

Black Cloud Over Emerald City

A true story from [The Rocklore Files](#)

Of [Jamie Thompson](#)

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Gene Yoder – Ladies Man, Big Man on Campus

Back in the winter of 1974/1975, I went on one of the strangest rock and roll odysseys of my life. The central character in this little tale was a guy named Gene Yoder who was the rhythm guitar player for our band "Emerald City." He was a tall, slender, blonde-haired, guy who looked a lot like Sean Cassidy - a pretty boy. When we first started hanging around we spent a lot of time playing our guitars together one-on-one and working out complimentary parts. We got along very well for the most part. I really didn't much care for his attitude when it came to women though. Yoder was forever bragging about his lascivious encounters with innumerable young women. I didn't believe his stories most of the time but I was a virgin at the time so I usually sat in embarrassed silence while he gregariously spun his tales.

Yoder was attending the Penn State campus at Hazelton, PA. His father owned a hunting cabin in the woods just outside of town so Yoder lived there during the week while he attended classes. Then he came home to gig with us on the weekends.

Yoder was always talking about all the wild parties that went on up there and, of course, all the chicks that were loose and fancy free and how he was with a different girl every other day. He also frequently suggested that we could get a gig up there and then we could all partake of the parties and the girls and have a smashing good time for a weekend. One important quality of his dad's cabin was that it was situated far out in the sticks so we could make all the noise we wanted and not attract any attention.

The Party, the Gig, the Girls

One weekend Yoder came home and announced that it was all arranged. He had scheduled a party at his father's cabin for a Friday night and booked us for a dance at the campus for the following Saturday night. It was going to be wine, women, and song all the way for us for an entire weekend!

The plan was to leave Friday evening as early as possible after everyone got home from whatever they did during the day. Yoder said he would drive down to meet us and then lead the way back so that no one would get lost. The party was supposed to start about the time we left home so we expected it to be in full swing when we arrived.

I must admit it sounded inviting to me. Even though I didn't believe Yoder's stories most of the time, I wouldn't have minded a wild party and perhaps a few lusty encounters with some college girls... or so I thought anyway. On the other hand, I was apprehensive because I had never been up there and I really didn't know what to expect. In the end I just figured, oh well, whatever happens will happen and I'll just go with the flow like I always do.

The Shnow Must Go On!

When the Friday of our planned departure arrived the weather report was not good. In fact it was frightening! There was a major snowstorm heading straight for us and we were headed north into the Pocono Mountains - right into the brunt of it! My mother was so concerned, she begged me not to go. But for some reason the weather report just didn't seem real to us. We had a gig. We couldn't just not show up. Plus there was the money. We all needed the money. My mother offered to pay me my share to stay home but

I wouldn't listen. After all, I couldn't let the others down. And the show must go on, right?

Ed's Jalopy

I waited by the door and watched out the window until our drummer Ed Staylin came by to pick me up. To my surprise, he arrived in an old jalopy... I think it was an old Comet from the mid-1960's or something. He borrowed it from his brother and let me tell you, it was a SERIOUS piece of junk. The body had rust holes everywhere and the paint job was mostly primer. There were holes in the floor that let in the bitter cold not to mention a nice view of the road as it raced by! The heater didn't work, and to top it all off, it had no accelerator pedal! Acceleration was achieved by pulling by hand on a coarse hemp rope that disappeared through a hole in the floor where the pedal should have been! As I crammed my guitar into the back seat with Ed's drums and then settled into the front passenger seat, I couldn't believe that I was going clear to Hazleton in that contraption.

We met up with the other members of the group over at Yoder's house. After everyone was accounted for we decided to travel in a caravan in case anyone experienced car trouble. That was a comfort! There were four cars in all. Yoder drove his car. Our bass player, Dan Corelly, drove his. One of Dan's friends, Jim Keen, brought his girlfriend Debbie in his car, and then there was Ed and I in Ed's brother's junkyard special. All of the cars were packed with our gear.

