



Photo by Michael Wilhelm

At the helm of Mobile Street Sweeper, Nick Voller, veteran sweeper of 30 years, prepares for another night of sweeping up leaves and dodging parked cars.

Sweeping Eugene clean

There are 106,000 residents in Eugene. Only eight are street sweepers.

Only a couple of those work the night shift.

Last fall, every Wednesday, at 2:30 a.m., I was awakened by a flashing yellow light, a roaring diesel engine, a clanging of steel, and the whirr of bristles on a powerized broom. It's a little ironic because I lived in a house by Serenity Lane.

Reporter's notebook

By Chris Norred

I'm from Rainier, Ore. where all the roads are still gravel and street sweepers would be absurd. So I was a little bit scared the first time I saw that machine, which looks a little like the people mover from the movie "Soilent Green."

But gradually I grew more and more interested in the machine, and in the man who operates it.

What do street sweepers do? Why do they do it? Do they like it? Where do they come from? Where do they go? What do they see?

Sunday, 11 p.m.: Michael the photographer and I arrive at the end of Garfield Street where we are to meet street sweeper Nick Voller.

Nick has been cleaning up this town for nearly 30 years now. He started when the job was still done with three-wheeled, tractor-like vehicles.

Tonight, Nick's Mobile Street

Sweeper has a cab with comfortable seating for two, air conditioning and heating, an automatic transmission, power steering and brakes and a two-way radio.

Nick greets us in the truck yard. I sign the release form (in case I'm killed or something). He revs up the powerful diesel engines, turns on the brooms, flashes the bright yellow light and we're off into the night to clean some streets.

Fall has begun and a lot of people spent the weekend raking leaves from their front yards into the street. Nick tells me this is the first night of the season that he's had to sweep a lot of leaves. "I like the trees, but I don't like the leaves," he says. "When it's just dirt I'll have to unload the sweeper maybe once or twice a night." We have four loads of leaves by lunchtime this night. But the streets look cleaner.

Bill, the other street sweeper on the nightshift is going to sweep the downtown tonight. Nick and I are heading off to wake up the neighborhoods between Chambers and Jefferson streets.

Nick sits on the right side of the cab. There are two steering wheels so the operator can watch the curb on either side if he cleans a one-way street.

With expert precision, Nick smoothly guides the massive machine as close as possible along the curb at a pace of about 10 mph. He explains how the gutter broom throws the dirt away from the curb and the pickup broom sweeps it into the truck.

We're edging along the curb

and talking when suddenly I become extremely aware that

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