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the *AVENUE*



A promenade of
teen-age lust and boredom

► By Elaine McArdle

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Onset's
Lynn Roderick
makes it big in L.A.



By Elaine McArdle

Standard-Times staff writer

It's 9 p.m. on a June Thursday. Three teen-age girls in tourniquet-tight jeans stroll at a leisurely pace down Acushnet Avenue in the North End of New Bedford.

They're moving twice as fast as the traffic.

Camaros, Corvettes, Mustang convertibles: bumper to bumper to bumper, a mile of humming engines stretching from Coggeshall Street to Lund's Corner.

Motorcycles and pedestrians weave perilously in and out of the cars, whose radios wage a fierce battle for command of the night air.

Van Halen roars from a white Dodge that spills long-haired teens from its rolled-down windows. A beat-up sedan sports the bumper sticker, "So many pedestrians, so little time," as its driver listens to a group named — appropriately — Megadeth.

Cars move slowly, slowly, their drivers and passengers gaping with romantic desire at others passing in the opposite direction.

It's a motorized version of an 18th-century courting promenade.

A promenade of teen-age lust, and boredom.

A shiny black truck on Paul Bunyan-sized tires towers above the cars. Its red-haired driver, in a Iron Maiden T-shirt, affects a cool, detached expression, then cranks his stereo above the din.

Acushnet Avenue. The only game in town. The only game, teens say, in the whole area.

It is certainly not the dating forum that concerned parents would select for their children. Junior high girls wobble uncertainly on stiletto heels past 30-year-old men who reek of liquor.

Still, teen-agers flood in from nearby small towns like Mattapoisett, from Providence, even from the Cape — a 45-minute drive to do nothing, to get stuck in a mass of cars.

It may be a teen-age wasteland, an attempt to create a scene where none exists.

But at least it's action. The kids are out engaged in life rather than sitting mesmerized and isolated in front of their living-room television.

It's a beating pulse in a city generally moribund after 6 p.m.

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Judy Viera, 32, says she is ready to move her business to another part of town.

In the past two months, the windows of Vogue, her beauty parlor at 1713 Acushnet Ave., have been smashed four times.

"It's over \$200 per window" she says, maneuvering a curling iron through a customer's hair. The shop never had insurance before, she says, and there's certainly no reason to get a policy now: "They wouldn't take us, or they'd drop us right away."

Her partner, Leonor Tsaliagos, 39, says, "The radios blaring don't bother me, the driving doesn't bother me. But when they start breaking windows, that's bad."

When the shop closes at 9 p.m., Ms. Viera leaves with her last customer. Intimidated by teens hanging around the store, she leaves cleanup chores until she returns in the morning. Lately, she sweeps up shattered glass along with hair clippings.

Laura Perry, 60, on the receiving end of Ms. Viera's curling iron, has lived on the far north end of the avenue her entire life. For the past three or four years, she says, the cruising has increased to the point that "if you have to come onto the avenue, you're scared.

"I say the National Guard should come onto the avenue and do their target

Staff photo by Mike Valeri

night on Acushnet Avenue in New Bedford bears a high price for some. Ronnie Quirk has a \$100 citation.

A promenade of teen-age lust and boredom has businessmen and abutters, cops, and kids on opposing sides . . .

On the Avenue

practicing. It's awful but true."

Ron E. Mello, 45, owns the Village Square Guest House, which caters to tradesmen working temporarily in the city. Several years ago, he hired a security guard to lessen problems around his hotel.

The guard, Ernest Carreiro, 52, can't quiet the traffic, but he keeps noisy people away from the windows.

Mr. Mello is putting the finishing touches on an avenue restaurant he plans to manage. But he says the first customer won't be served until the summer traffic slows.

"I won't even open it. It's a waste of time. I'll wait to open 'til September."

On 7:30 Friday night, the Acushnet Avenue traffic is barely audible from a spacious third-floor apartment on a side street.

But the night is still young.

Mark, 26, begins to tense as he awaits the inevitable onslaught: music, screeching tires, and worse — broken windows, cars vandalized by passing youths, even fistfights and other violence Mark says he's witnessed since moving into his home four years ago.

"It's very depressing," he says, his quiet voice and melancholy manner punctuating his words. "You have to pretend you don't see things. You just don't go out."

To Mark, the teen-age ritual is not a harmless pastime — it keeps him a prisoner in his own home.

"The only way you can possibly know what goes on here is to live here," he says. "Friends are afraid to come over because of the rowdiness of the people. It goes against everything that is peaceful."

