

CHOWCHILLA, Calif. (AP) — The motive is still a mystery. But the methods used by three silent, masked men who kidnaped 26 children and their bus driver make one thing clear — it was a crime planned out to the fullest, months in advance.

But it didn't work. The children escaped.

Still, that the captors could snatch a busload of mostly tiny children in daylight from a town where everyone seems to know everyone else, and then frustrate extensive search efforts by FBI, state and local law officers for more than 24 hours, testifies to their thorough preparation.

When the plan was hatched is unknown. As far back as November 1975, however, one of the suspects is known to have bought three government surplus vans one of which authorities have traced to the kidnap-

ing. He paid with cash.

Two of the three he bought were never registered. The other was registered two days before the crime in Los Gatos, near San Jose. Because of that, investigators said they had to search for records of the van by hand since the information hadn't been filed in the Department of Motor Vehicles computer.

The name and San Jose address the van was registered under turned out to be phony, according to Madera County Sheriff Ed Bates.

The vans were well equipped for a flight from the scene of the crime. They carried:

—CB radios, ideal for monitoring police activity, but made even more useful by the gabby "CB volunteers" who blasted out from Chowchilla nearly

every tidbit of information known about the investigation.

—Painted windows, so no one could see out — or in — and a tent-like tarp made the roundabout route to the gravel pits 100 miles away a mystery to those inside.

—A good supply of extra gasoline which kept the kidnapers from having to pull into a service station and taking the risk of an attendant being tipped off.

California Highway Patrolmen had quickly alerted gas stations on the major routes in the San Joaquin Valley about the kidnaping and had told them to report any suspicious looking vans.

The nearby creekbed where the bus was taken made an ideal hiding spot. Authorities said they could not see the bus at all from the road during daylight hours. It took a hastily organized air search to spot the big yellow bus in a thicket — and just before dark.

In the gravel pit near Livermore, the kidnapers had an excellent hideout.

The children were buried for nearly 18 hours in a World War II vintage military moving van about 25 feet long. It was buried in a spot in the quarry that was not being worked. The spot was surrounded by brush up to six feet tall.

Tests of soil samples taken from the site show the truck had been buried there less than a year, Alameda County investigators said. They added that there are numerous back roads to the spot and kidnapers could have easily driven in to work on the cavern at night without being seen.