

Tom and Geri Whitton GMC Coach Owners

In the spring of 2001, we decided to try to find a 70's era classic GMC motorhome to restore, travel and have fun with our children and grandchildren. These are our experiences.

The choice... My wife, Geri, and I had owned several motorhomes beginning in the mid-seventies with a 24-foot Champion that we used for a great trip to Alaska. The kids were small, and we were young. During this trip we saw our first GMC motorhome. Brand new, it pulled into our campground in Yellowstone National Park. It was sleek and eye-catching, far ahead of the square box design of our coach, which had been fitted on a Dodge truck chassis. We talked to the family in the GMC (friendly folks from Chicago), who told us how well it drove and how comfortable and well made it was. We didn't ask, but it looked much more expensive than our coach.

Time passed... Over the years, we bought and sold a Winnebago LaSharo and a Winnebago Itasca. Though we

had good times in them, neither seemed fairly well, but it was too small and underpowered particularly well designed. The LaSharo drove with a four-cylinder Fiat engine that never seemed



right. The Itasca, on the other hand, rattled so loudly and steered so badly that we couldn't relax while driving. It felt like driving on ice. Large trucks would nearly blow us off the road, and it would wear us out on a long trip. Obviously, driving it didn't offer much pleasure. We sold it, thinking there wasn't a motorhome made that would drive right and, at the same time, be comfortable to ride and stay in. We had all but forgotten about GMCs. It had been almost 25 years since the day we saw that first one in Yellowstone.

Then, while on vacation in Florida in 2001, we began to think about how nice it would be to have another motorhome but, again, would one be available that drove properly and was both comfortable and attractive? A clear option came back to mind when we happened to see a well-cared-for GMC parked at a welcome center. With that reminder, we began to look seriously into the possibility of finding a GMC.

The search... The task of finding the right coach became my project. We decided we wanted a 26-footer but didn't care about the model year. We wanted something attractive and comfortable. Beyond that, we didn't know for sure what layout we wanted. We would just have to look to see what was available. I searched the Internet, newspapers, GMC Motorhome Marketplace magazine and other classified ads. I also met some GMC owners in our area who introduced us to FMCA, GMC MI, the GMC Dixielanders and the GMC Net. All these contacts provided leads on units that were available. I learned there were quite a number of GMCs on the market, in a wide range of conditions and prices. The biggest problem was they were scattered across the entire United States. The owners were all helpful by sending pictures via the mail and Email, enabling the initial sorting and evaluating to be done at home. However, we decided that a final buying decision couldn't be made without first actually seeing and driving the coach.

For that reason, at one point, I flew from Kentucky to California to see a GMC that looked and sounded good; but after I got there, I was disappointed in its condition. That trip turned out to be an expensive wild goose chase! I suspect the

seller thought I was going to buy it for sure after traveling so far; he couldn't have been any more disappointed than I was!

Other GMCs on the market that piqued our interest were within reasonable driving distances from our home in Paducah, Kentucky. As it turned out, one of the best ones available at the time was a 26-foot, 1978 rear bath Royale located right here at home. It was nice, but it wasn't what we were seeking. I found an exceptional GMC located about a 100 miles north of here that was in almost new condition but, again, I didn't like the outside color or inside layout. Another, one of several we went to see, was about 300 miles away. It seemed to be in top mechanical condition, but the inside was ragged, and the exterior needed paint. By that time, we had decided whatever we bought, we wanted to have the inside redone and the outside repainted to our own tastes; but, the seller of this one had it priced too high for its condition. So, again, we passed.

