



# The Road to Bonneville

*Images and words: Spike Kilmer*





"Photography all started for me when I was a young child on vacation to Florida. The family camera was a Kodak 126 and I finally got my chance to take an image with it. I remember that image vividly to this day. I remember holding the camera up to my eye and framing the subject carefully, birds in a tree and I wanted to make sure I got them all in. I remember tripping the shutter. That click. I was hooked.

After that moment, I had the fire burning in me to photograph. On another vacation trip, I went around the island of Chincoteague, Virginia with the same camera and photographed cars. Any old hot rod or muscle car I could find. I went through two rolls of the family film. Nobody else in the family was happy.

Fast forward to 1979. I was living in a very small town in the suburbs of Pennsylvania, south of Philadelphia. My brother had also discovered photography, and used his paper route money to buy a Pentax KM. I used to take his camera and use up all his film as well. He never could figure out why a roll would come back with strange images on it. Later that summer, I had a job landscaping and I saved up my money and bought my own camera. A Pentax K-1000, similar to what my brother had. A fully manual 35mm SLR. I learned to use it by reading the instruction manual from cover to cover. I was surprised at fast I could pick it up. It just made sense to me. My first rolls of film were nothing spectacular. I still have that K-1000.

Throughout the years, it was always cars and cameras. I would sometimes sell a car to buy a camera, or vice versa. I remember my father took me to a camera store on my birthday and I bought my first TLR, a Yashica 124G. I loved that camera. Around the same time, my brother, who was in the Navy, shipped home a complete darkroom set. An Omega B600 enlarger and a Gral-ab timer. I taught myself how to develop film and make prints. I had set up a darkroom in our laundry room. In 1980 I found myself getting kicked out of my third private school and back into the public school system. They had a photography club which I quickly joined and prospered. There was a teacher named Pam Sanderson that was a huge influence on my photography. She had long black hair and tattoos. I was allowed to use the darkroom whenever I wanted, so I took full advantage of that. Of course, I was in my teens now, so my subjects had turned to girls. With a camera, I could approach anyone and ask them to model for me. the camera was a master key to anything. It opened a lot of doors.

During one such modelling outing, photographing a girl from my school in the woods near my house, we were on our way across a field and were approached by a disheveled man, looking for directions out of the woods. He began to followed us across the field, when, from behind a stone wall, police sprang up, guns drawn and made us raise our hands. The guy turned out to be a wanted fugitive , so me and my model slowly stepped away from the guy. A helicopter landed in the field and they had the guy face down and handcuffed, with a shotgun to his head. My first instincts were to start photographing. So, I did. I got it all. Behind the camera I was fearless. when it was all over and the helicopter flew away. I was left with a model in an empty field. I ran home and called the local newspaper and told them what just happened. They sent out a reporter to pick up my film, and again, I was left standing in the parking lot of where I went to elementary school, confused.

The next day, I got a call from my grandmother, telling me my name was in the paper. I questioned her if they used any of my pictures, to which she replied " No, but there's a nice one on the front page!". My image was on the front page of the newspaper that everyone in my area read! I was famous! My father took me down to the newspaper offices, several towns away to retrieve my negatives. Mainly because there where images of my model on that roll. I was awarded 50 bucks and got a tour of the entire newspaper operations, including the darkroom. I wanted to be a journalist.



In 1999, I was at the supermarket, browsing through the magazine rack, when I stumbled upon a Hot Rod magazine that had a supplement magazine attached. It was Hot Rod Deluxe, and it only lasted two issues at that time. My photography had grown over the years, and my main subjects now were cars and motorcycles. I was the manager of a camera store so I had access to any equipment I wanted. Besides my K-1000, I had settled on Nikon as my brand of choice for 35mm. I had quite a few different models, but my first was a Nikon FM with an MD-12 motor drive. That gave way to a Nikon F2AS with an MB1/ MD2 drive. Lenses were a 24mm, 35mm, 105mm, 50mm ETC. But in 1999, my main squeeze was a Nikon N90s with the MB10 grip. That was and is, my workhorse.

I contacted Hot Rod Deluxe after the second issue came out. The big wigs at corporate had decided to pull the plug on HRD, but a brilliant upstart named Aaron Lasky saw a new wave of traditional hot rods on the horizon, and got the funds together to start his own independent magazine, Car Kulture Deluxe. I was quick to jump on board, and soon, I was on staff. Or, at least, a regular contributor. Nobody was full time.

