

# MEMORY LANE

By **BILL PARKS, F71403**

## The Legendary FMC Motorhome

**T**he elegant FMC motorhome was first sold in 1972 and produced until 1976. This classic coach is still in operation today and is treasured as a collector's item.

The Food Machinery Company Corporation, better known worldwide as FMC Corp., has produced chemicals and machinery for more than a century. Its plant in Santa Clara, California, originally manufactured equipment to process the large volumes of vegetables and fruits grown and harvested in the area. FMC expanded into the defense business and began to produce military vehicles, such as tanks. Today it also makes gold mining

equipment, airport baggage handlers, people movers, and more.

By the late 1960s, company planners projected a cutback in government contracts and began to look for new product lines to offset the loss. Recreation vehicles were becoming popular, so motorhome production was selected. Key personnel from the FMC Ordnance Division were transferred to the newly established Motor Coach Division, and development of a prototype motorhome began.

**A different sort of design.** FMC's engineers already knew how to design almost indestructible military vehicles. In developing the motorhome proto-

type, they focused on designing and constructing "from the road up." Rather than utilizing chassis purchased from Chrysler, Chevrolet, or Ford, FMC designed its own heavy-duty chassis, incorporating some of the features found in its military vehicles. The first prototype was a mid-engine 19-foot vehicle, assembled in FMC's Riverside, California, plant, which was supporting the Santa Clara facility. It was followed by a 23-foot prototype. Neither reached the assembly line, but both underwent extensive testing that provided valuable data for the final design of the 29-foot production model.

FMC Corp.'s first coach, designated the 2900R, rolled off the line in late 1972. It was an intriguing unit powered by a rear-mounted Chrysler 440 V-8 engine, with outside service accessibility. The need for a long front-to-rear drive shaft was eliminated, thus permitting a low-profile design. With the engine in the rear, there was little noise in the passenger compartment. The 2900R's foundation was a fully integrated steel design with independent suspension for all wheels, creating superb control and a smooth ride. The upper aluminum frame covered by fiberglass provided passenger safety, comfort, and coach durability.

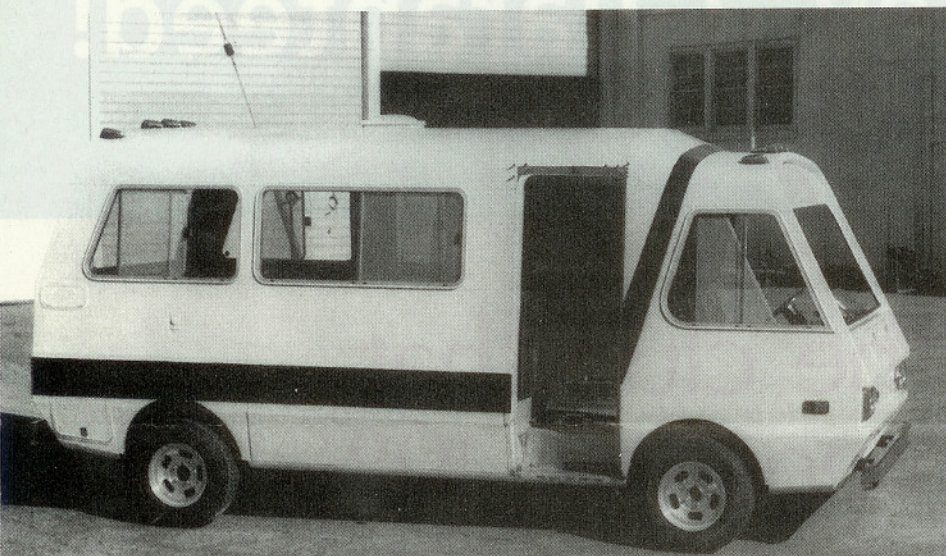
**And inside . . .** The FMC was an industry role model with a luxurious, livable interior. The ceiling was 6 feet 4 inches high, enabling taller people to move without stooping or bending. Because of its low floor profile, no step was needed inside the coach at the passenger door, thus permitting easy ingress and egress. A driver's-side *continued*



Photo by author

Classic FMC motorhomes fill the sales lot at Recreational Vehicle Services of Morgan Hill, California.





*The first FMC prototype was 19 feet long and had its engine mounted midway between the front and rear axles (left). Charles Kuralt, host of CBS' "On the Road," in the doorway of his FMC motorhome (below).*

Photos from the Jim Black collection

door, unusual for its time, provided additional safety and convenience. The curtains, upholstery, and deep pile carpet complemented each other and blended well with the colors of the countertops and tabletops.