The find... One day in late spring, I received a note from one of the GMC Dixielanders, calling a few more available coaches to my attention. One was described as having been owned by the deceased past president of GMC Motorhome International, who had done a frame-off restoration, including installing custom oak interiors. I called Mrs. Sara Fayard, the widow of Elam Fayard who had renovated the coach. She put me in touch with her son, Wayne, who Emailed digital pictures showing the inside and exterior, which had been sanded down in preparation for a



new paint job before his father passed away. The interior, though in need of freshening up, was unlike anything I had seen. It was customized,

including a custom-built dash, custom oak cabinetry and floors. Even in need of TLC, it looked impressive. Though certainly very much in need of paint, the outside panels looked to be in good shape. One problem was that the coach had been sitting in a closed garage for several years. No one knew how long it had been since it had been started or driven. Regardless, we decided to make the 537-mile trip to Atmore, Alabama for a firsthand look.

By the time we got there a week or so later, Wayne Fayard and his brother from Atlanta had the coach dusted off and running. Though stored high and dry, I could see that at some time in the past, portions of the oak paneling had been damaged by water leakage and needed replacing. The headliner was soiled and the sanded down exterior looked like bad camouflage. That said, however, it was apparent that this GMC had received an almost unbelievable number of improvements; and with some work, it showed promise for the future. The interior design and craftsmanship was nothing short of spectacular. It clearly had potential beyond anything I was aware of or had seen. I decided to take it for a drive. The steering was a little loose, but the engine ran well. The body was tight, and there was not a single rattle. It was love at first sight!

Past restorations and losses... Wayne told me when his father first purchased the coach; he brought it home, removed everything from the interior, including the dash, bathroom, kitchen and plumbing, then immediately removed the body from the frame. He replaced everything that needed replacing, refinished the frame, rebuilt the running gear, removed and completely rebuilt the engine, had the transmission rebuilt, removed the factory insulation from the body and sprayed foam insulation everywhere, then shaped it up with a double handled knife. He then designed, built and installed the unique oak interior. I didn't find out how long it took to complete all this work; but from the looks of the finished product, it must have taken a considerable amount of time. The workmanship is impeccable – as nice as fine furniture. He also did his own paintwork, designed fiberglass molds and made several fiberglass accessories, among others; the flared fenders and

custom grill on our coach.

We learned from Mrs. Fayard that in 1992 when what was to be our coach was newly completed, GMC Motorhome Marketplace

November 1992

\$2.50

Motorhome GMC Marketplace



magazine featured it on the cover as the first of what would become a regular monthly article in the publication. (*Editor's Note: In actuality, it was the first coach from a Coach and Owner article to be featured on the cover.*) The piece amiably describes the oak interior, hidden bath and other personal touches of the motorhome.

Additionally, we learned that Wayne Fayard builds racecars and is an accomplished mechanic himself. He had completely rebuilt the 455-engine in this GMC, including grinding the crankshaft and cylinders. He was thoroughly familiar with the systems in the GMC and had helped his father throughout the three restorations he had done. Yes, we learned that Mr. Fayard had actually restored a total of three GMC motorhomes. After finishing our GMC, he completed two others, a 23-footer and another 26-foot model that, too, had been featured in GMC Motorhome Marketplace Oct. '95 magazine. Mrs. Fayard had

sold the other 26-foot coach previously.

Unfortunately, a fire had destroyed the 23-foot coach. What was to become our motorhome had apparently narrowly missed also going up in flames. Both our coach and the 23-foot coach were parked in the double garage built specifically for parking and working on GMCs. A man was doing some welding on the back of the 23-footer when the insulation caught fire. By the time he got a hose hooked up, the fire had spread out of control. He finally managed to pull the burning coach outside the building with his pickup truck; but by that time the building had caught fire with our future motorhome still inside. At the last minute, he started our coach and backed it out. The only damage was a few spots of bubbled paint from the heat, but the 23-foot coach was a total loss. The bubbled paint was the reason Mr. Fayard had sanded down our coach in preparation for a new paint job; its condition when we bought it.

