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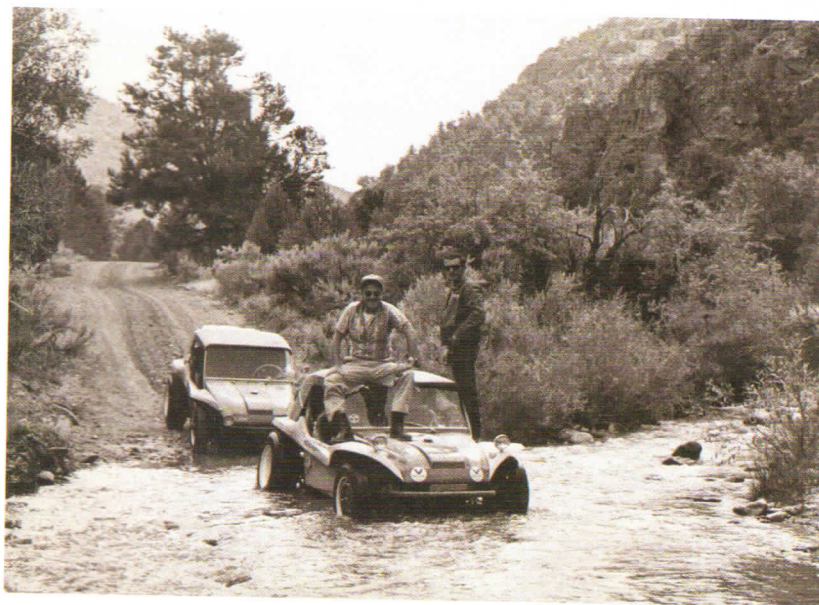
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50 1967-2017  
hot VWs





# FROM GYPSY ADVENTURE TO THE MINT 400

About the time the first issue of Dune Buggies & Hot VWs was hitting newsstands in summer 1967, 28-year-old LeRoy Wickham and three buddies were planning to make history of their own - a record-setting 580-mile off-road drive from Las Vegas to Lake Tahoe in two 40-horsepower VW buggies.

BY JIM GRAHAM

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEROY WICKHAM AND VINCENT KNAKAL

**T**hey had no idea their trip across some of the hottest and roughest terrain in the United States would be inspiration for the Mint 400 - "The Great American Off Road Race" - the following year.

On the 50th anniversary of their eight-day trip, Wickham, with co-driver and Grand Marshal Robin Leach, drove a replica of his "Old Yeller" Manx-style bug-

gy, leading 130 Trick Trucks, Class 1 buggies, vintage cars and VWs down the Las Vegas Strip to kick off the 2017 Polaris RZR Mint 400 presented by BFGoodrich Tires.

Wickham, a self-described adventurer, arrived in Vegas in 1962 as a result of a coin toss in his Boise, Idaho body shop: Heads - Canada. Tails - Las Vegas. He'd never been to either. "My grandmother was a gypsy and I guess I inherited her blood," Wickham said. "I've been a gypsy most of my life."

By 1967 he was churning out Fiberglass bodies of his own design - the Ko-





Top above: "Fellow Gypsy" Jack Frederick riding in the back of one of the buggies. Above: John Sexton charting a course to get the buggies through a field of rocks.



John Sexton during a midday stop to prepare lunch.



John Sexton cleaning up before heading out for another day of off roading.

yo-te - to meet the near-insatiable demand for weekend and off-road buggies that was sweeping the country.

"I figured out how to cut down Volkswagens and I was buying Bugs like crazy, cutting them down, putting them back together and selling them," Wickham said. The original Old Yeller - yellow body, orange hood and orange pods - hadn't set properly when he applied the

gel coat, so Wickham decided to keep it. Another one in purple metal flake also had issues and he gave it to his shop foreman, John Sexton.

Old Yeller's engine was a stock 1200 VW motor with an aftermarket exhaust. He also fabbed several of his own parts, including a skid plate and roll bar. "Everything else was pretty much stock."

