

THE FIRST ANNUAL AIRFLOW DEMOLITION DERBY

By S. E. "Nerf" Seavee. Reprinted from the 1978-79 *Airflow Newsletter*

Part I – PROLOGUE May 1978

Like most members of the Airflow Club, I underestimate the number of Airflow cars still in existence. Recent estimates tend to range between three and seven hundred.

But it is this author's serious opinion that more than three thousand of these tough vehicles remain extant throughout the world, and that greater than a third of them are currently operational. That proposition may be expounded upon at a future date, the editor of this Newsletter permitting, but the story to be told at this time deals with another matter, and may provide the explanation for the dearth of Airflows in a certain region of the USA.

This is a tale of enormous horror, and its few survivors, when they can be made to talk about it at all, compare it with the view from the bridge of the Arizona at 0810 on the seventh of December 1941, the firestorms of Dresden and Hamburg rather shortly thereafter, or mutter, in dreadfully cold tones, of man's inhumanity to machines.

It matters not that this tale is a fabrication, and that the actions of certain of its characters have been changed in ways as to imply their guilt, for that is in register with many of the accepted truths incorporated into the scholarly history of mankind's apocalyptic disasters. For example, what is truth to the surviving observers of Hiroshima?

THE PRELIMS

It all began on the Dirt Track Circuit of Heartland, USA, in the middle fifties. The producer's market of the late forties and early fifties had finally broken the World War II drought of new cars. Suddenly there was a vast overstock of newly unwanted cars of the thirties. Carefully babied through the war and the years following when production strove to meet demand, all at once these cars had no market value, but they could race, stock or modified, and they were at home on both dirt and pavement.

For the powerful and tough Ford V-8s, straight-eight Buick Century's, and the very archaic but light and fast Hudsons, etc., even in their very well-worn states, frequently exceeded the best performance of the new cars of the early fifties. Many a '33 Ford wiped out a '50 Plymouth or a '53 Cast Iron Wonder Chevy. Likewise, the startled drivers of more than one Olds Rocket 88 found themselves looking up what was left of the tailpipe of that beat-up '41 Century that had just now been beside them waiting for the red light to change. The rare ones, however, the Packards along with the Caddy twelves and sixteens, had almost all retired from the fray, and the orphans, Auburns and Cords included, just didn't have the guts and spare parts to survive routine driving over the extended period of the war; they too were loved, but best left in the garage.

This author's introduction to the Dirt Track occurred in 1937. As a very inept mechanic in a short-lived racing team (five high-school students —we were all big and lied about our ages) old Nerf got to know Monee, Hammond, and the other poor-boy tracks scattered around Chi-town rather well that summer. We were running a creeping wreck powered by the usual Cragar overheads on a series of junkyard B-block Fords, and occasionally it held together through the Prelims. In fact, once we even came in third in the main event, thanks to a monumental pile-up at the end of the track then occupied by all the high-grade machines.

No, the Buick didn't win it, but when it came in second it got a standing ovation all the way from the pits to the bleachers, and those were the days when only opera lovers and guests of Chiefs-of-States could be counted upon to even know what a standing ovation was.

But back to the main story, and excuse the digression; old Nerf can't find the words to deal with the major horror of his life without straying from the point every now and then to gain strength for the next part of its telling.

Maybe the little blue Buick had something to do with it, maybe not. But for certain the stage had been set in the East. In '39 the nation's radio and wire services took note of Langhorne, where genuine stocks were raced, and another Buick took the flag in the main event on Labor Day. Along with Joe Hill and Gaston Chevrolet, old Nerf was there. Then the war pulled the curtain down.

The second act began after the war at places like Darlington. The Mexican Road Race nailed it down. Stocks were in, and middle America got with stocks. But the center of our country was thin in both population and wallet, so the corn- and wheat-belt stocks were cheap and old; they were the cars of the thirties. Those early post-war middle America stock car races were vicious too. The vehicles had no value and their male drivers were part of the society that gave higher marks to Hero than Survivor. Nice guys finish last, and no matter that they lived to be the pall-bearers of the heroes.

As the carnage gained momentum a series of unexpected events occurred. In one area near to the center of the USA, a little DeSoto SE coupe began to play havoc with the races. The Airflow was known for its high-speed performance, toughness, and economy, yet on the short tracks it didn't have the zip to match its rivals. But its unique unit-body, waterfall grille, and streamlined tail —when its steering wheel was in the hands of a hero —made up for the zip. That funny grille up-ended the slightly-faster rival when in front, the rival braked for the turn. On the straight-away, another faster opponent found himself climbing the streamlined rear, not quite dead-center, and thus flipped to one side. Protests were lodged, but the DeSoto was usually declared the winner.

That DeSoto was driven by a mysterious stranger from the East and it was towed to the track behind a meticulously groomed C-9 coupe filled with spare parts. He claimed his name was Chuck Kramer but who knew who he really was. By the time Kramer caught the crowds' notice, the DeSoto was pretty beat-up, but it continued to win. From its dented front fenders to its dual drooping moth-eaten fox tails at the rear, it appeared to be close to being the ultimate iron, yet it was the heap to beat.

“Get that damn Airflow” soon became the rallying cry on those poor dirt tracks of Kansas, Nebraska, and eastern Colorado. Thus quite by accident — but what an accident — the Demolition Derby was about to be born.

Part II — MAYHEM IN THE MIDWEST September 1978

Synopsis Of Part I:

When automobile production finally caught up with demand following World War II the cars of the thirties rapidly underwent a change of status. From prized possessions their metamorphosis to junkers was abrupt. Thus they were the ideal vehicles for the newly-popular stock car races in the midwest where the winner's prizes rarely exceeded a few hundred dollars, and in these contests, their lives were short if not sweet. But a '34 DeSoto coupe survived and won time after time. “Get that damn Airflow DeSoto” became the rallying cry of the other drivers.

MAYHEM IN THE MIDWEST

About the time Chuck Kramer's DeSoto was winning its fifteenth event, late June I believe it was, a free-lance newspaper columnist of some fame was driving through western Kansas on his way to a fly-fishing vacation in the Colorado mountains. He'd pulled into WaKeeney about sundown, found a motel room, and then dropped into a local bar for a moment of rest and relaxation. He stared into the foam of his Grain Belt while his thoughts ranged to Colorado and trout. Where to begin fishing? Should it be the Crystal above Placita or the Black Canyon of the Gunnison? Then gradually the animated and occasionally raucous talk at the other end of the bar penetrated the fog surrounding his road-weary mind. It was car talk, stock car talk. He listened, for he'd done a few columns in '39 about stock cars at Langhorne; he'd caught their fever with his words and the columns were widely read throughout the East.