Mark grew up on the avenue. But when he was a teen, he says, things were different. Drugs and violence were limited to Brooklawn Park. And people cruising the avenue were older — in their 20s and more responsible.

Mark would not give his last name. He says he is afraid to, afraid some youths incited by his comments would make him or his property the target of violence.

Yet he refuses to move away. A self-taught craftsman, Mark has painstakingly stripped years of varnish and other abuse from the walls and floors of his apartment, and created a warm, *fin-de-siecle* atmosphere. "I have too much invested here," he explains.

"What are they doing out there? That's the question. I would think these people would be ashamed of how they act toward us. To me, it's just total disregard of everyone who lives here."

A few blocks away, Glen Guilbeault, 18, leans against a storefront in his muscle shirt and cowboy boots, and shares a bored expression with his five teen-age friends, all residents of other New Bedford



Staff photos by Mike Valeri



Cruising the avenue is a motorized version of an old-fashioned courting promenade — it's a modern boy-meets-girl ritual. Ann Farias and Chris Tetreault, at left, met on the drag and are now engaged.

neighborhoods.

"If I had a car, I wouldn't be here," insists Glen, who comes to the avenue every day at about 5 p.m. Without transportation, he says, "There's no other place to go."

Echoes his buddy, Daniel Moura, 16, "Ain't nothing else for kids to do, except go to the mall."

Reminded that the avenue is the province of teens with cars, perhaps even more so than for vehicle-less kids, Glen just shrugs.

As cars begin to congregate, the noise level rises.

"No, there's no vandalism," says Glen.

Adds Chris Hendriques, 16, "There's no neighbors here. Nobody lives here."

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For almost everyone but the kids, Acushnet Avenue is a problem.

It's a problem from 5 p.m. to the early

hours of the next morning, from April through November on weekend nights, and every night during the summer months.

Fire engines and other emergency vehicles can't get through the traffic.

Naive motorists who attempt the avenue quickly learn side routes, unless they're heading for one of the many Portuguese restaurants. In that case, they are likely to develop a case of indigestion long before they sit down to a steaming plate of *bacalhau*.

"They stop and talk to one another in the middle of the street as if they own it," grumbles Ward 2 City Councilor Robert Koczera, whose constituency includes some of the people who live along Acushnet Avenue. "Unfortunately, they just don't care that people are trying to use (the avenue) as a street" for passage.

The few businesses that stay open evenings complain that customers get

stuck in — or just avoid — the traffic jam, and are afraid to walk past groups of youths.

One morning last month, Anthony P. Folco, 30, discovered that someone had squirted glue in the door locks of his family business, Folco Jewelers at 1697 Acushnet Ave. A locksmith charged him \$40 to repair the damage.

Last summer, the store's windows often were smashed or riddled with BB pellets, he says.

Residents who live on the avenue or the many side streets can't sleep because of the cacophony of peeling rubber and rock music.

They complain of teens urinating in their yards, having sex in apartment doorways, sitting on cars they don't own, breaking bottles on sidewalks.

Drugs are also a part of the scene, but a small part, most observers say. Others say prostitutes — though in smaller numbers than in other parts of town — frequent the area.

Cruising wasn't a serious concern until about three years ago, when the city imposed a 9 p.m. curfew on drug-ridden Brooklawn Park. With no central gathering spot, teens took to their cars and to the street.

Each summer, their numbers have increased as word spread throughout Southeastern Massachusetts and even into Rhode Island.

"It's not only city people," says Lino Borges, 25, who has lived on the avenue with his family all his life. "I go to the Cape, and people say, 'You're from New Bedford? You must cruise the Avenue.'"

