

# On a Wing and a Prayer

## *A mission of mercy on the highway to hell*

By MICHELLE MEEHAN  
Sunday Magazine

**N**obody wanted to drive the beat-up, old delivery truck. OK. Maybe from the auto body shop parking lot to the supermarket around the corner. But on a treacherous 2,400-mile journey into the bowels of Central America? This mission called for someone insane.

"The truck had been driven from St. Louis to Atlanta, Texas," recalled Charlie Sanders, 66, of St. Louis. "That's where it broke down."

That's also where it sat in a mudhole, until Charlie and his 68-year-old cohort, Bob Mihalic, of Belleville, lost their minds and climbed into its cab.

"The assignment was to transport medical supplies to the Belize City Hospital," said Charlie, a volunteer pilot with Wings of Hope, a humanitarian organization that provides aid to impoverished countries.

The assignment was turned down by man after man.

"The guys that had originally driven the truck wouldn't drive it anymore," Charlie said and shrugged. "Nobody would. They'd been asking me to do it for months and I kept saying, 'No. No. No.' Then finally, I went soft in the head."

So he called up his buddy Bob — another Wings of Hope volunteer — and convinced him to ride along. The pair would embark on a six-day journey, bribing their way across borders and dodging banditos along the way.

"When Bob and I went to pick up the truck, it was stuck in the mud. The guys at the auto body shop were looking at us like we were crazy."

Which indeed they were.

"The truck only had one seat in it," remembered Bob, a slender man with dark brown eyes. "I went the whole way sitting on a lawn chair. ... Every time Charlie stopped, the chair would collapse. We finally wired it down with some coat hangers."

If the passenger's seat was bad, the driver's seat was worse. Charlie manned the wheel while standing up.

"The driver had a stand-up seat," Charlie recalled. "It was one of those slanted, hard seats, so delivery drivers can get in and out real quick."

This would come in handy a few miles down the road.

On a busy Houston highway, at the peak of rush hour traffic, the truck succumbed to Breakdown No. 2. This might have been an omen — if the pair was superstitious. Instead, they fixed it and drove on.

"From the time the truck stopped, till we got it moving again was seven minutes," Bob explained. "We're not stupid. We'd brought an extra battery along — just in case."

Next stop: a nearby travel agency for information on how to cross the border.

"We never would have made it across without (the agency's) help," Bob said. "They gave us a detailed travel book."

Then they gave them some advice.

"At the travel agency, this fella said, 'You may have to give 'gratuities' to get across the border,'" Bob recalled.

"Gratuities is kind of a nice word for bribes." And bribes is what they were.

"When we got to the border, we opened the truck and run the gate up so they could look in. This Mexican customs agent kind of frowned and went, 'Mmmm.'"

But a split-second later, when he opened their passports, a wry smile replaced his frown.

"Each passport had a \$5 bill in it. He saw we were cooperating and he said, 'Close the door and go on.'"

probably the main highway," Bob explained.

And if it's a sign that reads "T-O-P-E-S," it's best to use your brakes.

"We're driving along and I see a sign that says 'T-O-P-E-S,'" recalled Charlie, who served as driver for most of the trip. "I said, 'Bob, start watching for 'topes.' I don't know what it is. It might be a cattle crossing or something."

"The next thing I know, the truck takes off like an airplane. It turns out a topes is a giant speed bump."

And it rules the Mexican road.

"Their topes are built up like a curb. If you hit them at anything less than zero speed, forget it. When I took the topes, Bob hit his head on the ceiling."

Fortunately, Bob wasn't injured. Unfortunately, the little truck was.

"But we wouldn't find that out for several miles," Charlie said.

Not till after they crossed the Tampico Bridge — the hottest hotspot around.

"At Tampico Bridge, they had armed guards with uzis," Bob said. "But we weren't scared. The militia never bothers anybody. It's the local police you have to be afraid of."

That and the truck's dreaded brake system, which had yet to recover from the last topes.

"Seven miles out of Vera Cruz, the brakes went out totally," Bob said. "They don't have shoulders on the 'highways' in Mexico."

So Charlie hopped out in the middle of the road.

"I had to get out in the road and crawl underneath the truck," he remembered. "I disconnected the busted brake line and beat the end of it shut with (some old pliers.)"

About that time, a young Mexican truck driver showed up. He looked down at the pavement and shook his head.

"He points down to the rear dual wheels," Bob said. "Five lugs were out and the sixth one was loose. If that wheel would have come off, we wouldn't be sitting here right now."

"He told us a truck mechanic was 5 kilometers down the line. Then he writes on the side of the truck with his finger, 'Five kilometers an hour.' In other words, keep your speed down or you'll bust that wheel off."

