

History of the GMC Great Lakers Motorhome Club, Inc.

By William Helmore, GMC Great Lakers Charter Member, revised by Steve Johnson and Karen E. Breen



Ted's Drive In: A cruising destination for decades.

The Beginning

The initial organizational meeting of the Club was held at Ted's Restaurant, 42934 Woodward Avenue in Bloomfield Township—Michigan's first drive-in restaurant—during a snowstorm in mid-January of 1976. The meeting was the result of a great deal of work and effort by the GMC Truck and Coach Division of General Motors, the Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA), a group of 15 very devoted owner families, and GMC executives.

The "GMC Michigan Wolverines" were chartered on January 24, 1976 and encompassed not only Michigan, but Indiana and Ohio too. This would be the first GMC motorhome chapter chartered under the auspices of the FMCA and

also the first chapter of GMC Truck and Coach Division's GMC Motorhome Owners Club (GMC-MOC); they held rallies in May, July, and October. At the Club's first rally in May of 1976, its name was changed to "The GMC Great Lakers" and its scope changed to incorporate states and provinces that touch the Great Lakes. The name change was made to appease the Buckeye and Spartan fans who were not happy with "Wolverines!" Enlarging the geographic area would embrace a larger group of prospective members. By the Club's second rally (June of 1976 in St. Ignace, Michigan), the infant motorhome club had grown to 65 member families!

On July 23, 1977, GMC-MOC was incorporated and became "GMC Motorhome Owners Association, Inc." (GMC-MOA). In 1977, the Club dropped its affiliation with FMCA in favor of GMC-MOA. At its peak, there were 25 GMC chapters around the country.

While affiliated with the FMCA, the Great Lakers were one of the largest regional product-oriented GMC clubs. We've had members in Arkansas, California, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia!

The Great Lakers club was rechartered with the FMCA on March 10, 1981. In 1988, the Club petitioned the FMCA to reinstate the original 1976 charter date; it was granted. In 1990, the board felt that the Club should incorporate and the membership agreed. On December 7, 1990, the Club became "The GMC Great Lakers Motorhome Club, Inc.," a Michigan Corporation.



NEWLY ELECTED OFFICERS of the "GMC Michigan Wolverines," first chapter of the GMC Motorhome Owners Club, map future plans with men who helped organize their group. From left: Ralph Hodgdon, FMCA General Manager; Virgil Barbe, Wolverines president; Ann Schipper, secretary; L. L. McKenzie, Jr., treasurer; Max Cramer, GMC Staff Manager, MotorHome Sales.

Since its inception, the Club has had the good fortune to find and elect a long list of talented officers, the first of which were:

1976 Officers

President	Virgil Barbe
Vice President	Bob Beyer
Secretary	Ann Schipper
Treasurer	L. L. "Mac" McKenzie
National Director	Mac McDonnell

These individuals have served as president of the GMC Great Lakers:

Club Presidents

Virgil Barbe	1976-78, 1980-82, 1987
Edward Kurtz	1979
Tom Tryon	1983-85
Alex Birch	1986
Dan Ryan	1987 (assumed Virgil's term after he resigned)
Ivan Johnson	1988-90
Bill Howard	1991-93
Don Bolles	1994-96
Dick Olmsted	1997-99
George McLeod	2000-02
John Harvey	2003-05
Franklin Griffin	2006-08
William Helmore	2009-11
Richard Balsley	2012-14
Dale Frahm	2015-17
Becky Johnson	2018-21
Jerry Newman	2022 - present

Newsletters

Immediately following that January meeting at Ted's, General Motors began to publish a newsletter in February of 1976 from the GMC motorhome facility office in Pontiac, Michigan for and about GMC owners. [GMC Motorhome Traveler](#), as it was called, contained articles about club doings, resources, service tips, independent club activity calendars, and many extravagant rallies. Twenty-eight issues were published through February of 1979, and provided to owners at no charge.

The Club will always be indebted to Maryann Grausam, editor of the *GMC Motorhome Traveler*, for all of the work and effort she put forth and the organizational assistance she provided. Over the years, the following have been involved in the production of the Great Lakers newsletter:

