

The National Motor Bus Museum

The First Non-Profit Bus Museum

by Larry Plachno

Photos courtesy of National Bus Trader archives unless otherwise indicated



The bus started it all. Gold Star Line # 138, a 1945 Ford Transit, was photographed at the Joliet bus terminal while on a special charter for members of the Omnibus Society of America in the summer of 1963. Regular service to this point had been discontinued only a few months earlier. A few months later, the bus would be purchased by your author and would eventually serve as the nucleus of the National Motor Bus Museum.

We have recently had several inquiries about our old National Motor Bus Museum and about the 1995 concern over conflicting names. I know that parts of this information were published in Bob Redden's *International Bus Collector Newsletter* decades ago. We never did much with it in NATIONAL BUS TRADER because it might sound somewhat like an autobiography.

However, because of increasing interest we decided to dig back into the archives to see what we could find. Most of this information goes back more than 50 years to the 1960s and much of the following text was originally written in the 1990s but never published. If you want to follow along, this will give you the story behind the first non-profit bus museum. Strangely enough, the story starts with the abandonment of two interurban electric railways and was thwarted by the war in Vietnam.

1963 witnessed the abandonment of two transportation lines in the greater Chicago area. The first, and arguably more important, took place on January 21 when the Chicago, North Shore & Milwau-

kee Railway abandoned all service. This electric interurban railway operated hourly service between Chicago and Milwaukee with commuter service on the main line as well as on a branch line to Libertyville and Mundelein. Unlike most rail and bus abandonments, it ended up quitting while running "full tilt" with hourly service between Chicago and Milwaukee plus additional local service between Chicago and either Waukegan or Mundelein.

Some of us began pondering the possibility of replacing portions of the interurban commuter rail service with buses. While the main line between Chicago and Milwaukee was still served by Greyhound, there were several commuter stops, including Mundelein, that had no alternative service.

Only a few months later, Gold Star Line discontinued all of their scheduled bus service. This company was the successor to the Joliet & Eastern Traction Company which operated a 20-mile line from Joliet to Chicago Heights. In case you are not familiar, Joliet is a southwest suburb of Chicago while Chicago Heights is a south-



#138 is shown in the Des Moines yard next to the replacements for the trolley buses. Driving through Iowa in the winter made us appreciate heat and restrooms. The company was very receptive to our trip.

ern suburb of Chicago, making this somewhat of a “crosstown” line. Until very recently, the territory between these two communities was sparsely settled. Rail service was discontinued in 1923, at least partly because of the Illinois Central Railroad grade separation project at Matteson, Illinois. This necessitated expensive changes to the Joliet & Eastern bridge crossing at that point that management felt was not justified.

Gold Star Line was based in Frankfort, Illinois, one of few communities between Joliet and Chicago Heights with substantial population. Operations essentially followed U.S. 30 (also known as Lincoln Highway) between the two communities although some trips continued east across the Indiana state line to Hammond. The company was owned by Ray Warning. The Warning family also had interests in Warning Chevrolet in Frankfort and in a local school bus operation.

At the end, service operated on a two-hour headway using a small fleet of wartime Ford Transit buses that were already more than 15 years old. I never did ride the regular service, but I imagine it must have been interesting, particularly in the winter months. Those little “cracker box” Fords probably ran “flat out” on this rural federal highway and there was precious little heat for passengers in the winter.

The Omnibus Society of America, a bus hobbyist organization based in Chicago, decided to charter one of Gold Star’s Fords for a

Summer of 1965 found #138 posed on the old North Shore Line interurban right-of-way adjacent to the former Libertyville station, which was now for sale. The regular home for the bus was only a few miles north of this point.



Members of the Skokie Valley Lines group, as well as Ford Transit #138, drove to Des Moines in January of 1964 to charter the last trolley bus. Shown is the last time a trolley bus passed Iowa’s Capitol.

“final run.” As a result, several of us filled up most of the seats on a Ford. We were given bus #138, which had originally been built in 1945 for Schappi Bus Lines, a company that had operated in Chicago’s south suburbs. The fan trip expectedly covered the regular route to the bus terminal in Joliet as well as the bus garage.