Let it Snow, Let it Stall, Let it Snow

As we hit the road the snowflakes started to fall. We went about a mile or so when suddenly our junk car stalled at an intersection... and wouldn't start again. The caravan stopped. We all conferred over the open

hood for a minute or so and then decided to try jump-starting it. It worked! As the snow started accumulating on the ground and on the street, we were off again.

As we hit the Turnpike the snow started coming down hard and fast. There weren't many cars on the road. Mostly commercial rigs, salt trucks, and snow removal vehicles. I started thinking that most of the traveling public must have canceled their plans for that evening and for the first time I wondered if this was all a big mistake... then I had a feeling of doom. But Ed seemed to be in good spirits and we were in a caravan of friends so the feeling soon passed and was replaced by a romantic sense of adventure. I settled into the conviction that we would make it somehow and that everything would turn out OK.

Then Ed's car stalled again... and wouldn't start again. The whole caravan stopped and we all stood on the shoulder of the Turnpike, in the midst of what was rapidly becoming a blizzard, while the mechanically inclined looked under the hood. The obvious first solution was to jump it again. This was tricky on the Turnpike, though, because it meant that the vehicle supplying the juice had to be turned around so that the two car hoods could face each other. This was a dangerous operation on the shoulder of a highway with vehicles going by at high speed... and with snow rapidly accumulating.

Suddenly in the distance flashing yellow lights and bright headlights appeared behind a wave of snow that was being flung to the side of the road. Through the white sheet I could just barely see the charcoal outline of a huge truck with a snowplow that was barreling down the shoulder of the road. It was heading straight for us and if he didn't see us he was going to plow right into us! I looked around in a panic. There was nowhere to run! Off the shoulder the terrain rose sharply into a steep, rocky, snowy embankment. Running into the highway meant certain death under the wheels of some

truck. We were trapped! So, we stood there like a bunch of sitting ducks, waving frantically, hoping the driver would see us in time to stop.

We lucked out! The driver did see us in time. Moreover, he stopped to help. He parked his big truck behind us so that its headlights lit up our jump-start operation while the flashing yellow lights gave plenty of warning to oncoming traffic. After we got Ed's car running again we thanked the trucker and continued our journey.

We finally made it off the turnpike. That was a relief, or so I thought until I realized that the roads on which we were now traveling were snow covered and deserted. No sooner did we come to a traffic light when Ed's car stalled again. This time there was no conference. The caravan stopped while the jumpcar immediately turned around and pulled up to our hood. The experienced battery jumpers administered the necessary therapy and we were off again.

Let it Stall, Let it Snow, Let it Stall

The situation with Ed's car worsened as we slowly made our way through rural northeast Pennsylvania in the blinding snow. It got to the point where the junker stalled every time we stopped at a traffic light or a stop sign. Then it began stalling when we decelerated while going down hills... and there are a lot of hills in rural northeast Pennsylvania! Ed got to the point where he started running red lights and stop signs if he was reasonably sure that no one was around in order to keep the car from stalling. He also put the thing in neutral and coasted down hills so that he could race the engine to keep it going. I can still see him pulling desperately on that stupid rope! All of his efforts, though, didn't keep that thing from stalling regularly and the jump-start operation became a grim routine. We tried to make it fun by timing ourselves and trying to beat our best time, but before long we were

all sick to death of the situation. In all, I estimate that Ed's car stalled about 40 times during our journey to Hazelton. Each time the caravan of four cars full of teenagers and band equipment stopped, the jump was administered, and the snow got deeper.

When we finally made it to Hazelton it was way past midnight. What was supposed to be a two-hour drive ended up taking more like seven. Everything was closed as we drove through the town. We turned off the main road onto the access road that led into the wooded area where Mr. Yoder's cabin was located. It had been plowed earlier that evening but now it was snow covered again and very slippery. The caravan crawled along the windy little road in the driving snow as the forest grew thicker and darker on each side. We made it as far as a small restaurant/supply store for hunters. From that point the roads, which were now one lane wide, hadn't been plowed at all and had two feet of snow on them. We had no choice but to leave the vehicles full of expensive guitars and band equipment at the restaurant and cover the rest of the journey to Yoder's Cabin on foot... about a one half-mile trek through knee-deep snow. Meanwhile the white stuff was still coming down hard and fast. As we prepared to make our perilous journey Ed showed me his right hand. It was all red and rubbed raw with a twine pattern that looked like it had been branded into the skin of his palm and fingers. He could barely move them.

