



## The MCI International Chapter Rally in Columbus, Ohio

Article and photos by Larry Plachno

The MCI International Chapter of FMCA held a rally in the Columbus, Ohio area following the FMCA convention in Bowling Green, Ohio in July. Here, the MCI conversion owners pause for a group photo in front of the new Creative Mobile Interiors facility in Grove City, Ohio on Monday, July 27. CMI moved into the building only a few months previously.

In spite of the fact that new conversion shell sales were down in late 2008 and early 2009, the summer of 2009 saw substantial converted coach and RV activity. Fuel prices were better than in the summer of 2008 and several campgrounds filled to capacity. The Family Motor Coach Association held their annual convention in Bowling Green, Ohio in the middle of July. While attendance was healthy with more than 3,000 units, it failed to set any new record. However, the FMCA convention did prompt a number of pre-event and post-event gatherings and rallies for converted coaches.

Members of the MCI International Chapter of Family Motor Coach Association are FMCA members who own MCI converted coaches. It was originally founded back in 1981 and usually schedules a post-event rally following the regular FMCA convention. Members took advantage of FMCA's Ohio location to plan their post-event rally in the Columbus, Ohio area – the birthplace of converted coaches.

While most of the attendees lived in the Midwest, a few came from as far away as Florida and Texas. Member coaches covered more than 30 years of MCI manufacturing. The oldest was a pristine MC-8 owned by Lowell and Betty Snyder, the chapter's president and secretary/treasurer. Other popular models included MC-9s, 102C3s, plus some newer "D" and "E" models. Randy Wilcox represented MCI and brought his wife, Sandy, and two other family members along. They arrived in a 102DL3 that they had driven from the MCI facility in Blackwood, New Jersey.

Rally activities were centered around the Cross Creek Camping Resort in Delaware, Ohio on the northeast side of Columbus. Located in a beautiful wooded area near Alum Creek State Park and Alum Creek Lake, the campground was praised for its location, cooperative staff and campground activities. They were able to park all of the MCI member coaches on the same row.

Since FMCA activities in Bowling Green ended on Thursday, the MCII Rally got

underway on Friday evening with a reception held near the coaches. Highlights included pizza and imported beer as well as goody bags from Nancy Plachno of NATIONAL BUS TRADER with chocolates, a scented candle and a small baseball bat.

Due to the rain, the Saturday morning coffee and doughnut gathering was moved to a nearby campground shelter. Fortunately, the rain stopped as the day of activities started. Mike Middaugh of Coach Quarters provided transportation in the form of converted MCI coaches with an executive interior.

Our first stop on Saturday morning was at the famous Franklin Park Conservatory on East Broad Street. This interesting combination of historical buildings more than a century old combined with modern structures houses more than 400 species of plants including 45 species of palms. Display areas represent a variety of global climate zones.

Two special exhibits caught the attention of the MCII group. The first was the

40th Annual Ikebana Exhibit – the art of Japanese flower arranging. Numerous examples of the art of ikebana were exhibited around the central hall of the conservatory. Not only was each example of ikebana unique, but each had its own charm, colors and personality.

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Franklin Park Conservatory is the only botanical garden in the world with a permanent Chihuly collection. Dale Chihuly is known around the world for his individually blown glass artworks. An impressive video showed how Chihuly and his staff use specialized equipment and techniques to produce dynamic and colorful glass creations. Thousands of individually blown Chihuly glass elements and collections were placed throughout the botanical garden and several attendees gave them more attention than the plants.

Boarding our bus from Coach Quarters, we drove to the Ohio Historical Society and Ohio Village near the fairgrounds. Time permitted a brief look at some of the exhibits, including an impressive dinosaur presentation, as well as the large gift shop.

Our lunch stop was at Panera Bread in the historical Grandview Heights area. The staff took orders from the group and made up the fresh sandwiches and salads in a matter of minutes. Some of our people took advantage of the stop to take a brief walk.

Again boarding our Coach Quarters bus, we drove just north of downtown Columbus on High Street. Our stop was at Camelot Cellars Winery, Ltd. This unique operation bills itself as a “full service boutique win-



This photo was taken in the Asian area of the Franklin Park Conservatory. That bright object in the center of the photo is not a plant but one of the Chihuly examples of glass art on display.

ery.” In addition to offering a tasting bar and several varieties of wines, Camelot Cellars offers the experience of being able to select, bottle and custom label your own batch of wine for personal use, weddings, parties, family reunions and other special events.

Due to the size of our group, the staff from Camelot Cellars split us into smaller groups for three different activities. One consisted of an information session and tasting of white wines. The second was a more elab-



Another example of Chihuly glass art was hung from the top of this glass dome in the Franklin Park Conservatory. This one included globes, swirls and numerous other glass objects.

orate session where we learned about red wines and their colors. This took place with a wine tasting with a few different examples of red wines. Perhaps the most interesting activity was being able to fill a bottle of wine yourself, cork it, and then put a label on the bottle. The Camelot people allowed us to take our personal bottle of wine home as a souvenir.

On Sunday morning we got started a little later to allow time for church. With the very kind and much appreciated cooperation of the Cross Creek Campground staff, we arranged for our MCII group to participate in the pancake and sausage breakfast offered by the campground.

Kirwan Elmers, co-founder of Custom Coach and pioneer in the converted coach industry, stopped by on Sunday to visit with us. Over the years his Custom Coach Corporation had converted hundreds of MCI coaches, as well as other brands, into motor homes. He brought along some photos of the original gathering of “house cars” as they were then called in July of 1963 at the school house in Hinkley, Maine to witness an eclipse of the sun. Eighteen families attending founded the Family Motor Coach Association.

