



corvair

communique

Volume 15, Number 2

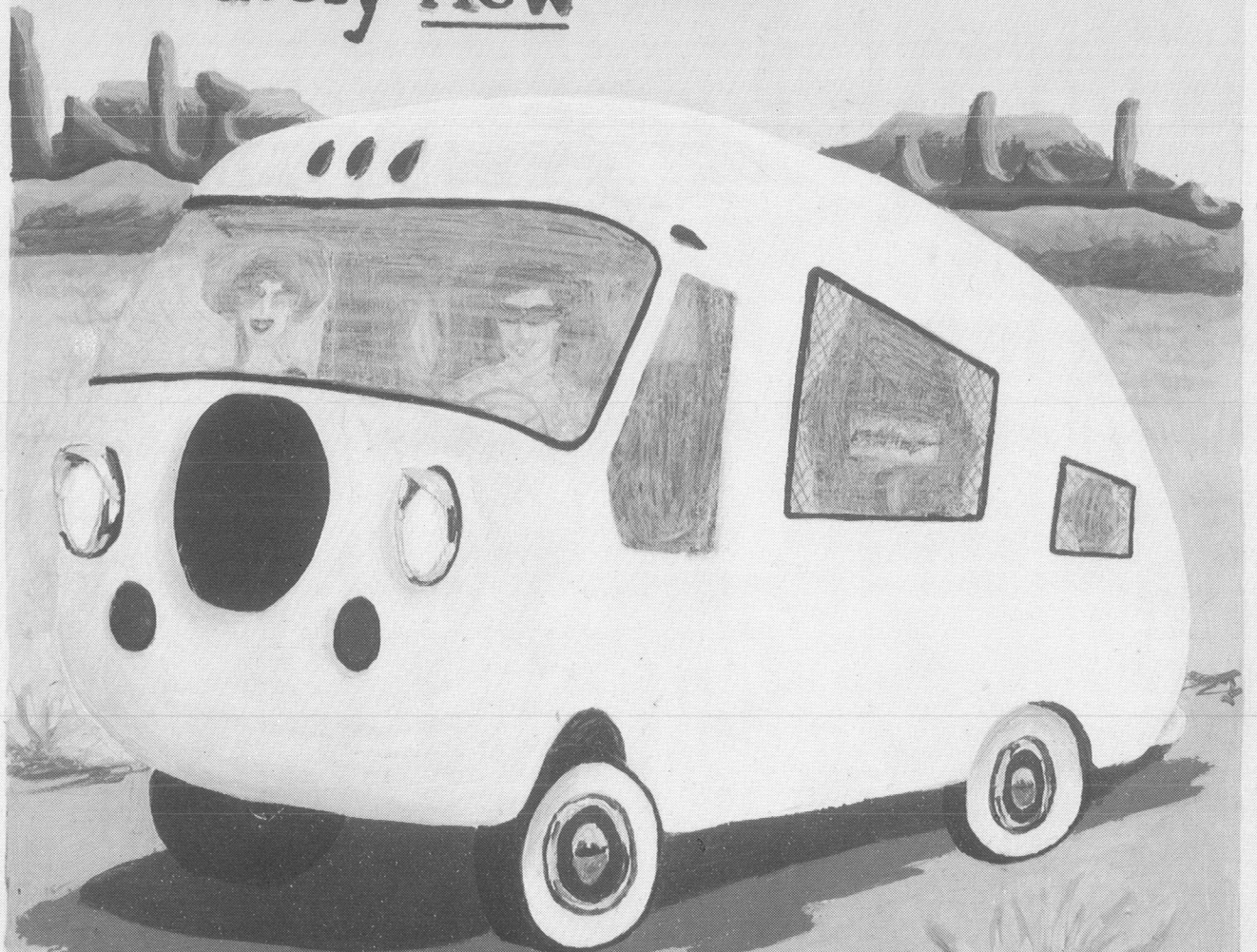
February 1993



Ultravans!

See the West!

in something
absolutely new



UltraVan

the last word in motor coach design

The History of a Dream

Chuck Palmer

Did you see the movie *Tucker: A Man and His Dreams*? Well, if you're an auto enthusiast you should have! It is the story of a man trying to get a project together on a shoestring, fighting the odds. Well, that reminds me of the beginnings of the UltraVan. Back in 1961, David Peterson spent all that time in the garage in Alameda, California while his wife Lucille took care of the family, wondering if he would ever leave the garage. Peterson was excited when he got the hull finished and drove it to the scales without an interior: 1,800 pounds! He was elated. And he hadn't even put the interior in. This kind of recognition and satisfaction comes with doing it "your way." Both Tucker and Peterson had this in common, seeing their own dreams driving down the road. When I saw all of those Tuckers in front of the courthouse in Oakland, California, it captured that feeling I get when I see 30 to 40 UltraVans at a rally.