After what seemed like a lifetime later, the truck clunked into a Mexican garage.

"They fixed the truck in 4½ hours," Bob said. "They only charged us \$25 for labor and \$32 for parts. And this was a Sunday morning."

"We couldn't understand the mechanic was in such a rush. He wouldn't even stop for a soda. When we asked his boss, he told us, 'You must get to the next town before dark, because of the banditos.'"

"The banditos are refugees from South America who are trying to walk to the United States. They're pretty well armed and they hide out in the brush all day."

At night, they rob unsuspecting travelers.



News Democrat/Dale Siebenberger

**Charlie Sanders, left, and Bob Mihalic recall their trip to Belize**

"There was another truck sitting at the border the same time we were crossing. And I guess the driver had decided not to pay. The last I saw of him, they were asking him to write down all the serial numbers from his fishing lures. ..."

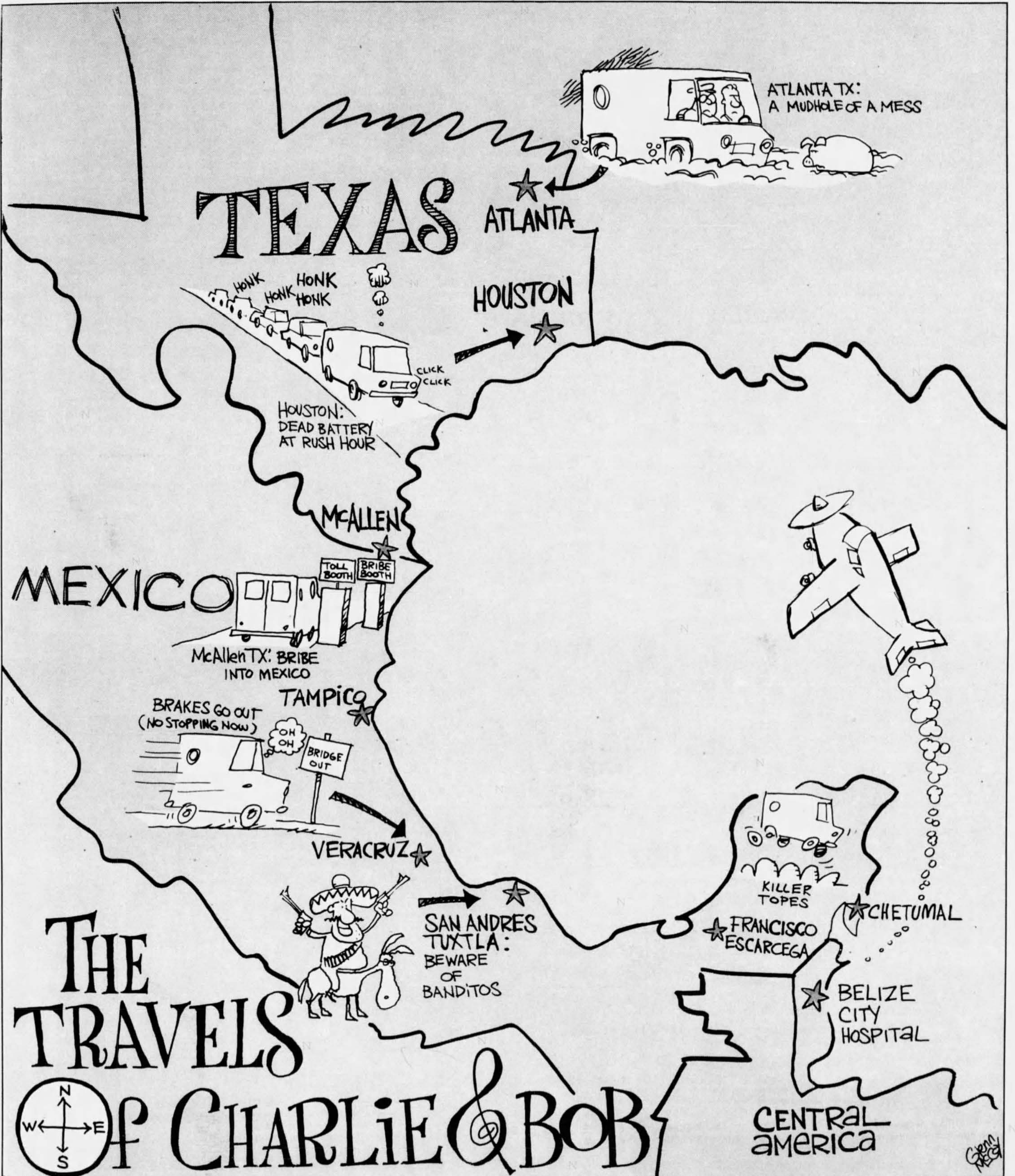
"Looking back, that was the best money we spent the whole trip."