Some of us who were interested in the little Ford Transit got together and began talking about it. As a result, three of us elected to purchase Gold Star Line #138. I was only 19 years old at that time and this was my first bus.

The complexities of the situation are not without their humor. Since Frankfort was now without public transportation, and since none of us involved with the Ford owned an automobile, some way had to be found to get to Frankfort to pick up our “new” bus. What we ended up doing was to take a Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific commuter train to Mokena, Illinois, and then we walked five miles on back roads to reach the garage in Frankfort.

In spite of my age, I was quickly installed as the official bus driver of the group. In retrospect, it appears that the reason for my “appointment” was that I had been driving newspaper trucks ever since I got my driver’s license and was the only member of the group to have driven anything larger than an automobile.

We initially selected the name “Skokie Valley Lines” for our group and operation. This was the name of the area between Libertyville and the north side of Chicago that had formerly been served by the recently abandoned North Shore Line interurban. It reflected our possible interest in a commercial bus line in that area. In fact, following a few days parked along the curb at my home to my mother’s dismay, the bus found a permanent home at a truck repair shop in Libertyville, Illinois, not far from the abandoned interurban line.

In spite of the new name of our group and the storage location for the Ford, nothing ever developed in the area of commercial operations at that time. Some transportation tokens were minted with the name “Skokie Valley Lines” for potential future use, but they ended up being used for fares for fan trips with the bus.

A few years later, at the end of the decade, some of the other people did put together a plan to operate commuter bus service from Mundelein to the Milwaukee Road commuter rail station in Libertyville. They not only had a route and a proposed schedule but also eventually adopted a pet name for the project – “LSMFT.” Ostensibly “Libertyville, Suburban Mundelein Fast Transit,” the letters also reflected the catch line in a Lucky Strike cigarette commercial of that era.

This concept reached the stage of a presentation to the village fathers at Libertyville. I got involved with this briefly by borrowing a TGH3102 for the occasion and driving the village fathers over the proposed route. However, it appears that the group and the village never got together because nothing ever developed from it. Although, a local school bus operator did run some similar commuter service in later years.

While movement in the direction of a commercial bus line declined, Skokie Valley Lines became very active with bus fan trips over the next three years. The first, and possibly one of the most noteworthy, came the following January of 1964 when Des Moines, Iowa, discontinued trolley bus service. Accompanied by a few faithful bus fans, I drove Ford transit #138 to Des Moines where we had chartered a trolley bus to make one last run under the wire. It was on this trip through the snow-covered hills of Iowa that I decided that, in the future, any bus I owned would have heat and a restroom, and any other equipment was negotiable. For the most part, I have kept to that resolution.

In May of 1964, I assisted in the movement of Cleveland Transit #874, the last trolley bus to run in Cleveland, to Johnstown, Pennsylvania. I had earlier participated in the last run in Cleveland operated by another organization. Later, I was able to charter and ride #874 in Johnstown. August of that year saw Skokie Valley Lines charter Pullman trolley bus #410 in Milwaukee. It was the last trolley bus in the fleet with Westinghouse electrical equipment.

The Skokie Valley Lines group chartered two last trolley bus runs in 1965. First to go was Columbus, Ohio, and the local company did things right with a final trolley bus decorated with black ribbons and black wreaths. On June 20, the group was in Milwaukee where we chartered Pullman trolley bus #350 for a final run. When we pulled into the barn, they shut down the power for the last time.

Later that year, in October we had an interesting trip on a new bus operation founded by Bill McCreary known as Tri-State Coach Lines that operated between northern Indiana and O'Hare Airport. We rode on a PD4103 and stopped in at the Gary Transit garage to see the old PD4151s they operated in charter service. Bill's father had owned Bluebird Bus Lines operating between Chicago and the southwest suburbs and was earlier involved with Leyden Motor Coach in the northwest suburbs. In later years the Tri-State operation went to the Shoup family that operated Cardinal Bus Lines in Middlebury, Indiana.

