# Ethnography of the WICKED STANGS Mustang Car Club

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### Introduction

In 2003, the Bureau of Transportation reported that an estimated 204 million automobiles were owned and operated by 191 million American drivers. Most of these drivers probably view their cars as more function than form, using it to get to and from work or to transport their children around town, while others view their cars as more form than function, and dote upon their automobile as if it were a newborn child. Most people, young or old, enjoy a hobby; some hobbies are free, while others are relatively expensive. Some people take on a certain hobby as a child while others discover theirs as adults. Some hobbies consume a very little amount of time and effort, while others envelope the person's entire life. The "Wicked Stangs" Mustang Car Club is a perfect example of a hobby that can at times become expensive, obsessive but all the while they keeps the members as close as family. This paper discusses many aspects of a club that shares a deep passion for cars (especially Ford Mustangs) and functions as a tightly knit family. First, I will explain how I selected this cultural scene, while describing my informants and how they became involved in the scene. Next, I will describe four activities I observed while interacting with my guide and the Wicked Stangs. I obtained my information through participant-observation and by conducting personal interviews.

# Scene and guide selection

I was in search of a scene to study and decided to brainstorm with my cousin, Elena. While I paced around her living room, I noticed a trophy with a black marble "Saleen Car Show" trophy next to a solid glass "1<sup>st</sup> Place" trophy on her kitchen counter. Elena explained that her husband Gary had won those and other awards at car shows for his Performance Red 2002 Ford Mustang Cobra. I had always known that he was a member of a club called the "Wicked Stangs," but I just assumed that he got together

with a few other guys every week and played with their cars. Elena assured me that it was much more complicated than that.

We heard the throaty roar of the Cobra as Gary pulled around the corner on the street leading into their apartment complex. After giving him a little time to unwind after work, I started to ask him questions.

Gary, like many other members of the Wicked Stangs, served in the United States Military as a Navy Operations Specialist and now works as a Senior Systems Analyst. He is a little less than six feet tall with dark features, and can often be seen wearing a black racing jacket with a Ford Cobra patch on the front. His Cobra really is his child. He keeps the inside clean and the outside sparkling. About three years ago while driving past the Mission Valley In-N-Out parking lot, Gary noticed several Mustangs with their hoods propped open parked in the lot with a crowd of men gathered around. He pulled in to check it out. He thought the guys were cool and he liked their cars, so he started attending monthly meetings with the San Diego chapter of the Wicked Stangs.

# How the Wicked Stangs came to be

In 1998, soon-to-be Wicked Stangs founder Emilio Valdez, a young member of the Navy who had recently transferred to San Diego, heard about a street named Mira Mesa Boulevard where people got together to show off and race their cars. He headed to the race and met future co-founder, Pha Ly:

Me and Pha had the exact same car...same model, same year, same color, everything. Except, his had *mods* and mine was totally *stock*. We'd race each other all the time. We'd both get up to the line, rev our engines, then I would just smoke him every time. He was cool about it though. He'd come over and ask me what I had under the hood. He thought I had *Nos* or something. I would tell him, 'Nothing man, it's all stock.' Then, he'd go home and tweak stuff around the engine, and he'd come back on Friday night and we'd do it all over again. He was cool about it though. We were tight after that, ya know?

Emilio and Pha started *cruising* together and heard about an annual car show, Fabulous Fords Forever, held at Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park, California. On the way home from the car show, Emilio attempted to race a yellow and a silver Mustang, both of which *pulled* him. The four cars pulled over and Emilio and Pha became introduced to future co-founder Juan De Leon and Wes. Soon the four became inseparable. On November 28, 1998 as they sat outside of a restaurant looking out at their cars, someone suggested they start a club. The others thought it sounded like a great idea, so they started throwing out names. Juan kept saying "Wicked... Wicked something, something Wicked..." He pulled out an old, tattered high school sketch of a mustang with the word "Wicked" written across the top. Emilio's girlfriend, Monica, peered over his shoulder and suggested that they call their club the "Wicked Stangs."

The next day, Pha shows up with these stickers for our cars, including a long banner for the front windshield. The words were written in these ghetto block letters, but we still thought it was cool back then. So we all slapped them on our cars and started going everywhere together. If someone was hungry, we'd all jump in our cars and go get something to eat. We'd make sure to find four spots right next to each other in the parking lot, then we'd back in so that everyone could see our banners side-by- side. It was tight. Random people would ask if we were part of a club. They'd say 'How do we join?' then we'd say, 'You're in!' It was that simple at first. They would ask and then boom! We'd slap a sticker on their car.