So, Car Kulture Deluxe lasted about four years, or 12 issues. Soon after, my good pal and artist, Zombie called me up with a new magazine idea, Traditional Rod and Kulture Illustrated. I was first in line. I shot the first cover and never missed an issue. I was also shooting for just about every major hot rod magazine out there. street Rodder, Rod and Custom, even The Rodders Journal. I was always shooting and getting in print. Because of that, I had met so many great people. Car owners. Hot Rod builders. Photographers. Writers. Amazing people with amazing stories. It was heaven.





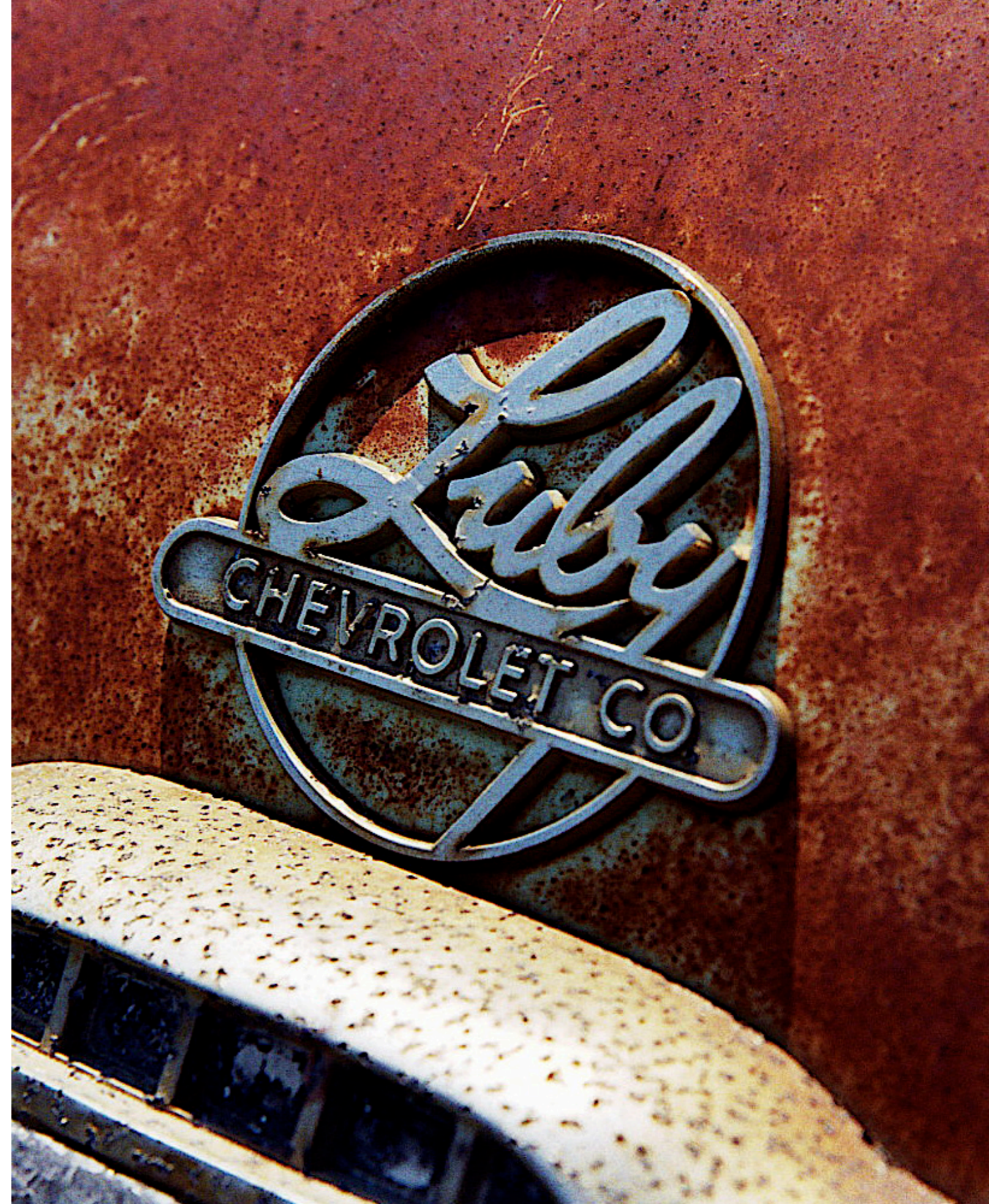


In 2007, my pal Larry Garland proposed a trip to the Bonneville Salt Flats. The trip included a bunch of people I had met at car shows and had become friends. There were some that I had never met, but now are like family. The cars included a 1959 Chevrolet station wagon with a big block Chevy, owned by Gary Newman and his son Mike Newman., a 32 Roadster owned by "Grumpy Gary", a 32 Roadster ( #5) owned by Larry Garland, and 31 Model A coupe owned by Howard "JR" Kelly. There was also a Sprinter van with an empty trailer that shadowed us the entire trip, and its purpose was to carry our luggage, and give us a lift in case of mechanical problems, which did arise. we only needed the trailer twice. Both times were for the newest car in the group, the 59 Chevy wagon. This was the core group of cars, all meeting up in Pennsylvania, where we would depart in August of 2007. A week before time trials started on the salt flats. Almost immediately after departure from Jr's house, still in Pennsylvania on Rt. 80., Larry began to have death wobble in his roadster to the point we had to pull into a rest stop. It was diagnosed as loose friction shocks on the front axle, and the problem was made less severe, but not eradicated entirely. Regardless we pressed on. All went pretty smooth after that, crossing into Ohio that evening, we got into a groove. I spent the day hopping from car to car, trying to decide which I liked best. I was shooting the entire time, of course. To prepare for the trip, I began buying up all the film I could. My cameras were a Nikon N90s for 35mm, and a Pentax 6x7 for medium format. My main lens for the Nikon was a 24-85 2.8/ f4 Nikkor. My film choices were Kodak 100 and Kodak 200 for colour, and Tri-X for black and white. Its a film that has never failed me since

my start in photography and a film I use to this day.

I think it was the second day into the trip that we met up with the rest of our group in Illinois. Aaron Grote had built a pick up from scrap parts and a junkyard engine of unknown mileage that we called "Sea Hag". His co-pilot was a guy we named Johnny Sparkle. It was actually the famous artist Coop who named him that in Wendover Utah. The final member of the group was Charlie in his 1950 Ford with the original flathead. Charlie would often wander away from the group and do his own thing. Every once in a while I would look back at the line and Charlie would be gone. He must have taken off and gone exploring, we determined after a couple of nights at the hotel. But he would always be back in line again come morning. I don't think I spoke more than a couple sentences to Charlie the entire trip, yet he shows up in a lot of pictures.

