

Peter Pan Bus Lines Celebrates 90 Years Part I

by Larry Plachno

Photos from Peter Pan or National Bus Trader
unless otherwise noted

In 2023, Peter Pan Bus Lines celebrated its 90th Anniversary. This is an amazing achievement and worthy of special note. One of the better-known and better-respected bus operations in the United States, Peter Pan Bus Lines combines the attributes of an immigrant heritage, a history of scheduled service and continued ownership by the founding family now moving into its fourth generation.

Over the years the Picknelly family has diversified into other business enterprises. However, Peter Pan Bus Lines continues to be one of the best known and most respected bus operations in the nation and a leader in the bus industry. It has also amassed some impressive safety awards. Here is an updated company review that incorporates some information from older articles with newer updates and information.

The Family Heritage

The story behind Peter Pan Bus Lines starts in Picarelli, Italy, in the province of Avellino. This small community of about 4,000 is located about 30 miles east of Naples. Carmine Picariello, the son of a subsistence farmer, was drafted into military service in 1885 where he learned road construction and utility work. When he returned to his hometown after his military service, Picariello found poor economic conditions and a lack of jobs. In order to support his family, Picariello decided to come to the United States. His military experience with road construction and utility work got him a position with the Department of Public Works in East Orange, New Jersey.

In 1899, Picariello was able to bring his wife and two sons to the United States. Three more children were born. It is an interesting reminder of those times that Carmine changed the family name to Picknelly to



In a scene often repeated daily, a Peter Pan bus rolls past TD Garden and the Bruins in Boston. Founded 90 years ago as a family business concentrating on scheduled service, Peter Pan is still a family business dedicated to scheduled service today. The company has also become a leader in the bus industry and the recipient of several safety awards.

sound more American. The names of the children were Americanized at the same time. Some of the children later changed the spelling of their name to "Picknally," because it appeared to be more Irish. In those years it was easier to get employment with an Irish name than a name that sounded Italian.

Carmine died unexpectedly in 1907 and his son, Peter C., who was then only 15 years old, took over responsibility for the family. Family tradition holds that Peter C. got involved with motor transportation because

of his father's background with roads. Initially, he was employed as a chauffeur. Then, in 1919, Peter C. was able to buy into the association running a route along Central Avenue from East Orange to Newark. In late 1925, Peter C. along with three other Italian bus operators sold their vehicles and route medallions to Public Service of New Jersey and then moved to Springfield, Massachusetts to start a new bus company.

Interstate Buses Corp. was created in 1926 with the operating authority for an initial



This 1949 GM PD2903 represents the post-war era of the company when the fleet was painted black and white. Peter Pan operated several models of GM coaches through the years until they switched to MCI.



This PDA3703 was one of several GM coaches in the post-war Peter Pan fleet. In later years, Peter Pan would purchase newer GM coach models including the PD4104, PD4106 and the following decks or Buffalo buses.

route from Hartford, Connecticut to Providence, Rhode Island. Peter C. not only served as president of the new company but also obtained operating rights for an additional route to Albany, New York. In spite of the fact that the United States was in the midst of the Great Depression, Peter C. sold out his share of the partnership in 1932 to strike out on his own.

The Interstate Buses Company continued to operate and was eventually merged into Bonanza Bus Lines. It is noteworthy that in 2003, Peter Pan Bus Lines acquired Bonanza.

How Peter Pan Got Started

In 1933, Peter C. purchased the Yellow Cab Air Line that was based in Springfield, Massachusetts. It operated a somewhat round about route that started in Northampton, north of Springfield, then operated south to Springfield and turned southeast through Stafford Springs, Connecticut where the route turned northeast to Boston.

After acquisition, Peter C. named the new company Peter Pan Bus Lines after the main character in the Sir James Matthew Barrie classic about the boy who lived in Neverland and refused to grow up. Family tradition held that two of Peter's children – Janet and Peter L. Jr. – bore a resemblance to the characters of Wendy and Peter Pan in the book.

