## Blue Birds With Wheels, Not Wings

By Carol L. Bowman



I remember the yellow bus and driver waiting impatiently, as I ran the last 500 feet of the mile long dirt lane, from our rural Pennsylvania farmhouse to the main road. The kids peering out the bus windows made jokes about my recurrent tardiness. By the time I ran up the metal steps and took my seat, my hair was tangled, my clothes in disarray and my cheeks beet red. This nightmare continued, except when I arrived at the bus stop early, or in truth, when the bus came late. These days, when cold wind gnawed at my bare legs, the sight of that bright image coming up the incline glistened like a savior.

Either way, I had a love-hate relationship with those school buses, each with 'Blue Bird Co. of America' imprinted on the bumper. Inside narrow aisles, slim two-seater brown plastic rows, short backs with metal head rests and windows that opened half way by depressing the clips, acted as my only route to an education, twice a day for twelve school years. The large rear exit door marked FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY remained strictly off limits. I fancied how fun it would be to jump out the back of the bus just once.

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Who could have guessed that decades later, as I traipsed through Mexico and Central America that I would be sitting on these very same buses, but my companions would not be 40 school students. These second hand blue birds transport at least 90 passengers per trip, scrunched three or four to a seat. Livestock ranging from chickens and turkeys to goats and pigs, 50 lb. sacks of potatoes and a myriad of other parcels and good filled baskets jam every inch of space.

American school buses, built to last, built for safety, built for a maximum of 50 students, face retirement from service about every ten years, which represents about a half life of their durability. Third world Latino capitalists, not about to discard anything mechanical until every sputter of life is gone from it, jumped on the opportunity. They decided to solve a problem of countryside transportation for *campesinos* needing to move their goods, crops and families from one place to another.

The idea of putting privately owned, transformed American school buses into the people and cargo moving business sprang up throughout Mexico and Central America over 30 years ago. Today, these buses rank as king of transportation in Guatemala and owning one carries a sense of pride.

When school districts exchange their bus fleet for newer, shinier models, the half used ones go to auction. US southern states' auctions, in particular, become feasting grounds for Latino entrepreneurs, eager to buy one or even two chained together. A driver makes that long haul from the US into Mexico and then crosses into Central America at the Mexican/Guatemalan border.

According to Gwyn Lawrence, in a 2007 article in *Revue Magazine*, "The Birth of a Camioneta," buses go straight to a workshop once they arrive in the Latin country. Six speed manual transmissions replace automatic ones, 13 window models are cut down to accommodate only 10 windows per side, roof racks with ladder access get bolted on and after removal of all rust and primed, the buses receive coats of bright, wild, neon colored paint.

Each owner gives his bus a name, usually that of his girlfriend or wife. Partners make up the majority of ownerships: the driver or *piloto* and the helper or *ayudante*. The *ayudante* hawks for riders prior to the bus leaving, secures all the cargo on the roof, collects fares once the bus is moving and retrieves parcels when stops are made. A destination board, placed above the windshield, readies these transportation workhorses to lurch into action.

Brakes smoking, motors groaning, gears grinding, reggae or salsa music blaring, they struggle through curvy mountain passes, on pot holed or cobbled roads, overloaded, 14 hours a day, seven days a week. They are cheap, dangerous and uncomfortable, but provide the greatest culture lesson about an area's people, while getting the traveler to his destination.

Gringos who started taking these buses to remote villages in Central America or to market towns in rural Mexico years ago, affectionately called them 'chicken buses', and the name stuck. Sharing your seat with a chicken, rooster, turkey, even piglets remains common, even today.

Larger animals, like goats and sheep end up on the roof of the bus, catapulted topside and roped to the luggage rack bars, along with sacks of corn and potatoes, cardboard suitcases or high tech back-packer gear. This lofty position gives these animals a great view, above all the smoke and exhaust gurgling from the lumbering machines, but the ruts of poorly maintained roads makes for frequent near tumbles from their perch. *Campesinos*, who buy or sell farm animals at regional markets, need to travel with their livestock, to or from their subsistence *ranchos*.

Since these American hand-me downs remain their consistent method of transportation, the practice of 'move over- chicken on board' occurs out of necessity.

Twenty five years ago, I traveled throughout the state of Oaxaca, Mexico on chicken buses. Although school bus yellow had disappeared in favor of a more Mexican color palette, their exterior paint job drabbed in comparison to the beauties I recently rode in Antigua, Guatemala. Bus decoration is serious business here. Owners compete to have the bus with the classiest chrome grill, the brightest paint job, the most lights blinking and the loudest horn blaring.

On my way to Santiago Zamora, outside of Aguascalientes, to see the village procession on Semana Santa's Maudy Thursday, I walked to the lot behind *Mercado de Artesanias* in Antigua.

Rows of colorful bluebirds on wheels lined the parking area. In early morn, many buses waited for a full load.

## Ayudantes

stood in front of their respective buses hawking, coaxing, heckling passengers on board. I searched the row for the destination board, Aguascalientes and scaled the steps to adventure.

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The chicken bus motto followed religiously is-'leave when full, stop when needed.' We waited a long time, until all the seats were occupied with people or livestock, but the show inside the bus, while the helper rounded up stragglers, turned out to be captivating. We served as the audience for the stream of cast members that paraded up and down the aisles, pushing passed fannies sagging out into the narrow midline space.

A young man, with rumpled, tattered clothes inched his way down the aisle with a palm basket and a hand written note, detailing an operation his father needed and the cost. A young girl in Mayan dress with a smile that could rip your *quetzales* right from your wallet pranced through with her basket of sweet rolls atop her head, black braids dancing about. A magician of sorts boarded, working puppets in both hands.

Of course, he expected to sell, not entertain. While I took in all these sights, smells and sounds inside the bus, the *ayudante* shuffled the cargo around on the roof. A large box with turkey combs bobbing in and out of the open flap passed by my window as it was handed topside. I wondered how those birds would like their ride with a view.

Finally, we were all sufficiently crammed in and the bus pulled out from its berth. I couldn't help but notice that at stops along the way, people were exiting using the rear emergency door. Here was my chance. I had wanted to jump from that 'emergency only' exit for 12 years. As the plaza of Aguascalientes emerged, we alerted the driver that a stop was needed. I pushed down the handle and out I went through the back door of a school bus. Then I realized that this is not a school bus, it is a chicken bus and what a ride it had been.