Finally the sense of the conversation penetrated his mind. There was to be a stocker event the next day at the fairgrounds at Oakley, and in this connection, a plot was being hatched. The victim, referred to as “Kramer or whatever his name really is” was apparently taking all of the top prize money out of the races in western Kansas and Nebraska plus eastern Colorado. “This dude has gotta be stopped and here's how we're gonna do it. First we put an auto scare bomb under the DeSoto's hood to sort of shake him up a bit, and then I'm gonna try to qualify that old Mack Truck I've been using on the road repair job on route 40 'tween here and Oakley. She sure ain't fast but if I can get her into a four-wheel drift in a turn and just ahead a that DeSoto, that'll be the end of that heap and Kramer'll be pickin' hunks of the Mack's chain outta his teeth for the next six months. If they won't let the Mack on the track, it's back to my Ford and I'll join you guys to box him in. So, Jim, you're gonna be ahead of him and you gotta run fast enough to keep him from nerfing you up his front end for he'll flip

you to one side or the other, and that'll get one of the rest of us to boot. He'd be home free, while we're towin' what's left of our heaps off the track."

The big man who had been doing the talking stopped and for a moment the silence was ominous. Finally the man he was looking at took a gulp of his beer and said, "How bout I tie a coupla sticks of dynamite on my rear bumper and instead of keepin' ahead of Kramer, I hit the brakes? I blow the front end right off that DeSoto and Kramer's feet, if he's still got 'em, are plowin' dirt."

The big man reddened and then controlled himself. "Jim, you're new to this racket so I'm not gonna bust your head in for that remark. We tried that four weeks ago at Cheyenne Wells. Bob Johnson's '35 Buick did everything just right, but the DeSoto pushed that dynamite right into his gas tank before it blew. Meanwhile it was Kramer who hit the brakes. They had to plant the whole thing in one grave 'cause nobody could tell which cinder was the Buick and which was Bob, now shut up."

Jim went white but controlled himself and then said very slowly, "On that short track I can keep my Chevy ahead of him once we hit the straight, but the Airflow will get me on the turns."

The writer, fascinated, temporarily forgot trout fishing, and vowed to be at the fairgrounds at Oakley the next day.

The event was anti-climactic. Jim's '36 Chevy went west on the east turn, the Mack was not allowed on the track and thus the Chevy took out a Ford in its death throes; the DeSoto won.

The writer temporarily delayed his vacation to file a dispatch to a syndicate. He knew his stuff, and it was picked up coast-to-coast.

That's where I come in again. Old Nerf was fixing toy midgets in Ohio. I'd sunk to the lowest —Maytag one-lung powered kiddie-cars. But I read the columns and then headed towards western Kansas. My cash would have been used up on transportation so I stuck out my thumb. As I got closer I began looking around. Well into Kansas I found it on a used-car lot in Hays, a '37 Ford 85 coupe. It was well-worn, but under the hood the engine number showed that somebody had stashed a '40 Merc in it. Well-worn or not, 95 Merc hp and less weight ought to take that DeSoto in a clean race. I took the Ford out, with an anxious salesman beside me. It warmed and poured out blue smoke. "Kinda loose", I said. "No, it don't burn no oil", he said; but in the rear-view mirror the blue smoke continued to belch forth. "Tell you what, I'll give you a hundred cash for this iron." He sucked in his breath impressively. "Six months ago this '37 would have brought in a thousand, now it's two-fifty, - it's a bargain." "A hundred and ten", I responded, "and let me off at the next light, I'd like to walk home." That did it, and in an hour or so I left town headed west in my own Ford. By now I was close enough to the scene of the action that 'most everybody had heard of Kramer and the Airflow. Thus I learned that the next big event was to be in Lamar and top money was up to four hundred smackeroos.

Meanwhile, the newspaper writer did another column about the invincible DeSoto and it hit a few other people where they lived. Martin Blue up in northwestern Iowa read the story late one night after a long hard day in his fields. All of a sudden the old '36 DeSoto S-2 in his shed came alive in his mind and in a new light. He spoke to himself aloud "By golly that car could make me some money too in those races, but she's too good for that kind of fate."

In a garage in Topeka Irwin Harold read about it during his lunch hour and then went to his next assignment. As he was replacing the front U-joint on a C-17 he began to wonder what a bigger Airflow could do in a stock car race. "It's hulky, he thought, "but it's tougher'n hell. Maybe I'd better get me one of these."

At Turner Field in Indianapolis Chick Corcoran, a young Indiana high-school student on his first summer job, climbed out of the Dodge hundred-octane tanker, lit a cigarette in a no- smoking zone, and began to think about what the big RX-70 could have done to the Mack had it been at Oakley. His daydream started to take on reality, and he began to wonder how long it would take the airport to miss the RX-70 and himself if they were not there for a few days.

Meanwhile old Nerf and the '37 Ford got to Lamar, but it was a near thing. I came in daydreaming, hit a railroad grade crossing without looking either way and all of a sudden there was this big cow-catcher right next to me. The detail on the builder's plate on the front of the boiler burned itself into my mind, and I just barely cleared the Santa Fe 2-10-2. The engineer shook his fist at me while I gave him the thumb to the nose. But man, no Ford, Airflow, or anything else ought fool around with a big black locomotive.

Both the Ford and old Nerf were wiped out at Lamar and again that damned DeSoto made mincemeat of everything else. Kramer came in first, and there was no second. Smoking irons littered the track from one end to the other as the survivors struggled towards safety. And this time a lot of those burned-out wrecks had been pretty high-grade cars at the beginning of the race, for the writer's national publicity was now attracting entries from far away, and they were not all junkers. Some of the drivers had been sparked by tall tales told in distant bars or in the pits of other race tracks by maimed and knarled mechanics who once, so they claimed, had driven the dirt in pursuit of Kramer's Airflow. Thus for the first time at Lamar, the DeSoto's triumph exacted a heavy toll of post-war iron. A '49 Olds 88, far too nose-heavy for its maneuver, screamed by the DeSoto on the first lap, but the barriers on the turn ended its excellent, but straight-line only, performance. Ross McClean from California was able to keep his also nose-heavy '46 Buick Bloatmaster intact for a few laps before the pounding of the dirt track caused the Buick to get tangled up in its own redundant sheet metal; flush one Dyna-flash.

A Hornet, away from its familiar nest, turned out to be just another tame bumble bee when its odd and archaic oak-bark clutch corked out. As for the vaunted Silex Studebaker, its only challenge ended when an unhappy Land Cruiser became airborne. Late-model Chrysler's did no better, as a Woodie, "Big Sara", provided the kindling log for the next night's fire at the hobo jungle alongside the Santa Fe tracks. Its driver, James Williams of far-off Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, escaped unscathed and went home immediately, determined to return to his first love, a C-2.

That damn newspaper fella was still around, and clever with his words. Forty cars had started the race. At the end only one was not quite scrap. The writer sized up the results and titled his column: "It was supposed to be a Race, it turned out to be a Demolition Derby." The crowds at Lamar and the readers of his column loved it. So forget about a race, let's have us a Demolition Derby.

For the next six weeks, old Nerf read the day-old papers in his hospital bed. The magic words, "Demolition Derby", had caught on. But even with the change of rules Kramer's DeSoto continued to win, and now the carnage had no limits.

