

Mr. Corvette
(Cal Bailey)

(From *City of Speed*)

Ventura Boulevard, that 9-mile-long passageway connecting the San Fernando Valley from east to west, contains more booze dives per square mile than even 16th Street, Indianapolis. Visiting it again in 2006, I found Ventura as busy and boozy as ever. But the parking lot in Sherman Oaks, where Cal Bailey used to deposit his red Corvette, was missing, and so was Cal's favorite house of spirits, the Tender Trap. Here it was where Cal, called "Mr. Corvette," used to joke, curse, threaten, and knock back the loudmouth till the wee hours. Poor palooka Cal has himself been among the missing for 40 years, or since 1966. This was the mad season when he at last forsook his cult status as Mr. Corvette to achieve far greater notoriety with his photograph on the front page of the Los Angeles *Times*. There he was, Mr. Corvette – muscular shoulders, bull neck, baleful face, and straining, slightly crazy eyes. When the photograph was published, some of us wondered whether the picture was taken after he was shot.

At the beginning of another recreational evening at the Tender Trap, big Cal tended to be jovial, with belligerence gaining the upper hand as the night wore on. Chug-a-lugging suds not out of a glass but a bottle, for additional show-boating he'd whip out a \$100 bill to wrap around the neck of the bottle. Sometimes, too, you'd listen to him lying like a psychopath about all the burglaries and bank heists and stickups he secretly pulled off without getting caught. And if you disagreed with him,

he'd inquire if you'd like to have your head stuffed inside a cement mixer.

So far as all of us knew, there were two things Cal Bailey truly loved: one being his wife and family, and the other his collection of Corvettes. Despite her husband's wild and reckless character, and all the saturnalias at the Tender Trap, Cal's long-suffering bride – she was a ravishing beauty 15 years Cal's junior – regarded him as the most gentle and mildest of men. Or so she said. The Baileys lived in a big house in the San Fernando Valley, and the man known as Mr. Corvette was a member of the PTA who chauffeured the kids to church on Sundays.

Cal was not always Mr. Corvette. When he first got into amateur sports car racing, he tooled a batwing 300SL, one purchased from none other than Lance Reventlow. But after Wild Billy Mitchell and Eddie Cole's V-8 hit big, he wisely made the big switch to plastic.

He came to own a pair of Corvettes, perhaps more. One was a red road sleeper, innocently licensed for the avenues. It paid regular visits to Hollywood Motors, where Max Balchowsky tweaked it into becoming, arguably, L.A.'s fastest street 'Vette. Cal knew what speed was. Saying so long to Max, he'd scald north on Mulholland, cross the top of the Hollywood Hills, then plunge down the other side to faithfully skid his red bomb to a halt in the parking lot of the Tender Trap for the start of cocktail hour.

His second Corvette was a still faster black one, No. 4, so raging it could not set wheels on the street at all. This was Cal's road racer, and at every sports car track, from Palm Springs to Paramount Ranch, he pitched in, defending the honor of the tribe of L.A. Corvettes. But he was erratic, got No. 4 off the pavement a lot, and lacked the cool temperament demanded of a winner.

Naturally enough, gossip soon spread about bad, black No. 4's immense power. Dan Gurney, then unknown and penniless, had just flunked out of a Ferrari-chauffeuring seminar at Tony Parravano U, Willow Springs Raceway. He was still on the make for a sugar daddy and hit up Cal at length. Cal at last gave Dan the okay for Riverside International Raceway's inaugural.

With what was obviously shattering ease, Gurney and No. 4 won. Won huge. The victory, in fact, became the talk of L.A. sports car racing, leading to Frank Arciero hooking up Dan to the same Ferrari 4.9 that would later bring nothing but grief to Ron O'Dell. And Dan's stature grew so enormous that he was being petitioned by Enzo Ferrari himself, asking Dan to join the Formula 1 squad.

Cal Bailey, in the meanwhile, basked briefly in his honorable new image as the sugar daddy responsible for launching Dan Gurney. But then Cal proceeded to lose his shirt in a truly hair-frying business venture involving a bowling alley. And following this, he embarked on the caper of his career, whose objective was to kidnap for ransom one of L.A.'s big tire and rubber rajas.

