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FAMILY MOTOR COACHING



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**THE CREATION OF A
LIBERTY
COACH**

**TESTING
WINNEBAGO'S
NEW
37-FOOTER**

Few people will ever accidentally find the five-bay, steel-sided building lodged on a dead-end street near the U.S. Navy's Great Lakes Training Center in a North Chicago industrial park. Fewer still would guess that this rather ordinary-looking 32,000-square-foot facility is the home of Liberty Coach, producer of some of the most prestigious, contemporary, and luxurious custom coach conversions in the world.

The plant's obscure location, however, is of little concern to the owners of this 17-year-old family-run business. You see, Frank and Jeanne Konigseder, 55 and 49, respectively, and their eldest son, Frank Jr., 24, never have depended on walk-in business for new custom bus conversion clients. Most of the Konigseders' clients find out about Liberty through word of mouth or by encountering the impressive, conservatively styled Prevost coaches on the road, at campgrounds, and — even more so — at the biannual international gatherings of the Family Motor Coach Association.

In fact, people who take the time to locate the Liberty facility, which is situated about 45 miles north of Chicago, ordinarily know exactly what they want. They have very particular tastes and ideas, and most of them already believe in Liberty Coach.

Typical Liberty clients already know that the Konigseders, to a great extent, have built their company's reputation on a firm conviction that coach designers/builders must be intimately involved in nearly every aspect of their product. These clients already know that Liberty's private coaches, which represent 95 percent of the firm's overall business, reflect the Konigseder family's deep understanding of the climates and situations that motor coachers encounter on the road. As lifelong motorhoming "cruisers" themselves, these North Chicago entrepreneurs have repeatedly broached those same situations in countless field tests.

It is a theme to which Frank X. Konigseder (Frank Jr.), repeatedly returned in a recent interview for *Family Motor Coaching* magazine. Since obtaining a mechanical engineering degree from Montana State University, Frank Jr. has served as Liberty's first vice president.

"We'll take a coach off-line, say if we're building one for spec, and we'll

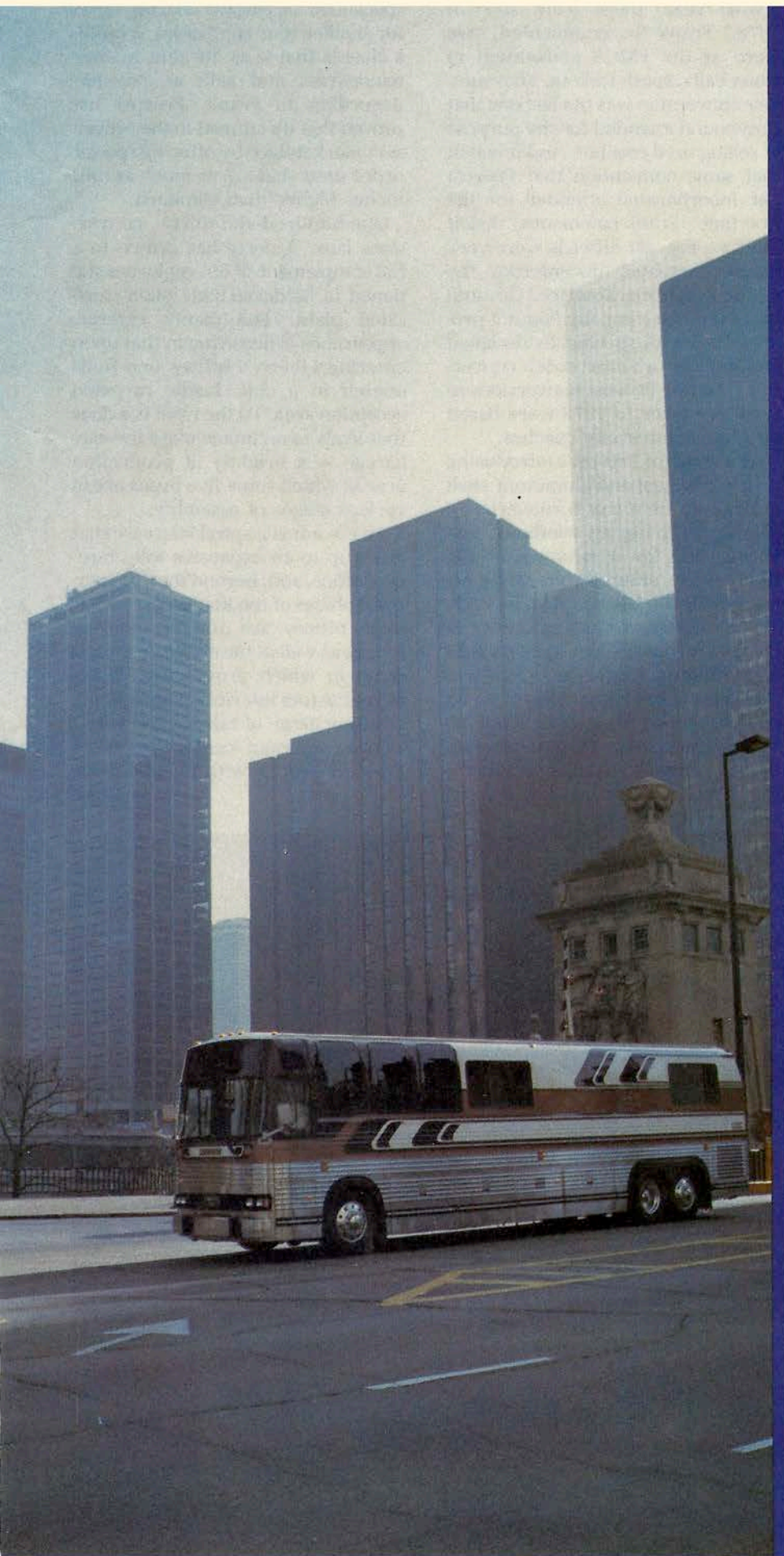
Liberty Coach Corporation:

