

Greyhound Buses Through the Years

Part I

As goes Greyhound, so goes the bus industry

by Larry Plachno

Photos courtesy of Don Coffin Collection



Frustrations in selling a new Hupmobile in 1914 led to its being used to transport passengers between Alice and Hibbing, Minnesota. This operation eventually grew to become Greyhound Lines. In later years, Greyhound would become a major influence in bus design and features.

The story behind Greyhound buses and their impact on the bus industry is so substantial that we had to divide it into two installments. This first section will cover the years from the founding of the Alice-Hibbing route in 1914 to the World War II era. Both Will Motors and Yellow Coach are major manufacturers included in this first section. A subsequent section will

start in the later 1940s and continue to the present day. It will primarily cover General Motors and Motor Coach Industries.

With the recent first deliveries of G4500 coaches to Greyhound, we are receiving questions from readers concerning Greyhound's impact on the bus industry. Is it true

that the bus picked by Greyhound becomes the most popular in the industry? Does Greyhound's selection of a make or model still significantly impact the industry? Has it always been this way?

It is obvious that scheduled service is no longer as important to the over-the-road bus



In the late 1920s, the Will bus manufacturing facility in Minneapolis, Minnesota, came under the control of the company that would become Greyhound. Note the "Will" name on the bumper of this 1928 Will model GY.



This 1916 Reo was operated by the company that became Greyhound. The young driver, Clifford E. Graves, later became president of Northwest Greyhound Lines which merged with Pacific Greyhound Lines.

industry as it once was. While Greyhound is no longer as large an operation as it once was, it has become the surviving coast-to-coast scheduled service bus company. Greyhound has had an enviable track record in picking bus makes and models through the years. Specific models operated by Greyhound may not have become popular with other intercity bus operators simply because they were unusual, or their purchase was limited to Greyhound companies, or they simply were too expensive for smaller companies. However, it is noteworthy that the make of bus picked by Greyhound soon became the industry favorite. Was this because other bus companies followed Greyhound's lead or simply because Greyhound was astute enough to pick the best supplier for their needs?

Equally interesting but less obvious is Greyhound's contributions to the advancement of bus technology through the years. The fact that American buses are regarded as the strongest and most durable on the face of the earth is in large part due to Greyhound's need for durability and reliability in scheduled service and their influence on manufacturers. On several occasions, Greyhound helped develop new models which significantly advanced bus technology. The new MCI G4500 is arguably Greyhound's most recent contribution to the state of the art. But it is only the latest in a long list of buses which date back more than three-quarters of a century.

The Early Years

Greyhound traces its history back to 1914 when difficulties in selling a new Hupmobile car caused it to be used to start a stage line between Hibbing and Alice, Minnesota. By 1918, the company had 18 vehicles in operation. Due primarily to an affiliation with a White truck dealer, the first buses purchased were Whites although some Reo, Dodge and Mack buses were also operated in the early years. However, as the company expanded

it began looking for buses more suited to its longer and hopefully faster routes.

Several Fageols were purchased in the next few years, particularly the popular Fageol Safety Coach. Surviving records indicate that more than half of the fleet was made up of Fageol buses by the mid-1920s. This was probably a wise decision since Fageol was one of the most prominent suppliers of over-the-road coaches at this time and was probably the most respected. In this case, the attention of the company that would become Greyhound was not a major influence since Fageol was already prominent in building buses while the bus operation was still relatively small and unknown.

Will Motor Company

Not long afterward, a holding company known as Motor Transit Management Company was created to consolidate intercity bus operations. A fortunate sale of Northland Transportation to the Great Northern Railroad gave the company money to purchase other operations. Presumably anticipating this future expansion, Motor Transit Management Company purchased Wilcox Trux in Minneapolis and moved the company to a larger facility.

Founded by H.E. Wilcox in Minneapolis in 1910, the company originally built both autos and trucks. By 1913, the company specialized in trucks under the Wilcox Trux name. The company became more active with bus chassis in 1916 and began delivering several to bus operators in Minneapolis and the Iron Range. Incorporated by H.E. Wilcox and Carl H. Will as Wilcox Trux in 1921, Will emerged as the owner in 1926 and sold to Motor Transit Management Company in 1927.

In the three-and-a-half years from mid-1927 to early 1931, the company built approximately 400 bus chassis initially using the name WMC and was later known as

Will. Most were equipped with Eckland or Lang bodies. Although most were sold to affiliates of Motor Transit, some new Will buses were sold to bus companies which were then not affiliated. Will buses were similar to Fageol in being conventional design with front engines and body-on-chassis construction.