GMC ownership 101... Though we had purchased it, it wasn't ready to drive. I trusted neither the tires nor the rear airbags, and the air conditioner was not reinstalled. It had been a long time since the chassis had been lubricated, the oil needed to be changed and there were some parts that needed to be put back on. The seats weren't bolted down tight and the driver's side of the windshield was badly cracked. All the spare GMC parts that had accumulated over the years were included in the purchase. Fortunately, new windshields were on hand. I agreed to buy new tires and air bags, and Wayne agreed to get everything installed and prepare the coach to travel. When it was ready, we were to meet in Birmingham, which is about half way between Atmore, Alabama and Paducah, Kentucky. He would drive the coach to Birmingham with someone following him to take him back home. Our son, Tom Jr. (or Tommy), and I would fly there to meet him; and, after dropping Tommy off at his home in Nashville, Tennessee, I would drive the motorhome on to Topeka Graphics in northern Indiana for a paint job. My wife was to meet me at Topeka Graphics in our car for the trip home to Paducah.

Tommy and I arrived in Birmingham Friday night and stayed at the Holiday Inn near the

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airport. The next morning Wayne Fayard was late getting to the motel. I finally reached him on his cell phone. He told me that he was having trouble with the engine dying about every 30 miles or so. He thought it was a fuel problem and had replaced the fuel filters but still had the trouble. A couple of hours or so later, he finally made it to the Holiday Inn, but the fuel problem was still there. He showed me where the fuel filters were located under the coach, mentioned a small water leak on the top part of the engine that should be watched and handed me the keys.

Tommy and I checked the fluid levels and started on our way. The engine didn't die right away from fuel starvation, but the loose steering linkage that I had detected during my test drive was more pronounced at highway speeds. Then, as we were starting down a long grade on the interstate, I could see traffic was stopped a half mile or so away. I pressed on the brake pedal and, to my surprise, barely had any brakes at all! I finally got it stopped in the nick of time and pulled off on an exit that, fortunately, happened to be right there. The problems were adding up. We had only gone about 10 miles. Tommy wasn't aware of the brake problem and asked what I was doing. I told him we were calling a wrecker. He said, "Dad, you're 300 miles from Paducah!" I told him it was too dangerous to drive and I wasn't going to risk his life or mine.

Four hours later, much of it spent standing in the hot Alabama sun; a semi-truck with a drop down trailer arrived and took us on our way. We rode along in the cab and dropped Tommy off in Nashville. I stayed with the wrecker and went on to Paducah where we deposited the GMC at a campground owned by Sam Futrell, a friend of mine. It was almost midnight when we got there. The way the GMC looked in its sanded down condition, there was no way my wife would let me bring it home. Thus ended our first day on the road with our GMC. I was exhausted, exasperated, disappointed and poorer!

The next day I called Larry Bontrager, the owner of Topeka Graphics and told him we were going to have to postpone the paint job.

Mechanical renewal... I knew generally what needed to be done but couldn't do it alone. I am

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self-employed full time as financial adviser and merger/acquisition intermediary, working with mid-sized manufacturing and distribution companies. Though not completely unfamiliar with automotive mechanics, I have spent most of my life doing deskwork. Automotive repair is certainly not my long suit, so I called a man in town that owns a small engine repair shop. I knew he worked on his own vehicles and had done some related work for me. I thought he might be willing to go out to the campground and help me get things going. He agreed to work with me on a part-time basis, and we got started. I bought a new water outlet fitting for the top of the engine, a new water pump, a new master cylinder, new wheel cylinders for all six wheels, new brake pads all around and new brake hoses. Part-time turned out also to be intermittent and occasional; it was very part-time. Two and one half months went by and we didn't get it done, then the repairman decided to throw in the towel.

I called a friend, Joe Corey, who is the head of maintenance for a small steel mill nearby. He had built hot rods when he was younger and was capable of doing almost anything mechanical. I asked Joe if he would be willing to help me finish the brakes and get the new wheel bearings installed. He said he would help when he could; but in addition to his job, he was coaching a softball team that summer. I needed help and not many people are willing to work in the heat and humidity, on the grass, in a campground. I appreciated his assistance whenever he could come out. He was a big help and after coming in by wrecker in mid June, I drove out of the campground under the GMC's own power with new brakes and wheel bearings in September.

