Classic Coaches

WES CAUGHLAN

GMC Glenbrook

GMC Eleganza II interior

A great motorhome, like a beautiful sunset, is something that's best defined in the eyes of the beholder. Clearly, different people like different things in their motor coaches.

But, if we were to poll motorhome enthusiasts and industry followers regarding the best production coaches ever built, it's a sure bet that the 35-year-old Ultra Van would make the list. Indeed, some might consider the Ultra Van a classic. Some might even view it as one of the best motorhomes ever, although they'd probably start a good argument in the process.

In looking back, however, we might all realize that the best motorhomes of yesteryear—be it an Ultra Van, a GMC, a Dodge/Travco, an FMC or a Revcon—might well contain some conceptual lessons for the motorhomes of the future. With that thought in mind, MotorHome herein takes a retrospective look at a few of the great coaches we might nominate as being among the best ever.

Like fine wine, they don't get older—they just get better

ROBERT LONGSDORF JR.

GMC HAD A 'CLEAN AUTOMOTIVE LOOK'

While much of the GMC's history has been well documented, GMC followers acknowledge that the inspiration for their favorite coach may have come from the Revcon, which had very similar exterior styling and had already pioneered the use of front-wheel-drive with its 455-cid Oldsmobile Toronado drivetrain.

Debuting in late 1972 for the '73 model year, the GMC carried a sticker price of only $15,000. Construction features included an exterior that was composed of fiberglass on the lower part of the coach and aluminum from the midline on up. Another revolutionary feature was its independent suspension and tandem rear axles that gave the coach some added interior space, since there were no huge wheel wells that had to be hidden inside cabinets. The suspension also included air bags that provided on-the-road height control and campsite leveling.

From the very beginning, General Motors Corporation adhered to automotive styling concepts for the GMC, mak-

# of Yesteryear

ing sure the exterior lines were uncompromised by protruding water-fill openings and appliance vents. Painstaking engineering assured that exterior lines remained sleek and that ride quality and fuel economy were the best in the industry.

In the GMC, function followed form. And the curved side-wall aerodynamic shell produced an interior that looked more like an airplane cabin than a motorhome. That look was reinforced by a heavy reliance on Formica countertops and lightweight laminates. General Motors made the coach in two lengths, 23 and 26 feet.


Ultra Van

ROBERT LONGSDORF JR.

A total of 13,000 GMCs were produced, with interior conversions done by several companies, including Coachmen Industries Incorporated, Elkhart, Indiana. An estimated 8,000 remain on the road today.

Why do upscale motorhome buyers today spend $15,000-$25,000 to acquire a unit in good condition and then spend a similar sum to refurbish and customize? "Primarily because there is nothing else in the industry today that can give them the styling and drivability that the GMC offers," says Wes Caughlan, president of Cinnabar Engineering Incorporated, Sandusky, Michigan, which holds the licensed rights to the GMC.

THE ULTRA VAN: 'WHALE ON WHEELS'

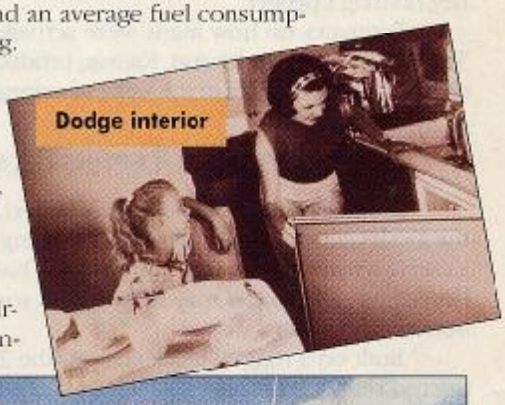
The Ultra Van, a time-tested concept that first went into production in 1961, still has a loyal—rabid may be a more apt term—following of nearly 300 owners who believe it is the best and most innovative motorhome to ever hit the road. Fully self-contained, the 22-foot Ultra Van was a rear-engine coach powered by a Chevrolet Corvair engine with monocoque construction as well as a wind-cutting, aerodynamic profile.

