

Hysterical Historical

A Moving Storey

1986 to 2019 amounts to some 33 years? That is how many I have had *The Cat Drag'd Inn* but for ten of those years she sat undriven, a playhouse for a sister-son whilst I was playing elsewhere. The rest of that storey is still being written.

In 1967 I purchased new a Chevy G-10 window Van with seats for eight and 283 engine. Named her *Willshedoit* and drove and lived-in that van thru all manner of mechanical and body rot problems until about 1986.

By that time I had added seats for two more, installed two additional fuel tanks (total capacity of three was 45 gallons) all the wheels and windows had been replaced; I'd rebuilt the rocker panels and rear quarter panels with black iron stove pipe; but when the frame broke at the right rear shock mount that was the end. The odometer showed 330,000 miles and the logbook 19 years and 48 states.

That was when I found this 1964 Superior bus. Named her *The Cat Drag'd Inn* and moved away from salty roads.

Willshedoit started out new with a fresh coat of School-Bus-Yellow and as one of the Scouts suggested "...she'll go faster if you paint a racing stripe on the side." So we did.

[transcribe Lowell Sun News article in normal text and expanded in *italic* text.]

B2 The Sunday Sun, Lowell, Mass, April 26, 1981

<https://newspaperarchive.com/lowell-sun-apr-26-1981-p-173/> (URL NFG now)

Willshedoit? She has, chugging 306,000 miles

By Christine McKenna, Sun Correspondent

Billerica — Few residents of Billerica are likely to have missed seeing in their neighborhood at some time or another a bright yellow 1967 Chevrolet van, patched with squares of welded-on metal to cover rust spots, decorated with countless stickers, topped with seven antennas and sporting a multicolored map of the United States on one side.

That van \$3,500 new, and it has chugged down more than 306,000 miles of dirt and paved highways – enough to get to the moon and part way back.

It belongs to Al Oxtan, a former Billerica youth leader who still spends much of his time in the community despite having relocated to New Hampshire some 12 years



ajo & Artie Rogers [Photo by Dick Hunt]

ago to work year-round at the Mount Washington Observatory, on the summit of New England's highest peak.

The map painted on the outside of the van is crisscrossed with white dotted lines that show where the vehicle has been. After each leg of a trip another dot is added to the map.

The lines span the entire country several times and loop up into Canada and down into Mexico. Oxton has been to all 48 continental states, mostly on hiking and camping trips as well as business trips connected with his work as a technician at “the Obs.”

The standard “twenty-five cent tour” of the vehicle sends a visitor into a small rectangular world that overwhelms the eye with a maze of detail.

The van is crammed with equipment, supplies, and unusual amenities that convert it into a self-contained home. Oxton says the van originally was equipped with the standard ten seats but “evolved over the years” into its present state of casual non-conformance.

Several amateur radios. Including citizens band (CB) and business band, hang from the ceiling of the front area. According to Oxton, “with the right circumstances we can talk around the world through repeater stations.”

An instrument panel that would make a Boeing 707 blush includes a hand throttle, an engine vacuum gauge, a digital clock and a car phone.

According to friend Artie Rogers, who's shared several trips with Oxton, “you can measure just about anything inside or outside the van” with the instruments, including wind speed, temperature and altitude.

There's even a “turn and bank” gauge that indicates the tilt of the van when it rounds corners. “We're too busy reading the instruments to look out the window and see whether we're about to tip over,” Oxton explains with a laugh.

Near the driver's seat is a slightly rusty busman's coin changer for tolls. Behind it is one of two fire extinguishers, a first aid kit and the “photo room.” Oxton is an avid and accomplished photographer. As part of his work with the Observatory he developed, created and exhibits a multi-media slide show to organizations of all types that advertises the purpose and goals of the “Obs.”

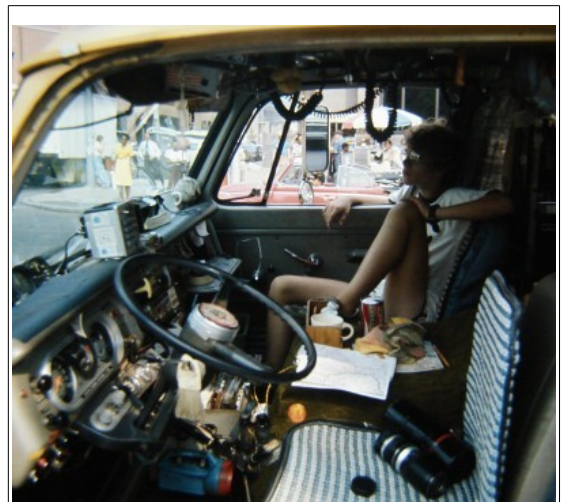
Step into the back of the van and you're in a five room, one and a half bath house that embodies the ultimate in economy of space.

A full-size hammock hangs across the length of the van, over a bench that serves as a bed by night and a sofa by day. Several rolled up sleeping bags complete the accommodations for six or so.

The record number of people carried in the van has been 23, but Oxton concedes most were kids, and the “trip” was around the corner to get ice cream. That was several years ago and, says Oxton, “We couldn't get those same 23 people in today – they're a lot bigger.”



Dave Zemel painting the map



Travis Hodgdon, navigator on the bridge

The “living room” is more or less where anybody happens to be when they are awake, but is equipped with a five-inch diagonal television set, as well as a radio and tape deck that send mellow tones throughout the van via three good-sized speakers.

The kitchen boasts a three-burner stove, a sink (a green plastic wash bin hidden under the stove), cupboards, a refrigerator (a red ice chest), and a copper kettle named Sam.

