

The history of FMCA

By Robbin Gould

Editor, Family Motor Coaching magazine

Do you remember 1963? Astronaut Gordon Cooper completed the United States' longest manned space flight by piloting his Mercury spacecraft 22 times around the Earth. Singers Peter, Paul, & Mary made the music charts with "Puff, The Magic Dragon," while Bobby Vinton crooned "Blue Velvet."

The sleek, trim Ford Thunderbird was attracting attention at auto dealerships. In movie theaters, crowds flocked to see *The Birds*, an Alfred Hitchcock thriller. It was a time of civil unrest, certainly, but also an era of family travel, emerging technology, and the-sky's-the-limit dreams.

A small number of families had discovered the fun of traveling in vehicles called "house cars." These vehicles attracted the attention of curious spectators they met at gas stations or along roadways. Most of these vehicles had originally served as school buses, transit buses, or intercity vans. After months and sometimes years of brainstorming, sweat, and plain old ingenuity by their owners, these vehicles were transformed into impressive homes on wheels. A few folks at the time were lucky enough to purchase vehicles already designed for life on the road.

Perhaps the story really begins in the spring of 1962, when Bill Christensen, F28, of Winona, Minnesota, wrote to 40 or 50 fellow house car owners and attempted to schedule a meeting to discuss forming an organization. Although he is said to have received favorable responses, no immediate action was taken.

In February 1963, Bob and Jean Richter, L1, house car owners from Hanson, Massachusetts, learned that a solar eclipse would take place on July 20 and be visible in Maine. The Richters decided that this event was a good enough reason to plan a party of sorts -- a gathering of their fellow coach owners to view the eclipse together. In April 1963, the Richters circulated a letter to 11 families, inviting them to attend the gathering and asking them to pass on the word to any other families who might be interested.

In the meantime, Ted Austin of Owosso, Michigan, and Dennis McGuire of Alma, Michigan, arranged a meeting of fellow coach owners in Corunna, Michigan. Held on June 2, 1963, it is believed to be the first meeting of any coach owners to take place in the United States, and families in attendance later formed the Michigan Knights of the Highway chapter. Shortly thereafter, the Richters learned of this informal meeting and invited these folks to Hinckley.

The resulting assemblage of 26 coach-owning families gathered on the grounds of the Hinckley School in Hinckley, Maine, on July 20, 1963. Indeed, these families viewed the eclipse and, in the course of that weekend, reached for the stars in other ways, too.

FMCA formed

During that weekend in Hinckley, the house car owners exchanged information, anecdotes, and technical tips about their vehicles. They also discussed at length the merits of forming some sort of club that centered around travel by house car. Wouldn't it be great to belong to an organization devoted to sharing information about these types of vehicles, one that also promoted friendships and fun activities?

Eighteen families at the Hinckley gathering decided to form a nonprofit association. An organizational committee was selected, with Bob Richter at the helm. On July 21, 1963, after several names were presented for consideration, "Family Motor Coach Association" was chosen as the official name of the group. This suggestion came from J. Raymond Fritz, L4, who would later become the association's second president.

A committee was appointed to draft a constitution for the new association. By December 15 of that year, the constitution had been written, circulated among the membership, and ratified.

As of January 27, 1964, a total of 233 charter members, one associate member, and five commercial members were listed on the membership roster of the Family Motor Coach Association. In an article published in the inaugural issue of Family Motor Coaching magazine in February 1964 it was noted, "A careful estimate of the average investment of each member of FMCA in their coach is \$9,450. Thus, the FMCA is currently composed of owners of coaches worth nearly \$2,000,000. The affairs of this organization are becoming serious business!"

Serious business, indeed

Like any fledgling club, FMCA's growth was slow and somewhat shaky in those early years. Charter members invested countless hours and considerable personal financial resources into getting the organization off the ground. Finances were slim. Charter members paid \$5 for dues. Each family was assigned a membership number and had the opportunity to purchase identification plates bearing this number. These oval-shaped plates -- which grew to be known as "goose eggs" -- featured raised silver letters on a black, crackle-finish background. A variation of those membership plates remains in use today.

Establishing chapters

It wasn't long before subgroups began to form within the membership. No doubt early members saw the advantages of being able to hold frequent gatherings, which could be held in close proximity to their hometowns. One weekend in September 1964, meetings held near Plymouth, Massachusetts, discussed the advantages of forming regional groups. It was decided that such groups could in many ways help to solidify and ensure the continuation of the national association.

Among the early regional groups to be formed were the aforementioned Michigan Knights of the Highway, the Midwest Coachmen, the Northeastern chapter, and the California chapter. Other early chapters included the Pioneers, the Twentieth Century Wagontainers, and the Badger Chapter.

As of June 1998, FMCA boasts 386 active chapters -- and counting.

