

Appealing to the gypsy in all of us.

JEAN SHEPHERD

• Today we are going to take up the brief study of one of the true curiosities of late 20th century American life—a substrata of the population that I shall here designate as the Van Culture. Little has been written about this, so I feel strongly that it is time to put it down for the record.

The Van Culture, though an offshoot of an earlier tribe called the VW People, should not be confused with those floating-bedroom devotees of California. It also has little in common with the Camper Crowd, although there are some superficial points of resemblance. Obviously, their vehicles have some similarities: unwieldiness and the ability to be used for sleeping as well as for lugging large crowds over the landscape. After that, the resemblances cease.

The Camper Crowd tends to attract dedicated family types—somewhat overweight, highly conservative politically, extremely fertile and usually middle-aged. They read *The Readers Digest*, *Field and Stream* and *TV Guide*. They can be heard any time of the day or night blabbing back and forth over their beloved CB radios, using such terms as "code seven," "ten-four" and others picked up by watching *Adam-12*, one of their all-time favorite TV shows.

On the other hand, the Van People tend to be heavily bearded, compulsive consumers of Granola and lifetime subscribers to *The Mother Earth News*. Their social habits tend to a distinct aversion to marriage unless it is performed by a guru standing knee-deep in the waters of Hiawatha. Despite the fact that a considerable number of them are now rapidly approaching their 50s, they remain forever 19. When they bother to vote at all, they will always cast their ballots for minority representatives. Their ideal candidate would be a black homosexual woman who once worked in the lettuce fields and has a strong dash of Cheyenne blood in her veins. (At this point, I feel it necessary to point out that I am making no value judgments, merely describing some of the more significant movements of our time.)

Both groups—the Van Culture and the Camper Crowd—seem to enjoy plastering their vehicles with various bits of propaganda material designed to prove to the world that their hearts are in the right place. The Camper Clan is forever proclaiming proudly its married togetherness state: *The Murchisons* or *Al & Freda Bugleblast* or *Bob, Betty, Ronnie, Dannie and Rover*.

This is often accompanied by a frank admission of their home base, regardless of how dismal it may be. Teaneck, New Jersey and Frankfort, Indiana seem to be among the more popular locales. The address is often accompanied in large block letters by the proud CB call sign: KF09768903, the assumption being that passing motorists would care to communicate with Bob and Betty and presumably Rover.

The Van People; on the other hand, are fond of plastering their equipment with such goodies as *Danger, I Brake For Animals* on the assumption that the mean old others are maliciously bashing their cars into goats, pigs, elderly Saint Bernards, draft horses and mud turtles.

Both groups have one overwhelming trait in common: Intense self-approval.

Future social historians, I firmly believe, are going to study the various strata in our society and judge their significance to the time by standards other than the old-fashioned class divisions such as economic, educational, racial and ethnic groupings. All these traditional structural lines are blurring rapidly, while such new social divisions as the Camper Clan and the Van Culture are becoming more sharply defined.

The driving styles of both sects are as opposed as their philosophies. The Camper Clan seem to be totally oblivious of any other machine on the road, ponderously rumbling with tank-like stolidity right down the

exact middle of the turnpike. I have seen 300 cars held up for hours by two or three strategically placed campers. And even though you'll occasionally see a lunatic motor-home careening along at 85-plus reminding you of nothing so much as a runaway Cape Cod house on wheels, the Camper Crowd generally drive as conservatively as they vote.

In contrast, the Van Culturists wheel their badly-sprung, unstable, underbraked, high-center-of-gravity, overloaded hulks as though they were Carreras. Recently in a Howard Johnson's on the Jersey Turnpike, I got into a rap with a state cop who spends his life patrolling that infamous highway.

COP: "Boy, I sure need this cup of coffee."

ME: "How come?"

COP: "Me and my partner just pulled another crowd of freaks outta the burning wreckage of a van."

ME: "Great Scott! Was it bad?"

COP: "Bad? You shoulda seen it. Even their tie-dyed T-shirts was on fire. One guy had an Afro that was burnin' so bad Newark Airport coulda used it as a beacon."

ME: "Holy smokes!"

COP: "That ain't funny, not funny at all."

ME: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way. It's just a figure of speech. You say they were driving a van?"

COP: "Yeah, before they pranged it. Naturally, there was about 15 or 20 kids in the back sleepin' off something, and the boob that was drivin' musta been going 95."

ME: "Ninety-five?"

COP: "Buddy, all van freaks drive 'em flat out. They love to tailgate. Don't ask me why, they just do."

