

Mavis and 289

By Bill Russo

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The places in this story are real. Much of what happens in the pages to follow actually did happen but not necessarily to the same person. Like a soup made of many ingredients the narrative is a mixture of events that stood alone, but now are combined to form a yarn that comes from a man named Rocco J. Lacobello. He is alive in the sense that he resides somewhere inside my brain. He is the true author of "Mavis and 289".

When I was in high school long ago and for a number of years after graduation, it was possible for me to purchase a serviceable car, simply by going to the local junk-yard.

After I dropped a hundred dollars down on the desk in his shack at the front of the property, Bill Rodd, the white-whiskered proprietor, would smile and say...

..."Go on out in the yard and pick something out. The keys are in 'em. But that don't mean the car's going to start. Drive it out or push it out. Once it leaves my gates it's yours."

Think of how great it was and how easy it was! Anything in the lot for one hundred bucks! Excitedly I'd roam the dozen rusty metal rows looking at everything from the nearly intact skeleton of a 1929 Model A, to beefy relics like Hudsons and Nashes. It was more like a museum of automobile history than a junkyard.

There'd be a few minis too - like the little Henry J - The Kaiser Company's compact car. It was designed to be the 'new car' for people

who could only afford a 'used car'. Kaiser left a few items out – horsepower for one. Brand new, the thing couldn't even do 50!

Customers who bought the Henry J during its production run from 1950 to 1954 didn't have to worry about their vehicle losing value, because it didn't really have any value to begin with! Kaiser Motors intended the Henry J, to be the new Ford Model T. It was instead, the prototype of Ford's later product, "The Edsel".

Sometimes I'd find a car that looked good, only to learn that somebody had removed the starter, or in some cases the whole engine! Bill Rodd didn't sell just whole cars. He sold pieces too! The customers had to remove the part themselves.

Bill Rodd never left his desk where he had an endless supply of foul smelling, cheap cigars and coffee. The coffee might have had something else in it besides cream and sugar! The old fellow laughed a lot and he slurred his words quite a bit!

I was always able to find a wreck that ran pretty well; usually it was a Ford 'flathead V-8' from the late 1940s to the mid 1950s. The vehicles generally lasted me a little more than 11 months – after which the process would be repeated.

During the winter months, all through high school I worked at the local McDonald's for 37 cents an hour. Keep in mind this was the 1950s when the burger cost 15 cents, and the drink and the fries were a dime each. So in a single hour, I made enough for a meal with two cents to spare.

I saved my pennies during the period of snow and ice, right on through the monsoon season that some people call 'spring'. On Cape Cod, where I lived then and still do; there really is no spring. The local calendar pages consist of January, February, March, March, March, June, July, etc. There's no April in Hyannis or May in Chatham; just rain falling down on Main, clogging every storm drain, from the Cape Cod Canal, to Canal Street in Provincetown.

In the summer of 1959, being 16 years old and in possession of a driver's license and one hundred dollars of savings, I made my first run to Bill Rodd's junkyard to buy my first-ever car.

During the winter, at the Hyannis Motor Vehicle Registration office I had won my right to operate a car on the first try. The inspector said that I piloted the machine like I'd been driving all my life.

He wasn't far from wrong. During the early 1940s after my father came back from World War Two, he bought a nearly 10 year old 1937 Ford V-8 that boasted almost a hundred horsepower.

My father worked very hard from Monday through Saturday. So hard, that he and my Mom slept quite late on Sunday mornings. Knowing this, four year old me, would snatch the car keys from Dad's dresser and head outside to the driveway. It was not paved, being a long, straight dirt track with a hump of grass in the middle.

Not especially bright, but precocious in some ways, I knew instinctively not only how to start the car but also how to put it in first gear as well as reverse.

In those early days I hadn't fully mastered the art of shifting a manual transmission, but I was able to use first gear to get the car rolling to the end of the driveway. Somehow, my tiny legs were sufficient to hit the brakes and stop the car before it crashed through the wooden fence at the property line. Pushing down hard on the clutch pedal, I shifted the car into reverse and backed it slowly to the beginning of the dirt driveway. For about a half hour or so, I'd run that car back and forth a dozen times or so and then happily sit in it until I figured it was near to the time Mom and Dad would be waking up.

I got away with this routine for several years and only gave it up after becoming a teenager and finding older friends who would let me drive their cars. With the pal in the passenger seat, I motored happily on the back roads of Cape Cod without once having an accident or being

stopped by the authorities. By the time I took my driving test at age 16 in 1959, I had in fact been driving for most of my young life.