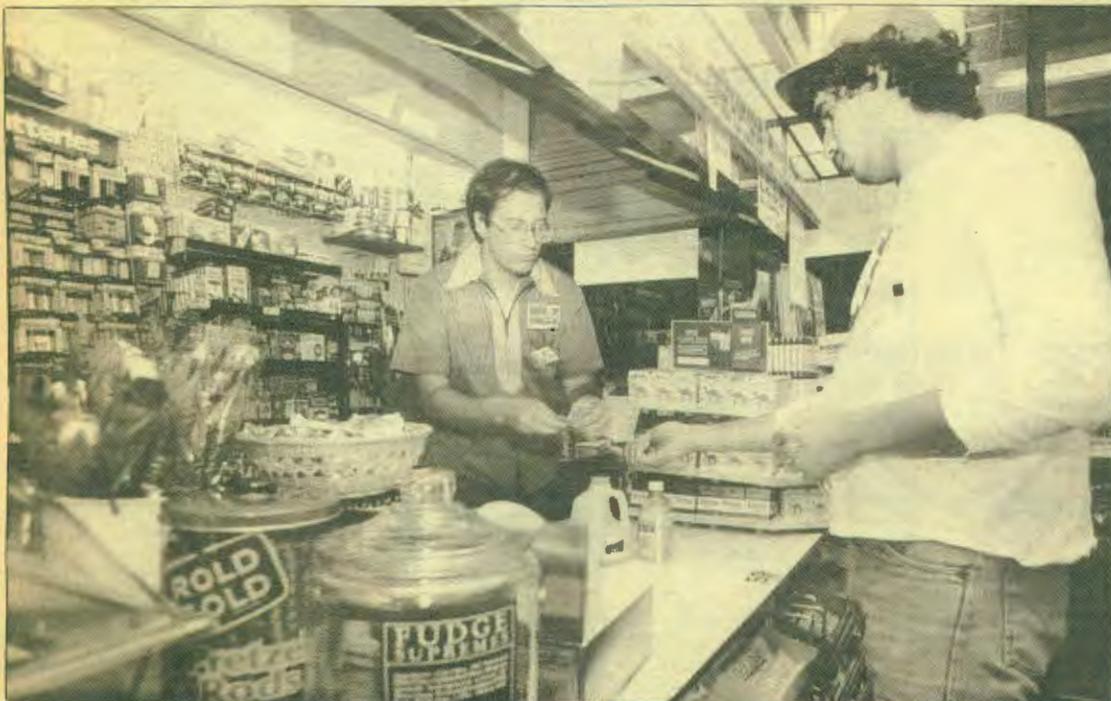
Police Officer Brad Paiva, assigned to the North End Station, estimates that 85 percent of the kids cruising don't live near the avenue. Mr. Koczera complains that out-of-town avenue cruisers "have less of a regard for the area."

The average age of the cruisers has dropped drastically in recent years, say observers, so that it is now mainly the domain of adolescents.

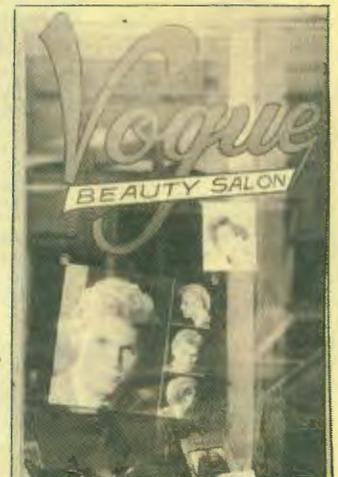
"I used to hang on the avenue when I was young," Mr. Borges says. "But it was never like this. Late at night, you go out and you see 14-year-old girls."

The scores of roaming youths may or may not be a boon to his business, says Brian Rapoza, 30, assistant manager at Cumberland Farms, 1737 Acushnet Ave.

"That's debatable. Obviously a lot of them come in here and buy sodas or candy. But it does have a negative impact. A lot of regular customers, who buy higher-priced items, are reluctant to come in here because of traffic problems or because there are a lot of kids hanging around in the parking lot.



Staff photo by Mike Valeri



Staff photo by Hank Seaman

Cumberland Farms assistant manager Brian Rapoza believes avenue cruisers deter people from his store. The windows of Vogue Beauty Salon have been smashed four times in the past two months.

"I'm not saying the kids are necessarily good or bad. But the impression the older people get of the kids tends to scare them away."

But most of his young customers are "very, very polite," says Mr. Rapoza. He sees little violence. "I don't know that that's as serious as a lot of people make it out to be."

And if there is a problem with teens urinating in residential yards, he adds, "It's because there aren't any restroom facilities."

Sgt. Jill Simmons has been assigned to the North End Police Station for five years. In that period, she has developed a rapport both with the cruising youths and with avenue residents.

"It's not like the kids are out looking for trouble," she says. "It's just that the sheer volume is a problem. Kids like to listen to music at 17 decibels above deafness."

"You've always got that element that's there," she continues, referring to street crime. "But it's not like these are all a bunch of hooligans."

Vandalism aside, North End Station Capt. Arthur Belli just doesn't understand the cruising scene.

"I'd like to see kids find something better to do. All they're doing is going up the avenue to meet their friends. It seems so ridiculous," he says.

"We need the cooperation of parents," he continues. "If parents would talk to their kids and tell them it would be better to have their friends over to the house, in small groups throughout the towns."

This summer — not a moment too soon, in the eyes of avenue residents — came the clampdown.