The product of forward-thinking entrepreneurship

By SHERMAN GOLDENBERG



Photos by Hoffman Productions Ltd.



go snowmobiling or skiing in West Yellowstone, Montana. And it gets to 65 degrees below zero out there. We'll know if the coach is going to work or not; if it's going to freeze; if it's going to heat. And we go to Florida every year; we'll know if the coach is going to cool, if the air conditioning works. It's better that we find out about it than have the customer call up later to tell us about it."

Liberty was founded in the early 1970s as an outgrowth of the family's foundry and machine shop, F.K. Foundries Inc. The 50-year-old foundry, still located across the street from Liberty's main offices, was built by Frank L. Konigseder's (Frank Sr.'s) father. This background not only equipped Frank Sr. with the trade skills required to complete one-of-a-kind custom coaches, but as a supplier of repair parts for buses, it brought him into close contact with the Greyhound Corporation years ago.

In 1970 the Konigseders — having outgrown their Krager production-line Class A motorhome — obtained their first bus, a Greyhound. They had shopped for production coaches, but, invariably, weren't satisfied with what they found. Instinctively, they wanted to tailor each coach that they saw to their own tastes and needs — to alter bathrooms, etc. Yet, having these changes made always seemed to carry a \$2,000 "optional" price tag.

So, the Konigseders decided to build their own personal coach. They acquired a used 1958 Greyhound bus through a broker. That first unit — "Liberty 1" — was not a "shell," per se. With a price tag of \$12,000, the bus had about two million miles on it and was still equipped with transit bus seats and luggage racks.

"We actually began the conversion of that bus as do many do-it-yourselfers in their own backyards," recalls Frank Sr., adding that there really were only two custom converters (Custom Coach and Wakefield) in business at the time. In his garage and foundry Konigseder, a trained patternmaker, had access to all of the tools he needed. Electricians and plumbers at the family foundry provided additional expertise.