Initially, the operation was somewhat of a struggle because the round about route, then on conventional roads, took more than 3½ hours to drive. The company charged only \$3.50 for a round trip, which was a bargain in depression years, but the extra travel time worked against the company flourishing. Finally, after operating for a few years, Peter Pan won approval from the State of Massachusetts to operate directly from Springfield to Boston via Route 20. This reduced travel time to 2½ hours and made the operation more practical and viable.

This was somewhat of a turning point in the company's history. As the number of passengers increased, the company was able to expand and run more buses. As the need for more staff evolved, various family members joined the company. Bill Picknelly, the younger brother of Peter C., became the first maintenance garage supervisor in 1942. After World War II, Bill's son Carmen took over supervision of Peter Pan's maintenance and became a legend in the industry. Carmen's son Tom continues the family tradition as senior vice president supervising garage locations until his death in 2021. Tom's son Joe is now the senior director of maintenance and one of the fourth generation of the family to enter the business.

Another new addition to the staff came under tragic circumstances. Bill Picknelly, who had been serving as operations manager, unexpectedly passed away in 1948 leaving a serious gap in the company admin-

istration. Peter L. Picknelly, the son of Peter C., who was 18 years old and had been attending Northwestern University, "temporarily" left school and returned to Springfield to fill the void left by his uncle. He never did return to college but did become a legend in the bus industry.

When the new Massachusetts Turnpike opened in 1957, Peter Pan obtained operating authority over it. This cut travel time from Springfield to Boston to less than two hours – essentially equivalent to private cars and faster than trains. The company also expanded into other routes. By 1963 Peter Pan had reached a new milestone. The company was now running 28 buses and annual sales exceeded \$1 million for the first time.

Peter L. Picknelly

Peter C. Picknelly, who had founded Peter Pan Bus Lines in 1933 and managed it

It all started in 1933 with the acquisition of a round-about passenger route from Springfield to Boston, Massachusetts served by a handful of larger automobiles. This 1934 Buick was typical of the initial fleet. Later, the company was able to operate directly from Springfield to Boston and moved into operating buses.



since then, passed away in January of 1964. His 33-year-old son, Peter L., then took over as the second generation managing the company. Fortunately for all concerned, Peter L. had stepped into the company in 1948 when his uncle passed away and hence had several years experience in management. In addition to being a guy who liked buses, Peter L. was very good at thinking outside of the box and moving into new directions. He steered the company to charters and tours and then began to acquire companies outside of the bus business and purchase real estate. This helped put the company in a strong financial position.

His first efforts in this direction came almost immediately because of the 1964-65 World's Fair in New York City. The Peter Pan World Travel Service, a travel and tour division was created. Due to the moderate mileage involved, Peter Pan was able to offer one-day tours to the fair with all expenses included. In following decades, several businesses were purchased and added to the family holdings. These included Camfour, a sporting goods distributor, and Belt Technologies, a manufacturer of metal belts. The Picknelly family also became involved with insurance and bus leasing.

A New Terminal and Expansion

As the company expanded, it needed more space. An early move in this direction was made in 1958 when Peter Pan acquired the old Trolley Barn. It was built in 1897 when the Springfield Street Railway Company changed over from horse cars to electric trolley cars. At that time the company was operating 27 buses and had run out of room at their previous location. For many years the building was used for both a bus garage and corporate office. Your editor noted that some of the old trolley wire hangers remained overhead for many years.

A major turning point for the company came in 1969 with the opening of a new and modern terminal at 1776 Main Street in Springfield. In addition to serving as the primary bus terminal for Springfield, it also housed the Peter Pan corporate offices and fleet maintenance facilities. It created a "first" by combining Greyhound and Trailways operations with Peter Pan since the building was owned by neither major carrier.

It might be noted that the "new" terminal remained in full operation for about 48 years and continues to serve as a maintenance facility. In 2005 it was officially renamed the Peter L. Picknelly Transportation Center. In 1980-82 the old Trolley Barn was renovated. It was then used by Coach Builders, Inc., a Peter Pan affiliate that specialized in rebuilding and refurbishing buses.