Elsewhere it caught on too and for a while, it remained a poor-people's thing. Notasulga, Alabama, Thief River Falls, Minnesota, and St. George, Utah (though shunned by the local Mormons) resurrected A-Model Fords, Chevy Superiors and the lowly Essex; they too were demolished. Kramer kept winning; everything else got wrecked.

Thus it did not take much longer before a poor but enterprising promoter figured out where the real action might be, and announced that a double-feature Demolition Derby would be held three weeks hence at Garden City. The first feature, on Saturday, would be the usual all model, all make. free-for-all; the second, to be held on Sunday, was to be for Airflows only. Chuck Kramer immediately registered for both events.

Meanwhile, Old Nerf checked out of the hospital and went Airflow hunting.

Part III – THE GREAT TRAIN HEIST November 1978

Synopsis of Parts I & II

The cars of the thirties were the stars of the early stock car races in the Midwest more than twenty-five years ago. A 1934 DeSoto coupe was the most consistent winner in Western Kansas and parts of the adjacent states. and hence many of the drivers of the other cars sought to put it out of action by any means at hand — fair or foul. The DeSoto survived and its exploits began to receive national press coverage. Following one particularly vicious race a story entitled: "It was Supposed to be a Race but it Turned Out to be a Demolition Derby" appeared in papers from coast to coast heralding the birth of a new sport.

THE GREAT TRAIN HEIST

Old Nerf hobbled away from the hospital in Lamar feeling a bit faint, but all the while my legs were coming back and after a cup of thick java in a diner nearby I began looking over the local used-car operations and then the junkyards. The answers to my question were almost always the same. "An Airflow? No, we don't have any of those funny lookin' things. Two months ago, sure, you could of had a choice of several, but then this guy

Kramer, or what-ever his name really is, hit this part of the country, began winnin' races and all of a sudden an Airflow was the only heap on the lot (or in the yard) that was worth scratch. They're all gone now."

So Old Nerf, without Airflow, decided to head for Garden City. Maybe I could pick up a buck or so working in a local garage, for even if I couldn't drive an Airflow, I was determined to be there to see what happened. I walked east to the edge of town and stuck out my thumb on Route 50 for Garden City.

And, you know what, Garden City turned out to be a real garden spot; it wasn't one of those misnamed flea-bitten western Kansas towns like Goodland, Imperial, Ulysses, or Eminence. Garden City had trees, green lawns, and its houses were well-kept and comfortable.

The center of town was the same way —wide clean streets and first-rate shops. The Warren Hotel where I had hoped to stay had no equal from Wichita to Denver; Garden City was (and is) a genuine oasis.

But Old Nerf couldn't ante-up for the Warren so I found the hobo jungle next to the ever-present Santa Fe tracks, and it was a good one too, running water from the artesian wells that covered the area, trees for shade, and lots of grass.

I found that jungle late in the day and after I'd made my peace with its other occupants and located a recently-vacated comfortable spot, I settled in to sleep, but a little after 11 p.m. as I recollect, thoughts of Airflows were interrupted by deep blasts from the west. Moments later a passenger train went past the jungle at at least 110 miles an hour, by my educated guess. In the faint light of our flickering fires it looked like an elongated Airflow. A voice was heard, and noted, "That's the Super Chief, boys, now we can go to sleep".

Old Nerf got up early the next morning and after starting the fire to warm what was left of last night's Mulligan and feeding myself, I was cleaning my utensils when the same deep horn blasts broke the silence but to the east. Again an identical serpentine monster, that elongated Airflow, appeared and rolled by me at an easy 100 mph. It was the west-bound Super Chief at about 7:15 a.m.

Remember now, those were the days when passenger trains were plentiful and many of them ran a lot faster than any that's left today. Those were the days, too, when many railroads, newly flush with wartime profits, put an impressive number of new streamlined trains into service and maintained their old streamliners superbly. A lot of them were named for cities. There was a City of Miami, Portland, San Francisco, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Salina, etc. Even some of the small roads put new trains in when anyone could tell there wasn't a chance for them to compete against the automobile. In central Illinois I'd seen a real nice brand new two-car elongated trolley named The City of Decatur running through the cornfields between that place and St. Louis; it lasted about three years.

So why is Old Nerf turning this into a train story? Well, unless I give you this build-up, you just wouldn't understand about the City of Garden City. It was the smallest streamliner of them all even though it was the only one that had City in its name twice. It ran on a streak of rust, called the Garden City Western Railroad Co. from Garden City through Wolf (find that on your map) and Lydia to Leoti, Kansas, where it connected with the Mopac (Missouri Pacific). The Garden City Western went nowhere, was broke, down and out, but proud. The City of Garden City was a '35 CW nine-passenger limousine bought second-hand off a used-car lot in Denver, and converted to flanged wheels in the railroad's small shop on the edge of town. Every morning it left Garden City to make a connection at Leoti at around 9:30 a.m. with the vaunted Colorado Eagle, Mopacs full-sized streamliner from Denver. It always arrived on time. The Eagle, pulled by a big 'Jimmy' from LaGrange could not make the same claim. Sometimes as many as five passengers got off the Eagle and then greeted the combination engineer, conductor, brakeman of the smaller streamliner as they clambered aboard the CW.

And thus back to Old Nerf's first morning in Garden City. Only moments after the Super Chief came through, another horn began sounding from the east. It wasn't loud but more melodious. Then along came a real-life Airflow, with a big Mars headlight mounted in the center of the roof and oscillating through its figure-eight pattern to warn all of the prospective vehicles about to go over the railroad's unprotected grade crossings to watch out. It was hitting sixty and accelerating as it rode the rusty rails bordering the other side of the hobo jungle.

By God, there was still an Airflow in this part of Kansas that wasn't yet a dirt track racer!

Old Nerf let that roll around his mind for a while, but, for the moment, couldn't sort out how an Airflow, converted to be a streamlined train, could fit the scenario of the Demolition Derby to come.

So I headed into town to find an Airflow or a job; if not the first then the latter. Someone I met on the street suggested that I go out to a heavy equipment dealer on the far side of town. I went and found out that I'd missed, by only twelve hours, a K-52 Dodge Airflow, once a tanker but later converted to a flat-bed half-track half-track??), to work in the then-new oil-fields west of McPherson. How it got to Garden City I don't know, but a young whipper-snapper all the way from western New York had beat me to it. The dealer said that the guy who bought it was named Jim Johnson, and maybe he'd sell it if I wanted it enough. The dealer also said that he'd seen a C-10 in a yard about a mile further out. Old Nerf wasn't about to provide an instant profit for that kid Johnson, so I wound up in the yard with the C-10. That had to be the sorriest Airflow in the world; no wonder no one else bought it. Then this sharpie came up to me and said, "That's a good car, chum. It came from up north into my yard under its own power." I looked to the north, up the bluffs of the Arkansas River valley and realized he was right; it probably had coasted all the way down those hills into his yard.

But that heap seemed to be all there; the drive-train was complete, and when I grabbed the fan I found the engine was free. The body was something else, it was the ideal first part for a before and after ad for Rustoleum. There were no headlights and every piece of glass had been busted out, but who needs headlights and glass for a Demolition Derby?