"Liberty 1" proved to be a sound first step for a family that was destined to become one of the nation's five leading bus converters. It was well built; in fact, it's still in use. The brokers who had sold Frank and

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Jeanne the coach were impressed with the results, and the Konigseders eventually won a contract to convert one coach each year for Greyhound's used bus program. Until 1978, Greyhound displayed the Liberty units at shows, in hopes of attracting individuals who were interested in buying used buses. That program was discontinued when Greyhound chose to market large fleets of used buses to charter outfits rather than to individuals.

In 1972 the Konigseders, who had formed a corporation called Liberty Coach, converted a 4501 Scenicruiser for Greyhound to promote sales of that model. Meanwhile, the fledgling converters had begun taking their Greyhound conversions to conventions hosted by FMCA, an organization in which they already were active family members.

Close links between FMCA and Liberty have been maintained ever since. Frank Sr. commented that FMCA gatherings were important events for the company in its early years, and still are.

Although Liberty currently converts at least 24 coaches each year, in its infancy the company produced only one or two units a year. There were four units in 1974. In 1978, a

pivotal year, there were six. "In 1978," Frank Sr. commented, "we were at the FMCA convention in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. That summer convention was the last one that Greyhound attended for the purpose of selling used coaches. And it was at that same convention that Prevost Car Incorporated attended for the first time." Frank commented that at the time Prevost officials were very much interested in entering the motor coach marketplace. Up until that time, the company had not produced a chassis specifically designed and built for a motor coach conversion; the few Prevost conversions in existence prior to 1978 were based on regular inner-city coaches.

As a result of Prevost's introducing a stainless-steel-and-aluminum shell exclusively for a coach converter — a shell with higher rooflines, less wiring, and fewer windows — the Konigseders entered into an agreement with the Quebec firm in 1978. The Konigseders' ongoing loyalty to Prevost, it appears, has equalled their long-standing allegiance to FMCA.

This is not to say that Liberty won't convert an MCI or Eagle shell, but the Konigseders prefer the Prevost with its six, high LeMirage windows. Frank Sr. said that because Prevost

specializes in elegant charter buses for smaller tour companies, it builds a chassis that is as durable, maintenance-free, and safe as possible. According to Frank, Prevost has proven that it's attuned to the conversion marketplace by offering special-order units that are as much as nine inches higher than standard.

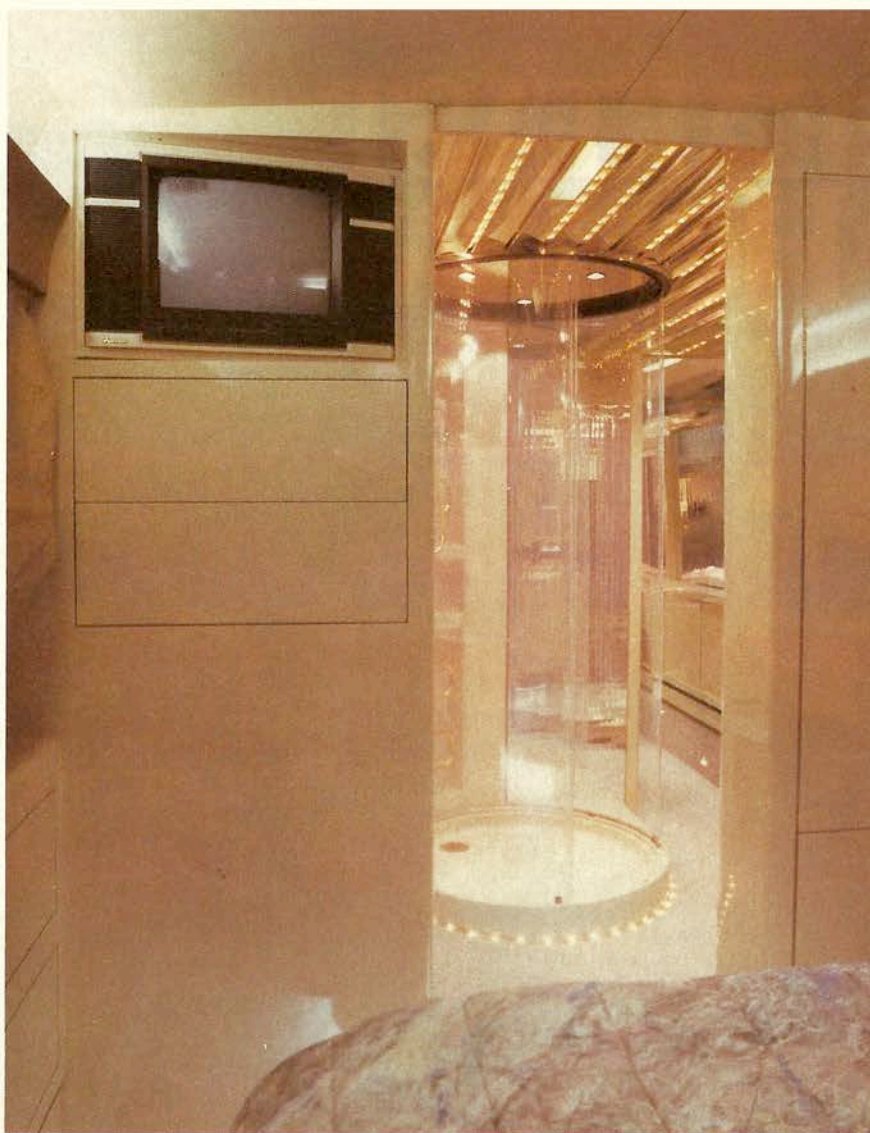
One-hundred-and-thirty conversions later, Liberty has grown to a full complement of 60 employees stationed in its deceptively plain steel-sided plant. The plant's exterior appearance is deceiving in that upon entering Liberty's offices one finds oneself in a chic, lushly carpeted reception area. To the right is a door that leads to an immaculate five-bay garage — a brightly lit production area in which some five buses are in various stages of assembly.

