

Reader Publishing Group

Let There Be Books

Traveling Light, Seeing the World, At 35 mph

By Ken Cable

Sometimes while traveling along we encounter people whose stories remain indelibly etched in our memories. It's usually because of the remarkable tales they have to tell and the examples of human ingenuity, adaptability and courage they display. Our encounter with the man and the Cushman motor scooter is a perfect example.

Many years ago we were on our way home from a couple weeks of roaming around Texas in our new twin Commander motor homes. We were revisiting the boyhood home of my brother-in-law "Tex" Allen. Tex has been in our family for a very long time. We bet on things a lot - I rarely win. You'd think I'd learn.

As we traveled along the Texas byways, he would entertain us with stories about his youth (via our CB radios) and of the colorful towns we were passing through. As we approached Elliott, Texas, he told us it was once called "Bug Scuffle" and I said, "Nah, not even in Texas." I bit and bet a longneck Pearl (a local beer) that even in Texas no town named 'Bug Scuffle' ever existed.

We stopped on a dusty street in the middle of town and I asked a woman walking by if Elliott was always named Elliot. Without hesitation, she replied, "No, it used to be called Bug Scuffle."

But I digress.

Heading west, we stopped one afternoon at a park on the Gila River near Gila Bend, Arizona. Our plan was to detour south for a day to visit Organ Pipe National Monument to see the desert in bloom.

The Gila River, dry most of the year, was flowing with about 6 inches of water from its source in the Black Range Mountains of western New Mexico. Our kids wasted no time jumping in the river where they cavorted and splashed the afternoon away. We were relaxing in our coach watching the kids in the river when there came a knock at our door.

I opened the door and greeted our neighbor who stood there with an old-style enamel coated coffee pot in his hand. He asked if we could spare a pot of water from our supply. Of course we could.

When we arrived at the park we noticed this gentleman, a middle-aged guy (grey hair, careworn face) setting up a very small, one person tent, next door. Parked in front of the tent was a Cushman motor scooter which I will describe later. This was the man at our door. We invited him in, made introductions all around, provided him with a longneck and his story began to unfold.

But first, let me describe his motor scooter. Most people in our age group remember the ubiquitous Cushman. They were everywhere when we were kids and came in

different shapes, sizes and colors. Our neighbor's was a vintage step-thru model - with home-made modifications.

On each side of the scooter housing he had fabricated and attached a plywood saddlebag perhaps 30 inches high, 6 inches deep and about 18 inches wide – with a closeable hatch. These he had painted dark green to match his scooter.

In one of these compartments he carried his pantry, a small Coleman stove, pans, coffee pot, a water jug, tent, pegs, ground cloth and a ¼-inch nylon rope. In the other he carried a second jump suit (he was wearing one of two), other articles of clothing and a small, goose down sleeping bag.

These items constituted everything he owned in the world, he said. A long neck or two later he told his story.

He had been in army for many years and achieved the rank of Technical Sergeant (two rockers under the chevrons). He was a diesel mechanic. As the Viet Nam war was drawing to a close the army began to look for ways to thin its ranks. They offered "Sarge" a fully paid Diesel Mechanic training course in exchange for his resignation from the army.

He accepted and almost immediately regretted that move. The training was poor and he soon found himself jobless, homeless and on foot. His effort to return to the army failed.

He acquired the aforementioned motor scooter and outfitted it as previously described and went on the road. As he traveled from place to place in the U.S. he would stop in little towns and work as a mechanic for a short while, resupply and ride on. On this day he was coming from California on his way to Dallas, Texas (can't remember why Dallas), then he was going to go to Lincoln, Nebraska, home of the Cushman Motor Works.

Sarge knew his motor scooter from top to bottom, stem to stern. It was an older vehicle when he acquired it, and like any aging man, beast or thing, it needed frequent maintenance to keep it going. There is a particular seal or gear somewhere deep in the engine bowels of his scooter that periodically needed replacement. After Dallas, he was riding to Lincoln to acquire this critical part that was out-of-stock everywhere else.

After Lincoln, Nebraska, his plan, he said, was to visit the small towns in the Middle West, angling down south as summer waned and the fall brought cooler weather in the north. Asked how he managed the super highways in his travels he said he mostly avoided them and when he couldn't he would ride on the shoulder.

The various Highway Patrols he encountered never cited him but encouraged him to find another route as soon as he could. His top speed was 35 miles an hour anywhere he went, which makes this next part of his story even more remarkable.

We asked him what other destinations he was planning for. He said he was going to make another trip to Alaska next year.

"Waaaaait a minute," I exclaimed, "you're making *another* trip to Alaska? You've already been there on that scooter - at 35 miles an hour?"

He said that he had made the trip during his first full year on the road.

"What about snow, ice, blizzards?" I asked.

Sarge explained. He said he started in April and followed the seasons north, staying with the good weather as it changed. By the time he got to Alaska, it was summer. Sometime in July he started south, ahead of the snow, ice and blizzards. He said it like it

was nothing unusual to ride and live out of a motor scooter all the way to Alaska and back.

Our afternoon waned. We retrieved the kids from the river and made dinner. Sarge declined our invitation, preferring to finish some left over Dinty Moore stew he had, before it spoiled. He packed and left at daybreak. I heard his Cushman rattle to life and listened as the sound of it faded off toward Dallas.

We have driven to Alaska more than once. We too followed the changing weather and stayed mostly dry. Our last trip, however, was a cruise.

Sitting on our balcony, looking out at wilderness that came right down to the waters edge, I thought about Sarge, scootering to Alaska on his tiny, rolling home.

Made me feel just a little guilty.

Ken Cable is a nature and travel writer. His novel "Lost!" about three young boys attempting to survive in the high Sierras during a spring storm can be ordered at www.readerpublishing.com. You can contact him at Ken@readerpublishing.com