

## The Creation of Big Horn

Brad Simon

**B**ig Horn is the magical creation of Hyler Bracey, Ph.D. Hyler had a tragic accident in 1970 racing at a NASCAR short track in Mobile, Alabama. He was severely burned over 45% of his body with third degree burns. Through many months of painful recovery he discovered that the accident, along with numerous other events in his past, was God's way of getting him out of racing. From his burn experience, Hyler learned you better live life to the fullest, there is no guarantee of another day. He also learned that he had a life purpose of inspiring others to live healthy, joyful, productive, spiritual lives, to go for and live their dreams. Out of this learning, he developed a zest for life that eventually resulted in his being a successful businessman and achieving many dreams. This is where the daydream of Big Horn came into the picture. Being a collector of horns and whistles, as well as being a storyteller, Hyler hopes that his story, daydream of Big Horn and zest for life will inspire others to achieve their own goals, dreams and visions.

Hyler grew up in the industrial town of Port Arthur, Texas. Port Arthur literally had been taken over by the oil industry. In this industrialized town he obtained work on a tugboat to earn money during high school. Bracey spent most of his time working long hours instead of playing and hanging out with the other students. The massive sounds of boat horns were a constant but pleasant part of his workday; over time Hyler grew to love each one of their distinctive notes. No wonder these sounds have now worked their way back into his life.

Hyler's collection began when he and his wife Cass purchased their first motor home and she mentioned that a more powerful horn for it would be better. You can only imagine the flurry of excitement over this idea. After hours of research on horns at a local university library, he found there has never been a book or article written on horns. Through a continued search he finally found a horn manufacturer in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, The Kahlenberg Brothers Company. Hyler contacted them and purchased a new horn for the motor home. However, his journey was far from over.

Through all Hyler's research he found that it was very difficult to find horns and whistles to collect. So with his passion rejuvenated, he frequented garage sales and antique shops and steadily built a small collection (**Figure 1**). In his adventures Hyler also found a Horn and Whistle club that publishes a magazine [*the founding editor was MBSI member Jack Hardman - Ed*] and subscribed immediately.

Hyler kept dreaming of a vehicle completely covered with bells and whistles. He admits he thought this daydream was so silly that he never mentioned it to anyone, not even his wife. Then one day he spotted a magazine ad that listed a large train whistle for sale. He called and spoke with a man who would soon change his life. In casual conversation he got so excited about his new whistle that the man said Hyler ought to buy his horn truck as well. Before he ended his conversation Hyler had bought not only the whistle, but the man's horn truck also (**Figure 2**). You can only imagine his wife Cass's reaction when he hung up and told her he had just made

such purchases. So off to Detroit Michigan went Hyler to pick up his new whistle and horn truck.

Now with a horn truck and a small collection of his own Hyler started to build his dream vehicle covered with horns and whistles. His next major purchase was a real show stopper—a Kahlenberg S-6, the world's largest air horn. This giant masterpiece immediately became the crown jewel of his collection. You can see that it is completely logical, and utterly fitting, that the official name for the vehicle would be "Big Horn."

This project became a great passion by providing him with a creative outlet not inhibited by the physical limitations caused by Hyler's accident. Big Horn soon became the center of attention at many local

parades and festivals. Big Horn was a dream come true for Hyler. His secret d a y - d r e a m s manifested themselves into this real life r o l l i n g t r i b u t e

that truly has "all the bells and whistles." Things were really rolling as he began to receive a steady stream of requests for Big Horn to participate in various events.

Then like a lightning bolt, Hyler had the idea to use Big Horn as a prop in his speeches on "How to overcome adversity" and "Making corporate visions and personal dreams come true." Big Horn was a manifestation of Hyler's dream and his wish that it would inspire others. While he was doing local parades and festivals Hyler never stopped to consider the special needs that would arise when he decided to take the show on the road. Weighing a whopping 12,000 pounds, Big Horn could only be driven about 600 miles a day. The security issues that surrounded Big Horn on the road also posed a problem for a safe place to park at night where nothing would be stolen. He came up with a solution—to have a trailer built to haul Big Horn. Hyler also decided that in order to pull Big Horn he would need to purchase a converted bus, because a regular motor home does not have a heavy enough chassis to tow that much weight. The solution worked great and Hyler said there was only one way to describe this combination: perfection.

