

unstoppable

THOMAS BUILT 'EM RIGHT

These buses are as American as the Hamburger. But it took all of a Canadian engineer's industry to get them up and about



Edition 21 of a special CV series by

APOLLO TYRES



APOLLO TYRES LTD. *unstoppable*

Never wary of progress, never skeptical about success,
Never scared of challenges, never tired of trying.
Every step of the way we travel with our customers,
On the "unstoppable" journey to success.

Thomas Built Buses, Inc. is a bus manufacturer based in High Point, North Carolina, United States and a subsidiary of Daimler AG. Perley A. Thomas (1874–1958) was a native Canadian and a millwright (specifically in woodworking), by trade. He worked for a subsidiary of the famous streetcar manufacturer J. G. Brill and Company, in Cleveland, Ohio, early in the 20th century, and attended night school courses in structural engineering at Case Institute of Technology then moved south to work for another streetcar builder at its High Point, N.C., location in 1910. Thomas became chief engineer, draftsman and designer for the company, using both his mechanical skills and his experience as a skilled woodworker. When the streetcar industry began to turn from wooden to steel construction, Thomas was able to make the switch, but his employer, Southern Car Company went out of business in 1915.

A TRANSITION TO BUSES: THE 1930S

The national trend in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s was toward use of personal automobiles rather than riding public



transportation. As streetcar ridership decreased, less costly buses were often used in substitution by the companies operating the service. Orders for new streetcars and renovations began falling off.

Just as he had made the transition from wooden to steel streetcar building, Thomas and his workers at High Point also made the transition to building buses successfully. In 1934, Duke Power of South Carolina had Thomas build 10 transit buses. In 1935, Thomas ceased production of streetcars and launched a new product: the school bus. The same year, the company built 200 wooden-bodied school buses for the state of North Carolina, beginning a long tradition with that state which continues to the present day.

In the early days of the school bus, Perley Thomas and his company's reputation for design innovation and quality manufacturing helped transform the industry. In the United States, many school buses in the 1930s were nothing more than flatbed truck chassis with wooden sides and a canvas roof. They had no lights, no mirrors and were much more suited to transporting vegetables to market than children to and from school.

In 1938, the company introduced the first welded all-steel bus body. In 1939, Dr. Frank W. Cyr of New York, who became known as "The Father of the Yellow School Bus", hosted a 7 day long national conference of industry and school leaders which established 44 important safety standards and the yellow color for school buses all across the United States.

Thomas has always been a leading name in church bus and school bus safety efforts. The company became a major school bus body builder in the post-World War II period. By 1960, it was one of the big six school bus body companies in the United States, competing with Blue Bird Body Company, Carpenter Body Company, Superior Coach Company, Ward Body

Company, and Wayne Corporation.

THOMAS BUILT BUSES

Thomas Built Buses, Inc. was incorporated in 1972 as the successor to Perley A. Thomas Car Works. Previously dependent upon truck chassis made by other companies for its bodies (particularly Ford, Dodge, GMC, International Harvester and even Volvo), in 1978, Thomas introduced its first bus chassis and began producing its popular Saf-T-Liner transit-style bus for school and commercial use. In 1960, the company began to manufacture a smaller conventional school bus on a cutaway van chassis, the Thomas Minotaur. It entered the commercial public transit bus market in the 1980s, and developed the Thomas Vista school bus, a modified conventional design providing improved front-end visibility for drivers, and its MVP line, a less expensive version of its transit-style school bus in the 1990s.

By the end of the 20th century, Thomas was one of only three principal builders of large school buses in the United States. It is still based in High Point, and in 1998, was acquired by the Freightliner Group of Daimler AG. Thomas employs over 1,600 people worldwide.

In 2004, Perley A. Thomas, founder of the Thomas streetcar and bus building companies, who died in 1958, was among the first inductees into the Raleigh-based, North Carolina Transportation Hall of Fame.

In 1995 Thomas launched the FS-65 conventional school bus which had different options for engines. The original options were Caterpillar and Cummins. Later, a Mercedes Benz Engine was offered as an option. The FS-65 was used throughout many districts around the US. The last FS-65 was produced and delivered on December 13, 2005 to O'Brien Bus Service, Inc. of Maryland.