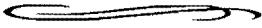


Mr. Skiff's VW



IN 1952, MORRISVILLE'S closest contact with the outside world was its neighbor Stowe, where tony people had begun to settle to enjoy the Nosedive, the National, the Perry Merrill, and the other trails hanging off the single chairlift. While Stowe was a smorgasbord of Austrians, Norwegians, and New Yorkers, Morrisville was a pale casserole of Catholics from French Canada and Protestants who thought they were there before trees.

Morrisville peopled the Mountain Company's trail-grooming snowshoe crews, lifeline maintenance shifts, and hospitality services. It was also where the ambulances raced nervous flatlanders to have their broken bones set by Doctor Phil in the wood-frame Copley Hospital. Orthopedics was a growth industry in Morrisville in the fifties. Depression, known then as melancholia, had not even achieved medical status.

In faraway Manhattan, the emerging multinational Union Carbide and Carborundum Corporation, lashed by the fear of a nuclear attack on Manhattan, had just completed a study to find the two least likely places in the United States where such an attack might occur. The winners were Morrisville, Vermont, and some nameless erg in the Arizona desert. Morrisville was no doubt selected because of its proximity to Stowe's more urbane hospitality offerings and to the Montrealer that steamed its way north daily from Grand Central Station.

Morrisville had yet to hear of, much less form, such a thing as a Regional Development Authority, so it did little more than react with curiosity as the cinderblocks gradually took the shape of Union Carbide's supposedly bombproof vital records storage center.

Natives would, of course, be offered jobs, but it was understood that it would require the mental horsepower of a New Yorker to actually manage the place, so,

perhaps because he had done something terribly wrong, one Mr. Skiff was chosen from the legions of Union Carbide employees in New York to manage the new facility in Morrisville. Father MacDonough's house next door with its matching woodframe garage was acquired from the Holy Family Catholic church at New York prices and given to Mr. Skiff and his wife as a residence. The first four local employees were Charlie Bailey, Emile Couture, Stan Fitts, and Pete Trepanier.

Their jobs were all variants of receiving and putting away files in boxes on shelves and remembering where they were. Pete was the handyman/janitor. He immediately plowed up half the newly acquired building lot and planted the largest asparagus bed in Lamoille County. This required liberal, frequent, and heady applications of manure. Mr. Skiff allowed this unusual use of corporate assets for the time being in deference to Pete's ability to repair virtually anything, including Morrisville's first copier.

This novelty cost \$3,600, the price of a home or a fleet of cars in those days, and was the size of a chest freezer. It had dozens of light bulbs and took eight minutes to produce one copy, a sort of daguerreotype printed on cardboard. Each copy cost \$3 to produce. It was the envy of every business in town that relied on mimeograph machines to make copies that faded into oblivion often before they were read.

Mr. Skiff approached his exile with great good humor and natives took a cautious liking to this puckish executive from down country. His city ways were a source of endless discussion in Patch's Market, Peck's Pharmacy and Graves' Hardware.

Nothing, however, generated more rural chatter than his purchase from somewhere in Connecticut of a brand new black 1954 Volkswagen reputed to cost about \$650. The car was designed by Hitler himself according to Peavine who drove cab for Eugénie Delaire. The only available color was black. The price, had it not been reported in *The Saturday Evening Post*, would have been discretely withheld by Mr. Skiff. After all, farms were still selling for \$5,000. Though gas, at 11 cents a gallon, was hardly an issue, the VW claimed to go very far on very few gallons of it. There was not yet an EPA to authenticate VW's claims, but MPG meant little to Morrisville citizens, for whom gas mileage ratings were as alien as ski wax formulas.

The black bug, however, fascinated townfolk the day it appeared, no one more than Pete Trepanier, a man with a strong affinity for internal combustion,

external combustion (dynamite), fruited brandies, and moving objects. Pete was the adopted son of Clovis and Elise Couture and the informal stepbrother of his Union Carbide colleague Emile Couture.

Whenever he got the chance, Pete circled the odd-looking vehicle with its flat windshield, its gas tank in the front trunk where the motor should be and its curious little air-cooled, four-cylinder engine where the trunk should be. There was no dashboard other than a speedometer/odometer and an ashtray. When you ran out of gas, you flipped a lever on the floor and the gallon of gas held in the reserve tank got you to a gas station.)

