

The Way We Were and a Table Talk Van

by TODD CORAYER

With so many fishing stories beginning with, “remember when...” or, “what we used to be able to do was...”, it’s good to look back at what some die hard fishermen did to get to the fish.

In the Fifties and Sixties, access to the beach for fishing and relaxing was far easier compared to these modern times. Many fishermen who wanted to cast through long stretches of shoreline for bass would drive there and spend a few days hunting for bass and blues, living out of their vehicles.

They needed to be resourceful, often designing and building beach buggys and campers in their driveways for days on the beach. They built bunks in the back of bread vans and amazingly spent weekends without cell phones. Families packed it all in converted anythings, dropped the tire pressure and drove sand trails down places like East Beach and the Charlestown Breachway. For kids it was a bathing suit, two t-shirts and a hat; that’s how you packed for the weekend.

With less people, houses and regulations, families could spend countless days playing and fishing the Charlestown beaches, building strong bonds and good memories. Beach stories were of Power Wagons and Trail Dusters, kids sleeping on the beach and Jim McCusker’s Table Talk van.

The McCusker family was nine people strong with a dad who lived to fish, which meant getting lots of kids and snacks onto the beaches where bass and blues cruised at night.

Jim converted a bread delivery van into a beach cruiser for his big family and fishing equipment. He built a small kitchen with a gas stove and refrigerator. It had custom rod holders, coolers and an outboard motor rack for the boat he lashed to the top. The sliding doors seemed to always be open, even with a child sitting on their mother’s lap riding co-pilot.

Those were different days, back then. Jim’s son Bill was a winter baby so he had to wait six months for his first trip to the beach. Bill laughed as he remembered that someone always



stood up to keep the c swinging as they bumped their way up the beach.

The Table Talk van may have needed better latches, but to Jim’s great credit, there were no mega-parts stores or an internet for overnight delivery. Most everything he needed to get his family to the beach he had to build himself, like an on-board power take off for the air compressor to re-inflate the tires, after lowering them to ten pounds in the front and eight in the back for the trip up the trail. He even managed to run airplane tires to gain traction for the big boxy two



wheel drive van.

In 1958, Jim became a charter member of the R.I. Beach Buggy Association and his official number 38 plate still hangs in the family garage in Green Hill. An unorganized organization at first perhaps, it was the genesis of what is now the R.I. Mobile Sportfishermen Club, growing from just whoever was there to a dedicated group with a mission to keep beaches open and accessible.

There was a certain sense of camaraderie on the beach, which meshed well with the competitive spirit natural to successful fishermen. When someone got stuck on the trail, others stopped to help out because that was what you did. Plus, they were in the way.

For a while, there were no girls on the trips. Son Bob said, “No Mom, no sisters. We were there to fish.” Finally, on her first trip, their mom traveled through a wicked storm, unsure all the way of where she was. After that they became family affairs with a charcoal grill and lots of books for Mom.

At sunset, dad’s left families sitting by camp fires to hunt for the big fish for which we still search; only it seems their numbers were a bit better back then.

When you are very young and your dad is very big, it is exciting to see stripers get landed and during the day, brothers had all they could do to drag heavy fish, like his personal best forty-seven pounder, from the water’s edge up to the safety of the dunes, when Jim and his friend Jimmy Martin were really catching.

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Mr. McCusker with a real, old-school striper, ready for the trunk first, then the beach grill



AKA “The Boys”