

Venture Tours from Virginia

by Larry Plachno

Photos courtesy of Venture Tours and
ABC Companies

A major milestone for Venture Tours came in September of 2008 with the delivery of their two new Van Hool double-deck TD925 coaches. Jimmy Hall and his family went to ABC Companies in Winter Garden, Florida to accept delivery of the two coaches. In the back is Claude Payne of ABC, Jimmy Hall and his wife, Allie, and their three children.



In addition to being one of the more respected members of the bus industry, Venture Tours has an interesting history. The company was founded by a mother and son partnership with prior experience in a family bus business. Over the years it has operated a very wide range of equipment and eventually acquired the original family bus garage that got them started. Today, the company is one of the first to operate the new Van Hool TD925 double-deck coaches.

Early Gallop Years

Jimmy Hall and his mother, Darlene Hooks (born Darlene Gallop), learned the bus business working for Gallop Bus Lines. Owned by Jimmy's grandfather, Ray Gallop, the company was headquartered at 600 S. Military Highway in Virginia Beach, Vir-

ginia. In the early 1990s, the company operated a fleet of nearly 50 coaches with the majority MCI but a few Prevosts, Eagles, and older GMs. Jimmy and Darlene expected to make a career of the bus business and eventually move into management and ownership of the company.

In his younger years, Jimmy remembers helping his grandfather make runs to bring out clean coaches full of fuel and drive back the previously-assigned coach to the garage. Jimmy would pick up the trash and clean the coaches while his grandfather drove. His summer months were spent in the yard, cleaning and fueling coaches. The story is told that the regular drivers would occasionally get coaches stuck in the muddy yard. When that happened, young Jimmy would be sent over to get the buses unstuck.

The untimely death of Jimmy's uncle in late 1987 resulted in a request for him to join Gallop Bus Lines on a full-time basis even though he was only 19 years old at that time. Jimmy took over the bus garage and the 48-coach fleet in spite of his age and worked along with the regular staff and put in more hours. Jimmy relates that the shop staff were very friendly and helpful. During the following nine years, Jimmy wore many hats for Gallop Bus Lines including dispatching, buying new buses, selling used buses and ordering parts.

Jimmy met his future wife, Allie, when working for Gallop. They were married in September of 1997 and now have two boys and a girl. As the kids have gotten older, Allie has become more involved in the business and office in recent years. The youngsters are already getting involved in the busi-

ness by helping to clean buses and do other odd jobs around the garage.

Founding of Hall Bus Lines

In addition to working for Gallop Bus Lines, by 1993 Jimmy was also involved with buying and selling coaches. He acquired a 1979 MC-9 from MCI in Blackwood, New Jersey and upgraded the coach with a new interior and video system. Pending a sale to a new owner, the coach was leased to Gallop Bus Lines when the 8V-71 engine blew.

Due to the cost of repairing the engine, Jimmy elected to charter this coach instead of selling it. This resulted in the founding of Hall Bus Lines. Equipment was parked at the Tour Time America/Martz lot in Chesapeake, Virginia while Darlene's home in Virginia Beach served as the company office. The fleet doubled in 1995 when Jimmy acquired a 1979 Prevost LeMirage from Four City Tours in Hampton, Virginia.

The illness of Jimmy's grandfather in 1995 and his subsequent death substantially changed the ownership and management situation at Gallop Bus Lines. Jimmy and Darlene found that the opportunity for upward movement to management and ownership of the company had substantially diminished. Jimmy elected to resign from Gallop Bus Lines and invest his time in his own little bus company.

