

Cruising Down the River

Arthur C. Sandstrom © 2006

“Help! Hey, somebody – help!!”

I turned and saw Bobby Goeth’s Volkswagen just starting to float gently past me, slowly turning sideways to the current, and sail majestically downstream. His wife and their two children were inside the car with him, and there were at least four arms waving frantically from the open windows.

People familiar with the old VW Beetles, or “bugs,” know they have a one-piece pan-type bottom and are nearly airtight to the point where it takes a good push to close a door with the windows rolled up. They have a tendency to float in high water, and that’s what Bobby’s was doing: floating merrily down the Niukluk River toward White Mountain, Alaska, located, as the song goes, “...a little southeast of Nome.”

I was standing on the far bank of the river, across from the old gold rush town of Council, putting on my hip boots and ready to scout out a crossing place for my Jeep station wagon. I was in no position to run out and catch the VW, now past me by some 20 yards and heading steadily toward deeper water.

“Bobby! Don’t open your door! Do – Not – Open – Your – Door!” I bellowed. Having offered this sage piece of advice, I solemnly watched the entire Goeth family slowly vanish around a bend in the river.

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The Goeths and I, along with two other coworkers at the Alaska Communication System station in Nome, had driven to Council on a warm Saturday morning in July. My two friends had ridden with me in my Jeep, and Bobby was driving his new VW, recently arrived aboard ship from Seattle. Council had its beginning around 1897 when gold was discovered on a nearby creek, but from a peak population of some 15,000 it soon emptied after major gold discoveries near Nome, around 25 miles away, in 1900. It lay deserted and almost forgotten, but its buildings were left standing and – surprisingly – intact and largely undisturbed. Even during our several earlier visits in 1957 and 1958, we found old calendars dating from the 1930s still hanging on the walls in an old school building. Many other artifacts were in evidence throughout the town, and the later mania for looting antiques and pointless destruction had not yet made its appearance.

My two friends had already waded across the river to the town, and I was the only one wearing boots. To the rescue! I got in my Jeep and eased down the gentle bank into the water, thinking I could make my way to the gravel bar that stretched down the river and drive downstream as far as I could to find Bobby.

I should have scouted for a shallow crossing.

No sooner had I left the bank than I sank into water halfway up the doors. I kept the engine running and frantically aimed for what I thought was safer passage. The engine sputtered and died. Silence but for the indifferent sound of water rushing past and the uncontrollable laughter from my two friends, standing safe and dry on the other side. I watched water flowing over the floorboards, and noticed with some puzzlement that my gasoline gauge, that had shown half full before I entered the river, now read completely full.

I silently climbed out of my Jeep and slogged my way to shore and joined my friends. Forgotten for the moment were Bobby and his family. I had no idea how I would get the Jeep out of the water. I had no rope or cable. It had no winch but without engine power even that would be useless.

Miracles do happen. From across the river, making its way slowly through the low brush, appeared an old Army 2-1/2 ton truck. Inside the truck was one of my friends, Richard Lee, who had a gold mining camp at Solomon, some nine or ten miles away.

After watching Richard hook a cable around the rear tow hook of my Jeep and effortlessly drag it from the water, I was left alone to take stock of my situation while Richard and my two coworkers drove downstream to see if they could find the missing VW.

Hmm. Full gas tank. Let's see... gasoline is lighter than water, so it floats on water...

I crawled under the Jeep and voila! A plug! I unscrewed it and watched a steady stream of water flow... and flow... until finally it changed color and became gasoline. I hurriedly screwed the plug back in and crawled back out from under.

What next? Anything? Uh, the engine oil? Water in the oil?

The dipstick confirmed that there was way too much oil in the crankcase. *Damn! Did I have any oil?* Ah... two cans. I again crawled under, unscrewed the plug, and watched a frothy mixture of oil and water pour onto the ground. After estimating two or three quarts had emptied, I replaced the plug, crawled back out, poured the two cans of oil into the engine, and stood listening to the river flowing past. It had sort of a lonesome sound.

Now. The fan splashed water all over the engine... did the distributor and wiring get wet?

I removed the distributor cap, wiped everything dry including the four spark plugs, wiring, battery cables and terminals... put everything back together... got behind the wheel... and...

My trusty Jeep sputtered into life! Two cylinders... three... and finally, shuddering but living, all four were firing.

And from downstream came the triumphant honking of the truck's horn, followed by tinny beeping from the VW. Bobby and his family had floated about a quarter of a mile downriver and gently grounded on a gravel bar where the river spread out. They had not even gotten their feet wet and had driven out of the river and up a gently sloping bank onto an old roadbed where the truck caught up with them.

Had Bobby's VW somehow missed settling on that gravel bar, it would have continued down a short distance to where the Niukluk River abruptly flowed into a narrow, deep gorge filled with rapids and rocks. Maybe pieces of the VW would have washed up on the banks where residents of White Mountain would have puzzled over them.

As in all our adventures in Alaska, this one, too, ended well.