To the left is a spiral staircase that leads up to an expansive sales/business office, and, beyond that, the personal offices of the Konigseders. Near their offices are the engineering rooms, as well as the elaborate sample room in which prospective clients select custom interiors from a mind-boggling array of fabrics and trims.

In an adjacent conference room Frank Sr. spoke with me about the

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company that he and Jeanne have nurtured for 17 years. He mentioned that Liberty does convert corporate and entertainment units on occasion, through dealers in California and Texas. An entertainer's unit, such as those Liberty created for performers Sawyer Brown and Kenny Rogers, usually falls under the "crew coach" category. These units typically feature a rear lounge/bedroom for the lead entertainer, a centrally located area with as many as nine bunks for the rest of the group, and a large forward lounge with a considerable amount of seating but minimal rest room and cooking facilities.

Sawyer Brown, a "rockabilly" group, also ordered an elaborate array of audiovisual equipment for the lounge. As are other coaches converted for entertainment groups, Sawyer Brown's bus was built to withstand the ultimate in wear and tear. But, unlike most of Liberty's higher priced customized personal

coaches, Sawyer Brown's conversion cost only about \$300,000.

Liberty's corporate units boast a considerable amount of comfortable seating, as well as superlative climate control systems in order to foster the most ambient conditions possible for business meetings. Corporate units may seat 12 people but offer little in the way of sleeping accommodations. Liberty has also converted units designed to serve as product demonstration vehicles, which include seating for as many as 10, along with demonstration areas and a small living area for the driver/demonstrator.

However, as previously mentioned, private motor coaches constitute the bulk of Liberty's trade today. And in this arena, the Konigseders say, Liberty places a great emphasis upon "residential" styling and highly "organized" overall design. It's all a result, they say, of management's personal experience with motor coaching and its ability to communicate with those

involved in the assembly process — and vice versa. The majority of Liberty's assembly workers are trained on the premises, and, in order to ensure allegiance and quality, they are relatively well paid for their efforts.

Prospective coach conversion buyers — often professionals, business owners, or retirees — have come to recognize Liberty coaches for their basic, rather conservative exterior highlights. Paint schemes generally feature horizontal lines that emphasize the length of the coach.

Another Liberty trademark is its professional approach and attention to detail with regard to the engineering involved in every facet of the coach conversion process.

