

Contemporary Collectibles: Collectors hop on the Greyhound memorabilia bus

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

There aren't many towns as small as Hibbing, Minn., that have given the world not one but two major icons. Most of us know it as the hometown of Bob Dylan, but it was also the birthplace of the Greyhound bus, which changed the transportation system of America, giving its citizens a romantic vision of speeding effortlessly across the wide-open spaces of their country.

The Greyhound story dates back to 1914 when a young, Swedish-born diamond drill operator named Carl Eric Wickman decided to change careers and open a Hupmobile automobile agency with another driller named Andrew G. Anderson. When they failed to sell their only car, they began using the seven-seat 1914 Hupmobile to shuttle miners across the two-mile distance between the small towns of Hibbing and Alice for 15 cents a ride (25 cents round trip.)

The service soon became so popular that overflow passengers were riding on the running boards and fenders, leading to additional cars and drivers, and extending the area they covered. In 1915 Wickman joined forces with Ralph Bogan, who was running a similar service from Hibbing to Duluth, calling their new firm the Mesaba Transportation Company, which in turn joined forces with Orville Caesar to form a new entity, Motor Transportation Company.

In harsh winter weather, drivers were equipped with snow shovels and passengers were provided with lap robes and hot bricks to warm their feet. In the meantime, a man named Frank Fageol built an enclosed bus for intercity travel in Muskegon, Mich., painting them a solid gray to disguise the effects of dusty roads. According to legend, an innkeeper along the route remarked that his buses looked like greyhound dogs streaking along, and by 1922 Fageol was advertising his bus line with the slogan "Ride the Greyhounds."

When, with backing from several railroads, Wickman began buying up smaller bus lines, Fageol's among them, he appropriated the name, becoming the Greyhound Corporation and adopted the running dog as its trademark in 1926 - an appropriate symbol suggesting streamlined speed. The following year they started making transcontinental trips from California to New York, and by 1935 the corporation owned 1,726 buses covering more than 46,000 route miles.

The Oscar-winning 1936 film "It Happened One Night," featuring a Greyhound bus, didn't hurt business, either.

By the 1950s, however, private car ownership was offering a serious challenge to public transportation. To lure the public back, Greyhound produced a revolutionarily streamlined bus called the Scenicruiser, designed by preeminent industrial designer Raymond Loewy and built by General Motors. Suspended by air rather than the old metal springs, the bus reached new standards of riding comfort, offering accommodations on two levels, the upper being an observation deck, and even had a spare engine if one broke down.

The deluxe Scenicruiser was in operation from 1954 to 1978.

COLLECTIBLES

There is a plethora of material available to the Greyhound bus enthusiast. Several firms, including Corgi and Arcade, made toy replicas of the Scenicruiser, Flexible Clipper and GM New York World's Fair Fishbowl models in cast iron, tin and plastic, and there are also plastic bus banks available.

Also found are bus china, similar to railroad china, such as dishes made by the Shenango company, as well as salt and pepper shakers, paperweights, celluloid knives from Solingen, Germany, ads focused on the scenic wonders to be found across the country and on the advantage of leaving the driving to someone else, brochures that illustrated the expansion of intercity bus travel from mere transport to tours and vacations, and postcards showing both vintage buses and bus stations, many of which boasted handsome art deco design.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible". She cannot answer letters personally.

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