

RV REPORTER

Searching For Safety in
Recreational Vehicles

Quarterly

1999-7

RV CONSUMER GROUP

**Man Killed
in Runaway
Bouder**



Are Class A Motor Homes Safe?

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*"...about as safe
as a convertible Corvair,"*
says JD Gallant

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**Southwind
Disintegrates
in Rollover**



EVIDENCE PROVES RESEARCH NEEDED

Every day I am bombarded with questions about class A safety. My answer is becoming quite simple: Evidence indicates that a typical class A motor home is about as safe as a convertible Corvair.

There are many reasons for the premise that class A's are generally unsafe, but at the top of the list is the fact that most class A's lack controllability on the highway. RV Consumer Group has long emphasized that every class A be controllable. We urge RVers to be sure that the motor home has at least five percent of the gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) in reserve for stopping deficiencies. We press for good balance and we emphasize long wheelbases. Because there will always be accidents, we promote low-speed collision protection. We are active in researching structural integrity and we rate motor home interiors for safety features that could soften the results of a fire, rollover, or collision.

“There are absolutely no guidelines, regulations, or open discussions on rollover protection.”

fast, they come apart in rollovers, and they offer little protection in collisions.

It is a shock to many RV consumers that there are no regulations to govern RV safety. I suppose I should take the “no” out of this statement because there is an ANSI code that does provide guidelines for some electrical, plumbing, heating, and fire standards within the industry. Except in a handful of states that inspect for adherence to the ANSI code, enforcement of these guidelines (they only become regulations after adoption by state legislatures) are left to the industry. In the 46 states that have no internal inspections, the industry does its own inspections. Where the state has no control and the manufacturer is not a member of RVIA (Recreation Vehicle Industry Association), there is no protection for the buyer. Simply: Anything goes.

One fact is absolutely clear: there are no low- or high-speed collision regulations governing RV structure. There are absolutely no guidelines, regulations, or open discussions on rollover protection. Other than the ANSI code—which has some basic combustible material controls for the interior—

there are absolutely no controls to mandate the use of flame-retardation materials to slow flame-spread throughout the structure.

Now, let's take seat belts. Many people are shocked when they find out that the placement and fastening of seat belts, other than in the cockpit, are not regulated. In motor homes, fastening methods and placement of seat belts behind the driver are left to the discretion of the RV manufacturer. There is no protection before the accident. After the accident, one may address any complaint in a court of law.

The nonregulation status within the RV industry is a result of the millions of dollars paid to lobbyists to influence state and federal legislators and agencies. Except for RV Consumer Group, there is no one to present a unified front for the RV consumer. The problem is that the RV industry can spend one million dollars for every one thousand dollars we raise for research and action.

From the above you can see why we must use strong tactics to get the word out and action started. I know of no other way than to punch to the nose or even below the belt. We're not going to convince the RVIA to spend millions on safety improvements by talking across the table unless they find out we can punch where it hurts. They are too big to bring to their knees, but we know they don't want a black eye.

My personal crusade is simple: I have promised that at the turn of the century I will aggressively begin building a team of 100 investigative reporters. These volunteers will collect and report on the results of claims and accidents such as you see in this edition. I will attempt to raise the thousands of dollars needed to build this research program and I will begin by begging for your financial support. My assistant, Dolores, keeps telling me that I need to be better at choosing when to punch and when to hug. I have begun my punching—and if you need some hugging to get aboard, please see Dolores. ♥

Because we do not want to show bias, we are publishing the documentation we have on class A accidents to-date. Manufacturers and brand names are not being withheld. We have attempted to give accurate details as we have received them from various sources, including accident reports, to complete these summaries. We are asking our readers to make a determination as to whether further research is necessary. At the end of this report, we will be asking for your opinion.

Are Class A Motor Homes Safe?

