

Collectibles That Come With Everything, Including the Kitchen Sink



By **CHRIS DIXON** JULY 11, 2005

THE motor home in Bill and Nita Bryant's driveway in Pleasant Valley, N.Y., is nearly 30 years old and has taken the couple on 200,000 miles of adventures, but there is no sign that it is ready to join its owners in retirement.

Still modern in appearance, even somewhat futuristic, their GMC Motorhome seems to share little with the boxy recreational vehicles typically seen in America's campgrounds, more closely resembling a monorail that has escaped from Disneyland.

GMC's house on wheels, built by General Motors' truck-making division from 1973 to '78, has an adoring group of owners who will gladly discuss every detail of its innovative design, from the unusual front-wheel-drive layout to the aircraft-style body construction. While many of its contemporaries languish in junkyards, the Jetsonesque GMC enjoys a following of enthusiasts who swap historical tidbits and dig deep into their bank accounts for extensive restorations.

The Bryants' enthusiasm goes further: their house -- the one without wheels, about 85 miles north of New York City -- has become a repository for what many consider to be the ultimate collection of memorabilia for a camper that refuses to drive off into the sunset.

"The nice thing about a GMC is that it's a real cruiser," said Mr. Bryant, who is 72. "And as old as these things are, if you keep them in shape, people will even come up and ask where they can find one."

It is not hard to understand the technical appeal that this road going manor holds for Mr. Bryant, who was an engineer for I.B.M. in 1984 when he bought the bright green Palm Beach, a 1976 model with lime shag carpet, for \$27,500.

Stylish and streamlined compared with the R.V.'s of the day -- the shape was refined in a wind tunnel -- its front-drive power train, based on the 455-cubic-inch V-8 engine and transmission from an Oldsmobile Toronado, eliminated the need for a long driveshaft to the rear wheels, giving it a low floor. The suspension was self-leveling, a great convenience when setting up camp. "That was very novel in '73," Mr. Bryant said. "Even today,

people get out their two-by-sixes to level their R.V.'s."

Taking a cue from the aerospace industry, the GMC's body used a framework of aluminum; the skin was bonded to the ribs with adhesive rather than rivets, helping to maintain a smooth exterior surface.

The motor home was available in two lengths, 23 or 26 feet, and offered a choice of 15 different floor plans designed with the help of House & Garden magazine. The interiors, which now seem wonderfully retro-groovy in their wild color schemes and paisley, plaid, polka-dot or flower-pattern upholstery, clearly articulated the decorative vocabulary of the 1970's.

"Some of them had orange shag carpeting and avocado accents," Roger Townsend, of Laguna Beach, Calif., said. "That stuff has been ripped out by most people, but others want them precisely vintage."

In 1973, a well-outfitted 26-foot model cost \$14,569, while a 23-foot version went for \$13,569. Prices climbed rapidly through the production years; by the end of the run, fully outfitted coaches were priced at about \$40,000, though General Motors reportedly still lost money on each sale.

Unfortunately for G.M., the motor home ran headlong into the energy crises of the 1970's, deflating the appeal of a 10-mile-a-gallon vehicle. In all, 12,921 GMC's were produced. Cliff Golby, who owns a GMC restoration business in Orlando, Fla., estimates that more than 5,000 are still on the road.

Mr. Golby owns the body panel molds and tooling for the GMC, having bought them from an entrepreneur who intended to put the motor home back into production, so today it is possible to buy replacements for nearly any component on the vehicles. Mr. Golby's company offers full restorations that can cost more than \$100,000.

Mr. Townsend, an anesthesiologist, owns a somewhat rare 23-foot model that he purchased for \$5,000. To date, he said, he has probably spent \$20,000 adding a rebuilt engine, transmission, new dashboard, Naugahyde interior, refrigerator, kitchen counter, stove and convection oven. He added that he is only halfway through the project.

"They don't command a huge price," he said. "You do this out of love, because it's fun and turns you on. You don't do it for resale."

For the Bryants and many others, the rewards of owning a GMC comes in the people they meet on camping trips or at any of dozens of annual rallies that can draw like-minded owners for socializing and GMC technical seminars. Each year, Mr. Bryant and his wife spend months crisscrossing the country and visiting daughters in Illinois and Texas.

"If we had been home all this time, I don't know if we would've lasted 50 years," Mrs. Bryant said, "referring to their half-century of marriage.

Mark Elmer, of Eagle Mountain, Utah, is in his fourth year as a GMC owner. When reached by telephone, Mr. Elmer, an auto-parts sales manager, said that he was outside replacing rubber body cushions on his 1977 Palm Beach. "Back when I was in high school," he said, "I thought it was the coolest motor home I had ever seen."

Mr. Elmer found his GMC for sale in Idaho for \$6,000. "I basically begged my wife to please let me buy this thing," he said. "Boy, has it opened up all kinds of new vistas. It's like a member of the family."

Mr. Elmer said he was amazed by the ready access to repair parts and technical support now available through an Internet-based culture of GMC vendors and bloggers.

"It's become a lifestyle," Mr. Elmer said. "I suppose the day will come when I'm too old to tinker with it, but I can't imagine I'll ever feel that way. They can bury me in it."