

Back to the Futurliners

by Larry Plachno



The Futurliners built by General Motors are technically not buses and never carried commercial passengers. However, they had a great deal in common with GM buses built just prior to World War II and are an important part of the GM heritage. This example was restored by Peter Pan Bus Lines and was recently photographed in Springfield, Massachusetts. PETER PAN.

Conceived by Charles F. Kettering at the Chicago World's Fair of 1933, the Parade of Progress went on to become an important part of the history and heritage of General Motors. While the supporting Futurliners never carried commercial passengers, they were, arguably, stepsisters to the original GM Silversides and noteworthy emissaries for General Motors during two decades. One Futurliner survives today in the fleet of Peter Pan Bus Lines of Springfield, Massachusetts. The story behind this vehicle is one of the more interesting sagas in General Motors' heritage.

Inventor and researcher, Charles F. Kettering, reportedly helped Hugo Young found the Flexible Company in Loudonville, Ohio, in 1915. Kettering received patents for many inventions, but he is probably best known for his electric starter for automobiles and an automobile generator. He founded Dayton Electric Research Labs which was later known as DELCO. First used on the Cadillac, the electric starter proved to be so successful that General Motors decided to buy DELCO so it could supply starters and electrical parts for GM automobiles. Kettering came along with the

purchase and was soon installed as a vice president of research for GM.

In 1933, the World's Fair opened in Chicago, and General Motors was one of the largest exhibitors. Kettering got the idea of taking the exhibit on the road to the American people who could not come to Chicago to see the wonders of science and technology displayed by GM. One might recall that this was in the depths of the Depression, television was still in the future, and Americans were willing to come to shows and interested in a better future.



The original General Motors Parade of Progress went on the road in 1936. Providing the backbone of the fleet were eight "Silver-Topped Streamliners" which were similar to moving vans of that period. This photo shows how the early convoy looked going down the road. PETER PAN COLLECTION.



The actual show was usually set up in an open field and was based around this central tent. To the right you can see three of the Streamliners connected by awnings to make up one of the walk-through exhibits. As you can see, several GM cars were also on display. PETER PAN COLLECTION.

Kettering won approval from GM management and soon after the fair ended began work on what came to be called the Parade of Progress.

The backbone of the initial Parade of Progress was a fleet of eight custom built vehicles called "Silver-topped Streamliners." They were 33 feet long, were built on a truck chassis having a wheelbase of 233 inches, and were powered by GMC gasoline engines. Constructed by Fisher Body's Fleetwood plant in Detroit, they resembled moving vans and were said to have been one of the largest vehicles then operating on America's highways.

In addition to the Streamliners, there were nine Chevrolet and GMC tractor trailer sets which transported booths, additional exhibits, gear, tents, lamps and electrical generators for power. Other vehicles in the caravan included a service truck and several automobiles.

After arriving at a show location, the staff would set up a central tent. Outside but near the tent, six of the streamliners were used to make up two walk-through exhibits. This was accomplished by parking three Streamliners side by side and then connecting them with canvas awnings. The seventh Streamliner opened up to form a stage, and the eighth Streamliner carried extra equipment. The resulting show, which was always free to those who attended, was educational and scientific in nature and similar to that seen at the 1933-34 World's Fair in Chicago at the General Motors exhibit.

This first Parade of Progress hit the road for the first time on February 11, 1936, leaving General Motors in Detroit for its initial engagement in Lakeland, Florida. After that, it remained on the road for four years. Perhaps the most noteworthy trip of the old Streamliners came in 1938 when the GM caravan left Laredo, Texas, going south to open

the new Pan American highway to Mexico City.

One source indicates that when the Streamliners and this original Parade of Progress was replaced by a newer one in 1941, it had played to approximately 10 million people in more than 220 cities. There appear to be no records on the disposition of the Streamliner vehicles after this original Parade of Progress was replaced. None are known to have survived.