Additional property was acquired in 1928 for expansion but Motor Transit management decided to get out of the bus building business and approached Mack, White and Yellow Coach to supply their bus needs. A long term agreement was made with Yellow Coach which purchased a 30 percent interest in Will in 1929. It appears that the facility eventually gave up building buses and instead concentrated on building Tropic-Aire heaters, which were installed in Motor Transit buses after 1926. This developed into Greyhound Motors and Supply Corp.

The Yellow Coach Years

Two major developments took place in 1930. The company name was changed to Greyhound, ostensibly because many of the bus operations being acquired already had the word Greyhound in their name. Also in 1930, Greyhound began buying buses from Yellow Coach which started a relationship that would last for decades.

John D. Hertz, who later made a name for himself in the auto rental business, got involved with the taxicab and livery business in 1909 and soon began building his own cabs. The resulting Yellow Cab Manufacturing Company expanded into building buses in 1923 as the Yellow Coach Manufacturing Company in Chicago.

Yellow Coach was immediately successful in building transit buses because of the simple expedient of obtaining the largest transit bus operators as customers. Major early orders went to Chicago Motor Coach, Fifth Avenue Coach in New York, People's

Motor Bus in St. Louis, Public Service in New Jersey and a 1924 order for Philadelphia. By 1926, Yellow Coach was the largest bus builder in the country with annual production of nearly 1,700 units, representing at least 30 percent of the market. General Motors wanted to expand into bus building and acquired a controlling interest in Yellow Coach from Hertz. In 1928, General Motors moved the Yellow Coach division from Chicago to what became its traditional home in Pontiac, Michigan.

The situation in the late 1920s was that Yellow Coach could already boast a major share of the transit bus market since it had several large transit customers. Yellow Coach wanted to achieve the same distinction in highway coaches and acquiring Greyhound's business was an obvious major stepping stone. Greyhound was well into a major expansion mode which would require more and more buses.

Oscar Schisgall, in his history of Greyhound, suggests that Yellow Coach captured Greyhound's bus business by the simple expedient of offering such a low price on new buses that Greyhound could not refuse. However, another part of the story is that Greyhound brought one of their recent Will buses to the Yellow Coach facility in Pontiac, Michigan. Yellow Coach used this coach as a model to develop their new Z-250 series model 376 for Greyhound. It was then produced in several other variations until early 1937. Some of the last variations were partially streamlined and a few of the last ones built from 1934 to 1936 were equipped with factory installed rest rooms. While Greyhound was the largest customer for the Z-250, it was also sold to other bus operators.

When Greyhound began buying Yellow Coach buses, Yellow Coach had approximately a third of the domestic bus market. While retaining their lion's share of the transit market, Yellow Coach began increasing



This photo shows the obvious connection between Will and Yellow Coach. The photo was taken on September 18, 1930 at the Yellow Coach plant in Pontiac, Michigan. The bus is a 1929 Will which was sent to Yellow Coach to serve as a model for Yellow Coach buses to be built for Greyhound. Note the unusual "backwards" running dogs on the letterboard.

their share of the highway coach market. Yellow Coach and GM dominance of the bus market increased substantially after World War II and came close to being 100 percent in the late 1950s.

Greyhound's first major contribution to revolutionizing bus construction came in the mid-1930s as a cooperative effort with Yellow Coach/General Motors. In about 1928, Dwight E. Austin developed the Pickwick Nite Coach in conjunction with Pickwick Stages. While the double decker sleeper bus was never successful from the standpoint of orders and production, it did pioneer integral design, a rear engine and an angle drive power train. Historical research suggests that Yellow Coach was trying to perfect the angle drive at this point

but Austin's patented angle drive was more workable.

Dwight Austin was hired by Yellow Coach in 1934 and immediately began work on new transit bus models with transverse engines and the "V" angle drive. Austin and his staff also worked with Greyhound to develop a new highway coach. This emerged in 1936 as the model 719 "Super Coach." When compared with the contemporary conventional highway buses, the 719 was revolutionary. Passengers sat on a raised deck and luggage was stowed in enclosed bays under the floor instead of being strapped to the roof. The rear-mounted transverse engine with V-drive permitted a flat front design with increased visibility and maneuverability.

During the early 1930s, Yellow Coach built buses for Greyhound which were based on the Will design. This 1930 model 376 operated for Eastern Greyhound Lines.