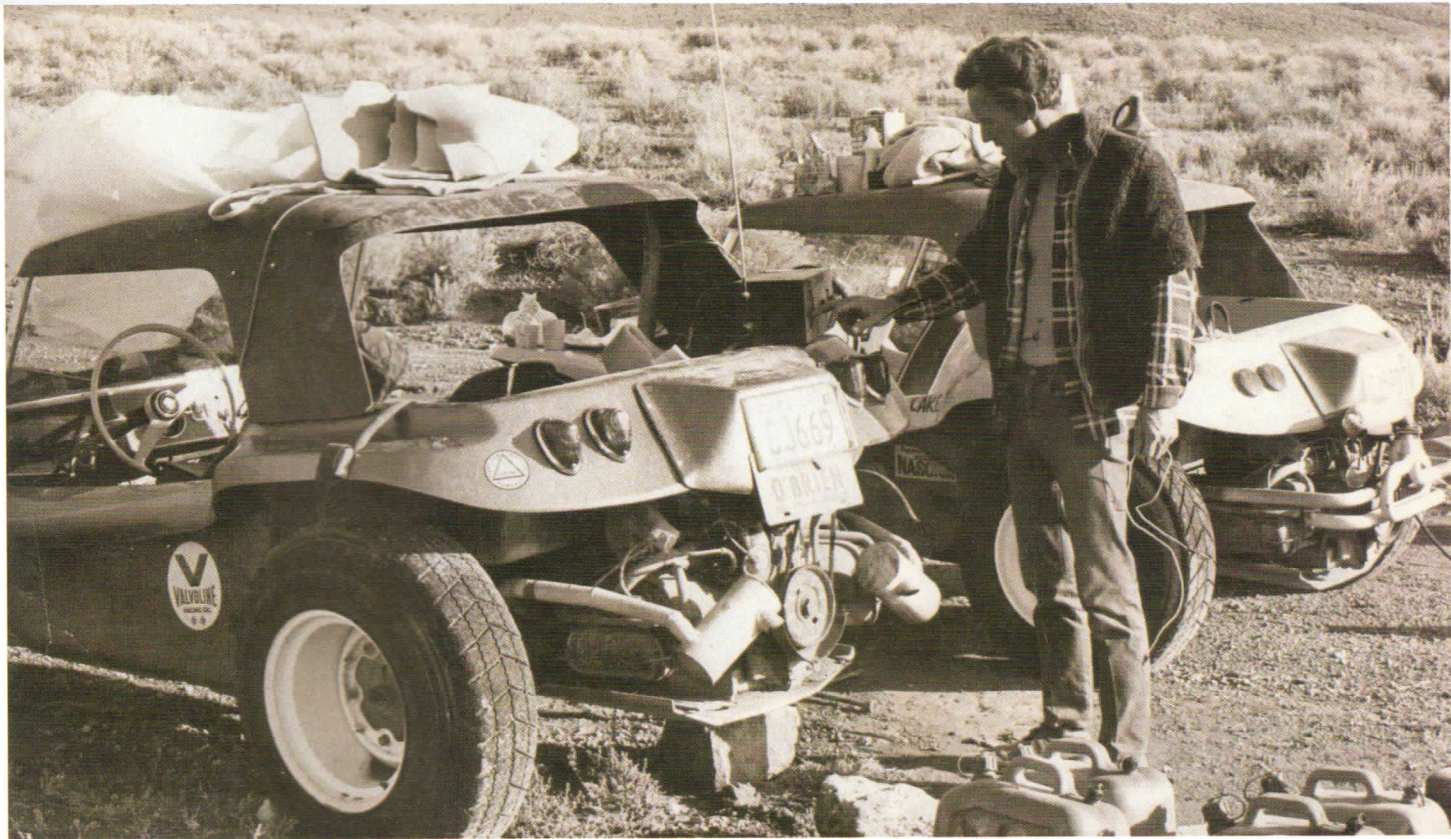
The idea for the trip came up because Wickham and Sexton were hankering for an adventure "to just go across

country and see the sites as we went," Wickham said. "We wanted to prove what these buggies could do and show that they were better than the Jeeps!"

