

The most long-lived tool in the GM Design is the GMC Motorhome-based viewing platform called the Chuck Wagon

By [Daniel Strohl](#) on Sep 6th, 2021 at 9:00 am



Auto designers may continue to incorporate more technology - 3D modeling, rapid prototyping, virtual reality - into their processes all the time, accelerating the time it takes to turn a sketch into a production vehicle. But none of that has yet to entirely replace full-scale clays, open-air senior design staff reviews, or one of GM's most remarkable design tools: the Chuck Wagon.

"We don't expect it to be going anywhere soon," said Christo Datini, an archivist with the General Motors Heritage Center who has kept tabs on the Chuck Wagon. "In fact, I hear the design executives want to get it back into service."

That would make sense, considering that the reason for GM's conversion of a 1974 GMC Motorhome into what is now known as the Chuck Wagon hasn't changed in the last half century. Winters in southeast Michigan are long and brutal and uncomfortable, and not every pending automobile design can be viewed in the comfort of the [Design Dome](#) on the grounds of GM's Warren, Michigan, Technical Center. Every now and then, a full-size model has to be rolled out to the patio, regardless of the weather, so designers can see it in the daylight and not under controlled lighting. "If you want to get close to it, you'd be out there in the weather," Datini said. "And the designers would likely be viewing models in a suit and topcoat, not a Patagonia."

According to Datini, designers routinely got sick after viewing models out in the wind, cold, sleet, snow, and rain, so somebody in GM Design - reportedly [Chuck Jordan](#) - ordered a mobile viewing theater to be constructed out of a [GMC](#) Motorhome, that six-wheeled Oldsmobile-powered front-wheel-drive masterpiece from GM's mid-Seventies outdoors obsession. Rather than outfit the interior with all the home-away-from-home amenities, GM Design had it constructed with two rows of stadium seating and two massive panes of custom glass from PPG for unrestricted viewing out the driver's side. Mechanically, the Motorhome remained stock.



Datini couldn't confirm that it was Jordan who ordered the vehicle to be built, nor could he offer much insight into how it got its Chuck Wagon name. "It may have not been called the Chuck Wagon initially, though internally it has been referred to that way," he said. "It could be that it got that name later on because it was used in the Chuck Jordan era." In fact, the only vehicle with that name that some older designers could recall, according to Datini, was a 1980s black stepside pickup powered by a 454-cu.in. big-block V-8 built for Jordan's personal use.

Whether Jordan commissioned it or not, the Chuck Wagon remained in service long after his tenure at GM ended. Sometime in the late Eighties, according to GM's records, it had some suspension problems, forcing GM to turn to a Motorhome specialist upstate for repairs. Around 2011, GM had it repainted in its current two-tone gray paint scheme. And given that its odometer currently reads a little over 33,000 miles, it's possible that the Chuck Wagon has left the grounds of the Tech Center more than just that one time. "It's roadworthy and titled, so I could see somebody taking it out," Datini said. "Though with the seats only facing one side, I don't know why."

However, much like the [NASA Crawlers](#) and the [Disneyland Autopia cars](#), the Chuck Wagon is one of those few vehicles designed and built for a single purpose in a single place, and it continued to fulfill that purpose for decades. According to Datini, "everybody wanted it back" while it was out for its suspension repair, and it remained in regular use at least through the 1990s and saw occasional use afterward. A set of GM archive photos shows a group of designers using it for an open-air review of the Cadillac XT4, with a production XT5 on the patio for comparison, which would date the photo to sometime between spring 2016, when the XT5 was released, and spring 2018, when the XT4 was announced.



GM's Chuck Wagon at the Cadillac XT4 design review.

These days, with construction work ongoing at the Tech Center and the patio outside the Dome torn up, the Chuck Wagon sits in a parking lot on the nearby Ponderosa, just off Mound Road, idle but capable of returning

to service at a moment's notice, according to Datini. "I imagine they're being a bit more judicious in how they do things with daylight evaluations," he said.

But at the same time, Datini said he expects the Chuck Wagon will remain in GM Design's hands for the foreseeable future. The most logical place for it, should GM Design ever fully retire it, would be the Heritage Center, already home to another GMC Motorhome, and he hasn't received any word that the Chuck Wagon is incoming.



Unless Detroit's climate happens to take a drastic turn toward the more agreeable - or unless technology can somehow perfectly mimic outdoor viewing of a full-size model - it doesn't look like the Chuck Wagon will ride off into that retirement anytime in the near future.