By the end of the first day, I had decided that Jr and I got along best, and that I liked riding in the Model A coupe out of all the cars. the '59 Wagon was too comfortable. Too much like a modern car. The Model A fit me like a glove and I felt at home once inside. I ended up riding with JR the rest of the trip there, and back. We became great friends and still are. Since then, we've taken many other trips all over the country, but mostly back to Illinois to visit Aaron. I've shot quite a few of hot rods he's built and put them in magazines. The coupe we rode out in was on the cover of Rod and Kulture a couple years before the trip. It now lives in London if I'm not mistaken.







The trip out to Bonneville lasted 4 days and was the best experience I've ever had. Being a photographer, it is easy to get caught up in the photography and forget the actual experience. It's a fine line between taking it all in and capturing it on film. I managed to do both somehow.

We spent a total of three days on the Salt Flats watching the races. We had pit passes so access was unlimited. Although the Bonneville experience is like a trip to another planet and church all at the same time, the journey was equally as impressive as the destination. The Model A had broken a radiator support rod while on the salt and one of the crew at Ford Racing, generously offered to weld it up, which he did. The salt definitely is a family gathering of like minded people from all over the world. Its a photographer's paradise. The salt acts as a giant reflector, spreading light evenly, making for amazing images. I went through a lot of film that trip.

I guess a valid question would be, "Why film"? in 2007, digital cameras had produced a fairly good quality image. I had, at the time, a Nikon D300, but it was acting up, and was off for repair. So, film was my only option, and besides, I prefer film. I wasn't on assignment for anyone on this trip, so I chose print film. I also shot slide film, come to think of it, but never had those images scanned to a digital format. I never thought they would ever be published until now. I did make a CD of images and gave them to each of the group later on, and I put together one of those self published online books for myself, but that's it.

The trip home took five days because we took our time and did a lot of exploring. We had taken the northern route out to Bonneville, and Route 63, the southern route across the US, for the trip home. When it was over, we all went our separate ways. We all still talk at shows and reminisce about that trip. It was a once in a lifetime experience. So many images that are now seeing print.





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