

Bus #906 Rolls Down Road of MTA History

Stories of how Mendocino County's public bus service got started and prospered, told by drivers of its oldest bus #906 plus mechanics and managers past and present.

By Suzanne Pletcher

Bus #906 is known at Mendocino Transit Authority (MTA) as *The Beast*. It has a large-diameter steering wheel that requires real muscle to turn, a cranky wheelchair lift, and thick steel siding that makes passengers feel like they are riding safely inside a tank. Bought gleaming new in MTA's boom years of 1997/98, it has outlasted one blown engine, the lifespans of all other MTA buses so far, and the long



MTA Driver Bill Baxter loves vintage autos and drives old bus #906.

tenures of several drivers. At age 21, it plays a mascot's role in the second half of public transportation's 43-year history in Mendocino County.

"#906 was the Cadillac of the fleet. Everyone wanted to drive it," said Bob Butler, maintenance manager at MTA. "Now no one wants to drive it."

With a half million miles on the odometer tallied from carting folks between Ukiah, Willits and Potter Valley most days over the span of a human generation, #906 has been part of community history. Several drivers have shared stories from behind the wheel of #906 in this article and its sidebar. But #906 almost didn't happen.

When public transit popped up in a new state tax law, powerful forces wearing the big boots of Mendocino County Public Works tried to stomp it down locally. In 1971, the California legislature passed the Transportation Development Act (TDA or SB325).

The new law required that a quarter-cent of the sales tax be diverted to create and support public transit. As a result, Public Works lost some of the tax money it was accustomed to spending on streets and roads.¹

“The law was a bit vague,” former MTA General Manager Bruce Richard said. “It said you could spend the money on streets and roads only if there were no unmet transit needs that are reasonable to meet. Well, what’s reasonable and what’s a need? That got debated for several years and changed gradually



In the mid 1990's, a gallon of gas cost \$1.18 if you pumped it yourself, \$1.38 if you got the full service. This bus was one of the 1st brand new buses MTA purchased.

the allocation of the tax income to support public transit.”

During the debate years, the price of gas was climbing, making it difficult for lower-income folks to afford to drive to work or school. The state mental hospital on Talmage Road closed and its residents were absorbed into the community but didn’t have transportation. The early Earth Day celebrations promoted less driving and reduced pollution.²

“At public meetings, the County supervisors were saying there was no need for a bus,” said Steve Turner, an early driver and later operations manager at MTA from 1979—2001. “But there was so much community expression of need that they set up MTA as a pilot project.” He added, “It was expected to fail.”

¹ 4/10/18 and 4/11/18 conversations with Phil Dow, director of Mendocino Council of Governments and Bruce Richard, former general manager of MTA.

² 4/16/18 conversation with Steve Turner

“There used to be some real fights about this,” said Phil Dow, director of Mendocino Council of Governments (MCOG), the county’s transportation planning organization that was established when MTA was formalized. “This was money they used to get, and the state legislature took it away from them and said, ‘We’re going to make it available for public transit.’ There were a lot of bitter public works directors.” In the end, Dow said he told the County, “Forget it. You’re never going to get that money back because there are a lot of transit dependent people here and too many unmet needs.”

Mendocino County inaugurated public transportation service as a pilot project in April 1976, a bit more than a year after the County and the four cities of Point Arena, Fort Bragg, Willits and Ukiah entered into a Joint Powers Agreement in January of 1975. The fleet was five old Argosy buses that Turner described as motor homes with windows, and it cost \$.25 for a local ride. That first year, MTA had a total \$250,000 budget to pay a handful of employees and keep the buses running from quarters at an old garage on Mill Creek Road. It ferried 5,400 customers around the County six days a week on a very limited schedule.³



MTA used old Checker cabs for its first Dial-A-Ride buses in the early 1980's.

The City of Ukiah was operating a taxi service, and it and senior centers held their hands out for some of the tax money. This was happening in every county, so the state finally forced them all into Consolidated Transportation Service Agencies. MTA became a formal organization in 1979.

³ MTA Quarter Century Report, 1976—2001.

As part of the consolidation, Richard discovered that a deal to purchase the City of Ukiah’s private taxi service—six Checker cabs, radios and the stipulation that MTA would keep the 10 taxicab employees—had been negotiated before he came on board in 1981.

“My feeling at the time was that MTA paid the City more than we should have—more than those cabs were worth,” Richard said. But it was a done deal: Checker cabs provided Dial-A-Ride service for years until wheelchair accessibility requirements forced an upgrade to vans.