In 1996, Jimmy concentrated on building up the fleet of Hall Bus Lines. In January of that year he purchased a 1979 ex-Greyhound MC-9 from Dave Paquette at ABC. Shortly after that, Jimmy made a major step forward by purchasing a 1992 Prevost H3-40 from Dave. This put Hall Bus Lines into a different league with a newer and more modern



The acquisition of a 1979 Prevost in 1995 doubled the size of the original fleet. Originally painted blue, this photo of the coach shows it in later years painted in the standard Venture Tours colors. Shortly after adding this coach to the fleet, Jimmy and his mother changed the company name to Venture Tours.

coach. In May of that year, Darlene joined her son full time in the business and in the summer months they incorporated and changed their name to Venture Tours. By the end of 1996, the company was operating nine coaches.

Move to a Larger Garage

All of this expansion required that the company seek better and more permanent facilities. Venture's first terminal was one bay leased in a garage in Chesapeake, Virginia – a facility that had also been leased by Jimmy's grandfather in the 1970s. A small

office was rented nearby with space for two desks and a few filing cabinets.

In 1998, Venture Tours moved to a larger facility that could hold two to four coaches, provided their own fuel tank, and also had office space. It was interesting that the address of this facility was 1212 Gallop Avenue, spelled just like the name of Jimmy's grandfather. Venture remained at this location for seven years and grew to a fleet of 23 coaches.

Venture Tours operated some interesting and diverse equipment in the 1990s as the company expanded. In 1996, its first year as Venture Tours, the company operated two 1979 MC-9 coaches, four Prevost LeMirages ranging in age from 1979 to 1983, one 1992 Prevost H3-40 and also leased a 1977 MC-8 from John Oakman at National Coach Works.

In 1997, the company expanded its fleet to 10 coaches and again made a major move forward. A 1978 MC-8 and a 1985 96A3 were acquired. However, the most interesting new acquisition was a 1989 Prevost articulated H5-60 that came from Hampton Jitney. With a seating capacity of 72, the articulated not only offered 16 more seats than the competition but presented a more modern appearance than some of the older coaches.

1998 might be called a watershed year for Venture Tours. The company purchased two brand new 1998 H3-45 Prevosts, the first new coaches for Venture Tours. Venture Tours also made a major move forward with a new contract. Other additions to the fleet in 1998 included two Prevost LeMirages, two 102A3 coaches built in 1985 and two 102C3 coaches. The MCI coaches came with 43-passenger interiors plus carpeted floors and the 102A3

The original coach that got Jimmy Hall into the bus business was this 1979 MC-9. Purchased from MCI in Blackwood, New Jersey, the coach was originally painted in the colors of Gallop Bus Lines as shown here. In later years, the coach was repainted and the name changed to Venture Tours.





The acquisition of a fairly modern 1992 Prevost H3-40 in 1996 was a major step for Venture Tours. With this coach, Venture Tours took a step forward into more upscale charters. This photo of the coach was taken at the Norfolk Naval Base adjacent to Chesapeake Bay.



This 1998 photo of a Prevost H5-60 articulated coach was taken at Fort Story in Virginia Beach with the Old Cape Henry Light House and the newer Cape Henry Light House in the background. Venture purchased their first Prevost articulated in 1997 and then added more units in following years. They were very useful on trips where their large capacity allowed them to replace two conventional coaches.

coaches looked brand new. Jimmy invested in satellite TV for both of the 102A3 coaches.

Due to the extra leg room and satellite TV on the 102A3 coaches, Venture offered them to the sports teams at Old Dominion University. Venture got the contract while the university saved money on their transportation. Passengers liked the additional leg room and the ability to watch satellite TV while driving down the road.

Venture Tours ended the century by adding five more Prevosts to its fleet in 1999. Two were nearly new 1997 H3-45 coaches. They were followed by a 1987 Le Mirage and a 1993 H3-40 that came from an MCI year-end blow out sale. The final fleet acquisition of the old century was a 1990 H3-40 that came from an operator in Charleston, South Carolina. As the century ended, the Venture Tours fleet now amounted to 23 coaches.

Dealing With 9-11 And The Economy

2000 was a fairly quiet year for Venture Tours from the standpoint of equipment. The only activity was the sale of one coach. However, 2001 saw substantially more equipment activity plus expansion into two new markets.

