

B&B Coach Works

This innovative, family-owned company has set new standards for bus conversions.



In 1973 Gary Bennett, F26457, built a camper on the back of a pickup truck so he could take his wife, Sandy, and two daughters camping. An insulation specialist in commercial construction, Gary had a four-week vacation each year to spend with his family on camping trips.

In 1976 the Bennetts found a 1954 Crown school bus in Hollywood, California. Gary and Sandy used their technical and creative skills to perform their own motorhome conversion. They

started in February, and the conversion was completed by August 1, in time to take a planned trip from California to Florida's Walt Disney World for Disney's celebration of the U.S. Bicentennial.

During the conversion process, the Bennetts discovered that parts were difficult to find. They contacted several motorhome manufacturers in California and began buying obsolete parts. They accumulated a warehouse of parts from Landau, Vogue, Sportscoach, Executive, and other companies. As

word spread about the Bennetts' parts supply, a business began to grow. Soon customers were asking to have their purchases installed, which sparked the next stage of the Bennetts' business. The next step toward the conversion business came when Gary received a call from American Coach Sales asking him to build a motorhome interior.

Also in 1976, Gary drove by Newport Dunes, California, and witnessed an amazing sight. For the first time, he saw several bus conversions parked together. He could not resist stopping to meet this group, which turned out to be a newly formed FMCA chapter called the Southwestern Bus Nuts.

Imagine the excitement when these folks found out that Gary Bennett not only had hard-to-find parts but could also do myriad repairs, from mechanical to interiors. Among the Bus Nuts present were Bob Howell, F13823, and the late Charles Cheneweth, L9986, who later served as President of FMCA. Both of these gentlemen became clients and good friends of the Bennetts. This was also when Gary fell I love with Eagle buses.

In 1980 the Bennetts sold their Crown conversion and began looking for another bus. They wanted an Eagle, but the cost was prohibitive. Gary heard about a wrecked Eagle 01 model in



Sacramento. It had a damaged front end and was available for \$2,000. Friends said it would be impossible to repair and convert the 01, but Gary liked a good challenge. To the delight and entertainment of neighbors and family, the new acquisition found a home in the Bennetts' bus barn.

Gary found a replacement front end in an unlikely place. A fire had damaged eight coaches in a campground storage area in Mexico. Gary went to the salvage yard, dissected the front end off an Eagle, and brought it home. Sandy and daughters spent hundreds of hours sandblasting and painting this replacement section. Attaching the new front end was a momentous occasion for all.

This part of the restoration was finished but the balance of the conversion was not completed for another five years. While running the coach conversion business, Gary was still working his regular full-time job and Sandy was raising two children. They worked on their personal coach conversion in the few scattered free hours that remained.

One day in 1981, with three buses in their yard in various stages of repair, the Bennetts decided to make their business official. They

secured the necessary licenses and opened their first shop-B&B Coach Works, C3309-in Huntington Beach, California.

In 1984 Bob Howell was involved in an accident that caused considerable damage to his 1962 Eagle 01. Known as "Mr. Eagle," Bob never allowed anyone to touch his coach. This time, however, he called on the Bennetts, which Gary and Sandy considered a tremendous compliment. This job marked the first time that B&B Coach Works performed work associated with an insurance claim. Bob's coach was insured with Alexander & Alexander, Inc. B&B continues to work with A&A and other insurance companies as needed.

In 1985 Gary finally withdrew from the construction trade union and devoted all his time to the conversion business. By 1988 the company needed more space. They moved the shop to Garden Grove, California, where they had 30,000 square feet inside and an equal amount of space outside. The Bennetts employed up to 15 people, and the business stayed open almost 24 hours a day.

In addition to interior and exterior conversions, B&B performed repairs and warranty work as an Eagle factory service

center. The Bennetts also converted two S.W.A.T trailers-one for the city of Huntington Beach, and an equipment trailer, complete with gun racks, for the city of Costa Mesa.

By 1990 Gary and Sandy realized they needed to scale down and take some time for themselves. They moved B&B to its current location in Las Vegas, Nevada. The shop has 10,000 square feet. Two full-time employees help Gary, Sandy, and their daughter Donna. In addition, several specialists work "on demand" on projects involving insulation, engine work, and exterior painting. Sandy and Donna do all of the exterior siding work. Sandy does the wiring and Gary does everything else, including stretching, widening, fabricating, and all other systems. All three of them help the cabinetmaker. Donna does all the cabinet sanding, staining, and finishing.

Through the years, Gary has designed many technical features that have become standard in other conversions. He has never patented these ideas and offers them freely to others. Gary and Sandy consider it a compliment when their ideas are used.

The Bennetts have implemented many creative and technical

changes for the Eagle bus. Their first conversion, completed in 1976, is one example of their creativity. This bus had 1-inch by 2-inch furring strips from end to end to provide stability for wall-mounted items.

In 1980, the Bennetts created the swing-out (café-style) bay doors. These lightweight doors have a clean, smooth appearance with no rubber hinge. The original bay doors are heavy and have a rubber hinge that can split and allow the door to fall.