Peter Pan Bus Lines was not the only bus operation of the Picknelly family. A company called Travel Time operated school buses in



1969 was a major turning point for the company when their new and modern terminal opened at 1776 Main Street in Springfield. In addition to serving as the primary bus terminal for Springfield, it also provided space for the Peter Pan company office and maintenance facilities. Both Greyhound and Trailways used this Peter Pan terminal.

the Springfield area and eventually transported 17,000 students daily on 600 buses. U.S. Bus was a coach operation based in Washington, D.C. in the 1970s and 1980s. Peter L. Picknelly was also involved with Sunshine Bus Lines in Florida and VIP Coach Lines in Atlantic City.

A major expansion came in 1985 with the acquisition of Trailways of New England. Peter Pan extended service over these routes

and came into the New York City market for the first time. The company was now running 150 buses and had a staff of 500. Further expansion came in the 1990s when Peter Pan acquired American Coach Lines in Washington, D.C., opened a office and maintenance facility there, and expanded service to Washington, D.C., Baltimore and Philadelphia.

This led to "fare wars" with Greyhound, the operator that had previously dominated

Peter Pan purchased its last GM coach in 1973 and moved to buying from MCI in 1974 with the new MC-8 model. Since then, they have continued to purchase MCI coaches for the Peter Pan fleet. In 1983, this MCI MC-9 with whitewall tires carried special lettering to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the company.



that market. At one point the fare from New York to DC dropped to \$5 while the newspapers covered the excitement. In 1999, Peter Pan and Greyhound decided to set aside their differences and worked out a pool agreement that would last for 18 years and also included joint service under the Bolt and Yo names for a period of time. It might be noted that in 1998, Peter Pan was still very much a scheduled service operation. That year 82 percent of the company revenue came from scheduled service, 13 percent from charters and tours and the last five percent from other sources.

A major turning point came in 1993 when Peter L. Picknelly acquired Monarch Place in downtown Springfield. Built in 1986 at a cost of \$110 million, the 25-story building was the tallest free-standing building between Boston and Albany, New York. It housed an office tower plus a 324-room Sheraton Hotel. It soon became a major factor in the renaissance of downtown Springfield. An interesting side note is that Monarch Place was built where the Springfield bus service operated by Peter Pan Bus Lines was located when Peter C. Picknelly purchased the company in 1933.

To some extent it can be said that Monarch Place completed the transition of Peter L.'s son, Peter A. Picknelly into bus company management. On his 21st birthday in 1980, Peter A. was named vice president of Peter Pan Bus Lines. He then became president in 1984 at 25 years old. In 1991, Peter A. became president and CEO when his father, Peter L., assumed the title of chairman. After the acquisition of Monarch Place, Peter L. moved his office there and concentrated on the building and other family business, leaving Peter A. to run the bus company.

In addition to having an excellent reputation as an astute businessman, Peter L. was



Monarch Place is a major part of the Springfield skyline and is obvious behind this Peter Pan MCI E4500 coach. Purchased in 1993, the 25-story Monarch Place was the tallest free-standing building between Boston and Albany, New York. It housed an office tower as well as a 324-room Sheraton Hotel.

extremely active in local affairs and invested heavily into his local community, primarily benefiting the youth in his area. At his 70th birthday celebration, when the family asked Peter L. to look back and name what he considered to be his major accomplishments, the first two items he mentioned were serving in the Army during the Korean War and becoming the youngest counselor and voted "Best Counselor" by his peers at the Boy's Club summer camp when he was only 15 1/2 years old.

Peter L. Picknelly unexpectedly passed away in 2004 while on a vacation trip to Portugal. Long acknowledged as an industry leader, Peter L. had been honored over the

years with countless appointments, directorships and chairmanships in transportation.