Early 2001 saw the addition of another H5-60 articulated plus a brand new 2001 H3-45 with a wheelchair lift. The purchase of the wheelchair lift turned out to be very productive since it opened the door to new business. In addition, a 1988 MCI 102C3 was purchased from an auction in Pennsylvania.

A step in the right direction was the purchase of a 1997 Prevost entertainer coach. It could convert to sleep 25 people at night and seat up to 26 for daytime travel. It was equipped with two large TVs with satellite plus a microwave oven and refrigerator. The coach was originally purchased with the

intention of using it for teams and it was kept very busy.

Venture Tours decided to sell six older coaches during the summer of 2001. This ended up being a good move because there were several cancellations following the September 11 tragedy. On the other hand, business picked up with sports teams because they became nervous to fly and the sleeper coach became constantly busy. As a result, one of the H5-60 articulated coaches was traded in on another 25-passenger sleeper coach in December of 2001. The two sleeper coaches were transporting teams as far as 600 miles or six to eight hours away for games.

Expansion With Groome Transportation

2002 saw more expansion into other markets as Venture Tours acquired the business of another company. Three repo coaches were acquired from US Bank and driven

Venture Tours has had a great deal of success with sleeper coaches with Vulcan Coach SuperCoach interiors. Shown here is a photo of Venture's second 1998 25-passenger sleeper coach. The shell is a Prevost LeMirage.



This photo shows a current line-up of coaches parked in the back yard at 600 S. Military Highway. The modern fleet and its large size is substantially different than the small bus company when Venture was founded.





Among the more interesting coaches in the Venture Tours fleet were some 1985 102A3 coaches and some 1990 102C3 coaches with fewer seats and more legroom. They were initially used on trips for sports teams.

back from California. Included were two 1992 and one 1990 H3-40 coaches. However, the real activity came in the fall of 2002 when Groome Transportation in Norfolk, Virginia closed down. Venture Tours made arrangements to purchase their equipment and take over over their existing contracts and charters as well as their phone lines.

Included in the transaction were a 15-passenger 1999 Ford 350 diesel, a 1986 Boyertown trolley, and a 1995 Metrotrans 24-passenger Ford diesel minibus. This expansion made Venture Tours more versatile in being able to offer a wide range of vehicles for charter ranging in capacity from 15 to 72 passengers, plus the sleeper coaches and a trolley.

Two coaches were acquired from Easters' Bus Sales in Bassett, Virginia in 2003. One was a 1997 H3-45 on which a 1985 102A3 43-passenger coach was traded. The second was a 1995 H3-45 that was a repo from a Miami operator. The big equipment change in 2003 was the sale of the last two H5-60 articulateds. It was getting harder to find qualified drivers for the articulateds and the increasing price of fuel made them expensive to operate. They were traded to Colonial Coach in Chicago for a pair of 1988 102C3 coaches. Also added to the fleet was a 2000 Ford diesel minibus that was a repo from US Bank in 2003.

Danny Langemeier joined Venture Tours in 2003 and became the head mechanic. Formerly with a Detroit Diesel company, Danny was responsible for improving maintenance and keeping drivers happy. Jimmy credits his hiring as one of the best decisions the company has made.

As far as equipment goes, both of the 102C3 coaches acquired in 2003 were sold in 2004. The 1984 Le Mirage XL was sold to a local bus company, Agape, and one of the 1985 102A3 43-passenger coaches was traded to Colvins for a 1993 102DL3 with a wheelchair lift. The rear of the coach had a large wheelchair-accessible restroom. In addition, a 1995 H3-41 was purchased from MCI. 2004 also turned out to be a bad year when two sleeper coaches headed north to New York City were close to Selma and one had a right front tire blow out. The driver lost control and the coach ran into an underpass and was totaled.



Shown here is the interior of one of the special 1990 102C3 coaches. With only 43 seats, these coaches offered additional legroom as well as a carpeted floor and enclosed parcel racks making a plush interior.