ACCIDENT #A-01

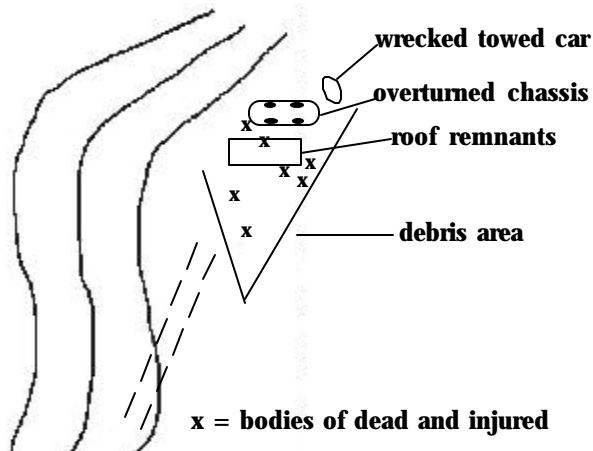
Three Killed and Four Injured in Rollover of Scenic Cruiser

Three members of one family were killed, two were seriously injured, and two were hospitalized as a result of a rollover in a one-year-old Scenic Cruiser by Gulf Stream. According to the police report the brakes failed and the driver lost control on a Wyoming highway. Although the curve was slight, the motor home gained speed on the long downgrade.

The report read: "The driver applied the vehicle brakes until they would not hold anymore. The vehicle skidded off the right side of the roadway. The vehicle overturned three times. It broke apart, coming to rest upside down. All passengers were ejected. The temperature was in the 80's and there was a slight breeze."

According to survivors, the driver smelled the brakes burning and told family members to lie on the floor. Two occupants were ejected after the initial roll, three during the second roll, and two occupants were carried with the roof and chassis.

The report indicates that the Scenic Cruiser began to come apart on the first roll and had totally disintegrated by the third rollover at approximately 250 feet from where the motor home left the highway. It seems that the motor home went about 100 feet off the highway before it rolled. The first body was found with the first debris at about 140 feet from the highway. During an interview with the wrecker operator, he said that the only large pieces of the motor home left were the roof



and the chassis. The remaining pieces were so small they had to be picked up with a front-loader and loaded into large trash bins. From talking to witnesses, survivors, and the reporting officer, the wrecker operator concluded that the motor home itself was not overloaded with personal items, but that it was pulling a small car without auxiliary brakes.

Both the wrecker operator and the reporting officer agreed that the brakes were heavily applied but did not slow the vehicle.

The owners of the motor home, Cecil and Mary Simpson, and their 6-year-old grandchild, Katy Finlon, were killed. Their daughter, her husband, and another grandchild were among the injured. The driver's sister was also seriously injured. All occupants were California residents. California law is unclear as to the requirement for auxiliary brakes on automobiles towed behind motor homes. No investigation was made into the actual cause of the accident.

Tell us what you think about this accident. ♥

ACCIDENT #A-02

Southwind Disintegrates During Rollover in Desert



When Laura Neumann woke up she was under a pile of debris that had been her Southwind. Her brother-in-law John was thrown clear but he could see part of her under what remained of the roof. He did not know whether she was dead or alive until later. Laura did not fully wake until she was in the hospital.

Laura and John had been riding down the desert highway in Southern California when a car pulled in front of the

— continued on page 4

Southwind. The motor home broadsided the car and headed for the desert. Before it went 200 feet it rolled completely over by the side of the road to end on its wheels. The 1989 Southwind came completely apart. The only thing that had any semblance of a motor home was the back. The walls had collapsed, the roof came completely loose and flipped off as it came back on its wheels. Everything that had comprised Laura's home was a pile of junk. She lost many valuables that simply disappeared.

Laura bought the Southwind because Fleetwood claimed that it had a steel cage. She thought that she had plenty of protection in case of a rollover or slow-speed collision. Laura now feels that her Southwind was structurally unsound and that it never was designed to sustain a rollover.