("Those krauts," Pete would mutter in a Québécois accent. Like many in the town, he was endlessly drawn to the curious car when Mr. Skiff parked on Portland Street to run an errand. The association with Hitler's Third Reich and the still painful experience of World War II kept a few in town at bay and intriguing quietly between lace curtains, while others stood on the sidewalk gawking.

Mr. Skiff took it all in stride and was quite proud of his car's status among the natives. He spoke politely with the curious, confessing his complete lack of understanding of things mechanical, but professing a deep affection for the appearance and fuel economy of his choice. He quoted to all who would listen the extraordinary mileage figures cited for the car. This meant nothing to his listeners, except for Pete, whom it annoyed.

Within the first few days of the car's arrival in Morrisville and a lengthy presentation to his workers by Mr. Skiff on the VW's design provenance and fuel economy, Pete was seized with a notion that he shared only with Emile and Charlie. A decision was taken to pool some funds so as to ensure that the gas mileage rating claimed by Mr. Skiff was exceeded. Pete secured a five-gallon gas can and job assignments were allotted. The proximity of the garage to the office was helpful. The proximity to the house was of concern.

That first evening Pete, the ringleader, snuck into the garage under cover of darkness and refilled the gaugeless gas tank without incident. Several days later, a much less comfortable Emile repeated the procedure and this simple process of reverse larceny repeated itself every few days into October.

It was several weeks before Mr. Skiff noted publicly that the vehicle he had bought had yet to use up its first ten gallons of gas in spite of the fact that he had put over 600 miles on the odometer. People outside the conspiracy began to take some notice. Mr. Skiff was proud but not cocky.

As November approached and the odometer crept up to 1,000 miles, Mr.

Skiff became even more enthralled with his new car. He touted the heady figure of over 100 miles to the gallon, a rating that exceeded substantially the claims of the manufacturer. This he declaimed to all as he went about his errands.

Renewed interest developed in the "krautmobile," as some called it. Those for whom gas mileage meant little began to prick up their ears as Mr. Skiff, once an enthusiast, now an evangelist, carried on about his car's fuel economy. People even began to ask where exactly he had bought it, since there were as yet no dealers in Vermont.

The midnight refueling raids continued without being noticed and the mileage continued to rise. In early December, the odometer turned 2,000 miles and even those who had quit Peoples Academy in fifth grade could do the math. They were impressed.

Saturdays would find Mr. Skiff parked in front of the Morrisville town office earnestly reporting to Willard Sanders, the Overseer of the Poor and a former engineer by trade, the miraculous bug's fuel efficiency. Skeptical of the flatlander's encomium, Willard checked in with Ron Terrill at the Texaco and Armand Crevier at the Esso to determine if Mr. Skiff had been a customer yet. The answers were negative. The nearest other sources of gas would have been Stowe or Hardwick. Willard could not imagine Mr. Skiff venturing to Hardwick, a rough and tumble town in those days, and, a simple man in spite of his New York City roots, Mr. Skiff professed a dislike for the folly and pretense of Stowe. No one was selling him gas.

The now widely discussed mileage rating kept creeping up. Mr. Skiff astonished the patrons of Patch's Market one morning as he told them that his own skepticism had led him to drop a weighted cotton string into the gas tank to assess how much fuel remained. To his astonishment and that of his listeners, he found about half a tank remaining.

In early January, Mr. Skiff wrote the newly formed Volkswagen Corporation of America in Paramus, New Jersey, offering to bear witness in their advertising to the extraordinary mileage of their car, which at this point he calculated was between 350 and 400 miles to the gallon, depending on how one read the wet string. He did not receive a response.

Pete doggedly maintained the refueling deceit, though Emile and Charlie had dropped out, fearing for their job security.

Morrisville had ensured its good name among Lamoille County communities

by voting each year to maintain its "dry" status. Thus Peavine, known only by his mother and the Department of Motor Vehicles as Alton, made weekly taxi runs to the "State Store" in Waterbury for the dry citizens of Morrisville drawn to alcoholic stimulants. Pete's passion for down-market, fruit-flavored brandies occasionally led to epic, bilingual ravings on Portland Street on whatever topic was most on his mind. His diatribe might concern the absurdity of using sweeping compound, the stupidity of changing rather than simply replenishing oil in a car, the use of dynamite in removing beaver colonies or in bass fishing, or the lactation equipment of one of the sisters who ran Mer-Lu's restaurant in Hardwick, noted by non-locals for its complete lack of a food menu or even a kitchen.