Richard and Dow both started work on the same day in the auspicious month for MTA of August, 1981. Driver Norma Wilson started that month in 1981 as did Butler, a former Coast Guard mechanic.

Those hires marked a turning point for MTA. Turner was already there and was “the heart of MTA,” as Richard put it. Richard turned out to be very effective at getting state and federal grant money to buy buses like #906. Dow at MCOG continued to argue the case for funding public transit. Wilson went from driving to managing the bus drivers. Butler kept running the hodge-podge of cast-off 23-passenger vans in order to serve a population that in 10 years had jumped 30% to 67,000 souls⁴.

Right away in 1982, Richard bought from Gary Hartman 2.4 acres that #906 and MTA would call home. It was a mud and gravel parking lot in south Ukiah next to the water treatment plant, edged by a rambling low-roofed building and an attached garage. Those became the MTA administrative headquarters and repair shop with room left over for bus washing and fueling stations. Then came the first brand new bus.

The good news was that it was a “deal.” Manufacturer Gillig was just starting to switch from making school buses to transit buses. The bad news was that it was a hand-built prototype.

⁴ CensusScope, Social Science Data Analysis Network: Mendocino County Population Growth, 1960-2000.

“It was a nightmare,” said Butler. The prototype was cobbled together from schoolbus parts, European parts that measured in metrics and soon could not be replaced, and “they had wires in it that went to nowhere,” he said. But he stuck with Gillig, which later made #906.

With a strong core team, new operations center and sales tax funding established and growing with the population, MTA headed into the 1980’s—1990’s boom years when #906 finally rolled onto the scene. Richard’s knack for getting grants flourished.

“At one point we happened to get federal grants that lined up over a period of three years in a row,” he said. “We can safely say that, before that started, we probably had the oldest bus fleet in the state of California. By 1997/98, we had the newest fleet of coach buses in the state (coach buses are 40-feet long).”

#906 was the baby of MTA’s nine shiny new buses. It arrived in the last batch of four Gillig *Phantom* buses purchased in 1998, and it was a marvel with power steering. Those buses got the name Phantom because the Gillig sales rep drove around the state in a prototype taking orders and promising the buses would be built “soon.” Someone tired of waiting joked that they were phantoms, and the name stuck.

MTA Drivers’ Stories from the Road

**Life Saver: Merle Coolidge, MTA Driver,
retired in 2001.**



Merle Coolidge

“Those were fun years, driving for MTA. The people made them fun, and the MTA workers. We were like a family. I had mostly the same people all the time, every day.

They were all great. You’re not supposed to, but you do chat with passengers.

“I never had any problems except for one. This fella had a mouth full of Copenhagen chew and he choked.” Apparently, the man inhaled some chew and it blocked his windpipe. He couldn’t breathe, and the situation quickly became desperate.

Coolidge pulled over and strode back along the aisle until he reached the man. Then he stuck a finger deep into the man’s mouth and flicked out a huge wad of chew. “I radioed the office and asked for an ambulance, and it came and took him to the hospital,” Coolidge said.

One of the first lucky drivers of #906 was Merle Coolidge, but it took a near-disaster to get him behind the wheel of the new bus.

A Potter Valley resident, he had been driving a smaller van-style bus between Potter Valley and Ukiah, ferrying students to St. Mary's School in Ukiah in the morning and bringing them and other passengers back home in the afternoon.

"I was driving back to Potter Valley one afternoon in an old used bus; this was about 1998," said Coolidge. "I turned off Highway 20 onto Eel River Road and the engine blew up. I coasted around the corner, across the lane and down the hill a little ways to a wide spot where I could get off the road. The black smoke poured out from under the hood. They brought out another bus and put the passengers on it and I drove them home. We had just gotten the new #906, so they asked me if I thought I could turn it around in my driveway. I told them, 'Sure.' Then I went home and widened my driveway. I drove #906 for three years until I retired at age 73, starting the route at my house at 7 a.m. and getting back home around 4 p.m. I could pull into my driveway, turn off the ignition, and go inside my house and stretch out my feet under the dinner table within two minutes of getting off work."

"The next time the man got on the bus, he said, 'Thanks Merle.'"

Pam Olson, MTA Driver 2002—2015



Pam Olson

A Stranger's Gift from the Heart

Olson took a year off work to care for her dying mother.

She was still grieving when she

went back to driving #906.

