

# The 1973-1978 GMC MotorHomes

*A history in photos edited by Richard Truesdell*





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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is often said that a book has many parents and this is certainly true in this case, even a self-published one. So I would like to thank a few people that helped get me to this point.

First is Joe Palenchar. Joe was the very first editor I worked with back in 1983 when I made my first contribution to the trade title *Autosound and Communications*. It was the first time that I was paid for putting words and pictures into a publication.

Next up are C. Van Tune and Jeff Bartlett at *Motor Trend*. In the nineties I was asked by Van to produce a mobile electronics section for *Motor Trend*. After a rocky start, with much help and constructive criticism from Jeff, I was able to make Autotronics a success.

At *Automotive Traveler*, the online magazine that I co-founded in 2007, there are two important people to thank. First is my business partner Bill Basore, who has continued to support the project even though we, like so many digital publishers, have yet to find a way to make a profit in what remains the passion of my life.

Also at *Automotive Traveler* is Robyn Larson McCarthy, an exceptional editor with whom I've worked with twice in my career. First was in 1998 when she was my editor at another trade title, *Mobile Electronics*, when I was one of her contributors. And for the last four years we have worked together on *Automotive Traveler* and *AutomotiveTraveler.com* to establish standards of editorial excellence comparable to any print publication.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention two close friends, Joe Babiasz and Steve Statham. Both are like brothers to me. Joe keeps my spirits up when this brave new world of digital publishing seemingly saps every ounce of my energy. And to Steve, my former editor at *Musclecar Enthusiast* who has self-published several books already, many thanks for paving the way for me to get this book from my keyboard to your computer screen or bookshelf.

And finally my parents. My mom doesn't quite understand it all, but I am certain that my dad, who is watching over me from a better place, does. I miss his encouragement every day.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

iii Acknowledgments

01 Introduction

02 Foreward

03 History of the 1973-1978 GMC MotorHomes

18 Owner Photography

34 Advertising

38 1977 TransMode Brochure

45 Specifications

48 References

# INTRODUCTION

Buda-Pesth seems a wonderful place, from the glimpse which I got of it from the train and the little I could walk through the streets. I feared to go very far from the station, as we had arrived late and would start as near the correct time as possible. It seems to me that the further east you go the more unpunctual are the trains. What ought they to be in China?

I read that every known superstition in the world is gathered into the horseshoe of the Carpathians, as if it were the centre of some sort of imaginative whirlpool; if so my stay may be very interesting. (Mem., I must ask the Count all about them.)

I found my smattering of German very useful here, indeed, I don't know how I should be able to get on without it.

I was evidently expected, for when I got near the door I faced a cheery-looking elderly woman in the usual peasant dress--white undergarment with a long double apron, front, and back, of coloured stuff fitting almost too tight for modesty. When I came close she bowed and said, "The Herr Englishman?"

# FOREWARD

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For much of the 20th century, General Motors was at the forefront of design innovation covering the widest variety of transportation devices, cars, pickups, heavy-duty trucks, and buses. But nowhere was the company's creative spirit more evident than in the design, engineering, and marketing of the 1973 to 1978 GMC MotorHome.

I have long been fascinated by all forms of what are essentially portable hotel rooms. When it comes to the most inventive recreational vehicle ever built, the leading candidate in the minds of many are the revolutionary MotorHomes GMC built from 1973 to 1978.

That's right, GMC. Now, I know what you're picturing: a motorhome built on a GMC chassis, not a GMC-designed and manufactured motorhome. But you would be just as wrong as I was when first coming across these classics. The 1973 to 1978 GMC front-wheel-drive



MotorHomes remain the only such recreational vehicles manufactured in house by a major automotive manufacturer.