MCII members gathered at a picnic table and on lawn chairs between the coaches for an official chapter meeting. Topics ranged from approving the minutes of the previous meeting to activities at the recent FMCA convention in Bowling Green as well as nominating new officers, seeking new members and planning future chapter activities.

The stop at Camelot Cellars proved to be both interesting and educational. Here, we had a hands-on experience filling bottles with white wine. We also learned a great deal about both white and red wines and had the opportunity to taste examples of each.





Randy Wilcox from MCI gives a presentation on MCI conversion shells at Cross Creek Camping Resort on Sunday, July 26. There were several questions from attendees including requests for details on the factory slide-outs available on the shell.

MCI hosted an excellent hot buffet lunch on Sunday at the Cross Creek Camping Resort. This event was held in the campground clubhouse located behind the office. The campground staff proved to be very friendly and accommodating.

Randy Wilcox from MCI provided information on the current MCI J4500 conversion shell and answered questions. Several options are available on new MCI conversion shells including a single front slide-out room and/or a single or double rear slide-out room to increase space in the front lounge and rear bedroom areas. He mentioned that the SmarTire® tire monitoring system is now standard equipment on conversion shells.

Following the business meeting, Motor Coach Industries (MCI) provided a catered buffet luncheon for members in the campground clubhouse. Included were chicken breast, old fashion pot roast with carrots and onions, pulled pork, potato salad, green beans, and buns. Different varieties of fresh pie were provided for dessert. There was more than enough food for second helpings for all those who were interested. During the luncheon, Wilcox provided MCI lit-

erature on conversion shells as well as green rubber buses and stuffed green cloth frogs to emphasize the fact that new MCI coaches use green technology to improve our environment.

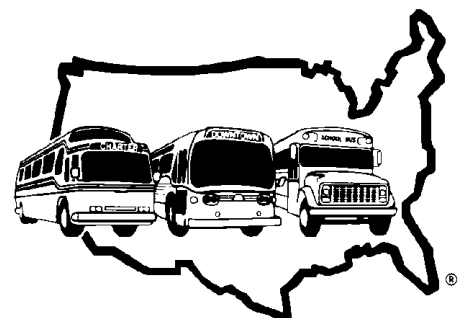
Later, on Sunday evening, we gathered near the coaches for an evening reception. In addition to some liquid refreshment, a light dinner of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and cole slaw was provided. Several

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Owen Connaughton, the founder of Creative Mobile Interiors, leads the MCI group on a guided tour of CMI's new facility in Grove City, Ohio. In addition to doing conversions on coaches, Sprinters and other vehicles, CMI also offers service, repairs and refurbishing.



An obvious highlight of the stop at the new CMI facility was an opportunity to inspect some of the consignment coaches in the back row. Some of the coaches had very low mileage and carried attractive price tags. Some of the MCI members showed some interest in the coaches.

members of the group continued talking about buses until well into the evening.

Monday morning activities started off with coffee and doughnuts between the coaches. Middaugh and Coach Quarters again provided a coach and transported the MCII group to Grove City at the opposite side of Columbus. Here, Owen Connaughton, the founder of Creative Mobile Interiors, provided a guided tour of their new facility.

Now celebrating its 10th anniversary, Creative Mobile Interiors moved into a brand new building in Grove City just a few months ago. The tour started at the reception area, went through the location where customers select wall and floor coverings as well as other surfaces, and then moved to the conference room with its one-way glass overlooking the shop. From here Connaughton led the MCII group through the general office, individual offices and break rooms to the huge production area in the rear. While the carpenter shop is in the center, one side of the building is dedicated to new coach conversions and upgrades while the other side of the building is used for service work, Sprinter conversions and major rebuilding.

Connaughton graciously opened up several used coaches in the back row that were on consignment for sale. Several of the converted coaches had attractive interiors and minimal mileage. Expectedly, many of the group took advantage of this opportunity to look at what was available. Many of the MCII members were obviously impressed with Creative Mobile Interiors since we saw that at least four members returned to CMI with their coaches on Tuesday morning to discuss retrofitting or a possible coach acquisition.

Connaughton and Creative Mobile Interiors provided a catered hot buffet lunch and

dessert for the MCII group. As you might guess, discussion turned to buses during the meal.

Leaving CMI, we headed back into Columbus for a stop at the Columbus Zoo, which was recently named the best zoo in the United States. The MCII members were given a few hours to wander around the rather extensive zoo and view the various animals and exhibits. Noteworthy was a train ride, a carousel dating from 1914, a large area with animals from Asia, and an impressive reptile and fish area including a manatee tank. Other areas of the zoo were dedicated to animals from North America, Africa and Australia. The adjacent water park for kids is called Zoombezi Bay.

The rally ended with the return to the campground from the Columbus Zoo. Some people disconnected their coaches and left on Monday night while others remained until Tuesday morning.

If you own a converted MCI coach and are a member of FMCA you are invited to join the MCII Chapter. Dues are only \$15 annually with a one-time initiation fee of \$25 for couples and \$15 for singles. Checks should be made out to the MCII Chapter and mailed to: Betty Snyder, Box 148, Emlenton, Pennsylvania 16373. For additional information, send an e-mail to [lbsnyder@embarqmail.com](mailto:lbsnyder@embarqmail.com) or visit the chapter Web site at [www.plachno.com/mci](http://www.plachno.com/mci). □

Recently named the best zoo in the United States, the Columbus Zoo offers a rather extensive collection of animals from several different areas of the world. The zoo also offers a water park and amusement rides. This flamingo exhibit was part of an extensive area with fish, reptiles and sea life.

