

# One Man's Life ..... by Pete Shaffer

## Part One: A chapter of our lives has closed

I found it! I found it! The set of diodes I had installed several years ago so my brake lights would work was still there, barely. Those of you with the mature coaches (1996, 1997, and 1998) know what I mean. The Cyclops brake light would work, but not the left or right brake lights. The culprit was a puny original equipment diode Freightliner had installed. The fix was to replace this diode with one or two diodes in parallel to handle the load. This was a tough job, requiring the flexibility of Rubber Man and an extra arm to complete the job. Those of you who performed this job rejoiced as I did, and now I was viewing the remnants of those diodes. Why is this significant you ask?

It was April 6, 2009 – I was working in my basement, installing a new screen on a storm door that was damaged in the “Great Kentucky Ice Storm” that occurred this past January, when the driveway alarm sounded, announcing someone was coming for a visit. Sharon was in Lexington shopping and one quick glance at my Craftsman wall clock told me it couldn't be her. It was only 3:00 p.m., and the shopping malls don't close 'til 9 or 10 p.m.!

As I climbed up the basement stairs, expecting to see a salesman, I was met by a horn-blowing neighbor speeding up the gravel drive. He was waving wildly and pointing at something in my side yard. That's when I saw my beloved 1997 Fleetwood Discovery – *The BigD* – blazing away with flames shooting 20 feet in the air and thick black smoke streaming in the direction of the stiff winds of the day. My first reaction was shock, and my second was a string of four letter words: “Fire, fire, fire!”

As you look at the first picture, you will see what I first saw. Now I want you to think about my neighbor's next move since racing up my driveway blowing his horn. He ran to my



Photo 1: Fire at time of dialing 911.



Photo 2: Ten minutes later



Photo 3: Thirteen minutes later



Photo 4: All over but the crying

5/8-inch garden hose with the thought he was going to put that fire out! Look at the picture of the fire, now look at your thumb.



BigD-less Pete

Yes, your thumb. Your thumb is about the size of a standard garden hose. Now picture someone getting close enough to the blazing inferno to actually get a stream of water to hit that fire. Now picture two propane tanks, one 40 gallons and one 24 gallons, completely full, located just about where the worst of the fire was. Now think about 90 gallons of diesel fuel located in about the same location. All this ran through my head at once.

I dialed 911 on my cell phone and was greeted with “911, what is your emergency and location?” I said, “My motor home is on fire,” and gave her my address. She said, “Is there anyone in this mobile home?” I said, “It's a **motor** home and no one is aboard.” She then asked, “Are you driving down the road?” I said, “No, it's parked near my home.” She said, “What? Is this a mobile home or what?” Running through my mind were all sorts of words to use, some nice and some not so nice, but I settled on, “RV, camper, motor home – it's on fire, send the fire department.”

Now, about half-way through all this conversation, I leaned down and grabbed the garden hose my well-intentioned neighbor was attempting to drag toward the roaring inferno. I couldn't really take the time to explain to him about the 64 gallons of highly flammable propane, since the nice lady on

the other end of the 911 call was asking so many questions! He was pulling the hose, and I was holding on, attempting to keep him away. He screamed, “Let go! I have to put it out while you are talking on the phone.” I responded with a scream of my

own, "Stay away!" and the nice 911 lady shouted, "You don't have to yell in my ear!" It was one of those days, let me tell you.

I hung up with the 911 lady and started to tell my hose-tugging neighbor about the propane, when one of the tires blew out from the intense heat. Now if you have never had the opportunity to experience a 110+psi tire blowing out, you don't know what you are missing! The noise is loud enough and scary enough to make you think you need change your underwear, let me tell you. The explosion of the tire seemed to convince my neighbor he was in the wrong place at the wrong time and suddenly had "something he had to go do."

If you think the tire blowing out was something, you should have seen the center propane tank when the intense heat caused it to vent! The sound was like a really loud Fourth of July bottle rocket screeching into the sky, but the flame was something else. If my neighbor had been standing there, squirting that pitiful stream of water on that blazing inferno, he would have lost his legs! It shot a flame about 22 feet across the yard, cooking the grass. Then there was the sound of breaking glass, and other explosions I could not identify. There was even one explosion that sent a 15-inch piece of flaming pipe toward the house 50 feet away. It landed on the sidewalk leading to the porch steps, still on fire! Hey, finally something my puny old garden hose could put out! According to the fire report, the fire department arrived exactly 13 minutes after the call was placed. They lied. It was more like 13 **hours** after I called. I know, because I stood there watching my coach go up in flames.

