

MCI Celebrates 90 Years

Part One

by Larry Plachno

Photos from MCI or the NBT Archives unless otherwise indicated



MCI counts its history from 1933 when the Fort Geary Motor Body and Paint Works, Ltd. built its first bus. Although the company also did automotive repair at this time, they were so successful with buses that bus building became their exclusive work by 1938. In the following years the company developed a series of buses that became increasingly popular.

In 2023 MCI celebrates 90 years since building its first coach. While all bus builders tend to have interesting histories, MCI is unique in a few areas. Over the years MCI has had several owners and built buses in three different countries. While under Greyhound ownership it took over as the leading American coachbuilder from General Motors. Today, MCI is part of NFI Group, Inc. and offers a range of coaches with clean diesel, alternative fuels and battery-electric power.

Over the years we have written about MCI from several aspects including models, production and ownership. This year we plan to combine several different sources from the archives to achieve a more rounded history. While this has generated a rather lengthy article, we suspect that many in the industry will enjoy, and some may even relate to this trip back in time.

Because of its length, we are breaking this article into three sections. This Part One starts with early days in Winnipeg and continues to the 1970s era. Part Two, in a future issue, will take up the story at that point and continue it.

It All Started in Winnipeg

I would be remiss if we did not start this story by talking about Winnipeg. Is it coincidental that MCI, the leader in the coach market, and New Flyer, the leader in the transit market, both originated in Winnipeg? Is there some magic in the junction of the Assiniboine River with the Red River? Or is it, as many local residents suggest, Winnipeg is somewhat special. It has always been one of my favorite cities to visit.

Winnipeg, Manitoba started out as somewhat of a wild and wooly frontier town and while it may have matured and become a great deal more civilized over the years, it seems to continue to attract people who are independent, not afraid of hard work and who have a well-developed sense of community. It is easily the most industrialized Canadian city for a distance of at least 800 miles.

What became Winnipeg started out as a trading post of the Hudson Bay Company located less than 70 miles north of the United States near where the west-to-east Assiniboine River emptied into the north-to-south Red River. Fort Garry was built somewhere around 1821 and was named for Nicholas Garry, an important director of the Hudson Bay Company.

Unfortunately, the new fort was washed away in the flood of 1826. This was not an unusual hazard because spring flooding sometimes combined with frozen rivers to cause major problems. About five years later the fort was rebuilt a little ways north at Selkirk because it was considered a safer

location. However, commerce and trade did not follow the new fort but remained at “the forks” where the rivers met, the current location of downtown Winnipeg. Hence a second and more substantial fort was erected there in 1835. The new fort was called Upper Fort Garry to differentiate it from the fort at Selkirk that became known as Lower Fort Garry.

Early records suggest that a commercial enterprise located immediately outside the walls of the new fort was a store that sold liquor. One presumes that this enterprise helped the local residents and trappers ward off frostbite in the cold winter months.

There are people who today humorously refer to the community as “Winterpeg” because it sometimes has snow on the ground for half of the year. Worse yet, the area is occasionally prone to flooding when the ice in the Red River breaks up in the spring. In spite of all of this, or maybe because of it, the area has attracted many enterprising people. Winnipeg became a major railroad and transportation center as well as providing the birthplace for numerous businesses and industries including the two major bus builders already mentioned.

Harry Zoltok and Early Buses

The key figure in the founding and early days of MCI was Harry Zoltok. He was born in Russia in 1905 but decided to leave his native land after the Socialists came to power. Zoltok arrived in Winnipeg in 1928 and decided to stay. One report suggests that he was so impressed by the cleanliness and width of Portage Avenue, that paralleled the Assiniboine River for a distance, that he elected to settle here. Since he liked to work



Much of the early success of MCI was due to the efforts of Harry Zoltok. He left his native Russia and moved to Winnipeg where his past experience in automotive work got him into building buses. Many contemporaries credit Zoltok with being a natural engineer who could develop parts and assemblies long before we had computers to help.

with vehicles and with his hands, he started working with a partnership known as J.R. Horne and Co. that worked on and repaired automobiles including some custom work.

Either in spite of or because of the Depression, Zoltok in 1932 partnered with Fred Sicinski and opened a new business in a 5,000-square-foot building on Fort Street in downtown Winnipeg. This was within walking distance of “the forks” where the two rivers meet. Since this was near the former location of Upper Fort Garry, they

named their new enterprise the Fort Garry Motor Body and Paint Works, Ltd.