Peter A. Picknelly and Continued Expansion

Another major expansion came in June of 2003 when Peter Pan reached an agreement with Coach USA to purchase five bus companies in the New England area that Coach USA had acquired in 1998 and 1999. Included were Bonanza Bus Lines and Pawtuxet Valley Lines, both based in Rhode Island. Arrow Lines was based in East Hartford, Milford and Waterford, Connecticut. Coach USA was based in Boston while Main Line was located in Portland, Maine.

This acquisition effectively doubled the size of Peter Pan Bus Lines and added approximately 175 buses to the fleet and increased the workforce from approximately 750 to around 1,500. The fleet now amounted to more than 300 buses. Apparently because it did not operate scheduled service, in early 2004 Peter Pan sold the Maine Line operation in Portland to Cyr Bus Line in Old Town, Maine. A few years later, Cyr Bus Line sold this company to another local operator in Portland.

For the first time since its founding, Peter Pan Bus Lines was run by someone other than a member of the Picknelly family. On May 15, 2012, Brian R. Stefano stepped in as the new president and CFO. A 23-year veteran with Peter Pan, Stefano was a graduate of Western New England College with degrees in accounting and business administration. Peter A. Picknelly assumed the title of chairman and chief executive officer, a

In June of 2003, Peter Pan purchased five bus companies from Coach USA in the New England area that effectively doubled the size of the company. Included were Bonanza Bus Lines, Pawtuxet Valley Lines, Arrow Lines, Connecticut Coach USA and Maine Line. The acquisition of Bonanza Bus Line was somewhat prophetic because the founder of Peter Pan sold out his interest in Interstate Buses years earlier and that was later merged into Bonanza Bus Lines.



position that had remained vacant since the passing of his father in 2004.

More Improvements

In 2010, Peter Pan was the first major bus carrier to offer reserved seating on certain routes. Initially, these were routes connecting New York City with Hartford, Philadelphia, Washington D.C. and Boston, Massachusetts. In 2013, this program was expanded to include all scheduled service. This allowed Peter Pan passengers to purchase a ticket in advance and have a reserved seat. Those passengers who were not sure of their departure time or date

could still purchase tickets up to the time of departure at terminals.

Another new Peter Pan innovation added in 2013 was the "Locate My Bus" Web page on the Peter Pan Web site. Based on Saucun GPS technology, the Estimated Time of Arrival for the next bus was shown for each stop served by Peter Pan. Major Peter Pan terminals would also show this information and it was freely available to other terminals.

Two purchases were made in 2014. A new garage was opened in Rocky Hill, Connecticut just south of Hartford. Located near Interstate 91, this facility would help support

Peter Pan operations in the Hartford area. That same year the Student Prince and Fort Restaurant with a German-American menu and a location in downtown Springfield was acquired. This is located near I-91 and Monarch Place, the office/hotel complex and tallest building in Springfield that was acquired in 1993.

A unique anniversary took place on August 11, 2014 when Bridgestone announced the 75th anniversary of their tire leasing agreement with Peter Pan. It was on August 11, 1939 that Peter Pan agreed to lease tires from Firestone for three 10-passenger Chevrolet buses and five 19-passenger Beck buses on a cost-per-mile basis. While the agreement remained, it was obvious that the fleet had grown a little since then. In 2015, the company partnered with online Web sites to sell tickets on Peter Pan buses. These included Wanderu, Busbuds and Gotobus.

There were several new programs and improvements in 2016. Included was a new Web site as well as a dynamic pricing model and a loyalty program with perks. Service to Cape Cod was also expanded at this time.

The year 2017 marked two major changes for Peter Pan. The first was an end to the 18-year pool with Greyhound. Peter Pan's expansion of service into New York City and Washington, D.C. in the 1990s prompted a fare war with Greyhound. This was eventually resolved by pooling services over certain routes and even joint service under different names. Other improvements at this time involved establishing new selling locations in Boston, Philadelphia, D.C., Baltimore and downtown Providence. Paperless boarding

Peter Pan originally introduced billboard buses when you still had to paint the buses by hand. With the introduction of exterior wraps and graphics, the appearance of billboard buses has improved considerably. This one highlights the features of the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts.