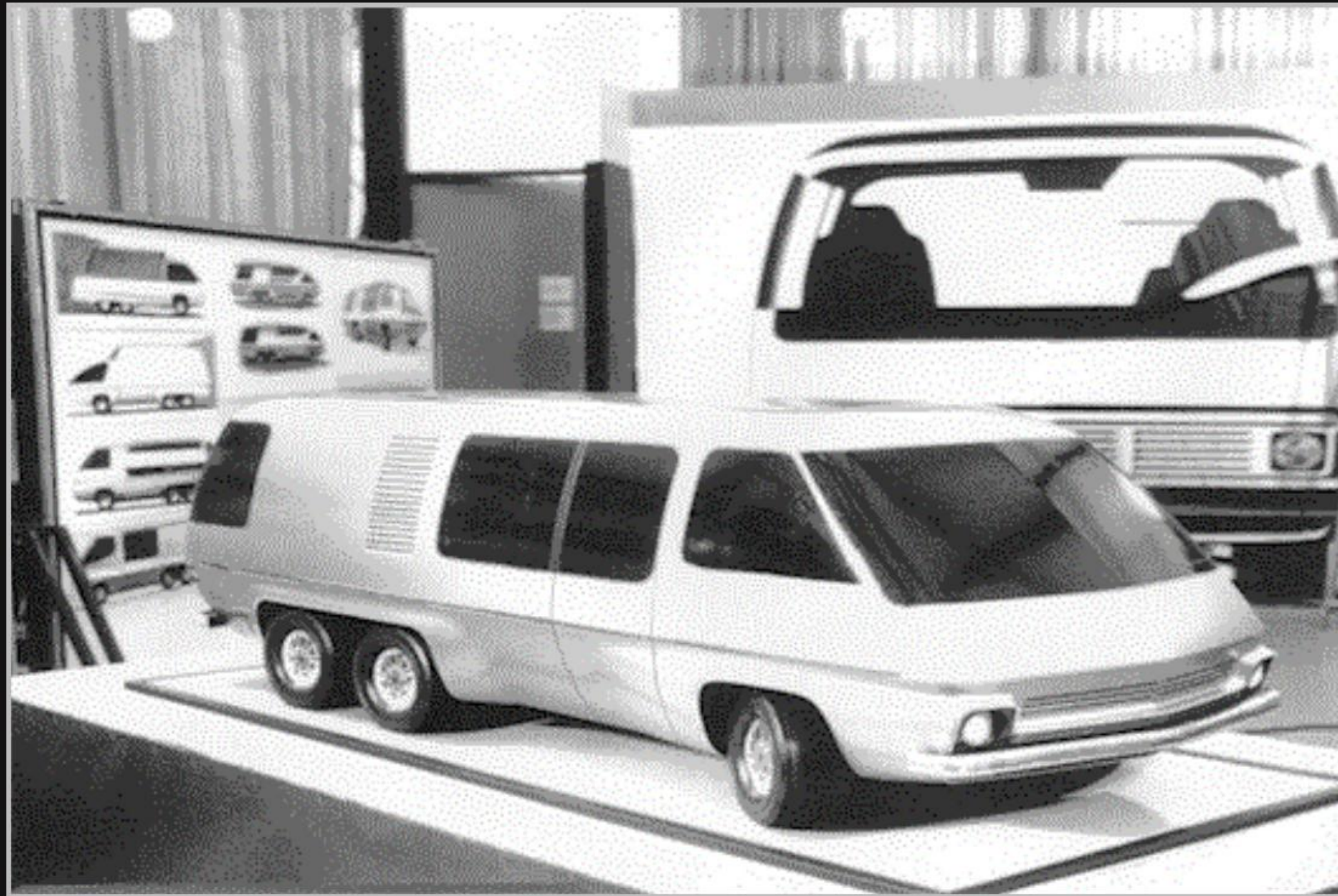
General Motors designed the GMC MotorHomes (I use the capital M and H as that's the way they were promoted and marketed by GM in the advertisements and brochures of the

era) from the ground up at a time when America's car company owned 50 percent of the domestic market. In those heady days, no concept, no matter how outlandish at first glance, was beyond the company's grasp.

Designed to be a halo vehicle for the entire GMC line, the GMC MotorHome would leverage the expertise GM teams had accrued in designing and building both trucks and commercial buses. GM's experience with reinforced plastics literally underpinned the construction of the RV's space-age-looking body.