Two hundred miles down, 2,200 to go. Bob and Charlie learned something new every day.

"One thing we learned was: If it's got asphalt on it, it's

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"We never did meet any banditos," Charlie said, shrugging.

They did meet a lot of nice people, however. And one of those people served Bob a free breakfast.

"The next morning, I stayed with the truck and Bob walked down to a restaurant and ate breakfast," Charlie said. "When the owner asked him what he was doing there, he said he was a volunteer with Wings of Hope."

"The man said, 'You work for no pay. We work for no pay.' He wouldn't take his money."

That's OK. Someone else would.

"Just before the Yukatan Peninsula," Charlie said, "we stopped to get the truck filled up with fuel. This guy filled up our tank. Then he filled up our two gas cans. He told us he put seven gallons of gasoline in each of our five-gallon cans."

And Charlie told him he was full of bull.

"I started to argue about the price," Charlie said. "And he started getting louder and louder."

Finally Bob walked up and asked the man: "How do you get seven gallons of gasoline into a five-gallon can?" He just smiled and said, "Don't you believe in miracles, señor?"

About that time, Charlie blew a gasket.

"Charlie's Irish and he was fighting mad," Bob recalled. "But I told him, 'Pay them and let's get out of here.' That place was an outpost. There were six big guys against us two. And half of them had machetes...."

"That Charlie. I had to keep him from getting his head cut off. I just said, 'Hey, knock it off. This isn't the good old USA.'"



Charlie and Bob laugh about their trip

This is the badlands of Central America — even though it didn't look too bad from the road.

"There aren't too many cars in poor countries," Bob said, "just a lot of trucks and buses. Mostly everybody walks everywhere they're going. The peasants are hard-working, good people."

Although they have little to show for their labor.

"Some of the shacks reminded me of some I'd seen in Africa. No windows. No doors. And pigs running in and out of them."

"On flat land, you might see ranches and farms. But nothing like we have here."

Modern conveniences were far and few between — and the truck's health was as poor as its surroundings.

"Everything went OK for a while," Bob said. "Then Charlie said, 'Hey, no clutch.' After that, he had to speed shift."

It was all downhill from there.

"You get the engine running at the same

speed the wheels are turning," Charlie said. "It's really not that difficult."

So long as you don't have to stop.

"I fed Charlie while he drove," Bob said. "I shoved fig bars in his mouth and Twinkies. We didn't have much food left at that point."

But they did have 290 miles to go.

"When we got across the Yukatan Peninsula, we pulled into Chetumal," Charlie said. "In Chetumal, the traffic was all stop-and-go. I was driving along when (the cars) all came to a stop."

Try as he might to avoid the inevitable, Charlie finally met his match.

"I got the truck straddled in the parkway," he recalled. "The traffic behind us was honking. ... We pulled over and gave a policeman \$5 to watch our stuff."

Then they headed for the nearest hotel.

"The next morning, we had to drive from Chetumal to Belize," Bob said. "The customs let us through without inspection."

"Without a clutch, we couldn't have stopped if

we'd wanted to. Charlie drove through, while I ran alongside yelling, 'No clutch-ee! No clutch-ee!'"

The dynamic duo drove straight to the heart of Belize City, where they turned over their keys to another volunteer.

"I've never been so happy to turn over a set of keys in my life," Bob said, proudly.

And his euphoria didn't stop there.

"The people at the hospital were elated to see us. They came out while we were unloading the supplies. It was wonderful to see their faces."

It was wonderful to give them new hope.

"The hospital looked like long, big barn," Bob remembered. "It was two or three stories high. When a patient came in from the jungle, he had to bring his own food with him. The only thing they could give them was milk, water and bread."

The supplies would make life easier for all.

"I think the water cooler we brought was everybody's favorite thing. They didn't have any bed sheets before we brought them either."

Or a washing machine. Or clean bandages. Or lights for the operating room.

"Every time we took something out of the truck, they'd say 'Ooooo! Ahhhh!' That made the whole trip worthwhile."

But the trip wasn't over yet. Bob and Charlie would repair two Wings of Hope airplanes, before flying one back home.

"We flew a single engine plane," Bob remembered. "The tail section was loose and the radio didn't work."

But compared to the truck, it was heaven with wings.

"On the way back, I said to Charlie, 'Do you think it was worth it?' He said, 'Absolutely, yes!'"

Then, I said, 'You want to drive back again?' He said, 'No way!' With a big N-O."

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