

The Sale of Big Horn*

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For the past three decades, Big Horn (Figure 1) has been an integral part of the consciousness of every collector who has been a reader of *Horn & Whistle*. Consequently, when rumors started to circulate late last summer that Big Horn was going to be offered for sale there was a rash of long distance telephone calls seeking inside information as to why it was being sold and to what heights the final selling price might reach. To cut to the chase, the auctioneers hammer fell at a half a million dollars! But as you will hopefully soon realize that is the least significant part of this fascinating story.



Figure 1. Big Horn, complete with bells, whistles and of course, the Tangley Calliope. Hyler Bracey (white suit) stands in the back.

The central core that was to later evolve into Big Horn first appeared here in the upper Mid-West in the 1970s on a truck owned by Milo Novak. It was a collection composed primarily of whistles powered by a Briggs & Stratton engine on an air compressor mounted on a ton and a half truck. At the time it was a very impressive rig. Milo brought the unit to numerous events and proceeded to conduct his own parallel performances. To describe Milo as a contrarian would be an act of extreme generosity.

Hyler Bracey seemed to appear out of nowhere onto center stage when he bought Milo's collection. We quickly got to know him as a considerate and highly articulate Southern Gentleman with unbridled enthusiasm, which included among other things: bigger and better. A few of the things we didn't know was that he had earned a PhD at an early age, that he had been severely

burned in an auto racing accident, that he would go on to write, has co-authored three top selling books and has spoken before many of the companies listed in the Fortune 500.

Big Horn has been featured in several previous issues of *Horn & Whistle* so it will not be necessary to repeat the entire story of its construction. For those wishing to review that information Hyler maintains a superb web-site featuring many pictures and personal observations at: <http://www.big-horn.com/bighornstory.html>

Hyler was interviewed for this article, and looking back he feels Big Horn surpassed his every expectation (Figure 2). It was a dream come true. But like a lot of situations in life, the path was not straight or without difficulties. When his first rendition of Big Horn was wrecked because the towing hitch broke while driving down an interstate highway he found himself seriously depressed for the first time in his life. As hard as it is to comprehend, he reported not being that depressed after his 1970 NASCAR accident in which he received severe third-degree burns. His steadfast faith in the ability to overcome adversity led to the need to build a magical unit that would serve to educate, to delight, and to inspire audiences of all ages; in short, a bigger and better Big Horn.

On his personal web site www.hyler-bracey.com it was noticed that one of his



Figure 2. Hyler Bracey, now past owner of Big Horn.

presentations is entitled *Corporate Growth Through Personal Inspiration*. Viewing that title and contemplating everything that went into the construction of Big Horn, one could presume that Hyler would be in accord with statements like: "God helps those that help themselves" and "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step."

Over the years Big Horn has been featured in countless newspaper and magazine articles, as well as the *Guinness World Book of Records*. As a result of having been highlighted on the popular television show *Monster Nation*, an offshoot of *Monster Garage*, Hyler and his wife Cass Flagg received an invitation to have Big Horn flown over to Australia for the Melbourne Auto Show. Intimately aware of all the complications such a trip would entail Hyler sent a two page list of specific requirements in a proposed contract. To his surprise the contract was quickly returned with the words, "ALL CONDITIONS AGREED TO" written across the cover page along with an up front check sufficient to cover all expenses. It was a ten day show and each day Hyler gave four keynote speeches intended to impact those in attendance with the importance of transforming dreams into reality.

While in Australia Cass and Hyler took the time to contemplate their plans for retirement and their desire to become more involved with their antique John Deere tractor collecting hobby (Figure 3). While Big Horn left spectators inspired and somewhat stunned with that "Wow" expression on their lips it was not without untold complications for its owners. Naturally, there was a great deal of dusting and polishing, but that was only the tip of the iceberg. In the construction stage, Big Horn, like nearly every project one undertakes, had edged up in size. So much so that getting it into its 102 inch transport trailer left only three-fourths of an inch clearance on each side. Loading and unloading had to occur on almost perfectly level ground and required the use of lasers to keep it on track. The highly tech-

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nical operation took one hour to load and forty-five minutes to unload. A trained three person crew was required.



Figure 3. Cass Flagg and Hyler pose with some of his John Deere equipment.