Conventions always part of the mix

FMCA's first national "gathering" took place July 17, 18, and 19, 1964, on the grounds of Fort Ticonderoga in Ticonderoga, New York. A total of 106 member families attended this event, hailing from 20 states and the Canadian province of Quebec. In addition, representatives from Frank Motor Homes, Clark Equipment Co., Wolfe Coaches, Private Coach Corporation, Telaak Kustom Koach, and Boyertown Auto Body Works were on hand to display their company's products.

The inaugural gathering commenced with a demonstration of the Centaur folding motor scooter in the morning and a get-acquainted meeting in the afternoon. Attendees occupied the evening hours by socializing and viewing movies of the Adirondack, New York, region, presented by Howard Jennings, L26.

During the weekend, chartered buses transported FMCAers to Lake George for swimming. Informational sessions dotted the schedule as well, including a discussion of CB radio led by Charlie Owens, F44, and Ray Fritz's talk about layouts and fittings for converting coaches. A meeting for coach owners interested in parking near the New York World's Fair also took place.

At Saturday afternoon's annual meeting, attendees were filled in on the financial condition of FMCA. At the time, the association had a cash balance of \$343.16 in banks, \$87 in cash, \$852.74 in accounts receivable, and \$1,730.40 in accounts payable. After a lengthy discussion about annual dues, a motion was made to increase dues

to \$12 per year. On Saturday evening, FMCAers gathered to discuss the future of the motorhome industry. On Sunday morning, the national nominating committee reported nominations for FMCA officers and directors for 1965.

According to a story in the Fall 1964 issue of Family Motor Coaching, "Many of the families departed Sunday afternoon, and the grounds were left in good order on Monday noon; in policing the grounds, less than a shoebox of litter could be collected, where over five hundred people had congregated for three days!"

FMCA's early conventions incorporated many activities still featured today -- and some no longer scheduled. For instance, in July 1968, motor coaches flocked to Beech Bend Park in Bowling Green, Kentucky, for the association's fifth annual summer convention. During this gathering, a Volkswagen Bug auto was raffled off and won by Rose Annette and Bob Mason, F1712. Convention-goers also participated in canoe races, folding bicycle races, and a zany hat contest.

FMCA's first conventions were annual affairs, typically held each July. These gatherings grew steadily, topping 1,000 coaches at Essex Junction/Burlington, Vermont, at the ninth annual summer convention in July 1972. By 1976 conventions began to be held biannually; the first national winter gathering attracted 687 coaches in early March 1976 in Harlingen, Texas. For a two-year period -- 1989 and 1990 -- FMCA hosted three conventions each year.

In July 1977, FMCA's Syracuse, New York, convention boasted 2,169 coaches, topping the 2,000 mark for the first time. The 3,000 mark was first surpassed in March 1985, during an unseasonably cold March convention in Tucson, Arizona. All records were again shattered in Las Cruces, New Mexico, this past March, where the official count reached an incredible 7,258 coaches.

FMCA headquarters -- why Cincinnati?

Upon its inception, FMCA was headquartered at 645 E. Washington St. in Hanson, Massachusetts. This remained the association's home until March 1965, when Bob Richter found it necessary to give up responsibility for day-to-day operation of FMCA to focus attention on his own business. Hence, the office equipment, membership records, and production of FMC magazine were transferred to acting executive director Kenneth T. Scott, L63, in Cincinnati, Ohio. Ken and his wife, Dotty, were the "glue" that held the association together in those early years, operating FMCA from the family room of their home in eastern Cincinnati.

In June 1967 the national office moved to what was affectionately called the "ivy-covered cottage" on Beechmont Avenue, also in eastern Cincinnati. In an article published in the January 1988 issue of FMC, Ken Scott recalled that despite such a romantic name, the "cottage" did present some inconveniences. "Small rooms and cramped space that was broken up among several floors necessitated some unusual office practices," he wrote, "such as stuffing mailings on the screened-in porch, which proved to be a taxing operation during Ohio winters." The small staff managed to work around such obstacles, and FMCA occupied this space for several years.

In July 1970, FMCA headquarters moved to an office at 5200 Beechmont Ave. -- reported in the Autumn 1970 issue of FMC as "luxuriating in a large black top parking lot satisfactory in size for parking visiting coaches -- yes, even sporting plate glass windows."

By 1976 the association employed 15 full-time employees who attended to the needs of approximately 20,000 member families. FMCA's leaders determined that the association was now big enough to invest in property rather than continue to rent from others. Thus, the life member program was created to help raise the necessary funds for purchasing property. Thanks to the generosity of many FMCA members, who paid \$500 each toward achieving this goal, enough money was raised to acquire property at 8291 Clough Pike in eastern Cincinnati, which continues to house the national office today.

