

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Kidnapped

The kidnapping scandal involving the rebel, the political strongman, and the five-time World Champion of Formula 1 used to make for a great story. Although hardly anyone remembers it anymore.

It happened in the spring of 1958 in Cuba, when the Caribbean's most rebellious island was in full revolt. From his mountain fastness in the Sierra Maestra, Fidel Castro had sent his guerrillas into Havana to foment trouble during Fulgencio Batista's international Grand Prix.

Fangio, the winner of the previous year's event, had just flown in from Buenos Aires, and two of the guerrillas, recognizing him in the lobby of the Hotel Lincoln, decided to abduct him. But all the melodramatic kidnapping of the biggest sports hero in the hemisphere accomplished was to suddenly turn all of Latin America against Castro's

own guerrillas – or so it must have seemed to Fidel, who in a couple of days ordered the release of Fangio, with apologies.

Another Grand Prix of Cuba – the last one – was conducted in 1960. In the starting field, just beginning his third

professional campaign, was Dan Gurney. There were no kidnappings.

Oddly enough, though, just six years later, in 1966, on a crazier than usual Los Angeles morning, there almost occurred a second kidnapping, and this one did touch Gurney, who by then was a global hero. Gurney hardly knew the intended snatch victim – Leonard K. Firestone, of tire and rubber riches – but during the starving beginnings of his own career, Gurney had known quite well the would-be kidnapper, one Cal Bailey a dangerous thug with two very fast Corvettes, the first a red bomb, innocently licensed



for the streets, and the second, an even faster black one, so sinister it could not set wheels on L.A.'s avenues at all.

Ventura Boulevard, a 9-mile-long passageway connecting the San Fernando Valley from east to west, contained more booze dives per square mile than even 16th Street, Indianapolis. But the parking lot where Bailey used to deposit his street sleeper red Corvette -- 283 inches, fuel-injected, four-on-floor -- was missing, and so was Bailey's favorite house of spirits, the Tender Trap.

The Tender Trap was where Bailey, called "Mr. Corvette," used to joke, curse, threaten, and knock back the loudmouth until the wee hours. Poor palooka Cal has been among the missing for almost half a century, or since he achieved far greater notoriety with his photograph on the front page of the Los Angeles Times.

There he was, Mr. Corvette -- muscular shoulders, bull neck, baleful face, and straining, slightly crazy eyes. When the picture was published, his drinking denizens at The Tender Trap wondered if it had been taken after he was shot.

At the beginning of another recreational evening at the Tender Trap, Bailey tended to be jovial, with belligerence gaining the upper hand as the evening wore down. Chug-a-lugging suds not from a glass but the bottle, for additional showboating he'd whip out a \$100 dollar bill to wrap around the neck of the bottle. Sometimes, too, his audience would listen to him lying like a psychopath about all the burglaries and bank heists he'd pulled without getting caught.



And if somebody disagreed with him, Bailey would menacingly inquire if he'd like to have his head stuffed inside a cement mixer.

So far as anybody at The Tender Trap knew, there were only a couple of things that Bailey ever loved, and they were his wife and family and the pair

of Corvettes.

Despite her husband's wild and reckless character, and all the saturnalias at the 'Trap, Bailey's bride -- she was a beauty, a former air lines stew, 15 years Bailey's junior -- regarded him as the most gentle and mildest of men. Or so she claimed. The Baileys

lived in a big house out in the San Fernando Valley, and the man known as Mr. Corvette was a member of the PTA who chauffeured the kids to church on Sundays.

Bailey was not always Mr. Corvette. When he first got into amateur sports car racing he tooled a gullwing 300SL, one purchased from pampered Lance Reventlow, “the million-dollar baby” and later patron of the Scarabs.

But after Wild Billy Mitchell’s and Eddie Cole’s V-8 hit big, Bailey dumped the 300SL and wisely switched to plastic, buying his first Corvette, the red one.

Then he began paying regular visits to Hollywood Motors so that horsepower guru Max Balchowsky could tweak it into becoming arguably the fastest street ‘Vette in all of L.A.. Bailey knew what speed was. Saying so long to Max, he’d scald north on Mulholland, cross the top of the Hollywood Hills, and then plunge down the other side to faithfully skid his red missile to a halt in the parking lot of The Tender Trap for the start of the cocktail hour.

Bailey’s second Corvette, No. 4, his explosive black one, was Bailey’s road –racer, and from Palm Springs to Paramount Ranch, at every sports car track he visited, he pitched in, attempting to defend the honor of L.A.’s tribe of Corvettes.

But he got No.4 off the road a lot and was a really terrible driver. Naturally enough, however, gossip spread quickly about No. 4’s bad blasting power.

Gurney, then unknown and penniless, had just flunked out of Tony Paravano U, at Willow Springs, and, still was on the make for a sugar daddy. So he hit up Mr. Corvette.

Succumbing to Dan’s charms, Bailey told him he could race No.4 at Riverside in the Raceway’s inaugural. Gurney and No. 4 proceeded to win – win huge. The victory became not only the talk of L.A.’s racing but big-time international racing, leading boss Ferrari’s petitioning Gurney to join his Formula One squadron.