So Old Nerf bought that heap. Very late that night I got back to my place in the jungle. In the meantime, I'd bought a battery from the sharpie. "It's only a buck," he said, "and it'll last you forever". By then and when he wasn't looking, I'd borrowed a coil from a C-23 I'd found in another part of the yard and a starter from a C-26 a little farther down the line. The engine was running, albeit a bit roughly, before I left that evening.

It was all in vain. The next day I drove the C-10 to Tribune where the last stocker was being held before the big Derby in Garden City a week hence. Kramer was there too and he won again.

As the race was started and we all took off, Tribune darn near disappeared in the blue haze caused by hundreds of weak rings, scored cylinders, worn guides and burned valves. My C-10 passed Kramer right away, but two laps later I wished that I'd paid more attention to the condition of its front u-joint and the drive shaft retainer bracket which had rusted almost in two. The joint broke, the front of the drive shaft dug deeply into the dirt and flipped the rear end of the car into the air. The whole shebang left the track and rolled over on its side.

Old Nerf climbed out of his now-collapsed rust-bucket and thought gratefully that at least it hadn't put me into the hospital the way that Ford had done. I hitchhiked back to the hobo jungle at Garden City. Dreams of dinner at the Warren Hotel followed by a shower and clean sheets in one of its rooms were reluctantly shelved for the moment.

The weekend of the double demolition derby drew near. In addition to all the cars scheduled for the first event, it seemed that almost all the Airflows in western Kansas were being prepared for the second. Nerf iron (yep, that's where I got my name, buddy), capable of doing great damage, was being welded onto the cars as inconspicuously as possible; it also helped defend the vehicle to which it was attached. Even old rusty plow blades made their appearance, but then word sifted down that they were cause for disqualification.

As for me, now that the C-10 had gone west, an inspiration was needed, right now, for this was a dark hour in my misbegotten life. Then off to the north I heard that melodic horn again and, Eureka, I had it: in a few days a certain local railroad was going to be missing one streamliner, and Old Nerf would be piloting a CW to glory on the Garden City track. Meanwhile rumor had it that the promoter of the local double demolition derby was receiving phone calls from other parts of the country as a result of the writer's syndicated columns announcing the forthcoming Airflow demolition event. The calls were from Airflow owners, and most were asking the promoter to call it off; on the other hand, a few wanted to sign up for it.

Old Nerf was busy casing his soon-to-be iron steed. I learned by observation when the combination engineer-conductor-brakeman left the City of Garden City on its siding after the last run of the day and when he showed up the next morning. Also, I found that it was gassed-up and serviced between runs in the middle of each day when the shop crew was on duty. Then I walked the track along its route out of town and found that the switch to a long spur out to a big abandoned sugar beet plant was still intact and operable. That plant was only a mile from the race track!

Two nights before the race I decided that it was time to case the City of Garden City close up. When I had crept up to it in the darkness I found that it was all locked up. It was easy to force the vent window on the driver's side without marking it and I was soon inside. The steering wheel was where it oughta be, but it spun

freely, no connection to the front wheels. Quietly I lifted the hood and found a U-joint in the steering disconnected. But it was all there and everything else was connected up just the way it left the factory. You don't have to steer a train, but it was obvious that the tight-fisted old buzzard who ran the railroad had taken no chances. If the CW couldn't earn its keep as a streamlined train, it could be quickly converted back to being a car parked on the nearest used-car lot.

Those flanged steel railroad wheels would be hell to steer off the railroad track, but I figured that their somewhat small diameter would get them around the turns OK if there was enough muscle at the steering wheel and if the gear held together.

The next day I just hung around and didn't do much. The rumors were really getting thick in that town. I heard that the police chief, alarmed at all the phone calls coming in and strangers appearing in town, had called Topeka and asked for the assistance of the Kansas National Guard. The governor, receptive to begin with, called the commanding general only to learn that on the weekend in question the guard was planning its big annual barbecue and beer-bust. The governor, safe in the knowledge that Garden City was a long way from Topeka, called the mayor back and told him that he was sorry but the guard was going to be on an important secret maneuver and thus while he couldn't say exactly what it was all about, Nebraska had better never try to take over Kansas by force!

In the afternoon I bought a few nuts and bolts, SAE type, from a local auto parts house and tossed 'em into my tool box. Then a few hours after dark I walked down the rusty track, tool box in hand, to the City of Garden City and in a jiffy I'd forced the vent window, hot-wired the ignition and off she went on an unscheduled run.

Man, that thing was strong and quiet 'til the speed built up, but then it sure clanked a lot every time those steel wheels hit the worn rail-joints on that streak of rust called a railroad. So I slowed her down to a walk and got the noise down to a tolerable bonk, bonk, bonk that wouldn't wake up everyone.

Straying from the point for a moment, don't let anyone tell you that an Airflow on rails is smooth and quiet the way it is on the highway. Any wheels rigid enough to keep from bouncing off the tracks are gonna be heavy as hell, and the addition of all that unsprung weight meant that even the CW rode like a stoneboat at speed with all the noise and vibration you'd expect if it was going lickety-split down a cobblestone street with four flat tires. By now it looked as if Old Nerf was pulling a successful rip-off. I got to the sugar beet switch and after spending a few minutes cleaning long-accumulated trash out of its guts, it forced open. Once the CW was over and clear I closed the switch, replaced the trash, and proceeded very, very slowly toward the abandoned plant. I wanted to take as little rust off those rails as possible for there was no point in leaving clues that would lead to the quick discovery of the missing streamliner.

Once inside the sugar beet plant, I got out my tools and quickly re-connected the steering gear. After checking over the rest of the car (train?) I yanked off the front fenders and then climbed into the back seat for some sleep.

Why yank the front fenders, you say? Well, I'd figured out that those flanged steel front wheels, freed from entrapment by their surrounding sheet metal could do untold damage to the other cars in the derby. They might raise hell with the steering, but they'd be the heaviest weapons on the track, and would quickly turn the contest into a scrap-iron orgy. They were all the nerf-iron anybody in the world would ever need. And besides, I was remembering that K-52 half-track that was stole out almost from under me. Let that kid Johnson get close to me just once with that half-track, he'd get the old steel wheel in the rear quarter, and then he could try to figure out what to do next with a half a half-track.

Old Nerf woke up in time to hoof it, ahead of the dawn, back to the hobo jungle and breakfast. Soon the Super Chief roared through on schedule, forty-eight cylinders worth of McIntosh and Seymour-derived turbo-charged diesels blasting down the track inside the three big streamlided Alcos (Ameri- can Locomotive Co.) at the head of the train. Man, those Alco PA's in Santa Fe war-bonnet colors were a sight to behold and a sound to hear. Amtrack, you'll never tie that.

But this time no melodic horn announced the forthcoming departure of the City of Garden City. Down, at the station a frantic search of the yards had not located the streamliner and a quick check with all of the agents down the line to Leoti turned no clues. Half an hour late, the stranded passengers were loaded into two taxis and on their way.

