

As eBay auction item, Stampede Trail bus would draw more bids than state jet

BUS STOP: A 25-year-old entrepreneur from the Interior sold an instrument panel from the dashboard of the bus in which Christopher McCandless died for \$177.50.

If a useless piece of junk can fetch that kind of cash on eBay, as it did late last month, just think of what the entire bus might be worth. The Anchorage Daily News reported Thursday the salesman was Kasey Cory. He said he found the panel on the ground and was cleaning up the litter around the bus, according to a posting on eBay.

Since the abandoned bus probably qualifies as state property, the Palin administration should seize the opportunity created by the release of "Into the Wild" and sell the bus.

The eBay route didn't fly with that other icon of Alaska transportation — the Murkowski jet — but the wrecked bus may draw more interest. Perhaps Sean Penn can be persuaded to haul it to Hollywood.

This would prevent other entrepreneurs from stripping the bus and also remove an attractive nuisance that exerts a powerful pull on pilgrims without a clue.

After watching "Nightline" Wednesday, I am more convinced that moving the bus off the Stampede Trail is the best thing.

In this post-Koppel era, the ABC show glorified a guy who prepared himself to visit the so-called "shrine," carrying a backpack and 10 pounds of rice.

The 29-year-old from Outside said



Dermot Cole

he wanted to "test my limits, I guess, to see what it's like to be hungry." He said he might have "to go run around the woods for a bit, or go fishing for a few hours to catch a fish, catch my own dinner."

If he really wanted to go hungry, he should have tried out for "The Biggest Loser."

"This is my new playground," he told the ABC correspondent. "If I'm not ready for it now, well, I'm going to learn what it takes to survive out there, and I think in order to learn you have to put yourself out there in sometimes-dangerous situations."

Portraying recklessness and lack of preparation as great virtues amounts to a rejection of common sense, but "Into the Wild" has found enthusiastic audiences. With news coverage like that provided by ABC, expect more adventurers with bags of rice.

The movie, by the way, is scheduled to open in Fairbanks on Oct. 19, according to Regal Cinemas.

The written responses to the "Nightline" piece on the ABC Web site included one from a person who said that ABC should have made it clear

that McCandless died from something he ate, not from starvation.

Author Jon Krakauer, who is largely responsible for promoting that idea, has now updated his book to correct an error in his original text, saying he had an "epiphany."

I checked a copy at the book store Wednesday. The new wording did not appear in the copies of the book that were printed in August, featuring a photo from the movie on the cover, so the epiphany must have occurred within the last few weeks.

He revised the book following the publication of a critical article in Men's Journal last month.

That article gave widespread attention to the fact that Krakauer's theory about McCandless' death has been known to be wrong since 1997.

In his original text, Krakauer wrote that because McCandless ate poisonous seeds he was not as "reckless or as incompetent as he has been made out to be."

Tests conducted at UAF in 1997 established that the seeds were not poisonous.

In the text released a couple of weeks ago, Krakauer said McCandless had the seeds in Ziploc bags — unlike the seeds tested at UAF — and that he thinks a poisonous mold grew on the seeds in the plastic bags, so McCandless was not as reckless or as incompetent as he has been made out to be.

The movie also promotes the idea that the boy died from poison, not from a lack of food, which may explain the

Ziploc theory.

Still, the most logical explanation for McCandless' death is that he succumbed to starvation.

A plausible theory is contained in a new documentary by Massachusetts filmmaker Ron Lamothe. In "The Call of the Wild," Lamothe investigates many aspects of the McCandless story, including the false claim about poison seeds.

One of the things Lamothe does in his documentary, a film that deserves to be shown in Fairbanks, is to analyze McCandless' daily caloric consumption and energy expenditure, showing that his weight probably declined steadily over 113 days.

Lamothe speculates that by the time McCandless died he weighed 83 pounds and had a body mass index of 13.3. Death from starvation typically occurs when the body mass index falls below 14, he said.

The documentary also includes an important finding that contradicts another part of the McCandless myth.

"Into the Wild" shows McCandless destroying his money and his identification cards, cited as evidence that the young man was turning his back on society.

Will Forsberg, a Healy musher, found a backpack on the floor of the bus after McCandless died in 1992.

"Squirrels were storing mushrooms in it," he said. "It was obviously abandoned by someone but still usable, so I took it with me."

He said he didn't know who it

belonged to or that Krakauer was writing an article for Outside magazine that led to his book. The pockets of the backpack were open, and it appeared to be empty.

Forsberg paid little attention to the backpack, but he happened to look in it nearly 10 years after McCandless' death and found a wallet in a hidden inner-pocket.

The wallet contained \$300 and numerous ID cards identifying McCandless. One of the things that made his death a national news story in 1992 was that the authorities didn't know who he was at first because no identification was found at the site.

Forsberg said he was troubled about the wallet. He tried to contact McCandless' parents, but received no reply. He tried to contact Krakauer through a mutual acquaintance, but received no reply.

He tried to contact Penn's movie crew in 2006, but he became disgusted when he saw them "chasing caribou with a snowmachine for the movie" and kept the news to himself.

When Lamothe arrived in Alaska last summer, conducting research for his documentary, Forsberg showed him the pack and later, the wallet.

Krakauer called Forsberg this week, after learning about the discovery, and he put Forsberg in touch with McCandless' sister. He planned to send the backpack, the wallet and the \$300 to her Thursday.

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