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Roadside America

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Bonnie and Clyde, Life on the Road

On the road together in the early 1930's Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow captured the imagination and the fantasy of Americans as anti-hero's battling against authority. The original Bonnie and Clyde became much more than the youthful criminals portrayed by Warren Betty and Faye Dunaway in the 1967 film directed by Arthur Penn. Bonnie and Clyde were an original example of influencers well before the concept or invention of mobile phones and social media platforms. To quote Roger Ebert's 1967 review of the film, "Bonnie was a gum-chewing waitress and Clyde was a two-bit hood out on parole. But from the beginning, they both seemed to have the knack for entertaining people. Bonnie wrote ballads and mailed them in with pictures Clyde took with his Kodak." In fact, the story of these two real-life anti-hero's captivated reporters and journalists and obsessed law enforcement during their time together but became legend after their death in an ambush with police on highway 154 near Gibsland, Louisiana. But how did this all begin? How did Bonnie and Clyde's time together on the road through their six-state crime spree change them or further define them? What impact did they have on those close to them and those who admired them? All these questions can be answered through examining their experiences on the road, and how these experiences affect them, a common idea in American car culture.

To answer these questions, it is important to note that the real story of Bonnie and Clyde and the 1967 movie adaptation of their exploits are not entirely consistent. Whereas the 1967 movie's early scenes depict Bonnie Parker as having met Clyde Barrow when he attempts to steal her mother's car and the two strike out on their adventure together. In contrast, an article published in 2017 by the Southern Weekend about the Bonnie and Clyde Ambush Museum, reported that "When Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow met in Texas, she was already married to someone in jail for murder, but the two were soon smitten. Bonnie snuck a gun into the jail where Clyde was serving time for burglary." It was after his escape from prison that they became fugitives from the law and travelled across six states in two years and became American legends, rebelling against authority and living on love as the modern-day Romeo and Juliet for the depression era.

Another key aspect of the true story of Bonnie and Clyde was that Bonnie was a skilled creative writer. According to a 2013 article published on December 6th on the History Channel, "While she was imprisoned in 1932 after a failed hardware store burglary, she penned a collection of 10 odes that she entitled "Poetry from Life's Other Side," which included "The Story of Suicide Sal," a poem about an innocent country girl lured by her boyfriend into a life a crime." While the 1967 movie touches on her writing ability, it also portrays her as being largely innocent before the chance meeting of Clyde Barrow. The true story is that Bonnie Parker had a criminal history of her own and had written about it early in the timeline of events of their storied run from the law.

In the case of Bonnie and Clyde, their travels defined them more than changed them. This can be said in that both were involved with law enforcement, and in the case of Clyde, he had already served a fourteen-year sentence for armed robbery. In the movie, Clyde, along with his

brother Buck, are portrayed as veteran criminals. There are several references in the film of police having already been looking for Clyde, as depicted when the police visited the store clerk in the hospital and showed him an arrest photo of him. Beyond these references, the stories written in newspapers attributed crimes that Bonnie and Clyde actually committed, as well as those that they had no involvement in. The longer Bonnie and Clyde were on the road, the bigger the stories became about their criminal activity and the sensationalism of their story. Another aspect of their time on their road was the development of a routine that defined how they carried out their crimes. Part of the legend of the pair was that they were pleasant in their interaction with the public but were aggressive when involved with authorities. It has been reported that they dressed well and took a lot of care about their appearance, they cared about their public image. The refinement of this grew while they were on the road, as Bonnie fed the media with mailed-in poems, stories, and her own accounts of her story of the crimes, along with favorable pictures of her and Clyde. The result of Bonnie and Clyde's time on the road gave them the opportunity to refine their method of how they carried out their crimes and more importantly allowed them to use their own stories and pictures to define how the news media portrayed them.

For Bonnie and Clyde with the ones they were close to, the road was a one-way street for the both of them. In the case of Bonnie, the finality of that one-way street ended in an ambush in Louisiana but was foreshadowed in the movie in the scene where the Barrow Gang visits Bonnie's mother. Bonnie has a discussion with her mother about how successful they have been and how she and Clyde would settle down after they were finished, and Bonnie's mother replies that she has read about all their activity and states that there's no way that Bonnie could return home and admonishes Clyde that he already knows that there is no turning back from the lives that they are now living. Then in the case of Clyde, his one-way street was foreshadowed when

his brother was mortally wounded then killed, along with the blinding of Blanche. The closest person to Clyde aside from Bonnie was his older brother Buck, and in the film, Clyde looked up to his brother as a veteran criminal. Buck admired Clyde's success and the fact that he had recruited Bonnie to join him and also enjoyed the fame the gang was obtaining through their time and actions on the road, as well as the influence they were having on the stories being printed about them. All of this emboldened Buck and recruited Blanche into being an unwilling accomplice to an active gang member during their time together. At the time that the gang appeared to be having the most success, the gunfight that occurred resulted in Clyde losing Buck and Blanche, and presented Clyde with the reality of his own demise that would soon follow.

Finally, the story of Bonnie and Clyde served as inspiration to those struggling across the country in a time of incredible poverty, where the average public felt powerless against the economic forces surrounding them. Banks in particular were seen as predators of livelihoods with ordinary people losing their homes to repossession, their valuables being sold just to survive because work was unavailable for millions of people. The primary source of information at the time were newspapers that not only provided news reporting but also entertainment. The narrative of the Bonnie and Clyde story was of two ordinary people fighting back against authority to the frustration shared by the general public and provided an outlet for the public to feel a sense of empowerment and courage against what they saw as oppression. This is further explained by the willingness of newspapers to accept accounts written by Bonnie and pictures taken by Clyde for use within their own reporting. In doing so, the news media became complicit in growing the legend of Bonnie and Clyde.

Throughout the film, the road defines and changes aspects of the characters Bonnie and Clyde. This film was one of the first to effectively demonstrate this concept of American car

culture, and helped begin and popularize the new culture of automobility, which would last even to this day.

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/s/ Andrew York

"I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.