All these things Detroit couldn't give, you will find in a small garage somewhere in America: a person's dreams and the ingenuity to make it happen.

Batway Productions presents, "Peterson: A Man and His Van." David Peterson's beginnings differ from Tucker's. He came from a humble beginning. His father was a carpenter, and David learned the trade at an early age. Building his own glider at the age of sixteen and then leaning to fly it. Repairing wood spars on aircraft which saved a lot of money, got him jobs others wouldn't (or couldn't) do. He worked at Spartan Aircraft in Tulsa. And during the war he was project manager for the B-29 in Wichita, Kansas. Also

during and after the war he was flying a Twin Beech for Sinclair Oil Company. At that time he started a flight operation in Tulsa with the then-new Beechcraft Bonanza.

He got the idea of putting engines on the wings of the Bonanza. But Walter Beech said it couldn't be done. Well, David did it. He made it go faster and upped the ability to carry more weight. Later Beechcraft came out with their own version of this and called it the Beech Baron.

So in this movie our hero has had a good background of understanding how things work and making ideas work.

One of his toys was a Spartan trailer which was about midway in size between what is now called a travel trailer and a mobile home. If he could drive the unit instead of towing it with a car and be able to tow a boat, he would save nearly half the weight. He started converting the Spartan, planning to put an engine in the front, leaving the rest of it pretty much as it was. He couldn't find an engine and drive system.

It's a good thing that the Olds Toronado was not available or he would have been able to carry out the original plan and the UltraVan probably would not have been born. In the process of looking for a suitable powerplant he looked at the Corvair. The concept was so perfect except the amount of power available could not handle the Spartan. He decided that he could start with a whole new design strictly from his airplane experience and build a new unit with nearly as much space, and cut the weight in half again.

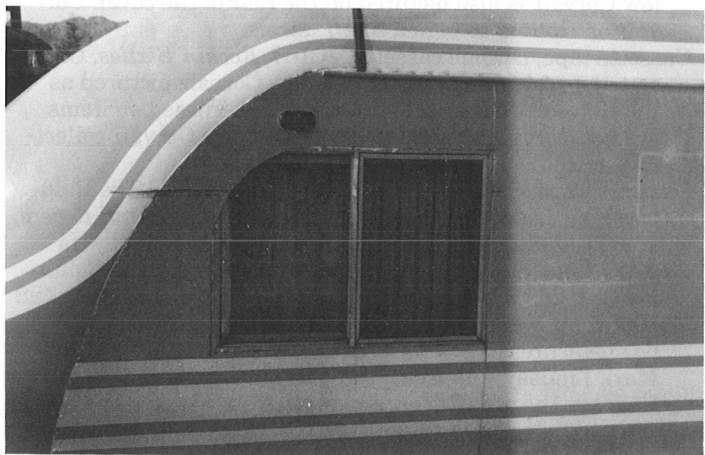
He rented a building and started construction September 1, 1960. January 2,

1961 he got the vehicle license (they were issued on an annual basis at that time) and started driving it. The empty weight was less than 1,800 pounds, 24 feet long, a full eight feet wide, 75" tall inside. Five times the cubic volume of the Volkswagen van and 400 pounds lighter. Even before the interior was finished, he took it to the mountains to test its sustained climbing ability and the project was on the way.

The light weight and streamlined shape was so easy for him because of his overall aircraft experience, plus the static test program that he had just completed on the airplane project. It is really amazing how a box carries a load. He liked to go through the shoe box demonstration to get people thinking, to see how flexible it is without the lid. With the lid on, the box is very strong and in fact one can cut some pretty big holes in it and it is still very strong. It is essential, however, to leave a good beam at the top or bottom or lose it all. Most motor homes, built on a truck chassis, have a load carrying door latch so that the door is part of the structure, due to the relatively heavy weight of the chassis that is torsionally very flexible. This concept requires an even stronger box than if it didn't have the chassis. The problem here is that one can't open or close the door unless on a relatively even surface. This type of construction is called monocoque construction, mono meaning single, and coque meaning shell. This is the type of construction that is used in today's modern aircraft.

His first UltraVan prototype was narrow at the bottom. This was to fit the early Corvair suspension under the rear without having overhang. It was wide at the top. Peterson was unsatisfied with what it looked like. He had not worked from plans, only simple sketches he could put down when he got an idea. He was working in a small garage. Only after it was finished and he rolled it out, did he know what it looked like.