Powered by a modified version of the

Oldsmobile Toronado's innovative big-block, front-wheel-drive drivetrain, the GMC MotorHome set standards for recreational

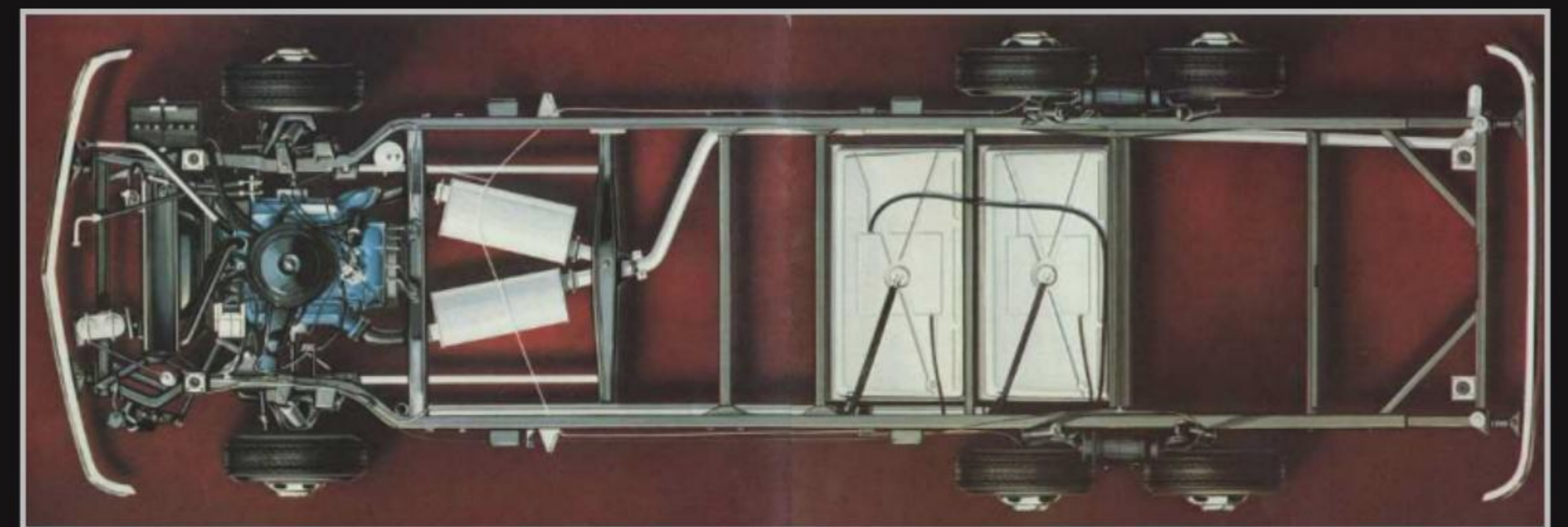


vehicle design that have never been surpassed. Moreover, almost 35 years after the last unit rolled off the specialized assembly line, these classics of the American road have engendered a cult-like following among motorhome aficionados.

I discovered these unique vehicles almost by accident while on a knowledge quest for background information on the Cadillac Eldorado. (The Eldorado is related to the

Toronado due to the similarity of their front-wheel-drive drivetrains.)

Unlike most of its contemporaries - boxes built upon a rear-wheel-drive truck chassis supplied by one of the Big Three - the GMC MotorHomes were built on a chassis specially designed and developed for use as a MotorHome. The GMC team constructed a totally integrated package that placed all the drivetrain components up front, resulting in a flat floor just 14 inches above the road. Combined with a very low step-in height (about the same as a contemporary truck-based body-



on-frame SUV), it broke away from all MotorHome conventions of the time.

The GMC MotorHomes were powered by a front-to-back mounted 455-cubic-inch Oldsmobile V8 (downsized to 403 cubic inches in the last year and a half of production in 1977

and 1978). The engine was combined with a GM-designed Turbo-Hydromatic 425 automatic transmission that was placed alongside the engine. The result was an extremely compact layout.

This marvel of packaging efficiency employed a wide chain drive to connect the output of the longitudinally oriented engine to the transmission. The final drive was connected directly to the transmission, and power was fed to the front wheels using half-shafts that ran under the front portion of the engine.

To maintain the flat floor front-to-rear, the engineers at the GM Tech Center in Warren, Michigan eliminated any sort of traditional rear axle. In its place, they substituted an equally innovative rear suspension consisting of a tandem pair of wheels on each side mounted on bogies, which rode on pins attached to the sides of the low-profile frame. The result was minimal intrusion of the rear wheels into the cabin. With the exception of the wheel wells, the rear suspension does not intrude into the living space.