Though it has been more than sixty years, I still vividly remember that first time I went to the junkyard to buy a car. I placed a stack of money on Bill Rodd's desk and tried to hurry him up while he counted.

"Just hold your hosses kid," he said waving his hand and stabbing at the rings of stinky cigar smoke swirling around his head. "I know you wanna get out in the yard and start treasure huntin' but I gotta make sure this is a hunnert bucks. Whad-ja do? Rob a piggy bank? This pile is mostly ones."

"I get paid in dollar bills Bill and I've been saving them for two years. There's a hundred there. Can I go now?"

"Ok kid. I know where you live. If there ain't a hunnert here, me and Emo will come to yer house to get the rest," he laughed.

Though he was smiling when he said it, I hoped I had counted right because Emo was a terror. He was Bill Rodd's best friend but he was a friend to no other person. Emo was a giant German Shepherd who was seven feet tall. At least that's how big he seemed to me when I left Bill Rodd's office and started out towards the junkyard.

Emo looked at me. He didn't bark but gave me kind of a grin that fully displayed teeth that were reported to have been used in Bill Rodd's defense a dozen or more times. Emo was Bill Rodd's combination friend, junkyard dog, and night-time security team.

The dog got up and started padding toward me.

"It's okay Emo, I'm all paid up! You can ask Bill Rodd. I paid him a hundred dollars. I'm going to look for a car that runs and I'll be out of here in a little while," I said.

The huge shaggy beast continued toward me, his grin getting even wider and toothier. Nervous, I thought about running and ducking into the first car that I could get to. Dodging a few cow-patties, actually

Emo patties; I relaxed when I realized that Emo was on a chain and he had reached the end of it.

By the 1950s when I was shopping for a car among the dozen rusty rows of Rodd's relics; Ford, Chevy and Chrysler had better than a 90 per cent share of the car market. But the junkyard offered far more delights than the few offerings of the 'Big Three'.

There were Hudsons, Packards, Studebakers, Frazers and Nashes galore! I liked them all but ultimately fell in love with a newer version of my dad's old car.

I selected a 1948 Ford Flathead V-8 coupe. Painted in standard black, the car had 95 horsepower, with a stated top speed of 78 miles per hour. Since 'she' was only 11 years old I wondered why somebody had relegated her to the junkyard.

The keys were in her and she started right up, humming a beautiful tune from an engine that sounded like it just came off the postwar assembly line.

Bill Rod opened the gates to let me out of the lot, and I drove "Mavis" as I had christened her, to Route 28 in Hyannis, the main road of Cape Cod.

Testing out everything as I drove, I found out that Mavis' radio worked perfectly, as did her heater, windshield wipers, and dashboard gauges. She seemed to be like a race horse gearing up for a stretch run. It was as though she wanted me to step on that gas as hard as I could. But Route 28 is a snaky and slow road, and I couldn't safely go much faster than 35. As I entered the village of Truro I looked at the dashboard fuel indicator and pulled in to Monty's Gas.

"Filler up!" I said happily when I drove to the pumps and saw that a gas war had driven the price of 'Ethyl' down to 17 cents a gallon. Mavis was running on fumes so she took 17 gallons.

After checking my tires, my oil, and cleaning my windshield, Monty said, "17 gallons. That'll be two-eighty-nine."

I handed him three singles and waited while he went inside to get my 11 cents change. I was pondering the synchronicity of the numbers. Mavis took 17 gallons of gas at 17 cents a gallon and according to the book, she gets 17 miles to the gallon – so I can drive 289 miles on this fill-up which is the exact amount of money I paid for the gas!

When Monty came back with my change I told him I needed to find a long straight road so I could give Mavis a good workout.

“She’s been cooped up in Bill Rodd’s junkyard and needs to get some hard running in Monty.”

“Well,” Monty replied, “I expect that she couldn’t be anything else but cooped up.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She’s a Ford Coupe, so what else could she be other than ‘couped up’?”

I pretended to like his joke and gave a respectable imitation of a laugh. “But seriously where can I take her where there’s a long straight road. I need to get the kinks out of her.”

“I know one place. But it’s a long trip. You might not want to go that far. It’s got a straight section of four lane highway that’s 15 miles long. But it’s very far away.”

“I want to go there Monty. How far is it?”

“Well, let’s figure it out.” Monty took a ruler from his pocket and measured off the miles on a full color map that he spread out on Mavis’ hood. After a few moments he said. “Round trip, it’ll be 289 miles.”

Gas, 17 cents a gallon. 17 gallons to fill Mavis. Mavis gets 17 miles per gallon. 17 times 17 is 289. 289 is the number of miles for a round trip from Truro to the place Monty pointed out on the map.