Las Vegas Sun writer and photographer John "Cookie" Cook pitched the idea of setting an official record and offered to come along to record the trip.

Interest piqued, Wickham pulled Bureau of Land Management maps of Nevada and charted a course avoiding all roads (they did allow themselves





John Sexton adjusting a "portable" radio to pick up news reports of their trip.



LeRoy cooking a breakfast of "rattlesnake and pancakes" for breakfast as Jack Frederick looks on.



LeRoy Wickham (in car) and John Sexton are greeted by a Sahara-Tahoe hotel and casino executive shortly before giving a radio interview.

to cross them when necessary). The Mint Hotel agreed to cover gas and expenses and the Sahara-Tahoe hotel and casino promised rooms and a dinner when they finished.

The trip, which now included Wickham, Sexton, Cook and "brother gypsy" Jack Frederick, started Sunday morning, Sept. 3, at the Mint Hotel parking garage and included a ribbon-cutting send-off with Vegas Mayor Oran K.

Gragson, local NASCAR officials, a pas- sel of TV, radio and newspaper report- ers, and a police escort out of town (which wasn't that far).

"We had all the food in mine and all the other stuff in John's buggy," Wick- ham said. "We lived like kings. We had steak, we had pancakes, we had eggs." When it started to get dark, they'd find a spot by a river, set up camp, build a campfire and sleep under the stars.

There weren't too many fences in

those days, Wickham said, and when they encountered one, they just drove till they found a gate. When fuel ran low, they tapped two five-gallon gas cans. When those ran low, they'd park outside of town, hike in, fill the gas cans, and hike back out to the buggies.

They arrived in South Lake Tahoe eight days after leaving Vegas "dirty, tired and beat," but otherwise in good condition, according to a hotel spokes- person. They'd suffered three flat tires



and a thrown belt, but the biggest concern was they hadn't been heard from for a couple of days (because they couldn't find a farmhouse with a telephone to check-in).


The trip generated so much publicity Mint hotel that executives enlisted Wickham's help with the inaugural Mint "400" Del Webb Desert Rally held the following April. Wickham wrote the rules and regulations (borrowing from the NORRA Mexican 1000 Rally run in October, 1967). And he spent two months before the race out in the desert mapping the course - 101 vehicles showed up for that first race in '68. Hunter S. Thompson enshrined it three years later in "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" and the Mint became a bucket list item for TV and movie stars (James Garner, Steve McQueen, Jay Leno), musicians (Ted Nugent) and even astronauts (Gordon Cooper).