A further innovation coming from GM's Saginaw Division was the use of hydro-air springs

for the rear suspension system, which gave the GMC MotorHome the benefit of an automatic leveling system that could adjust ride height and lower the cabin when parked at a campsite. A power steering pump was used for hydraulic pressure that regulated the innovative suspension system.

**The 26-foot MotorHome.  
11 floor plans available.**

Everybody doesn't have the same size family. Or the same travel plans. So we've made it easy for you to order almost any combination of interior modules to match your

MotorHome to your ideas.

There are two different units that fit in the right side of the living room. Three possibilities for the left side. And three different layouts for the rear.

And for even more variety, the passenger's seat in the cockpit can be replaced with a dual passenger seat.



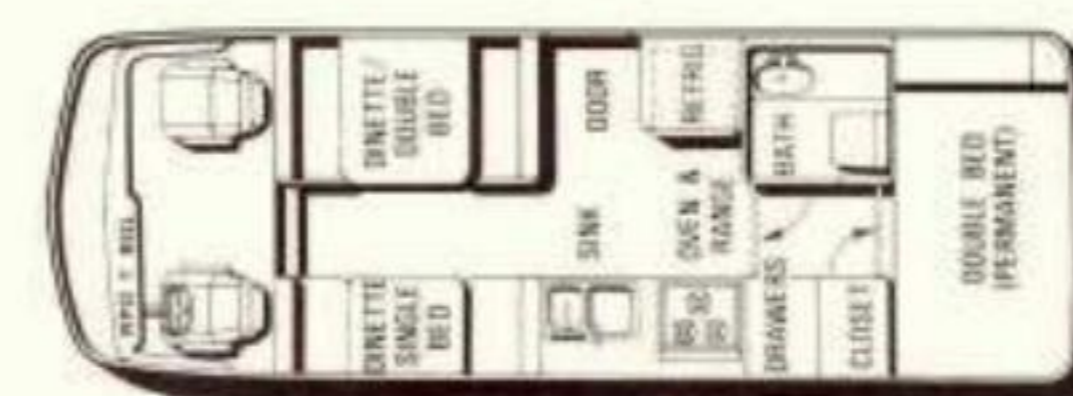
Base Floor Plan 26-1



Floor Plan 26-2



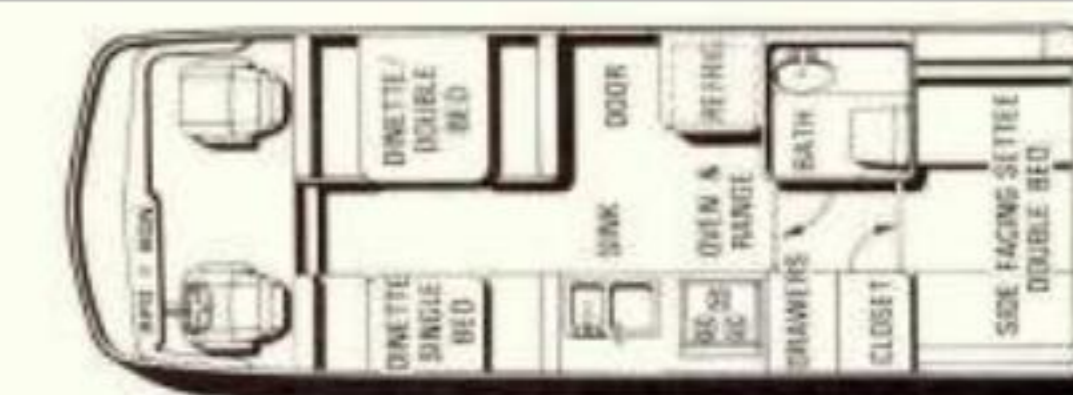
Floor Plan 26-3



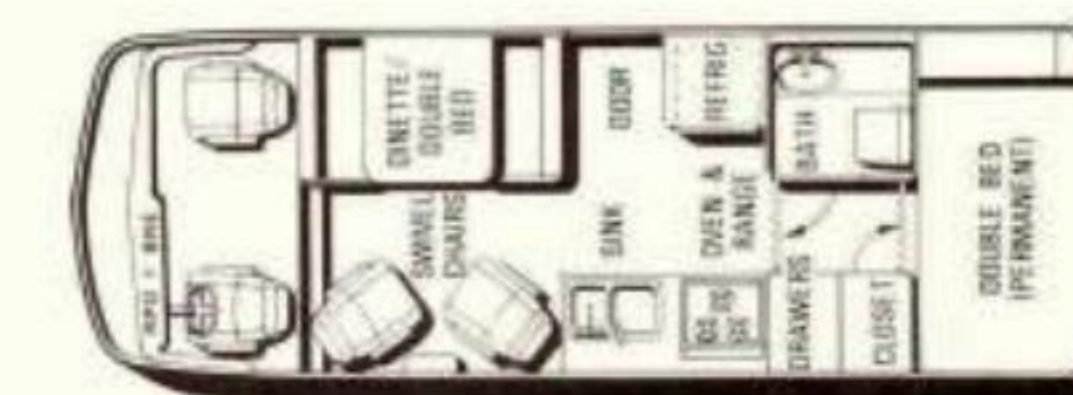
Floor Plan 26-4



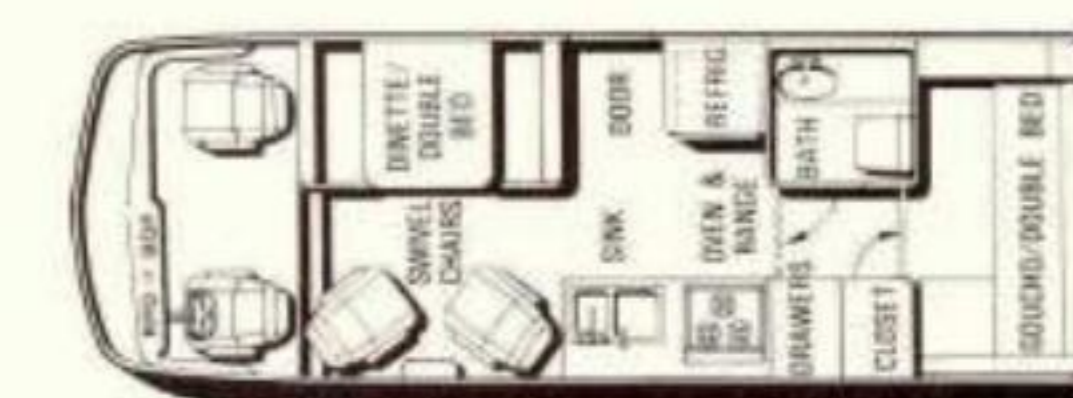
Floor Plan 26-5



Floor Plan 26-6



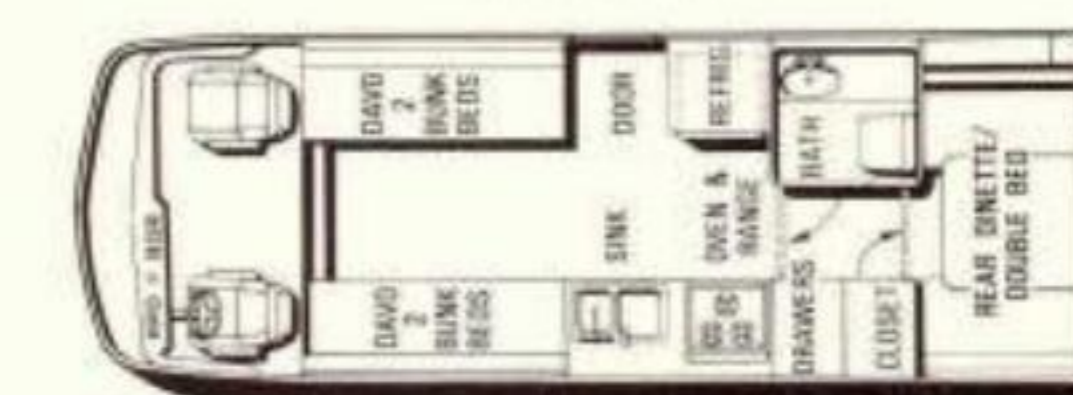
