

The Bonneville Coxswains

By Ben Eichelberger

Betsy. Leroy. Blackjack. Dirty Ghost. Purple Haze. White Horse. Enterprise. Big Bertha. Liquid Onyx. Drug Runner. Greenzilla. 8-Ball.

These labels are all the names of boats. Just like any seaman would bestow a title upon his vessel, so have these monikers been given to different crafts by their owners. Sailors have been doing it for hundreds of years, and the tradition continues today. Names are always given to large watercraft, seemingly out of a need to add character and personification to a faithful machine. A captain or crew member needs a name to call his vehicle in times of trouble and in instances of praise, so a boat needs a fitting title in order for a person to properly curse at it or coax it along. Naming a vessel also makes reference easier; instead of saying, “My great grandmother died on the big ocean liner that sank in 1912,” we have the luxury of being able to relate, “My great grandmother died on the Titanic.”

But the boats whose names I mentioned above aren't boats in the traditional sense. You won't find an Evinrude motor, a set of oars, or even a mast and sail on any of them. They don't float on the water or carve across a deep expanse of endless blue. No, these stylish cruisers would sink to the bottom of any river, lake, or ocean in which you placed them. They are called boats, but only with the same critical affection that they are christened with pet names. In reality, these 'land yachts' are Pontiac Bonneville family sedans.

In the automotive world there are many reasons why a car can be considered a 'boat', and none of them have to do with the ability to go for a swim. Usually a boat-like automobile is larger than most other sedans on the road, with a long hood, ungainly handling ability, poor braking response, and heavy weight. Passengers seeking a smooth ride typically like traveling in these types of vehicles because they tend to be roomy and comfortable, with a soft, forgiving suspension system. Often such a 'boat' will be a well-suited cruising car for extended trips on the open highway, but tend to pale in comparison to a sporty 2-door coupe on a winding country road. Generally speaking, they are vehicles in which your 80-year-old grandparents might be seen driving down to Florida for the winter. And in terms of being a characteristic automotive 'boat', the Bonneville is guilty on all counts.

Most people view Pontiac's former flagship sedan as nothing special. The Bonneville, which ended its 48 year production run with the 2005 model, is mechanically identical to the Buick LeSabre and Oldsmobile Eighty-Eight, which are often regarded as average, run-of-the-mill vehicles in the General Motors product line. The median age for a Bonneville owner is around 50, and though GM marketed sporty, powerful versions of the car to “upper-middle-income drivers with a youthful outlook,” it is often seen as the Pontiac for an older crowd. When sitting in a high school class, daydreaming of a first set of wheels, most 16-year-olds don't fantasize about owning a 4 door 'grandma car.' On the other hand, parents of 16-year-old high schoolers certainly feel that such a modest, common vehicle is the key to keeping a young driver out of trouble. Insurance companies echo this sentiment, with annual coverage premiums for these big, lumbering sedans often costing hundreds less than more nimble cars. The idea is that kids aren't likely to raise hell in a hulking 4-door piece of Detroit iron.

The same applies to all drivers, for that matter. When it comes to automotive performance, sedans aren't generally at the top of the heap. Speed and agility are synonymous with Ferrari, Porsche, and other exotic makes; even in the world of 4-door machines there are brands such as Mercedes, BMW, Audi, and Lexus that are associated with power, responsiveness, and elegance. The fact of the matter is that bland, average-priced, front wheel

drive American cars simply aren't the stuff of dreams. Nobody wants to soup up their family vehicle for a trip to the local drag strip, or take off on a high speed ride through a twisty mountain route. Unless, of course, you're a member of the Bonneville Club.