This group had been particularly interested in first runs and last runs. We discovered that Chicago Helicopter Airways would discontinue their scheduled helicopter service between Chicago O'Hare International Airport, Midway airport and some service to down-



Milwaukee's trolley bus system gave up the ghost on June 20, 1965 when the Skokie Valley Lines group chartered Pullman #350 for a final run. The sign read: "I'm Headin' for the Last Roundup."

town Meigs Field and Gary, Indiana on December 31, 1965. While others were getting high for the holiday, I got high on the helicopters and became the last revenue passenger between O'Hare and Midway.

Several things happened in or by 1966 that ended up sparking the start of the bus museum. Late summer of 1966 saw the last of the larger fan trips sponsored by Skokie Valley Lines. This time we used three buses in the fleet of the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) and they were driven by my younger brother, Ronald, who was driving for the Chicago Transit Authority while going to college.

At about this time our group started to take an increasing interest in equipment. The people from the Omnibus Society of America acquired TD4501-001, which was built in 1939 and technically was the first of the "old look" GMC transits. Then, ex-Cleveland trolley bus #874 came back from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and was operated in Chicago. It was originally built for Providence before coming to Cleveland. I rode this bus in Cleveland, Johnstown and Chicago. It would later go to the railroad museum at Union, Illinois, and probably set some type of record as a "boomer" trolley bus. Another member of our group acquired a small "old look" transit bus that was left over from the recent creation of the Bi-State Transit Authority in St. Louis, Missouri.

By this time our parking area in Libertyville was starting to look like a bus museum. I had just graduated from college at the end of the school year in early June. Since I had more time, I was able to follow up on the museum theme. Skokie Valley Lines was incorporated in Illinois on June 13, 1966 as a non-for-profit corporation. Approximately three months later, on September 20, the name of the corporation was officially changed to "Skokie Valley Lines - Operating Transportation Museum."

Our next step was to apply for IRS 501(c)(3) status so that donations would be tax deductible. The IRS had some concern over the name of the corporation so another trip was made to the Illinois Secretary of State. On December 2, 1966, the name of the corporation was officially changed to the "National Motor Bus Museum, Inc."

Within the next few months we were awarded the coveted 501(c)(3) status by the IRS. While there were already several railroad museums in existence in 1967, we were told that the National Motor Bus Museum was the only non-profit bus museum with IRS 501(c)(3) status at that time. Hence, when the historians write the history of the American bus industry, you can mention that I founded the first bus museum with federal non-profit status.

Shortly after obtaining the tax-deductible status from the IRS, three buses were donated to the National Motor Bus Museum by The Transport Company in Milwaukee. The first of these was #350, the Pullman trolley bus built in July of 1948. It was the last trolley

The Skokie Valley Lines group went to Columbus, Ohio in 1965 to run the last trolley bus in town. Your author pulled the ceremonial last pole. The last trolley bus to operate was appropriately decorated in black bunting.





Milwaukee's Transport Company # 1197 was acquired under the National Motor Bus Museum, Inc. name. A 1945 GMC TD4007, it came to Milwaukee in 1959 following several years of service in Indianapolis.

bus to operate in Milwaukee since it served on the Skokie Valley Lines fan trip on June 20, 1965.

The second bus was # 1197, a GMC "old look" TD4007 (serial 243) built in 1945. It was originally built for Indianapolis and came to Milwaukee in 1959. It was a good running bus, but I remember it having the old style transmission with the old lubrication.

The third bus from Milwaukee was #891, a 34SW Twin Coach built in February of 1947. It carried serial number 001 and hence was most likely the first 34SW built. For those who do not know, the "34" represented nominal passenger capacity and hence was a relatively short bus while the "W" suffix indicated a wide body, presumably 102 inches or thereabouts. Some people suggested that the 34SW was wider than it was long. That was certainly not the case but the extra width combined with a short length tended to give that impression.

Other acquisitions were being considered at this time. We went out to look at an ACF-Brill IC37/41 owned by Central West Motor



Tri-State Coach Lines # 101, which was probably a PD3703, was photographed on the trip in October of 1965. In future years, Tri-State Coach Lines was operated by the Shoup family who owned Cardinal Buses in Middlebury, Indiana.