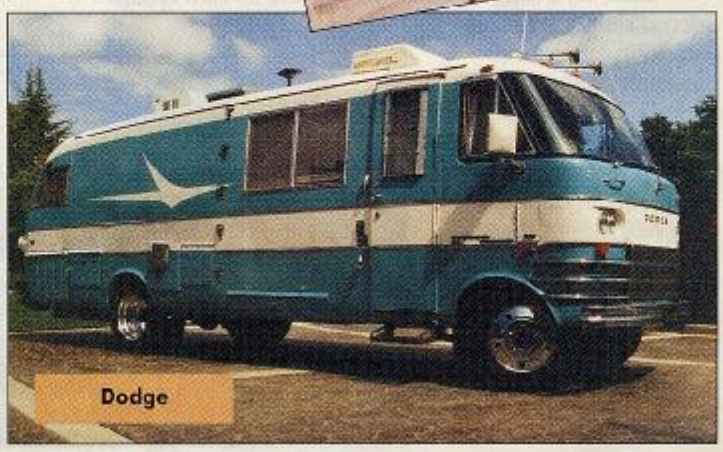
From all we can gather, it began—like many early motorhomes—as a backyard project, this one by Oakland, California, aircraft engineer David Peterson. According to Ultra Van fans, Peterson was on a quest for the ideal motorhome that was fuel-efficient and could also tow his boat.

His efforts led to the creation of an affordable motorhome for the masses—suggested retail in 1961 was just under $7,000—that, as its sales literature proclaimed, was "decades ahead of its time." Looking like a cross between an Airstream trailer and a Volkswagen bug on steroids, Peterson's goal was accomplished by creating an aerodynamic unit with livability enhanced by curved walls. The design has inspired current owners to dub their coaches "Whales on Wheels."

Along with a smooth suspension system and the handling characteristics of a van conversion, the four-sleeper Ultra Van offered remarkable all-season livability, with central-ducted air-conditioning. It had a dry weight of only 3,400 pounds, and an average fuel consumption of 15-17 mpg.

The Ultra Van's real claim to fame, though, was its then-radical rear-engine design. On the prototype, Peterson used an 80-hp, air-cooled Corvair en-


Dodge interior


Dodge

replaced on later production models by beefier 110-hp and 140-hp Corvair power plants. A 200-hp, 307-cid Chevrolet V-8 became the engine of choice when the Corvair died in '69. Over the years, however, owners experimented with Buick V-6s and a 500-cid El Dorado V-8 that set an unofficial motorhome speed record of 105 mph.

Revcon interior

Revcon

Classic or otherwise, most motorhome aficionados today would agree, the Ultra Van was an unforgettable example of motorhome design. But even they admit that the Ultra Van was not flawless. It had a tendency to overheat and to waffle in high winds due to its light weight. In addition, the freestanding front seats that seated four abreast simply rested on platforms—a hazard that would never pass today's safety standards. But, hey, nothing's perfect.

Estimates on how many were actually built vary from 375 to 500. The Hutchinson, Kansas, production plant finally closed its doors in 1970 in the wake of management problems.

DODGE'S 'LIFETIME BODY'

In addition to a lightweight, unitized, fiberglass body, the Dodge/Travco obviously had a lot going for it, including a classic streamlined design and the solid backing of Chrysler Corporation. In fact, it may have played some role in the demise of the Ultra Van.

Built on a rugged truck chassis, the 26-foot Dodge offered roomy interiors and floorplan options accommodating a family of eight. Actually built by Frank Motor Homes, Brown City, Michigan, it had a built-in national sales network of Dodge dealers. And Chrysler, with its deep pockets, created a veritable media blitz for the 1963 rollout of the then-Dodge motorhome.

Besides an attractive price of just under $11,000 for a motorhome that was nearly fully equipped, the Dodge offered unique features, such as a sewage incinerator system that almost eliminated the need to empty waste holding tanks. It was powered by a 318-cid, 200-hp V-8 and had a three-speed push-button automatic transmission, power steering and brakes.

Livability features included an electric driver's seat, a bath with separate shower and roomy pull-down bunks. Press releases promoted the Dodge's aerodynamics, passenger-car comforts and "lifetime" fiberglass body, "which cannot rust or corrode and never needs painting." Corporate literature also claimed a gross vehicle weight rating (gvwr) of 10,000 pounds for the 137-inch wheelbase, B300 1-ton chassis (later extended to 173-inches and designated the B375) and a 7,980-pound dry weight.