Responding to increasing complaints, New Bedford Police Chief Richard A. Benoit in early June assigned three motorcycle patrolmen to the avenue on weekend nights. Officers from the street crimes unit and the traffic division also are concentrating on the area.

"We will be enforcing the law on blocking intersections, on loud mufflers, on squealing tires," says Chief Benoit, who attends monthly meetings of a North End crime-watch group. "If they see that we are stopping a motor vehicle and citing a person for breaking the law, and giving them a ticket, then word of mouth will get around."

Officer Paiva says police are making about 50 arrests a week on the avenue for various traffic offenses and other crimes.

"We're not gonna stop," he promises.

Last month, the City Council handed police a new weapon: an anti-cruising ordinance.

The ordinance allows police to slap a \$50 fine on any driver who passes through certain avenue areas, designated by signs, more than three times in a two-hour period from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m.

Each subsequent trip in the same time period will cost a \$100 fine.

After studying how other communities handled similar problems, Chief Benoit suggested the anti-cruising ordinance, which was sponsored by councilor George Rogers and is now in effect.

"They have these ordinances in a half-dozen other cities," says Chief Benoit. "It won't solve the problem, but it will alleviate the problem."

Capt. Belli calls the anti-cruising ordinance "experimental," adding, "I'm sure it'll be challenged."

But Mr. Koczera believes it will pass constitutional muster.

"This is not a reactionary ordinance," he says. "When someone goes out for ice cream, will they be pulled over and subject to the anti-cruising ordinance? I don't think that's the intent. The intent is that, when there is a problem, that's when they'll be able to use the ordinance."

"Who determines whether you should get a speeding ticket? It's the same thing."

Skeptics, including avenue businessmen and teen-agers, scoff at its usefulness.

"They don't understand. No matter how hard they push, no matter how many tickets they give out, the kids are gonna come back because they have no place else to go. They can't go into a nightclub. This is it," says Donald Pelletier, 23, a motorcyclist and an avenue regular.



Staff photo by Mike Valeri

"It's not like the kids are out looking for trouble," says New Bedford Police Sgt. Jill Simmons. "It's just that the sheer volume is a problem. Kids like to listen to music at 17 decibels above deafness."

One aspect of increased law enforcement, Chief Benoit's motorcycle detail, is the object of rave citizen reviews.

"It was the chief's idea, and it was a good one," says Captain Belli, "because motorcycles can negotiate the avenue and break up gangs that stop in the middle of the street."

Cumberland Farms' Mr. Rapoza agrees. He says the new police motorcycle patrols have done "an amazing job" over the past month curtailng cruising.

Mr. Mello, owner of the Village Square Guest House near the Cumberland Farms, says the motorcycle patrols "do beautiful. It's 30 or 40 percent better this year. But they need more like 12," instead of the three now allotted for weekend evenings.

Weekend patrols may not be enough. "I'd like to see the (police motor) bikes out every night," says Sgt. Simmons.

Some believe that slack police enforcement of existing laws was the problem in summers past. And even with the motorcycle detail, cleaning up the avenue is going to "take more of a concerted effort from the police department with maintaining special details and enforcing the anti-cruising ordinance," says Mr. Koczera.

"There are laws on the books about how loud you can play your radio, about cutouts on your exhaust (system). The cops don't care," says Mr. Folco.

"I'd like to see them enforce the current laws. If a kid stops at a green light, or stops his car in the middle of the street to talk to some guy going in the other direction, or is operating with defective equipment, they should grab him."

"As for now, it's a free ride on the avenue."

Captain Belli disagrees.

"The problem is such that we have to stay on it all the time. It takes time away from our regular duties. We break groups up, tell them to move on. But they always come back."

"We're doing our best as far as keeping traffic moving."

But, he concedes, "There probably is frustration on the part of the police department. It's like struggling against a tide, and not making any headway."

On this issue, at least, kids side with the cops: they believe there is significantly more police presence on the avenue this summer, and they don't like it.

On 8:30 on a breezy Thursday night, traffic is light, but gathering emotional momentum while, ironically, losing speed.

A jean-jacketed teen walks by Dee's Hot Dogs, his pit bull terrier encouraging other pedestrians to give him wide berth.

The ubiquitous red-haired guy in the jacked-up truck



Staff photo by Mike Valeri

A Bridal Seasons billboard is the backdrop for, from left, John Fonseca, Kerri Duff, Abby Shaw and Derek Machado.

drives by.

A Standard-Times reporter and photographer flag down two motorcyclists in the parking lot of the CVS pharmacy, 2100 Acushnet Ave., which the bikers are using as a turning-around spot.