"It was such a comfort to be back behind #906's wheel, like an old friend who cares for you while you're getting back to normal after a big loss," she said.

Still, she was having a tough time as she made a stop at Autumn Leaves retirement home to pick up two passengers. One was a regular passenger but the other she didn't recognize.

Olson said, "The first paid her fare and boarded. The other was a girl, probably in her late 20's. She climbed the stairs and handed me a wreath of fresh

Even when it was relatively new, #906 had its quirks. The main one was the wheelchair ramp. It was an automated platform that extended out from the entry steps, and then lowered to the ground. If the bus wasn't level with the curb, the ramp wouldn't lower all the way down. Once when that happened to Coolidge, he solved the problem by hustling all the schoolchildren to the high side of the bus, which lifted the other side just enough to allow the ramp to descend all the way down.

Another time, the ramp extended out but wouldn't go down. Nothing that Coolidge tried would get it to work. Finally, he picked up the passenger out of her wheelchair, stepped gingerly down to the curb, and carried her over to the transfer bus headed to town. A kind passenger followed toting her wheelchair and they deposited her safely in the transfer bus, went back and retracted the darn ramp in #906, and drove on their way. Twenty years later, driver Bill Baxter had a similar episode.

"It was more than just a bus to me," said driver Pam Olson. "#906 had a heart and soul about it. It allowed people to come and go through its door every day without prejudice and they brought with them a unique energy and vibe that would breathe life into that bus.

flowers—vines, roses and wild flowers—and said, 'This is for you.'

I thought I'd give her a free ride, but she backed out of the bus. I said, 'Wait, what's your name so I know who to thank?' She smiled at me in a way I'll always remember and replied, 'Angel.' "

Olson was astonished. She never saw that woman again but the moment is a precious memory, of a stranger stepping forward onto bus #906 to reach out and give something that filled Olson's heart with gratitude at a moment when she really needed it.

Rescue on the Willits Grade

"One time going up the grade to Willits on the evening run I had four commuters on board. The bus was slowing down. I didn't want to over-react and so in my mind I was thinking what do I do and I started looking for a place to pull over. We came to a big dirt pullout so I pulled over just as the bus died, and there was no getting it started again.

“For instance, it felt happy on #906 when one day a passenger announced, ‘I got accepted into San Jose State College!’ I was the driver that got her to Mendocino College on time for classes every day.” Then one day she almost didn’t.

That day, #906 blew its engine when Olson was making her way up Hensley Creek Road to the college. #906 was groaning and slowing down. Olson knew it was dying but was desperate to deliver the students in time for class, so she kept it lumbering forward with smoke pouring out the back. Finally, within easy walking distance of the college, she had to pull over.



MTA's mechanics shop crew, l to r, Matt Wilsey, mechanic; John Cochrane, shelter maintenance; Jack Elliott, mechanic; Gwyn Sturges, bus cleaner; Bret Byrd, mechanic; and Bob Butler, maintenance manager. Byrd and Butler have each worked at MTA for more than 30 years.

“Well, it was after hours for the MTA mechanics crew. I had to call Bob Butler at home. He’s gruff but has a heart of gold. He and his wife Ursula drove up to help.

“The commuters weren’t complaining but I knew they wanted to get home: They were tired, they’d worked all day.

“My daughter lives up in Willits. She had left work at a bank in Ukiah and on her way up the grade she saw the MTA bus pulled over. Something told her, ‘That’s my mom’s bus.’ She pulled over.

“I called, ‘Yardley! Hey passengers, you just got a ride home!’ She lives in Brooktrails and so was going all the way through town. I told her to just drop them off at the bus stops that they say.”

It was because Butler put a new engine in #906 that he kept it in service so long.

Like Coolidge, drivers Olson and Baxter enjoyed driving #906 even in its old age: They both love vintage cars. Baxter said, “It is kind of a delight to drive this old thing.”

Olson was known as the driver who tamed *The Beast*. When the bus got old and felt hard to turn, she’d blame it on “arthritis of the Beast.” Retired driver Jim Nunn called her “captain of that ship.” At Olson’s retirement party in 2015 after 11 years of driving, Olson remembered crying. On her way across the lot for the last time, she stopped to pat #906 and gave it a quick kiss.

Some passengers too prefer #906 to the new buses. They favor the thicker cloth seats to today’s molded plastic/cloth ones, said driver Kim Lance. They like sitting up high in #906, she said, because they can look down on the traffic. And kids relish the cranky wheelchair ramp as they would a circus ride, often accompanying parents and grandparents up the lift.