The Trek

Yoder led the way as the grim travelers waded through knee-deep snow. It was exhausting work to pull our feet up just to take another step and do it again. We were all heartened, however, at the prospect of finding a nice party waiting for us at the cabin. Food, drink, a warm place to crash....

maybe not alone... Snowed in with a hot dog, a kegger and a pretty co-ed. The prospect made it all seem worthwhile.

As we trudged along there was some concerned talk going on behind me. I turned and found Jim Keen and Debbie, both of whom had come along for the 'fun,' inspecting the girl's feet. **My gosh! She was wearing sandals!!** I couldn't believe it!!! Her legs and feet were sopping wet and her bare skin was turning blue in the cold. Then I said something that Ed will never let me forget. "Boy, I'd hate to be in your shoes!" It was one of those terrible faux pas that I was famous for in those days. I couldn't believe I said it and I wanted desperately to reach out and snatch the words out of the air before anyone could hear them.

Debbie gave me a dirty look as Jim stared at me in disbelief. Danny just glared at me. Ed cracked up in hysterics and repeated it over and over again as we continued on. "Hey! I'd hate to be in your shoes he says! Sandals, eh? Hah! Boy I'd sure hate to be in your shoes! Thanks a lot Thompson! Hah Hah! I'm sure she feels much better now... now that she knows you're glad you're not in HER shoes!..." It was a joke! It just came out. I didn't mean to offend. Everybody says the wrong thing at the wrong time every now and then... right?

She could no longer walk so the only solution to avoid frostbite, gangrene, and amputation was to carry her. So, Jim Keen obliged. Man, what a task! It was hard enough to walk in that snow with your own weight let alone someone else's.

Aside from the catastrophes that were plaguing us, it was a beautiful place. The depth of the darkness was profound. The stillness was so pervasive it hardly seemed disturbed by the sounds of our little band of luckless stragglers. Is there any way to describe the sight and sound of millions of snowflakes falling in rural Pennsylvania in a place where there was no sound or light pollution? It was enchanting!

“Party Central”

Just when it seemed like we all would drop exhausted into the snow and freeze to death, the outline of a small building appeared. It wasn't like I imagined it - a rustic cabin made of logs and fieldstones. It was one of those pre-fabricated dwellings that you see on the highway being transported by a slow-moving flatbed truck and escorted by cars with flashing yellow lights bearing large signs with the words "WIDE LOAD" written on them.

At last! We made it!! But wait! Something was wrong... or missing. What was it??? It was the sound of college coeds partying... it wasn't there! Nope, I couldn't hear a peep coming from the place. No music, no murmur of happy voices, no clinking of beer glasses, no army of cars parked outside. The place was dark and silent and appeared to be deserted.

"Where's the party, Yoder?" Jim Keen asked with a clear tone of sarcasm.

Yoder sounded nervous. "There should be a party.... uh, there's always one on Friday night."

We huddled around the front door of the bungalow while Yoder fiddled with his keys. As the door flew open Yoder's two roommates, who were wrapped up in army blankets and sitting at a small table eating, gaped at us in complete surprise. The couple with the frozen feet headed straight for the bathroom.

"Hi guys! Where is everybody?" piped Yoder with an air of feigned puzzlement.

"What are you doing here?" one of them asked. "What's going on?" asked the other as they both surveyed our group. I think at that moment everyone was silently counting the number of beds versus the number of people. Suddenly the air became thick with tension.

"We gotta gig on campus tomorrow, man. You knew that," said Yoder. "Where is everybody? Isn't there usually a party here?"

At that moment it was clear to me and everyone else that Yoder had made no real plans for a party. He just assumed that there would be one. I could sense the spirits of our weary group fall as the reality of the situation set in.

At that moment, Debbie emerged from the bathroom limping slightly. Jim followed. "Is there anything to eat?" she asked.