Tell us what you think about this accident. ♥

ACCIDENT #A-03

Foretravel Rolls Over Without Crushing Occupants



Don and Vera Clair found themselves upside down in their 1991 Foretravel motor home after being struck by another vehicle, but they were pretty much uninjured. Although the cockpit roof was crunched and the rest of the motor home was twisted and in shambles, Don and Vera were happy to be survivors.

The Clairs were traveling at only 55 miles-per-hour when a car struck them and locked onto the motor home. The combined force of impact and drag by the attached vehicle caused the motor home to go out of control. The motor home, its towed dinghy, and the attached vehicle

then tumbled down an embankment.

The walls withstood the approximately 30,000 pounds of total weight as it rolled onto its roof. The roof over the cockpit area was crushed, but it did not reach the occupants. The cabinets and interior were ripped free and the overhead television landed between the driver and passenger's seats. The Clair's belongings were mixed with a shambles of food, appliances, fixtures, and cabinets.

Although Don and Vera were traumatized by the experience, they are determined to continue their RVing adventures in another Foretravel.

Tell us what you think about this accident. ♥

ACCIDENT #A-04

Bounder Disintegrates as it Strikes Tree During Runaway—Man Killed

The Bounder was pulling a new Saturn as it headed down the grade. Although the driver, ex-highway patrolman Legnon, was reportedly conscientious about having the best motor home/dinghy combination possible, the Bounder couldn't slow down enough to stay on the road. It left the road and hit a tree. According to sketchy reports, the motor home disintegrated upon impact and the driver was found wrapped around the tree.

Although the lawyers involved are tight-mouthed about this case, it looks like both Fleetwood and General Motors will be hauled into a Texas court for misrepresentation of the facts involving dinghy towing with a Bounder. To our knowledge, questions involving the total lack of structural integrity of the Bounder has not been included as part of the complaint.

Tell us what you think about this accident. ♥

— continued on page 5

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ACCIDENT #A-05

**Bounder Comes Apart at Seams
as it Traverses Smooth Desert**



When Ken Steckman passed out at the wheel of his Bounder, luck was on his side. The Bounder chose the soft and level desert to escape the hard highway. It didn't go very far, however, before its innards started falling apart and its shell started falling off. It hit a concrete abutment that slowed it down but it kept going. By the time it stopped, it had traveled only a few hundred feet—it was in shambles. This Bounder would never travel the highway again.

During its short journey many of the inside cabinets came loose. The overhead cabinets in the cockpit fell on Sharon Steckman and seriously injured her back. Something hit Ken in the face and broke his jaw. The slideout room stayed in but practically shook itself to death with cabinets and fixtures barely hanging on.

Ken and Sharon are not happy with the way the Bounder responded to the rough ride. They feel it should not have come completely apart. Because of their injuries and financial losses, they intend to proceed with a lawsuit against Fleetwood.

Tell us what you think about this accident. ♥



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Accident #A-06

Adventurer Flips on Highway - Occupants Survive



In attempting to avoid hitting another vehicle, Bill Zawislak lost control of his 1995 Adventurer and found himself upside down in the meridian. His wife Lois was stretched out on what had been the ceiling. She was unconscious.

After the paramedics arrived they braced the heavy chassis before attempting to remove Lois. They removed some of the pressure on the structure with a wrecker and, with gasoline and battery acid dripping on them, the rescue team was able to get her out of the wrecked motor home.

The dinghy had come loose and boomeranged to the other side of the busy highway—crossing two lanes without striking another vehicle. In a report submitted by the rescue team, the main damage to the motor home was a result of the collapse of the front pillars and support beams at the windshield. Lois Zawislak's legs were pinned under the collapsed steel beams. The report went on further to say that the cabinets and interior



generally held together except that the right wall came loose. After extensive study of police and rescue team reports backed by our investigative reporter's photography, it appears that the side isle was the culprit. With no support from interior partitions, the wall simply pulled free of the floor and the roof.