That same year, the Bennetts revised the engine accessibility

The years 1985 and 1986 were also productive for the Bennetts. Gary fabricated fiberglass end caps to update the look of the older bus and designed the "T" slide window for the driver and entry door. The "belly car" was designed to be carried in a bay to avoid towing. A receiver/trailer hitch was also created specifically for the Eagle bus. Holding, fresh water, and fuel tanks were constructed to use as few bay compartments as possible. The water tanks are made of 1/3-inch polypropylene and are built out of square to facilitate drainage.

The Bennetts began constructing cardboard interior mockups in 1989. This helped identify problems before the interior was constructed. The early 1990s brought further innovations such as slide-out rooms, louvers above the engine door for increased

40-foot piece of aluminum along the window area. This eliminates the need for vertical rivets and improves the exterior appearance. In addition, the Bennetts designed polished stainless-steel bumpers, non-fading taillights that use dual-filament bulbs, and a radiator sprayer.

Windshields for the 07 Eagle, a production 102-inch bus, are no longer available. Gary and Sandy created a small glass insert for the middle to allow the use of standard windshields, which are readily available.

Eagle engine alternatives. In 1997 the Eagle engine compartment was redesigned to accommodate a Cummins engine. Many owners consider the power of the older coaches insufficient, especially when driving in mountainous regions. Most of the converted Eagles have a Detroit Diesel 8V71 or a 6V92 engine, but with some engine compartment and cooling system modifications, the engine can be replaced.

The engine changes were initiated by Rod Paulson a top-notch diesel mechanic who owns and operates a mobile repair service based in Madera, California. The Bennetts often call him for engine work and always refer their California customers to him.

Mr. Paulson wanted to make a change in his own personal coach, so he replaced his Detroit Diesel engine with a Cummins. Traditionally, the replacement had been an 8V92 Detroit. Because

Mr. Paulson wanted increased durability, increased torque, and decreased emissions, he developed a procedure for installing four cycle, in-line 6 engines. To date, he has successfully retrofitted the 855 Cummins (electronic or mechanical), the Big Cam 3



Bob Howell's 1962 Eagle 01 was severely damaged in a traffic accident (above, but B&B made it look great again (right).

hatch, began to use foam insulation, and devised a procedure to raise the roof to provide more headroom. They first built the entry door air step in 1981, and is still one of their most popular features. A permanent part of the bus, this step operates off the Maxi Brake, so it is automatically extended and retracted.

In 1981 and 1982, the Bennetts introduced several more innovations. These included a full-size driver entry door; a fiberglass housing for the remote backup camera; a louvered engine door for better ventilation; a spiral entry staircase to allow side-by-side seating for the pilot and copilot; and a vinyl headliner that improved appearance and was easier to install.



ventilation widening of coaches to 102 inches, and lengthening of coaches to 45 feet. Of course, these enhancements necessitated the fabrication of new fiberglass end caps to fit the wide-body bus.

Other creations from the Bennetts include stretching a single

Cummins 400-horsepower, the Series 60 Detroit (electronic only), and the Caterpillar 3406 (electronic or mechanical). These installations have been performed in Eagles and MCI buses. Each application is a bit different and involves many details to consider. "There are pitfalls if you're not careful," Mr. Paulson said.

Owners who want more power should consider the following choices. Adding a turbo to an 8V71 will cost from \$6,500 to \$14,000. This includes a complete engine overhaul, cooling system modifications, and changing the pistons and cam timing. The cost of a factory-rebuilt 871 engine with a turbo is approximately the same; factory warranty included. A factory-reconditioned Cummins mechanical engine, which would carry a factory warranty, will cost approximately \$18,500. This includes the power steering pump, Jake brake, alternator, starter housing, and flex plate, New

Cummins, Series 60 Detroit, or Caterpillar 3406 engines will cost approximately \$30,000 each. Of course, they have a factory warranty, with an extended warranty option. An engine replacement can be accomplished in about 30 days; labor costs approximately \$10,000.

Installing a 6-cylinder in-line engine in an engine compartment designed for a 6V or 8V engine requires enlarging the engine access hatch from the bedroom. The actual loss of interior space is only a 10-inch-high space below a bed positioned rear to front. If the bed is positioned side to side, the floor space toward the rear of the coach will be elevated 10 inches. Although the customer usually supplies the coach for a conversion, Gary said B&B will help in locating a suitable unit. The average cost for converting the exterior is \$50,000 to \$60,000. This includes stretching, widening, raising the roof, and installing new

skin. Interior conversion costs start at approximately \$60,000 and increase with added options.

In spite of their heavy workload, the Bennetts have been active FMCA members. Gary is a co-founder, charter member, and first president of the Eagles International chapter, established in 1986. The Bennetts also helped form a new FMCA chapter in 1989, Buses Only.

According to Sandy Bennett, "The best part of this business is that we meet the most wonderful people in the world." As we have seen in other family-run businesses, clients often become friends. Gary and Sandy Bennett welcome all visitors; so look them up if you are in Las Vegas-you'll be glad you did!

For further information, contact B&B Coach Works, 4350 Arville, #6, Las Vegas, NV 89103; (702) 873-4415.