Yoder's roommates glanced at each other and then stared blankly back at us. "We just ate the last food in the house," they announced flatly. Our group let out a collective groan. We had just gone through the frozen tundra to get to this place and now there was no food, no party, and most of us had nowhere to sleep except the floor. No one could bring himself to say anything to Yoder. This was a real fiasco.

I didn't bother trying to secure one of the available beds. Jim and Debbie, with her frozen feet, obviously needed a bed. I was a pretty hearty kid so I found a spot against the wall and let the others haggle it out. As the night wore on I laid there on the hard floor with my coat over me staring into the darkness with my stomach growling, reflecting on the night's misadventures and wondering idly about what might be happening in the room where Jim and Debbie were sharing a bed. Eventually I fell asleep.

Poker Debbie

In the morning I awoke to voracious hunger and the sound of talking. I soon found out that Yoder's roommates had left for the weekend and that Dan Corelly and Jim Keen had left Debbie behind with us while they waded off into the several feet of snow to get some food. I was glad to think that

food was coming and that I didn't have to go get it. I was also relieved to see that the snow had stopped falling.

After I showered I hung around with Ed, Gene, and Debbie. They played cards to pass the time. Debbie took control of the cards. She seemed very good at what I thought of as hard-core adult games like Poker and 5-Card Stud. I elected to watch because I had almost no experience with games other than Old Maid, Crazy Eights, Go Fish, and War. Her mood had improved dramatically now that her feet were thawed out. I remember she had a peculiar humor about her... sort of vixen-like. I thought that she was enjoying being stranded in the wilderness with a boyfriend and four guys that she didn't know. She flirted wickedly with us while Jim was gone. Yoder was playing hardball with her on the flirting end of things. She handled him well, though, and she deflected his many suggestive comments with a phony innocent act. I played dumb. She wasn't my type anyway.

Food! Glorious Food!

When Dan and Jim returned we greeted them with cheers. They told us that the restaurant had closed because of the blizzard. They managed to free one of the cars but could only get junk food from a small convenience store. In the meantime, the road was plowed out so, after a rather unsatisfying breakfast of doughnuts, Tastykakes, and chocolate milk, Gene, Ed, and I walked to the cars, shoveled them out and, all except for Ed's scrap metal special, drove back to the bungalow.

Operation: Snowball Yoder, Phase 1

As we stood outside Yoder's cabin making plans for the gig, our frustration level was pretty high. No one was saying much about it but you

could read it on our faces. Then there was something else in the eyes of the group... without saying a word we all knew what the others were thinking. As if on cue we suddenly picked up snowballs and started bombing Yoder. He laughed and returned fire. It was all fun and games on the surface but there was definitely also a venting of subdued rage. The snowball fight lasted for quite a while and Yoder took many hard hits.

Afterward we resumed playing cards and Debbie continued her role as leader/dealer. I was very bored with the whole thing. I'm not much of a card player and even less of a gambler so I was glad when the time came to get going.

Disaster Strikes the Wipers

When we opened the door to leave, though, a miserable sight greeted us. It was snowing again! And it was accumulating. The sight sickened us all. Then the next disaster happened. When Danny Corelly turned on his windshield wipers, they went back and forth a couple of times and then went limp! We pulled on them and yanked them one way and another but we couldn't get them to go for anything. What could we do? We couldn't drive the car in the snow without windshield wipers! We were down to two cars so we did the only thing we could do. We unloaded Corelly's car and repacked the remaining cars with all of our stuff plus ourselves. It was VERY challenging, but somehow we did it.

Food! Glorious Food! Reprise

We stopped at a restaurant in town to get a much-needed good meal and then continued on to Penn State Hazelton. Maybe the gig would be really great. Maybe we'd have loads of fun and the balance of our adventure would be as fantastic as the first half was terrible.

The Gig

The snow continued to fall as we unloaded our gear through the backdoor of a cafeteria. The floor had been cleared of tables and a bunch of risers had been placed at one end of the room for the band to set up on. We trudged in and out of the door as a couple of student government types stood idly by watching us work.

