

## The Blue Olds

By Greg Schweiner

Excerpt from "Don't Tell Mom! Shenanigans of a Small-Town Kid"

The big blue 1958 Oldsmobile 88 was our first in the tennis-court-size models of the General Motors line. It marked a dramatic style change from the roundish look of earlier decades to the sleeker, flatter design of the mid- to late-1950s and onward. As was the fashion of the day, the 88 model was an overstatement of chrome accents.

This was a modern car, built when safety meant surrounding yourself with as much steel as possible. The Olds was 4100 pounds of highway safety when seatbelts were still an option and gas was 31 cents a gallon.

My memory of that car is associated with seeing a happy Dad. From the moment I saw him first emerge from it in a mystical cloud of light to how he cared for it later, it was Dad's pride and joy. I never saw him cherish another car as much.

On warm, sunny days in the summer, he would wash it by hand with a bucket of soapy water and a garden hose, which he held his thumb over to wondrously turn a trickle into a powerful spray. He used it to rinse the soap from the car and shoo away any of his children who stood nearby.

We'd be dressed in our swim trunks, dancing around while jokingly taunting and daring Dad to squirt us. He happily obliged. We'd run away, squealing with feigned terror and real delight, only to come right back for more until both car and children were clean.

For Joe and me, that was the car we grew up with. It was the only car we had ever really known, so there was a sense of familiarity that comes from having something your entire life. The big blue box took us everywhere without effort. It really felt like a family member. I felt bad when it needed to go into the shop, like I would a sick pet.

Cars have a way of capturing the fascination of little boys. From Matchbox Cars and Tonka Toys to the Batmobile and the Black Beauty, marketers and storytellers have found a way to target that fascination.

Plus, driving a car was one of those intriguing adult activities I couldn't wait to try. Watching Mom and Dad drive filled me with awe. Dad was constantly turning the wheel slightly back and forth as if trying to keep it on a straight line, and maybe he needed to because of bad alignment or tires.

The buttons, dials, and levers were all objects of my curiosity. Dad might move that big lever, push a button here, or turn a dial there. I observed it with utter fascination. How did he know what these things did? It seemed like a superpower.

We played with our Tonkas and our Matchboxes, making sounds as cars do. They sounded different then. When we made car noises, it went, "Rrrrrrr...Rrrrrrr... Rrrrrrr..." I chuckled when watching my daughters play with cars 30 years later, and they went, "Rrrrrrrrrrr." A sign of the ubiquity of the automatic transmission. Our cars had to shift gears.

Joe and I loved cars, and in 1965, television came up with the ultimate car for little boys: the Batmobile. Before the TV show aired, the commercials for the premiere of *Batman* were eye-catching to a five-year-old. Initially, it looked too scary for me, from the fast-paced fight scenes to the ominous black car racing about. Those fears proved to be unfounded.

By the time the last episode aired for the first season in May of 1966, Joe and I were completely hooked. We used to tie towels around our necks and prance around in our tights-whities, pretending to be the Dynamic Duo.

Being a year older, I was obviously Batman, and Joe was unquestionably Robin. We jumped, punched, and kicked imaginary foes while yelling, "BAM!" "POW!" "WHAM!" and excitedly ran

around upstairs until Mom had to tell us to stop. Even after that last show aired, Joe and I were still obsessed with the Cape Crusaders.

As summer came, we took our Batman adventures outdoors, but Mom scolded us to never ever play on the front lawn in our underwear ever again. So, we learned to make do with just the towel part of our costumes, with shorts, white tube socks, and t-shirts completing the ensemble.

We raced around the yard, chasing a make-believe Joker and his gang.

"WHAM!" "BAM!" "POW!" Joe yelled, punching at imaginary henchmen.

"WHAM!" "BAM!" "POW!" I called while engaged in my own pretend battle.