Floor Plan 26-7



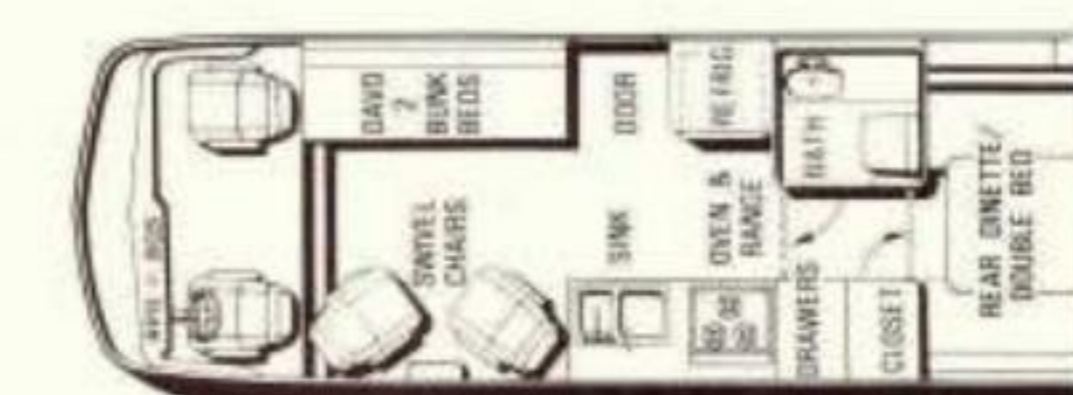
Floor Plan 26-8



Floor Plan 26-9

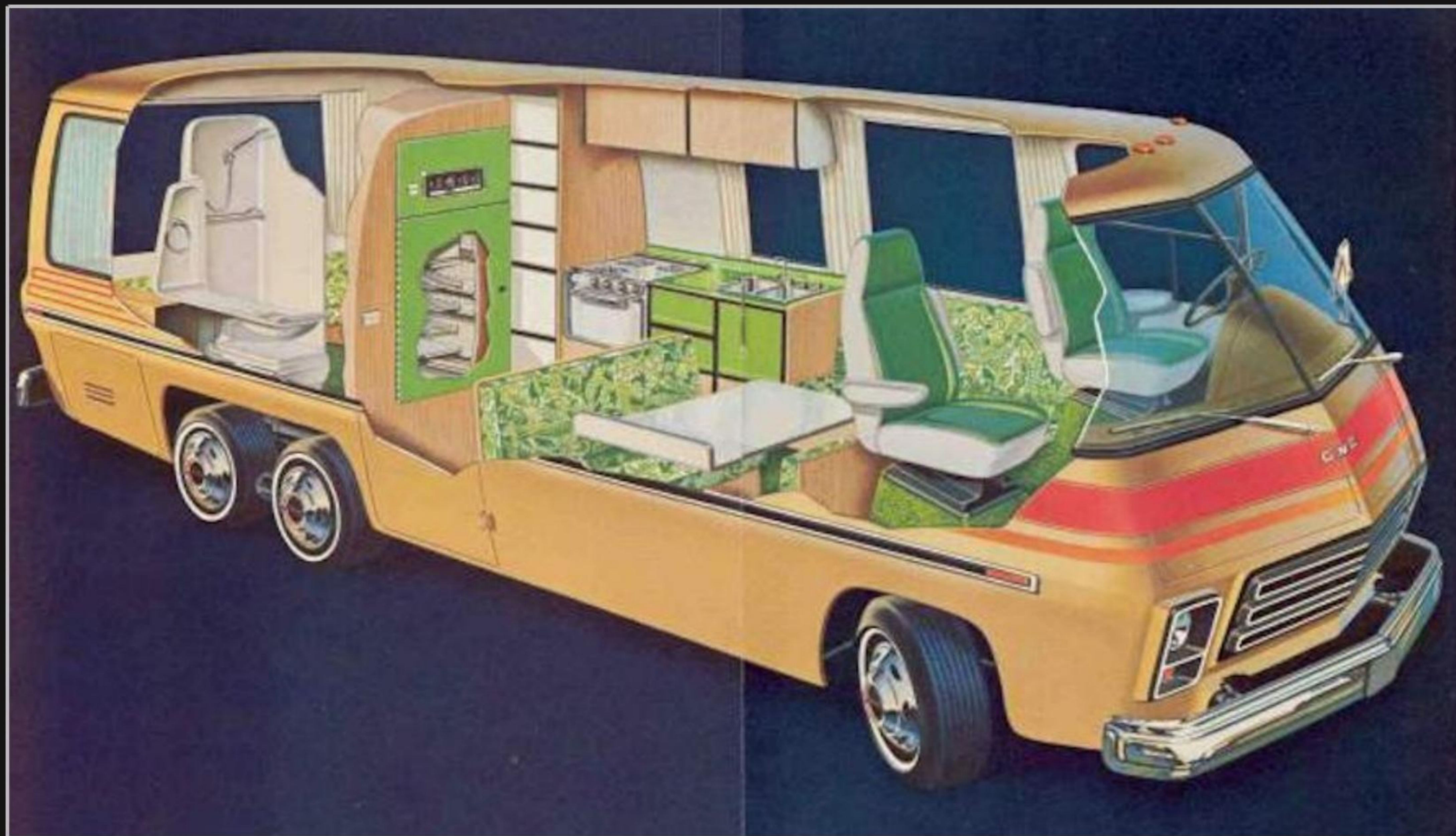


Floor Plan 26-10



Floor Plan 26-11

Compared to the competition, GMC MotorHomes were exceptionally compact, measuring either 23 feet long on a 140-inch wheelbase or 26 feet long on a 160-inch wheelbase. This was a step up from the initial design brief that planned for MotorHomes that would measure either 20 or 24 feet in length.



Yet they were surprisingly spacious on the inside. No matter the length, all GMC MotorHomes measure 96 inches wide (the

maximum allowed at the time) and less than 110 inches high, even accounting for the standard roof-mounted air conditioning unit.

Inside the cabin, the floor-to-ceiling height measures 76 inches. The vehicles boasted a low center of gravity, which contributed to class-leading driving dynamics of which other

MotorHomes could only dream.

The GMC MotorHome deviated even more from its competitors in the area of body construction. Instead of using the typical wood frame covered with aluminum, GM engineers employed a rigid welded-aluminum frame to save weight, mounted on a traditional steel ladder frame using body isolators. The body itself