Tell us what you think about this accident. ♥

Accident #A-07

Occupants Lose All But Lives in Fast Burning Dynasty



Although Danny and Mary Lou Biddle previously had problems with their Monaco Dynasty, including front wheel bearings, they were surprised to find smoke coming from the left front wheel as they drove down the highway. Shortly after exiting the motor home with their three guests, the fire consumed the entire right front and reached the propane tank.

It appears that the fire was the result of a bad wheel bearing in the left front wheel. It got so hot it combusted the tire and other components in the area. Even with three fire extinguishers, the Biddles could not extinguish the fire. Once the flames started working in the structure, there was no stopping the fire from reaching the propane tank. By the time the fire engines got there, the motor home was demolished.

It surprises us that a modern vehicle is not constructed with flame-retardant material sufficient to keep fire spread to a minimum. What if such a fire had happened within a heavily-trafficked tunnel or in a kindling-dry forest? Basic research into the problem indicates that the only fire retardant material required is on the interior paneling.

Tell us what you think about this accident. ♥

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Accident #A-08

Executive Catches Fire



Charles Craven, his two boys, two dogs, and one cat were driving their Monaco Executive motor home through local streets when the engine caught fire. Preliminary investigation reports indicated that the fire's origin was at the engine battery box and at the cables running back from the battery. These cables may have come in contact with the engine exhaust system and shorted out, thus causing the fire.



The Cravens have looked at another Monaco Executive with the same floor plan and found the battery cables were held in place with nylon ties and, at certain locations, were within one-inch of the exhaust manifold.

Tell us what you think about this accident. ♥

Accident #A-09

Man Killed as Bounder Hits Tree After Losing Brakes



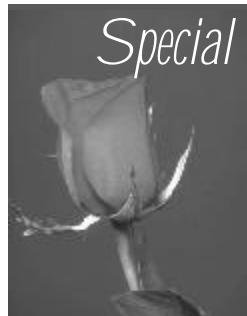
The 83-year-old man bravely honked his horn and waved people out of his way as the Bounder gained speed on a California hill. But luck was not with Amos West, Jr. as his Bounder hit a pine tree at an exit. The front half of the motor home was totally demolished from the force of the collision. It virtually exploded on impact.

Mr. West had braked the motor home heavily. He even applied the emergency brake. Investigators suspect that the problem was inefficient brakes. Reports indicate that the 1987 Bounder built on a Chevrolet chassis was towing a dinghy without auxiliary brakes. Because Bounders commonly have low payloads and short wheelbases, lack of control in such situations is not surprising. A full investigative report on this accident is pending.

Tell us what you think about this accident. ♥

We have reports of more accidents, but we think these are enough to get you thinking. Please give us your input and opinions. Turn to the back page, fill out the opinion poll, and mail or fax to us. We will print the results in the next issue of RV Reporter. ♥

Special Acknowledgement



Our sincere and appreciative thanks to Lifetime Members Alice Stevens and Don Berger for their continued financial support of our research program.

Thank you, Alice and Don, for saving lives!

Your Letters...

Technical Aspects of Weight and Balance Issue Provoke Response

The Spring 1999 issue of the RV Reporter is probably one of the most important that you have ever published. With regards to this weight and balance issue, I would ask that you take up with your engineering consultants what I have to offer. Even though I hold an engineering degree, it has been 20 years since I've practiced engineering — that is, “doing the calculations.” What I have to say may need professional review.

Your emphasis on GVWR, GAWR, and the actual weights of the vehicle ready for travel are very important, as the Canadians recognize and as you have stated in the newsletter. However, the most critical tie-in for your wheelbase-to-length ratio limitations is not overly stated and not even hinted at until the very last box in the newsletter entitled “According to the Society of Automotive Engineers.” Perhaps this understatement is due to a lack of engineering knowledge on your staff's part for which you owe no apology. But I need to bring it to the fore and that is the mass property known as “moments of inertia.”