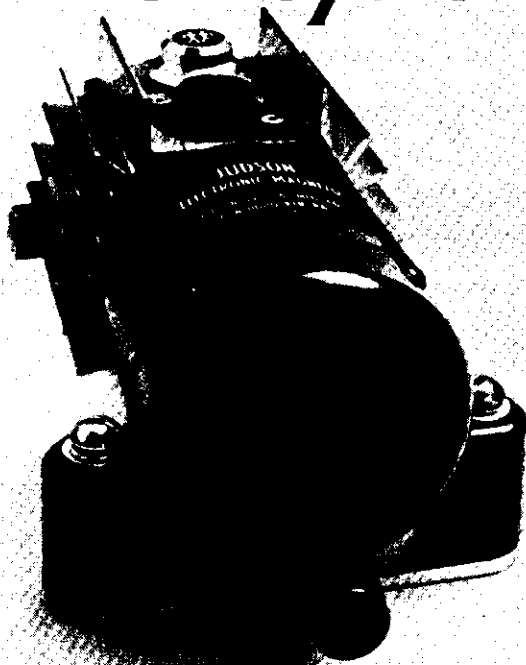
ME: "How many fatalities?"

COP: "Are you kiddin'? Ain't you ever heard the old saying 'God protects drunks and heads'? It looked like there was at least 30 of them staggering around in the bushes with their cigarette papers on fire, hollering, 'Far out!' and 'Heavy!' Me and Al hosed 'em down with CO₂. For once they didn't hit no-

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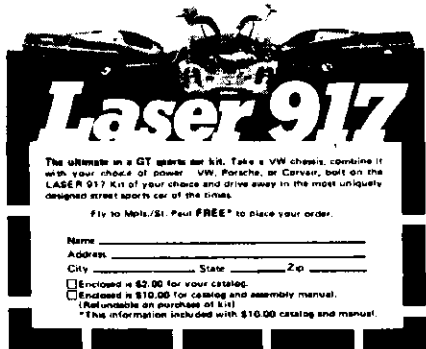
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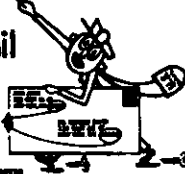
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body in another car. They just got caught in a mean crosswind doin' 95. That old van went airborne and left the road, hopped a culvert and that was all she wrote. She flipped over a couple times and them heads spilled outa her like two pounds of dried beans leavin' a one-pound baggie."

ME: "Wow!"

COP: "Yeah, you can say that again. I got one word of advice. Watch out for them vans. They love to tailgate, y'hear?"

He got up, paid for his coffee and left. I got to thinking about the whole new Van Culture and all the good things it has brought to America: a new sense of togetherness, for one. By the very nature of the van it tends to create crowds, and this can ultimately have a profound effect on our social structure, perhaps bringing people together after the splintering of the family group during the early days of the 1960s.

I saw a bumper sticker on the Massachusetts Turnpike, flapping in the breeze on the butt end of an Econoline van, that read: *The Family That Vans Together Hangs Together*. I guess they meant "stays" together, but then you never know.

Nevertheless, "vanning," as a verb, has become a fact. As with any new sporting activity, a whole catalog of subsidiary nuttiness had developed, not the least of which is the rapidly emerging school of art that probably will become known in time as Van Art, a natural evolution stemming from Op, Pop and other lesser schools spawned by Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup cans. The vast, flat expanses of metal make great canvases, and I have seen some really spectacular examples of the genre. I suspect that Salvador Dali would love to get his fingers on a van. A nice, eerie lunar landscape with maybe a melting watch or two dripping down over the door handles, evocative of space, loneliness, unscreamed screams and visions of endless, ghostly turnpikes leading from Nowhere to Nothingness through menacing, green-glassed toll gates manned by grinning toads. Wowie!

One dark night in L.A. I spotted a van on the strip that must once have been a run-of-the-mill VW, but whoever did the paint was heavily influenced by Vermeer, with overtones of Rembrandt. And then there was one I saw in Philadelphia, tootling along Broad Street, splashed with a bouquet of Van Gogh sunflowers gleaming under an angry, swirling sun of orange and crimson. (Wait until some guy with a real sense of humor paints his Nomad or Winnebago to look like a traveling log cabin.)

We are a nomadic, gypsy people and are getting even more so as time goes by. And gypsies have always decorated their wagons, so we are only carrying on the tradition. The van is an ideal vehicle for our restless race, the natural successor to the Conestoga wagon that brought us across the plains. By the mid 21st century, countless people may live their entire lives in vans, forever on the move. I can think of worse fates. ●