# **Today's Wicked Stang**

Welcoming members into the club was so informal at first that anybody who inquired was given a sticker and told where to go for meetings. The club rapidly expanded, to the point where it became unmanageable. They had to start turning people away, and would even tell unwanted members that the club was dissolving. Once they got to a reasonable number, they realized that they needed more structure. It was obvious that the club had too many facets for three co-founders to handle on their own, so the

executive board was established, bylaws were drawn up, and a website was created (wickedstangs.com.) The website enables members from all over the country to keep in touch and keep on top of what's happening in the club. There is a forum for discussion, pictures of member's cars, links to the other chapter websites, and more. E-mails are sent out to alert people of upcoming events. Today there are eighteen paying members and ten to fifteen members who float in and out.

New members who are interested in joining the Wicked Stangs must fill out an application and then endure a probationary period. The probationary period lasts for three months where the prospective member has to attend three club meetings and two club events. At the end of the three months, the member pays the \$50 club dues and is welcomed into the club. The Board members decided to have a probationary period to make sure people were serious about joining:

Before we implemented the probationary period, people would join the club, slap a sticker on their car and then we'd never see them again. A little while later we'd hear that some Wicked Stangs were out doing donuts in front of cops or getting into trouble. That brought our club down. Now we can weed out the bad guys and make sure they're serious about joining.

Most of the members are, or were, involved in the military. Because servicemen can be moved around the country or can be deployed at any minute, especially in this day in age, the executive board wished to maintain some structure in the club, but still keep it fun:

A lot of our members are in the Marines or in the Navy. They're away from home, away from their families, sometimes all they have is their car. We are like a family, not an obligation. We want to keep some structure, but not to the point where it's no longer fun. We are like family; everyone is welcome. Events are family friendly. We've had several Wicked Stangs Christmas' and other barbeques.

The San Diego Chapter of the Wicked Stangs was the first to start up. When Juan moved to Texas he started a club there also. Now there are chapters in Texas, North Carolina, Ohio, Florida, Michigan, and northern California and in East San Diego. They are hoping

to go international one day, especially since club members are deployed all over the world. Having a Wicked Stangs chapter close to military bases could help servicemen maintain ties with friends, reduce homesickness, and keep their morale high.

# The Executive Board Meeting

The San Diego Chapter Executive Board is made up of club presidents Emilio and Pha, and Board members Gary, Mark, Chris and Dave. They, along with their girlfriends or wives, meet once a month at "On the Border" in Mission Valley to discuss club grievances or issues, plan for future events, and discuss changes that could improve the club. The meeting is held one to two weeks before the larger club meeting, which is held on the first Wednesday of every month. The board meeting is very relaxed and casual as they are seated at a large ten-person table. Initial conversation ranges from topics such as what they had done that day, work, family, or how their cars are doing. Once the meeting began, the Board members recapped the previous months meetings and made Emilio aware of the main issues. One main issue was the banner that members are required to put on the front windshield of their cars. California law prohibits anything being placed on the front windshield that can obstruct one's view of the road. Many members of the club have recently been pulled over and been cited for having the banner that supposedly blocks their view. Although the members disagree that the banner is distracting, they Board decided to change the bylaws so that members would no longer be required to put the banner on the car. According to Board member, Dave:

There has to be some representation of the club on the car, but it is against the law to obstruct one's view. We will modify the bylaws to follow the laws of the state, but we will encourage people to display the banner. I personally will display my banner until I get a ticket.

# **Monthly Club Meeting**

There is no gavel or call to order to start the club meetings, which are held in the Mission Valley In-N-Out parking lot. Meetings are held in that particular lot because it is relatively empty in the evenings and there are enough spaces to accommodate large group meetings. People begin to filter into the parking lot around 7pm. They park their cars by pulling in backwards into the spaces. Some of them pop their hoods and others walk back and forth between the cars to check out the engines. The guys caught up with whoever they had not seen in a while, joked around with their friends, and made fun of each other. Their banter was reminiscent of that which takes place between fraternity brothers. At around 7:30pm, board members Mark and Dave told everyone to crowd around because the meeting was about to start. Everyone stands in a loose circle in front of the cars, nobody sits down. Like children playing in the street, someone yells "Car!" if a car is attempting to drive through the parking lot and the meeting pauses while everyone makes room for the car to pass through. Dave's girlfriend, Rachel, is the unofficial secretary. She takes minutes to keep track of what was discussed so that the notes can be posted online for people who were unable to attend the meeting. She was deemed "secretary" because she "has the nicest handwriting." Pha has the only "real" club position; he is the treasurer of the club. Mark collects dues and gives them to Pha, who puts them into the Wicked Stangs account at a bank. There is no president or vice-president. The Board members and co-founders share the presidential responsibilities.