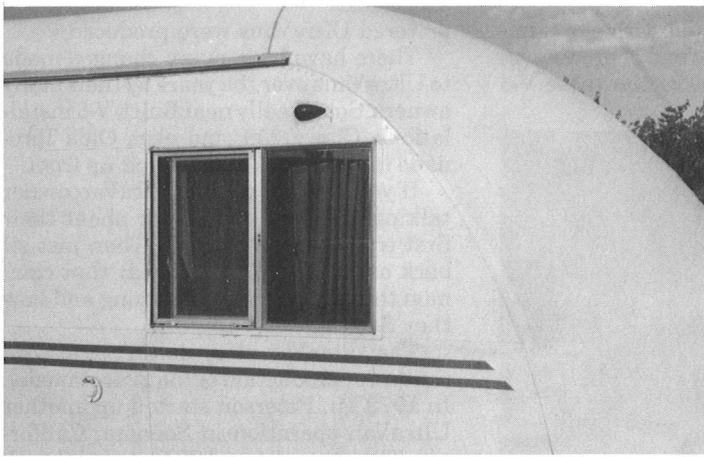
So the number two prototype was used widely for publicity. It was wider at the



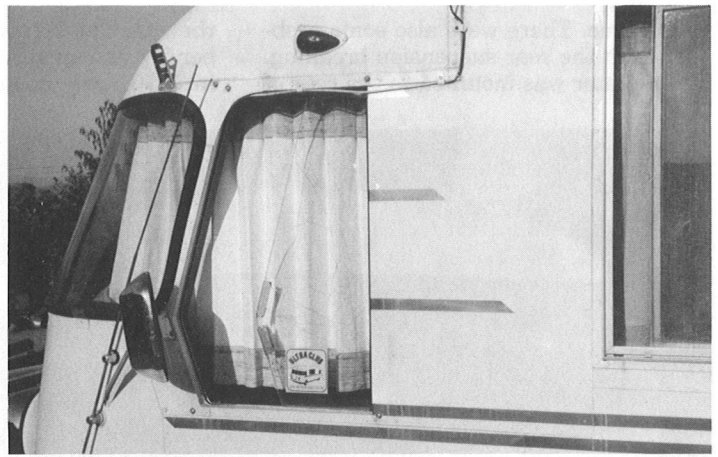
Early 24 foot UltraVan has curved rear window.



Early UltraVan s have a large forward sliding window. This is a 24 foot model.



Late model 22 foot UltraVans have a square rear window.



Late 22 foot models have a smaller sliding front window.

bottom and measured eight feet across at the belt line. He used dual wheels in the rear, not because it was heavy but to make it look better.

One thing led to another and Mr. Peterson was taking orders for his new vehicle called the "Go-Home!" Go home? Yes, Go-Home! I didn't understand it either but that is what the UltraVans were first called. I asked Mr. Peterson why Go-Home!? He couldn't recall why, which made me wonder why. Well, you have just learned a bit of UltraVan trivia.

About 22 UltraVans were built in Oakland by David Peterson or the Prescolite Corporation in San Leandro, California. During this time in 1965 a Mr. John Tiltonson, a Kansas publisher, became interested in the UltraVan. He flew to Oakland and negotiated an arrangement with Mr. Peterson to manufacture the

motor home in Hutchinson, Kansas.

Mr. Peterson took his equipment and tooling to Hutchinson and helped establish the manufacturing facilities which would net a production run of about 340 UltraVans. Total UltraVan production was about 360 units. The early units weighed about 3,500 pounds empty, so the Corvair engine that drove them was quite adequate. Most owners got fourteen to sixteen miles per gallon of gasoline. As production changed, the Vans got heavier and the mileage less.

Some of the major changes are as follows: Van number 215 was the first van to be completely produced in Hutchinson. Number 216 and up used modified late model Corvair suspension. Number 300 and up used half-inch plywood floorboards instead of 3/8" plywood. Number 360 and up had butt welded steering

shafts. Number 300 and up used hot water tanks instead of the instant hot water heaters used in earlier models. Also on 300, front sway bars were added to the lower A-arms. Number 356 and up used flush window glass. And number 364 and up were the late window production glass. Number 411 and up used a three-tank system. The toilet was mounted directly over the holding tank. The bathroom wall was flat (because the instant hot water heater was taken out of the wall).

When the production of the Corvair halted, the availability of Corvair engines became a difficult problem. They settled on the Chevy 307 V-8, mounted in the rear. The driveshaft went forward into a V-drive and back to a Corvette rear end and Corvette modified suspension. It really didn't perform much better than the Cor-

Late Model UltraVan Specifications

Color Combinations

Carpet and Upholstery: Blue, Gold, Green
Paneling: White Walnut, Dark Walnut, Mellow Cherry

