

# Blue Bird's Wanderlodge and Express Join the Complete Coach Works Family

by Larry Plachno

Photos courtesy of Complete Coach Works and Blue Bird Coachworks



The recent addition of Blue Bird Coachworks to the Complete Coach Works family effectively completes the Blue Bird reorganization and expands Complete Coach Works into new areas. Included in the Blue Bird Coachworks product line is the commercial Express series with a seated interior and the traditional Wanderlodge recreational vehicle. Shown here is the new 45-foot Wanderlodge Premier XL equipped with slides.

The recently announced acquisition of Blue Bird's Wanderlodge and Express product lines by Complete Coach Works effectively marks the completion of the Blue Bird reorganization and adds substantial new dimensions to the Complete Coach Works family. It also brought forth several questions from NATIONAL BUS TRADER readers. Hence, we decided to gather up information on the past, present and future and put it all together for you.

## Complete Coach Works

Complete Coach Works is located in Riverside, California, on the east side of the Los Angeles Metroplex and south of San Bernardino. The company was founded by Dale and Terri Carson to provide special services to the transit industry which were not easily available elsewhere. Initial operations started in 1986 with a modest contract to convert RTS buses with conventional exhaust to roof exiting exhaust. From there the company expanded to installing ADA-compliant wheelchair lifts, adding LED destination

signs, converting buses to CNG power, replacing older engines with the newer Series 50 and Cummins ISL four-stroke engines, and even repainting bus fleets.

CCW enjoyed steady growth and a loyal customer base due to Dale and Terri's guiding philosophy of customer satisfaction and delivering a superior product. The company developed a practical approach to natural gas engine conversions for transit buses and completed several projects including Santa Barbara Air Bus, the City of Fairfield, California, and the City of Simi Valley.

The development of hybrid conversions for buses led to a 21-bus contract for Elk Grove in addition to units in Santa Rosa and San Luis Obispo. Recently, Complete Coach Works developed their expertise in wheelchair lift retrofits on intercity coaches. In one 12-month period between 2006 and 2007, CCW installed close to 100 lifts for Coach USA and then provided more than 250 lift installations for Greyhound Lines on MCI D, D3, G4500 and Dina coaches.

CCW also works on rail equipment. The company has done several rail projects for Metrolink, the heavy commuter rail component of the Los Angeles transit system. These included major accident repair to both locomotives and passenger cars.

An interesting note is that Dale and Terri and Jerry Farrar invented the Glass Guard anti-graffiti window liner for transit buses and then formed Transit Care to manufacture and distribute the product. Glass Guard was an aftermarket add-on kit for the inside of any transit bus window. It introduced an inexpensive piece of plastic that could easily and economically be replaced if marked up by vandals. This saved the cost of replacing the window itself.

This led to the invention of the "three-minute window" that took the concept of the vandal shield and built it into a new window. Transit Care then became the supplier of a complete window assembly that integrated the vandal shield into the window frame. If damaged by vandals, it could be



Located in Riverside, California, Complete Coach Works provides a wide range of specialized services for buses, trucks and railcars. Shown here is a fleet of Freightliner trucks from Pacific Gas and Electric being retrofitted to CNG power at Complete Coach Works.



The Express is available in lengths of 40 and 45 feet with seating for up to 57 passengers in the larger unit. A wide range of interior options includes a restroom, fare boxes, destination signs, video systems with TV monitors, Wi-Fi, and in-motion satellite.

replaced in three minutes. Transit Care was sold to Ricon in 2006.

### Blue Bird Corporation

Headquartered in Fort Valley, Georgia, Blue Bird has a long and interesting history that dates back to 1927. In that year, the Blue Bird Body Company was founded by Albert L. Luce Sr. to build school bus bodies. Almost immediately the company became one of the first to offer all-steel school bus bodies, replacing the wood-bodied school buses then in use.

In the era following World War II, the traditional one-room school houses were closed and the need for school buses increased substantially. Blue Bird became a leader in this industry.

Over the years, the company would add other product lines. In 1950, Blue Bird introduced a flat front school bus and called it the All-American. The Wanderlodge, a luxury recreational vehicle, was developed from the All-American design and introduced in 1963. In the 1970s, Blue Bird began building commercial buses for transporting adults. This would eventually develop into several distinct products.

Blue Bird remained a private, family-owned company for 65 years. In 1992, the company passed to a management buyout group that temporarily moved the corporate office to Macon while the plant remained in Fort Valley. In 1999, ownership of the company was taken over by the Henlys Group PLC from the UK. Volvo was also substantially involved.

Henlys developed financial problems that affected Blue Bird. There was a reorganization in 2004 under a new holding company that saw Henlys' creditors emerge with a major share in the company. Then, in Jan-

uary of 2006, there was a bankruptcy filing. This was followed by the acquisition of Blue Bird by Cerberus Capital Management, L.P.

Cerberus invests in companies and banks virtually all over the world. One of their companies is ACE Aviation Holdings, the parent company of Air Canada. One of their best known companies is Chrysler Holding LLC, which was recently acquired from Daimler-Chrysler. Yes, this is the company that builds vehicles under the Chrysler, Jeep and Dodge brands.

Under Cerberus, the operations of Blue Bird Corporation were split up three ways. Blue Bird's core school bus building business is still located in Fort Valley, Georgia and is owned by Cerberus.

The smaller transit and commercial bus product lines were moved out of Georgia. Cerberus acquired North American Bus Industries (NABI) in Anniston, Alabama as well as Optima Bus Corporation in Kansas. The Optima operation and Blue Bird's smaller transit and commercial buses were moved to the NABI facility in Anniston.