Looking at the black pile of what used to be my coach, I found part of the diode I had installed dangling from a burnt wire. I also found the really cool pushbutton lock I had installed on the dish cabinets to keep the CorelleWare™ from hitting the floor when I drove over a driveway entrance. Also a ball bearing slide I used in the under-sofa drawer project I built (Fall 2006, page 11). But there was no trace of the King Dome, or the rearview camera. And puddles of aluminum were everywhere. Even the kitchen sink was looking weird. The porcelain coating had melted and had run down the sink drain hole before solidifying into a blob.

The good news is no one was hurt, and the thick black smoke missed our house. I'm working with the insurance for the motor home cost and the contents lost. The insurance

company wants to know where the keys are. I asked, "What for? There aren't any locks left!" "What caused the fire?"

All I know is there was a violent lightning and thunder storm about six hours before I saw the flames. In my mind, the cause could be a lightning strike, or an electrical short, or a combination of lightning strikes causing a lingering electrical problem. Other than seeing fire coming from the center of the coach, right about where the circuit breaker box and power transfer switch were located, I don't have a clue. Then there were the silly questions they asked. "Were you carrying a flammable liquid when you saw the fire? What color was the smoke? Does your RV have running boards? Did the RV have rear windshield wipers?" I think I stumped him when I told him that not only did it not have rear windshield wipers, it didn't have a rear windshield!

The salvage company is supposed to be here April 13. We are trying to figure out how to get the 37-foot remains (with four out of the six tires blown out, burnt up and flattened, the leveling jacks in the down position with the jack return springs no longer functioning due to the intense heat, and a set of locked rear wheels) out of my driveway without damaging anything else.

After the fire, the hardest thing I had to do was tell my five-year-old granddaughter the news. She took one look at the blackened pile and asked, "Pop-pop, where am I going to sleep when we go camping?" It about broke my heart, let me tell you.

As my 93-year-old father is fond of saying, "Another chapter in my life has come to a close." I guess you could say, the BigD lives no longer. ❖

**Editor's Note:** When Pete submitted this article, he wrote: *Although we had to curtail our participation in this group due to problems, I read the daily emails [on the Yahoo! Group] and dreamed of the day when we could get back into the swing of things. We were just getting to that point and had taken the coach out a few times last year. When the coach caught fire, she was fully loaded with our possessions in preparation for a ski trip.*

As sad as this article is, there is good news: he and Sharon weren't on the road when this happened, nor were they asleep in the rig. In part two, Pete tells of the lengths he had to go to, to get the remains of his beloved BigD removed.

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## Part Two: A chapter of our lives has closed

### BigD Fire aftermath - disposal

Are inanimate objects alive? Like your motor coach, is she alive? I am in the "yes" camp, but I would probably think my wife is in the "no" camp. My dad said that cars and boats are "shes" because we have to love them, care for them and even fix them all the time. Not sure what he actually meant by "fix them," but since Mom and Dad had six of us kids, I'm thinking he did not mean what we just did to our dog. I will leave that up to you to decide.

My coach, the BigD, was alive. I applied all of Dad's logic about these things and yes, she was alive. Let me explain. First a disclaimer. All references to "she" are about the coach, even though some comparisons could be drawn at times to my better

half.

Now that the shock of losing my beloved coach to fire has passed, I pressed on to the mechanical part of any loss, getting rid of her remains. She was a big pile of black, smelly, leaking rubble, and she had to go. This should have been easy. It was not.

On April 6, I called the insurance company to report the loss and ask what I needed to do. They talked about appraising the vehicle, salvage and/or disposal. I asked if they could fast-track the disposal, since there were fluids (diesel, power steering, stabilizer jack and room slide hydraulic and maybe transmission and engine oils and antifreeze) leaking all over our side yard, and propane gas was leaking from one of the two

tanks. The response I received showed me he had no idea what his company had insured. "What were you doing with propane in your car?" I explained it was a motor coach, or motor home and he said, "Oh" – you know that kind of "oh" you say when you don't have a clue, and probably under his breath was saying, "Why did I have to get this call?" Then he promised a speedy resolution and said something like "we will have it out of your way in a few days." *It took three weeks and a day.*

### And the fun begins...

The first towing/salvage company to call told me they would be here "tomorrow." I asked if they knew what they were picking up and he said, "We do this all the time, we know what we are doing, trust me." I said, "Fine. Just make sure your truck can handle 20,000 pounds."