Peter Pan was the launch customer for the new MCI J4500 model when it was introduced in 2001. They later returned to be the first to order the newly improved J4500 in 2013 and again in more recent years. Today, the J4500 model dominates the Peter Pan fleet and new coaches continue to be added on a regular basis. Shown here are some Peter Pan buses in a newer paint scheme on a multi-bus movement.



was instituted system-wide and a lowest price was guaranteed.

The second major change marked the start of the move from the old Peter Pan Bus Terminal when bus operations were transferred to Union Station. The old terminal, located at 1776 Main Street, opened in 1969. It combined Greyhound and Trailways service under one roof and served as the center of bus operations, as well as Peter Pan bus maintenance and corporate headquarters. On June 25, 2018, the Peter Pan corporate offices moved from the old terminal to the third floor of the newly-renovated Union Station. This leaves the bus maintenance operations remaining at the old terminal.

In addition to bus operations, the Picknelly family has acquired several non-bus businesses. These include Camfour - a wholesale sporting goods distribution company, Hill Country - a wholesale sporting goods distributor based in Texas, Belt Technologies - high performance conveyor belt systems, Century Woodworking, Architectural Windows and Doors, Duval Precision Grinding, PMP Air - providing private executive jet services, Opal Real Estate Group - Property Development and Management and The Student Prince/The Fort - an 80-year old landmark German-American restaurant. The family now owns a total of seven restaurants with two more under construction. Additionally, the family is also involved in several cannabis dispensaries.



Peter Pan either hosted or co-hosted four different Bus Bash events. These included 1982 at U.S. Bus in Tuxedo, Maryland; in 1987 with Peter Pan in Springfield, Massachusetts; in 1996 joined with Gold Star Line to host a Bus Bash in Tuxedo, Maryland and 2001 saw Peter Pan again host a Bus Bash in Springfield. Shown here are some of the buses often seen at these events.

Bus Bash Events

A total of four different Bus Bash events were either hosted or co-hosted by Peter Pan Bus Lines and affiliates. Your editor thoroughly enjoyed working with Peter L. Picknelly on these events. While he was an outstanding businessman, it was obvious that

he went out of his way for buses and bus people. Until today, this list of four Bus Bash events stands as the all-time record for one sponsor.

The fourth Bus Bash was held in May of 1982 at the U.S. Bus facility in Tuxedo, Maryland just outside of Washington, D.C. Peter Pan Bus Lines hosted the 14th Bus Bash in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1987. In 1996, Peter Pan Bus Lines joined with Gold Line to host a Bus Bash in Tuxedo, Maryland that included a tour of Washington, D.C. May of 2001 saw Peter Pan Bus Lines host a Bus Bash in its home town of Springfield, Massachusetts. This included a look at some of the first J4500 coaches in regular service and a ride on the new *Tinker Belle* boat.

I think it is appropriate to mention that over the years, Peter L. Picknelly was responsible for preserving and restoring some historical vehicles that were displayed at Bus Bashes and other community events. Noteworthy was a historical Buick that carried the early company paint scheme and represented the fleet when the company was founded in 1933. Next came a 1949 GM PD2903 that was beautifully restored and carried the post-war black and white paint scheme of Peter Pan Bus Lines. More recently, Coach Builders restored a 1939 GM Futurliner that was originally used for a mobile GM show in that era.

We will continue the Peter Pan story with the second and final part that starts with notes on the Peter Pan fleet and follows activities and events through to 2023. □

In 2017 Peter Pan moved operations from the former terminal at 1776 Main Street to the nearby renovated Union Station. Combining the old with the new created a multi-model terminal shared by Peter Pan, other bus companies, Amtrak and other rail operations. In 2018, Peter Pan's corporate office moved to the third floor of the Union Station complex.



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