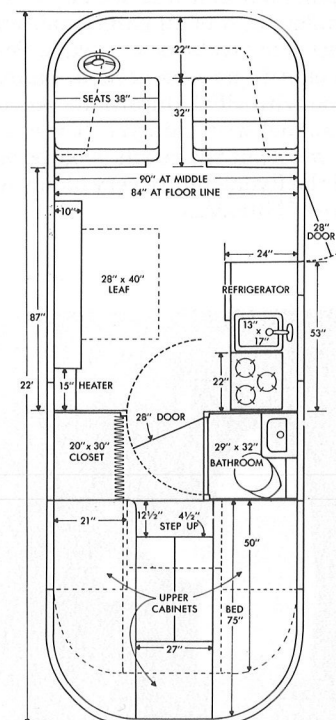
Standard Equipment

Fire extinguisher
Safety belts
Dual batteries
Battery charger
50 gallon fresh water system
Electric water pump
Dual drain system with 50 gallon holding tank
Water heater—six gallon
L.P. Gas system 40 lb. with gauge
L.P. Gas refrigerator with freezer compartment
3-burner range—thermostat, oven and broiler
Spare tire with wheel
Jack and lug wrench
30 gallon gasoline tank
307 cu. in. 200 HP V-8 engine
F78-15 tires

Wall to wall carpet
Drapes at all windows for privacy
Melamine plastic wall paneling
Vinyl coated ceiling
Insulated throughout, including fresh water and holding tank with urethane spray
Safety glass throughout
Wall heater with thermostat—14,000 BTU
110 volt hookup—25" shore line
Two rear view mirrors
Electric windshield wipers
Windshield washers
Clearance lights
Turn signals
Back-up lights
Dual horns
Defrost fans

Optional Equipment

AM/FM radio
Stereo tape player
Generator—110 V
Air conditioning
Tinted windshield



vair engine. There were also some problems with the rear suspension breaking. The radiator was mounted in the rear of

the van. The V-8s started with the number 513 and up until the end of production in 1970. Only about 50 of the these V-8

powered UltraVans were produced.

There have been many changes made to UltraVans over the years by their many owners. Some really neat Buick V-6 installations, Chevy 238, and even Olds Toronado installations in back and up front.

If you want to get an UltraVan owner talking, just ask him or her about their first trip home in the van. Then just sit back and listen! You will hear that common thread of what went wrong and how they fixed it.

The UltraVan story doesn't stop with the end of production of the 22 foot model. In 1972 Mr. Peterson started up another UltraVan operation in Sonoma, California. This was a 24 and 26 foot model with a mid-engine V-8 offset to the driver's side. Only three of these were built (of which I do have one). He used specially extruded I-beams and keel beams. So the story goes on.

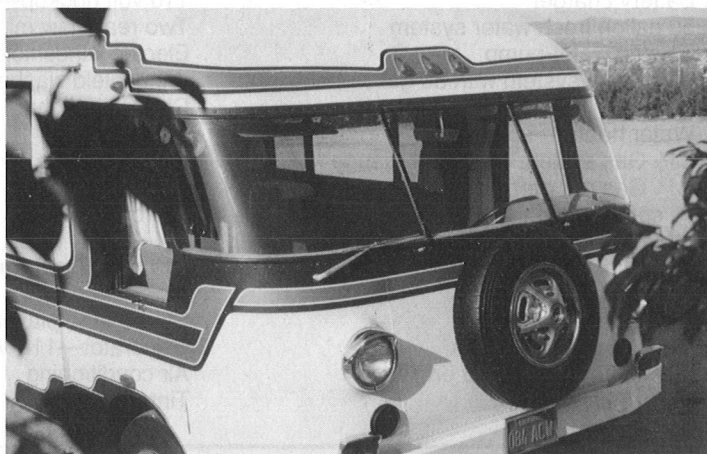
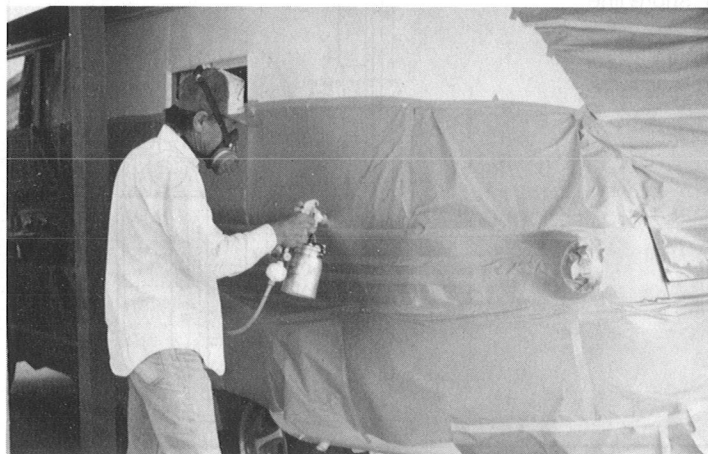
If you would like to keep abreast of UltraVan activities, special stories, and the like, then you must join Group UltraVan and receive their quarterly newsletter *Whales on Wheels*. Send \$4.00 for a year's membership to Group UltraVan, 5537 Pioneer Rd., Boulder, CO 80301. ☺



Two of the three 600 series 24 foot UltraVans that were built (side mounted V-8). Roy Moranaka's #604 and behind Christy Barden's #603.

