


AmericanWay

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OCTOBER 1984



Ferry Nice
Pg. 124

The Old Volks At Home

By JULIE BECKER

Vermont Volksmaniac Frank Hanley lives by the credo: You can't keep a good bug down.

In an era of lemons, Frieda Volkswagen was a genuine peach. She never broke down in out-of-the-way places, she handled herself beautifully in blizzards and torrential downpours, and in several frightening situations, she avoided collisions by turning quickly on a dime.

I drove Frieda out of the showroom in June, 1967. During her lifetime she cruised America, logging 201,224 miles through 27 states. She was a bright red berry of a bug, eager to accept the challenges of the road. With inextinguishable vigor, she climbed the steep hills of San Francisco, crossed the Rockies in Colorado, survived a dust storm in Kansas, and sloshed through mud up to her belly while exploring the back roads of Vermont.

By the spring of 1983, however, I was faced with a serious dilemma. I'd always promised Frieda that I'd never take her to a junkyard; in fact, the thought of running her through a compactor chilled my very bones. Yet I had to face reality: She was no longer safe to drive. Her front end shook, her brakes were questionable, her electrical system was full of short circuits and corrosion, and her rust-ridden frame was clearly separating from her body, even though gobs of Bondo and fiberglass were stuffed in the cracks.

For a brief while I considered turning her into a planter, growing ferns and wild flow-

ers in her backseat. She had too many rough edges to become a piece of playground equipment, and I dared not donate her to the annual demolition derby at the Champlain Valley Fair. Luckily I found the solution when I discovered Frank Hanley's Old Volks Home.

Hanley, a technical designer by trade, runs a retirement home for old bugs in his backyard in Milton, Vermont. With several dozen Volkswagens in his possession, he's able to restore vintage Beetles for a hobby, often collecting parts from three or four cars to yield one authentic model.

His *pièce de résistance* is a pristine 1955 sedan named Mrs. Phipps the Graylady, but he's also resurrecting a 1950 convertible, a 1952 split-window sedan, and a 1951 Karmann-built convertible — which alone will cost \$18,000 to fully restore. Once those are done, he plans to turn his 1963 sun-roof model into a replica of Walt Disney's Herbie, using electronic gadgetry to squirt water, beep the horn, and open and close the hood.

As might be expected, Hanley's garage is a maze of VW hardware, "semiorganized" so he has some idea where to look for engine components, electrical parts, suspensions, and

Frank Hanley shows off two restored Volkswagens, one of which is Mrs. Phipps the Graylady (in foreground).







Hanley restores Beetles at his Old Volks Home in Milton, Vermont.

transmissions. Doors, fenders, and quarter panels all have their places, as do gaskets, weather stripping, floor pans, chrome, and carpeting. He says:

"I can't go more than two or three weeks without getting behind the wheel of a Volkswagen. Otherwise I start withdrawal symptoms. There's something about a new Volkswagen smell. It gets in your blood and you just can't shake the phobia — that little tight feeling when you close the door and you feel your eardrums about ready to explode."

There's an innocence that comes with owning a VW bug, which is probably the reason so many people give them affectionate names such as Zuma, Eugene, Benny Blue Boy, the Fledermaus, and my own Frieda. According to Hanley, each Beetle has its own personality and requires a bit more appreciation than an ordinary car. He observes:

"A Volkswagen is part of the family. It becomes a pet, and instead of patting it, you wash and wax it. It almost seems to be semihuman."

The funny-looking little autos quickly acquired a reputation for dependability when they first were imported to America from Germany (where the words *Volks* and *Wagen* combined to mean "the peoples' car"). They were simple to operate and easy to repair. This was a real boon to the amateur mechanic, for, as Hanley notes, even "a moron on a bad day" could fix a VW.

People got hooked on Volkswagens be-

cause they were long on gas and short on maintenance. You could count on a bug to start in the morning, no matter how frigid the weather, and keep chugging forward, no matter how rough the road.

As the VW bug increased in popularity, stories of Beetle exploits in snow became legendary. The engine was mounted in back over the rear tires, so the car would go as long as there was some traction. Hanley remembers a severe blizzard in the early 1970s when northern Vermont roads were blanketed with nearly 40 inches of fresh snow. The road he lived on was never plowed, but that didn't hold back his 1965 convertible. He recalls:

"Snow was literally parting over the hood and up around the windshield and down around the sides of the door, but yet the car kept going."