Anyone who has displayed at car shows can empathize with this next set of complications. Hyler reported that the unit needed constant oversight with a polite but firm demeanor. Untold times youngsters, and even occasionally adults, would start climbing around on Big Horn and began tampering with things out of curiosity, rather than malice. Such behavior presented a constant danger and ever present worry. Naturally, there was the constant flow of questions that had to be politely answered. Were there 10,000 of them, or maybe just three questions asked 10,000 times over and over? Those questions generally fell into: "Why did you build it?" "How much did it cost?", and "Can you blow all of them at once?" Again, those of you who have presented at a show know how weary one becomes of such mundane questions and longs for a query with even a spark of imagination in it.

With retirement on the horizon Hyler no longer needed Big Horn which had been an integral part of his presentations. Helping to cinch the decision to sell was the reality that maintenance and insurance was costing about \$25,000 a year. As Hyler said, "Like the man that climbed the mountain, I don't need to carry the mountain around on my back to relate the experience of having been to the top." With the decision made to sell, the next task was to find a venue capable of attracting bidders interested in this unique vehicle. Ultimately, there was one outstanding candidate and that was Kruse International of Auburn, IN, which is located directly

beside I-69 just north of Fort Wayne. Web site is: www.kruseinternational.com Billed as "The world's largest collector car sales organization" it is just a short distance away from the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Museum which highlights some of American's most spectacular automobiles (www.abdmuseum.org).

In arranging the actual auction, Hyler turned to Bruce Cynar for assistance in negotiating the extent to which Big Horn would be featured in promotional materials and numerous other complications arising from selling a big ticket item. Hyler was totally delighted with the way Bruce worked with auctioneer and facility owner, Dean Kruse prior to and during the sale. Bruce, like many of us, was very familiar with Big Horn but, had never had the opportunity to see it in operation. In the interview for this article he used words like, "Absolutely amazing to stand next to, totally mind-boggling!" That sentiment was obviously shared by the hundreds of visitors who packed around Big Horn to witness Hyler's pre-sale demonstrations.

Kruse auctions are held in a cavernous building that tends to dwarf university field-houses by comparison. With Big Horn positioned near the exit door Hyler made a few closing remarks when Dean Kruse began the bidding. Initial bidding was lively and quick soaring upward at a staggering \$25,000 per bid! Things slowed down at \$480,000 and then momentarily stalled out. At that point Dean Kruse, a master of negotiation, began to hold confidential conversations between the serious bidders and Hyler, who is himself equally a master at negotiating. Bruce Cynar found this highly charged atmosphere totally captivating as he watched the action swirl around him. In the end Hyler won! He held firm refusing to sweeten the pot by throwing in the Kenworth and transport trailer. Hyler had a very pleased expression on his face knowing he and Cass were taking home a half a million dollars!

But in talking with Hyler it is quickly obvious the sale price is insignificant in comparison to the assurance that Big Horn's new owner has important plans that coincide closely with those of Hyler. Following the sale Hyler transported Big Horn down to Huston, Texas and provided the staff of the new owner, John O. Quinn, with three days of training needed to oper-

ate the unit successfully. John O. Quinn is an attorney who has been hugely successful in a number of very high profile cases; he is reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in Texas. He has an extensive collection of vehicles and during the next few years is going to be constructing a new museum. Big Horn will be displayed prominently with informational kiosks around the perimeter. From Hyler's point of view, the best part will be the extent to which Big Horn will be used with disadvantaged children.



Figure 4. Cass and Hyler contemplating work on his new project, "TOOOOOT."

But don't jump to the conclusion that Hyler Bracey is terminating his relationship with Horn & Whistle. Currently he is busy constructing "TOOOOOT" which will be mounted on a small truck (Figure 4). Remembering back, Hyler's favorites were the massive Kalenberg S-6 which was the world's largest air horn, and the mellow Crosby 10" chime which reminded him of the steamboats during his childhood. We're going to have to wait to see TOOOOOT, but in the meantime keep your eyes open for the big tractor-trailer unit with Darbun Grits Plantation written on the side. Hyler and Cass are displaying their favorite John Deere tractors all over Dixie.

Big Horn's Assets:

- * A Verdin Bell Carillon
- * A Tangley Circus Calliope
- * 55 antique steam whistles
- * 46 air whistles
- * 18 train, boat, submarine and truck horns
- * Four ship horns including the world's largest air horn
- * 21 fire alarm, emergency, railroad trolley, fire truck, carillon and train bells
- * Two US Navy destroyer steam sirens