

## **Gulf Streamers 2008 Buddy Rally in Tampa, Florida** **January 15-20, 2008**

I don't know what I was expecting when I signed up for this rally last fall. What is a good rally? Friendship, fun, food and fabulous shows or places to visit are good ingredients. Well, our Gulf Streamers Buddy Rally was all that and more. Led by the efforts of Bonnie Cooper (and daughter Erica), supported by Les and Jean Potteiger, wagon-master, and countless other helpers, we had a terrific rally for over 70 happy campers.

Bonnie had secured a close location for our Gulf Streamers about 100 yards from the RV display area of the 2008 Florida Super Show. She and Les had arranged for a large tent for our activities and food functions. Les and other helpers were on call with two large golf carts to help weary or disabled folks to specific areas, anywhere in the large show area. This was just for starters. Bonnie and Les passed out registration gift bags and welcomed us with a catered dinner in the tent. They introduced a scavenger hunt for items hidden in the Gulf Stream RVs displayed in the RV show. What a wonderful hunt (as long as the dealers didn't arrest us). By finding the most items from the Gulf Stream RVs on display, the successful hunters qualified for cash prizes of \$100, \$75 and \$50. In addition, all the items collected would be given away in additional drawings at the end of the rally. Then Bonnie reviewed all the extra items that would make our rally special over and above the Florida Super Show elements. This included a dinner and musical play Wednesday night; a pizza lunch Thursday; a Subway lunch on Friday; a wine and cheese reunion on Saturday, and finally a farewell hot breakfast on Sunday before the drawings and goodbyes. This orientation occurred on Tuesday, the day before the show opened, giving us a chance to settle in, not, however, before Bonnie organized a car caravan to the Hard Rock Casino Tuesday night. No one fessed up on wins or losses.

Bonnie also came up with a great idea to welcome "first-timers." Whenever a Gulf Streamers' member attends a first rally, we all should make an effort to welcome him, making him comfortable. Bonnie developed a system to encourage this process, which would result in a cash prize drawing. It is an interesting paradox; we go to rallies to meet friends and renew acquaintances and it is natural to gather in what some would call cliques. But it is also interesting and rewarding to meet new people and incorporate them into our group. I had the opportunity to meet several unique individuals. The first was Marvin Panch, one of NASCAR'S 50 Greatest Drivers and in the National Motorsports Hall of Fame. To be honest, I don't know much about NASCAR, but I learned a lot more as we dined and chatted during the rally. It was impressive as some folks approached Marvin, asking about records that he held and races he had won, including his 1961 Daytona 500 win, in addition to his other 16 major wins. He was burned badly in an early race before the drivers adopted the namex fire-proof underwear to avoid these problems. He also raced before spoilers and wide tires made the sport safer. By the end of the rally, I had an autographed press release photo. Marvin was heading to Daytona to be honored at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Daytona Races.

While we all are not famous drivers, we are no less interesting. I was lucky to meet with and dine several times with Sandra Parker and Maxine Keene, two great folks from North Fort Myers, where I have wintered for the last several years. On the face of a meeting, you don't see the connection; but then you learn they are from Northeast Ohio where I spent most of my life. Sandra was a professor at Hiram College, where one of my sons almost attended. Then as they talked about their summers near Ashville NC, we found they stayed near Marvin's summer home in the same area. How many times do we say it is a small world before we are compelled to talk with every new person we meet? During my chats and dinners with Marvin, Sandra & Maxine, many other rally members came up to introduce themselves to these first-timers, showing that Bonnie's system was working. Another first-timer that I talked with was Bill Terry, who was a member of Escapees like myself. We are more alike than you know.

Wednesday, the RV show opened with coffee, donuts and a line-up of hungry campers. We had over 1300 RVs of all types and prices, 350 vendors of parts, services and accessories and finally an assortment of musicians, clowns, jugglers and oddities, such as the huge redwood tree carved out to become an RV. Looking over this array, one may be inclined to muse: So much to buy, so little time or, as some said, "Eyes that exceed the Budget." The motor homes were of every configuration and price range. I viewed the \$1.4 million Prevost and the classy, expensive Travel Supreme. However, I was more impressed with the Gulf Stream Tour Master with a TV viewing/Rec. Room and a huge walk-in closet, a floor plan that others will copy but never duplicate. Featuring a full wall slide-out, Gulf Stream achieved all this living space by incorporating a Murphy bed, an old concept updated to fit new needs. They engineered a bed that folds up in the wall and includes a large TV screen on the underside of the bed. On the wall

opposite are two large recliner chairs for kickback viewing style. On the lower-end motor homes, Gulf Stream came up with another win in the Vista Cruiser Mini, a Class C, with great fuel mileage, a full wall slide-out and a KING SIZE Bed. Kudos to the folks at Gulf Stream that keep coming up with home runs. Having a motor home, I did not review the trailers or fifth wheels; but there seemed to be an endless array.