As #906 rolled over the finish line of 12-year bus life expectancy and kept on going, Richard continued his grant-writing winning streak. A \$5 million federal grant in 2010, combined with smaller state grants and

Pictures from MTA’s Past

MTA Bus Rodeos



From 1989—2001, Steve Turner, then the operations manager at MTA, put together a five-driver team and bus to compete in regional bus rodeos. MTA’s “home field” was the Mendocino College parking lot. Ten events included: backing into a narrow “alley,” driving a narrow route with diminishing side clearance and executing a panic stop just before hitting barrels, driving between a line of elevated golf balls that started 4 inches away from the wheels and in subsequent rounds went down to 1-inch wider than the wheels, etc. You lost a point for each golf ball you dislodged.

\$110,000 in local funds, were used to build one of Ukiah's architecturally significant modern buildings, a big maintenance shop powered by rooftop solar collectors. The opening ceremony was August, 2012. MTA also installed above-ground fueling tanks, refurbished the administrative building, paved the parking lot and built a solar canopy to shelter off-duty buses.

"#906 is still active and in service every day in Ukiah. The drivers hate it," said Butler. "Now we have the new coaches, 40-foot low floors with electric assist power steering that they can drive with one finger.



MTA Bus #906 in 2018, still goin' strong.

It's funny to see how that transition happens. #906's series of Gillig used to be the Cadillac and now it's the worst thing in the world. And you know it is going to happen again with the next generation of technology: In another 10 years, the newer buses that we have now will become a #906."

In pictures, the drivers' arm muscles are shining with sweat and bulging as they turn the wheel. Turner didn't remember whether #906 competed, but does remember the earlier GMC buses because MTA had rebuilt them with air assisted power steering and the power assist reliably failed during the intense steering demands of competition. Unfortunately, the air assist also powered the brakes and throttle on the GMCs. Nonetheless, MTA brought home trophies every year. The rodeo was an all-day affair: Everyone brought shade canopies, food, and drinks on ice.

MTA Halloween Buses



For 4-5 years in the mid-1990s, Kathy Holt, MTA dispatcher, was the queen of

Before retirement, #906 will get one last shot at modernity: It will be outfitted with GPS (global positioning system) technology, an electronic passenger counting system that tracks passengers boarding and where they get on and off.

“RouteShout will enable any customer to go to the MTA website and find out how long it will be before #906—or another bus—will arrive at their stop to pick them up,” said current MTA General Manager Carla Meyer. “They can check with their smartphone.”

But #906’s days on the road are numbered.

“We will replace it with an all-electric coach, the first in MTA’s fleet,” said Butler, who is gleefully test-driving the new electrics. “The new electric bus will drive the downtown Ukiah route, which is about 100 miles a day, and it will be charged with electricity generated from our solar panels.”

The timing of #906’s retirement is a grant funding issue: It’s an expensive bus to replace. A coach bus today costs around \$550,000 and an electric bus is close to \$1 million even though the cost of the battery packs is coming down, said Butler. MTA will use *green vehicle* vouchers from the California Air

putting together a team and decorating the buses as a fun-house of horrors. They decorated the bus at the MTA shop and took it downtown for kids to walk through as part of Pumpkinfest festivities.

MTA Holiday Trolley



Glenna Blake, MTA's former marketing manager

MTA debuted its Christmas Trolley in 1996 because of a transportation conference it hosted in Ukiah that spring. It was the first statewide organization conference to be held at the brand new Ukiah Conference Center. Since all the motels were at the north end of town, MTA borrowed a trolley from South Lake Tahoe Transit System to shuttle attendees back and forth. It was a big hit, and mentioned in Herb Coen’s column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. So MTA rented the trolley for the Christmas season for several years and then bought one.

Resources Board to lower the cost of a new electric to about the same as a traditional bus.

Butler is looking forward to #906's retirement. "On our end in the maintenance shop we know it is going to be an electric bus and is going to be new challenge for us and a very interesting challenge," he said.

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"MTA got a state Good Idea prize for it. Glenna Blake was the major person to make that happen. She and I were both at the conference when that award was announced and so we both went up to the front to give a speech and I said, 'Sometimes the best thing that a general manager can do is to get out of the way.' By golly, it is still going and going strong. I wasn't keen on the idea, but Glenna spearheaded it and everybody else helped to make it work." —*Bruce Richard*