It was only a year later that the little company began vehicle production. In 1933, they built an 11-passenger body on a Packard car chassis. Initially they followed typical limousine procedure by cutting the vehicle in half and extending the body. Soon, however, the company began building their own bodies and putting them on truck chassis.

By 1937 the Fort Garry Motor Body and Paint Works had moved up considerably in technique and expertise. That year they turned out a coach for Grey Goose Bus Lines that was built entirely by the company without an outside chassis. This moved the company closer to integral construction and improved durability. This upgraded quality caused business to increase. With the increase in bus manufacturing, a decision was made that the company would focus on over-the-road coaches in the future. By 1938, the Fort Garry Auto Body and Paint Works was concentrating on building coaches and had discontinued the automobile repair business.

In contrast, the other bus builder in Winnipeg, Western Auto and Truck Body Works, builder of Western Flyer buses, would eventually make the opposite decision and concentrate on transit buses. They later became known as New Flyer.

It might be noted that as time went on, Zoltok began using stainless steel in construction to reduce corrosion and improve coach longevity. This was somewhat of a marked contrast because General Motors

Greyhound of Canada became an early customer of the Fort Garry Motor Body and Paint Works. Early work and buses they got from the company survived well on Canadian roads and in harsh winter weather. By 1950, the fleet of Greyhound of Canada consisted of 129 coaches, all built by MCI.





Built from 1956 to 1960, the MCI Model 96 was one of the last models built before the company switched to developing the "MC" series for Greyhound. This example was operated by MacKenzie Bus Line Ltd.



MCI did build a trolley bus for Winnipeg in 1942. It was the first trolley bus and hence first zero-emission bus built in Canada. Although no others were built, this unit remained in service in Winnipeg for 25 years.

used aluminum to reduce corrosion. It is noteworthy that in our market today, other coachbuilders have followed the lead of MCI with stainless steel construction.

Connecting with Greyhound

Numerous people credit Zoltok with being a natural engineer. In these days prior to computers and sophisticated drafting equipment, Zoltok developed the habit of sketching a needed part or assembly on the floor of the factory in chalk. In some cases, the area was roped off until the part was completed. The resulting improved quality at the Fort Garry Auto Body and Paint Works became known to many of the local bus operators. Included was Canadian Greyhound Lines where a long-term relationship developed.

Canadian Greyhound Lines was having difficulty in finding buses capable of dealing with rugged Canadian winters and roads. At that time they were operating several 1930 model "Y" Yellow Coach buses that had high mileage engines and were starting to have body problems. The Fort Garry Motor Body and Paint Works was awarded a contract from Greyhound to work on some of the better units. They rebuilt and somewhat streamlined the bodies while also installing rebuilt engines.

Pleased with the work on rebuilding their model "Y" Yellow Coaches, Canadian Greyhound turned to the Fort Garry Motor Body and Paint Works again. This time the problem was a group of four Yellow Coach model 732 coaches purchased by Canadian Greyhound in late 1936. They had proven to be a

disappointment. In addition to being heavy, these coaches were unable to deal with the hard Canadian weather and road conditions and their engines were starting to give up. Canadian Greyhound returned them to Yellow Coach in 1937.

For those who do not know, or have forgotten, this was a major expression of recognition and respect for the little Winnipeg bus builder. Already owned by General Motors, Yellow Coach had recently developed their Super Coach and was obviously becoming the leader in the American bus industry. Asking the Fort Garry Auto Body and Paint Works if they could do better was a real compliment. The management at Canadian Greyhound approached Zoltok and asked him to design a coach larger than anything in their current fleet that could carry 37 passengers. This desired coach also had to deal with Canadian roads and weather conditions.

In addition, the Greyhound people wanted this new model to have many of the features of the new Yellow Coach 743 Super Coach but none of the shortcomings. As you might expect, this was a very tall order given the fact that Yellow Coach was considered the leading bus builder. However, it was also obvious that success would propel the Fort Garry Motor Body and Paint Works into the big time. Any bus that would operate safely, reliably and economically in the local environment would be a winner any place else. Zoltok agreed to build such a vehicle.

People from Greyhound provided Zoltok with information on both the advantages and the shortcomings of the Yellow Coach 743 Super Coach. He then went to work on the floor with his chalk. What resulted was the new model 37-UM that was turned out in September of 1938. This model was a substantial step forward and was powered by an underfloor Hall-Scott pancake engine. Trans Continental immediately placed an order for two at \$15,000 each. In November,

In 1940, the company was renamed Motor Coach Industries and moved to a larger facility. The new location at Erin and St. Matthews streets had 20,000 square feet that could better handle increasing production. This photo shows a series of coaches being built on what was then the assembly line.