Then local police arrived, and soon called the Finney County Sheriff. And now all those strangers in town gave Old Nerf the big break he needed.

“Today’s bad and tomorrow’s going to be worse. I know that you’re upset about your missing train, sir, but with all these strangers in town if we get through the weekend OK we’ll be back Monday morning with some of the sheriff’s men to look for it”.

Part IV — THE DOUBLE DEMOLITION WEEKEND BEGINS February 1979

Synopsis Of Parts I - III

In the early fifties, the demolition derby was born in western Kansas where the stock car races were so vicious as to destroy almost all of the vehicles entered. These were mostly the cars of the thirties and they were turned to scrap by the hundreds in the process. However, a '34 DeSoto coupe was both a consistent winner and survivor. Growing respect for the performance and durability of Airflows culminated in the announcement of a demolition derby to be held in Garden City, Kansas, limited to Airflows only. Meanwhile, in an apparently unrelated event a streamliner, The City of Garden City, was stolen from a local railroad.

THE DOUBLE DEMOLITION WEEKEND BEGINS

There were an awful lot of strangers in town and a lot of strange beat-up cars too. A few days earlier Kramer had announced that while he was still entering both the events of the weekend, the DeSoto would be retired following Sunday’s derby, provided that it survived the all-Airflow contest. He’d got what he’d come out here for, he said, and it was time to be headed back east and get started on a full show-restoration of the now weary SE coupe.

So it was show-down time in western Kansas; it was now or never to get that damn DeSoto. For the writer’s dispatch, filed immediately after Kramer’s announcement, said as much, and now the town was filled with strangers and strange iron.

During all those weeks the writer, no matter how he tried, was not able to get next to Kramer. He sought to take Kramer’s measure, to learn what drove the man to such lengths and from whence the infinite skill in his trade had come.

Then it happened, just before Saturday’s derby. The writer had the laconic Kramer, or whatever his name really was, cornered and for once Kramer did not seek to escape. The obvious questions were asked and Kramer’s answers were terse, direct, and entirely factual. He gave no inkling of the character behind his impassive facade. There were no boasts or complaints or any of the other responses of a normal human being in the limelight and under pressure. It seemed that ice water flowed in his veins.

The writer, feeling the moment of contact fast ebbing away, asked in desperation “Do you have a personal name for that DeSoto?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“Stewball II.”

The writer, temporarily confused and feeling that his leg was being pulled, suddenly remembered.

“Stewball, what the h---. Oh, I get it, the famous racehorse, the one that raced in England and Spain and then in all the county fairs around here and always won every race. By the way what happened to him?”

“A few years ago I was a jockey and Stewball was my mount.”

The writer was dumb-struck as Kramer paused, shuddered slightly, and brushed away a tear. Then he controlled himself and continued in low, measured, flat tones bereft of any human qualities. “After we got back from Stewball’s triumphal tour of Europe he needed a rest, but he also needed to keep in practice. I brought him out to these western Kansas county fairs where he had enough speed to win every race while still gettin’ plenty of rest along the way. Stewball was a racehorse but he was also a show-off. He’d start each race real slow just like my SE, but by the stretch he’d caught and was away from the pack. Then after the turn he’d be so far ahead of the rest of the horses that he’d break his gait — no way to hold him to it — and cross the finish line dancin’ and prancin’ like a show horse. Once when Stewball and I were in Vienna we went out to see the

Lipizzaner at the Spanish Riding Academy, but they all looked like plow horses compared to Stewball crossing the finish line and he knew it. Stewball became the wonder horse of western Kansas but he also made some enemies. A man thinks he's got the fastest racehorse in six counties doesn't always take kindly to having it showed up by a horse that damn near stops before it dances across the line still way ahead of everything else."

"So Stewball was thriving and puttin' back some of the weight he'd lost. He always was a good eater except he didn't chew his food well enough."

There was a pause, and the writer bit his tongue waiting for Kramer to continue.

"One night just before the races at the Fair at Friend, about thirty miles north of here and what a misnamed flea-bitten place that is, some local Barney Google broke into Stewball's stable and spiked his hay with short pieces of barbed wire. We buried him the next day on a bluff overlooking the Arkansas. My sense of loss was too great for anger so I headed home to the East."

"Then after two years I came back here several months ago to work something out of my system. It wasn't exactly revenge and it wasn't exactly not. Anyway, I'd gotten too heavy to race horses, and I'd heard that stock car races were the thing here now. When I came on out I stopped by the bank to get in touch with my old friend the Loan Arranger. He's pretty old now but he 'fixed' the first race for me. I'd had some luck with the SE on the longer tracks back east, but after that first race, it seemed to be Stewball reincarnate and went like the Furies of Hell. Since then Stewball II has put hundreds of local stockers to their final rusty rest in the yards of western Kansas. We both seem to have got something out of our systems and accidentally helped invent the demolition derby to boot. If we live through the weekend, it'll be time to move along."

Then silence, and when the writer looked up from his hastily written notes Kramer was gone; for one brief moment he had revealed himself to the world and then faded into the crowd.

Shortly thereafter Kramer and his redoubtable SE won Saturday's all-makes, all-models, demolition derby. As usual his strategy and tactics were perfect. Through skillful driving he stayed out of the way while the rest of the field cannibalized themselves. Toward the end when there weren't many left, the survivors came to their senses and took out for the DeSoto. Dodging nimbly between the smoking dead and dying irons Kramer paused every now and then to nerf another victim into oblivion. As first-aid crews darted between the wrecks to rescue an occasional survivor, the contest came down to the SE and a rare '37 Lincoln Zephyr coupe, the only other iron yet capable of movement. Warily they picked their way through the treacherous flotsam covering the track as they circled each other. An occasional feint tested the reaction time of each driver, the remaining maneuverability of each steed, and established that both were closely matched.

Then Kramer found the Zephyr's blind spot and went for its right rear quarter. It was only a light blow, its tap hardly audible to the spectators, and the overly-light rear end of the Zephyr was nudged to the left merely a foot or so, but that put it directly in line with the remains of a big differential, long since wrenched from a Cadillac in its death throes. There was an ominous crunch as the Lincoln and Cadillac differentials met each other. The actuator of the Zephyr's Columbia two-speed rear end had been torn out by the blow, and immediately after came a screeching clatter that jolted the spectators to their feet as the hapless Zephyr ate its own ring gear.

Both cars were hardly marked but it was Stewball that went a dancin' and a prancin' down to the judges stand midst the cheering crowd.

As the crowd hushed, the aging chief judge, a Basque sheepherder long since removed from his childhood home near Pamplona yet still bound by the romance of the bullring, declared Kramer the winner and, overcome by emotion, startled the audience by awarding Kramer both front fenders of the Zephyr to boot.

Protests were lodged but the old Basque, respected and feared throughout the community, stood his ground. For his part Kramer accepted both the purse and fenders with the quiet dignity that so often marks a true champion.

That night Kramer went early to bed and easily to sleep, though no one knew where. But throughout the town, celebration and disappointment were rife, alcohol flowed freely, and trouble brewed at every corner. Then to top it off as the police chief was dispatching his meager force this way and that he received a phone call from his fellow peace officer at Cimarron, thirty miles down the Arkansas.