Now that Hyler was ready to begin travel over long distances he knew where his first trip would take him. Reading a newspaper one morning, he



Figure 2. The original Big Horn. Mounted over the front of the truck is the Kahlenberg S-6, the world's largest air horn.

Photo: Hyler Bracey, *Horn & Whistle*, Fall, 1995.

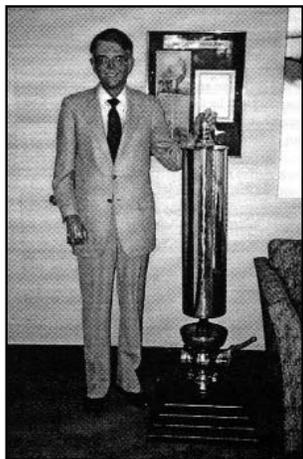


Figure 1. Hyler Bracey, posing with one of his many steam whistles.

Photo: Hyler Bracey, *Horn & Whistle*, Winter, 1966.

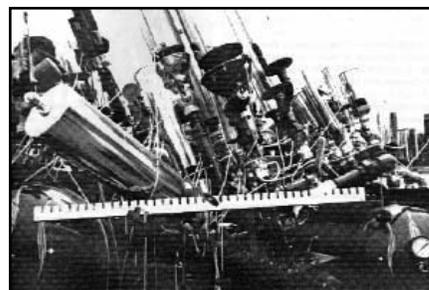


Figure 3. Big Horn after the wreck. The various steam whistles can be seen arranged in a whimsical fashion.

Photo: Hyler Bracey, *Horn & Whistle*, Winter 1997.

was stunned to see that the U.S. Navy was launching a ship named the USNS BIG HORN! Hyler quickly wrote a letter to the ship's captain explaining about his Big Horn. After much correspondence the captain of the USNS BIG HORN suggested the two Big Horns meet when his ship returned to port in Norfolk, Virginia. Hyler and his wife Cass agreed that this would be fun and made all the arrangements to meet and spend a full day touring the USNS ship BIG HORN. The day came and Hyler, Cass and their in-laws loaded up and went for a full day of touring at the naval base. The next morning they met with the captain and crew and had a spectacular showing of horns blowing and media coverage. After a long day of fun and touring they returned to the bus very exhausted and ready to relax.

Tired but happy they left Norfolk and headed for home. Reaching Charlotte, North Carolina, Hyler was growing tired and stopped at a safe place for the night. The next morning after a good night's rest he settled into the driver's seat and pulled back onto the highway. Unfortunately, the worst was yet to come. As he pulled onto the highway and proceeded to get to cruising speed, Hyler checked his mirrors only to see the trailer pulling out to the left side of the coach and then disappear from sight. All six wheels on the trailer locked and it slid out of control across the interstate. The trailer flipped and slammed into the embankment with a sickening crash. The sight was horrifying, but to Hyler's relief no one was injured (**Figure 3**).

After calling 911 the highway patrol and wrecker arrived quickly; unfortunately, Big Horn was damaged beyond repair when the trailer flipped. The horns and whistles looked to be okay but the body and sheet metal were beyond repair. Hyler's life passion was now destroyed and he was crushed emotionally. Returning home Hyler sunk into a deep state of depression for the first time in his life. The thoughts of Big Horn's twisted framework and his dreams of inspiring others lay dormant. But the story was about to change.

After several days Hyler realized that he, like an artist, was blessed with a blank canvas. His dream was still alive. He danced with thoughts of what the future was about to unveil. All he needed now was a plan, "a how," that would lead to the brand new Big Horn—one "with all the bells and whistles." After many conversations with parade and festival people he realized that this was going to be a grand adventure. The people he talked with helped him realize what it was he needed to build: the new Big Horn needed to be a magical preservation vehicle, a rolling tribute of the sounds of the Industrial Revolution. The beautiful horns and whistles, with all of their glorious sounds, are rapidly disappearing from today's society and Hyler felt an obligation to build a vehicle that would be a fitting monument for their display. Lots of lights, self-propelled, hidden wheels, smoke machines, add himself as the mad professor, and THINK BIG!