Newsletter Publisher/Editors

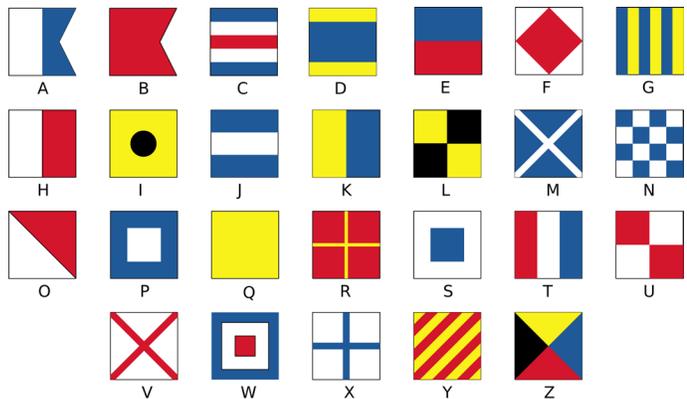
Sally Barbe	1976-78
Ray Gamble	1979
The Staubs	1980, 1987
The Davises	1981-86
The Skalskis	1988-92
William Helmore	1991-96
Dottie Harman	1996-99
John Wright	2000-17
John Pryzbylek	2018-21
Karen Breen	2022 - present

Initial Identity

Employing the International Code of Flags as a unique manner to identify GMC motorhome owners' clubs began in 1976. Nautical flags were originally used as a method of communication and identification for ships at sea, or relate messages across distances, adopted to create distinction to the GMC motorhome at events, and the simplicity of identification, around the globe.

Each GMC club has their own insignia flag showcasing their club by using the first letter in their club's name. The design was used on patches that were offered to each member of the GMC clubs and were originally designed by GMC Truck and Coach under the direction of GMC-MOA club organizers, Mac and Gloria McDonnell.

The GMC-MOA also issued a plaque to each member family indicating their club affiliation and number within that club. The first 50 plaques were reserved for the president of that club, with the membership counting off after that. GL059C was originally assigned to Alex and Bea Birch (yes, *the* "Birchaven" namesake). When Alex became president of the Club, his GL number became GL005. "C" or "H" after a number signifies "charter" or "honorary" member.



Rallies

The Club holds rallies each month, May through October. In past years, a Club birthday party was held in January at a hotel with a dinner and varied activities; today, we celebrate the club's birthday with a kickoff rally each May.

The club has held hundreds of rallies, attended dozens of special rallies (GLASS [Great Lakes Area Spring Spree]/GLAMA [Great Lakes Area Motorhome Association]; GMCMI [GMC Motorhomes International] and eight FMCA conventions). Some of the special rallies have been joint rallies with other GMC Clubs. Rallies were held throughout Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Canada. The furthest summer rally was held in Branson, Missouri in 1995. Several winter rallies have been held in Florida (1990, 1992-93, 1995-96, 1998-2002, 2005) and Arizona (1994, 1997, 1998, 2000-21) for snowbirds!

A discussion took place in January of 1979 regarding the need to transport the Club's equipment to rallies. In May, the membership considered the purchase of a single-axle trailer. It would be built with a 4' x 8' bed with 13" wheels. The membership was assessed \$15 to cover the cost of the trailer and was delivered in late July. This trailer served the club for many years until repairs and the need for a larger trailer became evident.

In January of 1990, a ballot was sent to the membership regarding the purchase of a new and larger trailer. It would have twin axles and an awning to provide shelter; servers would be able to stand and work within the trailer. The funding came from a \$20 assessment from the membership and the remainder from the Club's treasury. The club eventually sold this trailer in 2015.

Website and Newsletter

Our website, gmcgreatlakers.org went online in the summer of 2004. It was established and maintained by member Walt Halley. In April of 2012, the Club agreed to contract with a professional web designer to update the site's structure, graphics, and navigation, under the guidance of the newsletter publisher/editor. In January 2018, the site was rebuilt by club member Steve Johnson.

The [Great Lakers Newsletter](#) began publication in April of 1976 to promote interest of and participation in its first rally. The location was Groveland Oaks County Park in Holly, Michigan for the following month. It is presently published five times a year and features tech tips and member news as well as information about the planning and afterglow of its rallies.

The Great Lakers Today

In January 2020, the Great Lakers club officially dissolved their affiliation with the Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA). As an FMCA chapter, all club members were required to maintain a current FMCA membership.

In August 2019, a significant increase in FMCA member dues caused the Great Lakers Board to examine how FMCA benefited the Great Lakers club. Over the years, FMCA's purpose of promoting recreational travel and modern recreational vehicles/services was falling farther away from the Great Lakers club purpose. In addition, the required FMCA membership of our club members was deterring new members from joining the Great Lakers, and risked the departure of many current club members.

In October 2019, a special ballot was mailed to all Great Lakers members, resulting in 71% of members voting in favor of dropping our chapter affiliation with FMCA. As a result, the Great Lakers club is a standalone, nonprofit organization whose sole purpose is the preservation of the GMC Motorhome through shared knowledge and history at club rallies, and through club communications.

Won't you join us?