The next stop was the front-end shop. Ronnie Swanson owns Swanson's Alignment here in town. He is fully trustworthy and knowledgeable in his trade. His shop has one of the best reputations in this region for large trucks and motorhomes; consequently, they stay busy.

The GMC ended up being there for another month and a half as the steering was put into like new condition. While searching with the telephone for front-end parts, I met Jim Bounds, owner of the Cooperative Motor Works in Orlando, Florida.

Jim turned out to be a great help on many fronts as the renewal continued. Ronnie Swanson also installed new shock absorbers; double checked the new brakes, wheel bearings and seals and made sure of the proper torque on the wheel bearings. The coach steered and stopped like new when I left Ronnie's shop at the end of October. Incidentally, he also taught me how to run a metal lathe while the GMC was there. I liked it so much I could see myself becoming a machinist in a second life!

It was time to tackle the fuel starvation problem that Wayne Fayard had experienced when he drove the coach to meet Tommy and me in Birmingham. In addition to the fuel problem, I had also noticed the headers were leaking. I wanted someone to thoroughly check out the engine, set the timing, install new spark plugs and plug wires. A friend of mine owns a river towing company. His port engineer, Jerry McNeil, runs his own automotive repair shop on the side. He has the reputation of being an accomplished mechanic and undertook the task of fixing the fuel problem and fine-tuning the engine.

For starters, Jerry found problems in the Holley Fuel Injection System. The computer wasn't sending the proper signals to the injectors. Further complicating things, the fuel pressure coming into the system was unstable. By that time, I had met Emery Stora on the GMC Net. Emery is a long-time GMC owner and competent guy who will delve deep into anything he undertakes. When you meet him, you respect him for his capabilities and willingness to help other GMC owners. He happened to have a complete spare Holley Fuel Injection System that he offered to loan to test my system; he sent it out from his home across the country. Jerry wired up Emery's computer but still couldn't get my system to work the way it should.

Frustrated, I finally decided to replace the Holley fuel injection with an original Quadrajel Carburetor. Jim Bounds quickly shipped a professionally rebuilt unit. Jerry installed it, but we still had the fuel problem. We had checked the vent valve in the left well early on to see if it was stuck – it wasn't. We had replaced the fuel filters, checked the fuel vapor canister and went through

two new Holley electric fuel pumps but still had the problem. In the meantime, Jerry had everything else on the engine finished. He had installed a fuel pressure gauge in one of the first steps. When the engine first started, the pressure would be high but gradually dropped as the coach was driven. You could almost count on the engine dying when more power was needed going up a hill at highway speeds. We finally decided it must be an accumulation of rust and dirt in the gas tanks that was clogging the lines, particularly when more power and fuel were required.

The gas tanks needed to be dropped and inspected, and the lines needed to be replaced. It was December; the weather was cold and Jerry couldn't get the GMC inside his garage. I called Ronnie Swanson to ask him if he would do the work, which was far away from his specialty. He agreed to do it when he had the time on a weekend. Equipped with work pits, his shop is ideal for replacing tanks and lines. New tanks also came with the purchase of the coach. I helped Ronnie one Saturday in February. We finished the job, and I called Larry Bontrager at Topeka Graphics to see if he could work our coach in for a paint job. He said, "Bring it on up."

Another false start... My sister, Judy Roy, in Indianapolis said she would meet us as we passed through town and loan us a car. We accepted her offer; and eight months after the first try, we again started on our way. About forty miles north of Paducah on I-24, the coach started choking for gas. I pulled off at the next exit, changed the fuel filters and tried again. A few miles further down the road it choked and quit running. I pulled to the side of the road and waited 10 minutes or so. It started up and ran fine. Dejected, we turned around and headed back home. It choked and stopped every few miles, but we finally made it home under our own power. I called Larry and, again, postponed the Topeka Graphics paint job. A few days later, I removed the new Holley fuel pump, installed a Delco and went for a 100-mile test run. It didn't hesitate. The problem seemed to be resolved at last. That's the good news, the bad follows. On the way home from the test run, I pulled into a parts store to pick up something. When I came out, the motorhome wouldn't back

up. Reverse had gone out of the transmission!