After basking briefly in his honorable new image as the sugar daddy responsible for the launching to stardom of Gurney, Bailey quickly returned to his old, troublesome, habits: he proceeded to lose his shirt in a truly hair-frying business venture involving a bowling alley in the middle of the Mojave desert. And following this, he embarked on the crackpot caper of his career, whose objective was to kidnap for ransom one of L.A.’s big tire and rubber rajahs.

This last little trick got him killed, as well as confirming the worst suspicions of his rattled boozy brothers at The Tender Trap, who suddenly came to understand the source of Mr. Corvette's gangster talk, and his flaunting of \$100 bills.

And around this time, Bailey's dishy spouse came forward to describe an odd domestic episode that revolved around Bailey's firing a sawed-off shotgun, creating a gaping hole in the floor of their kitchen.

But receiving the greatest jolt of all was poor-little-rich-kid Reventlow. When he'd sold Bailey his German gull-wing, the Woolworth heir had neglected to notice that Bailey was marking him down as a future snatch victim.

The total denigration of Bailey's character reached its peak when L.A.'s fuzz went public and pronounced him a compulsive, lifelong, wholly inept, criminal, whom the constabularies of two nations had stuck behind bars in the 1940s and early 1950s.

But the fuzz couldn't hunt him down and deliver the capital punishment it believed he so richly deserved until 16 seasons when he dressed up in a Halloween mask and undertook the kidnapping of Leonard Firestone.



Something so bizarre only could have happened in Los Angeles, where Bailey had been living after visiting the insides of penitentiaries in the United States and Canada, attesting to his unsoundness as a car thief, robber, and bungling burglar.

For a while he stayed clean, but it didn't last. Bailey's new troubles began when, in trade for some range land he'd somehow managed to acquire in Oregon, he came into possession of a bowling alley out in the vast Mojave, which became such an unmitigated disaster –it piled up thousands in dents, and Bailey had litigious Investors bearing down on him – that he decided to torch the place for the insurance.

Unfortunately for Bailey his midnight arson party

went all awry because all of the gasoline fuses he had set refused to ignite. Opening a door to investigate what was wrong, he unwittingly supplied the fire scene with the last ingredient it was missing: air.

The violent backdraft and explosion that followed lifted the roof off the structure and hurled Bailey out into the street, as well as back to the attention of his old and dogged enemies, the fuzz. Bailey, however, couldn't be prosecuted for trying to burn down his own property; encouraged, he next set out to sue, unsuccessfully, his insurance company for refusing to pay up!

Life became dull, especially since he was out of racing, having sold No. 4, and now his bankroll was as deficient as his intelligence. Bailey decided there was one thing to do. Having earlier become casually acquainted with moneybags Firestone, and having had a long conversation with him on the subject of Corvettes, Bailey concluded he might as well shanghai him for ransom.

Following week of vacillation about the size of the restitution -- \$8 million? \$10 million? – Bailey and his henchman, another worthless denizen of The Tender Trap named George Skalla, at last initiated the abduction by motoring toward Firestone's



Beverly Hills mansion high in secluded Coldwater Canyon.

Bailey, for once, he wasn't in a Corvette, but was driving the passenger car he had earlier instructed Skalla to borrow via Midnight Auto Parts. The two would-be kidnappers stopped so that Bailey could telephone Firestone's manse, where a maid provided the information that Mr. Firestone was home but indisposed.

Garbling the message, Bailey told accomplice Skalla, "Firestone's

working on the garbage disposal. Guess he's throwing Coke bottles down there."

Moments later, Bailey, dressed up in a ghoul's mask for Halloween, and flourishing a big revolver, identified himself as a parcel post delivery man, then opened Firestone's front door to confidently waltz inside.

He was immediately struck by a cannonade of gunfire sent to him courtesy of the elite sharp-shooter detectives of the L.A. fuzz's top ransom squad, who been barricaded issue the manse patently awaiting Bailey's and Skalla's arrivals.

It was all a great hoax. The maid who'd answered the phone had been an undercover fuzz agent. Leonard Firestone wasn't even at home and hadn't been ever since Skalla had run to the fuzz and ratted out Bailey with news of his plans.

Bailey could not have chosen a more lethal accomplice. Himself an ex-jailbird about to be returned to prison, Skalla, a stool pigeon magnificent, who had absolutely believed Bailey's threats to "stick your head into a cement mixture," and was petrified of him,



had sung and sung and sung.

The police, as a result, had known more about the kidnapping than Bailey had: they'd even rented out the getaway sedan that he'd instructed Skalla to steal. Skalla had furthermore been wired for sound, and the detectives waiting to dispatch him to eternity had presumably gotten a nice chuckle out of Bailey's "garbage disposal" remark.

As befits a Judas goat, Skalla had gotten shot down with Bailey. With life oozing out of him, he had asked his friends, the fuzz, who had become his assassins, what had gone wrong, and was curtly informed he'd neglected to duck.

There was a last little twist. Skalla's heirs unsuccessfully attempted to sue the fuzz for workman's compensation. For, after all, wasn't Skalla employed as a fuzz snitch while he was double-crossing fumbling brigand Cal Bailey, Mr Corvette? -JS