“They still gonna hold that Airflow Demolition Derby in Garden City tomorrow?”

“Fraid so.”

“Well, they’s a bunch of Airflows, at least fifty I’d say, camped down at the tourist park along the river here. They been comin’ in all day long and ain’t makin’ a bit uh trouble, but I don’t think I ever in my life seen such a bunch of determined lookin’ men. They’re old but almost every one of those cars runs just about perfectly. Now one of those things is a tanker that looks kinda like an Airflow and another is a flat-bed half-track that looks kinda the same. I think I remember it from when I was workin’ in McPherson a few years back, but anyway those people have strung lights around and seem to be mounting something on that half-track. I’ll let ya know if I hear anything more.”

The phone went dead and the chief puzzled over the information. So far he’d learned that only about fifteen local Airflows were entered in tomorrow’s contest and it didn’t seem as if they could cause him that much trouble. But, lord, the town could be taken over by that bunch in Cimarron. After a bit he tried to call the Governor in Topeka again, but that worthy head of state had given his staff the slip and was having a night on the town (Kansas City, but the one in Missouri where he was not so well-known).

For the first time in almost ten years the chief began to check and clean his own weapon. He also called a leading citizen living on the highway on the east side of town.

“Frank, you’re deputized right this instant. Call me if you see anything funny coming this way on route 50 from Cimarron. Stay awake and at your post ‘til noon tomorrow. Sorry I gotta do this to you, but we may have an emergency and I can’t spare one of my men for the job.”

As Garden City awakened on that fateful Sunday, an early morning fog, rare for that season in western Kansas, blanketed the area. At the Warren Hotel some of the early birds were already enjoying their second cups of coffee. A few strangers drifted in out of the gloom for breakfast, but nothing much was moving, and on the streets there was that special quiet that seems to occur only in the midst of undisturbed fog.

But not for long. As Old Nerf was slipping out of town for a final check on the City of Garden City being kept in its hiding place until just before the final event, the air was split by the wail of the town siren. As I later learned, the police chief had got his phone call from the east side of town and after a moment’s hesitation had flipped the switch on the siren to blow the tornado warning. Now nobody’d ever heard of a foggy tornado so after a moment or two some of us began to think that maybe something real big was up. But I kept on going toward the sugar beet plant.

The siren finally whined down from its final blast and was followed by several minutes of ominous silence. The citizens of Garden City, fearful and uncertain, cleared the sidewalks and herded their children indoors and downstairs.

Then a throb, almost inaudible to begin with, filled the air, while those still outside anxiously sought to pierce the gloom as they waited helplessly. Out of the fog came a Dodge RX-70 and what in hell was a tanker labeled Turner Field, Indiana, doing in Garden City, Kansas? Following it in almost dead silence were legions of out-of-state Airflows, three abreast and driven by cool desperate men. At that moment each was a stranger, but the events to follow engraved their names on the journalist’s brain; yes, he too was up and ready for action.

The first row behind Corcoran’s tanker was also from the East, Pat Edwardson in a C-1 side-by-side with Irwin Howard’s CU and a C-9 from Virginia driven by Rick Chase. Immediately following came the boys from the West. Ross McClean, now in a C-9, was right beside Gordon Williams and his C-2, while bringing up that flank was Hick Duncan in a C-9 coupe. As McClean came into sight the journalist was momentarily distracted, for he recalled seeing the man in California several months earlier on the strip at Muroc. The C-9 had won the modified class by running a 239 Ford block capped with two big Ardun O.H.V. heads personally flown to the dry lake by Zora Arkus-Duntov himself. McClean, a master of the old switcheroo, got the C-9 running only a half-an-hour before his triumph.

Then memory was confirmed, for from the twin pipes of McClean’s C-9 as it passed by him came the distinctive stumbling rumble of a hot-cam, high compression O.H.V. V-8 running somewhat overheated at low rpm. This was in sharp contrast to the quiet and clipped exhausts from the single pipes of the flat-head straight-eights in the other two Chryslers.

Then came Steve Jackson in an immaculate C-10 next to Benny Slaughter in a slightly modified nearly-perfect C-2, and Parker Russell in his C-10 coupe.

And on and on came the Airflows!

Martin Blue, now in a C-17 side-by-side with another in the capable hands of Irwin Harold and a coupe of the same model that had left Coeur D'Alene only the night before. Bob Moorman was at its wheel. Up from Arkansas, Ev Small relaxed behind the wheel of his SG. Lou Wade in the S-2 from Wichita wondered what fate had in store, while Irwin Spahcheck, muttering to himself about the slow-pace, knew exactly what his SG could do in the clutch if only it didn't break down.

And they kept on coming out of the fog — at least a half-mile of Airflows. Westy Oliver in his C-17 listened to the clanking U-joints of the adjacent C-17 driven in by Will Howard. Beside Howard was tight-lipped Fred Monarch in a showroom C-1. They were followed by an SG in the hands of Clark Ellis that was flanked by a near-perfect CV from Sunbury, Pennsylvania, and a big CW from the same state driven by Paul Serious, one of the legendary "First Three Thousand."

Behind them, momentarily, there was a gap. Then all by itself came Stewball II with Kramer, or whatever his name really was, at the wheel. Stewball II had burned two exhaust valves so Kramer also was having a hard time with the slow pace. To keep up his speed he was swinging the SE from side to side on Garden City's only cobblestone street. Thus the Airflow, its springs stiffened for the dirt tracks, was truly dancin' and prancin' its way through town.

Bringing up Kramer's rear, Harvey Rollander rode shotgun in a tired old CV with Ohio plates, and to protect the flanks Matt David in a C-10 coupe and Howard Roof in a C-1 coupe, also bearing Ohio plates, had dropped slightly behind.

Again a gap, but this time it was punctuated by the strange noises of a thing yet to come. The suspense was almost unbearable and then the fog was broken by the K-52 half-track, the Airflow rear guard. Its flatbed now supported an Oerlikon 20 millimeter four-barrel automatic cannon. The Swiss, masters of neutrality, had developed the weapon that now protected the Airflows, but it was war surplus and cheap, sold to Benny Slaughter from a nearly-completed aircraft carrier on the ways at Long Beach shortly after the war ended. Behind the cannon grim-faced Tom Harrison, his C-10 left behind in Cimarron, watched to the rear. Jim Johnson at the wheel of the half-track, and with great confidence in Harrison, sat back and enjoyed Garden City's scenery. As the strange entourage passed the Warren a few of the participants in yesterday's derby gathered to watch.

"What kinda nonsense is this," one said. "A few nails on the street would stop 'em all," came from another.

"Look at those dumb fox tails draggin' behind Stewball," said a third.

Then for an instant they found themselves looking into the fully-loaded barrels of the Oerlikon and the cold blue eyes of Tom Harrison. Dead silence was followed by an audible sigh. "Let's go back inside and have another cuppa coffee and talk this over, fellas."