Replacing the sleeper coach took a great deal of effort. A 1997 H3-45 was purchased from Canadian Coach Sales. Originally a repo'd seated coach, Canadian Coach Sales had raised the roof, blocked off some windows, and updated the exterior. It was brought to Bruce Basden at Vulcan Coach where a new SuperCoach interior was installed.

Moving to the Old Gallop Facility

By 2005, the old facility and office had served for seven years and was increasingly inadequate. Jimmy and Darlene were look-

Three different buses in the current fleet, from left to right: One of the two new Van Hool TD925 double-deck coaches. A 2009 Prevost with the Volvo engine and Allison transmission with a special interior for transporting sports teams. One of the two MC-8 coaches modified with a trolley appearance.



ing at building a new facility on five acres in Chesapeake, Virginia when Albert Helou offered to sell the old Gallop Bus Lines property. Helou had purchased Gallop Bus Lines in 2001 and had renamed the company Atlantic Coach. In 2005, Venture Tours acquired the former Gallop Bus Lines garage at 600 S. Military Highway in Virginia Beach. Atlantic Coach leased back a portion of the building and continued to operate for two more years. This was a homecoming for Jimmy and Darlene who had learned the bus business at that location.

Equipment activity in 2005 included the purchase of an H3-41 from MCI in Texas and the sale of two 102C3 coaches built in 1990, the last with 43-passenger interiors. In addition, a 1994 H3-45 was converted to special wide two-and-one seating with a passenger capacity of 31. In basketball season, four original seat pairs were installed to give the coach a capacity of 36. It became popular with college teams and to some extent replaced the 43-passenger coach. The other 25-sleeper Prevost was then sold to Green River Lines in Illinois. Perhaps the biggest event in 2005 was the acquisition of the first Van Hool by Venture Tours. This new coach had both a wheelchair lift and a Caterpillar engine.

2006 was a tough year for Jimmy Hall and Venture Tours. The stress of the 2004 accident and the acquisition of the Gallop property in 2005 took its toll. Jimmy suffered from ill health for a few months but a correct diagnosis by a doctor and some medication brought things back to normal. A highlight of 2006 was adding Jessica Knapp to the staff. Originally involved in quoting charter rates and dispatching, Jessica now



This 2009 Prevost H3-45 was originally delivered with a standard seating capacity of 56 passengers. In November of 2008, it was outfitted with 30 wide leather seats with six regular seats remaining in the rear. From November to March, the coach will be configured to seat 36 passengers for sports teams. From April to October, the coach will be used with a 56-passenger configuration for the busy charter season.

wears several hats. Two coaches were purchased from Talmage Lewis in 2006. Both were 1999 56-passenger H3-45 coaches.

Moving Ahead With Van Hool Double-deck Coaches

Venture Tours had several fleet improvements in 2007. The most interesting development came early in the year at the UMA Motorcoach Expo in New Orleans. Here,

Jimmy and his wife, Allie, placed an order for two Van Hool TD925 double-deck coaches. This was done on the show floor with their sales representative, Claude Payne, and ABC Vice President John Oakman. In 2007, the company sold four of its H3-40 coaches including the 1992 model acquired in 1996, the first year of Venture Tours.

Acquired from Bieber Tourways in Kutztown, Pennsylvania was a 1999 H3-45 with two-and-one seating. This was one of the executive coaches originally built for Anderson Tours. It already had satellite TV, and Venture Tours added wireless Internet. Venture also removed the rear galley and installed regular coach seats in the rear, thus increasing capacity and making another 36-passenger coach.

The body-on-chassis trolleys in the fleet were replaced in 2007 by two unique coach-type trolleys acquired from Ambassadors in Nova Scotia. They were modified from MC-8 coaches dating from 1975 and 1976. In addition to being more durable than a body-on-chassis bus, these coaches seat 47 passengers in upholstered bus seats, have fold-down 15-inch monitors with DVD-Radio-CD player, and have restrooms.