To keep the following as simple as possible, let me explain a 3-axis coordinate system where all 3 axes converge at the center of mass of the vehicle. The x-axis is called the longitudinal, or roll, axis. It is parallel to the longitudinal centerline of the vehicle. The y-axis is called the lateral, or pitch, axis. The z-axis is called the yaw axis and is perpendicular to the ground plane formed by the x and y axes. It is the moment of inertia about the yaw axis that is pertinent to the discussion of RV rear axle overhang and the wheelbase-to-length ratio.

In simplistic terms, even though the RV may be within its GVWR and GAWR, it may have a dangerous yaw moment of inertia. Look at an 18-wheeler in comparison to a fifth wheel/pickup truck RV combination. Have you ever noticed where the wheels on the 18-wheel trailer are located? They are near or at the rear of the trailer. This is not so with the fifth wheel/pickup combination. Why is this? The 18-wheeler has a tractor that has a much larger weight-carrying capacity percentage when compared to its own total trailer/truck GVWR than does the pickup truck. This means that the 18-wheeler carries a much higher percentage on the kingpin than does the pickup truck. So the RV trailer must carry much more weight on its axles, percentage wise, than does the 18-wheeler's trailer. To bear this burden this is partially accomplished by moving the axles on the RV fifth wheel forward of its rear end. By doing so, the yaw moment of inertia comes into play much more so when compared to the 18-wheeler trailer. This is why the 18-wheeler can get by with a short wheelbase tractor, whereas the tow vehicle for the RV

fifth wheel must have a longer, relatively speaking, wheelbase for stable towing. It is the yaw moment of inertia that also needs to be figured into the wheelbase-to-length ratio of motor homes.

I'm sorry that I cannot bring the numbers to bear on this assertion. But it is too important of an issue for me to let it go by without saying something.

Mike Paul, Wisconsin

Everything you are saying, Mike, sounds very good to me. We must keep in mind, however, that every RV manufacturer has a staff of engineers who are still building motor homes that cannot go straight down the road and trailers that wobble and flip for no apparent reason. As a non-engineer technician responsible for analyzing the situation, I must live by performance rather than theories.

Mike, you must know as well as I that an RV is not an “engineering miracle.” RVs are built by an unregulated and unsophisticated industry. They are built for

fun rather than productive use. Because of their many deficiencies, some of them are death traps. Although we know this, we also see the industry booming. Some of the manufacturers who are making the highest profits are turning out substandard products. I know this because I see the results of production and I read most of the “official” reports produced by the industry.

Because the barriers are so strong, we must begin with the simplest parameters. We at RVCG stick to parameters that have worked quite well and will work quite well if engineers will build according to those basic tenets. They must adhere to GVWRs. They must be built with balance according to GAWR. Motor homes must be designed with sufficient wheelbase to allow for adequate stability under all but the severest road conditions. Trailers must be designed with axle placement to provide proper hitch weight while suppressing tendencies for tail wobble. And, the list goes on.

Building a well-balanced RV that will stop within established guidelines while responding to the needs of the driver is not difficult. It is being done by a few manufacturers with some models. The manufacturers know when they are doing right and when they are doing wrong. We have proof of this. We do not, however, know what to do about it. Thus the dilemma of a hard attack or acquiescence. Because we don't know what either will accomplish, we at RVCG try to keep to a middle road. Thanks for your input. ♥

“RVs are built by an unregulated and unsophisticated industry.”

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Answered by JD Gallant

Do Dual Pane Windows Do What Is To Do With Dew To Stop Mildew?