Synchronicity! I’m not sure how I knew the meaning of that word but I did. In simple terms it’s a pile-up of co-incidences that might lead to something very far from the realm of the ordinary.

As I took my 11 cents change from Monty. I knew that I had to immediately set out on an adventure to the point on the map that Monty touched. A place called Gloucester, Massachusetts. After exchanging Bill Rodd's dealer plate for my own at the DMV, I was ready to go.

Mavis and I took Route 6A from Truro and headed towards Eastham to pick up Route 28 to the Cape Cod Canal. Running smoother than honeybees in a hive, Mavis quickly devoured the road to the canal where we crossed over the Bourne Bridge to mainland Massachusetts to pick up Route 28.

Every few miles, I'd shove the clutch down to the floor and rev up the engine, just to hear the roar. When I slipped her back into gear Mavis tried to gallop a lot faster than twisty old 28 would allow. It seemed like neither I nor the car could wait until we finally got onto Route 128. It was a brand new speedway that started outside Boston and made an almost straight line up to our destination, the fishing village of Gloucester.

Along the way I chatted with Mavis, who was not just my first car, but somehow much more than that. Though she could not speak back to me, I felt certain that we had some sort of a psychic connection and that she would never let me down.

Whoever had owned her before me had been generous to her. She was equipped not only with a radio but also, a chrome air cleaner for her carburetor, and white sidewall tires.

She also had a suicide knob on her steering wheel. Outlawed now, they were very popular among teenagers back in the day, because when you

used the knob you could steer the car with just one hand. Even the sharpest corners could be negotiated using only the left hand. This system of navigation enabled a teenaged young man to wrap his right arm around the young lady squeezed up against him.

The knob was held to the steering wheel by a pair of screws that sometimes loosened - and if they did so as a driver was rounding a corner, it became apparent why the device had been nicknamed 'suicide'.

That thing always had the potential to cause serious and fatal accidents; but I used it because I was sure that Mavis wouldn't let anything happen to me.

When I got past the city of Brockton, home of unbeaten heavyweight boxing champ Rocky Marciano, I turned on the radio; full blast. After dialing through some ear splitting static I heard the comforting sounds of drums underneath the clear voice of country singer Johnny Horton. "In 1814 we took a little trip along with Col. Jackson down the mighty Mississip. We took a little bacon and we took a little beans, and we fought the bloody British in the town of New Orleans."

Rock n Roll had taken over the music scene by 1959 but that country song managed to get to the top of all the charts and stay on top for a long time.

I likened my trip to the tune. I had come from Cape Cod where there's a town called Old Orleans. I had loaded some soda and sandwiches in the back seat. I wasn't traveling on a river - except if it rained, Route 128 would resemble the Mississippi more than a highway. But there was no rain on that summer day. The sky was clear blue and the sun was red hot.

I was on the biggest and busiest part of Route 128 - four lanes on either side. It was the biggest highway I had ever seen. The speed limit was 65 miles per hour. I stomped on the gas and got her up to 70.

"Are you okay Mave?"

She answered with a mighty roar, seeming to say, "Give me more!"

"Okay baby," I shouted back. "Let's see if we can get up to 80. They say your top speed is only 78 but we'll beat it if we work together. I'll squash that gas pedal right up against the floor board. If you'll do your part, I'll do mine"

Picking up speed, we flashed by a mile marker that said we were on mile seven, eight more to go until Gloucester. We were up to 75.

The steering wheel started to shake, and I heard a kind of a whining sound from one of the rear tires. When we flew by Mile Marker 8, our speed was a pinpoint under 80.

"C'mon Mave. You can do it," I shouted encouragement to her engine, which now was knocking and gasping for more air and more gas. I pushed even harder on the fuel pedal, though it was already pushing through the rubber that covered the floor boards.

The steering wheel shook so badly now that I was unable to steer the car. It stayed on the road somehow, but not through any efforts of mine.

Mile Marker Nine. "We did it Mavis! We're going 85 miles per hour. Mission accomplished!"

Mile Marker Ten. Five more miles to go. The steering wheel stopped shaking and the tire stopped whining. Mavis smoothed out her engine and quieted down so that I could hear the radio again.

Dandy Dan Donovan, one of the WMEX Radio Good Guys from Boston, said "Here's a new one by that Rock n Roll King, Bobby Darin. He wowed us with "Splish Splash, I was takin' a bath", now here's his new song – it's an old tune from the Three Penny Opera – Mack the Knife."