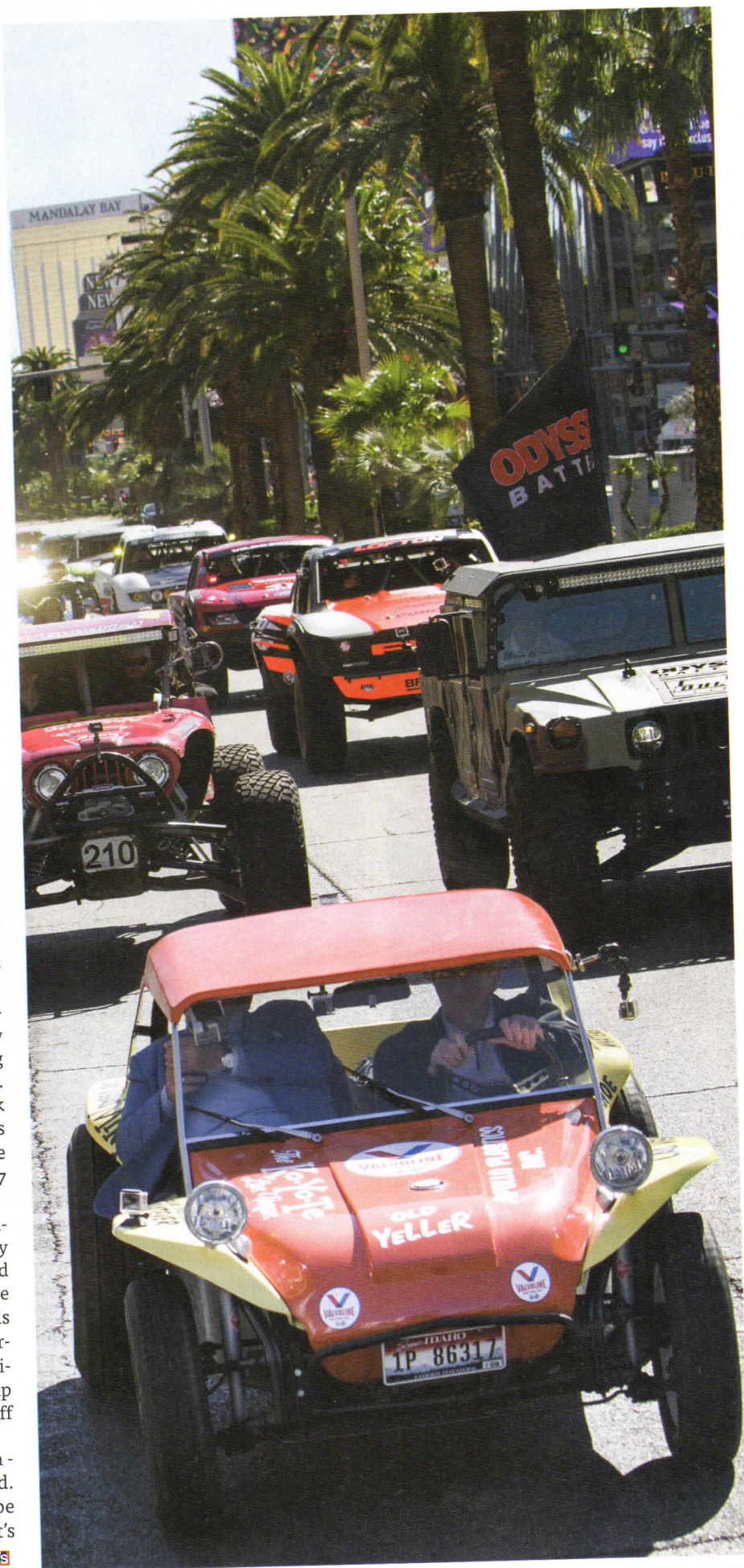
But the gypsy in Wickham called again and he moved to Alaska, and then back to Vegas, eventually settling in Fruitland, Idaho, with his wonderful wife Nadine, enjoying retired life and refurbishing children's pedal cars from the 1930s and 40s. Discovered there in 2016 by the new owners of the Mint 400 - Matt and Josh Martelli - he attended the 2016 race and was honored with a "Pioneer of the Mint 400" award, in front of more than 1,000 people at the drivers' meeting.

Inspired, Wickham set about recreating Old Yeller. None of the 128 Koyo-te bodies he originally fabbed could be located, so he bought a buggy at the Portland swap meet and spent 10 months turning it into the New Old Yeller.

Work over the next few months included fabricating a new hood, a new dash, a new rear pod and rebuilding the tired engine back to factory specs. Wickham did pretty much all the work himself, enlisting Graphic Impressions of Ontario, Oregon, to help recreate the graphics using old photos from the '67 trip.

Following a test drive in September, Old Yeller 2 was ready to go. LeRoy trailered it with his sons LeRoy Jr. and Kent from Idaho to Las Vegas and led the parade on the 50th Anniversary of his historic ride. 2017 Mint 400 Grand Marshal Robin Leach joined LeRoy, who piloted the buggy down the Las Vegas Strip in front of army current and vintage off road race vehicles.

"We were just out to have some fun - and we did - back in '67," Wickham said. "I could never have imagined we'd be leading the Mint 400 50 years later. It's been a great ride." 



DUNE BUGGIES AND HOT VWs



