

# The GMC Motor Home



*by Tim Dye*

In a time period when most RV's resembled a huge box, and their interior appointments were considered utilitarian in nature, General Motors was building what they called "The showplace that goes places". Today these GMC's have what has to be considered a cult like following. It is said that of the 12,921 built between 1973 and 1978 that 8,000 to 9,000 are still registered and in service today.

The demand for motorized recreational vehicles was on the rise in the late 1960s. General Motors decided to jump into this market, raising the standards as they did. Although much research was done in the creation of the GMC Motor Home, in a way GM already was producing some of the main components, and implementing much of the technology used, throughout their other divisions. For instance, the drivetrain, a 455 motor, 425 Turbohydromatic transmission and front suspension had been in use at Oldsmobile since 1966 in the Toronado. The rear suspension comprised of two axles with dual swing arms and air springs was technology borrowed from GM Bus & Coach. This combination allowed the GMC to have the smoothest ride and lowest center of gravity of any RV on the road. Remember that most motorized RVs of the day were attached to a heavy duty, firm suspension truck chassis placing them high in the air.

The body was a combination of molded fiberglass panels and heavy gauge aluminum, fiberglass was nothing new to GM, they had been using it on the Corvette for years. This created a Motor Home that not only rode

nice but looked great too.

A prototype was first displayed in May 1972 at the Transpro '72 trade show in Washington DC. Production models were first offered as 1973 models. Assembly of the new motor home took place in Pontiac, Michigan at a facility just west of the main truck plant. This was an older facility with a two level layout. The chassis was assembled on the lower level while the body was assembled on the upper floor and dropped down to



*Interior view of a GMC Motor Home showing one of the many configurations offered.*

be mated with the chassis. Originally the interior was manufactured by an outside company but later that too was done in-house. The interior units were slid in at the

back of the vehicle for installation before the rear panel was affixed. GMC historian Don Meyer said some of these vehicles were outfitted as busses or for use as ambulances.

GMC dealers did not automatically become GMC Motor Home dealers. It took three acres of buildings and space to service and sell the GMC Motor Home, a facility that reportedly cost \$250,000, many were separate, stand alone dealers.

If you have a hard time deciding what you want on your sandwich at Subway because there are too many toppings and dressings to pick from, you probably would not have wanted to order a GMC



Motor Home. In 1973 there were 4 different models, 6 exterior colors, 15 different floor plans and 2 body lengths to pick from, and that does not even include the options. The two lengths offered were 23' and 26'. Base price for the 23' was \$13,569 and for the 26', \$14,569.

The models were named after National Parks, Canyon Lands, Glacier, Painted Desert and Sequoia. The model name defined the interior decor, not the floor plan. There were three standard exterior colors, white, camel, and pineapple yellow. For an extra \$34.00 you could order bittersweet orange, sky blue or parrot green.

There were only minor

changes in 1974, and as far as the body goes there were no changes during the entire production run, parts from a 1973 would work on a 1978. In 1975 there were some changes on the interior such as new fabrics and



*Cut-away view and interior photo from a 1973 promotional sheet on the GMC Motor Home.*

colors. In 1977 there was an engine change, the Oldsmobile 403 replaced the 455. Also in 1977 there were two special Coca Cola models offered, both were white with red graphics. The base model had the same pattern and graphics as a regular model, but there was an upgraded model called a GadAbout. It had a sweeping wedge of Coca Cola red that graduated to yellow near the top. Out back was a spare tire cover made to resemble a Coke bottle cap. Inside it had some special features as well. One of them was a refrigerator that looked like a Coke vending machine. Five GadAbouts were given away in a contest sponsored by Coke.

Production ended with the



*GMC promotional photo showing Motor Home at Burlington Municipal Beach in Vermont.*

### *GMC Motor Home Production*

*1973 - 2059*

*1974 - 1664*

*1975 - 1656*

*1976 - 3260*

*1977 - 2403*

*1978 - 1879*

*Total - 12,921*

1978 model year, a press release dated November 11, 1977 said in part “GMC will discontinue producing luxury Motor Homes”. Production never reached the levels anticipated and it was noted that around 100 trucks could be produced in the amount of space and time it took to produce one Motor Home.

Pontiac owned one of the Motor Homes and used it as part of their “Trans Am Territory” program. Trans Am Territory was a special space set aside at various race events around the country where Trans Am and Firebird owners could park their cars and socialize. The first time this took place was at Road America, Elkhart Lake, WI. June 5th and 6th 1976. Participants often got discounts and a parade lap around the track. The GMC was dubbed the “Trans Am Traveler” and was at each event, often with a display of Trans Ams and Firebirds. These events also took place at Mid Ohio, Riverside, Laguna Seca, Pocono and other locations. Trans Am and Firebird enthusiast, as well as Firebird clubs would attend in great numbers. At its peak as many as 325 cars would attend. The April 1982 issue of Thunder Am Magazine had a short story about Trans Am Territory and how it needed to be saved by enthusiast writing let-



*Pontiac’s GMC Motor Home with five 1978 Trans Ams.*

ters to Pontiac, so one would guess it must have been winding down by then. Don Meyer told me that there is one of the GMC RVs in the General Motors Heritage Collection, I wonder if it is the Trans Am Traveler?

One of the most famous GMC Motor Homes has to be the one that was used in the 1981 movie “Stripes”. This movie starred Bill Murray, Harold Ramis, John Candy, John Larroquette, Judge Reinhold, Bill Paxton and Warren Oates who drove the 1970 Judge in “Two Lane Blacktop” (you knew I had one more Pontiac connection up

my sleeve). This is a hilarious movie where the main characters decide to take the U.S. Army’s new EM-50 Urban Assault Vehicle for a joy ride. Based on a GMC Motor Home, the EM-50 carried a cannon, machine guns, flame throwers, missiles, and all manner of infantry weapons. It also featured hideaway armor plating which would cover the windows, tires and other vulner-



able points when going into combat. It also featured a fully equipped communications and navigation suite. Designed to prowl urban areas without attracting attention, the EM-50 could quickly deploy its weapons before an enemy knew it was there, or realized what it was.



*The EM-50 Urban Assault Vehicle.*

If you have never seen this movie, or if it has been many years, you might want to rent it, it’s good for a lot of laughs.

The popularity of the GMC Motor Home has not diminished over the years, actually just the opposite. Two publications started up for fans of this vehicle, not in the 1970s like you would expect, but rather in 1992

and 1994. There are clubs for them too, I was first made aware of this in 2007 at an event in Tulsa when a group of 7 or 8 of them showed up. Of course there are web sites also with technical information, tours, parts and all kinds of information about them.

You can find them for sale in the \$15,000 to \$25,000 range. If you want to cruise and camp in vintage style, a GMC Motor Home might just be the ticket!

