

LOOKING BACK

BRUCE HAMPSON

The Barth



Aluminum was the material of choice for travel trailers in the '40s and '50s; this coach took it totally upscale

Evolution, whether described by Charles Darwin or dictated by an open marketplace, is never-ending. However, while self-powered recreation vehicles — motorhomes — were the logical progression from the increasingly ornate travel trailers of the 1940s and '50s, most coach manufacturers never toiled in the non-motorized arena. Most also never advanced beyond basic upgrades of their original ideas. They didn't evolve — so they became extinct.

Of course, many trailer manufacturers suffered the same fate. When the family-owned Barth Corporation set up shop in the mid-'60s to make travel trailers, the company quickly made a name for itself among the chic set. But when the company was still churning out trailers and truck campers five years later, it remained for an outsider to appreciate how well the firm's manufacturing techniques would adapt to the new motorhome market.

"Obviously, the construction they had for the trailers was excellent," noted Mike Umbaugh in the August 1986 edition of *Indiana Business*. "And, it appeared that (it) would adapt very well to motorhomes." So, Umbaugh bought the company — and as the name

suggests, almost immediately redirected its emphasis. (However, the company would continue to build trailers right alongside motorhomes until '73.)

According to an advertisement in the August 1969 issue of *Trailer Life*, the Barth was "more than just a travel trailer." The next month, readers would see just how much more, as the upscale all-aluminum trailer morphed into an upscale all-aluminum coach.

The first truly mobile Barth was a 24-footer that rolled off the assembly line at \$14,500 base MSRP. Of course, while even a stripped-down Barth was impressive, the company offered a wealth of extra-cost comforts, and most of them found their way onto the Barth 24 tested in the Summer 1970 edition of *MotorHome Life*. Bulked up with a 5.0-kW AC generator, 10,000-BTU roof A/C, 60-gallon fuel tank, stereo, water purifier, roof luggage rack/ladder and Monomatic potty, the "as tested" price bumped up to \$17,700 —

change to
Barth Motor
Company

high for the era, perhaps, but that amount would barely pay the sales tax on later models.

Built on a Chevrolet motorhome chassis, the coach employed Barth's patented body/frame construction (featuring interlocking aircraft-riveted .062-inch extrusions) and bridge-type corners with thick .040-inch aluminum skin, hand set and bucked for each rivet. Powering the 7,800-pound GVWR coach was a 255-HP, 350-CID Chevy small block, mated to a Turbo Hydra-Matic transmission. The Barth's square profile effectively negated any real fuel savings from its light weight; mileage still ran into single digits.

Interestingly, Umbaugh never considered abandoning the Barth's aluminum construction, although by the late 1960s, fiberglass had made a complete about-face. When Clipper Coach first tried using the fantastic plastic back in 1948 (for trailers), they failed miserably. When Wally Byam tried it again in 1952, offering the timeless towed Airstream shape in plastic, he, too, quickly saw the error of his ways. But by the time of the Barth, America was enam-

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ored of the stuff — making the aluminum motorhome something of an anomaly.

Actually, Barth didn't remain completely aloof from the lure of fiberglass. By the mid-'80s, the company offered its familiar boxy bus styling with optional molded fiberglass front and rear caps. The fiberglass imparted a more traditional motorhome appearance; otherwise, the coach designs were identical, right down to the price. Eventually, the squared-off, bus-style profile would win out entirely.

Surprisingly, the smaller bus style coaches weren't prohibitively expensive — the company offered 25-, 28- and 30-footers for less than \$60,000 — though the luxurious 35-foot flagship was only a grand shy of \$150,000.

In a test of a bus-style 28-foot Barth Motorcoach in the October 1983 edition of *MotorHome*, the

basis for the relatively high costs was evident. "Although we looked hard for shortcomings," the author noted, "we could find none except for the absence of a shelf under the bathroom sink. The Barth truly was one of the most problem-free motorhomes we've ever evaluated."

Four years later, the magazine tested one of the most refined (and expensive) Barth coaches ever built, the 36-foot International. Built on a Barth Regency chassis and filled with every conceivable creature comfort, the International priced out at a cool \$200,000. At that, however, the coach couldn't completely escape the "love it or hate it" attitude toward its bread-box shape. As one gentleman was quoted in the article, "You can't tell if it's coming or going."

The same might've been said of the company itself. Mike Umbaugh was astute enough to

diversify the company when the first oil embargo hit stateside in 1973-74, turning production to the development of an aluminum high-cube delivery van. In the '80s, that success led to the birth of a commercial division that created everything from mobile medical clinics to remote television production units.

Unfortunately, Barth Motor Company shut its doors in the late 1990s — although at least one aficionado, Keith Letherman, believed in the product enough to purchase the name and tooling in 1998 from then-owner Spartan Motors. In 2001, the Letherman Construction Company spent a reported \$500,000 to design and engineer a prototype. Ultimately, the plans were shelved "due to a lack of orders and support for the continuation of the Barth." ■