

a Dodge truck chassis.

What followed was hundreds of companies producing thousands of vehicles in amazing quantities; 526,650 last year.

It moves so fast you can barely tell the players, even if you have a scorecard. Styles and companies come and go at an incredible rate, bouncing along on the stormy seas of our nation's economy. RV sales are controlled by the discretionary portion of our income as well as far less predictable variables of attitude and emotional tone. Add to that an occasional fuel crisis, or competition from other forms of recreation (whatever's 'in'), and you can see why companies like Open Road, Rectrans, and GMC (motorhomes) have thrown in the towel. Despite the fact sections of the industry are growing, this summer's fuel situation and the reduced RV sales that will come with it will further deplete the ranks. Similar problems in coming years will also contribute to this depletion, and only the best, most stable companies and vehicles will make it through. Much of the basic history of the recreational vehicle industry remains to be written.

Cruising through Denver at sunup, I was really getting into it. Sunup and me? That's a real change. One reason I've chosen this career was having to deal with just one 7 o'clock per day; but is it pretty. Then came the mountains.

Going across Route 80 had been pretty uneventful until then. Fuel stops (more frequent than I'd have liked as the 360 cubic inch Dodge V8 broke in), some food, a little rest, and physical necessities (more about them later). Except for my episode in Iowa, Trans Van's road manners were fine. After getting used to its size, cruise control, air conditioning and stereo helped the miles tick by very comfortably.

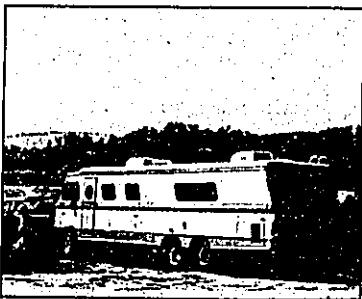
Heading for Aspen to pick up my favorite friend Nancy (she was skiing and I had the broken ankle), I hit my first twisty pass. Getting uphill was no problem, though the 4 barrel was almost always all open (expensive) and the Torqueflite occasionally got confused and scrambled shifts, but the turns were a real handful. Though the Dodge chassis' handling has improved drastically over the years, Trans Van's still big and topheavy, and even heavy duty suspension doesn't cut it on slippery, tight mountain roads. Power brakes did a fine job, hardly noticing the RV's extra

weight as I fell down the other side of the mountain at 55 (well . . .) miles an hour. If you're doing it for the driving experience, take a car.

Once up there, it's worth it. There are no words sufficient to describe the beauty. If the Government wants us to stop traveling in RVs, they're going to have to close the Rocky Mountains, also Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Pacific Ocean, etc.

The Vehicles

Like snowflakes, it seems that virtually no two recreational vehicles are ever identical. For the most part that's true. Despite the fact that well over a half million units were sold last year, most were individually hand assembled. An industry where you're not sure what's going to sell next week, let alone next month, isn't conducive to the mega-dollar tooling and mass production that are a cornerstone of the auto industry. With RVs changing so rapidly, it's difficult to define specific classes and cover them



all . . . so, we'll take an overview, and try to get everything in (if we miss your baby, don't feel bad).

At least there's a clear starting point. The smallest and generally least expensive RV is the camping trailer. Towed behind a car, these little wonders can fold out into a two bedroom apartment with kitchen and bath (well, almost) at a moment's notice. It's still pretty close to roughing it; but since they're inexpensive, easy to pull and add little aerodynamic drag, camping trailers will no doubt see an increase in popularity as fuel gets scarce.

A step-up is the conventional travel trailer. Ranging from the low teens to around thirty feet long, trailers cover a wide range of lifestyles up to a fully self-contained home on wheels. Since they've been around longest of any RVs, many are very refined; it's a shame that much of that may be lost but, cars necessary to pull the larger units are becoming fewer and more

expensive. In the future, smaller, lighter, and more aerodynamic designs will be needed, following the example set by Airstream years ago.

An alternative exists in the form of '5th wheel' trailers. Designed to be pulled tractor style by a hitch in the bed of a pickup, these relatively new units offer the advantages of other travel trailers in a modern, efficient package. They're designed to be used with trucks, where more powerful engines will likely remain available for years.

Speaking of pickups, these top selling multi-purpose vehicles have been the object of much RV attention in recent years. The most basic change is the Cap, a simple enclosure of metal or fiberglass, added to the bed to extend storage or provide shelter. The latest version cuts through the back of the cab, and extends the interior to create sort of a mini-van (the 'in' setup for Japanese pickups on the west coast). For those of you who don't like your passengers, several companies are selling an all weather version of just the interior—no cap—ala Subaru Brat.

It's a big jump to the slip-in camper. These are funny shaped self-contained units that slide into the pickup bed and go along for the ride. With a sleeping area hanging over the cab, many of these use space very well, making comfortable traveling for two (maybe two and a half). Best of all, with a little effort, the whole thing slips out of the truck's bed when you don't need it, saving fuel and freeing the pickup bed for other purposes. Lately, there's been a move to build units like this permanently onto pickup chassis (especially Japanese minis), and though some are very nice, I think a convertible unit is more in keeping with the times. In fact, the better ones could see a surge in popularity in the near future.

From pickups we move to vans, where most RV action's been centered lately. It seems almost impossible to list, let alone describe, all the things that've been done to vans over the past couple of years, but here goes. Most basic is the van conversion, with a custom interior, exterior trim, and perhaps a custom window or two, all added to the basic van. Some would not call these immensely popular units a true RV, but what could be moreso (if this van's rockin', don't bother knockin' . . .)? When you begin modifying a van's body,

Continued on page 13