Like the concept for the original Parade of Progress, the idea for its replacement came about when Kettering again visited a World's Fair. This one took place in New York City. GM displayed their Futurama and also showed the prototype for what would soon be called their "Silver-sides" coach models. Kettering decided to replace the Streamliners with vehicles looking more like the new "Silver-sides" coaches and to also expand and modernize the

GM-9 leads a convoy of Futurliners during a ceremony in Detroit in May of 1952 to kick off the revamped postwar Parade of Progress. Note that the bubble driver's area has been roofed over to keep out the sun. THE GM FUTURLINER RESTORATION PROJECT.



Parade of Progress exhibits with those now shown at the Futurama.

The new vehicles were known as Futurliners. A total of 12 were built on the bus assembly line in Pontiac, Michigan. At that time, this was still the Yellow Coach bus division, but it would soon be known as GMC Truck & Coach. Both the length of 33 feet and the width of 96 inches matched the original "Silversides" prototype. Because of the upper level cockpit, the overall height was up to 11 feet 7 inches. The wheelbase was 248 inches. An unusual wheel arrangement was used with dual front steering wheels, each with its own set of brakes, brake drums and bearings. Because of this, the Futurliners were equipped with power steering.

When built, the Futurliners were powered by a four-cylinder diesel engine, presumably a Detroit Diesel 4-71, and equipped with a four-speed manual transmission. Hence, the drive train was the same as what GM was putting into diesel passenger coaches at this time. Two 45-gallon fuel tanks were provided. Empty, each vehicle reportedly weighed about 33,000 pounds. When new, the Futurliners were painted red and white with gold and silver trim.

After basic work at Pontiac was completed, the Futurliners were moved to Fisher Body Fleetwood in Detroit to be finished. One report indicates that these vehicles had a total of 19 display and access doors. Exhibits were installed in some. They could be displayed by opening the huge clam shell doors on the sides of the vehicles. Some were provided with generators since the Parade of Progress often had to provide its own electrical power. All apparently had a 16-foot panel on the roof which was fitted with



The Futurliners had a fairly plain back end. But in many respects they were similar to the first GM Silversides buses and were built on the bus assembly line in Pontiac, Michigan. This photo is of GM-7, the Futurliner restored by Peter Pan Bus Lines. PETER PAN.

lights for night displays and could be raised seven feet above the vehicle roof.

Similarities with the original Parade of Progress continued to show up. Like the original Parade of Progress, this new version left Detroit for the first time and hit the road in February. This time it was 1941, exactly five years later than when the Streamliners inaugurated the original Parade of Progress. Like the first Parade of Progress, the first show was in Florida. This time it was in Miami while the Stream-

liners headed for Lakeland five years previously.

However, this new Parade of Progress was larger, more modern, and had several improvements. The early show with the Streamliners had five major exhibits while this show with the Futurliners had 15 major exhibits plus two Army trucks which were part of the Defense Exhibit. One of the more noteworthy improvements with the new show was the use of the Aer-o-Dome, a tent with exterior aluminum supports. When erected it seated 1,500 people and provided a huge interior area without any supporting poles.

Traveling with the Parade of Progress must have been an interesting experience. General Motors hired 50 young men from all over the country who were recent college graduates to run the caravan and most of the show. Drivers had to climb an interior stairway to reach the driver's area on a Futurliner. Here, the driver sat with his head about 11 feet above the ground and was surrounded by a glass bubble. His seat was in the center of the vehicle with a modern command console in front and two jump seats for passengers just behind him. As originally built, the Futurliners were often terribly hot to drive because of the glass bubble top and the lack of air conditioning.

Going down the road, the Parade of Progress often consisted of a convoy of up to 50 vehicles. A new GM convertible was in the lead while at least a dozen trucks loaded with tents and seats were at the rear. One report indicates that the 50 vehicles consisted of the 12 Futurliners, 24 trucks, 11 passenger cars and three station wagons. All of the Futurliners had radio receivers, but only the leading and trailing one could transmit. The maximum convoy speed was



The traditional Futurliner caravan consisted of approximately 50 vehicles when going down the road. A new GM convertible was usually in the lead followed by the 12 Futurliners, 24 trucks, 11 passenger cars and three station wagons. Roofs above the bubble cabs place this photo as post-1953. THE GM FUTURLINER RESTORATION PROJECT.