Central Greyhound ordered four at \$15,600 each. These prices on buses back then make an interesting contrast to today's prices.

These new coaches were barely out of the door when Zoltok took up his chalk and began working on a new model. He was apparently influenced by the newly launched Yellow Coach PDG series that introduced the "Silversides" model. What resulted was a new and improved bus that would be called the model 150. It retained a front radiator and the underfloor pancake engine.

Major improvements on the new model included moving closer to full integral construction and introducing exterior paneling. In later years this became traditional stainless steel siding on MCI coaches. Another major improvement on the 150 Model was the use of ducts for distributing heat throughout the coach, replacing the floor heaters used on earlier models. These vents could also be used for cooler air in the summer months. As you might guess, any improvement in heating was most welcome in the Canadian winters. Canadian Greyhound was so impressed that they immediately placed an order for 10 of these coaches.

Now with sales increasing and Canadian Greyhound as a major customer, Sicinski and Zoltok decided in 1940 to expand and reorganize the company. It was recapitalized and renamed Motor Coach Industries. Operations were moved to a larger 20,000-square-foot facility at Erin and St. Matthews Street. This was almost directly west of the original location and provided four times as much space as the original Fort Garry location. In later years this location came to be called Plant 1 and served as the company's primary production facility for about 25 years, until the introduction of 40-foot coaches.

Soon after moving into the new factory, bus production had to be curtailed because of the war effort. During the war years the factory was open 24 hours per day and concentrated on producing military vehicles. MCI did build a trolley bus for Winnipeg in 1942. It was the first trolley bus and presumably first zero-emission bus built in Canada and it remained in service for 25 years. Additional units were not built because of the wartime scarcity of materials and the high import duties on traction motors.

While bus production expectedly resumed after the war, MCI continued to be a small, regional builder. By 1947, MCI was building a new coach approximately every two weeks and hence turning out 25 or 26 coaches each year. During this period, Zoltok continued to design parts and assemblies that increased the quality and durability of MCI coaches.

This era saw the relationship between MCI and Canadian Greyhound begin to



Seeking more production space, MCI moved to Plant 1 on St. Matthews Street in 1940. Almost immediately bus production ceased as the company was drawn into the war effort. MCI's coach production would be centered here until the late 1960s when the new Fort Garry plant was opened to accommodate longer buses.

grow stronger. In 1940, Canadian Greyhound operated a total of 67 vehicles. These were primarily older Yellow Coaches, Kenworth and Hays-Anderson buses with only 17 newer MCI coaches. However, by 1950 the Canadian Greyhound fleet included 129 coaches, all from MCI. Not only were MCI coaches meeting the requirement of dealing with Canadian roads and Canadian winters but their use by Canadian Greyhound served as a great endorsement for the company.

MCI saw an opportunity to venture into other types of manufacturing in the post-war years with two subsidiaries. A new plant was built on the corner of St. Matthews and Wall Street, across the railroad tracks from the existing St. Matthews facility. Partially constructed from wartime packing cases, it soon logically came to be called Plant 2. It was initially used for the operation of the National Products Pole Line hardware

division as well as the manufacture of road machinery.

Greyhound Ownership

Management at Canadian Greyhound had been increasingly pleased with MCI and its coaches. As a result, they offered in 1948 to acquire partial ownership of the company. What resulted is that Canadian Greyhound took a 65 percent ownership in MCI while Sicinski retired and Zoltok became president of MCI. This vote of confidence increased sales to double what it had been. Between 1945 and 1949, MCI turned out more than 300 coaches, effectively more than one coach each week.

Once again the floor of the plant became a blackboard for Zoltok's chalk engineering sketches of different components and assemblies that would improve the coach product line. Like General Motors, Zoltok

The Courier 95 Model helped establish MCI's reputation for reliability and durability. As was typical of that era, buses imitated the bright siding of passenger trains and the new General Motors coaches. MCI was prone to use stainless steel because it held up well in bad weather.





In 1958, Greyhound took full 100 percent ownership of MCI and the company immediately began building the "MC" series of coaches to develop a coach suitable for the new owner. The first MC-1 was built in 1958 and other improved models followed.



Starting with the MC-5 model in 1963, coach bodies were shipped to Pombina for completion. As soon as MCI coaches showed up in the Greyhound fleet, other operators were interested. Soon, MCI was on its way to becoming an international builder.

believed that platform integral construction was the most durable at this time and had the most longevity. While Zoltok's version of platform integral was different than that used by General Motors, it continued to survive in MCI's "D" model coaches for decades.