This 1934 Yellow coach model 788 showed an early attempt at streamlining with rounded corners. An extended roof rack for luggage was added later.





Built in 1935, the X-1 was one of three pilot models for the new 719 developed by Dwight Austin and Yellow Coach. It revolutionized intercity bus design with its flat front, enclosed underfloor luggage compartments and rear engine.



Introduced in 1936, the Yellow Coach model 719 "Super Coach" became the new flagship model of the Greyhound fleet and revolutionized the intercity bus industry. The following model 743 introduced air conditioning and the diesel engine.

In 1937, the model 719 was improved as the model 743 which introduced air conditioning and the diesel engine. Sales of the 719 and 743 were effectively limited to Greyhound and affiliates but they revolutionized highway bus construction in a very brief time. Yellow Coach as well as other manufacturers soon ceased production of the body-on-chassis conventional style buses and began providing integral flat front models, usually with underfloor luggage space. The transverse engine and V-drive lasted in GM highway buses as long as they remained in production, which was 1980. However, the flat front, integral construction, and rear engine are still typical on highway coaches today.

Greyhound was partially responsible for the smaller series of "Cruiserette" flat front buses introduced by Yellow Coach in the late

1930s. Flixible in Loudonville, Ohio had developed a smaller bus known as the Airway which was economical to operate and became popular with smaller operators. In 1937, it was redesigned with a flat front and in 1938 emerged as the first of the Clipper series with a straight in rear engine. The new Clipper was an immediate hit with the smaller operators and was purchased by larger operators, including Greyhound, for smaller routes.

Yellow Coach decided to compete in this market and introduced their "25" and "29" series coaches in the late 1930s. Greyhound purchased models PG2502, PG2503, PG2504, PD/G2901 and PG2902 in the 1939-1941 era for its smaller routes. Unlike the larger coaches, these were built without the "V" drive and with straight in engines to keep costs down.

Greyhound's cooperative effort with Yellow Coach late in the decade did again revolutionize the industry but its impact was delayed and somewhat mitigated by the intervening war.

By the later 1930s, the railroads were introducing diesel powered streamline trains with ribbed silver sides. In 1938, Greyhound approached Yellow Coach with the idea of putting silversiding on coaches to make them look modern and swift. Yellow Coach invested a great deal of effort into this new idea which eventually led to the development of what came to be called the Silversides models.

Yellow Coach started in 1938 with a full size mock up of a 33-foot coach which could seat 37 passengers. It sported both fluted aluminum sides as well as Greyhound's tra-

The small Clipper, introduced by Flixible in the late 1930s, became so successful that Yellow Coach decided to enter this same market. Greyhound subsequently purchased the Yellow Coach "24" and "29" series coaches for routes with less patronage. Shown are three 1940 Yellow Coach model PG2502 coaches which were delivered to Canadian Greyhound Lines and operated by Central Greyhound Lines.



ditional "running dog" logo. A year later, in 1939, Yellow Coach built a real prototype

which became the one and only model 1206 produced. Painted in Greyhound colors, the

Patterned after the new silver-clad streamlined trains of that era, the Silversides design was the last pre-war design developed by Greyhound and Yellow Coach. Shown is a 1941 model PDG4101 which was delivered to Pacific Greyhound Lines. More than 500 pre-war Silversides were built before production ceased because of the war effort.



sole 1206 was put on display at the New York World's Fair appropriately replacing a 1939 743. The 743 was later delivered to New England Greyhound Lines.

All of this work led to the production of four Silversides models in 1940 and 1941. The models PGG3701 and PDG3701 (gas and diesel) continued the 33-foot length of the 1206. In fact, the first production PGG3701 would replace the 1206 on display before the World's Fair ended. Slightly longer at 35 feet were models PGG4101 and PDG4101. Including the prototype, a total of 588 of these pre-war Silversides coaches were built before production of these models ceased because of the war effort.

While the initial impact of the Silversides design was cut short because of the war, the silversides concept became an industry standard for years. From the late 1940s until the arrival of European coaches in the mid-1980s, most highway coaches sold in the U.S. and Canada (and many in Europe) had silversiding of one form or another. Even today, six decades later, there are still models with silversiding as standard equipment and others where it remains an option.

The second and final section of this article will appear in a subsequent issue. It will start in the 1940s and continue to the present day. Coverage will be primarily concentrated on General Motors and Motor Coach Industries. □

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