

Confessions of a Higganum Outlaw - by art wiknik

I was rather amused by the letter to the Editor in the December issue of the *Bulletin* referring to Higganum Center after dark as "Outlaw City." The writer's main complaint was that the police were never around when you really needed them.

As a former Higganum Center Outlaw, however, I know that all you have to do is give the police a call and they will come to the Center. Let me share some of my experiences.

In the 1960's when my friends and I graduated from high school (most are now grandparents), Higganum didn't have much to offer teenagers for excitement. So nearly every night, we would hang out in front of the Higganum Hardware store after it closed for the evening. We also didn't have much of a social life because the local girls believed that guys who did nothing but sit around night after night in front of a store were too weird to date. They referred to us as "Gearheads" or the "Hardware Boys."

Our evening activities were fairly routine and usually consisted of listening to car radios, peeling out, talking about cars, peeling out some more, or watching the world pass through the center.

But if things got really boring, we always managed to come up with something that was good for a laugh.

At the intersection of Routes 81 and 9-A (154 today), the only obstacle that caused vehicles to stop was a rarely used walk light that would trigger the traffic light. One night, one of my friends pressed the walk light button, forcing a car to stop at the crosswalk. The driver looked silly as he waited patiently for someone to cross the road, but none of us moved. When the traffic light turned green, the driver drove away, shaking his head for making him stop for nothing.

We thought that was pretty funny and decided to see how many cars we could stop. As soon as a vehicle came into sight, the walk button was pushed. When a car stopped, the ten of us walked across the road where we would patiently wait for the next car so we could walk back.

We must have looked threatening to at least one of the vehicles because the occupants quickly locked their doors. And as soon as we got across the street, the car sped off before the GO light even came on.

The next three cars did nothing eventful as the drivers just watched us parade across the street, and we were ready to call it quits when a Volkswagen beetle stopped.

This time, one of the guys thought he recognized the driver, so instead of peacefully walking across the road as we had done so far, we approached the car. The driver, who turned out to be a complete stranger, probably thought he was about to be mugged, put the car in reverse and shot backwards up the road. He turned around at Calliari Place and zoomed off in the opposite direction, back the way he came.

We had a good laugh and decided to sit in our cars for the rest of the evening.

About fifteen minutes later, a State Police trooper pulled into the parking lot. We thought nothing of it because we had an unspoken agreement with the police; as long as we kept our noses clean, they would not hassle us. For the most part, our mischief was harmless and didn't require their attention. However, that night somebody had obviously turned us in.

"Evening boys," the trooper greeted us. "I just got the weirdest complaint. It seems that vehicles are being unnecessarily stopped at this walk light. Do you know anything about that?"

No one said a word as we nervously eyed each other, but the trooper knew we were the culprits.

"I don't know why you guys are messing around with people who are innocently driving through town," he mildly scolded us. "But if I ever get called down here again because of that walk light, I'll pinch all of you for obstructing traffic. You got that?"

"Yes officer," we answered in broken unison, assuring him we would never do it again.

Things stayed quiet for a few days but soon we were bored again.

Since we were not old enough to legally consume alcohol, we decided to indulge in a different kind of amusement at the expense of those who did.

Located in the parking area between Watral's Store and the Depot Road Whistle Bridge was a utility pole with a live electrical outlet. On a quiet summer night, we set up a stereo with two big speakers and played a car drag race recording at full volume.

The dragster's roar and squealing tires echoed through the center, drawing several patrons out of the Village Barn tavern. We hid in the shadows trying not to laugh as they looked up and down the road asking each other, "Who the hell was that?" and "Which way did he go?"

We waited a half-hour before trying it again but this time we played the recording just after a car drove by. When the barflies charged out of the tavern again and saw the taillights disappearing toward Middletown, they jumped into a vehicle to give chase. Ten minutes later they returned, complaining about not being able to catch the offender but boasted they'll be ready if he comes back.

We took that remark as a challenge.

Twenty minutes later, we played the recording again. However, unknown to us, someone had notified the State Police of a loud car racing up and down the road. The instant we turned on the stereo, two cruisers roared out from behind the feed store with their lights flashing. With no outlaw driver in sight, the police must have figured

the offender was pretty fast so they sped off in different directions to catch him.

It would not take long for the troopers to figure out there was no one to chase, which meant we would be big trouble if they came back and discovered our prank. We immediately collected the stereo equipment and high-tailed it home. We didn't dare to hang out again for several nights.

However, two of my friends could just not stay away.

Late one night, the duo climbed onto the Route 9 Outlet roof and hid behind a six-foot diameter store sign. Armed with a supply of cherry bombs and a slingshot, they began to lob firecrackers at passing vehicles. Before long, a town constable was summoned to investigate. Not feeling threatened by the local law and able to observe the officer's every move undetected, the pair continued to fire cherry bombs into different locations, forcing the constable to sprint around the center as he tried to pinpoint the source.

The constable soon tired of the game and called for back-up. Within minutes, a State Police cruiser quietly rolled into the center and along with the constable positioned themselves at strategic locations. The mere presence of the State Police forced the pranksters to lay low for several hours until the center was once again quiet and no longer under the watchful eye of the law.

Within a year, my friends and I left town to attend college or join the military. We returned home at different intervals so it was difficult to resume our role as the Hardware Boys.

Besides, a younger crowd was now hanging out in Higganum Center just like we used to do.

That's when we knew it was time to face life as adults and no longer indulge in the antics of our outlaw youth.