



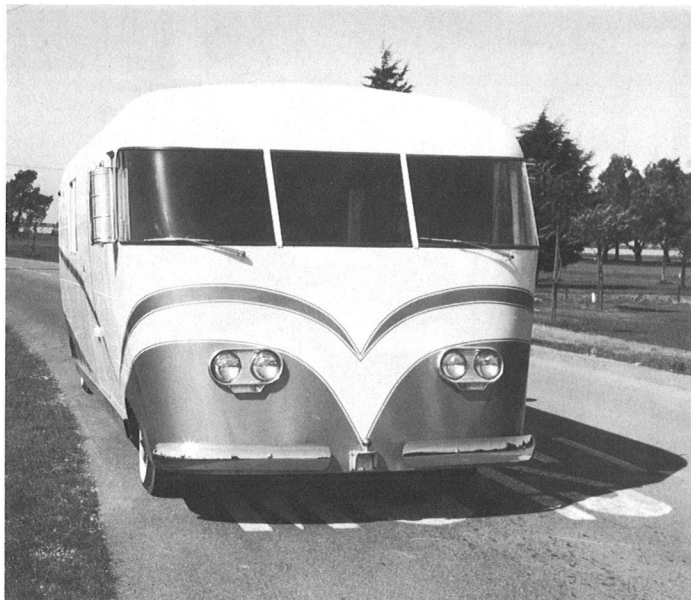
corva

communique

Volume 2, Number 8

April 1980





This is a front view of #101 Ultra Van prototype taken in Alameda in 1961. Note the 1961 Corvair headlight bezels and how the van tapers at the bottom. The trailer hitch in front was to run the boat down to the water.

The Ultra Van Story

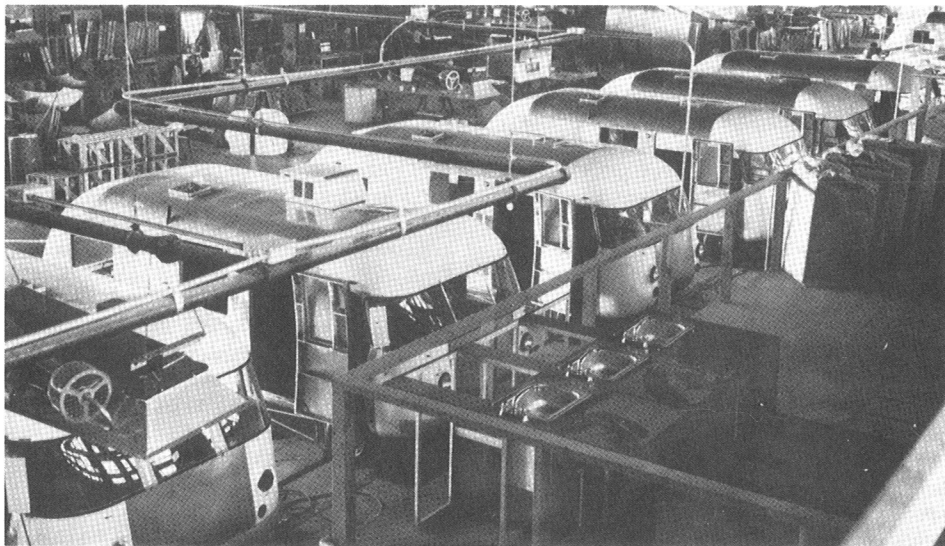
By W. Christy Barden***

"If the Olds Toronado had been around in 1960 there might never have been an Ultra Van" - so stated David Peterson****, originator, builder and developer of the Ultra Van. He was looking for an engine and drive-train to install in his Spartan trailer that he pulled to Oakland, California, from Kansas in 1958.

Mr. Peterson became aware of the Corvair during 1960. What fascinated him (as well as many Southern California racers) was that the engine, drive-train and entire rear suspension were a bolt-in operation. This was also true of the front suspension as well. Seeing the simplicity of this concept, he conceived the idea of building a motor home, like an airplane, and bolting on the automotive parts that were needed. And Voila! The conception for the Ultra Van.

Mr. Peterson was living in Oakland at the time (and still does) and rented a garage in Alameda. And in that garage built the first prototype in a matter of four months. By instructing his wife not to forward phone calls, he literally locked himself in the garage, working night and day, and single handedly (except for help to buck the rivets) turned out the first Ultra Van.