The Futurliner driver sat with his head 11 feet above the ground. That bubble cab was hot until these little roofs were put over it during the 1953 rebuilding. There were two jump seats behind the driver for additional staff if necessary. Futurliner drivers had a radio receiver, but only the leading and trailing unit could transmit. THE GM FUTURLINER RESTORATION PROJECT.

usually about 40 miles per hour because the Futurliners were not capable of running at higher speeds – even after later improvements.

Upon arriving in the city where the show would be held, the caravan would parade down the main street with the mayor or other dignitary in the lead con-

vertible. The caravan then proceeded to the location where the Parade of Progress would be set up, usually school grounds or a fairgrounds.

Unlike the Streamliners, which were grouped in threes, the Futurliners tended to carry individual displays. Parked around the central tent, the Futurliners would open their huge clam shell doors on the sides to show-off their displays. The back door may be open to provide fresh air for a generator. THE GM FUTURLINER RESTORATION PROJECT.



The biggest job was erecting the Aero-Dome tent and placing the seats. Some Futurliners contained exhibits which were displayed by opening the clam shell side doors. One Futurliner was designed to be the stage in the tent. Some of the Futurliners had generators since the Parade of Progress often had to provide its own electricity. At night, lighting panels would elevate seven feet from the roofs of the Futurliners. This allowed the Parade of Progress to remain open after dark and even gave it a little bit of an amusement park atmosphere.

There was no admission charge to see the shows and the exhibit areas were generally open. New GM automobiles and appliances were usually on display but there was no overt sales effort. Most of the exhibits were based on science, technology or future expectations. Included were early versions of television, black light, and kitchens and living rooms of the future. An early version of the microwave could fry an egg without burning a newspaper, there was a demonstration of stereophonic sound using a ping

pong game as an example, and an example of how sound can travel over an ordinary beam of light. Since Kettering had a major hand in developing the modern diesel railway locomotive for GM, it was expected that one of the Futurliners would highlight GM's railway locomotives. The young men who drove the Futurliners also presented most of the exhibits.

In the nine months since it got underway in February of 1941, the new Parade of Progress attracted 2.5 million visitors in 30 cities in 10 states. This turned out to be the most popular Parade of Progress tour of them all. By this time much of the Depression problems were behind and Americans were experiencing the start of new prosperity. The bombing of Pearl Harbor and subsequent declaration of war occurred when the Parade of Progress was playing in San Antonio. The tour was subsequently cut short, the Parade of Progress effort was curtailed and the Futurliners were put into storage.

With few exceptions, the Futurliners remained in storage for a dozen years. Some

of the vehicles briefly emerged from mothballs in 1946 to participate in a Detroit parade commemorating the golden jubilee of the automobile. The introduction of the new Corvette in 1953 may have been the reason why the Parade of Progress was resurrected that year. Prior to going back on the road, the Futurliners were refurbished and received several improvements designed to alleviate some of the problems discovered on the 1941 tour.

A metal roof was fashioned above the glass bubble cab and Harrison air conditioning was installed in an effort to reduce the heat in the driver's area. Most or all of the Futurliners also received a newer electrical generating plant at the back to provide power during the shows. In addition, the entire drive train was substantially reworked. The original engine was replaced by a 145 horsepower, 302-cubic inch six-cylinder engine. The mechanical transmission was replaced by a Korean War era four-speed automatic transmission which was connected to a two-speed gearbox, effectively giving the vehicle eight forward speeds. Drivers indicated that this

failed to improve the top speed, which remained in the vicinity of 40 miles per hour. The drivers also mentioned that the Futurliners had problems with power steering pump failures, probably because of the power needed to turn the dual steering wheels.

This revamped caravan took to the road on May 12 of 1953 to begin what might be called the third era of the Parade of Progress. Most of the exhibits were new or at least updated from 1941. One of the major changes from the earlier shows was the introduction of the two-seat Corvette to the public.

This caravan remained on the road for three years. However, the crowds were not as big as in the earlier years because of the increasing competition from television. GM finally shut down the Parade of Progress for good in 1956. It is known that one of the Futurliners was damaged in an accident, although, the other 11 were apparently still operational in 1956. These were then sold or given away.