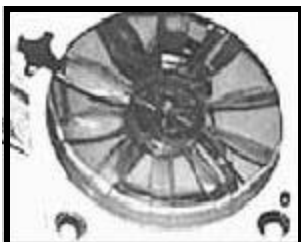
I am in the process of ordering a 29-foot class C motor home, model year 2000. One option available is the factory installation of Thermo-Insulated dual-pane windows, instead of the standard single-pane windows. The price for this option was obtained directly from the manufacturer—an MSRP quote of \$850.00. The additional weight for the dual-pane windows is 85 pounds. I understand that having dual-pane windows will help eliminate condensation from forming and better insulate the motor home. Is this true?

David Peaslee, Washington

A two-word answer to your question, Dave, would be, “No” and “Yes.”

They cannot help eliminate condensation because condensation is nothing but dew on the inside of a container or room. The moisture is in the air. It will settle on the coolest spot available. If that spot is part of a wall, it will settle there. The more moisture in the air, the more of it will settle. If the windows provide better insulation than the walls (especially in the corners), the moisture will begin to turn into mildew in hidden places.

The only way I know to eliminate moisture-laden air is to vent it to the outside with good power vents and cross ventilation. High-powered roof venting should be provided for bathroom and galley. If you are a heavy breather while asleep, you need good venting in the bedroom. In a mini, a great collector of moisture will be the windshield. The entire cockpit will also be a great collector of cold air. I recommend installing drapes or curtains



This powerful roof vent is designed to exhaust moist air to the outside.



Torque windows allow for good venting in all kinds of weather.

to separate the cockpit from the living area when living in temperatures below 40-degrees Fahrenheit.

I have not yet found dual-pane torque windows. Because they are better than sliders for ventilation, I recommend torque windows for cross ventilation at the galley and in the bedroom. If you can have dual-pane windows installed in the larger windows and leave the ventilating windows as torque, it might work well because the moisture will settle on the angled glass and drip to the outside. When living in an RV in cold weather, I use the windows as an indicator of how well I am controlling moisture. For example, I never cook with open pots. When condensation does collect on the windows, it's easy to wipe with a sponge.

Yes, Dave, dual-pane windows are good insulators. They are especially helpful in cold-dry climates and where it is extremely hot. The \$850 will be returned through comfort and energy savings if you are going to use it in these extremes.

I know that 85 pounds doesn't sound like much, but if your net payload is already less than 1,500 pounds (which I suspect is the case), that 85 pounds will be cutting into your reserve for stopping. Dual-pane windows have their place, but I'm not sure that they are very practical for a mini unless you're planning on living in a snowdrift. ♥

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Your Letters...

V10 Engine In Class A's Getting Bad Reputation, Says Member

I've been reading various website billboards and I have read that the Ford V10 engine seems to be having some problems on class A motor homes.

According to specifications, the class A has a V10 with 275 hp and the class C has a V10 with 265 hp. Why the difference and why does there seem to be more problems with this engine on the class A and not the class C?

Barbara Arril, Quebec

The Ford V10 engine is designed for vans and trucks, Barbara. With an approximate 4-to-1 axle ratio it can pull 15,000 pounds without too much of a problem. It can occasionally pull up to 18,000 pounds but this shouldn't be constant. A typical class C weighs between 10,000 and 14,000 pounds. This is within the range of the V10. Gas-powered class A's typically weigh between 15,000 and 20,000 pounds. To get enough power at the rear wheels you need to lower the axle ratio closer to 5-to-1. This increases the speed of the engine dramatically at highway speeds. This increased RPM puts more stress and wear on the entire engine. Because RVers hate to slow down for hills, the average V10 is literally pounded to death every time it must pull a grade with a class A.

I think the Ford V10 can be an efficient engine with reasonable longevity if it is driven correctly. Like everything else in RVing, education is the key. ♥

Who Determines Seat Belts in Motor Homes, Grandparent Asks

In February 1998, when we purchased our motor home (with two couches facing one another in the rear), the salesman refused to recommend safety belts for those seated on the couches. I understand the legal issues and why he did not recommend those belts. However, I am most concerned about the safety issue (not the legal issue) and wish to provide for the safe travel of our passengers, especially our four granddaughters, ages nine through eighteen, who often accompany us on our travels.