What started off in January 2002 as a simple website devoted to a common GM car has turned into a thriving online community of almost 6,000 members in just over four years. BonnevilleClub.com was the vision of Minnesota resident Jeff Keacher, who, despite the car's widespread ownership, noticed "a dearth of websites focusing on the Bonneville." In response he founded the Bonneville Club internet forums, a place for enthusiasts to swap technical information, share pictures of their cars, buy and sell auto parts, discuss issues related to Bonneville's, and even converse about things unrelated to automobiles. There have never been any fees or dues associated with the club, and membership is as easy as choosing a user name and password and inputting a small bit of personal information. Owning a Bonneville is not even a requirement to join; one of the three club administrators currently drives an Oldsmobile, and there are at least two members who drive Fords exclusively.

Keacher's original desire was to keep things simple, clean, and family-oriented, and the website has successfully maintained this standard while undergoing enormous growth. Bill Wren, one of the site's current administrators, was member number 144 when he joined the club in August of 2002. Keacher saw ambition and responsibility in Wren's character, and promoted him to administrator of the website's 'Tech Info' section. "Shortly thereafter," remembers Wren, "I got promoted to full administrator of the club. Ever since then I've become somewhat of a mouthpiece of the managing staff, though decisions are always made with equal input from the other two admins. And ultimately, Jeff has the final say in everything."

In addition to Wren, club administrators Don Blackwell, Jr. and Jim Wallace make every effort to keep objectionable content off the web pages of the Bonneville Club. To assist in their efforts the administrators have bestowed the title of 'moderator' on deserving club members, whose role is to monitor the tone and content of conversations in an effort to keep language appropriate and volatile tempers suppressed. Other titles have been doled out as well; the rank of 'resident gearhead' was established to denote club members who excel in mechanical troubleshooting and maintenance. "We established the gearheads in an effort to ease some of the administrators' work load," confesses Wren. "At the time, Don and I were the only two admins, and we were way too busy trying to manage the website and answer technical questions at the same time. Something had to give, and we came up with the idea of a gearhead rank. To my knowledge, we're the only forum that has specifically designated technical experts for reliable troubleshooting."

With a bevy of staff, all of whom fulfill their duties without compensation, the Bonneville Club continues to accommodate its increasing membership. There is a wealth of content to sift through on the website, and though the work of addressing mechanical problems and keeping the peace is tedious, the end result is a marvelously informative collection of all things Bonneville. As a proud owner of a 1997 Bonneville and club member since June 2004, I have come to appreciate the hard work that goes into making the website successful and have personally benefited many times from the contributions of various members. When part of my car's right headlight unexpectedly fell off, I knew which replacement part to order within 10 minutes of asking for help. In an instance where I had trouble figuring out why my car struggled driving up hills on the interstate, I was able to track down a solution with the help of other members who were having the same problem. When I experienced a chronic engine coolant leak

common to Bonneville powerplants, I was told exactly why the problem occurred and how to fix it. If anything goes awry on my vehicle, at nearly any time of the day or night, chances are I can find an answer on the Bonneville Club website.

“The major factor to which I attribute the success of these forums is the gearheads,” states Wren. “People generally join this website because they have a mechanical problem with their car. They post a question about this or that, and they usually get a response within the day. Our gearheads are good enough that they can diagnose many problems quickly and accurately, and the result is an extremely satisfied new member. People tend to surf back to the site after having such success asking a question, and they end up hanging around on a long term basis. Our increasing membership is the direct result of an incredible staff of gearheads.”

And people do hang around Bonneville Club. It isn't just about getting solutions to problems, though; there is a 'Lounge' forum where any and all random topics can be discussed. At any given time you can find jokes, interesting web links, and good-natured debate between the men and women club members. The 'Audio' forum is dedicated to improving the stereo system of the Bonneville, and is a good place to find information on CD players, speakers, and amplifiers. If washing and waxing your car is the goal, 'Detailing and Appearance' is the place to discuss the best methods for getting the vehicle clean. There is even a handy 'Gatherings' forum, where club members frequently arrange to meet up around the United States and hang out together.