I found a local transmission shop that was familiar with GMCs. He couldn't take it right away. I scheduled an appointment, but it was another long wait. At long last, he rebuilt the transmission and had us ready to go in May. We left for Topeka Graphics for the third time, early the morning of May 31, 2002. It is a 500-mile drive. Geri followed me in the car on this trip; we communicated with walkie-talkies. When we pulled into a truck stop for gas west of Indianapolis, we saw another GMC with a Suzuki Sidekick in tow parked to one side. As I was filling up, Richard Archer, a well-known GMC enthusiast walked up and introduced himself. We took a look at each other's coaches. (His was in great shape after a long restoration. He didn't say a lot about mine at the time; but months later, after the paint job was finished, we laughed and he told me he didn't want to say anything the day we met, but mine looked like an outcast from the GMC community!) I passed Arch later on the road. The coach looked bad, in need of paint, but it ran like a top! We made it to Topeka by late afternoon without a single problem.

Looking back, I think some of the mechanical troubles we have had are probably due to a combination of things, including: sitting in storage for so many years, which could have dried out the seals and rusted the gas tanks, my own lack of experience and the local mechanics' lack of familiarity with the GMC. Regardless, I feel that everyone involved did his or her level best at every turn.

The paint job... Larry and Karen Bontrager



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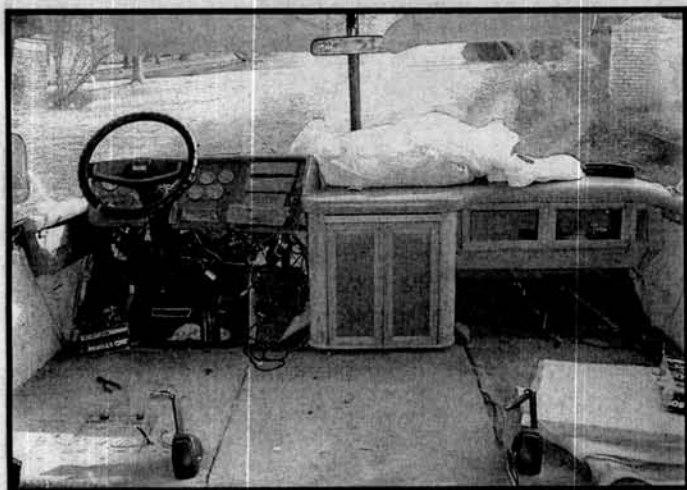
work as a husband and wife team managing Topeka Graphics. They are knowledgeable of the service they offer; and, it doesn't take being around them long to see that they are hard working. By far, their main business is painting new recreational vehicles, trailers and motorhomes that are built in the factories near their own facilities. The main industry in northeastern Indiana is the manufacture of recreational vehicles and mobile homes. Topeka Graphics is part of that industry. In addition to painting new vehicles, they have painted many GMCs over the years. They are good at it, their price is reasonable; and, they will paint any design or color you choose. However, repainting GMCs is a sideline or "fill-in." The summer is their busiest time with new vehicles, and the summer of 2002 turned out to be a record year.

Larry asked me how soon I needed the coach when I gave him our colors, along with a drawing of our paint scheme. I told him we would rather have a good job than a fast job. It was May 31. He asked me if around the first of July was okay with me. I told him we could live with that. Little did we know that we were in for another long wait. Larry and Karen didn't know what was going to

hit them. New business poured in; they were overwhelmed, and our GMC, of necessity, took a back seat. I stayed in touch all summer and early fall. Things didn't slack off. In late October a slot opened up, and our GMC was finally ready to be picked up in mid November.