Another difference is that General Motors liked to use substantial quantities of aluminum to reduce corrosion and increase longevity. In comparison, Zoltok and MCI went with stainless steel for the same reasons. More than one person has suggested that the harsh Canadian winters and resulting salt on the roads became a major reason why MCI embraced stainless steel construction at an early date. However, MCI remained essentially a well-regarded regional builder until developments in the United States in the 1950s changed its future.

General Motors introduced their new PD4104 model in 1953 and Greyhound's new Scenicruiser in 1954. These remarkable coaches effectively decimated other coach-builders in the United States. In 1955, GM built 84 percent of all buses in the United States (both coaches and transits) while plucky Flexible built another seven percent. All other builders combined shared the remaining nine percent.

I might suggest that a major reason for GM's success in sales was their buses and coaches were good, reliable and durable. In addition, GM offered their popular Detroit Diesel engine as well as financing programs. They were essentially the bus of choice among the leading coach and transit operators. In 1956, the U.S. Department of Justice filed an antitrust suit against General Motors. While the suit never went to court, it became a major factor in future bus manufacturing developments. Among other things, GM would eventually back out of the bus building business.

As a major customer of General Motors, Greyhound in the U.S. was named in the suit. According to the figures I have, Greyhound purchased about 49 percent of the coaches built by General Motors from 1953 to 1960. What resulted is that Greyhound began looking for a way to purchase coaches elsewhere. With MCI already partially owned by Canadian Greyhound, it became the prime candidate for a captive bus builder.

Greyhound's official history suggests that Zoltok was not immediately receptive to the

idea and took some convincing. However, in 1958 he agreed to allow Greyhound to take full 100 percent ownership of MCI. Zoltok remained as company president and was also elected to the Greyhound Board of Directors.

MCI was immediately charged with developing an improved and modern heavy-duty coach suitable for the needs of Greyhound in the United States. This developmental era covered four models – MC-1 through MC-4 – and approximately six years. During this period, Greyhound in the

This photo shows production in the years immediately prior to MCI starting to work on the "MC" series of coaches for Greyhound. By 1950, MCI was turning out more than one coach each week. Although still primarily a regional builder, the company's reputation had spread among Canadian bus operators.





The Pembina, North Dakota plant opened in late 1963 with the MC-5 model. It is located near the United States-Canadian border and has always completed coaches started in Winnipeg.



The new Fort Garry plant is located south of Winnipeg and went into production in June of 1968. It was constructed to build 40-foot coaches since that length would have been difficult at Plant 1.

United States continued to buy coaches from GM while Canadian Greyhound continued to buy buses from MCI.

The prototype MC-1 was developed in 1958 and went into production in 1959. Expectedly, the design was influenced by the popular PD4104 but was more angular and less rounded. Major features included modern slanting passenger windows, fluted stainless steel siding, the destination sign was moved to the roof cap above the windshield, and both air conditioning and air ride suspension were included. The prototype MC-2 was built in 1959 with regular production in 1960 and 1961. Major improvements in the MC-2 included the more powerful 6V-71 Detroit Diesel engine replacing the smaller 4-71 in the MC-1.

A prototype MC-3 was built in 1961 with regular production following from 1961 to 1963. Most of the changes were cosmetic and minor. Later in 1961 a prototype MC-4 was built and regular production took place in 1963. The most substantial change on the MC-4 was in the drive train with the more powerful 8V-71 Detroit Diesel engine and a Spicer four-speed transmission. This engine made the 35-foot coach somewhat overpowered since the same engine would later be used in 40-foot coaches.

U.S. Production and Sales

Expectedly, all of this led to some changes at MCI. In 1962, MCI became a wholly-owned subsidiary of Greyhound and plans started on a new production scheme to allow for increased sales to Greyhound and the United States. A new production facility was built in Winnipeg at a cost of \$525,000. It was located across from Plant 1 on the west side of Erin Street and became known as Plant 3.

Under the new plan, Plant 1 would cease building completed coaches and instead build unfinished coach bodies. MCI Models MC-5 and MC-5A actually had separate

models numbers for U.S. and Canadian coaches. Those intended for delivery to U.S. customers would be trucked on company-owned flatbed trailers to the U.S. for finishing while those intended for delivery to Canadian customers would be finished at the new Plant 3 in Winnipeg. This arrangement not only simplified customs on United States components but also met what came to be called "Buy America" provisions for agencies buying with federal money.