That little trick got him killed, and also confirmed the worst suspicions of his rattled drinking buddies at the Tender Trap, who suddenly came to understand the source of Mr. Corvette's gangster talk and his flauntings of hundred dollar bills. Cal's ravishing spouse – herself belatedly revealing her late husband's secret life – described an odd domestic episode that revolved around Cal's creating an enormous hole in the floor of their kitchen. Deliberately discharging a sawed-off shotgun will do that. But the prize for receiving the biggest jolt of all went to Lance Reventlow. When he'd sold Cal his 300SL, Lance had neglected to realize that Cal was marking him down as a future snatch victim himself.

The total denigration of Cal's character achieved its peak when the police went public and pronounced him a compulsive, lifelong, wholly inept thug, whom the constabularies of two nations had stuck behind bars in the 1940s and early 1950s. But they couldn't hunt down and deliver the capital punishment they believed he deserved until he dressed up in a Halloween mask and undertook the kidnapping of Leonard Firestone 16 years later.

Cal Bailey was born in Texas in 1922 and, by the time he reached Los Angeles a generation later, he had indeed seen the inside of penitentiaries in the United States and Canada, attesting to his unsoundness as a car thief, robber, and bungling burglar. But thanks to the salutary influences of L.A., for a brief period he remained reasonably clean.

It didn't last. Cal's troubles began when, in trade for some range land he'd managed to acquire in Oregon, he came into possession of a bowling alley out in the middle of the Mojave Desert. This became an unmitigated disaster. The bowling alley piled up thousands in debts, and Cal, who suddenly had litigious investigators after him, decided to torch the place for insurance.

But his midnight arson party went awry because all the gasoline fuses Cal had set refused to ignite. Opening a door to investigate what was wrong, he unwittingly supplied the fire scene with the last ingredient it was missing: air. The following backdraft and violent explosion lifted the roof off the structure and hurled Cal out into the street, as well as back to the attention of his friends the bulls. Cal, however, could not be prosecuted for burning down his own property. Encouraged, he next set out unsuccessfully to sue the insurance company for refusing to pay off.

Life became dull, especially since he was out of racing, having sold No. 4. And Cal's bankroll was now as deficient as his smarts. Having earlier become casually acquainted with Leonard Firestone, and having had a long conversation with him on the subject of Corvettes, Cal concluded he might as well shanghai him for ransom.

Following weeks of vacillation about the amount of restitution (\$8 million? \$2 million?), Cal and his henchman, one George Skalla, at last initiated the abduction by motoring toward Firestone's Beverly Hills estate high in secluded Coldwater Canyon.

For once, Cal was not driving a Corvette. He was the driver of a passenger car he had earlier charged goon Skalla to borrow via midnight auto parts. The two morons stopped so that Cal could telephone Firestone's. A maid provided the information that Mr. Firestone was home but indisposed.

Cal garbled the message. "Firestone's working on the garbage disposal," he explained to Skalla. "Guess he's throwing Coke bottles down there."

Moments later, Cal and Skalla, crook and accomplice, pulled onto Firestone's semicircular drive. Dressed up in a ghoul's mask for Halloween and flourishing a big revolver, Cal identified himself as the parcel post delivery man, then opened Firestone's front door to confidently waltz inside.

He was hit immediately by a cannonade of gunfire discharged by three barricaded homicide dicks, who had been patiently waiting inside to fill Mr. Corvette full of as much lead as they possible could.

The maid who'd answered the phone had been an undercover police agent. Leonard Firestone wasn't at home and hadn't been ever since George Skalla had run to the police to rat out Cal with news of his plan. Cal could

not have possibly chosen a more lethal accomplice. Himself an ex-jailbird about to be returned to prison, Skalla – who had absolutely believed Cal’s threats about “sticking your head into a cement mixer” and consequently was petrified of him – had sung and sung and sung. A stool pigeon magnificent.

As a result, the coppers had known more about the kidnapping than Bailey did; they even rented the getaway vehicle that Cal had instructed Skalla to steal. Skalla was furthermore wired for sound, and those detectives waiting to send him to eternity presumably got a good chuckle about Cal’s “garbage disposal” remark.

As befits a Judas goat, Skalla perished with Cal in the fusillade. With life oozing out of him, he asked his policemen friends, who had become his assassins, what had gone wrong and was informed he’d neglected to duck.

All its customers agreed that the Tender Trap became a far more peaceful joint without Cal threatening to jam skulls into cement mixers. A duller one too. It soon tanked.

In a last, bizarre twist, heirs of George Skalla tried, unsuccessfully, to sue the police for workman’s compensation benefits. For, after all, hadn’t stone-stupid Skalla been employed as a cop snitch instead of the fumbling associate of brigand Cal Bailey, Mr. Corvette?