Volkswagen antics aren't limited to snow and ice. Bugs have been known to perform well in water too. An ad Volkswagen used to put in magazines showed a bug driven down into a boat access area. The copy read: "The last one to conk out is a Volkswagen." (One is reminded of the classic scene in the 1973 Woody Allen movie *Sleeper*, in which Allen — who, after sleeping for 200 years and waking up in the Twenty-second Century — spots a 1970s vintage VW resting in a pond. He turns the key, and the bug starts without so much as a sputter.)

Early Volkswagen owners used to remind passengers to open the window a crack be-

fore trying to close the door. Brand-new Volkswagens were airtight, and for that matter, watertight too. People used to claim that Beetles would float, and more than one has given it a try. Says Hanley:

"In England a few years back they used to have boating races with Volkswagens. They used to seal up the bottom of them, drive 'em down into the rivers, and see who could drive across to the other side."

But what has happened to the venerable Volks? Known as everyone's favorite second car, they were purchased by millions of folks in the 1950s and '60s, then suddenly became scarce when Volkswagen of America announced in 1979 that no more Beetles would be produced in this country.

Hanley attributes the decision to cease production to several factors. He notes that the dollar was on a terrible skid in the mid 1970s, while the German mark was on its way up — a phenomenon that caused the price of Beetles to double in about three years.

But the crushing blow came, he believes, when Americans began to see the need for pollution controls on automobiles. With the extra equipment, the Beetle went from 60 horsepower down to 40. Laments Hanley:

"The car was so heavy, it could hardly get out of its own way. I think that more than anything caused its demise."

At about the same time, American drivers were looking for fancier buttons, dials, and gadgets. For a once-simple car that was manufactured for more than 20 years without

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even a gas gauge on the dashboard, the new-fangled bugs just didn't fit the mold. The worst change, in Hanley's estimation, was the introduction in 1968 of an automatic transmission.

"Why take a good thing and ruin it?" he asks, adding: "I've never known anybody that even liked 'Auto-Stick Shift,' and I don't think they ever really sold that well. To me, it was 'un-Volkswagen.'"

Today, Volkswagen bugs are made in Mexico, and Beetle purists will be happy to learn that they've gone back to the basics — the way bugs were meant to be when they were designed in Germany in the late 1930s. The Mexican bugs are air-cooled, so steaming radiators are never a worry, and with fewer pollution controls in Mexico, the price is still cheap. Hanley says VWs are so prolific there that the joke is: "A Volkswagen is like a bellybutton. Everybody has one."

Many Americans still savor the chance to drive a new bug, and Hanley says it's not an impossible dream. The catch is, they'll probably have to wait at least six months because the demand is so high. A company in California imports Beetles from Mexico and "federalizes" them by putting on stronger bumpers and door beams and adding pollution controls. Oddly enough, the new bugs pass the emission standards in all states except California, which has the strictest laws.

California also is the leader in old Beetle restoration. Hanley says it's almost impossible to find bugs or bug parts in West Coast salvage yards any more because they've been bought up in bulk. He says:

"They command extremely high prices out there and are very desirable. It's kind of funny. You drive down to Bel Air or places like that and you'll see a Mercedes-Benz or a Rolls-Royce — and a Volkswagen. It's a status symbol right now to have a Volkswagen."

Not surprisingly, Hanley's long-term goal is to build and maintain a complete production history museum of the Volkswagen Beetle from 1945 through 1979. He'll need 38 restored bugs to represent each major model change, and, if all goes well, the doors will be open within 15 years.

As for my faithful Frieda, she'll never be a museum piece, but Hanley has promised that she'll be honorably reincarnated. Her engine and transmission will be removed and rebuilt, then used, along with two fenders and the hood, in a 1967 convertible. More than a mere "parts car," she'll be an organ donor, nobly giving the gift of life to one of her compatriots who has yet to succumb to the invasion of rust.

Julie Becker is a writer based at Shelburne, Vermont — not far by Beetle from the Old Volks Home at Milton.