



Woodward Avenue: Cruising the Legendary Strip (Cartech)

Robert Genat

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Detroit's Woodward Avenue was America's center of gravity for cruising and street racing in the '50s and '60s. Its widely paved surfaces with long sections of arrow-straight road between traffic signals provided the ideal location for stop light street racing and cruising action. Woodward even became the unofficial test track for the profusion of hot factory iron churned out by Detroit's engineers. If you lived in the Detroit area in the '60s and wanted to drag race Woodward Avenue was the place to go.

Woodward Avenue: Cruising the Legendary Strip is filled with stories from the people who cruised and raced Woodward in that wonderful era. Also featured are the clandestine and not-so-clandestine efforts by the factories to build cars that the Woodward crowd would buy and race. Woodward Avenue includes everything that surrounded Woodward's action, including Detroit's legendary DJs who provided the cruisers' musical soundtrack, the hang-outs and drive-ins, the high-performance new car dealerships that provided the cars, and the legendary speed shops that provided the hot rod parts.

Excerpt from book's foreword by Eric Dahlquist, former Hot Rod Magazine editor

The same set of cars would race three, four or five times then peel off and go south down Woodward the other direction, matching up with the same or different cars and do it all over again. Once the retail shops along the streets closed there was little normal traffic. Detroit is a working man's town, so most of the regular citizens were home finishing dinner, helping their kids with homework or zeroed-in on prime-time television. By default, the racers were left to themselves. Since Woodward bisected all these various small towns and municipalities, each with their own police force, the jurisdictions were limited and police patrols and routes were known and predictable. Police presence seemed minimal at best on this night.

Still, Detroit had always had hot cars, things moved fast here, people thought fast. The story is told that when Ed Cole became president of GM, he had the elevators speeded up so employees wouldn't waste so much time going from floor to floor. To the engineers who designed them and the marketers who peddled them, Woodward was a place to stretch out their legs on their way across town, measure their creations. The Big Three had its proving grounds, but the real crucible of market competition now was out on the street where life was unpredictable and reputations were made.

The first cars we raced were SS Chevelles and GTOs, maybe an Olds 4-4-2. The Hemi blew the m away like King-Kong on the Empire State Building swatting those pesky bi-planes. It was shooting fish in a barrel. 409 Chevys, 406 Fords, even what had to be a 350hp, 327 Chevy II four-speed, one of the fastest sleeper cars of the day. It didn't matter . . . you'd slap the accelerator and the Coronet would rocket launch.

On and on we raced, baiting on anyone with enough guts to try. Eventually, we worked into the middle of a whole jockeying pack of 8-10 cars we toyed with the competition as different cars gave us a shot. Drivers would slide alongside and yell, What the hell is in that thing? Stock came the reply. The Dodge Boys had carelessly forgotten the correct badging so the engine was denoted as a 383.

This literally went on for hours. Like Bruce Miller's Endless Summer, you became hooked on the next wave, the next challenge, the next high. Just to hear the Hemi dual quad 3140 Carter's AFBs cramming all that cool Michigan air through their throats, the TorqueFlite slamming into second gear one more time with a sound of rubber so loud it scared you.

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