

The Joys of Judging Corvairs

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“Firebrier” Restoration



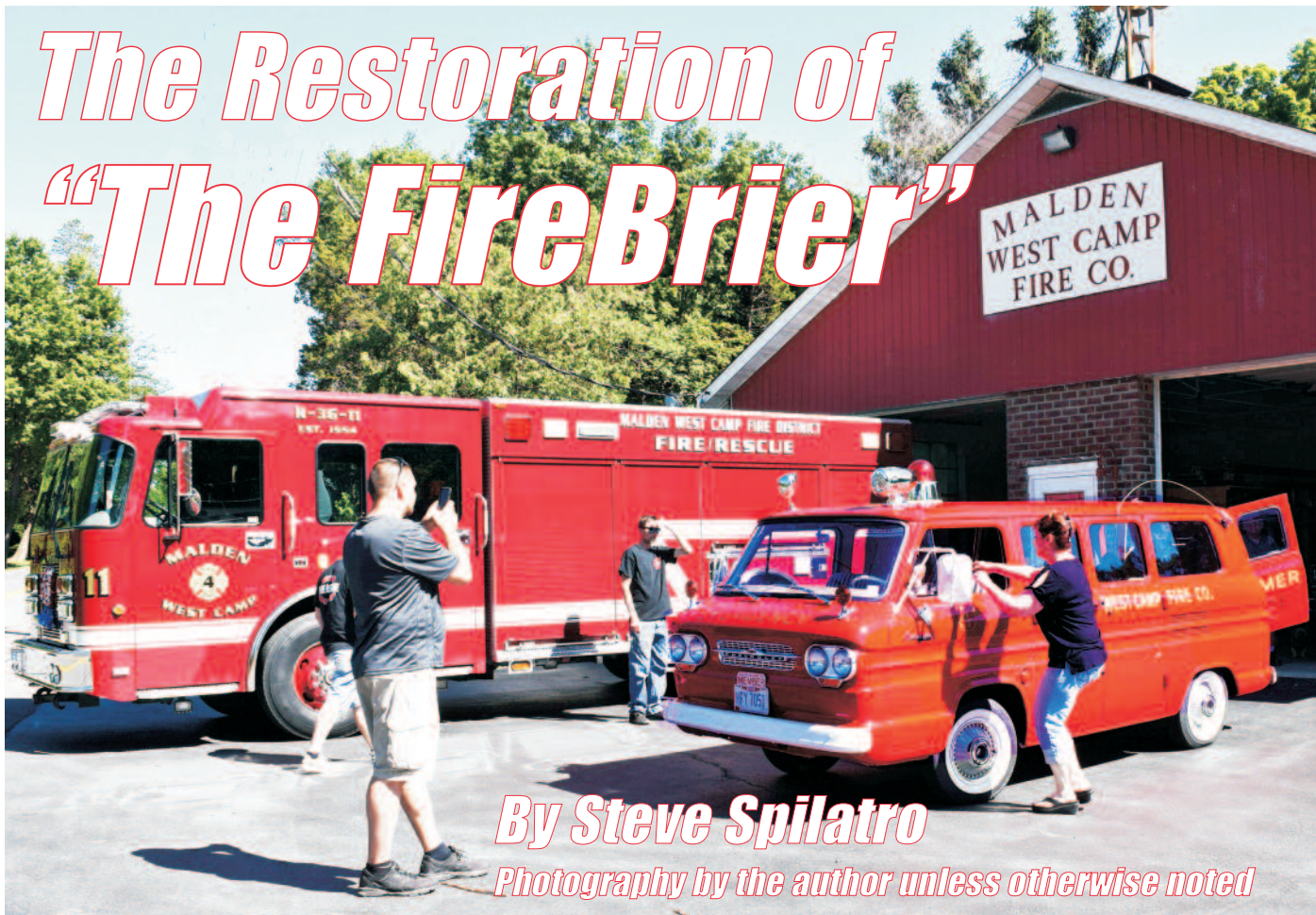
1961 Greenbrier in England



Corvair Museum Display Engine



The Restoration of "The FireBrier"