Part V — DOOMSDAY May 1979

Later that morning after the fog had cleared the local Kansas Airflows and their drivers proceeded to the track. They had not been invited nor did any of them attempt to join the parade led by the RX-70. Meanwhile Old Nerf fired up the City of Garden City and ran it off the end of the track for a test run in the lot adjacent to the abandoned sugar beet plant. On rails it had been a jewel; on the dirt it was a real pig. I could barely turn it and when I did get it to turn the flanges on those steel wheels threw tons of dirt every which way. Inside of fifteen minutes I was pretty close to being worn out, and that whole lot had been cultivated into a pattern never seen before in Kansas nor any other place for that matter. But I had got the hang of it! Now watch out, hapless victims and spectators, this thing is gonna crunch everything in sight and while it's doing its job there's going to be so much dirt flying into the bleachers that more than a few onlookers will be buried alive!

Back at the track all of the Airflows that had driven in from Cimarron had sort of surrounded the place and the K-52 sat right in the middle of the main and only entrance gate. Harrison had the Oerlikon aimed dead center down the approach road, and the others gathered around Kramer as he stood near Stewball. Almost all of the others, that is, for McClean was missing.

Outside the gate the promoter, his staff, the cash customers and the local Airflows ready to participate in the derby gathered. Time passed and the crowd began to get fretful. But each was too curious to leave and too fearful to attempt to pass by either side of the K-52.

High Noon was about to occur in Garden City.

Off in one corner of the field, McClean sat tensely behind the wheel of his parked C-9 checking his watch frequently. A low-boy trailer, its ramps down, was attached to the Airflow.

The tension continued to build as from far down the highway the siren of a police cruiser began to herald its approach. Then what appeared to be the first break in the stand-off occurred; one of the crowd around Kramer jumped into Stewball and sent it rocketing down the field and up onto McClean's trailer. As the SE braked to a stop on the trailer, the C-9 took off toward the main gate, the trailer and SE bouncing and swaying behind it while the pounding they were receiving soon disengaged the ramps.

As the Airflows squeaked past the K-52 Tom Harrison's face broke into a wide grin as he waved to McClean and Gordon Williams, who was still at the wheel of Stewball.

Then as it gathered speed the awesome bellow of the Arduin-Ford-powered Airflow going through its gears held the crowd transfixed; Zora would have been proud.

For once Kramer had been too startled to move, and as his beloved Stewball disappeared down the highway his face was a masterpiece of puzzlement. Then the silence was broken by Paul Serious.

"Kramer, or whatever your name really is, I've been chosen to speak for the rest of these guys. Sure, some of us came out here to raise hell, but the other night in the campgrounds along the river in Cimarron we all decided that things had gone far enough, and we'd put a stop to this Airflow Demolition Derby. That kid Corcoran took some persuading but even he finally decided that any RX-70 was too good to die on the plains of western Kansas. Now we don't want you or any of the rest of us up on that bluff overlooking the Arkansas river tomorrow and havin' to bury Stewball II beside Stewball I, so when you've cooled down you can ride back to Cimarron with one of us, pick up your SE and head east, for there ain't gonna be no Airflow Demolition Derby here or anyplace else as far as we're concerned. Sure, it was a cheap shot to trap you this way, but it's for your own good."

Serious fell silent while the others nodded their assent. Kramer's mouth began to work, but before he could speak everyone's attention was drawn to the police cruiser now skidding to a stop directly in front of the K-52. Harrison, in a gesture of respect for the law, got down from behind the cannon and approached the cruiser with open hands and a welcoming smile on his face.

The police chief was so disarmed (mentally at least) by this unexpected event that he climbed out of the cruiser and found himself shaking Harrison's hand before he realized that for the first time in his life he was being friendly to a perfect stranger and one who was probably a crook to boot. But now it was too late to do otherwise and the chief, who was basically a square shooter, decided to continue to respect Harrison's precedent as Paul Serious moved forward to join them.

Thus the negotiations began on a friendly note but they quickly reached a hard spot.

"Sure, I don't want to see this derby happen anymore than you do and so far it's cost both me and this town a lot more than it's cost you people. But that damn fink promoter has a permit that's legal in the eyes of the law and I'm sworn to uphold the law whether I like it or not. And besides, no bunch of self-appointed vigilantes, locals or outsiders, is gonna be runnin' around Garden City or Finney County for that matter while I'm still in office and drawin' breath."

Serious regarded the chief seriously while his mind raced to find an accommodation to the impasse that now confronted them. Something was needed to prevent the destruction of the local Airflows while still maintaining the respect of the chief and his local law.

But that something wasn't about to be found; Old Nerf took care of that.

While events were unfolding at the track, I was taking my ease in the CW waiting for just the right moment to make the break and cover the mile to the track fast. I couldn't start early 'cause somebody would impound the City of Garden City for sure before the race began, but if I started late too many Airflows might already be out of action before I hit the track. Then just a few minutes before the race was scheduled to start I heard that high-

powered V-8 leaving town from the direction of the track and figured that it *was time* to go. Three hundred and eighty-four cubes came to life and began to strain against those steel rear wheels when I dropped her into low gear. Rocks were flying every which way and, buddy, here she comes ready or not.

I reached up and switched on the big Mars oscillating headlight on the roof and began to lay on the horn. The City of Garden City was on her way to destiny!

Back at the track, Serious was just starting to open his mouth to try to answer the chief's outburst when everyone's attention was riveted toward the abandoned sugar beet plant. For it was just about then that Old Nerf hit the concrete road to the track doing about sixty in second gear. As I slewed her onto the highway I thought for a moment she's a goner but she went into a pretty little four-wheel drift onto the far side shoulder of the road and then recovered. "Man, this thing really skates on concrete" flashed through my mind as I dropped her into high gear. With headlight flashing and horn blowing the City of Garden City roared, clattered and skittered down the highway bounding into the air every now and then when she hit a bad joint in the concrete. And, for that matter, the good joints went bad as she crunched her way through their edges during that wild ride to the track.

About a thousand feet before I reached the entrance road to the track I realized that I was going too fast to stop or to make the turn in any normal fashion if there is anything like a normal fashion for a streamlined train going down the highway. I took a chance again — for one thing, she steered easily if not responsively on concrete — and got her into another four-wheel drift, but this time straight down the highway. Man, concrete was flying everywhere and each time she hit a joint, going straight sideways, I thought she was going to roll. But she shuddered to a halt aimed right up the entrance to the track. I dropped her in low and popped the clutch; the flanges of her rear wheels ground their way into the surface of the road for a few revolutions and then she took off. "Watch out cruiser, watch out K-52, I'm on my way in and nothing's gonna stop me!"

When they first caught sight of the CW as it was coming down the road sideways at sixty miles an hour with horn blowing, Mars light flashing, and concrete sailing every which way, the chief and everyone else at the track just could not comprehend what was going on in front of their eyes. Even when she came to a stop aimed right at them and then lurched forward, they remained paralyzed, their brains locked up tight by the enormity of that which they had witnessed.