New Paint For UltraVan #513

After many sketches, drawings, and test layouts on Len and Edys Ryerson's UltraVan #513, a final design was decided upon. Because it had been repainted many years ago and had some spot repairs since, it was decided to strip the complete unit of all paint, and repair fiberglass and rivets as necessary. Seven gallons of stripper was needed. Painting was done with PPG Durathane polyurethane enamel with catalyst. It was a lot of hard work but the result is pleasing to see and the Ryersons are very happy with their "new" UltraVan.



Eureka!

Discovery of the first ULTRAVAN

Jim Craig

Mr. Dave Peterson, designer/builder of the UltraVan, has confirmed that the Ultra shown in the accompanying photos is, in fact, the first UltraVan he built (see the *CORSA Communique*, Vol. 2, Number 8, April 1990).

The information that I followed to find this very rare piece of UltraVan history was originally provided to my friend Mory Snyder, through a longtime friend of his who was an old car buff. Another friend, Bob Franz, Mory, and I contacted the executor of the estate of the last owner and arranged to see the Ultra that was for sale, not knowing which model of Ultra we would see.

After arriving at the executor's home in northern California he showed us the owner's certificate which was a California certificate and it indicated the Ultra to be a 1960 model, first sold in 1960. Wow! I couldn't believe my eyes. After a 20 mile trip from his place up winding dirt roads to his grandfather's place in the mountains, we pulled up to a deserted-looking old house and he said, "Park in front, and the Ultra is out back." Now, just imagine this setting: it is like you might see in rural Kentucky where a Hatfield or McCoy might meet you at the gate brandishing a squirrel rifle and wanting to know, "What business you have in these parts?" The place was quiet and deserted except for a couple of crows that sounded the alarm of our presence.

The Ultra was parked in the back yard in the grape vineyard and at first glance I knew it had to be number one or a prototype. After a few "Wows," "Great Scotts," and some "I can't believe its," I settled down to feast my eyes on this very differently shaped and constructed Ultra. Obviously it had sat quite a few years, it had sunk into the dirt until it settled on its belly. The wheels were buried up to the brake drums and then some. The local packrats had piled up a lot of debris as a home on top of the engine, thinking that someday it might run again and heat up their home. Someone had stripped all of the cabinets and upholstery from the interior, and the floor was stacked up with many old tires and all kinds of other junk. The early Corvair dash panel was intact and it showed 32,000 miles.

The engine appears to be the 80 horsepower, 1960 engine with 1961 carbs. It has an automatic transmission and the complete early Corvair rear suspension assembly. It had single wheels on the rear



but Dave indicated it was originally set up with dual wheels. We measured it out to be 24 feet in length.

The body shell seemed to be in good condition except for some magnesium skins on the left hand side that possibly salt water had got to. Also the front trailer hitch and left front bumper had been pulled off at some time, probably trying to tow it. All of the windshield glass is good except for a few cracks in the lower left corner of the driver's glass. All other plexiglass windows were in good condition.

One of the first things that is noticeably different about this Ultra is that the entrance door is in the center instead of up near the front, and that the front and rear ends do not roll under. This one is angled straight down on front and rear. Also, the headlight assemblies are from a 1960 Corvair.

Yes, this is a very different UltraVan,

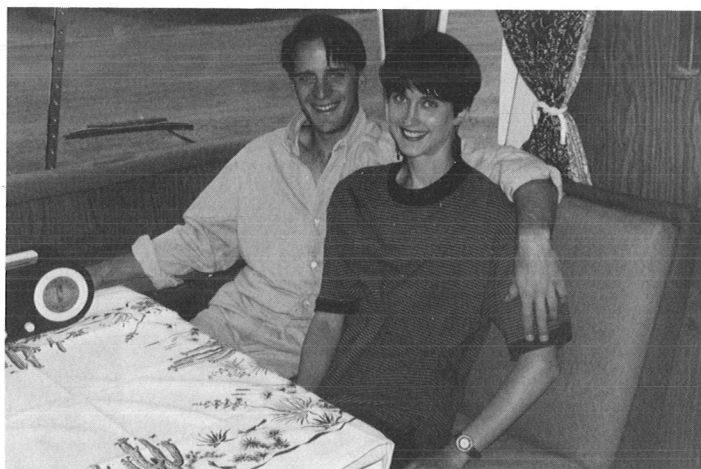
and very rare and important to the UltraVan history. One that only a few people have ever seen. (It is 30 years old.) Most of us have only seen pictures of it. It is very restorable and it would be a job for some dyed-in-the-wool UltraVan person to tackle.

Mory Snyder and I plan to do some minor repairs on the exterior, make it roadworthy, and clean up the interior. It will then be made available to anyone who would complete the restoration on it.