Here Hyler was on a grand new adventure in life, this was only the beginning of this whole new dream. After talking with many people, cornering everyone he could, Hyler received valuable input on the how to make this all happen. One of the most helpful was Larry Spreckelmeier, a fellow whistle collector who introduced the idea to the University of Cincinnati's industrial design department. Hyler challenged the department's 21 design students to design, with his criteria, a magical vehicle that he envisioned. He talked about the old Big Horn and all the ideas he wanted to incorporate and set them to the chal-

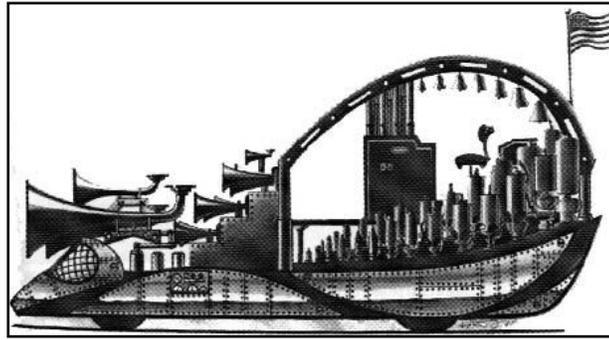


Figure 4. The winning concept of Big Horn. Kristin Steiner of the University of Cincinnati won a scholarship for the unique design.

Photo: Hyler Bracey, *Horn & Whistle*, Spring, 1998.

lenge. After two meetings and judging in ninjudges, Kristin Steiner won the challenge and received a well-deserved \$2,500.00 scholarship (**Figure 4**).

Hyler was faced with the next challenge—finding someone who could take the picture Kristin had drawn and build this magnificent machine.

Back to Georgia and onward in this next step Hyler went. He found the team that could make the new design a reality: Jimmy Ferguson and Ricky Johnston, master sheet metal workers, and Al Moody, an engineer-

ing genius. Through four years and almost twenty thousand man-hours, Hyler was blessed with the talent of many experts: Val Dempsey, Audio & Visual; Larry Spreckelmeier, Horn & Whistle specialist; Kristin McKinley Steiner, Design; John Wellborn, Lighting Engineer; Gary Grybos, Graphics & Painting; Bob Erickson, Computer Systems; Cesar Becerra, Marketing & Public Relations; John Hurkmans, Marketing & Logistics; and most of all, the loving support from his wonderful wife Cass Flagg. Now Big Horn is Hyler's rolling masterpiece ready to dazzle the mind and intrigue the imagination.

With a Verdin Bell carillon, a Tangley Circus Calliope, 55 antique steam whistles, 46 air whistles, 18 train, boat, submarine and truck horns, 4 ship's horns including the world's largest air horn, 21 fire alarms, emergency, railroad trolley, fire truck and train bells, two US

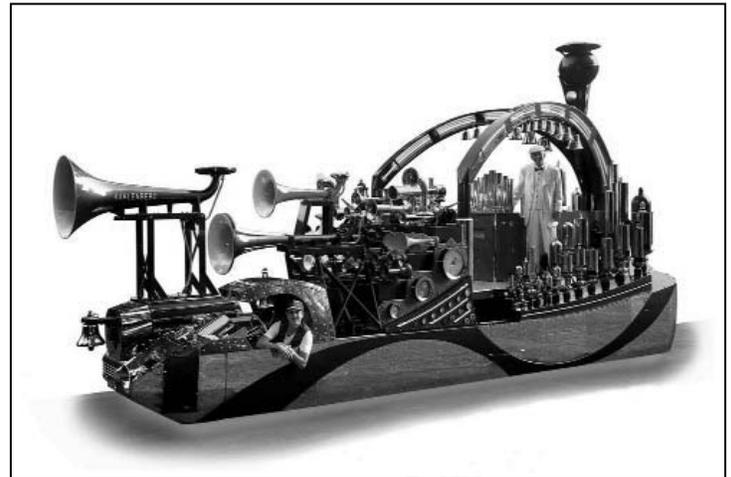


Figure 5. Hyler Bracey (in back) encircled by "all the bells and whistles." (and Tangley Calliope). His wife, Cass, sits in front.

Photo: Hyler Bracey

Navy destroyer steam sirens, one diaphone fog horn, 175 feet of multi functioned neon lights in red, white, blue, green and purple, 22 high-powered strobe lights, accessory compressor and an air-operated cockpit door, 164 cfm rotary screw compressor with 200 gallons of air storage capacity, billowing smoke machines, 300 amps of audio power, wireless PA system, remote control for audience participation, 66 electronic and mechanical gauges, 7500-watt Onan generator, a 2500-watt Heart inverter and seven 1450-amp batteries as used in the space shuttle. Big horn is the most acoustical vehicle on the planet that amazes all who see it (**Figure 5**).