At May's meeting, there were sixteen people present, including one founder (Pha), three board members (Mark, Dave, and Chris...Gary was at work), two women members, three wives, five regular members, and two prospective new members. Of the eleven men at this months meeting, seven were or still are members of the United States

Military. Within the club there are three mechanics who own their own car shops and are more than willing to fix other club member's cars. Members remarked that money was definitely an issue, as those who did have it tended to spend it on their cars, while those who claimed to not have it (maybe to avoid paying dues) still showed up to meetings from time to time with hundreds of dollars worth of modifications added to their car.

Mark started by sending around a sign-in sheet and by welcoming new members to the club. I did notice that he did not introduce the members to everyone else, but by the end of the meeting, most of the old members had at least introduced themselves to the new guys. Then, Mark recapped what was discussed during April's meeting, including the discussion about the banner and logo. He explained that at May's board meeting, they decided to change the bylaws to mirror California driving laws. Dave also demonstrated the new logo that will be printed on new, smaller banners and stickers. He explained that they are also working on creating business cards to hand out to prospective members and vendors they meet at car shows, developing a new application, and designing t-shirts and hats in order for members to be more uniform when they are at club events, car shows, or San Diego Car Club events.

Dave discussed the upcoming May and June events, most of which include car shows being sponsored in various locations around San Diego, ranging from Chula Vista to Ramona. The Board members decided to require that people who are interested in going to the events sign-up ahead of time to make sure that there are enough people to make the trip worthwhile. Also, if the event costs an entrance fee, members will be required to pay up front. The meeting was very entertaining. It was an hour long due to the amount of interruptions that occurred because the members could not stop making

side comments to each other. Once all the events were discussed, Dave asked for any suggestions, comments, or questions. One girlfriend spoke up and informed the club that her boyfriend, a paying member and active Marine, was leaving for Iraq in three weeks. The board members decided that they would hold a "going away" party for the departing member at Dave and Buster's restaurant and adult arcade next weekend. With no more questions being raised, the board members said "Ok, meeting's over," and everyone began to say their goodbyes.

# **Dyno Tuning** (pictures on page 19)

Very early on a Saturday morning, Gary and I arrived in the Starbucks parking lot on Mira Mesa Boulevard to meet Emilio before we started on what would turn out to be a very long day. We were going to Superior Automotive in Anaheim, California to put Gary and Emilio's cars on *the Dyno*. Car fanatics from all over Southern California head out to Superior Automotive and wait for hours to get their car tuned on the Dyno, in order to maximize how much torque and horsepower their cars are capable of *putting out*. Emilio wanted to be there early to ensure a turn. As we tried to keep up with Emilio, Gary explained what I learned to be a common feeling among other male car lovers:

If I weren't married today, and I didn't have a serious girlfriend, I would probably throw all of my money and all of my time into my car. I would add so many modifications. But now, I have to consider Elena, think about mortgages, putting away money for our future kids, and other stuff. I have to be practical. I can't spend money on my car without thinking about it first. That's just how it is now, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

We slowly pulled into the driveway of the garage (slowly to avoid scratching the car body, as I noticed all of the drivers doing) and saw about ten other cars waiting their turn. But Emilio had called the owner ahead of time and made arrangement to get his car on

the Dyno early, along with Gary's car. We still had to wait a couple of hours though because there were three cars ahead of theirs.

The ten or so cars (more drove in behind us) that were waiting for a chance to get on the Dyno had pulled backwards into the parking spots, just like Emilio and the other founders had done in 1998. This makes it easy for people to crowd around the front of the car and check out what's under the hood. Typically, the guys will open their hoods, huddle around the cars and look at each other's engines. Five or six guys will crowd around, ask the owner what kind of modifications he has made, make comments about how much they like it, what they have done to their car that is similar, or what they have seen other people do. Also, they tell the other guys what kinds of problems they're having and other people will give them advice.