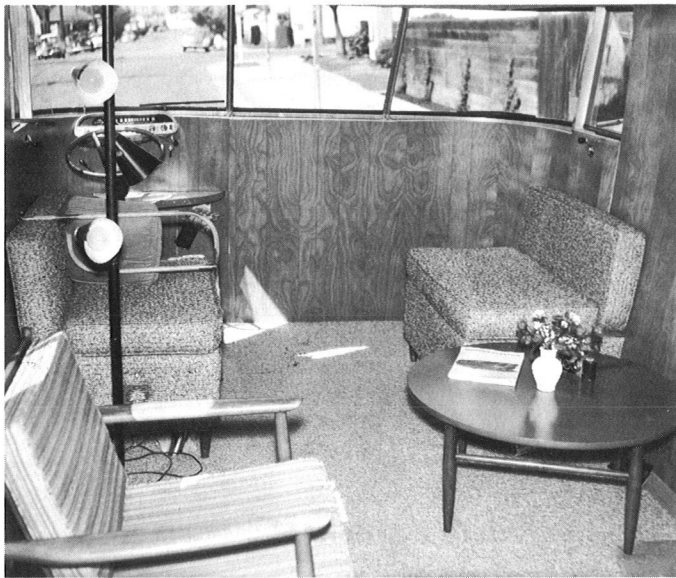
He started with only rough sketches and a lot of ideas in his head. Laying the aluminum side members and joining them, he built the ribs for the sides and top. Then he designed the rear



A rare view of the assembly line in Hutchinson shows the shells on moveable dollies.



A look at #101 in everyday use shows the prototype at the marina in Alameda. Note the 13" Corvair wheels. Designer Peterson towed the boat regularly with the Van.



An interior shot of #101 looking forward through the windshield shows the Corvair dash and powerglide shifter. The seats did not swivel, but note the small pillow against a bar for the driver to rest his back. The side windows were standard Chevy with the roll-out handles under them. The pole lamp gives the "feeling" of a house.



Another interior view of #101 shows designer David Peterson opening the gas refrigerator under the propane stove. Note the sink behind the stove. The cover swings over and covers the stove and sink. This photo was taken in 1961 at Peterson's home.

section. If you have ever seen the rear end of a Spartan trailer, you will know where he got the idea for the rear of the Ultra Van. Mr. Peterson stated in our interview that he should have taken a mold of the back of the Spartan trailer, but instead he built a form by hand out of blocks, conforming to his established radii he finished the right rear (now fiberglass) panel of the Van. Instead of doing all of this a second time for the left side, he merely made a fiberglass gel coat on the right side mold and before it jellied, pulled it off and jerked it inside out and Voila! the left rear panel. Gutsy, eh?

His concept was to have a vehicle with a low center of gravity, streamlined, with as little weight as possible. The stream-lining came out of the 1930's - remember the Chrysler Airflow, the Scarab of Bill Stout, and Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion? Peterson was growing up with the aircraft industry at that time; flying, working for Stearman, Beech and Boeing in Wichita, Kansas. He even designed and built what he called the Super "V". This was a Beech "V" tail Bonanza modified to a twin using 3040 Lycoming engines whose nacelles were only fourteen inches high. Now that's a feat. It was one of the first light twins to be certified by the FAA in the early fifties. I digress.

Using his experience in aviation, he was conscious of weight and aerodynamics. He incorporated all of these concepts into the Ultra Van. The water and gas tanks were an integral part of the body, doubling as structure as well. As work progressed he still hadn't yet determined what the front end would be like. One day, while driving around Oakland he saw a 1961 Chevy Step Van and Voila! The front end of the Ultra Van was conceived. He built the entire front around the windshields of the Step Van (which was somewhat stream-lined itself). Using these windshields with another piece of glass between them, he finished the outer shell of the Van.

For the front suspension he took the 1961 Corvair suspension and welded an extension to it;

this made it the width of the Ultra Van, also extending the tie rods. In this rear he bolted in the 1961 engine, drive-train and suspension. All vans were fitted with the powerglide transmission and positraction axle. The width of the lower part of the prototype was 86 inches, so there wasn't much overhang. The width at the top of the van, however, was 96 inches, so when you looked at it from the front or back it looked like a hot air balloon. In the second Van the width at the bottom was 96 inches also. He merely used double wheels on each side of the rear to offset the overhang, because of the narrow track of the standard Corvair.