After a full day of widow shopping (and drooling), I was ready for our night out with Gulf Streamers. Bonnie and Les had two large buses waiting to whisk us off to Tampa's Performing Arts Complex. After a quick trip downtown, we were ushered into a beautiful comfortable dining area. They had arranged a great dinner buffet of gourmet foods in superb surroundings. Great food and enjoyable conversation preceded the musical play "The Drowsy Chaperone" and we had great seats. If you haven't seen this musical, don't miss it; it is Broadway's record-smashing hit, loaded with laughs and has the most Tony awards of the 2006 musicals. Based on the ticket prices I saw, Bonnie is gifted to get so much for our rally cost.

The show management was slow to get electricity to many of us and other show participants. Bonnie and Les continued to press them for taking care of our group and providing each of us with contact names and phone numbers for electrical hookups. By the time we got back from our night out, we had power. The show manager apologized for the confusion on the last night of the show.

Wednesday was more window shopping with the parts and service suppliers. If you haven't been to the FL RV show, I recommend it to you. If you can't find it here, I don't know where you can get it. We returned to the Gulf Streamers tent for a tasty pizza lunch; Bonnie and Les had plenty—six different kinds of pizza. Many of us appreciated a chance to get off our feet and not have to pay the high prices for food in the show. The evening kicked off the first of three shows at the RV Supershow with Stephanie Ann, a high-energy singer/fiddler/classical violinist. Her fabulous performance blew us away. Having performed with Tony Bennett, Dionne Warwick and Marvin Hamlisch, she entertained us with a blend of pop, jazz, country and gospel music. The following night was Broadway and TV enjoyment with Lew and Ellen. The last night Ron & Kay Rivoli captured the audience with their songs about the RV Life. They travel extensively in an RV and apparently Kay writes lyrics about the many facets of what we all experience. She skillfully matches these with popular melodies that we all recognize and the crowd went wild! They are so good the RV show has brought them back for the last seven years. Heck, I bought four of their CDs myself. [Another small world moment: Marvin Panch knew them personally because he hired them for performances at NASCAR parties].

Before each night's entertainment, the show provided a light snack. After the performance, the Show had a door prize drawing of items donated by the vendors. Gulf Streamers Club had donated a "Rally Ho" Game, Big Rigs Directory and three Game Sets, not to mention numerous items for the goodie bags. While each of us was hoping for the "Week in Key West," it was still great to walk away with "Reliable1 Spray Cleaner," which I did for two nights in a row (the first door prizes I've won in 20 years.) My hearty thanks to this generous vendor for this good product. The show also provided coffee and donuts for every morning, if you wanted to fight the lines. Most of us preferred our own coffee pots and the Gulf Streamers tent for camaraderie.

Speaking of the Gulf Streamers tent, we had an additional lunch of Subway complete with all the salad toppings on Friday. Then Saturday Les & Jean, along with the help of Don & Suzanne Palczynski, organized a wine and cheese party for the Alaska Caravan attendees. Finally on Sunday, Bonnie provided a HOT breakfast for our farewell meeting with drawings and cash prizes for the Scavenger Hunt and First Timer Introductions.

Ted & Karen Glas (Member #?) won \$100 for 1<sup>st</sup> place in scavenger hunt contest  
Ron & Hazel Riffel (Member #?) won \$75 for 2<sup>nd</sup> place in scavenger hunt contest  
Bill & Diane Gallo (Member #?) won \$50 for 3<sup>rd</sup> place in scavenger hunt contest  
I was lucky to be drawn as the winner of \$50 prize for the First Timer Contest,  
Bill & Diane Gallo were also the winners of the \$25.00 Wal-Mart gift card for the Questionnaire Drawing.

But the real prize is meeting so many interesting and friendly people that belong to Gulf Streamers.

Wrapping up this article, let me editorialize about rallies and rally cost. I spoke with another couple that attended the show for only one day. They belong to Gulf Streamers and FMCA. In our conversation, they mentioned they had not attended a Gulf Streamers rally because the cost of a FMCA rally is about half of ours. Well, that spurred me to take them to our convenient rally site to meet Bonnie, Les & Jean. Also, I reviewed our agenda with them, pointing out the extra lunches, dinners, shows (my show ticket was \$52), AND the fact that we had hook-ups (electric & water here, plus sewer sometimes) which they do not get at FMCA. No disrespect to FMCA, because theirs is a different type of rally. Ours could be termed an "All-inclusive Resort Rally." The other advantages of the Buddy Rally are the convenience of simple registration (Gulf Streamers pays \$130 of rally cost to the Fairgrounds and handles all paperwork), plus you can bring your buddies with you on this rally; they don't have to be Gulf Streamers members. What's not to like? They left with a commitment to be at "Back Home in Indiana" this summer. I hope I can encourage everyone who reads this and has not attended a Gulf Streamers rally to seriously consider comparing the value of our rallies to others. If you only have time to attend one or two rallies, do not miss our summer rally!

Respectfully, Russ Johnson