By Steve Spilatro

Photography by the author unless otherwise noted

This is the story of a Corvair 95 emergency van, the fire company and communities it served, and how that van was restored to return home after 30 lost years. If

Providence ever touches classic vehicles, it seems to have interceded on behalf of this one. The van itself was remarkably well-preserved despite evidence of some brutal use and

weather exposure. Preserved also was a history in pictures, documents, newspaper articles and recollections of people who knew it. The Greenbrier came into the service of the Malden-West Camp Fire Company in 1963, at a time when its territory and emergency response activities were expanding. It was the first new vehicle for the Company since its founding about a decade earlier.

The Malden-West Camp Fire Company was named for the two hamlets north of Saugerties in Greene County, NY. These are old historical communities; West Camp dates back to early 18th century encampments of British settlers on the west bank of the Hudson River. Malden, aka Malden-



Emmett Vedder Sr., original first driver, sitting in the newly purchased Malden-West Camp emergency van in 1963. Photo used by permission of Emmett Vedder Jr.

On-Hudson, was once the center of a bustling brick-making industry but has long since retreated to mostly residential status. The origin of their local fire company and its emergency van trace back to September 1953 when two houses in Malden burned on the same day. Lacking local fire service, a Mutual Aid call brought in fire companies from Saugerties and surrounding communities, which resorted to drawing water from the Hudson river to battle the blazes. Within weeks residents had petitioned for creation of a new local fire protection district. Over a period of several months there were numerous community and planning meetings, and in April 1954 the new fire company was incorporated with a territory that encompassed both the Malden



and West Camp communities, with a firehouse for each.

Ever since the founding of the new fire district the residents of nearby Cementon had wanted in! Like Malden and West Camp, Cementon is a small unincorporated community nestled along the Hudson River, and its name commemorates the cement factories that once operated there. It had not been included because Cementon was across the line in Greene County and already within the Catskill Fire Protection District, with service from the Citizens Hose Company. But residents of Cementon were unhappy with that arrangement.

The Cementon area was paying \$5,000 per annum for fire protection



The Malden-West Camp fire house. Originally built with just the two forward bays, the rear addition was added later.

as well as a surcharge on their fire insurance because the Citizens' fire station was over 6 miles away. The West Camp firehouse was a short two mile run from Cementon and could provide quicker, less expensive service, as well as qualify homeowners for a fire insurance "C" rating with a substantial reduction in premiums. So, in the spring of 1963, Cementon residents were trying again and the

Catskill Town Board was reviewing their petition to change districts. This was an opportune time since the current contract with the Citizens Hose Company of Catskill, New York, would expire in July and contract negotiations were underway.

In May, the Malden-West Camp volunteers passed a resolution of support. Residents of Cementon had donated generously to the construc-



Ceremony for delivery of the new emergency van to the Malden Fire Station on Sept 4, 1963. From left to right are John J. Helfert, Company President Harry L. Moose, Fire Chief Luther Emerick (seated), Fire Commission Chairman Harold W. B. Bennett (handing keys), and Company Vice President Francis P. Clum. Photo from Kingston Daily Freeman.

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Malden-West Camp #4 on display at the September 1969 Open House in front of the West Camp Station. Also visible are one of the 1954 GMC pumpers and a new 1500 gallon engine that replaced the 1937 REO tank truck in 1968. Photo from the Fire Company Archive.

tion of its two firehouses, and for several years West Camp engines had been suppressing fires in Greene County on an ad hoc basis. After several months of negotiations, on July 22 the agreement was signed adding the Cementon Protective Fire District to Malden-West Camp's territory. The potential expansion of their fire protection territory was one reason the Malden-West Camp volunteers had for several months been discussing purchase of an additional vehicle.

By 1963 Malden-West Camp saw many uses for a small support vehi-

cle. That spring a resuscitator-inhalator had joined the other trauma equipment and the Company was discussing the formation of a rescue squad. But transport was also needed for a large inventory of other fire equipment, so they opted for a general use emergency vehicle that could provide basic life support as well as haul other gear to "jobs." There would have been little debate as to which auto dealership they would turn to for a suitable vehicle.