When he finally rolled his prototype out of the Alameda garage in the summer of 1961, it was 24 feet long, 8 feet high, and 8 feet wide at the top, and weighed only 1800 pounds (that's the shell with no interior). He was elated for he had one-half the weight of a Greenbrier and over twice the space. With the help of his wife, Lucille, the interior was finished, in the same basic style that most of the later Ultra Vans were done. So this was Unit #101, with a weight of just under 3000 pounds.

To build the ensuing Ultra Vans he rented a warehouse on 8th Street in Oakland, down by the water. Here he built the second Ultra Van, which became known as the demo Van. He spent much time in this Van promoting the vehicle. The third Van built was delivered to a Dr. Watson of Walnut Creek, California, in the summer of 1962. With the building of the fourth 24-foot Van the Prescolite Corporation came into the picture and built several Ultra Vans under Peterson's supervision. Mr. Peterson took the project back and built several more 24-foot Vans in Oakland, one of which was a special 27-footer for a big family. Boy, that Van is really something to see!

Starting with Unit #201, he redesigned the Van to 22 feet, which is what all the ensuing Vans are. He redesigned the front suspension, using upper and lower "A" frames with Chevy II ball joints. He redid the rear suspension, utilizing a modified late

model Corvair suspension. This allowed the use of slip joints in the axles, so the rear wheel could come out closer to the edge of the Van. Peterson said he was never really satisfied with this rear suspension. I had what he called a "wheelbarrow" effect, or oversteer. I've found that a hydraulic stabilizer took care of this problem.

In 1965 a Mr. Tillotson of Modern Handicraft, Inc., a Kansas City publishing outfit, saw Peterson's operation in Oakland and wanted to build the Ultra Van on a grander scale. They gave Peterson a sum of money, and he and all of his tooling moved to Hutchinson, Kansas. There he set up an assembly line in a 10,000 square foot building. He was there about a year helping to set things up. The first Ultra Van delivered there was Unit #215, which is owned by CORSA member Jim Williams** in Seattle.

There were about 360 Ultra Vans produced between 1965 and 1970. About 310 had Corvair engines. They sold new for about \$8,500.00. When G.M. stopped manufacture of the Corvair, the Ultra Van used a Chevy 307 cubic inch V-8 with a marine type "V" drive into a modified Corvette rear end and suspension.

The story does not stop here. Peterson took the project back in 1970. Then he designed and built a new 23-foot Ultra Van. This one used the same kind of monocoque construction, but this time using a side-mounted V-8 engine in the center of the Van, driving directly into a differential located on the left side of the Van, no engine in front or back, but in the center on the left side. Will this man never stop? He drives this Van today.

In the mid 70's a group tried to start to produce this Van in Sonoma, California, but were under-capitalized. Only two of those new Vans were ever delivered. Ernest Newhouse***** has one of them. He's the founder of the Ultra Coach Club, and former owner of my Ultra Van, Unit #228.

I've had a fascination with vans since grammar school - remember the Volkswagen Van with all its room? I was small then. After College I finally

bought a Volkswagen Van (couldn't afford a Greenbrier). Then I learned about the Ultra Van in 1968. I went to Hutchinson to see about getting one, but couldn't afford it. Finally, in 1973, I bought a used one from Ernest Newhouse. I was in ecstasy, finally, after all these years, an air-cooled rear engine HOME. It fulfills all of my fantasies, with a bordello-size bed, clothes closet, toilet, bathroom, shower, living-room, dining room, kitchen, and guest bed. What more could I want, a HOUSE ON WHEELS, and 17 M.P.G. to boot (some people boast of 20 M.P.G.).

I've driven mine back and forth across the U.S. several times and up into Canada also. All told I've put about 50,000 miles on my Van.

Tragedy struck in April of 1976, after coming back from "The Dr. Ralph Old-Tim Corvair Medicine Show" in Tacoma, Washington. The Ultra Van was struck by a hit-and-run truck driver while parked on the "Streets of San Francisco". The next three years were spent putting it back together in Ed Martin's**** back yard.

The damage was extensive. The entire left side of the Van was wiped out. This included a good portion of the front end, which took most of the wiring, fuse box and instrumentation with it also. The Van just sat for a year while I was in Saudi Arabia.