I have nowhere to turn for advice, statistics, directives, etc. I have contacted our local police departments, the

Highway Patrol and Consumer Reports to no avail. You are our last hope. If no study has been done relative to the above, perhaps one needs to be launched.

Norah Lynne Brown, Ohio

That was a smart salesperson, Norah Lynne. I wouldn't want to recommend any modification or addition of seat belts. The law says that the location and attachment of seat belts is the responsibility of the manufacturer. Any changes that you make must be completely on your own. You must accept the responsibility for any errors in location or attachment. ♥

Bus Conversions - Are They Safer Than Standard High-Line Coaches?

I have a gas rig now but, like many, I consider "moving up" someday when we're able to spend time traveling and living on the road. I've read about and looked at diesel pushers. To save money I think one would be wise to purchase a high-line coach.

How do these high-line coaches compare, generally speaking, with bus conversions? Are these conversions safer or more reliable?

Gene Rusco, California

Many so called "high-line" motor homes are built the same way as "low-line" motor homes, Gene. They simply have more glitter. A bus conversion is a heavy-duty shell built on a commercial bus chassis. At least, that's the way it's supposed to be. Bus conversions should be the safest and most reliable way to go. They will also be the most expensive.

Bus conversions are often plagued with the same overloading problems as other motor homes. We often find models with personal payloads under 3,000 pounds. This, of course, allows almost nothing for reserve. ♥

WE WELCOME YOUR COMMENTS!

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If these benefits and conditions get you all excited, please send an email to JD Gallant or Dolores Haley at: volunteer@rv.org

We need the few. The proud. The RVCG grunts.



Court of Public Opinion Updates

Monaco vs Biddle Case #1999-2

On June 24, 1999 Danny and Mary Lou Biddle took a one-day trip with their Monaco class A motor home. On their return trip, the motor home caught fire and within minutes the entire coach was engulfed in flames. It was totally destroyed. The Biddles and their guests escaped unharmed.

Soon after the fire, the Biddles wrote: "One of the many problems we have had with the motor home was with the braking system and wheel bearings on the front axle, driver's side. This is the area where it appears the fire started. We have no idea as to the exact cause of the fire, we only know that we have lost our lifetime dream."

The Biddles are happy to report that Monaco has settled the case to their complete satisfaction.

Holiday Rambler/Endeavor vs Drake Case #1998-12

Richard and Jacqueline Drake decided to pursue their case against Monaco aggressively. They purchased several shares of Monaco stock and attended the annual stockholders meeting. At the meeting, they had an opportunity to get some points across about their case. A short time later they went to an arbitration hearing.

The Drakes report that Monaco/Holiday Rambler has resolved their dispute to their complete satisfaction.

Fleetwood/Jamboree vs Lewis Case #1999-1

Ted Lewis filed a lawsuit against Fleetwood when he realized that his 1997 Jamboree class C motor home was over the weight specifications, making it unsafe to drive.

Ted writes: "I am pleased to report that we have settled our case with Fleetwood to our satisfaction. Thank you for your support. Your forum is a tremendous resource for RV owners."



Check our Court of Public Opinion at www.rv.org



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- I think that Class A motor homes are generally unsafe and regulations should be enacted and enforced to make them safer.
- I think that Class A motor homes are as safe as can be expected and we must leave the responsibility of structural integrity to the manufacturer.
- I think that _____

My thoughts on the accidents featured in this issue:

Accident #A-01 _____

Accident #A-02 _____

Accident #A-03 _____

Accident #A-04 _____

Accident #A-05 _____

Accident #A-06 _____

Accident #A-07 _____

Accident #A-08 _____

Accident #A-09 _____

Comments: _____

Please feel free to attach another sheet if you have more comments.

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