What remained was the Wanderlodge line and the larger commercial seated bus line known as the Express model. These two product lines had traditionally been tied together because they were built in the same factory and shared some commonality in chassis construction. These were sold to Coachworks Holdings, Inc., a D/T Carson Enterprises, Inc. company. Included in the

**The Express and Wanderlodge share a common chassis structure. Built at Blue Bird Coachworks in Fort Valley, the chassis is regarded by many as the strongest chassis in the bus industry. The Express and the Wanderlodge are completed on nearby finishing lines.**







The cockpit area of the Express offers state-of-the-art features and controls. Options like fare boxes and destination signs can be added for scheduled service operations.



Shown above is part of a fleet of Express buses recently completed at Fort Valley. The company holds a GSA multi-year agreement to build and supply the Express to government agencies.

sale were 32 acres of property and more than 320,000 square feet of indoor manufacturing space located across the street in Fort Valley from the school bus plant. Also part of the sale was the "Bird's Nest," the campground for Wanderlodge owners located on Blue Bird property.

### Product Line

The Express is essentially the seated version of the Wanderlodge. It is sold in two different lengths, 40 feet and 45 feet. Altoona-tested and designed for a 12-year life, the Express features stainless steel body construction, underfloor luggage compartments, and seating for up to 57 passengers. Major options include a restroom, an ADA-compliant lift and restraint package, and numerous entertainment and electronic devices. For transit and commuter express operators, the Blue Bird Express offers destination signs, fare boxes, and full audio/video systems. For highway coach

applications the Express can be ordered with numerous appointments ranging from a bare bones prisoner transport to a plush charter and tour vehicle with TV monitors, DVD players, Wi-Fi, in-motion satellite, and other features.

Being built in Fort Valley, the Express complies with "Buy America" provisions and hence is an obvious favorite with public sector operations. The company already holds a GSA multi-year agreement to build and supply the Express. In addition, the Express is also being offered to transit fleets for bus rapid transit and commuter express service. The Express is sold directly out of Fort Valley. Steve Richardson is the East Coast sales manager for the Express.

The Wanderlodge has traditionally been at the top of the list for recreational vehicles. A new 2009 Wanderlodge model was unveiled to the public on January 15, 2008 at the Tampa Super Show during a cham-

paign and cheese cocktail hour. A wide variety of floor plans and appointments are offered. The current model is the 2009 Wanderlodge Premier XL that is 45 feet long and 102 inches wide. The Wanderlodge is sold through dealers that include Harvey and Steve Mitchell at Parliament Coach; Holland Motor Homes in Holland, Michigan and San Diego, California; and John Bleakley Motor Homes in Douglasville and Unadilla, Georgia. Rick Lamb is the national sales manager for Wanderlodge.

Dale Carson takes a close personal interest in the Blue Bird operation. He and Macy Neshati alternate their weeks at Fort Valley so there is always someone from the Carson companies there. However, there is a resident Fort Valley-based management team including a head of production, as well as a head of materials management with duties including warehousing and inventory control, a head of engineering, a parts manager and a service manager.

The Birds Nest campground is still there and open to Wanderlodge owners who stop in for service or to visit the plant.

### Recent Improvements

There have been several recent improvements in both product lines.

At the rear, the Express has had the rear cap updated and the modernized engine doors were changed to "barn door" style to provide technicians better access and roominess for service work. The front cap has been modernized and updated while high intensity headlights have been added for ease of access and maintenance. In addition, the Express has been lengthened to a true 45-foot platform.

The Express is available to eligible public agencies through a blanket multi-year purchase order from the Government Ser-

The current Wanderlodge model is the 2009 Premier XL. It was unveiled to the public in Tampa in January of 2008. In addition to the upgraded interior, the Wanderlodge also features slides by HWH.





The spacious interior of the new Wanderlodge is enhanced by HWH slides, providing an appearance that no longer looks like the inside of a bus.

This attractive galley area shows some of the Wanderlodge interior upgrades that put it on the same level as the expensive highline conversions.

vices Administration (GSA). GSA makes the bus available through their Auto Choice program which is literally a click and buy process on the GSA website. The Express is also now available as an alternatively fueled bus with both Compressed Natural Gas and Hybrid power trains.

In similar fashion, the Wanderlodge has also recently received upgrades at the front and rear and has been made into a true 45-foot coach. However, the biggest improvement to the Wanderlodge is in the interior with dramatically upgraded and updated interior packages that can be custom designed.

The Wanderlodge interior has been upgraded to rival and even surpass the best

highline coaches. Standard features now include a stackable washer/dryer, a built-in Sub Zero refrigerator with dual freezer drawers, and air activated sliding pocket doors at the bedroom and lavatory area. Enhanced electronic and entertainment equipment includes a Sony Bravia 600 watt entertainment system with 12 speakers, a subwoofer, two 40-inch high definition LCD screens, dual high definition receivers, and an in-motion satellite system.

Physical interior enhancements include the generous use of tile, granite, and marble as well as genuine leather furniture and designer fixtures and shower. There also is a keyless entry system and Girard automatic

awnings with wind sensors for auto retraction. The Wanderlodge comes with HWH slides that are installed at Fort Valley and have an integrated HWH leveling system. Mechanical improvements include an active handling suspension system, upgraded axles still featuring independent front suspension, disc brakes all the way around, and outboard air bags for a more stable ride and minimum body roll in turns.

For additional information on the exciting new Wanderlodge, contact any of the Wanderlodge dealers. For information on the new Express you can phone (478) 825-0330 or send an e-mail to sales@bluebird-coachworks.com. □

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