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Some guys collect stamps. Kevin Kronlund collects tanks.

By Richard Chin
rchin@pioneerpress.com

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Kevin Kronlund drives a fully restored M29 Studebaker Weas on a frozen lake next to his cranberry farm in Spooner, Wis. (Ben Garvin, Pioneer Press)

If we ever have to fight World War II again, Kevin Kronlund is ready. He's saved the wheels that saved democracy.

Kronlund, a northern Wisconsin cranberry farmer, has one of the best collections of World War II vintage military vehicles in the country. It includes jeeps, trucks, ambulances, half-tracks, staff cars, bulldozers, artillery pieces and a Sherman tank.

His barns in Spooner, Wis., are packed with about 80 vehicles, from the tiny — a Cushman scooter

made to be dropped by parachute behind enemy lines during the D-Day invasion — to the colossal — a 90,650-pound tank retriever, the largest wheeled vehicle the Army used during the war.

The cannons and machine guns can't fire anymore, but everything else has been restored to work just as it did more than 60 years ago.

The giant anti-aircraft spotlights can still light up the sky. The amphibious craft can chug across a lake and then roll up onto the beach, crushing any opposing cattails. And the vehicles have been outfitted with all the accessories: helmets, signal lights, tools, life jackets, instruction manuals.

"It all runs," said Kronlund, 51. "It's like a lot of people. You start collecting stuff and things get out of hand."

He isn't alone.

Kronlund is a member of both the Minnesota-based Red Bull Historic Military Vehicle Association, which has about 150 members, and the Red Arrow Military Vehicle Preservation Group of Wisconsin, with about 100 members.

Those organizations in turn are part of a U.S.-based network of collectors, restorers and fans of antique military hardware called the Military Vehicle Preservation Association. It has about 10,000 members worldwide.

For many, membership in the olive drab, sheet metal fraternity — participants tend to be middle-age guys — starts with a jeep.

That's because you can restore a jeep in a typical residential garage. There are a lot of reproduction parts available. And, unlike a tank, you can drive it to the farmers' market once it's running.

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Bullets used in a fully restored quad .50-caliber anti-aircraft gun. (Ben Garvin Pioneer Press)



Kevin Kronlund tries to fit into a fully restored quad .50-caliber anti-aircraft gun. (Ben Garvin, Pioneer Press)

Worldwide, there are 5,000 to 6,000 restored World War II-era jeeps, making it the most restored vintage military vehicle in the world, said John Varner, founder of the Red Bull group.

"It's Uncle Sam's convertible," said Red Bull president Wally Piroyan. The 46-year-old Excelsior resident bought his World War II jeep for \$600 about 15 years ago. He finished restoring it just a couple of years ago.

"I wanted to do a tank. I was completely insane," Piroyan said.

Collectors find many restored World War II military vehicles gathering cobwebs in barns or warehouses or rusting in fields or junkyards. They were swords that were converted into plowshares: surplus gear that did civilian jobs after the war.

Surplus 2.5-ton Army trucks went to work on farms. Decommissioned half-tracks were converted into logging vehicles. Obsolete tanks were turned into bulldozers.

With the guns disabled, there apparently was not much worry about putting old weapons in the hands of private citizens.

"There's never been a guy who robbed a bank with a Sherman tank," Varner said. "Partly because the tanks themselves are worth a quarter million."

The Upper Midwest has been a rich area for old military hardware because both Fort McCoy in Wisconsin and Camp Ripley in Minnesota were auction sites for surplus vehicles, Varner said.

But after World War II, American truck and automakers urged the government not to bring home all the vehicles that were sent overseas. They feared the surplus equipment would hurt sales of new cars and trucks.

So a lot of American war wagons ended up being sold to foreign armies or mothballed in overseas motor pools. Now they feed the hobby of British, French, Dutch and Belgian enthusiasts.

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"The bulk of the World War II restored vehicles are in Europe," Varner said. "The Italians have just gone nuts in the last 15 years."

To get what they want, many American collectors shop abroad.

Varner, the 56-year-old superintendent of schools in Onamia, had his 1943 Dodge command car shipped from Britain in 2000.

"The beauty of it was there were no import fees because it was an American-made vehicle to begin with," he



Kevin Kronlund (Ben Garvin, Pioneer Press)

said.

John Kottke's 1943 M9A1 International Harvester half-track was used in the Israeli army before the Hamburg, Minn., man bought it through a broker about seven years ago.