⊕

Editor notes: This article was written in late 1990. Since then, UltraVan number 101 has languished in safe hands, waiting to be restored. At this fall's High Desert Rally of Group UltraVan, it was the subject of some restoration tech sessions. See "Chapter News" for details and pictures.





Love At First Sight

W. Christy Barden

Joe and Dori DeCamillis were looking for a van to drive from Boulder to California for living in while they did their art work. While Joe was driving down the road he saw this funny-looking van parked in a field, and he knew *that was it*. He showed it to his wife Dori and she wasn't sure until she saw the back of the Van. She remembered it as a shape out of the 1930s. It was love at first sight. The Van belonged to Vaught I. Fosmo, number 538, a V-8 model. They bought it!

Joe and Dori met at the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1983. She is from Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and he is from Louisville, Kentucky. Joe majored in creative writing and Dori in fine arts and English. They are both active and eat

healthy foods. When they met it was love at first sight. Dori liked his eyes and sense of humor, Joe liked her legs. They found they had everything in common because they do everything together.

Joe left to attend UCLA in Los Angeles in 1984 Dori went out to visit him four times while he was there. When she was graduated in 1987, he came back to Boulder to be with her. He started house painting with his brother, then managing a Boulder restaurant, then started doing art with Dori. They make art of the 1950s, oil painting of house interiors, from pop to the famous. They were married June 10, 1989.

The UltraVan was in poor shape. They started with the interior. Using an Art Deco theme, they redid the interior. Black and white square linoleum was used for the floor, red and white gingham curtains, light green on the kitchen appliances. They painted the damaged Formica white. The finishing touches are Art Deco painting hung on the walls. My favorite is "See the West!"

Vaught Fosmo was very helpful in getting the Van running and worked on many of his special systems. Next they used my back yard to paint #538. They did the entire job in one weekend. Joe's house painting experience really helped here. The did the prep by sanding by hand

the entire Van, wiped it down, masked the windows, etc. Then using an airless sprayer he painted a primer coat, two gallons of X-I-M Premium Brand 400 white, which is fast drying. He recommends using three gallons. The finish coat was Kelly-Moore Q.D. Industrial Enamel 185-100 white, two gallons. Again he suggests using three gallons. The cost of the paint was about \$50, and airless sprayers rent for about \$40-\$60. The paint job really looks good: a bright white, offset with red wheels and a red cover over the spare tire.

Some people would be satisfied with the same old vehicle. The DeCamillises spent much time making their UltraVan into a piece of their art work. This shows the commitment they have to their future.

Dori has one brother and two sisters, and Joe has three brothers and two sisters. They plan to have six children and would like to start on their first one this year.

As of late 1991 they were parked in the back yard of Elga and Hilda Green (owners of #294) in the Los Angeles area, working to get material together for an art showing. They made it to California with no trouble, and except for a few leaks the Van is working out fine. We wish them the best of luck. Ⓢ



ULTRAVAN 401

Its Own Story

Al Polus

(The following is a script of a recording made by Al Polus which introduces his UltraVan #401 when he is not there to answer questions.)

Hi there, folks. What's that you say? You never saw a motor home like me? No, I wasn't homebuilt. If you have a few minutes I'll tell you about myself.

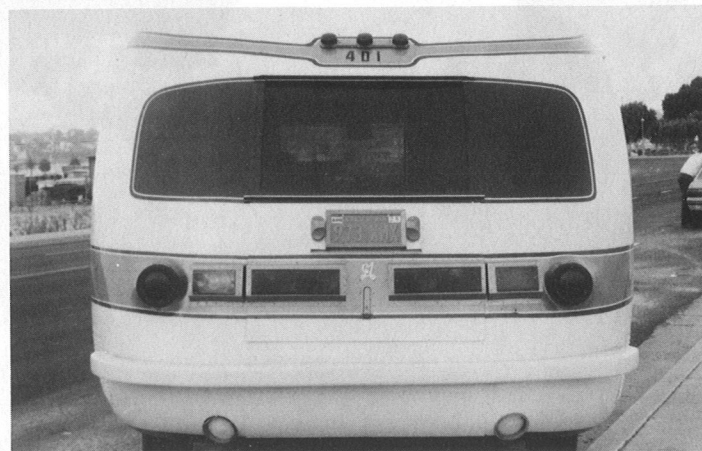
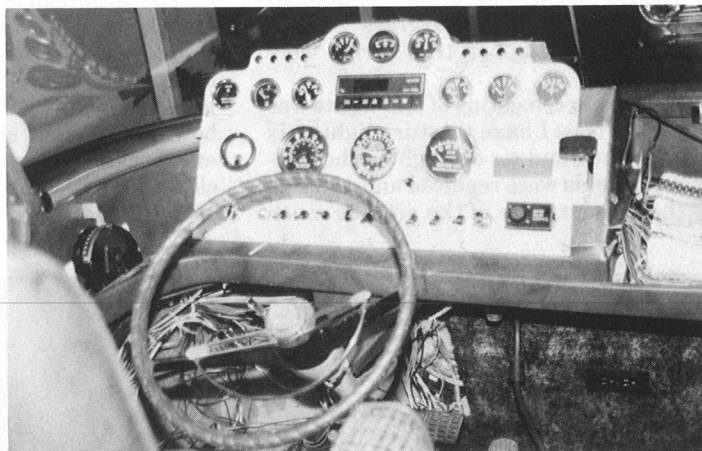
I am an UltraVan. My owner calls me Road Runner because I have been to just about every state in this good old U.S.A., also Canada and Mexico. I have traveled well over 200,000 miles.