One summer afternoon, we were thus engaged, running down the driveway, vigorously throwing punches and kicks, and constantly having to re-tie the knot around our necks so the capes would stay on. Our unchoreographed fight scene had us circling around Dad's prized Oldsmobile, pursuing the Joker, who was getting away in our dramatically improvised scene.

Caught up in the moment and standing next to the shiny car, I called out to Joe, "Quick Robin, to the Batmobile." And with that, I opened the driver's side door and jumped in, letting the heavy door close behind me. Robin, who was merely following orders, hopped into the passenger seat, but his door stayed open.

I was five years old, and the steering wheel was half my size. It was awesome. Joe looked at me as if to ask, "Now what?" I grabbed on to the enormous wheel, my hands only getting to the 4-and-8 position, and felt a sense of power. Scanning over the distinctively curved dashboard was spellbinding. All the buttons and dials. I felt that I could really drive this car. I felt like I was Batman.

There was a brief sense that maybe we shouldn't be playing in Dad's car. I was pretty certain Dad had a rule about it. Maybe when he said, "Never play in the car." But sitting behind the wheel of the Batmobile outweighed any concerns. This was the best game of Batman ever. This was the best game ever!

I had no idea how to drive a car, and the only thing I could see past the dashboard was the sky. With my hands on the steering wheel, I turned it left and then right, exaggerating the motions I had seen Dad do. There was no steering wheel lock on a '58 Olds, so you could turn the wheel while it was in park and without a key.

Then I realized that our engines weren't running.

"Rrrrrrr... Rrrrrrr...Rrrrrrr..." I started out

"Rrrrrrr... Rrrrrrr...Rrrrrrr..." Joe followed. Apparently, this Batmobile had two engines.

Joe started pushing buttons on the dashboard and turning dials at a frantic pace, uttering gibberish like "turbas, nitons, jenjens."

"There's the Joker", I yelled, though I couldn't even see out the windshield.

Our pretend chase continued on pretend roads until my brother, 'Robin', started complaining that he wanted a chance to drive too.

"Robin never drives, I protested. Not when Batman is around'.

"Uh-uh"

"Uh-huh"

"Uh-uh"

"Uh-huh"

"There's the Joker," I called out again, trying to distract him.

"Let's get 'em, Batman." Joe went back to the buttons.

I didn't know what the big lever behind the steering wheel on the right side did, but I had seen Dad move it, so I pulled it down and went back to steering. The '58 Olds had no lock for the gear shift on an automatic transmission either.

Joe was now holding on to the dashboard and bouncing up and down on the edge of his seat, partly to mimic the motion of the car and also from the exhilaration. I pushed the lever back up.

"We're getting closer, Robin," I called out, rocking the steering wheel back and forth.

"Right, Batman," answered Joe, continuing to bounce on his seat.

I pulled the lever down again and kept steering. Joe's seat-bouncing started to slow down and then came to a complete stop. He looked around the car in a rather bored manner.

"I want to drive now."

"Not now; we're chasing the Joker." I continued steering.

"I don't care. I wanna drive."

"I told you, only Batman drives", I said, leaning into the steering wheel.

"Then I wanna be Batman," declared Joe.

"You can't be Batman; you're Robin," I answered definitively as I pushed the lever up again.

Suddenly, we heard a distinct clunk. A slight shudder went through the entire vehicle and through us. We both froze. Whatever that was, it didn't sound good. Joe stared at me in horror.

"What'd ya do?"

"Nothin," I yelled back.

"The car is moving!" Joe freaked.

He looked down from his open door to confirm that, indeed, the automobile was no longer in a parked position. We were backing down the driveway, which had a noticeable incline.

"I am getting out of here," he screamed.

"That's too dangerous", I tried to sound big brotherly. Safety talks and film strips warning of kids dying while playing in cars suddenly returned to my memory, just as the reality of where we were settled in.

"I don't care. I don't want to be in here." Joe sounded certain.