was designed with weight reduction in mind throughout.

With their expertise in molding the complex

panels for the Corvette, GM's designers specified that lower body panels for the GMC MotorHome be constructed from molded fiberglass below the body's waistline. The upper side body and roof panels between the ends are sheet aluminum. With a minimum of seams between the panels, a GMC MotorHome is much less likely to leak, compared to its more conventional contemporaries.

Without the wood frame found in most other recreational vehicles, a GMC MotorHome has very little on it susceptible to rot, which contributes to their unrivaled longevity. The GMC version had more in common with the construction of aircraft than with other recreational vehicles against which it competed (think boxy, unaerodynamic Winnebagos).

The design of the GMC MotorHomes provided for unrivaled flexibility when it came to



outfitting their interiors. The 23-foot models typically sleep four, while the 26-foot models easily sleep six in comfort. As the brochures from the era illustrate, there is nothing claustrophobic about a GMC MotorHome. With their huge windows, the interiors are bright and airy. Customers had their choice of myriad interior configurations and a seemingly limitless

number of trim combinations. Much of the interior design of the GMC MotorHome came from GM's Frigidaire Division.

While GMC offered ready-to-drive MotorHomes for purchase at specially authorized GMC dealers, the company also sold a shell - the Transmode -

that could be outfitted by outside vendors. This allowed for even more floor-plan and personalization options. With the rear wheels mounted tandem-style (one behind the other rather than side-by-side) without any rear axle,

they did not intrude into the cabin and were easily concealed by the cabinets.

Many owners have lovingly maintained their MotorHomes' interiors in period-correct Seventies' style, with the original plaid



upholstery and colorful vinyls that were characteristic of home design of the era. Others have been modernized their classics, outfitting them with all the amenities of a 21st-century recreational vehicle. It is not uncommon to find

interiors as luxurious as those on a private jet, complete with state-of-the-art galleys, flat-panel televisions, and high-end A/V systems.