Nothing frustrates a rock and roller who's dragging gear around more than a couple of able-bodied bozos standing around not helping. I can't tell you how many fraternity parties I played where the Social Events Coordinator promised we would have a dozen, or so, pledges that would be at our beck and call for backbreaking work... But then, when the work was being done, our would-be slaves just stood around and watched.

We got ourselves all set up and did a sound check. From there all we had to do was wait for the crowd to come...

You guessed it! They never came! Well, at least not what one might call a crowd. The rest of the kids that showed up were also student government types who were conscripted for crowd control duties. So, we played our high energy rock n' roll sets for Jim Keen, his card-playing girlfriend and a mostly empty room with six or seven kids standing off on the side by the door with their arms folded. They watched us with the same expression as if we were a test pattern on TV while Jim and Debbie danced close as if in a trance. Finally, one of the student government kids asked, "Can you guys play any music from the Carpenters?" We were stunned!

"How about some more Grateful Dead?" Gene asked hopefully.

"Who?" the student asked.

"Sorry, we don't play any Who songs," Dan answered with a crooked look.

“What??”

“What’s on second!” Ed called out with a silly grin. I cracked up loudly all by myself and everyone looked at me like I was nuts. This was going to be a long night.

If you've ever played rock n' roll to an empty room, then you know that it's not very stimulating. In fact, it's downright boring!! You end up talking and acting as though it were a glorified rehearsal. The bottom line is, though, you usually don't get paid until AFTER the gig is over so you play short sets, take long breaks, and stick with it for the sake of the monetary reward at the end.

Operation: Snowball Yoder, Phase 2

During our second break there was a lot of grumbling going on within the members over the whole trip. So, we decided to lay a trap for Yoder and pay him back good for everything. When he wasn't looking we snuck outside and then sent Eddie Staylin in to tell him that there was a sexy girl outside saying that she wanted to meet him. Meanwhile we prepared the trap. The moment he walked through the door he got nailed by a wicked snowball cluster bomb that continued for several minutes. Eventually he escaped from the onslaught and managed to take cover behind some bushes. A tremendous snowball fight then continued for the rest of our break and Yoder took a real beating. I remember him laughing as the snowballs whacked him. He didn't get it! He thought it was all for fun! When we continued playing our last set Yoder's hair was tousled and he was soaked. He looked ridiculous and very uncomfortable... but we didn't mind!

A Done Deal

When the gig was over we all worked hard to get out of there fast before the roads got much worse. Luckily it wasn't snowing as hard as the night before or we may have opted to camp out right there in the cafeteria where it was warm and where there was food. I don't suppose the student government types would've allowed us to do that but we might've tied them up until after we left in order to avoid going back to Camp Yoder!

Well, we found our way back to Yoder's bungalow. No party, no chicks. It was a done deal. The disaster had now swallowed the journey up, the party, and the gig. What could be left?

Operation: Snowball Yoder, Phase 3

The next morning it was still snowing lightly and we nailed Yoder with snowballs again. This time he didn't seem to enjoy it as much. He started complaining that it was unfair of us to saddle him with all the blame. After all, how could he have known that there would be a blizzard that weekend? He had a point there, but we nailed him anyway! It wasn't so much because of the blizzard as it was all of the BS that he had been shoveling onto us for so long.

Breakfast at Ed's

Before we went to the gig the day before, Ed secretly picked up some eggs along the way. He surprised us all by whipping them out and offering to make breakfast for everyone. But as the food was being consumed and Ed was still toiling in the kitchen, Jim Keen made the innocent mistake of

taking a second helping... and inadvertently ate Ed's breakfast for him! Man! I don't know if I ever saw Ed so angry when he found out! He was ready to attack Jim and beat him to a pulp. Not many words were spoken but you could cut the tension in the air with a knife. I managed to corral Ed into one of the bedrooms and calm him down before he did something he'd regret. He was very bitter... not to mention hungry!

Let Your Love Rain Down on Me

The time to go home finally came just in time for the rain to begin. This was not good news for Danny and his windshield wiper situation. We also had to rethink the pack job because Ed's brother's car had completely died while we were there and we decided just to leave it parked at the hunter's restaurant until someone could return for it. (No one ever did!)