"Wait!" I called, examining the dashboard for some clue for what to do. It was now a confusing blur. All the confidence I felt in my ability to drive evaporated in a flash. Out of ideas, I turned to look back at Joe, but he was gone; there was only the open door. "Joe!"

The car was moving of its own accord, with no one in control. I had no idea what I had done or how to stop it, and I was scared to death that it might explode or something. With the panicked energy of someone stuck underwater, I pushed on the heavy door with all of my might, fear boosting my strength, determined to escape this runaway deathtrap.

The driveway seemed to be moving by so fast, yet time was going by so slowly. The pavement sped past me at two or three miles per hour. I could hear the crunch of the tires on gravel picking up in tempo. The car never sounded as heavy. It was more than enough to crush a 5-year-old boy. I tried not to imagine the results.

My body was shaking. Then, hoping not to be the cautionary tale for other young boys, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and made the jump, dramatically tumbling into the grass, rolling several times for effect. I came to a stop, taking a quick physical assessment for injuries and feeling lucky to find none.

My attention turned to the car sinking backward, further and further down the driveway. Both front doors were open, making it look somewhat like a giant, helpless bird with wounded wings. The front grill made a pleading face of hopelessness as it drifted silently away.

I turned back at Joe, who was lying on the lawn on the other side of the driveway. He was mesmerized by the scene but seemed otherwise unharmed.

"You OK?"

"Yeah, but look at Dad's car."

The Olds was now traversing at a good clip down the steepest part of the driveway. As the back bumper approached the road, the first thoughts of cross-traffic entered my mind, and I swallowed my heart. I frantically scanned both directions of Roosevelt Street, as I was taught to do before crossing a road. It was a residential area, yet still had regular traffic. No other cars thus far.

I lay on the grass, helpless to do anything other than watch the car roll onto the road. Dad had so many rules regarding roads. For example, we always had to cross a street at an intersection, and never

in the middle of the road. He wouldn't let us play near the road, much less on the road.

What's the penalty for playing with his car on the road? We all had a healthy fear of dad's temper, and his punishments were mostly corporal. I had a sick feeling in my stomach while seriously considering the run-away-from-home option.

Everything happened as if in the dream I hoped it was. The car slowed a bit as the back tires approached the centerline. For a minute, I thought that it might roll back into position, but it continued over the center hump of the road.

It began to pick up speed again, the rear end heading towards the curb opposite our driveway. Now I was really worried. I didn't know how far it would go. Might it tear through Mr. Schilling's house? The whole neighborhood? My understanding of propulsion and internal combustion engines came from *Road Runner* cartoons.

I held my breath as the car continued on its path. What next? With a thud and an awkward sort of bounce, the rear tires hopped the curb and onto Mr. Schilling's lawn. I gasped. "Please stop," I thought. The rear wheels kept moving across the grass.

"Please stop," I pleaded with myself. The next obstacle would be Mr. Schilling's house. "Please stop."

Then the front tires hit the curb, but without sufficient force to continue. The car rocked back and forth a bit before coming to a rest.

The big blue Olds was now partly on the road and mostly in Mr. Schilling's front yard. It looked vandalized sitting there, the front doors still open, the trunk pointing up, and the hood pointing down. And this was a no-parking zone, too.

I sat on the grass, staring at the car, contemplating my fate. This was the worst trouble I had ever been in my whole life. This is the most trouble anyone I knew has ever been in. Dad's cherished car was sitting on the neighbor's lawn like an abandoned wreck, and I was dead.

I turned back to Joe, hoping for some empathy or support. Then I thought about how I could pin some of the blame on him. He looked over at me, clearly in deep consideration of his options as well.

After a pause, he leapt up. "Dad!" He screamed at the top of his lungs, running towards the house. "Greg drove the car into Mr. Shilling's yard!"

Just then a car came by on the northbound lane, slowing down to gaze upon the scene, which included me, before giving a little toot of its horn to alert someone of the situation. I can imagine his conversation when he got home.