I approached my first non-Wicked Stangs informant and inquired about his car. He informed me that he was part of the International Mustang Bullitt Owners Club, which is an online forum where Bullitt owners can post pictures and talk about their cars, and *Bench Race*. I forgot his name and thought it would be rude to ask again, but as I continued to speak to him about how he got involved in car clubs, I noticed that he had strong feelings about the people with whom he interacted. He described his hobby as being a *Status culture* with "powerful cars for powerless men who are in a constant struggle to outperform."

With this, he popped open the hood of his true blue 2001 Bullitt and the other car lovers flocked over. They checked out his engine:

<sup>--</sup> What kind of gears do you have?

<sup>--4-10&#</sup>x27;s.

<sup>--</sup>Oh, I have 3-73's.

<sup>--</sup>Yeah, I should've gotten 3-73's.

He turned to me and said, "See? It's all about who has the most knowledge. Everyone wants to figure out what they can do to go faster." Then he lit a cigarette and made his way to talk shop with the rest of the guys.

Finally it was Gary's turn to put his car on the Dyno. Emilio's car was hooked in for less than an hour and *pulled* 452-*rwhp*/ 494 *rwtq*. Gary was strapped down to the Dyno and after a few runs he pulled 316-rwhp/ 316 rwtq:

The Dyno tells you the rear wheel horsepower. It tells you how much horsepower and torque the engine is putting out to the rear wheels. The higher the number, the better. A maximum goal? Probably 500. But 460 or 470 is nice.

The engine and its output were observed as being the center of conversation. After each run on the Dyno, four or five guys would run in, crowd around Gary and ask "what'd you put down on your first pull?"

# **Friday Night Races**

As the number of deaths due to illegal street racing steadily increased, the San Diego Police Department were forced to come up with an alternative for teens and young adults. They created "racelegal.com" which sponsors legal street racing in the parking lot of Qualcomm Stadium once a month, as an outlet for kids and to discourage illegal street races on our crowded streets. This two-year old effort has found a 99% decrease in "organized illegal street racing activity" and is strongly supported by the Wicked Stangs who are adamant that their members do not participate in illegal racing.<sup>2</sup>

I met Gary in the "spectators" parking section at the races during the April racelegal event. It was approaching seven o'clock in the evening. Sunlight was beginning to fade, stadium lights flickered, and racers prepared their cars in the *pit*. As we walked over to the pit area where some club members were working on their cars, Gary informed me that he was not going to race because he had not found time to buy new racing *slicks*.

He had, however, gotten me a ride in the fastest car at the races: a completely modified 1993 blue Ford Mustang LX Notchback. I met Doug, the owner of the fast car, and noticed that he was a man in his early thirties. He wore a light blue racing jacket, jeans and tennis shoes and immediately asked me if I'd signed the waiver. The waiver stated that I would not sue the driver or racelegal should I be injured while riding in the vehicle. I was given a yellow wrist bad to show to the operators at the line when we pulled up to race. I was pretty nervous about getting in the car with Doug. We had never met before, and Gary had boasted that he could reach over 100 *mph* in about six seconds. That just seemed awfully fast. But it was too late to back out. Club members were jealous that I was allowed to have a ride considering Gary was the only other person who had ever ridden in his car. Many offered to take my place if I was "too scared." I did not want to seem like a chicken, and I figured I would never get another chance to ride in such a fast car so I asked Gary to hand me a helmet.

Doug started to work on cars as a teenager. He purchased a car (the one that intimidates every driver on the track) and became obsessed with adding modifications. He wanted to have a fast car that no one could beat. Even now when people refuse to race him, he still wants to improve his car and make it better, cleaner, faster. Doug met his wife at a racetrack, and like Gary, he became limited in how many modifications he could make to his car. Now that they have a child, she asks that he restrict his racing to three or four runs per race because it is so dangerous. Before sliding into the passenger seat, I looked around the inside of his car. He had a *roll cage*, a Nos lever and Nos regulator, and everything was strapped in place. He takes off with so much velocity that if something is not strapped down, it would probably fly through the windshield. Doug strapped me into the passenger seat of his car by two shoulder straps and two leg straps.