Sam? Well, explains Oxtan, it's named after the copper “Sammie” kettles used by members of the Appalachian Mountain Club, which he belongs to. “I think the word comes from Samovar,” he says.

Several clotheslines with wooden pins hang across the van – “There's always something soggy that needs to be dried out” – and fish nets hang on the sides, holding a miscellanea of supplies.

The full bath is for the hardy only. Oxtan points proudly to the van's skylight and says with a glimmer of a twinkle, “when it rains, it doubles as a shower.”

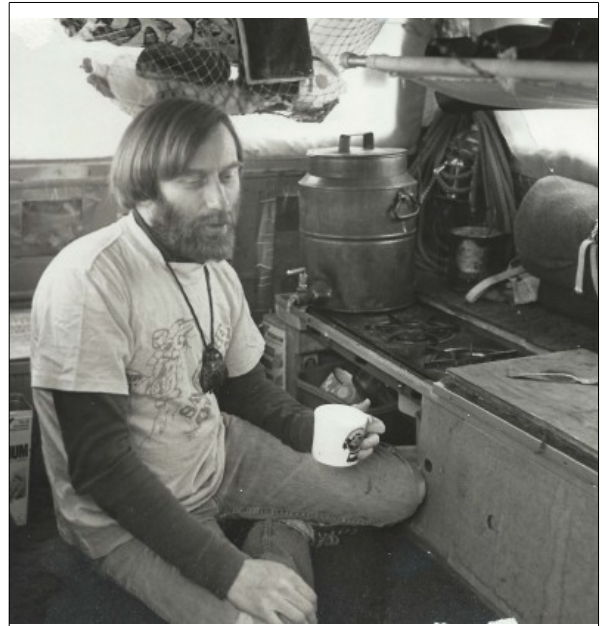
Like any classy dwelling, the van has its own library – a bookcase of fascinating titles strapped in, like most everything else, by rope. Along with the expected – “Camping and Camping Crafts” – are a couple of surprises – “Yertle the Turtle” by Dr Suess and a copy of “The New Testament in English.” A dictionary is used to settle Scrabble and Ghost disputes, and there is a pamphlet of limericks.

The van is heated by a gas furnace, though Oxtan says body heat goes a lot further in keeping the van warm. Four inches of insulation added to the inside of the vehicle help, too.

The van gets 12 to 14 miles per gallon, which has become a big expense in recent years, says Oxtan. As a hedge against ever spiraling gas prices, he equipped the van with three gas tanks for a total storage capability of 45 gallons.

The van attracts attention wherever it goes, and has inspired spot inspections by police in all corners of the country. “After the usual license and registration check,” says Oxtan, “the policeman usually admits that he just wanted to see the inside of the van.”

Crossing the border into Canada or Mexico requires patience as custom officials tackle the job of checking out the miscellaneous gadgets and



ajo & Sammy in galley



On The Road in the Southwest



Sleepy Roadrunners

verifying that none will be used for spying. Once, puts in Artie Rogers, a customs official was particularly agitated to see a box marked “fireworks.” After tearing the box open, however, he found only tools.

The van has an official name but, says Oxton, by tradition it is never spoken out loud. The name is painted on the front doors of the van:

Willshedoit.

One thing “*Willshedoit*” did was play a part in an anti-nuclear protest at Seabrook, N.H. last year. While crowds of people and vehicles were turned away from the gate of the

nuclear plant, a friend of Oxton's managed to get permission to park on the property of a local resident whose house happened to be within yards of the front gate.

Whenever officials tried to disperse the protesters, they ran for the van, which had become a sanctuary. Just to touch it rendered them immune from police censure. While at Seabrook, the communications equipment on board was put to full use.

Oxton was stranded on Route 128 in the Blizzard of '78 for three days, and though he eventually found shelter in a Needham home he says he could have lived in the van. “It's a great place to be even when you're caught in a traffic jam,” he says. “You just go in the back and put on tea.”

The longest trip he ever made was a 35-day cross-country journey. The last big one was a trip to Winnipeg, Canada in 1979 to see an eclipse. Once, on a whim, Oxton and a group of friends took off for Montreal to go ice skating.

“We could sit around all day telling stories,” Oxton says of the all the journeys *Willshedoit* has taken, large and small, and he dreads seeing it end.

“It's got ten years left on it,” he predicts, noting that the engine – it's third – is in good shape although “rust is a major problem.” The back doors don't open anymore and are held together by glue, according to Oxton.

He figures it would take between \$8,000 and \$10,000 to replace the van now. – which would be “too much of an expense.”

“It's become a landmark,” says Oxton, “people see it and come up to me and say, 'Hey, I remember when we went on a trip years ago.’” Oxton was involved as scoutmaster or assistant scoutmaster with three different troops – 52, 55, and 50 – in Billerica for close to ten years and, as he a believer in the English version of Scouting, his young followers wore shorts year-round. His “hyperbolic paraboloids” graced many a Greater Lowell BSA annual show. Many boys, some now adults, have memories of trips in Oxton's van that will undoubtedly be special to them all their lives.

Oxton's final ambition is to take the van to the only two states it hasn't seen. He figures he may drive it to Alaska someday. As for Hawaii: “I've been thinking of mailing a hubcap to Hawaii and having it sent back just so I can say, “This part of the van has been to all 50 states.”



Roadrunners Camping in Florida



7902 Eclipse Expedition to Calgary

What will happen when *Willshedoit* finally gives up? “I’ll put it up on blocks and turn it into a greenhouse,” says Oxtan. He doesn’t seem happy at the prospect.