A few of the Futurliners came out of retirement in 1946 to participate in a parade commemorating the golden jubilee of the automobile which went through the streets of Detroit. This photo was taken at Cadillac Square on Woodward Avenue. Since the little roofs have not yet been added, you can see the original wrap-around bubble cover on the driver's area. Note that the driver has on a white shirt and tie. THE GM FUTURLINER RESTORATION PROJECT.



Two of the Futurliners were given to the state of Michigan. One was fitted with displays and became known as the "State Police Safetyliner." It was put on display at county fairs in Michigan for a while, but both units were eventually sold at auction. At a later date, Joe Bartz, an automobile collector from the Chicago area, began to locate and purchase some of the old Futurliners. His goal was to refurbish them to transport his historical automobiles. While he never achieved his goal, he apparently did save several of the Futurliners from the scrap yard. This writer remembers seeing some of them in a junk yard near DuPage County Airport just west of Chicago several years ago. In recent years, these Futurliners have found new homes.

One Futurliner was purchased by Bob Valdez, a former hair dresser who lives in California. He spent several years and in excess of \$100,000 to rebuild his vehicle into a motor home. He is now retired and rents the vehicle out for publicity.

Another Futurliner was purchased by Mario and Richard Petit from Montreal. Their original plans were to rebuild additional Futurliners so they invested in tooling for the windshield, some of the body work and bumpers. However, they completed the rebuilding on the one Futurliner and then leased it out to a cellular phone company. Today, it tours Canada as the "FIDO Phoneliner."

The last of the Futurliners from the Bartz collection went to the National Automotive and Truck Museum (NATMUS) in Auburn, Indiana. After a period of sitting around gathering rust and serving as a home for small creatures, it was moved to the pole barn of Don Mayton of Zeeland, Michigan, where it is being lovingly restored. The goal is to restore this Futurliner to its original appearance in time for the 2008 centennial celebration of GM.

Probably the most attractive of the remaining Futurliners is owned and operated by Peter Pan Bus Lines of Springfield, Massachusetts. This vehicle was discovered in 1997 in an upstate New York corn field. It was badly rusted and in a sad state of disrepair and had not operated under its own power in many years.

After learning about the heritage of the Futurliner and the Parade of Progress, Peter Pan decided to preserve and restore the vehicle. A second Futurliner was acquired for parts and they were sent to Coach Builders in Springfield. Located in Springfield's former trolley barn, Coach Builders specializes in motor coach repairs, body work and installation of new equipment.

Coach Builders spent three years working on what they called the "Gentle Giant." The basic frame structure was totally refurbished with major structural members being



After the Parade of Progress program ended, a few of the Futurliners went into other service or collections. However, most of them ended up rusting away in fields or scrap yards. This photo shows the original condition of the Futurliner found by Peter Pan Bus Lines in a corn field in upstate New York. PETER PAN.



Realizing the historical importance of Futurliners and the GM Parade of Progress, Peter Pan Bus Lines purchased this Futurliner after finding it in a corn field. It was photographed at Coach Builders in Springfield, Massachusetts. The unit was restored with body work, repairs and new equipment. PETER PAN.

rebuilt or replaced. Skin and body parts were then repaired or replaced as necessary. After that, it was necessary to rewire and repower the vehicle.

When the work was done, the silver siding and chrome trim were cleaned or replaced and the Futurliner was painted a dark green and white in keeping with the

standard Peter Pan Bus Lines paint scheme. Peter Pan's Futurliner is now fully operational and turns heads wherever it goes. It is used for Peter Pan shows and promotions and is also available to others for corporate promotions.

Our special thanks to Joel Dirnberger and The GM Futurliner Restoration Project for providing information and photos. Their project Web site is located at www.futurliner.com. □

This photo shows the current appearance of the Futurliner restored by Peter Pan Bus Lines. Note the clam shell doors, the dual front wheels and the lighting unit which raises seven feet above the roof. It is currently used for Peter Pan shows and corporate promotions. PETER PAN.



**Visit the
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