

SAW-HORSE JUSTICE

By John S. Halbert

(Saw-Horse: "A crossbar supported by a pair of "A"- shaped legs at both ends, used to mount boards or other objects while they are being sawed.")

Late July, 1972:

It was sunny, hot and humid that mid-summer morning, as I drove along on a two-lane northern Mississippi highway toward Memphis. In a hurry to attend an early-afternoon meeting, I was, as usual, cutting it close. My watch said it was nearly noon, and with many miles yet to go, I came up behind a long, slow-moving line of dump trucks and construction machinery. Mile after exasperating mile, the snaking procession crawled along on the narrow road while I seethed. Finally, I saw my chance and floorboarded the accelerator pedal. In a flash my blue Chevy zipped out into the opposite lane and zoomed past the trucks and road graders.

When my streaking station wagon finally shot into the clear, I eased off the gas and settled back to the posted speed limit.

All at once, there came a loud, shrill sound A siren! Looking in the rear-view mirror, I gaped in dismay at the flashing red and blue lights of a Mississippi Highway Patrol car that was crowding my rear bumper. A gesturing officer wearing a "drill-instructor's" hat motioned me over. At the side of the road, the grim-faced, middle-aged trooper, whose name-tag identified him as "A.M. Moving ," whipped off his metal-rimmed sunglasses and looked me up and down with a sneer of contempt. "What's the big idea?" he demanded. "I clocked you at seventy-one miles an hour back there. Don't you know there's a sixty-five speed limit along here?"

"W---well . . . there were a lot of trucks . . . " I stammered lamely, but Officer Moving wasn't listening to any explanations.

"Follow me!" the trooper called back over his shoulder, as he strode to his car. "You're going to court *right now!*" he scowled, grabbing the door handle of his patrol car.

In a cloud of dust the powerful black-and-white police cruiser swept around me. With shaking fingers, I fumbled for my keys, started the engine, and swung onto the highway behind the officer's vehicle.

Two minutes later, the police car turned off the pavement and pulled up to a ramshackle white frame building set about fifty yards off the highway, at the edge of some woods. It appeared the structure had until recently been a country grocery store and gas station. A crudely-lettered sign that read, '*HIGHWAY COURT*' was nailed above the black-framed screen door. I parked the Chevrolet and followed the trooper inside.

". . . got another one for you---!" Moving called out to no one in particular, as there was no one else in sight. A second later, however, a grossly overweight, ruddy-faced individual with thinning, sandy-colored hair brushed aside a dingy muslin curtain at the rear and shuffled through a door opening. He spotted the officer and grinned, revealing a couple of missing front

teeth. As he hitched up the suspenders of his overalls over his hairy shoulders, I could see he was also missing his shirt.

My puzzlement as to who he might be was answered when the trooper again spoke. "Nabbed this guy, judge! Nailed him going seventy-one just this side of the highway project!" I distinctly saw him gravely wink at the man, who momentarily narrowed his eyes in return at the officer.

"All right, follow me!" the bare-shouldered man growled. I turned and fell in behind him; the trooper took up the rear. "In there!" We turned and entered a disorderly room with a half-dozen rickety chairs scattered about.

"Is this the courtroom?" I wondered.

The fellow in the overalls motioned for me to stand in front of a cluttered pile of planks. An old door, minus the handle and hinges, was laid across a pair of battered carpenter's saw-horses at one end of the room. With a start, I realized that this conglomeration was the judge's bench! I was facing trial in a saw-horse courtroom! Rubbing his stubbly chin, the Fat Shirtless One settled heavily into a squawking ladder-backed chair.

Trooper Moving handed him a piece of paper that he glanced over, then he looked up at me. "You're charged with driving your vehicle seventy-one miles an hour in a sixty-five speed zone. How do you plead?"

All at once, I had a prickly feeling. Of course! Why hadn't I understood it before? *All this was a setup!* The slow-moving trucks and road-building machines had been deliberately creeping along in order to cause me to speed up to get around them---so Officer Moving could swoop down, catch me, and drag me off to this so-called "Highway Court!" Was I now in the clutches of a gang of roadside racketeers who could very well be desperate, dangerous men? With a chill of alarm, a horrific thought struck me: *No one except these two men know I am here!* Was there a secret jail nearby? A torture chamber? Shallow graves? I had read stories about places like this.

"I SAID, HOW DO YOU PLEAD?" The hairy, florid-faced man, looking annoyed, jolted me out of my reverie.

"Ah, guilty, I guess."

The official's beady eyes focused on me.

"But couldn't the road graders and trucks try to stay out of the way of cars driving through?" I knew I was pressing my luck, but went on, anyway. "Maybe if they'd pull off to the side of the road every now and then, people wouldn't have to drive so fast to get around them---"

The judge sucked in his breath; his face turned beet-red. There now seemed no way for me to beat this rap. For what seemed an eternity, the pudgy man riveted his eyes on me while he mulled over my disrespectful outburst. He shot a glance at Trooper Moving, who was glowering at me; a thunderous expression on his face. The magistrate whacked his wooden gavel down onto the makeshift bench so hard I thought he had cracked it. The saw-horses scooted a couple of inches sideways on the dusty floor.

"Fifty Dollars Fine!" .

"I don't have that much cash on me---do you take checks . . .?"

To my surprise and relief, the official nodded. I pulled out my checkbook, scratched the amount onto the draft and handed it to him. He snatched the paper from me and scrutinized it. Then, with a beefy hand he stuffed the check past several folds of flab down into an inside pocket of his overalls.

He slammed his gavel once more onto the horizontal door. "Dismissed!"

I wanted out of there before he changed his mind! In haste, I re-traced my steps to the outside, jumped into the Chevrolet and in a hurry started the engine. As I drove away from the

creepy "courthouse," I saw, in my mirror, the officer and the "judge" standing outside the weatherbeaten building, both men with hands on hips, glaring at my departing car.

I turned back onto the highway and resumed my interrupted journey toward Memphis. I had gone only about a mile when I saw---headed toward me, this time---the same slow procession of trucks and construction vehicles that had been my nemesis an hour earlier, followed by yet another line of frustrated-looking drivers. Looking at my rear-view mirror, I watched the leading car pull out into the other lane to pass the trucks. A minute later, when I again glanced at the mirror---yes, there they were, far back in the distance---the flashing red-and-blue lights of a police car

Officer Moving was making another arrest.