Upon my return in 1977 the work started. The problem was to find someone who knew aircraft and sheet metal work (David Peterson wasn't doing this kind of repair work at the time). After looking around for a while I was lucky enough to talk Mickey Mahoney* into doing the work. he was retired from North American Aviation, where he was in charge of the sheet metal shop. Aircraft racers will remember him as the man who built the "Sorceress", an all metal racing bi-plane. His work was superb (I helped bucking rivets, etc.) and when it was finished the wrecked side was straighter than the unwrecked side.

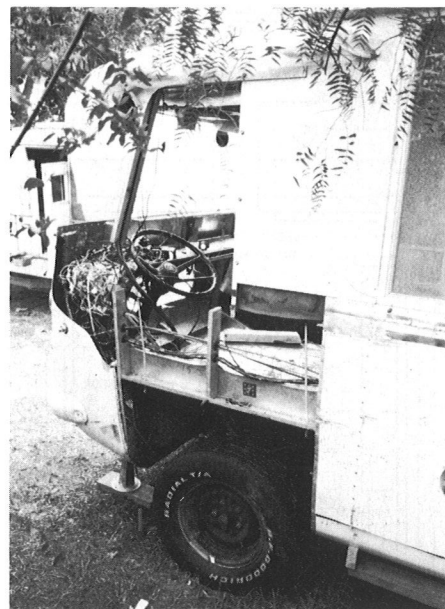
Next some modifications. A bigger rear

window (remember the 1958 Volkswagen), late model Volkswagen bug tail lights, next to Chevy Vega tail lights. The thing really lights up at night. Custom-made bumpers made from 7-inch aluminum tubing (all show and no go).

After the body work was finished in early 1978, the rewiring was next. No wiring diagram to go from, so I just rewired the entire Van. A lot of nights were spent here.

Next the paint. I'd always wanted to do a proper job with a paint scheme on an Ultra Van. Ideas went from a "watermelon slice" to a "brick building" look. Fern Friest's 4th grade class in Half Moon Bay had a field day with "how would you color this Van?" I wish there was space to show all their drawings. By 1978 I had done the final drawing for the paint scheme. I found the right people to do the job with Southwest Aircraft Painting in Upland, California. They did the five colors in DuPont Imron paint. This was the most important part of the project, for it **HAD** to look good!

In the interior water damage was prevalent from sitting out that year after the accident. The cherrywood design formica interior couldn't be duplicated, for the design was obsolete. Using a wood-grained mylar-coated aluminum, I finished the interior panels. Then, cutting the rug! Eighty



This view shows all the exposed wiring that went God knows where.



This side view shows Mickey Mahoney working on the right front wheel area.

pounds worth, fitting, forming and cussing! Selecting the material for the upholstery and shades was done by June, 1979. And NOW IT WAS FINISHED!

My first trip with my (new) Ultra Van was to Detroit and the 1979 CORSA Convention. It took first in class in the Concourse. I couldn't have asked for a better tribute to Ultra Van #228.

The Ultra Coach Club was formed in 1967 by Ernest Newhouse****. It is incorporated as a Mutual Benefit organization in California. It is now a nation-wide organization with an eastern and western division. They have rallies (gathering of lots of Ultra Vans) all over the country each year. There are about 200 member families (remember there were only about 360 Ultra Vans produced), so that means that over two-thirds of the Ultra Vans are accounted for.

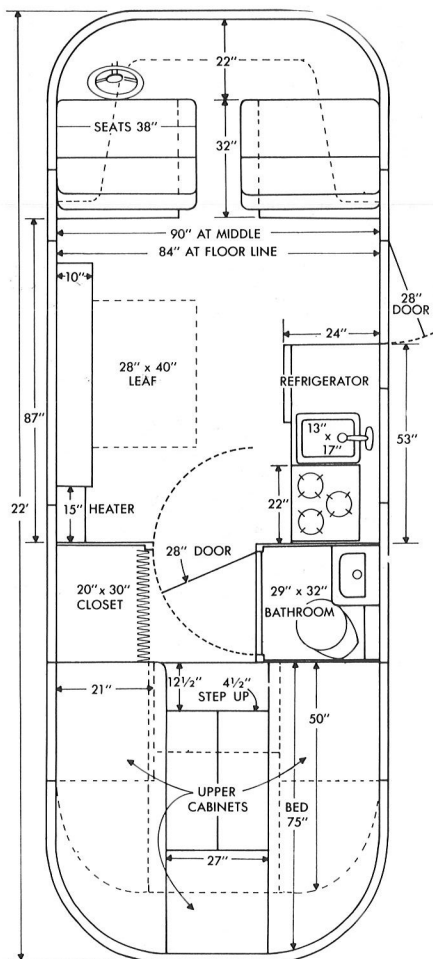
As a user organization it's imperative that all Ultra Van owners stay together to keep these Vans running. For those people who really want to know ALL the technical information about the