In October of 2007, Venture Tours purchased an E4500 MCI shell with a Caterpillar engine and B500 transmission from MCI sales. This coach was sent to Amadas Coach in Moneta, Virginia to be converted into a 56-passenger coach but with special additional touches. The coach ended up with custom built, laminated parcel racks and restroom, leather Amaya seats with wing tip headrests, special window treatment, and 15-inch monitors with a DVD player. Allie

Jimmy Hall told ABC salesman Claude Payne that he would purchase a new Van Hool when they made a U.S. double-deck coach available. Jimmy purchased two coaches when ABC Companies announced the availability of the new Americanized Van Hool TD925 double-deck model. Shown is a pre-delivery photo of one of the coaches at the ABC facility in Winter Garden, Florida.



worked closely with Amadas in selecting the interior options and earth tone color scheme. At that same time, one of the 1994 H3-45 coaches with two-and-one seating was also sent to Amadas to receive laminated parcel racks and other upgrades.

Venture Tours was active in early 2008 because the 2008 ABA convention was held in Virginia Beach. The company was one of the operators selected to supply motorcoach service for the convention. Shortly after that, Venture purchased its first 35-foot coach, a used F3500 acquired from Fun Tours. The reasons for adding a 35-foot coach to the fleet included better fuel mileage and an increasing number of customers with smaller groups. It turned out to be the right decision because the F3500 stayed busy in the fall in spite of the downturn in the economy.

In September, Venture took delivery of a new Prevost H3-45 with the Volvo engine. Although originally delivered with 56 seats, Venture purchased a set of two-and-one seats for the coach. Plans are to convert the interior to two-and-one seats during the winter athletic season for transporting teams. Then, in the spring, it will be returned to its 56-passenger capacity for the heavy summer charter business.

September of 2008 was a special time for Venture Tours because the two new Van Hool TD925 double-deck coaches arrived. Jimmy remembers telling Claude Payne years ago that he would buy a Van Hool coach when they made a U.S. double-deck coach available. When Van Hool offered the Americanized TD925, Jimmy and his wife Allie were among the first to buy.

Both coaches seat 81 passengers and have seat belts on all seats. Jimmy says that the double-deck coaches are very helpful for some clients because it eliminates the need to charter a second coach when the group has more than 56 passengers but not more than 81. The double-deck coaches have already been used on the only tour offered by Venture, a weekly run to Atlantic City. The advantage of the double-deck coaches is that they can handle what would normally be an overflow crowd for a conventional coach without requiring a second coach and driver.

The current Venture facility is located on Military Highway. It sits on just more than two acres of land. There are more than 20,000 square feet in the building that includes a service pit, an automated bus washer, and three bays for repairs and service. There is also a bus lift that can lift all of the coaches so that service personnel can stand underneath. Parts inventory is substantial, and includes a spare transmission. There is also a 60-foot paint booth and four more bays rented from a local body shop.

A portion of the building includes six offices, a kitchen and conference room. The dispatch office



Venture Tours has had great success with the Van Hool double-deck coaches. Like the earlier articulated coaches, their extra capacity can make the difference between operating one or two coaches for some groups. Taken by Venture driver Dennis McGhee, this photo shows one of the double-deck coaches on a trip to a ski resort in Snowshoe, West Virginia.

has 60 lockers and a desk for drivers to do paperwork. In 2008, Venture hired its first full time dispatcher, Sebastian Scott. He has more than 30 years experience as a bus driver and also has experience as a mechanic for a truck company. Venture rents office space and parking to American Tours that is owned by DC Trails of Lorton, Virginia.

Jimmy mentions that they have already made some improvements on the building. In 2005, Venture downsized to 18 coaches to gain better control of the business. Today, the fleet is back up to 23 coaches and Jimmy says that he has a very positive feeling about the future in the charter bus business. □

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