He was quiet for a few seconds and then said, "Okay, tell me what." I explained it was a 37-foot-long motor home and in her current location there was a steep 400-foot-long gravel driveway to ascend. He said he'd better drive out here first to look around before bringing his wrecker. Tomorrow never came for him. In fact, four tomorrows never came for him. On the fifth tomorrow, after yet another call to see where he was, I was told they were too busy and no longer interested in towing my "truck."

The insurance company sent out another towing/salvage company to do the deed. Another phone call and another explanation that this was a 20,000-pound 37-foot-long motor home (no one understands the "motor coach" title). He said, "No problem; we do this all the time and we know what we are doing, trust me. Kind of like a Greyhound bus right?" Don't you just hate it when someone refers to your coach as a bus?

Tomorrow came and went, and I called. "Tomorrow for



The BigD partway down the driveway



BigD on trailer and being secured



BigD in body bag; truck trying to turn around



Truck pushing BigD onto trailer

sure," he said. I waited and, lo and behold, he was right. The next day someone drove up our driveway, got out and started to look around. With his hand over his mouth, he kept mumbling, "Omigod, omigod, omigod," over and over and over again. I asked what was wrong and he said, "This thing is huge! I thought it was going to be a large pickup truck. Omigod." After about a half hour of "omigods," he left, never to return.

The insurance company sent out the third towing/salvage company. Another call and another tomorrow. After three tomorrows, they showed up and left without even getting out of their truck, never to return.

The insurance company sent the fourth and final salvage company to remove the BigD. This time he came unannounced in a large tractor and 55-foot flatbed/trailer combination. The driver had to park at the bottom of our drive and walk up to the house. "I can't make the turn to get up your driveway," he said, waiting for me to offer some sort of solution to his problem.

About then, a blowing horn sounded, announcing he was blocking the road and the school bus couldn't get past.

"Where does this road come out?" he asked. I informed him it dead-ended in about a half mile and I didn't know any driveway big enough for him to turn around in. A four-letter word escaped and he started to walk back down. I jumped on my tractor and cut across the fields and went down the hill and got in front of him, then drove down Goose Creek Road to find a wide spot for him to pull over to let the traffic pass. After he parked, I drove him back up the grass-covered hill with him screaming in my ear, "We can't make it up *that* hill in *this*, can we?" and another four-letter word escaped his mouth. (Okay, maybe I was showing off just a little, but isn't that what boys do?)

We live in a semi-rural area

on a ridge top with a fantastic view. Payment for this view is a steep driveway that spirals around the hill on its way to the top. The BigD never had problems with the turn at the driveway entrance, nor the climb up to the top to her parking spot, but apparently large trucks do.

He looked things over and announced he was going to return to his garage some two hours away and talk it over with the boss. Some of the possibilities were to cut the coach up into three parts, load it onto three smaller trucks, or even fly a helicopter in to lift the coach out, or somehow drag her down the hill.

Four tomorrows later they returned with several men, the tractor trailer/flatbed and a medium-sized tow truck. Their plan was to put a tire on the side where both rear tires burned and exploded, mechanically release the rear brakes using a caging bolt, lift up the front end and tow her down the drive. Once at the bottom of the drive and on the county road, he planned to back the tow truck pushing BigD up and onto the trailer. All this was planned so school buses wouldn't be a problem. A solution to the problem of 20,000 pounds going downhill brakeless pushing the tow truck out of control was to simply lower the front end and let the frame drag.

All went well. Within two hours she was loaded onto the flatbed, and this is when things got real interesting. Remember when I asked if you thought inanimate objects are alive? Well I swear, she was fighting her final removal with all she had. After all, she was mine for ten years, and we grew up together and I loved her, cared for her and constantly fixed her. Once on the trailer she must have realized she was about to lose the battle to stay home. She must have summoned some inner strength and called out to all the critters large and small to help.