The City of Garden City roared and slewed up the entrance road until it was almost upon them and then everyone scattered. As I put her into another great wrenching drift, I lined up her right front steel wheel on the left front end of that cruiser and the left track of the K-52. Wham, crunch, and then she broke through and I found myself momentarily alone on the deserted track.

The first one to recover was Johnson. White with anger and with all thoughts of preventing the destruction having left his head, he was out to get that CW that had just clipped his beloved K-52 as he made a flying leap for the driver's seat of the wounded half-track, its gun now wrenched from its mountings and lying harmlessly on the ground.

But Old Nerf and the City of Garden City had done their work well. That left track was now jammed tighter than a drum, and that locked up the left rear axle as securely as if it had been welded into its housing. The differential was still OK as was the right track and axle, so when that kid Johnson fired up the Dodge and popped the clutch in pursuit, the right track was driven at twice its normal speed and that whole she-bang started whirling around that stuck left track in a circle. Being dragged sideways was too much for them so the two front tires blew and that speeded things up. As it churned the earth the half-track appeared to be digging its own grave, but Johnson was too furious to let up on the gas let alone shut it down. Finally the vibration and strain became too much, a piston and half a rod tore their way through the hood and everything creaked to a halt. Up on the driver's seat Johnson was now weeping, but no one, not even he, was ever to know whether it was in anger or sorrow.

Meanwhile those local Airflow drivers, seeing their way now cleared, jumped into their cars and roared onto the track in pursuit of the City of Garden City while the spectators poured into the stands. Old Nerf was waiting, and the steel wheels of the iron-horse CW cut their way right through a C-17, a pitifully small S-2 coupe and a CX before they knew what hit them. The others re-grouped while the City of Garden City tore this way and that in pursuit of another victim, meanwhile throwing up clouds of dirt so massive that the sky became obscured and some of the spectators had to fight to keep from being buried alive. The cataclysm was upon us all, and for

the next half hour all sense of civilization and humanity deserted us as we fought to kill and to stay alive. None, not even the spectators, were safe from those terrible engines of destruction whose drivers were forced to a level of survival so primitive as to deny the last hundred thousand years of mankind's progress.

Finally it was over and only one gladiator remained. The City of Garden City had prevailed over all the others, and the world was again slowly coming to its senses. Helpless to prevent the destruction, the outsiders and their Airflows had long since departed, in anger and in sorrow for their camp at Cimarron and then the long trek home. Kramer went willingly with them for now; even he understood that mankind had gone beyond the limit in its inhumanity to machines.

But Old Nerf did not yet know that as I proudly drove the City of Garden City up to the judges stand. For once in his life Old Nerf, the born loser, had won the main event! Then, midst the nervous laughter and scattered clapping of the few remaining spectators, I stepped out of the CW for my award. As I looked up toward the chief judge, I realized that I was not seeing the old Basque of yesterday but rather the sheriff of Finney County.

"Stick out your hands, son. You've just won a brand-new set of bracelets."

The End

EPILOG

Now you know why there are so few Airflows in that section of the Great Plains encompassing parts of Kansas, Colorado and Nebraska. And there's a legend among the older folk around Garden City that if you go out to the old abandoned race track at midnight you may yet hear the muffled sounds of Airflows in mortal combat midst the faint flickering of a ghostly Mars light. By the way, the City of Garden City was never returned to train service and, if you're interested, I'm told that the CW sits gathering dust in an abandoned shed next to the Garden City Western railroad track (yes, the line is still eking out a precarious existence) near the edge of town.

As for Old Nerf, well, I've never left Kansas since that day of destruction. After a few weeks in the slammer I learned that I was up for a Federal rap when someone had figured out that since the Garden City Western was under the jurisdiction of the Interstate Commerce Commission, stealing a train brought the FBI into the picture. So they called Washington and a man soon came out. Right away he wanted to talk to me and I allowed it as, yes, I thought I had the time. So he comes up to the visitor's window and introduces himself.

"I'm the agent from Washington. I'm John W. Smythe and I collect old cars on the side. Got my eye on an Airflow too," he said. So I decide that I'd better play it pretty cool.

"Pleased to meet you. Does the FBI pay well?"

At that he looks kinda confused and says, "No, I'm from the FAA, it doesn't pay too good and I really don't know what I'm doing out here, but when I got the assignment I thought that at least I might be able to find another Airflow while I was on the case. By the way, can you tell me where the plane crashed?"

Now the sheriff, who's pretty dumb, gets red in the face when he hears all this, because even he knows that FAA stands for Federal Aviation Agency. He stomps over to the nearest phone and right in front of both of us picks it up and calls Washington. He's arguing with someone on the other end of the line and then he hollers...

"Sure he'll talk to me. Tell him that it's the sheriff of Finney County, Kansas, and if that doesn't do it, tell him I'm the guy who fixed the speeding ticket he got coming through here when he was still the Senator from Missouri."

That does it and the next thing we hear from the sheriff is, "I'm doin' fine, Harry, how are you doin'?"

And then the sheriff launches into a tirade about bureaucracy in Washington and about how they don't even know the difference between the FBI and FAA, they're tossin' so many initials around. Gradually he quiets down.

"Thanks, Harry, stop in and say hello next time you're out here, bye".

Now the fur really does fly in a hurry; Smythe is sent packing, and my trial is over in a jiffy.

"But what happened to that journalist?" Glad you asked, for I'd almost forgotten him. He left town Monday morning after he'd filed his dispatch on the derby. He'd also taken a vow to himself, so he told me, that as soon

as he got home he was gonna get him an Airflow. But in the meantime he'd got tired again, so he was off to fish the Gunnison before he headed home. A few days later and a mile or two below Cebolla, he wet his line, made his cast, slipped on a rock, and they fished his body out of the river at Delta a week later.

I've grown kinda fond of Kansas since then, and particularly Leavenworth. The countryside around here, when I see it, is green and soft and the Missouri river flows darn near by my front door. Now that I'm a trusty I've got responsibilities, and when I'm allowed outside the walls I often look across the river into the state of Missouri but I'm always glad to go back. Every now and then when there's a plane crash at Kansas City International, it's just across the river you know, my friend Smythe comes out from Springfield, Virginia, and visits me. Not wishin' nobody no bad luck, but Smythe's not been out for quite a spell.

But, like I say, I prefer Kansas where I'm living off the fat of the land and the only thing I've got left to fight is parole.

Respectfully, S. E. "Nerf" Seavee (0437765) Leavenworth, KS 66048

Oct. 4, 1978



The only known photograph of any of the events that led up to and included the First Annual Airflow Demolition Derby. Nerf was leading the pack during the stock car race at Tribune when his front U-joint broke, the drive shaft dug into the dirt and flipped the C-10 off the track. Note missing drive shaft, and drive shaft retainer bracket. Nerf, who was unhurt, posed for the picture taken by a local newsman, shortly after Kramer's SE, Stewball II, won the event. Unfortunately despite thorough research no pictures of Kramer's '34 Desoto Coupe or of the City of Garden City have been unearthed to date. Photo courtesy of Garden City Daily Examiner, July 1952.