For instance, Liberty's hefty Universal marine generator is mounted on a slideout tray, which facilitates maintenance. In addition, the generator is supported by mini air bags, and its compartment is insulated in a way that renders the gen set one of the most vibration-free and noise-free auxiliary power systems on the market.

The same attention to detail applies to the wiring. The North Chicago firm uses standard marine wiring, in conjunction with a considerable number of breakers for safety reasons. "When you look at our wiring, how it's done, and you look at a panel — the way it's professionally done with 90-degree angles, the way wires are numbered, the way everything is laid out — you won't see another panel like that," commented Frank Sr.

Apply the same concept to the design of the exterior storage bays, which are organized with serviceability in mind.

"We don't take everything and spread it all over the lower compartments of the coach," said Frank Sr. "You've got a big coach with big luggage bays, and we leave as much space as possible by consolidating items. But, in doing so, we maintain the accessibility."

Yet another trademark — or tradition — at Liberty is the firm's unusual approach to warranties. While new units carry a one-year/unlimited mileage warranty, and Prevost's chassis warranty covers the coach for two years/200,000 miles, when a customer calls Liberty for help, the age of his or her vehicle really isn't impor-

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LIBERTY

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tant. The Konigseders have a habit of helping out long after warranty obligations have expired. They'll go to great lengths to locate a reputable repair facility for a harried bus owner on the road. And Liberty owners who frequent FMCA's annual conventions are probably well aware of the service that the firm performs at the shows.

"When we attend a convention," said Frank Sr., "we perform free service for our customers who desire it. We have been doing this since our inception. When we first started this, I would provide service after show hours. Frank Jr. would be involved in that. And as we got larger, we developed a system by which each department head attends the convention — whether it's the cabinet-makers, the plumbers, or the electricians — and performs free service on any coach, so that he (the department head) becomes totally aware of a problem in the manufacture of our coach.

"As I've said, if there's a coach that has a problem and it's five years old, we're going to take care of it. If it was a problem in manufacture, if a cabinet fails, we're going to take care of that — regardless. We're not going to turn around and say, 'I'm sorry. Your coach is five years old; we're not going to warrant it.' We're going to warrant it."

Liberty conversions today are available under either the "Signature" or "Limited" brand name. The "Signature" brand encompasses the company's completely customized private units, which sell for an average of \$360,000. However, the design possibilities are nearly endless with these units — they bear their owner's "signature" — so the price tag for a customized unit may far exceed this figure, as did a recently completed unit that was equipped with a \$167,000 chassis, marble tabletops, and a \$35,000 audio system. The unit carried a price tag of \$467,000.

The "Limited" brand name was introduced at FMCA's 1983 winter convention in San Antonio. It is a production model, and, accordingly, it is more economically priced, selling for a base price of \$275,000. When the unit was introduced, it was advertised for some time with a \$200,000 price tag. Since that time,

chassis costs have risen nearly \$50,000 and several popular items have been incorporated as standard features — thus the corresponding increase in the base price.

Some buyers opt for the standard Limited and add some higher-line componentry — linear ceilings, leather upholstery, or a baseboard water heating system. Such additions are

high-line, production-model Class A owners.

Built exclusively on Prevost's LeMirage chassis, the Limited is powered by a 450-horsepower Detroit Diesel 8V92 engine. It is offered in three floor plans: a center aisle/side bath model, a split bath model, and a side aisle/side bath model. Visible interior surfaces, including the



From left to right: Frank L. and Jeanne Konigseder and their son Frank X. Konigseder, Liberty's vice president.

permissible, so long as these options in no way alter the standard cabinetry or the floor plan established for this production model, as these areas are critical to the cost savings. The fundamental differences between the Limited and the Signature are minimal. However, one may find that the generator in the \$375,000 unit is a tad quieter than the version in the \$275,000 coach. The Limited's plumbing may consist of less expensive polybutylene rather than the rigid copper found in the Signature models.

"But the interiors and mechanical aspects of the Limited are super," said Frank Jr. The construction methods and the electrical system are the same in both brands. In fact, Frank Jr. noted that in both brands of Liberty coaches, the wiring comes off of the same spools, the cabinetry is built the same, and the same generator is installed. "The advantage is that when we build the cabinetry (for the production models), we cut four coaches at a time. And that's where the labor savings come in," he added.