With his new style, Las Vegas smooth, Bobby crooned, "Oh the Shark babe, has such teeth dear, and it shows them pearly white. Just a jack knife has old Mac Heath babe, and he keeps it out of sight."

Mile Marker Eleven. Four more miles left. Mavis and her engine seemed to be singing along with Bobby Darin as he wondered “Did our boy do something rash?” It seemed to me that Mavis sang the same words. She wanted more.

“Okay baby, let’s go for 100! One hundred miles per hour in a used 1948 Ford that was designed for a top speed of 78. We can do this! We are at 90 right now!”

I stamped down even harder on the gas pedal. It seemed like I pushed hard enough to force it right through the floor. But Mavis didn’t complain. In answer I heard the sound of two extra carburetor barrels kick in. But that was impossible because Mavis didn’t have a four barrel carb. Hers was only two.

Mile Marker Twelve. Four barrels? Two barreled carburetor? Whichever it was, the steering wheel started shaking violently again. It wobbled so much I actually took my hands from it, and yet somehow Mavis continued to hug the road and streamed on. The speedometer inched upwards to 95!

Mile Marker Thirteen. Two miles to go to Gloucester. The left rear tire howled like an October Northeaster knocking down the biggest trees on Cape Cod. The right front tire joined in and the music formed by the duo was a symphony from Hell. 96! 97! Finally the speedometer forced its way to 98!

Mile Marker Fourteen. One mile left. Life suddenly slowed down. Though we would cover the final mile in about 30 seconds, everything seemed to be happening in slow motion.

The steering wheel stopped shaking, but my hands wouldn’t. I put them on the wheel at ten o’clock and two o’clock and gripped the wheel as tightly as I could. The tires fell silent. The motor began running as smooth as the gentle Main Street water wheel in Hyannis as we reached 100 miles per hour!

Without realizing it, I lifted my foot from the gas. It sought a quiet spot near the driver's side door, where it slowly regained its senses. The feeling gradually came back into my hands.

One hundred miles per hour might not seem like a big deal if you own a Jaguar or a Lexus, and run the open roads of Texas. But if you're 16, in tiny New England, and driving a 1948 Ford Coupe; it is a huge thing!

To this day I don't know how I survived that 289 mile road trip to Gloucester and back. Yes I do. Synchronicity. That and Mavis. She took care of me. She protected me and kept me safe.

I woke up in the hospital in October that year and had no idea of what happened to me. I knew my head hurt really bad, I had no idea why.

"Car accident," they said. "Your head hit the dashboard and you have a compound skull fracture. Your vision will clear up soon and you'll start remembering what happened."

They were right. My eyes had been swollen shut by lids that were as big as baseballs. As the swelling went down each day, my vision improved and so did my memory.

Car accident. But not with Mavis. Mavis had thrown a rod! I remembered the whole thing. I was going to cost almost \$300 to fix her engine. I took her to Joe's Fix a Flat in Hyannis.

Joe was a quirky guy. He always gave written estimates, costed out to the exact dollar. In the 2000s, he would be diagnosed as having OCD, but back in the 1950s everyone just thought he was eccentric.

He was a great mechanic though and to tell the truth, I am positive I would have gotten Mavis fixed except for the number. Joe's estimate of the cost to fix Mavis was \$289.00.

“That’s a lot of money Joe,” I said as we stood in his shop underneath the lift that he had Mavis on. “I can go to Bill Rodd’s and get another relic for a hundred bucks.”

“But you’ll never get another Mavis,” he replied.

I called my pal, Goo Smith for a ride to the junkyard. Goo’s real name is Chester but he’d been called Goo since the fourth grade when he started imitating Grandpa Jones and the other comics on the Grand Ol’ Opry, which we listened to every week. His “How-dee” imitation of Minnie Pearl was so famous it even got him on the radio a few times. Minnie was a comic on the Opry and was also on a lot of network TV shows spinning her down-home tales while her trademark hat with the price tag on it, sat atop her head.

As I was getting in Goo’s car I noticed for the first time that his license plate ended in 289! I should never have gotten in, but I still had not fully realized the significance of the numbers.

Driving down Route 134 Goo was talking faster than that guy on late night TV that sold pots and pans in a fast talking spiel, fifty years before infomercials and pitches from Home Shopping Network.

Unfortunately, just like the demo guy on television, Goo talked with his hands. He was jabbering away and motioning with his arms when he was supposed to be turning off Route 134 onto High School Road.

The car smashed into a house at the corner of the road. Goo was slumped over the steering wheel and moaning as if he were ready to die. I felt okay.

