

The Betten Bunch

Here's the story of a crazy family, making memories a thousand miles at a time.

By Ty Adams

It sounds like a television sitcom that would've made the Brady Bunch look mundane: a couple with eight children packing into a 24-foot motorhome every year for a trip from New Jersey to California and back. Sure it seems like a crazy scenario, but for Monaco owners France and Coe Betten and their fleet of children — it was reality, it was memorable and it was the best education anyone could possibly get.

“We began in 1964 and took six weeks to make the trip to California where my parents lived,” France said. “We did it every year and took a different route every time. We got some wild stories. A lot happens when you've got eight kids in a 24-foot motorhome.” Throughout the sixties, the traveling crew consisted of France and Coe and their children Terry, Cheryl, Scott, Randy, Rick, Mark, Chrissy and Laura. Oh, and just for fun, France's sister “Auntie” Kay would occasionally tag along. By the time the older kids were in high school, they'd seen every state in the lower 48. And then came Brad, their ninth child.

“When Brad came along and he heard all the other kids tell about Yellowstone and Jackson Hole and all these places, we had to turn around and do it all over again,” France said. “So we feel that we've seen it all and we can really appreciate the beauty of this country.”

Of course, traveling with that many people in such a small space wasn't always beautiful, and that's where all the good stories come in. It also doesn't hurt that France is an enthusiastic storyteller and times his punch lines with perfection.

One of the funniest and most disastrous events happened on their first trip in the motorhome, and it's a lesson many RVers have learned in one form or another. It happened in 1964 while the Bettens were in California visiting France's brother Fred. They'd left the motorhome in Santa Ana because of an engine problem, taking a quick trip up to see Yosemite National Park while the motorhome was in the shop.

“There was a holding tank release lever in the front of the coach,” France said. “We were in Yosemite when my wife realized that the holding tank was full.’ So I called up my brother Fred. I said ‘Fred, that holding tank is — he said: ‘too late.’”

The shop mechanics had already jacked up the coach and started to remove the engine. But it caught on the holding tank release lever as they were pulling it out. “Sixty gallons of poo ended up right there in the garage,” France said. “They had to call the fire department. Sixty gallons is a lot of poo.”

The fateful holding tank story is also a reminder of how different the country was at that time. “There were no campgrounds back then, no dumping stations,” France said. “So you would pull off the road into the weeds and pull the holding tank lever.” Although the Bettens never made the holding tank mistake again after that first year, they kept piling up the humorous stories.

“Randy, he’s our third son, and he was hell on wheels. He caused more trouble than the other seven put together,” Coe said. “So we always had to have some punishment for him.”

Randy’s old punishment had been to sit in the bathroom. But after buying a new coach they realized he didn’t mind the new bathroom because it had a window, and he could stand on the toilet and watch the scenery go by. So the new punishment was to go to the back of the coach and put his nose on the floor.

“One time, when Randy was there with his nose on the floor, he kept hollering: ‘It’s getting hot back here!’” France said. “And we kept saying, ‘Be quiet, Randy.’” When Randy persisted that the floor was getting hot, France pulled the rig over and discovered that this was no ploy for attention. “The tailpipe had been bent up into the floor from backing into something,” France said. “There were ten-inch flames coming up. I told the kids: ‘As soon as I get this thing stopped, you all run.’ It was winter time so we didn’t have water in the tank, but I did have beer.”

Like episodes in a long running series, the Betten stories are endless: There was the time they went to cut down a Christmas tree somewhere between Iowa and Florida and got the coach stuck between two trees. The tow truck driver wasn’t going to allow them to ride in the coach while it was being towed, but France promised they’d pull down the shades, so he took them to the airport. Or the time Coe was driving through a tunnel in Pennsylvania and it sounded like someone was firing a machine gun at the coach, although the real explanation was they’d forgotten to retract the entry step.

A personal favorite is the story of Uncle Klem, a Vietnamese pot-bellied pig that was a Christmas present to France and Coe from the kids. “He was a real cute little pig,” France said. “He lived with us for 10 months. Either by coach or by plane, he crossed America three times. We had Klem in a little animal carrier out in L.A., we had him in a bar and he started going ‘oink, oink, oink.’ There was a drunk in the bar who sat up and said, ‘My God, I hear a pig!’ He thought he was hallucinating.”

While the Bettens’ stories are good for comedy value (and there are many more of them) France and Coe feel that all the motorhoming they did with their children had a very meaningful benefit.

“It’s such an educational experience, it’s so broadening,” France said. “There were no VCRs, no TVs, no video games. It’s the reason all nine of our kids are entrepreneurs today. They’re all outgoing.”

All the Betten children agree. “I was a novelty in school, all by myself,” said Brad, the youngest, who now owns a real estate brokerage at 36. “The teacher would talk about places like Niagara Falls or Mount Rushmore or Yellowstone Park, and I had actually been to all of those places.”

In a letter to his parents, Mark Betten wrote, “I know now that we were so blessed by your unexplainable — yet slightly masochistic — desire to enclose us all in this new fangled travel machine and take us from coast to coast, time and time again ... I doubt that you could have imagined how much it would mean to us all so many decades later.” “We were all in awe of this great country,” Scott adds. “It was a history lesson better than any classroom.”

Laura still remembers what her father would say whenever they stopped at a new campground, “Go make friends.”

Now on their seventh Monaco motorhome (a 2003 Executive), France and Coe have ample advice for newer motorcoach enthusiasts, starting with “take the kids along,” and “don’t wait to do it.” And when it comes to experience keeping kids entertained on the road, they are the professionals.

On the long drives across country, they would keep the kids entertained by playing games and making up contests. “To keep us busy, we’d get a dime if we could spot a VW bug, or a pig, or a black cow, etcetera,” Laura said. “There was always a big ticket item worth more, like a man sitting on the side of the road in a polka dot shirt selling watermelons with a three legged dog.”

To make it educational, France would challenge the older kids to read the encyclopedia about places they’d been and then pass an oral test for \$50. Cheryl remembers how she missed out on big bucks by mispronouncing Potomac. “We did a lot of singing, too,” she said. “Coming Round the Mountain was a favorite.” When they visited Disney World, Coe dressed all the kids in red and white stripes so they were easy to find. To avoid missing shoe problems, she gave all the kids flip-flops with their names on them, which were to be deposited in a box by the door before coming inside.

And if that doesn’t cement their veteran status, just take a look at their FMCA (Family Motor Coach Association) number, which is 905. They got it in 1965, just two years after FMCA was formed. The most recent FMCA numbers are well into 300,000.

France credits all that experience as the reason they continue to own Monaco coaches. “We’re not accidental Monaco people, but we do bleed Monaco blue,” he said. Although he is now semi-retired, France pioneered and developed the beverage truck industry, so he knows a little something about running a business.

“We decided on [the company] for three reasons: the product, the company employees who are so down to earth and care about what they do, and the family of Monaco owners.”

The Bettens are members of the Monaco Travelers owners' club, and were able to share their 58th wedding anniversary with over 100 of their Monaco friends at a rally last year. As part of the celebration, the Betten "kids" did some talking about all their adventures. Laura took the stage and told the crowd a story that even her parents weren't aware of. "She said, 'Late at night, when you thought we were all asleep, we could hear dad, serenading mom,'" France remembers. "Then she started leading the audience in the song 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart.' There were 140 people singing 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart' and everybody's crying."

For all the memories, whether humorous or touching, for France the recipe is the same: one RV, one family, and an open road. "That's togetherness," he said. "That's why we have so many good stories."