States. While the price was reasonable and the coach was in good operating condition, we decided against adding it to our collection. We were also looking at an ex-North Shore Line White transit bus that had gone to the Waukegan, Illinois, transit operation. Although it carried a reasonable price was in good operating condition, it was not added to the museum collection.

I think it can be safely said that the National Motor Bus Museum was a victim of the Vietnam War. By way of background, I had originally started in transportation publishing while still in high school and continued a small publication while I was in college. Hostilities in Vietnam began to flare up at this time and our Uncle Sam began to draft people to serve in the military. Having graduated from college, I was no longer draft exempt and eventually received my invitation to join the troops.

In retrospect, this was somewhat unexpected. I had tried to enlist in the past but could not pass the physical because of past medical problems and my very flat feet. Apparently, the physical requirements for being

891 was acquired from the Transport Company in Milwaukee by National Motor Bus Museum, Inc. A 1947 34SW Twin Coach, it was jokingly suggested that the coach was wider than it was long.





Seeking more practical bus experience, your author worked for Valley Transit and Coach Travel Unlimited of Justice, Illinois supervising the garage, training drivers and managing the scheduled service. In addition to school buses, the company ran a suburban transit route and several coaches.

drafted are less than for enlisting. I ended up being assigned to an Army hospital where I did paperwork, helped returning injured Vietnam soldiers get a GED, served briefly as a pharmacist and then replaced a Major in running the admissions office before returning to civilian life.

There was no secret that the money used by the National Motor Bus Museum to pay for insurance, fuel and acquisitions had mostly come from my own pocket. With my abrupt departure from the scene, none of the other individuals involved with the museum were willing to step up and provide the time and money to keep the museum going in my absence. Hence, it simply came apart.

Fortunately, most of the equipment was saved in one way or another. Most of the buses acquired by members of the Omnibus Society of America eventually ended up at the Illinois Railway Museum in Union, Illinois. The Ford transit went to a man on the north side of Chicago who converted it to a motor home.

The three buses from Milwaukee were taken to the trolley museum at East Troy, Wisconsin, where they languished for several years gathering rust. However, all three of them eventually fell into private hands. Due to a major effort by Milwaukee bus people spearheaded by Russell Schultz, the #350 was moved to Dayton. The #1197

Glenview Bus Company of Glenview, Illinois operated school buses, a few coaches and several suburban transit routes. These little GM transits were typical on most of their transit routes. It was one of these buses that was borrowed to show the proposed Mundelein commuter shuttle to the Libertyville village fathers.



While the magazine office was located in Delavan, Wisconsin, we founded and ran Wisconsin Illinois Stages. We acquired a route from Chicago to Wisconsin and then Greyhound gave us their route to Madison. While the company ran a regular bus tour program, it did not run a substantial number of charters.

went to John King of Elkhorn, Wisconsin, who has restored it. The #891 went to a Milwaukee-based bus group and was stored near Wind Lake, Wisconsin. By the time I got back from the service, the buses had been dispersed and there was nothing left of the collection.

After my return to civilian life, I tried to get some more operating experience to enable me to move back into transportation publishing. Prior to being drafted, I worked for Glenview Bus Company in Chicago's northern suburbs. After returning, I worked for Valley Transit of Justice, Illinois and Coach Travel Unlimited supervising the garage, training drivers and managing the scheduled service. However, as a disabled American veteran I found it difficult to work for others so I started moving towards being self-employed and returning to publishing.

From there, I worked for the communities of Woodridge and Bolingbrook, Illinois and founded and managed a commuter bus service to the nearby railroad stations. After that we created Executive Commuter Coach and ran commuters in and out of Chicago in coaches from the southwest suburbs.

NATIONAL BUS TRADER was founded in late 1977 as a monthly bus equipment publication. Since my degree is in English with minors in Geography and Philosophy, my plans had been to get back into transportation publishing. Bus people selling used buses wanted a more frequent publication since the current bus magazines only came out six times a year. Within a year NATIONAL BUS TRADER had moved into slick paper and color printing. In 1979 we also started publishing BUS TOURS MAGAZINE for bus tour planners.

