunion on Sunday at Meadow Avenue and Moosic Street — the former site of the Villa Capri diner.

#### Case Beverages.

The Angels were one of several local gangs that hung out at the Capri from the mid-1950s through the 1960s. There were also the Twisters, the Sleepers and the Stockers, to name a few.

The common link among the gangs and their members wasn't a penchant for trouble, violence or drugs. It was simply a love of cars.

On any given night of the week, it wasn't unusual to see as many as 100 cars lined up outside the Villa Capri, while their proud, young owners swapped advice about tuning up engines, replacing transmissions and fixing carburetors.

"Our cars were our lives," recalled Jack Costa, who still has his '51 Ford.

The proprietors of the diner — Ben Monacelli, Mattie Leonardi and Vince Alberts — didn't mind the loitering because the guys always bought something to eat and, aside from an occasional fist fight, there was never any real trouble.

"For us, the Villa Capri was the nucleus of the entire city. It was what was happening for young people at the time. It was just like in the movie 'American Graffiti,'" said Rich Pica, a former Road Angel who is now the city's fire chief.

"You'd pick up your girlfriend in your car and take her to the Villa Capri," recalled Morell.

"We put in a lot of hard work for our cars. Some of us — like me — washed dishes in the Villa Capri to buy our cars," Klee noted.

"We all learned how to work on the cars ourselves. We didn't have a choice. We couldn't afford a mechanic. That's how a lot of today's mechanics and body-work men got started," added Morell, who presently earns his living as the owner and operator of Morell's Towing Service.

For the past 30 years, various former Road Angels have talked about holding a reunion, promising themselves they'd do it soon but never actually getting

around to putting it together.

About six weeks ago, Tommy Maroon decided he'd had enough of the talk, so he picked up the phone and started making calls.

Flannery's and Bargains Garage told him it would be OK to use their parking lots for the get-together and, before long, word about the reunion traveled faster than Maroon's Chevy used to drag race.

The reunion will be held this Sunday starting at 2 p.m. at Meadow Avenue and Moosic Street — the same site where the Villa Capri once stood. There will be hot dogs, hamburgers, soda and a DJ.

Klee said a big crowd is expected. Quite a few guys who hung out at the Capri nearly 40 years ago will be coming in for the event, from as far away as Delaware, New Jersey, Ohio and Texas. More than a few will be bringing along their old cars.

"I think this reunion will bring back a lot of memories for a lot of people," Klee said.