It looked gorgeous! We were pleased. We paid the bill and drove home without a hitch. Larry told me that he wasn't going to be able to take on any more GMC paint jobs as long as his new vehicle business continued at a high level. I have since learned that he is taking on a few again as





fill-ins. (My guess is that winter is the best time to get a one painted.)

Refreshing the interior... With all the mechanical work that had been done, little had been done to the inside of the coach. I had taken the doors off the cabinets and removed the drawers somewhere along the line and had some good help and advice on refinishing. Fred Vowell and his wife, Marta, own the local Pittsburgh Paint store. I made use of their know-how to refinish the cabinet doors and drawers and, later, the walls, dash and floors. Basically, I found that good results in refinishing take forethought, followed by careful application. One tricky part came when we had to replace sections of oak paneling that had been damaged long ago by leaks. The new wood had to be stained to take on the color of the old paneling before applying the polyurethane. Fred has a talent for mixing up just the right stain color. We used a polyurethane satin finish on the walls, doors and drawers, and a gloss on the dash and hardwood floors.

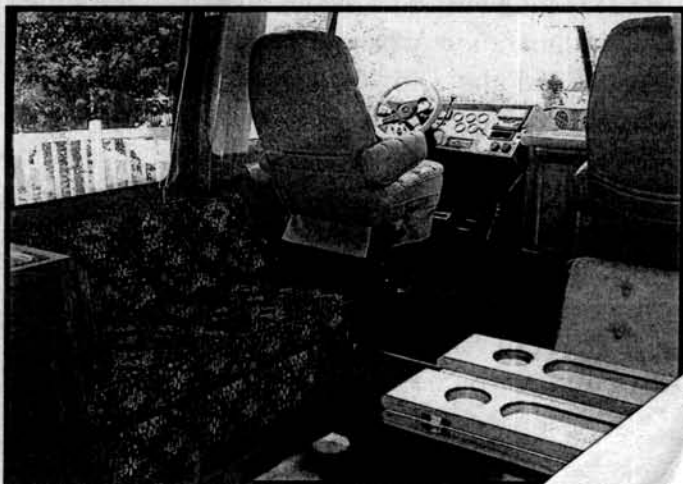
The cabinet frames and valences had to come down to install the new headliner. The upholsterer took these things down, but it was left up to me to get them back up. I assure you that taking them down was easier! While the cabinets were out of the way, an able young man by the name of Chris Borgia, who lives nearby, designed and installed a new entertainment system. Chris figured out a way to put a television set in the cabinet in the center of the dash, which turned out to be a nice touch. He also installed a new TV on a swivel in the bedroom area, a VCR on the step behind the passenger seat, a new AM-FM radio-tape player

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in the dash with a CD-DVD player underneath. In addition to all this, he installed new speakers everywhere. I made the speaker housings out of plastic pipe and finished them to match the oak cabinets. The system works perfectly using remote controls, looks neat, sounds great; and, the grandchildren love it.



Repairing the oak paneling and putting everything back together would have been tough working alone; but for this phase, I was able to enlist the assistance of Dennis Dickie who is the head of maintenance at one of our local high schools and is skilled at doing the full range of tasks necessary to restore the interior of a motorhome. Dennis can do it all with attention to detail. We worked a lot of evenings and weekends in the winter of 2002/2003. While we were working on the walls, cabinets, dash and floor, the upholsterer was recovering the couch cushions and covering sections of the walls and the valences with fabric. On another front, a local seamstress was making custom bedspreads for the twin beds.



GMC Motorhome Market



Geri and a friend, Sue McDougall, who is a talented interior designer, selected the fabrics and colors. The main colors are gray and cranberry, or dark red, which is a nice contrast to the natural oak shade of the wood. By the middle of May, it all started to come together. The new carpet was installed last. The interior was about finished, but I had never even tested the plumbing.