In retrospect it might be noted that the name NATIONAL BUS TRADER was intentional to continue using the National name with related operations. There were also plans to use the National name on future things.

We then moved the publishing operation to southern Wisconsin to get out of the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) area. For a hobby, I purchased the old Cardinal interstate route from Central West Motor Stages that ran from Chicago to southern Wisconsin and it became the start of our Wisconsin Illinois Stages, Inc. I changed the route and schedule to serve a local academy and we soon found ourselves running second sections. Then, Greyhound went on strike and gave us their route from southern Wisconsin to Madison. My hobby grew to where we needed more buses and staff.

1985 saw us selling our commercial bus operations because they were taking too much time and effort. We then moved to our current location in rural Polo, Illinois and built an office for NATIONAL BUS



The public can view the museum's historical buses in a very attractive and professional setting inside the AACAM building. That Clipper in the center came from Jim Lehrer, a famous TV personality who always wanted a bus of his own. DAVE MILLHOUSER.

TRADER. After selling the bus operations, we had more time for other things. We began thinking again of doing more with a bus museum. We now had 12 acres of property plus a large pole barn that could house six to eight buses. In addition, more property was being offered to us. While several individuals and operating companies had preserved historical buses and coaches, there was still no formal bus museum with a real public display building.

We spent substantial time discussing options and drew up plans for two museums. One would be a reborn National Motor Bus Museum that would preserve buses and display them to the public. The second would be a National Bus Trader Museum of photos and paper or historical items from our archives. In addition to a large number of photos and color slides, this collection also includes substantial trolley and interurban photos and material as well as some old aviation items.

During our planning, it quickly became obvious that both staff and money were needed to do a good job with the museums. It was the lack of staff and money that paused the National Motor Bus Museum when I was drafted. We were going to go ahead with reviving the National Motor Bus Museum and had picked our former garage manager from Wisconsin Illinois Stages to organize and manage it. He asked us to give him a little time to help Pat Nelson bring in buses from the Pat Famos factory in Zagreb, Yugoslavia. For those

who do not know, Pat Nelson brought in the original LAG coaches under his Sabre name and was fairly successful. Unfortunately, our former garage manager ended up with a serious medical problem and passed away, thereby putting this project on hold.

The National Bus Trader Museum is still being considered because we have a substantial amount of photos and material. However, as time goes on we are looking more at making it digital rather than physical. This could be a reality in the future when more time and money become available.

We applauded when a group in the Northeast began talking about developing a professional bus museum in the 1990s. Maybe they could accomplish what we had put off. However, we soon began getting calls and letters that we initially could not understand. It became obvious that in spite of all of the words in the English language, someone at the new bus museum wanted to use the same word we had used to identify our bus museum in 1966, our bus magazine in 1977 and other pending projects.

We originally spoke with Fred Lehrer, the brother of media personality Jim Lehrer who was helping gather support for this new museum, and then sent a long letter to Dick Maguire who was spearheading the new museum. The result is that cooler heads prevailed. They changed their name to the Museum of Bus Transportation to avoid these conflicts. We were later told that the individual who insisted on using the conflicting word was banned from membership in the museum.

There are two comments to end this story. One is that the museum name ended up being of only brief importance anyway since the bus museum recently merged with the AACAM (Antique Automobile Collectors Association Museum) in Hershey, Pennsylvania and hence they no longer operate under their own corporate name.

The second is that the bus museum management did accomplish what I and others hoped they would do. They have acquired and preserved a number of historical buses and have many of them on display to the public in the very professional and attractive AACAM building in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

NATIONAL BUS TRADER continues to applaud and support this group. We also support the other non-profit groups and museums and encourage them to send in more information and news releases that we can share with our readers. □

The Museum of Bus Transportation deserves a great deal of credit for putting together an impressive and professional bus museum that eluded the National Motor Bus Museum. The public part of the museum collection is housed in this magnificent building belonging to the Antique Automobile Collectors Association Museum in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Additional buses are stored and maintained at the nearby annex. This photo was taken during the 2017 Spring Fling event. DAVE MILLHOUSER.



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