

Forever Woodward

This nostalgic cruise wasn't as dreamy as the old days, but it was still moving.

by J.P. Vettraino



In its heyday, from the feel-good '50s through the first gas crunch in the '70s, Detroit's Woodward Avenue was more famous than any cruise strip California could offer.

In 1908, Woodward had the first stretch of concrete roadway in the United States. By the '50s, it angled 22 miles northwest from downtown Detroit, through suburbia and into the country. The cruisers traveled a 10-mile route from the Detroit border through Oakland County: eight lanes of pavement divided by manicured islands, right through the heart of the auto industry.

On summer nights Woodward filled with young people in chopped '49 Mercs or '63 Chevy 409s, or their parents' Country Squires. The strip framed a generation's identity. As Linda Hatcher, Class of '64, put it, "Woodward shaped our lives."

And on Saturday, Aug. 19, the cruise came alive again, in a fashion. Oldies station WOMC and merchants along Woodward sponsored Dream Cruise '95, a rolling showcase for vintage iron with street fairs and car shows en route. An estimated 250,000 people turned out—on foot, in muscle cars and in family sedans.

In the '50s and '60s, many considered cruisers borderline delinquents, and some businesses prohibited them on the premises; this time, merchants welcomed them. Even the cops were cool.

Cell phones weren't part of the scene in the glory days, but there were hundreds in Dream Cruise '95, particularly in the cheeky northern suburbs. Shain Park was the center of activity in Birmingham. The Contours were singing '50s standards, people danced, and GTOs and 4-4-2s parked on the green.

Legend has it that the Big Three did development work on Woodward in the late '50s through the '60s. The cruise was a quick run north from Chrysler in Highland Park, or a few miles



west from the GM Tech Center in Warren. It was reasonable for young engineers driving prototypes to make a pass on the way home to see how they were doing against the hot rods.

At 8 p.m. on Dream Cruise night, no one was racing. Creeping south from Birmingham, traffic was gridlocked at intersections. There were hundreds of vintage cars, even if LH sedans outnumbered the Charger R/Ts. Guys with hot cams and comp clutches had to be struggling, but everyone looked happy.

There really wasn't much racing on Woodward in the '60s, either. Rick Paul drove his '67 Fairlane GT in the Dream Cruise, and the 46-year-old Royal Oak resident said fast guys only met on the boulevard. They headed for less developed areas—on Crooks or Coolidge north of Big Beaver—if they planned to do business. If



Oldies, such as the Shelby GT350 (below left), were the heart of Dream Cruise '95.

a guy was pressing to get you into the country, you were wary. He might have a trick or two under his hood.

Most of the old landmarks have been bulldozed under. Ted's Drive-In, the rendezvous for Vettes, is the site of an office building. A furniture store has replaced the Totem Pole restaurant, Linda Hatcher's old hangout. She noted that the chamber of commerce has learned what Totem Pole management knew in the '60s: Cruisers mean business.

The eight-mile drive from Birmingham to the Detroit city limits took more than an hour. It seemed every square foot was occupied by people or cars. Couples sat in lawn chairs next to their Sport Furys and Chevelle SSs, cooking hot dogs on hibachis. In Ferndale, a blue-collar suburb just north of Detroit, people were more raucous than those in the Birmingham crowd. Music blared from the bars, and teen-agers with painted faces shouted at the cars.

With the end of Dream Cruise '95 at midnight, traffic thinned and the hardcore got an opportunity to show its stuff. Yet judging by the number of cars pulled over, the police had grown less tolerant. Some would write the Dream Cruise off as an attempt to commercially exploit a phenomenon whose time had come and gone. And maybe it was. Nostalgia, after all, never lives up to the real thing. But even the cynical could see that everyone was having a great time.

"My kids couldn't understand how it was back then," Hatcher said. "But if you grew up here, all those great feelings came pouring back. Like WOMC keeps saying, 'Forever Woodward.'" ■

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