"Martha, funny thing I saw today. There was this car sitting on the grass on one side of the road and a little boy sitting on the grass on the other. I'll bet that little fellow's gettin' a whoopin' right about now."

The driver circled around the Olds and kept going. The horn toot brought the attention of Mr. Schilling, who stepped out onto his stoop to consider the spectacle on his front lawn. I tried to shrink into the grass as much as possible, but he was staring right at me. There was no place to hide.

I heard the front door open rather loudly. Our front door was almost never used and pretty much only served an ornamental function. Dad didn't want foot traffic on the carpeting inside. So, the fact that it was being used now only confirmed the amount of trouble I was in. I watched Dad storm out of the house onto our large wooden porch, with Joe right behind.

Dad paused at the top of the stairs, staring at his prized possession lying helplessly across the street. He turned to me, and our eyes met. His face had a look of shock, concern, and disbelief. I turned away in shame. In his commanding military voice, he called to me, "Are you alright?" I tried responding, but no sound came out. I could only nod.

"Both of you, sit on the steps and do not move," Dad barked, pointing to the porch stairs. He waved to Mr. Schilling, who was still waiting patiently for someone to remove the illegally parked car from his front lawn.

"Sorry Archie. Let me just get my keys". Dad darted in and out of the house, apologizing all the

way.

"Sorry Archie. Sorry Archie. If there is any damage, let me know. You know kids these days."

He ran across the street, and after giving the car a quick once-over, he apologized again before returning it to the driveway. He then carefully paced around it, looking for any signs of damage, before moving on to the interior, and then the undercarriage, working like a CSI evidence tech.

Sitting next to Joe on the steps, I was already near tears. "Thanks a lot", I sniffled.

"You did it. You were the one driving," Joe answered defensively.

"Ya didn't have to tell Dad."

"You would have blamed me, and then I'd be getting a spanking too."

"Uh-uh"

"Uh-huh"

"Uh-uh"

"Uh-huh"

"Alright, enough out of both of you!" Dad had finished his inspection and was now standing in front of us. His presence was imposing, as if a giant blocking out the sun.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"Joe was playing in the car." "Greg was Batman..." We both started up at the same time, like desperate criminals saying anything to save ourselves. Well, at least I was. Misery loves company. Any blame I could deflect onto Joe couldn't hurt.

"Enough!" We instantly stopped mid-sentence. "Joseph, tell me what happened." Joe went on to give a pretty accurate replay of the incident. I tried objecting at one point, which Dad overruled with a forceful, "Quiet!" I had no choice but to remain silent while Joe finished his testimony.

"Gregory, is this true?" Dad asked.

"I dunno," I answered meekly, wondering what happened to my protections against self-incrimination.

"Gregory, were you behind the wheel of the car?" Dad asked in a point-blank manner.

I looked down and tried not to answer.

"Gregory, were you behind the wheel of the car?" This time it was asked in a way that suggested further refusal to answer would result in painful consequences.

"I guess so," I answered, breaking down in tears.

"Don't you start with me! Joseph, go play. Gregory, come with me."

I was sobbing as I followed him into the house, out of fear, self-pity, and maybe to gain some sympathy from Dad. "You are lucky that there is no damage to the car, or this could be much worse," he warned.

I didn't feel very lucky. I was scared to the point of nausea.

It might be one of those traumatic events that got erased from my memory, but I don't remember the actual punishment; only that the yardstick used to deliver the blows ended up as three one-foot sticks. There was more crying, this time from pain, humiliation, and anger.

Backing the car down the driveway lived on in our family folklore for years. It was another memory that stayed with me for my entire life and was certainly filled with emotion.

Despite its age, the Oldsmobile is the family car I remember most. The rest are a blur of Mercurys and Chevrolets of equal size physically, yet combined, do not take up the space in my heart for the Blue Olds. The first car I ever drove.