I heard a yelp and another four-letter word and knew something was wrong with the flatbed driver. I ran over expecting to see blood, but was instead greeted with another four-letter word and pointing. "Big .... black ... with feathers, ran under the trailer from that wooded area to that one. Several of them." I replied he had just met our resident wild turkeys and not to worry. As I turned away we heard a loud snort, kind of like air gushing out of a tire, and then we saw movement. A big buck was no more than ten feet away, and scared the heebie-jeebies out of the driver. Another four-letter word.

Then we heard what can only be described as girls crying. Several of them, and they were close. Very close. All of a sudden, four goats emerged from the wooded area and started toward the wreck of the BigD. The driver, clearly out of his realm in the wooded countryside, looked stunned, and looked to me to tell him what to do. About then it started to rain. Another four-letter word and the driver started for the cab of the truck with the goats close behind. Something I didn't know was that goats don't like the rain. So they went to the only shelter they could find –

under the trailer with the BigD on top. The four goats under the trailer refusing to leave ... car horns sounding, announcing someone wants to get by ... then more horns. It was like the races had just let out! The driver shrugged and pointed to the four goats, saying, "I'll squash them if I try and move this thing. What do I do?" A neighbor got out of her car and started to swear like a drunken sailor, throwing sticks and stones at the goats. They didn't move.

I did the only thing I could think of: I called the county sheriff. They sent a detective out to investigate and find out who owned the goats. As we were standing around talking, I mentioned that the goats were on the lam and were fugitives. "Why don't you put them into the back of your cruiser and take them downtown and 'grill' them?" I asked. My attempt at humor was met with the look like I was from outer space.

Finally a neighbor in a pickup brought some kind of feed over and enticed the goats to leave the sanctuary of the trailer to feast on sweet goat treats. The flatbed driver took this opportunity to drive away and be rid of this place.

The goats, seeing their dry shelter leaving, followed the truck

as it drove off with the BigD on top. The last I saw of her, the four goats were trotting behind yelling, "Nooooooo, noooooo, noooooo" in little girl voices. (Those of you who have goats will know what I mean. The rest of you probably think I'm nuts, and you're probably right.)

With the BigD gone, I went back up the hill to clean up what remained. The driveway was scarred from dragging her down hill, a driveway pipe was damaged when she ran over the end and squashed it, and 2,100 pounds of burnt debris had to be gathered up and hauled off to the dump. I told you, the BigD fought her removal with everything she had left in her.



Last load of debris getting ready to go to the dump – 2200 pounds in all



A last look at the BigD in far happier times

I'll never forget the fun times we had, and the Discovery rallies were highlights of our adventures. I'll never forget the people we met. A lot of them emailed me to say how sorry they were. Now I understand why her former owner cried as she watched her motor coach leave her yard for the last time when Sharon and I bought the BigD ten years ago. I cried, too.

### BigD fire aftermath and some advice

Insurance is something all responsible people have to protect themselves and loved ones when catastrophic events occur in their lives. Everyone draws their own lines where they need and can afford insurance coverage. I have insurance on all of my vehicles and selected a deductible we could live with if anything should happen.

Motor coaches are an odd mix of vehicle and house. With my insurance company, they looked at the loss in two parts. One was the vehicle and it was handled by one division located in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and the house portion or personal property contents was handled by the property division in Ohio. Since the fire occurred while the BigD was parked on our home property, the insurer allowed us to be reimbursed under that policy. We had replacement coverage for contents and thought this was going to be easy. Did you know when you

lose everything, the insurance company wants you to make a list of all items lost, its age and current value? Everything? How many spoons do you have in the kitchen drawer? Did you remember the tools you have? What about the silk flowers on the table? How many bath towels? Do you know all this? Our list was four pages long. Sharon and I composed the list by each of us making the list, then we compared notes. We walked around this house looking in all closets and drawers saying, "Did we have one of these in the BigD? Did you remember to put that window fan on the list?" What about the change everyone always keeps for newspapers? Frisbees for the dog, and tennis balls?

Some insurance companies ask you to take pictures of everything in the house and they store them for you. I recommend you take them up on the offer. It protects them as well as you.

### A final note

In May we settled with the insurance company on the coach; around June 1, we received the check for the contents. ❖

**Editor's Note:** Pete's insurance advice is good. We should all heed them. I extend thanks to Pete for sharing his experiences with us and we wish the Shaffers well.

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