Ultra Van, there is a manual. Len Ryerson**** and his wife, Edy, spent three years of their lives putting together all the information an owner would want to know, including modifications, supplier's addresses, detailed drawings, etc. No question is left unanswered in this manual of over 300 pages. You even get a few basic lessons in electricity and plumbing. For \$50.00 plus shipping there is a limited supply of the new manuals still available. Also, for those who want to know the availability of Ultra Vans, Ed Martin**** keeps a list of Club members' Vans that are for sale. Prices on today's market go from bottom (really bad shape) \$3,500.00, to top shape at \$15,000.00

In doing this article I've answered many questions that I had developed over the years, and I hope it answers some of yours. I have strong emotional feelings about the Van and what it represents. The ultimate tribute to any vehicle you really like (or love) is to USE IT. And use it I do. Thank you, David Peterson!



This driver's side photo of Barden's van shows how the entire front section was pulled forward in the accident.



This basic floor plan was used throughout production with only a few optional changes available.

IMPORTANT NAMES AND ADDRESSES OF THE ULTRA COACH CLUB:

DAVID PETERSON, *****
He doesn't answer letters,
Too busy hang-gliding.
Phone: 415-531-0586

President of Club:
WARREN SUCKOW***
3129 W. Hayward Ave.
Phoenix, Arizona 85021

Ultra Coach Manuals:
LEN RYERSON****
18628 Rayen St.
Northridge, Calif. 91324

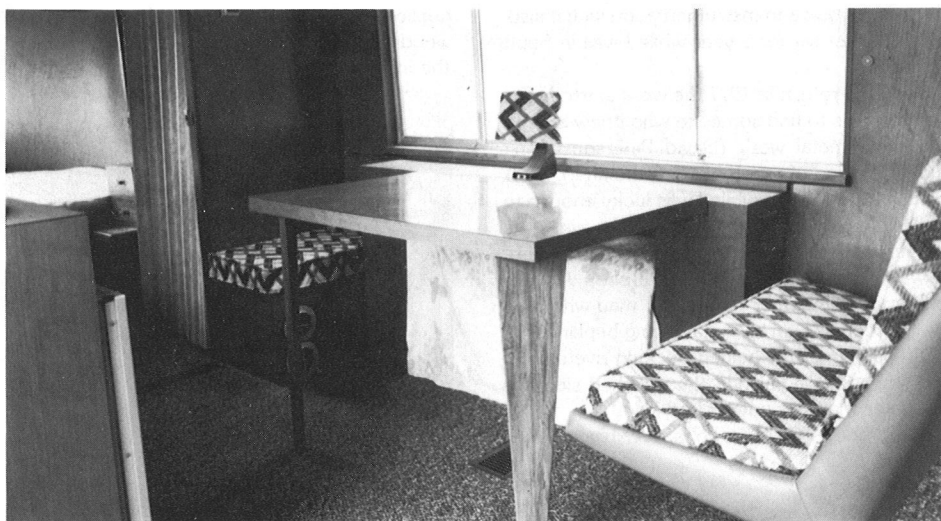
Founder and Director:
ERNEST NEWHOUSE*****
15239 El Soneto Drive
Whittier, Calif. 90605

Eastern Director:
WALTER DAVISON***
1208 Asturia Ave.
Coral Gables, Florida 33134