Likable as it was, of course, the Dodge wasn't perfect, either. Current owners say it actually weighed more than its stated gvwr, with some fully loaded coaches tipping the scales at more than 13,000 pounds. Because it lacked anti-sway bars, there were problems with body roll and crosswinds. Tire changing was difficult due to the low-slung body. Weight put a real strain on the 318 engine, requiring first-gear on most grades.

Still, the Dodge was actually No. 1 in motorhome sales for a time, creating a clamor for Dodge chassis among other coach builders. It was renamed the Travco in 1965 to avoid conflicts with other coach makers, as Dodge by 1968 introduced two more chassis dedicated to the motorhome market. But, the Travco didn't survive, and the name was sold to Foretravel, which continues to support the brand.

REVCONEERS COVET REVCON

While much of the industry was focusing on affordable motorhomes in the '60s and '70s, Southern California-based Revcon Incorporated came along with a glitzy high-line custom coach. It utilized a revolutionary front-wheel-drive concept built on the Oldsmobile Toronado chassis, equipped with a 455-cid Oldsmobile V-8. Suggested retail was $25,000-$30,000, but the classy lines, teak interiors and innovative pow-

FMC

ertrain captured the fancy of enough buyers to allow the Revcon to become a major player in the high-line motorhome marketplace, as well as an influence on future motorhome design.

While its styling, engineering and plush interiors were noteworthy, the company never tried to get into the "bigger is better" race, preferring to keep its coaches under 30 feet, which, in turn, didn't overload the drivetrain. The Revcon had a superb suspension that earned it kudos for handling and performance. It limped through the 1973 and 1979 gas crisis and made a valiant attempt to continue production into the 1980s, but it succumbed to the continued decline of the motorhome market and more than its share of management woes.

Today, the Revcon is coveted by a small number of enthusiasts who call themselves the Revconeers. Gordon Tibbs, vice president of the southwest chapter of the owners' club, says he has no doubt that the Revcon was a coach that was "way ahead of its time." Having spent more than $20,000 renovating his 1972 coach, he recently acquired a 1973, which he may eventually restore. "Every year, when the new-model motorhomes come out, they look more and more like my coach," says Tibbs.

FMC

Among the legendary motorhomes, the FMC was, perhaps, one of the most intriguing, having been born in response to one economic downturn and ultimately owing its demise to another.

Predicting a reduction in its military contracts in the 1960s, FMC Corporation, a Santa Clara, California, manufacturer of airline equipment and military vehicles, decided it would diversify into the consumer market with the production of a motorhome. Intended for the high-end market, it was mounted on a chassis custom-built by FMC for its bus and motorhome markets.

In designing the chassis, the company drew on some of its military experience to produce a heavy-duty foundation that featured axles similar to those used on armored personnel

carriers. The coach itself utilized an aluminum frame with a molded-fiberglass exterior. The gvwr for the motorhome, powered by a rear-mounted Chrysler industrial 440 V-8, was a hefty 15,900 pounds.

FMC opted for a 23-foot prototype, but elected to go into production in 1972 with a 29-foot coach offered in two floorplans at a suggested retail of about $30,000. The FMC earned high praise from owners and industry press, who liked its responsive handling and the smooth ride of the independent suspension.

The FMC's low profile and excellent aerodynamics were also noteworthy, although mileage averaged only around 8 mpg. An innovative feature was a driver's-side door that could be entered like a car. Interiors benefited from central air-conditioning, and special attention was paid to interior and exterior lines to give the coach a smooth look.

During the FMC's production cycle, a total of 915 coaches were produced, including one that saw service with CBS as a vehicle for the Charles Kuralt On the Road series. According to Jim Black, former executive with FMC and president of Recreational Vehicle Services Incorporated, Morgan Hill, California, "the order to shut down the assembly line came in 1976, when sales had dropped dramatically due to higher pricing, the uncertain energy climate and an inventory that reached $9 million."

Black, whose company now holds the licensed rights to all FMC parts and accessories, emphasized that although FMC got into the motorhome business "primarily as a way to keep a lot of people busy between defense contracts, the company had a high commitment to quality and customer service, which remains to this day. FMC has handled recall problems for second-, third- and even fourth-time buyers and continues to be active in tracking the vehicles that remain on the road.

"Quite frankly," Black added, "the product would be cost-prohibitive to produce and maintain at that level of commitment. There were a bunch of really good vehicles built back in those days that couldn't be built today." ■