Somebody had contacted the police department. A patrol-car and an ambulance showed up and the attendants quickly put Goo on a stretcher and sped him to nearby Cape Cod Hospital.

The police questioned me for several minutes. I said I didn’t know what happened. We were on the way to the junkyard and the car suddenly crashed. I had no visible wounds so they were not in a particular rush.

Finally one of them told me to get in the police car and said they'd drive me to the hospital to get me checked out. Just then the wrecker moved the car from the front porch of the home where it had crashed. For the first time I saw the number of the house – 289.

While I was in the emergency room I saw Goo walking out of the hospital. A nurse who had been in the exam room with him, explained that he was fine. No injuries. He had just panicked after the crash.

As for me I was fine for another four or five minutes and then I collapsed. Turns out I had been walking around in shock with a depressed skull fracture and fell into a coma for more than a week. As I was balancing between life and death, the doctors were trying to decide whether they should attempt an operation.

My skull-bone was pressing on my brain. The pressure could cause a buildup of blood that might kill me. Surgery to pull the bone back also might kill me. One young doctor wanted to operate right away. An older, more experienced physician advised waiting.

In the middle of the night, about seven days after the injury, the bone moved away from the brain, as if by magic. In the morning I was conscious and beginning to heal.

After a recovery period of close to six months, I was about 90 per cent normal and was again able to drive and function reasonably well. The first thing I did was to go to Joe's Fix a Flat to retrieve Mavis.

"She ain't here. Bill Rodd came and got her. You could go to the junkyard and see if she's still there," he advised.

"She ain't here," Bill Rodd said, puffing out a noxious cloud of cigar smoke. "She's gone."

"Where is she Bill? I've got to get her back."

"She's in Hyannis. She's in Eastham. A little bit of her is in Boston. I had to sell her off one piece at a time. Nobody wanted all of her, but one guy wanted her carburetor. Another fella bought her gas tank. A

different guy bought the radio. She's all over Massachusetts. Her frame's still here if you want it."

Too late. I was too late to save Mavis, but not too late to save myself.

The numbers! If you yourself start to see a sequence of numbers popping up randomly, go slowly and be careful. You might not know which way to go or what to do. But try to do the right thing and you will probably be okay.

If I had listened to the numbers and spent the \$289, I'd be a lot better off today.

Still in all things aren't too bad. Many years ago I bought a house in Hyannis on High School Road. I've got a store on Main Street and I do okay. All in all things have worked out. To help make sure they did, I located my store at 289 Main Street. And my house, it's 289 High School Road, the very house I crashed into way back in 1959.

I'm telling you this story because I have no family to pass it along to. I'm 74 years old and don't dare to wait any longer to tell the tale.

Watch the numbers. I'm not saying 'play the numbers'. Be aware of them. They play a far larger part in your life than you can imagine. Trust me. I know.

Ronald J. Lacobello

May 7, 2017

From the Editor:

Random Notes on 289: Since the time of this story, the 1950s, the number 289 has become important in the automobile industry. From its beginning with Mavis, the number came to be used in the early

1960s by Studebaker as the name for its powerful 289 beefy V-8 engine, that it placed in its pickup trucks and sedans.

Ford Motor Company made a 289 V-8 a few years later that it plugged into its Mustangs and other cars. The engine is available today only as a legendary racing engine. The Studebaker engine is considered by many to be superior to the Ford product. The motors were different but bore the same name because 289 was the number of their cubic inch displacement.

289 is the number 17 squared.

In history, 289 was the year that Roman Emperor Maximian tried to recapture Britain and part of Gaul which had seceded from the Empire. Though Maximian had superior wealth, and a far larger army and fleet, he was beaten; not by the Brits and the Gauls, but by bad weather. Powerful storms sunk much of his fleet and forced him to accept a peace treaty.

289 is said to be the year of birth of St. Margaret the Martyr. For refusing to denounce Christianity she was put to death – an act that is said to have produced a number of miracles. One of which was her escape from the insides of the devil who had taken a reptilian shape and swallowed her alive. The cross that she wore irritated the insides of the monster and she escaped alive. She is one of 14 saints said to have spoken to Joan of Arc.

289 is an area code for part of Toronto. The city is the largest in Canada and larger than any city in North America except for three: New York City, Mexico City, and Los Angeles, California.

289 is the percentage of growth in usage in Wikipedia from to 2004 to 2005 when it became an internet behemoth, reaching more than 30 per cent of the internet universe for the first time.

In Ayn Rand's seminal work, *Atlas Shrugged*, 289 was an executive order that quickened the pace of the collapse of the economy and the government.

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