Plumbing leaks and the fiberglass fiasco... I filled the tank with a hose and turned on the water. The kitchen faucet worked. The bathroom faucets worked and the shower worked, but the toilet leaked out on the floor. The outside hose connection leaked badly to the outside. The pump leaked, but the water ran harmlessly under the back of the coach. Underneath, the wastewater tank was leaking badly. Other than the toilet, fortunately, nothing leaked inside. We were trying to get ready to go to our first rally, but the plumbing needed attention before we could go anywhere. I went to the local RV supply store and bought a new water pump and a new flush valve for the

toilet.

Mike Feezor, a friend and fellow GMC owner who willingly lent a hand throughout the entire project, again offered to help with these eleventh hour repairs. He and I bought some materials for fixing leaks in plastic tanks. We dried out the tank with my leaf blower. That worked but it blew nasty (and smelly) stuff out all the drains that had to be cleaned up rather quickly. We then mixed together the two parts of the leak repair material and pushed it into the cracks in the wastewater tank. It looked watertight, but we both thought it would be stronger if we fibreglassed over everything. Mike brought over some resin, hardener and fiberglass cloth from his garage. He works on Corvettes and is good with fiberglass. He mixed the resin and hardener together on a board, scooted under the GMC, applied the resin and fiberglass cloth over the cracks and crawled out. I asked him if I could take a look. I slid under on my back. It looked thoroughly sealed but I felt something in my hair on the back of my head. I



had laid my head down on the board with the resin that was hardening fast! I came out instantly. Mike took a look at the back of my head and said, "At looks bad." That wasn't very reassuring. Geri walked up at that moment. I asked her to get a comb. (Here's the picture... A balding, slightly overweight man is sitting in our driveway trying to pull a comb through the hair of another graying, slightly overweight man also sitting on the concrete.) Mike kept saying, "This is bad, real bad." The resin was setting up, and I was becoming convinced that I would have to have my head shaved. Then I realized the humor in it all and couldn't stop laughing. Mike said, "This is serious," and began spraying brake cleaner on the resin and mentioned it might help if we could put some oil on it. I think he was considering motor oil. Geri ran in the house and came out with a measuring cup half full of cooking oil. He poured the cooking oil on my head and kept combing. Unbelievably, it worked! The resin began breaking up into small pieces and coming out with the comb. (Maybe we should suggest this for the next edition of "Hints from Heloise.") When it was all over, with my slick hair, I looked like the last of the greasers but the whole thing shampooed out easily that evening. I sometimes laugh to myself when I think about it; and, the tank doesn't leak a drop! The next day I removed the water hose connection valve; took it apart and put it back together. To my amazement, it quit leaking. The toilet was a little more difficult; but, I got it apart, installed the new flushing valve, put it back together and it doesn't leak. Replacing the water pump was straight forward, though it had been mounted in a tight place in the earlier restoration,

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requiring the removal of the LP tank. Finally, the plumbing leaks were fixed, and we were ready to go to on our first trip.

Milestone reached... We have actually done more work and replaced more parts than I have discussed here, but this touches on the main items. We have had a lot of help and made a lot of friends along the way. The project, for all practical purposes, is finished; but, there will always be things that need attention. After all, these machines are getting on in years. Even the newest models are a quarter of a century old. I would never have dreamed it would have taken this long to reach where we are, which turned out to be about two years. It was a lot of fun, and it feels good to stand back and admire the finished product. When we attended our first rally in Bowling Green, Kentucky on June 3-6, we received a lot of compliments, all of which were much appreciated.



The sleek, modern, coaches and the friendship of other GMC owners, admirers and enthusiasts make everything worthwhile. This is truly a great hobby!

We hope you enjoy this article, a regular feature of our magazine. If you know someone you would like to recommend for a future presentation, please drop us a note. With this in mind, you may receive a letter or be approached by one of our editorial staff members at a rally or campsite. It is our hope you will feel free to show your coach and share your ideas, suggestions and adventures with other GMC coach owners. We have never found a GMC coach owner that was not interested in other GMC coaches, no matter in what stage its reconditioning or restoration might be.

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