Acquisition of adjacent parcels of land in late 1986 and renovation of the existing building in subsequent years have helped FMCA's office staff to keep up with the work generated by an ever-expanding association. As of this writing, FMCA has 45 full-time employees and 12 part-time employees. The association also maintains a second office at 3590 Roundbottom Road in nearby Newtown, Ohio, which houses FMCA's mail forwarding department, as well as additional storage and meeting space, and campsites for visiting members.

And the growth continues. Membership records indicate that as of May 31, 1998, 111,257 families belonged to FMCA.

### The commercial connection

From the outset, FMCA was a family organization supported by motorhome-related companies. Although infinitely smaller than today's RV industry, a number of companies were already in business in those early days. Calling the industry a "baby giant" in the first issue of FMC magazine, Bob Richter listed 11 companies that were involved in motor coach production, as well as four custom conversion companies. Familiar names such as Blue Bird Body Company and Custom Coach Corporation were on that early list. How many readers also remember Krager Kustom Koach, Traveliner House Car, and The Roaminghome Company?

In January 1964 Crown Coach Corporation signed on as FMCA's first commercial member. The 1,000th company to do so was World of Recreation in June 1975. In September 1990 Quality Motor Coach became C5000; in August 1996, Sun Rocks RV Resort became C7000. As of May 30, 1998, 2,350 companies were active commercial members of FMCA.

Since the early years, FMCA commercial members have supported the association's conventions and rallies by exhibiting, sponsoring entertainment and coffee hour, providing door prizes (even a Foretravel coach in 1978), performing coach service, and donating the time of countless industry officials. They've also advertised in FMC magazine and provided discounts to FMCAers.

From the beginning, the need was felt among industry representatives to unite as a collective body for the betterment of both coach owners and companies. In January 1966, the first meeting of the Manufacturer's Advisory Board took place in Cincinnati. Later, company officials served on the Industry Advisory Board. Today, the FMCA Commercial Council continues to meet three times yearly.

### Family Motor Coaching magazine

Volume 1, Issue 1 of FMC magazine, dated February 15, 1964, was produced during a blustery Massachusetts winter by a small group of people largely unfamiliar with publishing. Those factors, plus a meager treasury at the time, seemed a formula for failure. However, Bob Richter recalled in a 1988 interview that shortly after the formation of FMCA, "it became a real necessity to get out a magazine to the members, although economically it was a crazy idea."

FMCA was blessed with dedicated people who generously donated their time and expertise. The first magazine was pasted up in Bob's cellar; typesetting took place 45 miles away; and camera work was completed in a third location. Dick Parece, F22, printed the magazine in his basement. The finished product was assembled at the home of Doc Whiting, F7, where volunteers gathered around a pool table to fold and collate the pages. Twenty-one hundred copies of Volume 1, Issue 1 were completed just seven months after the Hinckley gathering, and this first magazine contained 36 pages.

Initially FMC magazine was printed quarterly. In February 1971, it began to be published bimonthly, until January 1978, when it began new life as a monthly publication. Today the magazine averages approximately 288 pages a month.

## A monument to success

On July 4, 1994, 79 FMCA members traveled to Hinckley, Maine, for the dedication of a monument that had been built to commemorate the founding of FMCA. Appropriately, the monument is situated on the grounds of the Good Will-Hinckley School, the birthplace of FMCA.

The monument is constructed of India black granite. The goose egg portion measures 6 feet long, 4 1/2 feet high, and 20 inches thick and weighs 3 tons. The base is 7 feet 6 inches long, 1 foot high, and 20 inches thick. The inscription tells the story of that fateful meeting in July 1963 that resulted in the birth of the Family Motor Coach Association.

Dick Parece, who participated in this commemoration, noted in a September 1994 article in FMC, "Everyone (in attendance) was in agreement that this was the greatest day in FMCA history."

## FMCA today

Family Motor Coach Association has evolved from infancy into a sophisticated force in the RV industry. More than 86,000 active member families belong to the association.

Current members can take advantage of the broadest-ever range of benefits to aid them in their travels. FMC magazine is rated as the most popular member benefit in the last three readership surveys conducted for the association. Other popular benefits include a mail forwarding service, a roadside assistance program, discounted motorhome insurance, and an emergency medical assistance program.

In 1998 FMCA president Dottie Pierce, F57064, reflected on FMCA's 35th anniversary. "I'm so proud to be a part of this very special organization. We all owe a debt of gratitude to the many fine folks who created the Family Motor Coach Association, and to those who have continued to nurture it over the years. Those folks worked so hard to realize their dream of creating a national motorhome owners association, and every member now benefits from their foresight. Today FMCA's future is indeed bright."

Perhaps Bob Richter said it all when he dedicated the inaugural issue of Family Motor Coaching magazine to "those far-sighted people who can realize that here we begin a new era in American travel."

The era continues.