He also had me wear a helmet, a precaution required of all drivers and passengers who race at the stadium. Doug and his car are so famous among local drivers that he is able to bypass the line of revving cars and cut to the front of the line. His wife called three times while he prepared me for the run and drove to the starting line to remind him that he needed to go home soon:

She doesn't mind that I race, after all, that is how we met. But we have a baby girl now, so she gets a little freaked out that something's gonna happen to me while I'm doing something trivial like racing on a little stretch of track. My car is just so fast, it scares her. If she wanted me to quit racing, I might. But she knows I love it too much to stop. Instead, we compromise. I race a little, I call and keep her updated, and then I come home.

Only two more pairs of cars were ahead of us in line when Doug realized that the car in front of him belonged to his friend, a paraplegic who had the gas petal and brake moved up toward the dashboard so he could continue racing. As Doug's friend watched us pull up next to him on the line, a toothy grin crossed his face and he mouthed, "You're about to lose." Doug let out a hearty laugh and blew some Nos in a thin white stream out of the hood. We got to the line and I was told that I "better not pee on the seats." I watched the lights on *the tree* change from the top yellow light, to the middle yellow light, to green. Doug pushed the Nos lever in and we took off. The front of the car lifted off the ground and we were propelled forward like an amazingly fast roller coaster. On this run the car ran a 1/8 of a mile in 6.7 seconds at 105mph.

We slowed down after passing the finish line and turned to go back toward the pit. People lining the side of the track cheered and tried to high five Doug as he slowly cruised by, back straight against the seat, left arm laying loosely on the door frame, a look of pride on his face. He was handed a printout of his time and sighed, "6.7...not very good. But I did have extra weight in the car." People ran over as he got out of the car and asked to look under the hood. Gary ran over and exclaimed, "How cool was that?!"

Other members also asked me how it was and I realized that only a privileged few are able to experience something like I just had. But all I could do was smile.

# What the future holds for the Wicked Stangs

Not everyone in the Wicked Stangs gets their car tuned on the Dyno or races their car. But they do go out and support their fellow club members when they participate in such activities. Emilio was deployed to Iraq on the day before this paper was to be turned in and will be gone for six months. Before he left, the club members got together and had a barbeque to say goodbye. He will be missed like any brother leaving on a long journey. While he is away, he will stay updated on club activities and attempt to participate in executive decisions by e-mail and by reading the online forum on the Wicked Stangs site. Before he left, he told me:

I've got big plans for the Wicked Stangs. When I get back [from Iraq], we're gonna start up a magazine. Then, I want to open a store. We'll sell parts, have deals with vendors and mechanics. It'll be a place for us to hang out and have real meetings instead of in a parking lot somewhere.

Until then, the executive board members, Pha, and Emilio's wife Monica will run the Wicked Stangs and continue to keep up with their nationally expanding club.

# Conclusion

I was hesitant at first to use the Wicked Stangs as my cultural scene. I was afraid that they would not provide me with enough information to create a unique and interesting paper. Now, after sorting through my notes, verifying interviews, and writing the body of this paper, I realized that I had *too much* information; so much information, I don't know what to do with it all. The Wicked Stangs turned out to be an amazing network of friends who share a common interest. I was immediately welcomed to join in

with the discussion and attend group meetings. Rachel, the unofficial secretary, told me that I should get a Mustang and become an official member.

I missed April's meeting because Gary was out of town and I felt uncomfortable about going by myself. I didn't know much about the club because I had only attended events with club founder Emilio, Gary, and club member Alex, so I did not quite know what I would say, or how I would introduce myself. May's meeting was held the night before this paper was due, so I had to rush home when it was finished to add the final touches. If I had to do this all over again, I would have sucked it up and attended the meeting alone. After all, the members were very welcoming and frequently asked me if I had any more questions or if I needed to fill in any holes.

Overall, this was a very good scene to study for my first ethnography. The informants were cooperative, knowledgeable, and very willing to talk about their cars.

Riding in Doug's racecar was definitely the highlight of this study, and is something that I will never forget. I found this experience to be incredibly enjoyable.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Statistics from Miller, Leslie. <u>Cars, trucks now outnumber drivers</u>. 29 August 2003. Salon. May 2004 <a href="http://hypertextbook.com/facts/2001/MarinaStasenko.shtml">http://hypertextbook.com/facts/2001/MarinaStasenko.shtml</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Statistics from www.racelegal.com. San Diego Police Department's Drag Net Unit. 2003.