David, 24, is riding a Kawasaki. He won't give his last name because, "My mother doesn't know I own a bike."

With his riding companion, Ronnie Quirk, 25, David says he goes "up and down, up and down" the avenue.

"That's because the cops don't let nobody hang out," complains Ronnie, atop a Honda Hurricane 600.

As if on cue, a police cruiser filled with four hulking officers pulls abruptly into the parking lot.

The reporter explains they are doing an interview for a story about the avenue.

The officer behind the wheel flashes his brights onto a sign that states, "No Loitering."

"You wanna break the law, too?" he asks the reporter.

The cruiser doesn't budge as the interview with the motorcyclists continues.

"If they would let us park and talk to our friends, we wouldn't be going up and down," says David, eyeing the cruiser.

"I guarantee," says Ronnie, "that I'll get pulled over when we leave here."

Ronnie and David roar off, heading south.

Minutes later and about a half-mile from the CVS parking lot, Ronnie stands next to his bike talking to two police officers in a different cruiser. David is nowhere to be seen.

"They pulled me over," Ronnie says. "New Bedford — this town is a lotta fun, I tell ya."

An embarrassed-looking kid of about 16 is tossing his motorcycle helmet and backpack onto the front seat of the cruiser. He is frisked, handcuffed and placed in the back of the police car.

His motorbike stands forlornly next to the curb.

"He was probably driving with only a permit after dark," explains Ronnie, whose souvenir for this evening is a \$100 ticket for improper lane passing.

He feigns indifference. Will the fine persuade him to stay away?

"Not at all," he says, mounting his Honda.

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Ann Farias, 18, and Chris Tetreault, 17, both of New Bedford, met on the avenue five months ago. She was in a gold Pontiac Fiero, he in a Cutlass Supreme.

Now they're engaged to be married.

"We just stared at each other," recalls Chris, who has All-American blondish good looks and sharply defined muscles. "She told me to meet her at the CVS parking lot, and then she came with me and my friends."

They say their parents know where they spend their evenings.

"Oh, yeah," says Chris. "My mother used to hang downtown every Thursday night" in the days before the Dartmouth Mall laid waste to inner-city New Bedford. "This is the same thing."

But the police are taking the fun out their old stomping ground, they say.

Chris admits that some teens "spoil it for others," that there are plenty of drugs for those who are looking.

"But we just wanna cruise, and drink some Coca-Cola," he says, lifting the familiar red-and-white soda can.

"They should be fair and just leave us alone," says Ann. "We're not doing any harm."

Criminal fines aren't going to keep her from her favorite pastime. "I've gotten three tickets in one day because of my headlight," which was broken, she says. "I still stayed on the avenue."

Kerri Duff, 17, is about as vivacious and charming a high school student as a parent could hope for.

Dressed in a denim dress, Kerri is poised on the fine line of womanhood, and floats unselfconsciously back and forth over the line: at one moment giggly and wide-eyed; at the next, fully adult in her flirtatiousness.

Her boyfriend, Dave Risdal, 18, is less enchanted than Kerri with the avenue — he says he would rather be home sleeping.

"We came down to find him," says Kerri, pointing at

their friend, 19-year-old Bill S. Collins. "It's not like we're doing drugs or anything."

But she loves the excitement, the action. "It's fun because you see a lot of things, people fighting, drug busts, people getting arrested."

She pauses. "It's not the best thing in the world or anything."

Kerri lets out a scream as she spots Abby Shaw, 17, who just graduated from Kerri's alma mater, Old Rochester Regional High School in Mattapoisett.

"See! It's exciting because you meet people you haven't seen in a while," she bubbles.

Still, she insists, the avenue is not the focus of her young life.

"I have a good friend, she's here every single night. I think she does it because she goes out with a lot of guys who cruise the avenue. She likes to check out the guys."

"That's why a lot of girls and guys go down here," Kerri reflects.

A mating ritual?

She laughs. "Yes, and the mating calls are the screeches of the cars and the horns."

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In the end, the issue of the avenue can be pared down to two viewpoints that are probably irreconcilable.

The businesspeople and residents are, metaphorically, on one side of the street.

"Everybody has a constitutional right to drive their car," says Mr. Folco. "But we have a constitutional right to be able to operate our business without people operating their cars loudly or squealing their tires. People have a constitutional right to have a fire engine get to their house without a half-hour delay."

On the other side are teens who insist they have nowhere else to go.

Concludes motorcyclist Donald Pelletier, "I would rather be down here and be straight, with my bike, than be in a bar and be wasted and come out and kill somebody. When it's hot, what are ya gonna do, sit in the house all day?" ■