But for me and many other Bonneville owners, the highlight of continued participation at BonnevilleClub.com is the 'Performance and Brainstorming' forum. Within the club community there exists a large contingent of members who love to go fast, and many have taken their 'boats' to quarter mile drag strips across the country. Muscle car or not, these members seem to have it in their blood to improve the power and quickness of whatever it is they're driving, with a few modifying their sedans to the point of being as powerful as Chevrolet Corvettes. On any given day you can visit the website and find a new theory for improving power, tips for being a better drag racer, or a design for a performance-enhancing part. People spend thousands of dollars on their engines, transmissions, and suspension systems, effectively transforming their Bonneville's into something that would give many imported German cars a run for their money. Acceleration, top speed, handling, and braking are upgraded on many cars, creating an automobile that often performs much better than the typical expectations of the general public. Many members pride themselves on the extent of their modifications, and derive much pleasure from being able to share valuable information in an open forum. Through the collective efforts of many Bonneville owners, reliable methods have been developed for safely making these vehicles perform better than when they left the manufacturing plant.

“When I first joined this club, nobody had any idea about what we were doing,” chuckles Wren. “It was like walking through a minefield at midnight during a thunderstorm. But we gradually learned from each other's successes and failures. It's a great challenge to improve on such a simple motor that's already so damn good.” It's the challenge that keeps the Bonneville Club interesting and compels us to push the limits of our machines. The satisfaction is in every small victory and every ounce of speed and agility that is gained through innovation and fearless experimentation.

Still, there is the obvious question: Why? Having run through the laundry list of the Bonneville Club's highlights, do we really know why people gladly participate in a community devoted to discontinued sedans, where names like Stubborn Wench, Old Ironsides, and

Grandma's Revenge are imparted upon these 'boats'? To be sure, it is highly beneficial to provide a technical forum for those who wish to work on their own vehicles or know the cause behind a problem, but why do people keep coming back? The enormous success of the 'gearheads' is certainly a factor, but is there something more going on under the surface? Why do people visit an automotive club to tell jokes and share family stories, and why do some users log on enough throughout the workday that they are reprimanded by their employers? Even while writing these words, I can scarcely keep myself from checking the website every 15 minutes to see if any new conversation topics have started, or if any of my thoughts and questions have been addressed by other members. For some, perhaps even myself, participation in the Bonneville Club borders on addiction, looking for every chance throughout the day to check the forums for new information, entertainment, and playful banter. Is this all due to some attraction to the Bonneville as a machine, or does the answer transcend the identity of the organization as a Bonneville Club?

To understand half of the puzzle, you must first realize the nature of internet forum interaction. The very structure of the forum system lends itself to ceaseless checking and rechecking of the message boards. I liken it to having a conversation with a group of people, but having to wait minutes, hours, or even days for a response from your counterparts. It is as if you turn to a friend and ask him a question, but it takes the sound of your voice five minutes to reach his ears. When he finally hears your question and responds, you have been sitting, patiently waiting for him to answer for the entire five minute duration. You really wanted to know the answer to the question so you didn't get up and leave; you just sat and waited to hear what he had to say. In the same way, forum interaction is a series of questions or statements that often require a time delay for the responder to type his or her message. Often you want to know what the next interchange in the conversation will be, so you constantly log on to see if anybody has posted a reply in your conversation. You want to know what is being said, so you don't abandon the website for a day; you keep checking the message boards until someone has taken part in your topic. It is this aspect of online communication that explains the frequency of many users' visits.

But why would a person even bother interacting on the Bonneville Club to begin with? Aside from the need for troubleshooting, what can explain the people who stick around to participate in the 'Lounge,' or take the time to arrange a Bonneville meet in the 'Gatherings' section? Perhaps we can extract insight from a personal example. Mike Cooney, a 22-year-old engineering student from Philadelphia, has been a participant on the website for over three years. He has done extensive modifications to the body of his car, as well as in-depth motor and handling upgrades, and he relates how he came to own his Bonneville and become a member of the club.