The Berzal family, owners of the Berzal Chevrolet in Catskill, had been

supporters of Malden-West Camp from its inception. The Malden and West Camp firehouses were built on donated land, financed entirely through fundraisers and public donations, and constructed with volunteer labor - it was a different age! The West Camp station was located at a site known as Rock Cut Triangle on land donated by Thomas Clum, who's relative Harold owned one of the houses that had burned the previous year, and a parcel donated by the County. John J. Helfert, who would later serve six terms as President of the Fire Company, was first to offer land for the Malden station; however, land donated by Mrs. Arlene Schirmer was deemed more suitable. Donations of construction materials flowed in, including block and other construction materials for the Malden firehouse from Salustiano Berzal, for which he was later honored with a lifetime membership in the fire company.

Salustiano "Shorty" Berzal was the family patriarch and well known in the area for his mushroom farming and various other business interests. Among the family holdings was the Chevrolet dealership in Catskill, which Salustiano had purchased in 1955. Renamed Berzal's Chevrolet, its president and treasurer was son Roland "Bobby" Berzal, who at age 21 became the youngest operator of a Chevrolet dealership in the nation. Several years earlier Roland had also been a young volunteer with the Fire Company. Like other dealerships of the day, Berzal's hosted meetings of local Corvair enthusiasts in the (now disbanded) Mohican Corvair Owners Club. It is conceivable that Roland



The Firebrier as found in Florida, July 2016.

was the person who recommended a Corvaire 95 for the Malden-West Camp support vehicle.

The Corvaire 95, Chevy's innovative line of rear-engine light duty forward control vans and pickups, was introduced with great fanfare with the 1961 model. The no-frills Corvaire panel van was aimed at the commercial transport market whereas the Greenbrier window van received more amenities for transporting people and families. But sales withered, and through June for the '63 model year almost 40% fewer were assembled compared to the same period in 1961. Desperate, the Home Office inundated dealerships with promotional materials extolling the FCs, particularly over its chief rival, the Ford Econoline. Malden-West Camp apparently preferred the Corvaire 95 van's larger 1,800 lb. payload and more spacious cargo area, accessible from either side with the optional left side doors. Certainly the Corvaire 95's superior suspension would afford better handling on fire runs along the winding, hilly roads of Ulster and Greene Counties. Maybe favorable reports also came from other communities operating Corvaire 95 emergency vehicles, such as Monroe and Inwood, a ways down the Hudson Valley.

By the first week of June negotiations were underway, and the decision was made shortly thereafter to purchase a Cardinal Red eight-door Greenbrier to be customized as an emergency support vehicle. This would become the Company's first new vehicle since its founding. Two 1,000 gallon GMC tanker trucks had been purchased new in 1954, funded

by a \$17,000 public bond, one for each of the firehouses. A refurbished 1937 REO pumper was also quartered at West Camp. A public bond would not be needed for the much smaller new emergency vehicle.

The converted Greenbrier van was delivered on September 4, 1963, to the Malden firehouse. The newspaper photo of the delivery ceremony shows Harold Bennett, Chair of the Fire Commissioners, handing over the keys to the Fire Chief, Luther Emerick, sitting in the front seat. In gold lettering, the fire company's name was emblazoned across the intermediate doors and rear quarter panel, "Emergency" was proclaimed across the front and rear, and an encircled number "4" on both front doors identified this as the Company's fourth vehicle. Borne on the roof are a beacon light, siren, and spotlight, and in front of the windshield are two emergency flashers. Emmett Vedder, Fire Chief of the Company in 1960, was designated and would remain first driver for several years.

The Malden-West Camp Fire Company emergency van remained



Original "Shipper" form received by Berzal's Chevrolet. "02063" identified Berzal's as dealership #63 in Zone 2. "6-26-63" is likely the date the van was inventoried at the dealership. Scan provided by Warren Leunig.

in service for over two decades, and was typically packed "to the gills" with all the equipment it was intended to carry. As a brush truck it carried Indian fire tanks, firefighting rakes and metal brooms, a portable generator and water pump for brush and



Van elevated on wooden pedestals in my garage for restoration.