The Konigseders view the Limited as a logical stepping-stone for many

radius-cornered overhead cabinets and the extra-wide (46-inch) dinette base, are fashioned of Formica for the most part. Several color choices are available, and buyers who contact Liberty before a production run generally enjoy a wider selection of interior appointments. Those who fail to speak up in time will be obliged to accept the coordinates — usually an array of "comfortable" earth tones — chosen by Liberty's interior design specialist, Jeanne Konigseder.

Jeanne works out the color schemes with the clients. "There is a certain grouping (of colors) that's included with the Limited line," she said. "If the client wants something better, no problem. But I've already told her ahead of time that she will have to pay a little bit more for wools and leathers. Most generally, they don't. Most people want something that's wearable. They don't want to become a slave to their coach. They want to enjoy it. They don't want to have to sit here and clean finished wood and do all those kinds of things."

As is true of the Signature, the Limited has been extensively "field tested" in Montana near the collegi-

ate home of the Konigseders' youngest son, 22-year-old Kurt.

A customized Signature, in turn, can involve most any adaptation imaginable, from an ultra-modern Formica driver's compartment to a round Plexiglas shower stall with heated towel racks and mirrored ceilings. Clients normally spend two to three days in North Chicago poring over design plans. Liberty employs computer-aided design (CAD) to assist the clients in floor planning. To a great extent, the design hinges on the larger options that the customer desires. For instance, owners can opt for a house-size washer and dryer, but their floor plan options will be diminished, as the coach will have to be designed to allow for servicing and removing those appliances.

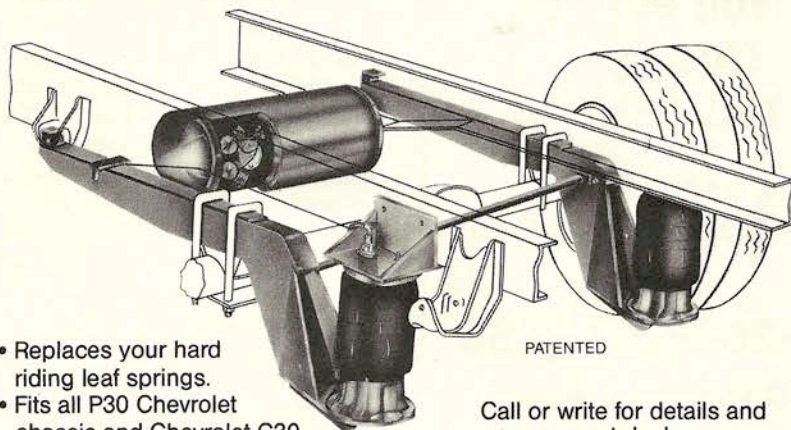
Although the CAD system is available, some design work — often based on blueprints of previously built models — is still performed by hand. Even so, the computer system clearly has been a boon for speeding up the floor planning process. "Recently some people came in from Switzerland," commented Frank Jr., whose responsibilities are divided between engineering and sales, "and they didn't have much time. They didn't have any idea what they wanted to do as far as a layout. We gave them the drawings and they came back and said, 'We want to take this drawing and add it to this drawing; we want to take features from this plan and add them to this plan.' Fine. We take it all to the computer room and give it to the computer operator, and she plays around with it — and they had it (their floor plan) in a day."

Aside from tile colors and wallpapers and ceiling styles, the buyer of a custom coach must select from the hundreds of fabric-and-trim alternatives that are exhibited around the large semicircular table in Jeanne's sample room. Interior themes may run the gamut from futuristic to traditional. Wood interior options range from oak to teak, from maple to pecan. As for draperies, carpeting, and upholstery, custom buyers may review any of the hundreds of swatches that Jeanne regularly obtains from the Merchandise Mart in Chicago.