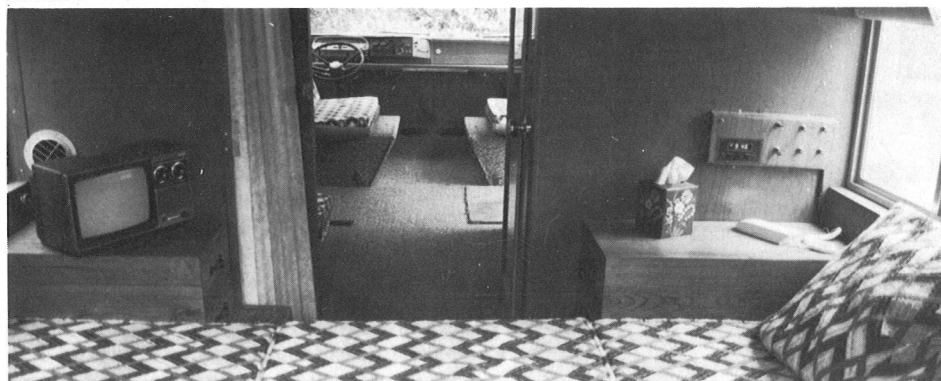
Buy & Sell List of Ultra Vans:
EDWARD A. MARTIN****
104 Via Estrellita
Redondo Beach, Calif. 90277
Phone: 213-357-6335



This view of the driving area shows the passenger seat turned so the driver can be "watched."



This photo shows one of the suggested uses of the folding table that covers the storage shelves.



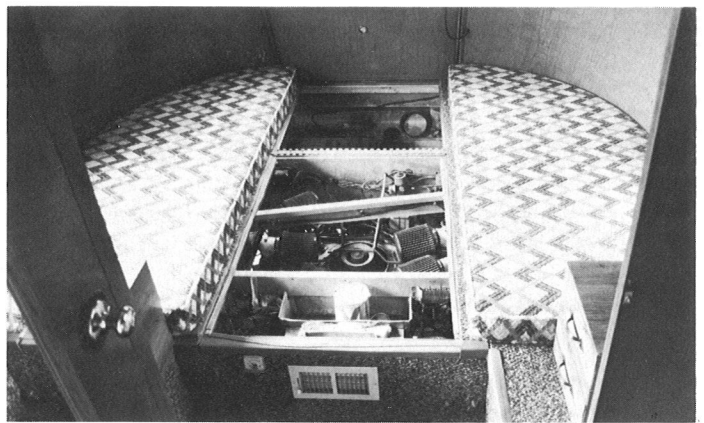
Looking through the rear window shows the bed in the foreground and the entire length of the van forward to the driver's compartment.

EXPLANATION OF GURU CODE:

- | | | |
|-------|-----------------------------|--|
| ***** | = Supreme Ultra Van Guru | - Inventor & Developer of Ultra Van |
| ***** | = Chief Ultra Van Guru | - Head of Tribe |
| **** | = Senior Ultra Van Guru | - Over 10 years owning an Ultra Van |
| *** | = Junior Ultra Van Guru | - 5 to 10 years owning an Ultra Van |
| ** | = Apprentice Ultra Van Guru | - Under 5 years owning an Ultra Van |
| * | = Honorary Ultra Van Guru | - Has no Ultra Van but is a great help |



A view of the finished interior of Barden's Van.



Where's the engine? Under the bed, of course!



Your author and guru at rest...Christy Barden!

SPECIAL CLOSE-OUT!

**BELOW WHOLESALE
WHILE THEY LAST**

'79 CORSA Convention T-Shirts

5 for \$10.00

Must be purchased in lots of 5
to defray postage & handling costs

Send checks to:

CORSA, Inc.
P.O. Box 2488
Pensacola, FL 32503

STATE PREFERRED SIZES-NO ADULT MEDIUM AVAILABLE
Orders will be filled to closest size available while supplies last.

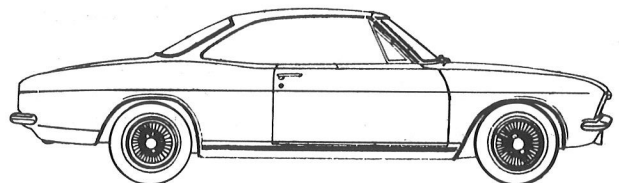
Check your local stores for comparable prices to new
75% cotton - 25% polyester Hanes T-Shirts.



VACATIONLAND CORVAIRS



**OHIO
MAY MEET
V
MAY 17th & 18th**



**• PARTY • CONCOURS • SWAP MEET
• 50/50 DRAWING • DOOR PRIZES**

**BILL BEATTY
CHEVROLET
HURON, OHIO**