My stuff and I got assigned to Jim Keen's car while Ed squeezed his drums and his stuff into Danny's car. Yoder managed to pack the rest in his car. The last I saw them that day they were pulling out of the bungalow's driveway. Danny was driving with the window down and his head sticking out so he could see the road. It was going to be a long drive for him in the rain with the window down!

Once we all got on the road the caravan dissolved. Everyone went their own speed and soon we all lost sight of each other's cars. I made some light conversation with Jim and Debbie but before long we were traveling in silence. We were all tired and the weekend was a complete washout despite all our efforts.

As I sat in the backseat and dreamily watched Northeast Pennsylvania whiz by my mind replayed the events of the weekend: Ed pulling on that dopey rope and us having to jump-start that car a thousand times. The blizzard, the frozen feet, bombing Yoder with snowballs, the

party that no one came to, the gig that nobody saw, no food, not enough places to sleep, Ed almost murdering Jim, Danny's windshield wipers, the rain. What a disaster! Thank God it was over!

It Ain't Over Till It's Over

As we pulled into Langhorne, PA about five miles from my house, Jim's car started to make weird grinding noises. Then it started smoking and spitting motor oil onto the windshield through the air vents on the hood. Jim tried to keep the car going but we were losing power fast as steam started billowing out of the front grill. The car gave a gasp, a wheeze, and then it died as Jim coasted it to a stop on the shoulder of the road. He cursed and punched the steering wheel as a huge plume of smoke, steam, and oil vapor puffed out of the hood.

I couldn't believe it! We were so close to home! I wanted so much to take a long shower, get some food, and relax in the comfort and security of my house. Now I was hours away from home by foot, or who-knows-how-long by thumb. The last thing I wanted to do was leave my guitar and amp on the side of the road in a dead car. And poor Jimmy Keen! There he was, stranded with his girlfriend and a car that probably needed a tow to the nearest junkyard. This was the icing on the cake!

Looking around, I realized where I was. An acquaintance of mine named Jerry Oppenheimer lived in the neighborhood that was situated beyond the tree line on the other side of the road. I didn't know him real well but I had been to his house once before and I was sure that if anyone was home, they would let me use their phone.

Jerry wasn't home but his mother was very nice. She probably didn't remember me but she let us in anyway and within minutes I was talking to my mother on the phone. She had been worried sick about me all weekend.

After explaining our circumstances she agreed to come right out and pick me up. Jim and Debbie also made arrangements for a tow truck to come and for someone they knew to pick them up. Within twenty minutes my stuff and I were in my mother's car. I stared pensively at Jim's disabled car as we drove by. He and Debbie were too preoccupied with their predicament to wave as my mom and I pulled away. I couldn't help wondering what calamities might have struck the others on their way home.

Home Sweet Home

As we drove down the road I kept thinking that we might get a flat, or that the engine was going to blow up, or that the tailpipe would fall off, or that a meteor might fall out of the sky and obliterate us. But, it appeared the madness had finally ended for the weekend.

Upon arriving at home I jumped out of the car and kissed the driveway. Then I ran into the house and had a joyful reunion with my dog, who was also worried about me. There's nothing as good as coming home after a royal misadventure. I stood in the hot shower for about an hour and then had a royal feast in the kitchen... home sweet home!

Black Cloud Over Yoder

The Odyssey became known among our band and our friends as "That Time the Black Cloud Followed Us to Hazelton" and the story was told and retold many times.

With closer observation it soon came to my attention that, in particular, the Black Cloud seemed to follow Yoder around - precipitating doom and destruction upon him and everyone who happened to be anywhere near him. So, I concluded that we were just innocent victims caught in the

crossfire between Yoder and the gods. I don't think he ever learned his lesson, though. The last I heard, to this day Yoder, now almost 50, dies his hair blonde, never married, and dates only beautiful young women who are under 30... I haven't seen him in years. I also make it a point not to stand under trees during a thunderstorm!

The End



Jamie Thompson is a writer, musician, songwriter, photographer, videographer, husband, and a stay-at-home-dad with two small children.

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