"It can be a very fun thing," said Jeanne of the interior design process. "It really can, if — foremost in their minds — they know that this is going to be expensive. I mean, if you have

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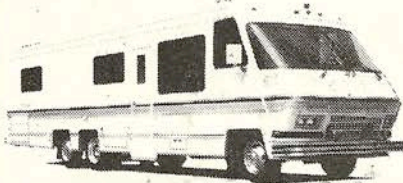
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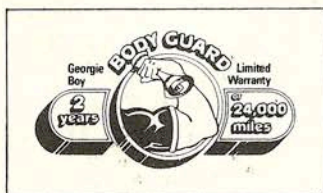
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LIBERTY

somebody in here who says, 'I'm only going to spend \$150,000,' I'm going to tell him right away that we can't even begin."

If a client selects a color that Jeanne considers unwise or outrageous, she'll say so, of course. But she'll readily arrange it, nonetheless, especially if the color will be incorporated in removable furnishings only. If a client wants to incorporate gaudy hues within a more permanent structure — in ceramic tiling or countertops, for instance — Jeanne will be more outspoken, pointing out that it may adversely affect resale value in the future.

And there's a personal interest as well; that foot-long Liberty nameplate that adorns each of the firm's conversions.

"You don't really want to see an ugly Liberty go down the street," said Jeanne. "I mean, there have been a couple that have gone out of here that I'm not too proud of. And some people have had trouble selling their coaches."

This doesn't mean that Jeanne won't take chances with interior design. She's always looking for something different — reviewing magazines and visiting new homes and offices to keep up with trends. This is the sort of outlook that led Liberty in 1982 to introduce the first all-contemporary coach, decorated in solid colors and shiny, high-lacquer finishes with European-style cabinetry. "We took away all of the traditional heavy, dark wood grains and used all plastics, chromes, Lucites, and all space-age materials," Jeanne recalls. "The remark, of course, was 'it will never fly.' But there were long lines of people at that (1982 FMCA) convention waiting to see that coach. It was three days I'll never forget."

The unit sold quickly.

That same innovativeness applies to the mechanical componentry, which is the primary responsibility of the two Konigseder men.

Consider: they've developed a system by which the voltage of backup batteries is electronically monitored, so that the generator automatically recharges the battery and then cycles off.

Consider: they've installed push-button-controlled astral ceiling windows in a coach so that the flush-mounted window covers are nearly

invisible when closed.

Consider: they've engineered a unique water boiler system that feeds into a zoned heating system with baseboard units throughout. Heat from the same source is channeled to the engine, water heater, lower compartments, and generator.

"We never look back to see what everybody else is doing," commented Frank Jr. "You're always looking forward, as far as doing something different."

For additional information contact: Liberty Coach Corporation, 1400 Morrow Ave., North Chicago, IL 60064; (312) 578-4600.

The Limited's Standard Features

Among the listed standard items on the Limited production model coach conversion (retailing for a base of approximately \$275,000) from Liberty Coach of North Chicago, Illinois, are the following:

- 3 14,000-Btu Cruise-Air air conditioners
- 3 propane furnaces
- 4 automotive heaters
- 50-gallon propane tank
- 12-kw Universal generator
- 60-amp converter/battery charger
- 3 deep-cycle 12-volt sealed batteries
- 1 generator starting battery
- AM/FM digital stereo cassette deck with six speakers
- CB radio
- Mitsubishi remote-control color TV
- 135-gallon aluminum fresh-water tank
- 125-gallon aluminum holding tank
- 20-gallon-capacity electric water heater/heat exchanger
- Bathroom vanity with molded marble top
- Travler or Raritan marine commode
- Roof-mounted air horns
- Air-operated step well cover
- Faucet in lower bay
- Formica-lined closets and cabinets
- NuTone food center
- Sharp space-saver micro/convection oven
- Ice maker
- Digital clock & thermometer
- Norcold three-way refrigerator
- Central vacuum system
- Leather driver's and copilot seats
- White Naugahyde ceiling
- Heated water compartment
- Fuel warmer on generator
- Carpeted lower compartments
- Halogen aft docking lights
- 14-inch-by-14-inch electric roof vent in bath