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Engine as found in 2016. Inset shows one of the pistons with a detonation hole.

grass fires. For accident and trauma situations, there were the multiple resuscitators, four and ten ton hydraulic "porta power" extractors, first aid and other life-support kits. Other fire scene support gear included self-contained breathing apparatuses, smoke extractor, portable radio, lights, and more.

A two-way Motorola radio was installed in 1969, and photographs of the Open House held in June of that year show the Malden-West Camp #4 proudly displayed with the other fire trucks. Along with fire service there were various other firematic events and community responsibilities to be met, from parades and demonstrations to transporting Santa Claus during the holiday season.

During the 1980s, the van was toting ever more gear. To serve as an air-truck, a large, four oxygen cylinder cascade weighing over 600 lbs was mounted over the powertrain, which surely put the rear suspension and

engine to the test. And if that did not max-out the GVW, acquisition of additional more modern equipment eventually did. Conceding the need for a larger support vehicle, in 1987 the Malden-West Camp Emergency Vehicle made its final run and was reluctantly decommissioned.

The van's subsequent chain of ownership is unclear, but the 1995 NY State inspection sticker still adhering to the windshield shows that it had been road worthy for almost another decade. Quite recently the van reemerged in central Florida, where it came to my attention in 2016 through the oddest of coincidences.

Because of my interest in deciphering the FC paint and trim codes, people periodically send vehicle data which I can add to the Corvanatics FC registry. In early May, 2016, Warren Leunig sent scans of several FC "shipper" documents originating from Berzal's Chevrolet that he had

acquired at a swap meet. A car or truck shipper is similar to a window sticker in showing the various options ordered for a vehicle, but is retained by the dealership. One of the shippers identified a fire company as the buyer of a Greenbrier with an interesting assemblage of options that included supplemental left side doors, a posi-traction rear axle, and a 35 Amp LCI (low cut-in) generator, a relatively rare factory option intended for vehicles with a large electrical load. Also listed was a "9552A six cylinder engine" – a 102 HP FC engine.

A couple of weeks after receiving the collection of shippers, my good friend and longtime Corvair enthusiast Ed Bittman took "a trek into the woods" of central Florida to inspect a FC on Craigslist and sent the vehicle codes. A quick check in the FC registry revealed this to be the fire department van of the Berzal shipper received only 16 days earlier. An extraordinary coincidence by any measure! Jim Barbuti, a member of the Central Florida Corvair Club had brought the van to Florida from a New York junkyard a few years earlier, and now had it up for sale.

Intrigued, I flew to Florida and with Ed did a full inspection of the van. The engine was clearly out of commission. There was a moderate inventory of damage to exterior and interior panels, as well as some visible rot to the undercarriage, but by virtue of having original paint the van looked pretty solid. The odometer "15882" was easily the first rotation considering that a fire protection district was relatively small and that the windshield inspection sticker suggested that 1995 was the last time the van

was on the road. With Ed's help we negotiated a purchase price and I had the van trailered up to Ohio for a ground-up restoration. The vehicle now widely known as the "Firebrier" would be returned to the days it serviced Ulster and Greene Counties.

The restoration began, of course, by first undoing the work of the Flint assembly line 54 years earlier. No rotisserie in my small one-car garage, so elevated on large wooden pedestals the Firebrier was systematically (more or less) deconstructed. Crossmembers, suspension, steering brakes, control cables, doors, seats, electrical, dash, interior panels; battery compartment, headlights, taillights, bumpers, etc. etc., etc. - everything was removed and disassembled. Codes on the powertrain indicated that everything was original, and the crankcase "TO614VD" was in agreement with a FC 102 HP engine.