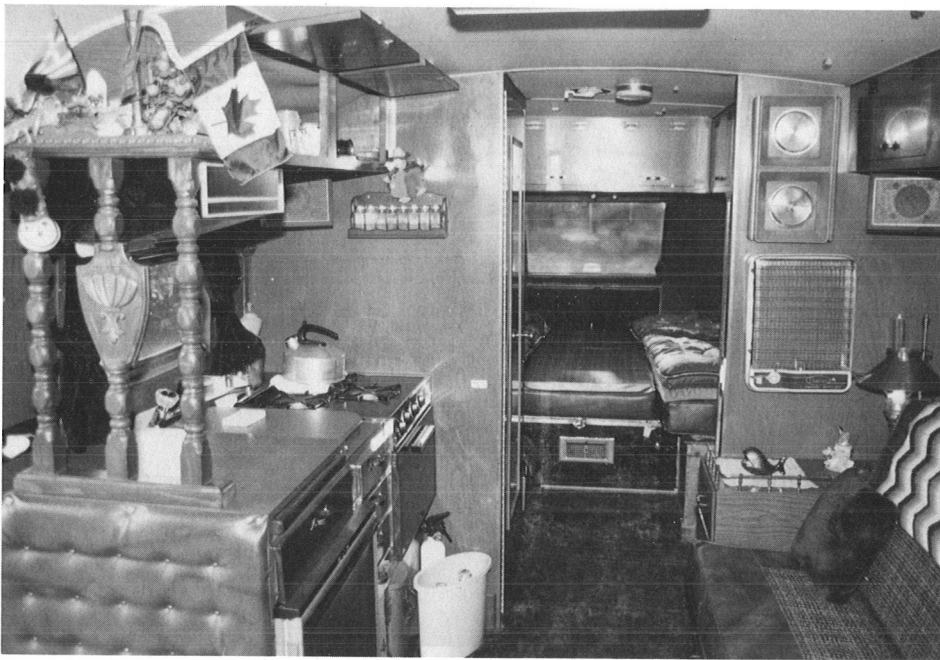
I was built in Hutchinson, Kansas in 1969. There were many more there at that time on the assembly line. I am 22 feet long and weigh under 3,000 pounds empty. I have a 140 horsepower rear-mounted Turbo-Air engine which gives me passenger car speed. This is one horsepower for only 21.4 pounds of weight; other motorhomes using truck

chassis run 40 to nearly 60 pounds for each horsepower. I can travel 15 to 20 miles on a gallon of gas, depending on how much weight I have aboard, the headwinds, and the amount of hill climbing demanded of me. I am less than eight feet tall and 96 inches wide. I can turn at a 50 degree angle and can park in most spaces a car can. My body is of monocoque construction like an airplane fuselage,

with riveted aluminum panels and bulkheads. I carry four tanks: 30 gallons of fuel, 30 gallons of fresh water, 30 gallons of gray water, and a 30 gallon holding tank.

My driver has modified and updated me quite extensively, in fact there have been over 150 changes in me. I will tell you just a few of them. My exterior was off-white in color. I was taken to the air-





port paint shop where all my paint was stripped off to bare aluminum. It was primed, then painted Pastel French Vanilla with acrylic urethane paint. Then a stripe design was added in brown and gold. My small rear window was replaced with a smoked plexiglass one-piece window that slides up between the roof and ceiling. Also a screen that can be put in place when desired.

Next, a new wrap-around rear bumper was fabricated of fiberglass over a wooden form. Rubber trim strips were added.

Light bar consisting of four lights was installed. Now I have two turn lights, six brake lights, and six tail lights. The electrical systems were replaced and updated to the present state of the art. Too much

detail to go into now; over 700 hours of work.