Scan the ads on eBay and Craigslist, and you're sure to find running examples of the GMC MotorHomes for as little as \$5,000. At that price, expect the interiors to require a total renovation. Still, all but the worst basket cases are candidates for restoration.

Well-maintained examples typically start at \$15,000, with high-end restorations easily topping \$30,000. Bethune Sales is one of the online sites offering a great cross section of

GMC MotorHomes for sale.

And yes, for you Bill Murray fans, it was a converted GMC MotorHome that became the EM-



50 Urban Assault Vehicle immortalized in the 1981 blockbuster and comedy classic *Stripes*.

With their big V8 engines, aerodynamic bodies, advanced suspension, and high-tech construction, it should come as no surprise that the GMC MotorHomes set benchmarks for performance and efficiency. In spite of weighing more than 12,000 pounds, they are capable of reaching 100 miles per hour while delivering eight to 10 miles per gallon. And given their

longevity, it's not uncommon to find the Oldsmobile V8s now equipped with modern fuel-injection systems that improve driveability and fuel efficiency with such systems costing \$2,500 and up, plus the cost of installation.

Their drivetrain components were incorporated into countless GM vehicles built in the Sixties, Seventies, and early-mid Eighties, so maintaining a GMC MotorHome is surprisingly easy. Prospective buyers will find strong club support and an established supplier base.

For those if you interested in even more details about the design and engineering innovations in these road-going Holiday Inns, take a look at Bill Bryant's three-part series in the February, March, and April 2004 issues of *Family Motor Coaching*.

The equally excellent GM MotorHome Enthusiast website is where I located many of the brochures and images seen on these pages, offers compelling reading if you are as intrigued as I am by these technological marvels.

Over its 103-year history, General Motors was responsible for many landmark vehicles, from the V-16-powered Cadillacs of the Thirties, the Tri-Five Chevys of the Fifties, Pontiac's GTO,



and of course the Corvette, America's sports car. Its trucks and tanks helped win the Second World War while the Suburban, marketed by both Chevrolet and GMC, is considered by many to be the grandfather of today's SUV.

More importantly, GM as much as any company in America, laid the foundation of the middle class giving a generation of Americans the ability to buy homes, build families, and enjoy the fruits of their labor, both workers and management.

With our affluence in the Sixties, Americans hit the road in record numbers as the summer vacation became the staple of suburban life.

Recreational vehicles became ingrained in the fabric of postwar American for a generation of baby boomers. With so many GMC MotorHomes still in the hands of the original owners, it's not



surprising to see current owners that are in the sixties, seventies, and in some instances, their eighties. GMC MotorHomes are often handed down to younger family members as heirlooms.

The GMC MotorHomes were conceived at a time when GM could marshal any of the resources necessary to build almost any transportation device it desired. While priced beyond the means of many, starting at \$15,000 on the road, this was the RV to aspire to own.

Today, almost 35 years after the last one was produced, the 1973 to 1978 GMC MotorHomes remain to this day the standard against which all others are measured. State-of-the-art at introduction, many

of its current owners believe that it has yet to be surpassed in terms of innovation and versatility. Most would not be seen behind the wheel of any other motorhome or RV.







***This 1977 GMC MotorHome is in almost 100% original condition except for normal wear-and-tear items like tires, hoses, and batteries. It features a roof-top storage compartment, a single overhead air conditioning unit, and is powered by the 1977-8-only Oldsmobile 403 V8.***



***Save for the installation of modern-style window shades, this GMC MotorHome looks as if it just rolled off the Pontiac, Michigan, assembly line. Unlike many GMC coaches with original, period-correct upholstery, the beige trim in this unit doesn't scream "1970s avocado."***



***This 1976 GMC Royale MotorHome is in almost 100% original condition and is the pride and joy of GMC enthusiast Glenn Gardner who has owned this exceptional coach for just two years. Glenn is contributing many of the photographs in this edition.***



***This coach retains all of its original interior components, including the shades. The orange upholstery appears virtually brand new on this coach that has covered just 40,000 miles from new. With its rear bathroom this GMC can easily sleep four in total comfort.***