From 1961 through mid-1963, an 80 HP Turbo-Air 6 was the only engine available for the Corvair 95. The air-cooled Corvair engine had 6 horizontally-opposed cylinders with crankcase and cylinder heads manufactured from cast aluminum. Its lightweight, compact design afforded excellent weight distribution to the vehicles while preserving cargo space above the engine compartment. By 1963, customers were clamoring for more muscle. 80 HP was double the output of the VW T1b Transporter's 4-cylinder boxer engine, but stacked poorly against the 101 HP engine available to its nemesis, the Ford Econoline. An upgraded, longer-stroke 95 HP engine would become standard for 1964 FC models, but for the remainder of '63, the best GM



Front door dog-leg repair. Typical of several other areas, rotted metal was replaced with salvage parts when available.

could do was to make available a modified car 102 HP engine as special Central Office Production Option (COPO) #9228. Unfortunately, with its high compression and poor low end torque, the 102 HP engine was never ideal for the hefty Corvair 95,

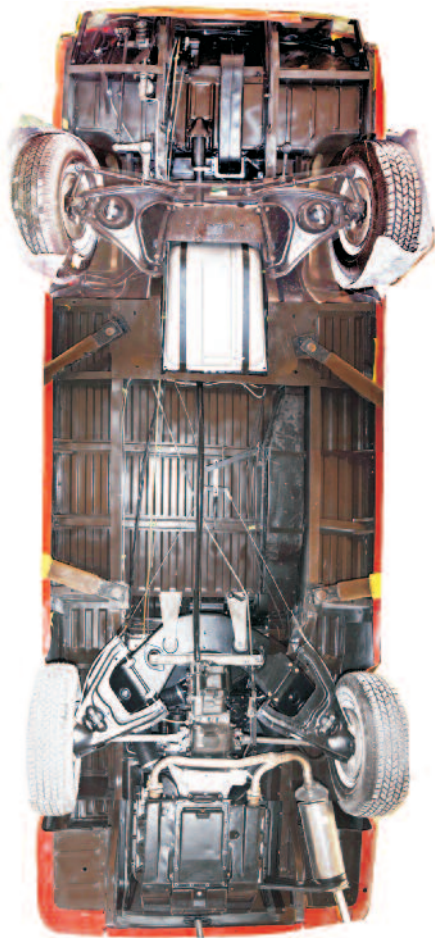
much less one hauling a ton of fire gear.

Unfortunately, the Firebrier was a testament to the limitations of the 102 HP engine in the Corvair 95. Holes in three of the pistons pointed to a long-term detonation problem. Holes in



The Firebrier being trailered to state inspection station.

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Photomerged image of the re-assembled undercarriage.

three pistons!? Apparently near the end this poor engine was running, in effect, on four cylinders! Its ultimate demise culminated when shrapnel from the failed third piston was punched through the crankcase by a camshaft lobe. There would be no escaping a full rebuild. To add insult, the engine and undercarriage had been subsequently inundated at some time. Sediment covered the shrouding, was packed between fins of the pistons and heads, filled the lower shrouds, and even choked pushrod tubes left exposed sans valve covers. Mud was caked, sometimes rock hard, in almost every crevice of the

undercarriage.

Fortunately, all the coded powertrain components were salvageable, including the cylinder heads, distributor and crankcase, which was repaired with aluminum welding. The bell housing, rear housing, crankcase cover, shrouding, and air induction assembly were also saved. Although the clutch was a complete loss, the innards of the 4-speed synchromesh and positraction transaxle needed work but were largely spared. In August 2016 the powertrain "remains" went to Ken Hand's Handy Car Care in Fowler, Michigan, for a full rebuild. Ken also located and rebuilt a replacement LCI generator. The carburetors supplied by Steve Goodman of Rear Engine Specialists were fully rebuilt and correctly coded.

Working in stages, first the undercarriage and then the body, interior and exterior were stripped to bare metal. Undercoating had been applied by both the factory and dealer, and over 40 lbs. of this nasty stuff had to be removed (yep, I saved and weighed it). The bulk was chiseled off with torch and scraper, followed by alternating rounds of aircraft stripper and diesel fuel, working down through several grades of wire brushes until every niche and crevice was free of that tenacious tar. Exterior and interior paint was removed with a combination of aircraft stripper,



Six year-old Emmett Vedder, Jr. behind the wheel in 1963 (top frame). In 2018, Emmett Jr. once again sat behind the wheel (center frame) of the restored Malden-West Camp emergency van, as did his grandson, Emmett Vedder, IV (lower frame).

rotary disc sander and wire wheel.