Pembina, North Dakota, located 68 miles south of Winnipeg, was selected as the assembly location in the United States. Greyhound already had a subsidiary in Pembina known as the Greyhound Motor and Supply Company. It manufactured engine parts and assembled motors. Fourteen acres were acquired in Pembina to build a 31,000-square-foot plant for finishing coaches for the U.S. market.

All of this got underway on September 13, 1963 when the first shell arrived at the new Pembina facility. In a relatively short time, 300 coaches of the new MC-5 model were built and delivered to Greyhound from Pembina. This created a new record for MCI by bringing coach production up to one coach per day. Although similar to the MC-4 model, the MC-5 had two baggage doors on each side instead of three on the MC-4.

It should be noted that up until this point, MCI coaches were rare in the United States. Once Greyhound in the United States began taking delivery of MCI coaches in large numbers, other operators became interested in them. By 1964, MCI coaches were being offered to other bus operators in the United States. Campus Travel, Inc. of New York City became the first non-Greyhound buyer and operator in the United States. By 1967 a parts

The procedure of framing up coaches in Winnipeg and trucking them south to the United States for finishing started in 1963 and continues today. Among other things, this reduces shipping costs on some components while allowing the finished coach to meet Buy America requirements. This photo of a coach being transported from Winnipeg was taken later during the MC-9 era.



facility was established at Pembina for MCI owners in the United States.

It seemed like the new production program had barely gotten started when MCI began talking about improvements in 1965. Two different things prompted this. One was that MCI coaches were an immediate hit on the U.S. market. Production of the new MC-5A model had reached two coaches a day and was taxing plant capacity. The second is that Greyhound was talking about a new MC-6 model that would be 40 feet long and 102-inches wide. It was intended to be a replacement for Greyhound's aging Scenicruisers.

I have been in the Plant on St. Matthews. There is a walkway above a relatively small production line area. Things were tight with the 35-foot MC-5 and MC-5A models. They would be impossible with 40-foot coaches, particularly if sales continued to increase. The revised plan involved the purchase of a 24-acre site in the municipality of Fort Garry on the south side of Winnipeg. This name might sound confusing since the actual Fort Garry was located in downtown Winnipeg, just north of where the two rivers meet, but this municipality had taken that same name.

Construction started on a new 134,000-square-foot plant set up for the production of 40-foot coaches. Because of its location, this became known as the Fort Garry plant. Plant 2 on St. Matthews would receive a 60,000-square-foot expansion and the Pembina facility would get a 66,000-square-foot expansion. All of this required an investment of \$6.5 million in 1966 money. The new production plan would see coaches produced at the new Fort Garry plant and then trucked to Pembina for finishing. At this time even the coaches going to Canada were completed in Pembina to DOT levels and then driven back to Fort Garry for final completion.



The new Fort Garry plant was established to build the new MC-6 coaches because of their 40-foot length. However, because of delays with the MC-6 model, production at Fort Garry started with the MC-7 model that ended up being the replacement for Greyhound's aging Scenicruiser fleet. Shown here is the first production MC-7, noteworthy because of the partial wheel covering on the third axle. ROBERT REDDEN, REDDEN ARCHIVES.

The old St. Matthews Plant 1 would no longer produce buses and would become active as a support facility producing parts. Hence, the door where completed coaches exited the plant was removed and bricked up. The new Fort Garry assembly line went active in June of 1968. Production of the MC-6 model had been delayed because of difficulty getting approval on the 102-inch width. Hence, production on the new Fort Garry Line started with the MC-7 model. The MC-7 was similar to the MC-5 but raised and extended to 40 feet and built with three axles. It was the MC-7 model that effectively replaced Greyhound's Scenicruisers and became the new flagship of the Greyhound fleet.

While two prototypes for the MC-6 had been built in 1967, actual production was held off pending approval of the 102-inch width of the MC-6. When it became obvious that universal approval of the increased width was not forthcoming, the MC-6 went into production in 1969 and 1970. Only 100 were built and they operated on selected routes where special permits had been obtained. This was the last model built exclusively for Greyhound.

Our 90-year history of Motor Coach Industries will continue in a future issue with Part Two starting in the 1970s. □



Originally intended to be a replacement for Greyhound's Scenicruisers, the MC-6 model offered several innovations including three roof heights, a 12-cylinder engine and a width of 102 inches. The new width proved to be a problem and only 100 production units were built. This builder's photo shows one of the units that was going to Canada.

From the
May, 2023



Issue of

National Bus Trader

9698 W. Judson Road • Polo, Illinois 61064

Ph: (815) 946-2341

Fx: (815) 946-2347

www.busmag.com