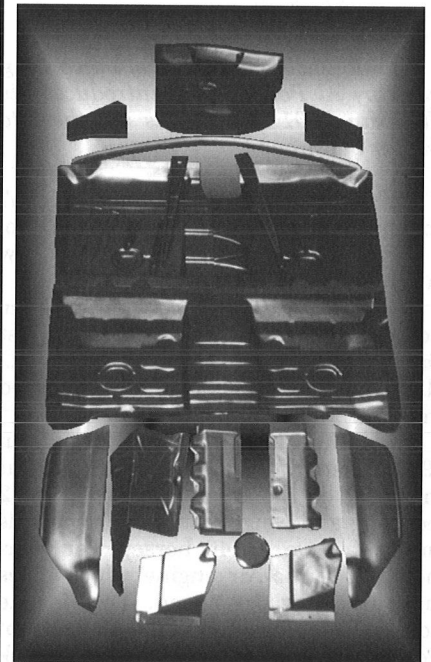
The bedroom was remodeled, with red velour curtains, new cornices, also gold mini-blinds. Walls were covered with gold velour with brown tufted Naugahyde. There are new red cut pile rugs wall-to-wall. The custom mattress is five inches thick, of brown Naugahyde and yellow and brown centers.

The bathroom is wallpapered in silver and white vinyl, floor is brown wall-to-wall carpet. There is a new Sea-Land toilet with updated dump system, and a mirrored wall with new stainless round bowl and walnut sideboard with bronze and brass rail, new folding curtain for closet, and full length mirror on each side of the bathroom door. ④



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High Desert Rally

Jim Craig

The anticipation began to build at our little oasis known as "Rancho Sunny Vista" here in Joshua Tree, California, as Friday afternoon rolled around. The cheery sound of an UltraVan horn was heard as the first two Ultras drew up in the driveway. Even Sandy, our dog, welcomed each Ultra member as part of the family. And on this note we began our fourth annual High Desert Rally with the best friends we could ever have.

The atmosphere of our rally is one of rest and relaxation along with plenty of information in the technical and craft sessions. The first day of the rally was spent welcoming the arrivals and visiting with each, drinking coffee and taking in the good desert air. Each day of the following week, technical and craft sessions began at 10:00 AM and lasted until lunch time, around 2:00 PM. One day was planned for a trip to Laughlin, Nevada (a little Las Vegas on the California border) by bus, but everyone was enjoying themselves so much at the rally that we decided to cancel the trip. On Wednesday we all went to Twentynine Palms, California to visit Bob and Grace Ballew where we had a good technical session by Bob. The ladies enjoyed their crafts, being shown how to paint on small rock slabs by Grace. After leaving the Ballews, we visited with other friends Sid and Pat Remington who have restored an original adobe house in Twentynine Palms.

It seems like each day the ladies performed magic in preparing the potluck dinners. They had something different each day, with an occasional repeat. One day we had lunch at the Seniors Center in Yucca Valley. It was nice to visit with all the people and socialize with other seniors.

Technical sessions during the week included an engine disassembly, repairing damaged aluminum skin on the Ultra, paint stripping, metal cleaning and preparation, corrosion prevention, priming, and topcoat finishing.

Eight of the ten UltraVans that were in the yard left Friday for the Great Western Fan Belt Toss & Swap Meet in Ontario, California. On Saturday those remaining went to the local swap meet and bought a few things, then went to J.R.'s for a big breakfast. On the way home we stopped at some garage sale signs and of course we had to check them out. We all brought something home that we couldn't



do without. All in all, we had a good day.

Sunday was a day of leisure, with nine more UltraVans returning from the GWFBT&SM. That evening we watched slides of Jim and Marlene's trips to Baja California by dune buggies. On other nights Jim showed slides of his travels in Japan and China.

During the two weeks of the rally we had members from Canada, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, California, and Australia. Yes, Australia. A new couple, Dick Pike and Helen Herbel of Sydney. They bought their UltraVan 374 in September 1992 from Emil and Evelyn Miller in La Crescenta, California, while on their way to the United Kingdom. Returning from the U.K. in November 1992, they came immediately to the Ultra rally. The Ultra 374 has had a V-8 installation and one owner from new (1968). They intend to tour North America from time to time, indefinitely, coming mainly from Australia which probably will be their home base.

Friends in La Crescenta knew they were looking for a motor home. A "For Sale" sign was seen being put up by Evelyn Miller on her front fence. Dick and

Helen phoned them the night they arrived in Los Angeles. They inspected the van the next morning and bought it at first sight. They liked it straight off. Helen and Dick spent five weeks touring England in a VW bubbletop, and on their return to L.A. were ready to take off in their new UltraVan that had been checked over by their engineer friend Barry Gage. They were told about the Joshua Tree rally and thus headed off.

"We have spent a wonderful week with the Craigs, receiving an abundance of friends, hospitality, and making new contacts with people of your country," say Helen and Dick. "We have discovered the beauty of the desert and walked amongst its wildlife."

Dick and Helen had a crash course on the operation of UltraVan 374 and learned to cook pumpkin pie. They offer thanks to all those people who have kindly offered U.S. friendship to two Aussies.

The weather stayed pretty good until late in the second week when the temperature started falling into the low 30s at night. All in all, it was a great time. Everyone bid each other so long until the January 1993 rally in Las Vegas.