Bare metal always gives the fullest measure of the needed structural repairs. Serious rot was exposed on the jacking braces, lower front cowl, battery compartment floor, several door jambs, as well as the front cab dog legs and floor pan. These were reconstructed using salvaged body panels from Mikes Auto Parts (CA) and the Corvair Ranch (PA), or refabricated from sheet metal. Body work was also required to repair several crunched body panels, the mutilated

battery compartment opening (a DIY hack for using a standard sized battery), and numerous dings, dents and holes in interior surfaces. I did all body restoration and priming myself, as well as painting the interior, saving the painting of the exterior for a local body shop.

Matching original auto paint colors is not straightforward since many old paint codes can no longer be mixed with modern paints. The undercarriage was painted with PPG DCC Concept acrylic enamel, the chocolate brown color typical of FCs off the Flint line was matched through trial and error. Scanning the interior paint yielded a near perfect match for the Chevy Fawn Poly. When auto paint is scanned, the computer does not deconstruct the original composition but rather looks for the best match among known formulas, which in this case was, ironically, Ford "Pueblo Gold, Light French Silk". These and other acrylic enamel formulas used on the project have been posted on the Corvanatics website.

Having purchased the Firebrier sans title, I was rather anxious to secure one before transferring too much of the life savings into the project. In Ohio this requires negotiating a knotty judiciary process for obtaining a Court-Ordered Title. Along with the requisite paperwork and fees, there is a requirement that the vehicle be driven into an official state inspection garage under its own power. So beginning in March, 2017, I began to reassemble sufficiently for the Firebrier to be trailered 50 miles north to the nearest inspection station and then driven about 100 feet into the garage.



Restored cab. Notice Motorola Motrac radio head located in place of standard radio.

The crossmembers, brake housings, and engine shrouding were blasted and repainted or powder coated, and the suspension, steering and brakes were rebuilt to stock specifications. The control cables are all NOS, brake and fuel lines are new, reproduction wiring harnesses were installed, and the gas tank is a Clarks repro. The restored heater box and ducting were necessarily installed as well. The powertrain was popped back in, and in July the Firebrier moved under its own power for the first time in over 20 years, taking a short trek up and down an alley.

The state inspection serves mainly to assure that a vehicle has a valid VIN and is not stolen, but I could tell the inspection officer did not quite know what to look for on a Corvair 95. So I showed him where to find the VIN plate and then the hidden VIN, which I had clear-coated on the undercarriage sill. For cryptic reasons a reinspection was required, necessitating a return trip two weeks later to show (as best I can tell) that the VIN

had not changed, before the essential paperwork was issued. Shortly thereafter in a formal courtroom hearing I presented my case to a municipal judge, who approved the title. With a title now in-hand and much less anxiety afoot, I was ready to complete the project. So, to Marietta's New Wehl Body Shop went the Firebrier to have the exterior painted.

Over the next seven months, within the daily slog of routine fenderbenders, the Venham brothers Rick (the proprietor) and Gene (a former fireman) gave the Firebrier the expert skill and attention to detail it deserved. The exterior color selected after testing several different shades of Sikkens base coat. Prior to stripping the original paint, I made tracings of the original hand painted lettering, which were later digitized and used to cut stencils. After applying the base coat and the first clear coat, the gold lettering was sprayed, and then topped with five more clear coats. When the exterior was finally finished in March of this year, the Firebrier

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Load area with vintage firefighting and trauma equipment.

was trailered home for final reassembly.