"There's Israeli tags on it," he said. "They loved World War II U.S. half-tracks."

Jeeps and other old military vehicles aren't necessarily cheap. The scarcity of vintage Army wheels means that prices have held up, even during a recession, according to collectors.

"I should have been like my brother. He bought

vehicles instead of putting money into a 401(k)," Varner said.

Varner said a correctly restored World War II jeep is worth about \$15,000, but the rarest vehicles can cost much more.

"The price of tanks has gone up ridiculously," Kottke said.

Varner said restoring a DUKW "Duck" amphibious vehicle "just about bankrupted me. No divorce, but there was talk."

He ended up selling it for \$50,000 when the kids went to college. "It paid a lot of tuition," Varner said.

John Bizal, a 47-year-old Prior Lake resident, turned the hobby into a living. He owns Midwest Military Inc., a company that sells original and reproduction parts for vintage jeep and Dodge military vehicles.

"I just sent some parts to a guy in India," he said.

That's sometimes what it takes to restore a vehicle that's been through a war. Kottke said he once spent \$800 to have a missing part custom-made for his half-track.

"A regular citizen wouldn't know it's missing, but anyone who knows anything about these, the first question they would ask is 'Where's your windshield armor?'" Kottke said.

In some ways the hobby combines the motivations of vintage car collectors and war re-enactors. Some restorers are obsessed with the challenge of restoring their jeeps to authentic, factory-new condition.

But all of them see preserving rolling pieces of

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history as a way to remember veterans who first used the equipment in earnest.

Kronlund said his interest in World War II was sparked by his great uncle, Sammy Akey, who was killed serving on a destroyer in the Pacific in 1944, and by a father who was a tank commander.

"Collecting military vehicles to me is more about preserving history, and more importantly, it's about honoring veterans," he said. "You're preserving a piece of history that's got a lot more meaning than a shiny old car."

Kronlund said he turns down requests to use his vehicles in movie productions, preferring to roll them out to give rides to veterans at parades and other patriotic commemorations. Every September, local collectors gather near his farm to give free rides to the public.

His barns are full of some of the most iconic as well as some of the most unusual models produced during World War II.

His Sherman tank is one of only about a dozen operating Shermans in the United States, he said. He has a 2.5-ton truck that unbolts in the middle so it could be shipped on a World War II-era airplane. There's a snow tractor that was designed to rescue downed pilots in arctic environments. Another vehicle was designed to tow skiers in a planned raid on German heavy water facilities in Norway. It spent its civilian life working at a ski hill before Kronlund found it.

It took him 10 years to persuade some nearby farmers to sell him a World War II D7 Caterpillar bulldozer. Just after he finished restoring it, another one became available. He got that, too.

"I didn't want to see it go to scrap," he said. "To me,

it's an important piece of history that's worth saving."

He has the Dodge ambulance "made famous on 'M*A*S*H,'" a Long Tom cannon, a truck that can deploy a portable bridge and another that's a gunsmith shop on wheels.

"The military made so many different pieces of equipment for so many applications," Kronlund said.

His collection includes vehicles made by a roll call of now defunct manufacturers — Ward LaFrance, Packard, Studebaker, Allis-Chalmers — when the country really was the arsenal of democracy.

He has shelves full of vintage spare parts — some in their original crates — a library of instruction and repair manuals, and the vehicle that started it all, a Korean War-era jeep bought at an auction from the local sheriff's department about 27 years ago.

"I didn't realize it was a military jeep at the time," he said.

"A lot of people call it the green disease," Kronlund said of his inability now to resist a vehicle in the Army's olive drab.

One prize in his collection is a jeep equipped with an anchor, the rare Ford GPA, an amphibious vehicle. Only 14,000 were built, Kronlund said. He found his in a barn near Barnum, Minn. He said it's worth about \$100,000 now.

But Kronlund said he's not in the hobby for an investment. He most cherishes the friendships he's made with veterans and the stories of their experiences that are triggered when they see their old equipment.

"The vehicles are made of steel. The price of scrap

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metal goes up and down, and the value goes accordingly," he said. "The friendships and the people you meet. That's the priceless thing of the hobby."

Richard Chin can be reached at 651-228-5560.

FYI

For information about vintage military vehicles and public events where they will be displayed, see the Red Bull Historic Military Vehicle Association Web site, redbullhmv.com. The Military Vehicle Preservation Association can be found at mvpa.org.