

## A GMC motorhome renovation

Acting on a long-held crush, an FMCA member restores a 1973 classic.

*Written by Todd Moning*

Daniel Prigmore says of his restored GMC Land Yacht: “I believe there are things that you can do really, really right that are very unique.”

He admired her when he was a young man but never asked her out. Over the years she blossomed and found many suitors.

Meanwhile, he flourished professionally as a Boston-based real estate counselor. Approaching retirement, he restored a 1930 96-foot motor yacht and cruised more than 30,000 miles. Oh, the adventures he had ... Seattle to Alaska ... Venezuela to the Canadian Maritimes ....

After six years of ocean voyages, he decided to look for a land vessel so he could explore the coasts and interior of the United States in more detail.

Searching the Internet for motorhomes for sale, he quickly discovered that the object of his unrequited admiration had maintained its allure, more than 35 years after he first laid eyes on her. Yes, the only motorhome that truly mattered to Daniel Prigmore was the one made by General Motors Corp.

“I’ve known about the GMCs since the 1970s,” said Prigmore, an FMCA member who is now retired and living in Coconut Grove, Fla. “They were always the most pleasing to my eye.”

With its low-profile design, angled windshield and tandem rear wheels, the sleek GMC motorhome had a distinct visual appeal. But this front-wheel-drive vehicle also was known for its maneuverability, comfortable ride and deceptive power. Models sold for \$35,000 to more than \$40,000 by 1978, the final year of production.

### The heart grows fonder

Prigmore still carried a torch for the GMC because it met all of his criteria for a motorhome: “It had to be small enough to fit in the campgrounds of the national parks,” he said. “Not too tall that it wouldn’t fit



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under the porte-cochere of every five-star hotel we went by. The interior and exterior had to be pleasing and yacht-grade quality. And it had to have performance.”

In 2007 Prigmore found just such a coach, a 1978 GMC Birchaven. He bought it for \$15,000, intending to do a massive restoration/renovation/conversion. “That coach was all original; in fact there was nothing wrong with it, so it seemed a shame to tear it apart. So I went and found another one.”

His new flame would be a 23-foot 1973 GMC Land Yacht that he bought from a private owner in Wisconsin, for about \$10,000.

The previous owner had removed the interior and had started body and mechanical work with the intention of doing a full restoration, Prigmore said. “Essentially his attention turned to other things, so he was no longer interested in finishing it.”

Like any successful relationship, the Prigmore-Land Yacht bond would require commitment — two years and half a million dollars, to be precise.

Restoring it was “a massive project,” Prigmore said. “I did all of the design work and specifications, and then found superb craftsmen to carry out my plans.”

Two teams worked on the Land Yacht -- a mechanical team and a finishing team. “My thinking was that it would get all of the performance upgrades that people have dreamed up over the years. Engineers loved the GMC. There have been more tweaks to these vehicles than imaginable.”



*The GMC Land Yacht's gutted interior prior to restoration*

### **Mechanical updrades**

Lee Harrison of IDEN Corp, Woodridge, Va., handled the mechanical side, Prigmore said. “He primarily builds aftermarket parts for GMCs. He’s been doing it for 25 years and he occasionally takes on a works project.”

Harrison rebuilt the Land Yacht’s 265-horsepower GM 455-cubic-inch V-8 engine. The engine was converted to fuel injection and returned as closely as possible to factory specifications.

Harrison rebuilt the three-speed automatic transmission and equipped the coach with dual air bags and four-wheel disc brakes. He upgraded the alternator, air conditioner and Dana air compressor and replaced wiring, brake lines, air lines, etc.

Additional upgrades: a 40-gallon fresh water tank, a 40-gallon waste water tank and two new aluminum 35-gallon fuel tanks.

## Finishing touches

The body work, interior work and exterior painting were completed by Fairhaven Shipyard in Fairhaven, Mass., which traditionally performs such work on yachts and commercial boats.

“I can tell you, Fairhaven Shipyard has never done a motorhome before,” Prigmore said. “But they had done a significant amount of work on my boats, so that’s how I knew the quality of their fiberglass work, their paint work and woodwork.”

All of the interior woodwork and cabinetry is custom made using foam core plywood and solid stock. The cabinets and paneling are cherry wood with 16 coats of varnish.

## Interior modifications

Prigmore, who is not married, said the Land Yacht is designed as the ultimate couples machine. “It’s not designed to carry four or six family members.”

The original GMC was offered in two models — a 23-footer and a 26-footer — and more than 30 floor plans. The design had no designated bedroom areas; all beds were converted from seating areas when needed.

Prigmore’s remodeled Land Yacht has a mid-coach dinette that converts to a bed, but the rear is essentially a queen bed.



*Custom cabinetry and woodwork give the Land Yacht interior a classy look.*

“The way this coach had been set up, the rear was a settee arrangement convertible to a bed. By the time you get done with all of the mechanisms of that, there isn’t a lot of space. But by going to a platform back there, I gain all the space under that platform.”

In that space he put in a 5.5-kilowatt Onan generator and a storage compartment that is accessible from outside the coach.

In the bathroom, he managed to fit in a full-size separate shower, “which was the real trick in a 23-footer, he said.

Besides the full-size shower, one of Prigmore’s favorite features is in the driver’s area. “We moved the passenger seat inboard and back, which allowed us to build a full navigation table in front of it.”

## ‘A 10-year adventure’

Prigmore has put approximately 6,000 shakedown miles on his Land Yacht, averaging 8 to 10 miles per gallon.

“I expect this to be a 10-year adventure that’s probably eight weeks a year. I’ll use the motorhome mostly in the spring and fall months.”

He won't be alone. FMCA has more than 20 GMC chapters composed of proud owners who continue to tinker with and enjoy this ageless classic.

Prigmore understands the GMC fervor, and why so many remodeled and well-equipped GMCs are still on the road.

"There is a lot of aftermarket support for the vehicle. Between Cinnabar and guys like Lee Harrison, and if you go through the RV clubs, you'll find many original parts and upgrades available. So it's not like owning an orphan."

Cinnabar Engineering, in Sandusky, Mich., manufactures and distributes original GMC Motorhome parts.

### 'Very unique'

The typical GMC Motorhome today costs \$15,000 to \$25,000 to buy. Nicely restored models, like Prigmore's, can cost much more. "There are some people who have put six figures and above into them, and there's not a good history on recovery of that," Prigmore said.



*The navigation table in the driver's area is a handy feature.*

"I had a 1930 motor yacht of some 96 feet and we put 34,000 man hours into the restoration of that boat," he continued. "But I recovered my capital when I sold it six years later. I believe there are things that you can do really, really right that are very unique.

"Whether I ever get any part of my money back out of my GMC, I won't know until I know. But if you look at what people spend for these ultra-luxury motorhomes, what I've put in to my GMC is comparable."

One thing's for sure: Daniel Prigmore will never be one of those people who lament over "the one that got away."



Story Source:

<http://www.fmca.com/index.php/join-family-motor-coach-association/stories/3016-a-gmc-motorhome-renovation>