There are a lot of doors and windows on an eight-door Greenbrier, requiring a lot of attention. The cab front door vent windows were fully rebuilt and an early reinstall step. All of the window regulators and door latch mechanisms were ready to go, thoroughly cleaned and relubed. The windows worked like new when installed with new channel liner and fuzzies, as did the door latches after

some adjustment. The doors received Clarks repro weatherstrip, new rubber bumpers, and repainted trim panels attached with lots of those easily damaged "sombbrero screws." Finally on went rechromed outside door handles and well-polished inside handles and cranks.

There was much additional interior assembly. Front and rear bench seats were reupholstered with Clarks reproduction fabrics. The rear interior panels and front air vents were repainted



Engine restored with LCI generator and pre-oil bath air cleaner.

and fitted with new weather stripping and rubber seals. Front and load area floors were covered with new floor mats (that I reproduced for this project) and trimmed with restored or NOS scuff plates. The thoroughly cleaned instrument panel was connected to a new front wiring harness.

The original front wire harness helped guide rewiring the emergency accessories. By 2016, the front and rear emergency flashers and the roof-mounted Unity spotlight remained but the siren and the beacon light were gone. Miraculously, Tim Wynne, a member of the Malden-West Camp Fire Company had saved the original siren, a Federal 66G, which he generously donated and was restored by Rescue Market in Elyria, Ohio. The historical photos of the van revealed the beacon as a Federal Model 17 and a fully-restored replacement was acquired. The emergency flashers were reinstalled—two rechromed Yankee Turnflex units upfront and NOS flush-mounted Dietz cannisters to the side of each rear door—all operated by a GM reproduction four-way traffic hazard switch under the dash. A Motorola Motrac FM two-way radio, very similar to the one added to the van in 1969, was restored. The head unit and mike were mounted below the dash with the transmitter/receiver under the front seat, coaxial-cabled to a NOS Antenna Specialists spring mount and 52-inch whip antenna on the rear quarter panel.

Finally the Firebrier was stocked with an assortment of vintage firefighting gear to show the types of equipment it once hauled. Some original to the Malden-West Camp



The restored Firebrier closely replicates its in-service configuration.

Company, the display includes a resuscitator, Smith Air-Pak breathing apparatus, fireman's axes, fire extinguisher, Indian fire tank, firemen's clothing, a mobile two-way radio, an assortment of Teledyne and Wheat spotlights, and other equipment typically needed at a fire scene.

July of this year, the fully restored Firebrier was trailered to Saugerties for a weekend homecoming. On Saturday, after 30 years adrift, with lights flashing and siren wailing, the Firebrier returned to its home port, the Malden Firehouse, and parked in front of its old bay. It was greeted fondly by the senior firemen and with some noticeable curiosity (possibly amazement) by the younger volunteers. Along with Tim Wynne, now a fire Commissioner, others present were Emmett Vedder Jr, whose father was the first "First Driver," and Rich

Pesce, who had also driven the vehicle on occasion. Also present were Phillip and Sam Emerick, son and grandson of Luther Emerick, who as Fire Chief had ceremonially received the keys to the van in 1963.

The same day in 1963 that the picture on page 12 was taken, six year-old Emmett Vedder, Jr. took his dad's place behind the wheel. In 2018, Emmett Jr. once again sat behind the wheel of the restored Malden-West Camp emergency van, as did his grandson, Emmett Vedder, IV, as pictures were taken. Emmett, Jr. wrote in an email afterwards "this story and its pictures now need to be handed down to Emmett the IV, history means everything. It's a continuation of my Dad's history that I am now able to pass down to my grandson who never knew him." These comments remind us that classic cars once were like

members of an extended family, and a restoration renews not only the vehicle but also connections among us and to a time long past.

Notes: Information for the article came from newspaper archives of the *Kingston Daily Freeman*, *Saugerties Daily Post* and *Catskill Mountain Star*. I drew upon an online article about the Berzal family from the Saugerties Historical Society. And I am particularly grateful to Warren Leunig for sending the scan of the Firebrier shipper, Ed Bittman for finding the van and assisting in its purchase, Emmett Vedder, Jr. for the pictures he provided, Tim Wynne for all of his help, recollections and donations of fire-fighting gear, and all my other Corvair enthusiast friends who offered advice and helped locate parts during the restoration.