"It was my mom's car, and I used to borrow it a lot in high school. When my mom went to buy another car, she was planning on trading it in. But I kind of grew attached to the car. It was pretty quick, black on black, leather, and it fit my BMX bike in the trunk without having to take it apart. So, my mom proposed I buy the car. I did, and I think I paid her about \$2,000 or so. Pretty cheap.

"I found the club back in '02 from searching Yahoo. There weren't very many members and not a whole lot going on, so I didn't sign up until I got into college. I became a member the 23rd of February 2003. I liked going to the Performance section and the 1992-1999 maintenance forum. Every once in a while there would be something pretty interesting in the Performance section. All that stuff really got me hooked on performance. The idea that I could tinker with

my family car and make it reasonably fast became more and more realistic as time went on thanks to [Bonneville Club].”

Mike has a passion for his car that is unmatched by most other members, and he possesses a wealth of technical knowledge that can only come from a true love for his hobby. However, it would seem that his fondness for the Bonneville was not a preexisting condition; rather, it came as a result of his membership in the club. Before there was much activity on the website, Mike had little interest in becoming a member, and seemingly little interest in working on his automobile. Yet when fascinating, inspiring topics began showing up in the ‘Performance’ forum, he became motivated to start dreaming big. Mike now has a unique, one-of-a-kind Bonneville that is highly respected among club members because of its appearance and drivability.

Was Mike spurred on by the sheer desire to outdo the other club members who were posting in the ‘Performance’ forum? Perhaps. But I believe a larger part of him was enamored with the sense of community that started to blossom within the Bonneville Club. He may have thought highly of his car before reading about the exploits of different club members in the quest for performance, but he truly fell in love with it when he witnessed the camaraderie developing in the message forums. There may have been a part of him that wanted to work on an engine, but there was also a part of him that simply wanted to belong to a community of friendly people who were trying to have fun with their vehicles.

Bill Wren admits to much the same kind of scenario. In reference to the motor that powers the Bonneville, he discloses that “it was the forums that made me fall in love with the 3800 V6.” His passion for the car was also not ignited until being exposed to the world of Bonneville owners. Similarly, I saw my car as nothing more than a middle-of-the-road sedan until I joined the club, at which time I realized the Bonneville Club is a unique community. I saw people joking with each other, interacting like old friends, sharing ideas about engine performance, and even getting together to share workspace and turn a few wrenches. To become a part of that community, I simply took the plunge and started doing what everyone else was doing. I had always thought it would be fun to learn the workings of a car, and my eagerness to learn allowed me to be absorbed in the fabric of the Bonneville Club. Almost two years and many hundreds of dollars later, I have a hobby that keeps me looking for ways to get a little more excitement out of my daily drive. The car is an average Bonneville to most, but my pride comes from the fact that I have changed a common vehicle into something that is distinctly my own. It is unique because of the sweat I have invested in it, and more energy and resources will surely be diverted to the car in the future. This Bonneville is the one that I own, and I have found reason to care just a little more about it through the passion and amity of the club community.

Bonneville Club is an environment that is infectious, with genuine people who appreciate each other and refuse to hide behind the anonymity that the internet allows. The simple fact is that early on, Jeff Keacher set a precedent that his club was going to maintain a respectful, straight-shooting atmosphere between members. The right people crossed paths, and Keacher handed the maintenance of the site to an outstanding crew of administrators, moderators, and gearheads. Though the lineup has changed slightly over the months and years, these are the people who have made the Bonneville Club community the thriving, addictive place it is today. The car itself is not key to the dynamic of this club; in fact, with the same people in the same positions, I’m sure the Bonneville Club could successfully survive as the Chia Pet Club. When people who do not own a Bonneville join the website and become fully participating members,

it's a sign that something special is going on. Certainly I have succumbed to its charm, but it is because I truly enjoy the interaction and opinions of the people who comprise the club. This community has surpassed the realm of being merely an enthusiasts' gathering spot; it is a cyber home for many who have discovered belonging as the coxswain of a 'boat.'