In time, his enthusiasm for blackberry brandy, or lacking that, a Nehi soda laced with grain alcohol from his shop, made the long-running deceit impossible to conceal, as the alcohol gradually gave Pete's mouth greater and greater sway over his judgment. One Saturday afternoon in the back room of Graves' Hardware, Pete loosed his secret to a thrilled audience of loggers gathered to admire a new Evinrude chainsaw.

Soon the whole town was privy to the prank, all but Mr. Skiff, who was still blissfully ignorant and enamored. Like Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*, Mr. Skiff never tired of sharing his calculations with anyone who would listen. His persistent calls to Volkswagen continued to elicit silence and may have delayed the opening of a dealership in Vermont.

As the first signs of spring approached, Mr. Skiff was obsessed with the marvel of his perpetual motion machine. On March 25th as Morrisville's French Catholics were celebrating the Annunciation, the mileage reached 500 miles to the gallon, a figure even Mr. Skiff had trouble embracing, but did.

His updates now elicited worried smiles. Emile had confessed his complicity in the prank to Father MacDonough, whose good Irish humor led to the imposition of only a few Hail Marys as penance. But Emile was still haunted by the thought that his promising career with Union Carbide might be threatened by the prank. He approached Pete about ending the deceit.

Pete would have none of it. So Emile and Charlie snuck into the garage late on a Sunday night and siphoned off all the gas, leaving only vapors and the reserve gallon.

The next morning Mr. Skiff reported sadly that his car had finally used up its fuel. He calculated and recalculated his final mileage to report it both to the man-

ufacturer and to the Guinness *Book of Records* at 618 miles to the gallon. He told Emile and Stan that he would go to the Texaco at lunch and refuel his car for the second time in its life.

Word spread rapidly. At noon, the Atlas Plywood factory whistle blew and quite a crowd of folks gathered to witness the event. Mr. Skiff, running on his reserves, pulled up to loud applause. Chet opened the front hood, unscrewed the cap and refueled the small tank. Mr. Skiff got out, acknowledged the crowd, tendered Chet \$2, from which he got change, and left.

The hoax ended after several more refuelings that occurred within weeks, rather than months of each other. Eventually, Emile, Pete, Charlie, and the innocent Stan each got handwritten notes from Mr. Skiff which read, "Thanks for all the gas and the good fun. You sure had me going."

Jeeter's Leaky Roof



JEETER'S WIFE, LOU, was feisty, not the type to "go broody" and hole up for a period with checkout counter magazines and palliative junk food like some of her girlfriends enduring beer-soaked marriages. She had no complaints about Jeeter personally, but rather about his projects and his "hulks," a '58 Olds and a '48 Chevy pickup. These "hulks" gave her countless opportunities to describe vehicle failures. To her best friend, Norma, she replayed her anxiety at setting out with a car that might fail anywhere in Lamoille County or mercifully before it even left the driveway where it would respond with eerie silence when she turned the ignition key.

Lou was undaunted by most of life's challenges, but standing tall next to Jeeter's highly recognizable wreck of a car clutching four bags of groceries while hitching a ride home from Brousseau's Market was, as Lou said, ". . . beyond the pole." She would confide her elaborate plans for revenge to Norma and to Cathy, the checkout lady at Brousseau's who had often let her use the manager's phone to call Jeeter when the Olds lay smoldering on Portland Street.

Jeeter's efforts to improve Lou's opinion of him as well as their social status in town focused mostly on shiny objects. If Lou's anger began to weigh heavily on him, Jeeter would bound off to Dagnon's Auto and come home with spiffy new seat covers, a car heater that plugged into the cigarette lighter (further taxing the exhausted battery), a new hood ornament, or some shiny accessory that would at best not compromise the car's motile function.

When the Vermont legislature saw fit to liberalize vehicle-inspection laws, to accommodate a slumping economy and higher levels of auto body rot in deference to Vermonters on fixed incomes, Jeeter saw himself as off-the-hook with regard to the Olds's sheet metal. This led to several catastrophes for Lou that left