The FMC was built only in a 29-foot length, but different floor plans were available. The interior was sensibly designed, providing for a spacious living room, galley, bath with tub, and rear bedroom with twin beds that could be converted into a queen-size bed. The coach had tinted safety glass all around. Readily accessible interior storage totaled 84 cubic feet, excellent for a coach of its size.

The driver's compartment provided for efficient operation of the vehicle. Luxurious pilot and copilot seats were adjustable for complete comfort. The ever-present engine hump, normal for front-engine units, was eliminated, permitting easy movement into and out of the front seats. A full complement of useful instruments was clearly visible on the dash, and controls were within easy reach. This, along with excellent road visibility, allowed for many hours of comfortable travel.

**Public acceptance.** The FMC was a coach built for the upscale traveler. When initially offered, it had a retail price of \$27,000. By the end of 1973 it was approximately \$29,000, and as the years went by, its price soared to as



high as \$54,500. Prices charged by motorhome dealers were sometimes even higher by 1976, when dealers realized that the popular coaches would no longer be made. To compare these figures, consider that one could purchase a brand-new stationary home in the mid-1970s for \$40,000 to \$50,000.

FMC went all out to assure customer

satisfaction, and dealers were selected across the country. A customer service training center and logistics system in Santa Clara assured prompt vehicle assistance and availability of needed spare parts nationwide. In addition to the dealer network, FMC contracted with many 76 Truck Stops across the

*continued*



United States to provide on-the-road warranty service.

This beautiful motorhome received excellent market acceptance. But unfortunately, it was launched just before the first of a series of oil crises hit and gasoline prices skyrocketed. Even with the gasoline shortage, owners loved their new coaches. One former FMC owner who remains a motorhome traveler today stated, "The ride, drive, and class were great and better than any I have driven since." Like top-quality motor coaches today, FMCs were in the public eye at automobile racetracks across the country. Prominent drivers Mario Andretti and Parnelli Jones both owned FMCs and traveled to and from races in their coaches. Famous entertainers such as Clint Eastwood, James Brolin, Carol Burnett, and Pat Boone also owned FMCs.

Perhaps the most publicity the 2900R ever received was thanks to CBS TV's roving reporter Charles Kuralt, who crisscrossed the country in various motorhomes for more than 20 years. During the years Kuralt's "On the Road" series aired, he and his crew wore out six motor coaches. The sixth and final motorhome was an FMC that was still running strong when Kuralt

retired. The coach is now on display at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan.


**End of the line.** Even though the FMC motorhome was a product of outstanding engineering and loved by its owners, the company ceased its motorhome operation in 1976. The coach was introduced just as a major fuel shortage hit the United States. Gasoline prices eventually jumped almost 300 percent, and supplies were low. RV travel was drastically curtailed, and the market for new motorhomes almost disappeared. Not only was the FMC the victim of bad timing, but it also became unprofitable to make in relation to FMC Corp.'s other products — namely, military vehicles. Much greater profits were available in tanks and similar equipment, so the company focused on these instead.

When production ceased, many of the 915 FMC motorhomes built were still under warranty, and the remainder required routine maintenance and logistics support. FMC kept its commitment to its customers and arranged with Jim Black, an FMC manufacturing executive, to set up an organization to service these coaches, which continues to this day. Black, who runs Recreational Vehicle Services, C1249,

in Morgan Hill, California, holds the rights for FMC parts and even has all of the original tooling. Recreational Vehicle Services can, if needed, produce large parts, such as a new 29-foot fiberglass top.

More than 25 years after the groundbreaking FMC coach debuted to high reviews, these units are still making fans across the country.

*Two FMCA chapters are devoted to FMC coaches: FMC Club Southeast and FMC Club East. For more information, contact FMCA's Chapter Services Department at (800) 543-3622.*

**Memories wanted.** FMCA members accumulate memories as fast as the odometer racks up miles on their motorhomes. Because everyone enjoys reflecting on the "good old days," FMC welcomes members to submit their early-day motorhome adventures — and misadventures — for possible inclusion in this column. Please include photos, as well as a current daytime telephone number if possible. If you're not a writer yourself, don't worry; our editorial staff can help you put your memories down on paper. Send to Memory Lane, Family Motor Coaching, 8291 Clough Pike, Cincinnati, OH 45244. 

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