From Rolling Bungalows to Mobile Mansions:
The Origins of America's Obsession with the Recreational Vehicle

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies the rise of the recreational vehicle technology in America. It argues that recreational automobility required the achievement of mass automobility and long distance roads to become a viable travel option. The RV represents an important spinoff technology from the automotive sector by fusing highway travel with domestic household technologies. It identifies the enthusiast origins of recreational vehicle technology, which unmistakably began to take shape in the 1920s and 1930s. It contends that the Depression era initiated a vital formative period for the development of an RV industry and the culture of recreational automobility. This era's developments revolutionized travel using mobile accommodations, which eventually centered on the development of mass-produced travel trailers. The futurism and optimism about technology in the 1930s led to wild-speculation about trailers as a revolutionary force in society. However, the realities of mobilization and World War II shifted the trailer industry into the role of producing wartime housing. The post-World War II era is considered a golden era of the travel trailer as RV technology was accommodated to postwar domestic life. In this era, the RV industry split from its sister technology of manufacturer housing. The adaptability of the RV is proven as a key element of the technology as historical conditions contribute to changes in design. The Tin Can Tourists of the World played a prominent role in this at each step story by increasingly centering their lifestyle around RVs. It shows how a diverse range of American users have looked to employ the RV in their lives in a wide range of shapes and sizes, from rolling bungalows to mobile mansions.

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INTRODUCTION

A group of enthusiasts met in Tampa, Florida's DeSoto Park in 1919 during the early days of the autocamping craze. Unlike other visitors to Florida, these autocampers decided to form an organization for their activity. In a few years their small club would grow in both size and influence. It took the name the Tin Can Tourists of the World and represented the first recreational vehicle club in the United States. One of the early executive officers—drolly titled the Royal Chief Can Opener—gave this speech just a few years later in 1926:

> Fellow tourists. I greet you in the comradeship of the open road. In six years' time your number had grown to almost 500,000. We took the name of 'tin-can' tourists, first applied to us in a derisive spirit, and made it the most democratic organization in the world. There are those who prefer the life on the ocean wave; others who dwell on farms or in cities, but as for us, give us the life on the bounding springs and the balloon tires.[1]

O.G. Shoups's quote reflects an optimistic credo that became firmly entrenched in recreational automobility even as the users themselves changed over time. As the boom times of the 1920s turned into the bust times of the 1930s, this hopeful view of creating a mobile way of living continued to grow considerably. By this time the manufactured trailer had transcended its mundane camping origins and had come to represent a newly prophesized life on wheels. A visionary call to a mobile life on the road had a distinct appeal to Americans living in the midst of the Great Depression. Among others, Roger Babson (an economist and the founder of Babson College) recast the promise of manufactured trailers in this vein as a portent of an exciting future

[1] "Motor Knights of the Road Frolic in Florida Camp Convention of 'Tin Can Tourists of the World' Draws Hundreds," *Reading Eagle*, Jan. 8, 1926, 20.

where Americans could live and thrive on the road. "I am going to make an astonishing prediction," he exclaimed in 1936. "Within twenty years, more than half the population of the United States will be living in automobile trailers!"[2] Babson's viewpoint was undoubtedly influenced by the Depression, but it also reflects how adaptable the dream of living on wheels could become. By looking to fiction, one can also see how the promise of recreational automobility was reinvented yet again to reflect the prosperity and domesticity of the postwar decades. Lucille Ball delivers these lines to her husband in the 1954 movie, *The Long, Long Trailer*.

> We'll always be living out of suitcases and using other people's things. Living in some stale little hotel or some grubby furnished room. But don't you see, if we had a trailer no matter where we went, I could make a home for you. And when the job was over, we could just hitch up our house and go on to the next.[3]

In an era where domesticity and home life was paramount in much of American culture, the potential for recreational automobility and the recreational vehicle to allow one to have a literal home on the road appealed to many Americans.

Today, while driving down nearly any interstate highway, one would be hard pressed to go an hour or even fifteen minutes without seeing a recreational vehicle. In the American South during the winter the coming of these vehicles is a sure way to tell the seasons have changed. Even if one were to take a trip to a college football game or to a NASCAR race it would be impossible not to notice the hundreds or even thousands of people forming impromptu communities among the rows of tailgating campers. It would seem to most observers that recreational vehicles are a well-established part of America's technological environment, but

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[2] Roger W. Babson, "We'll *Soon Be* Living *on* Wheels: Millions-Half the Population of the U.S.-Within 20 Years Will Be Trailerites, According to Roger W. Babson," *Trailer Travel*, January-February 1936, 10.
[3] *The Long, Long Trailer*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1954, Sonora, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2006), DVD.

how did our relationship with the recreational vehicle begin? How did it grow over time into the vacation and lifestyle choice of millions of Americans? Despite the ubiquity of the recreational vehicle in modern culture, very little has been done to explain its ascendance and persistence in American culture. The recreational vehicle's popularity did not emerge because of some preordained or inevitable concurrence of events. Instead, it was the result of many people's choices and actions over the last one hundred years. This dissertation tells their stories and delves into their motivations. It's a tale of users, producers, and importantly enthusiasts, all of whom contributed to the technology and recreational vehicle cultures that endure today.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, it is important to delineate the purpose of the project by defining what we mean by "recreational vehicle." Various terminology has been used to describe the same set of technological artifacts. According to Miriam-Webster, a recreational vehicle is "a vehicle designed for recreational use (as in camping)."[4] A better, more specific definition might read "any readily mobile vehicle or vehicle attachment which is both road-worthy and constructed to provide shelter in support of camping-style activities." This definition provides for a little more clarity, and specifically, it includes both the motorized house car, or motorhome, and the travel trailer, which is towed by an automobile or other road vehicle. For this study I will use the terms "recreational vehicle" and "RV" interchangeably. Often this definition will be applied backwards to describe technological artifacts that at the time might not have been named as such. This is not to suggest that there was an ideal form of recreational vehicle waiting in the ether to be invented nor should it be taken to suggest a single, dramatic threshold for RVness. Instead, this dissertation means to discover how our operative definition of

[4] Merriam-Webster, "Recreational Vehicle," Merriam-Webster Dictionary. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/automobility (accessed February 11, 2011).

an RV came into existence. One will not find the story of a single heroic inventor giving the world the first purebred RV, but instead a story about a dispersed collection of auto travelers and camping enthusiasts. Across many years, these users individually worked at the fusion of automotive and shelter technologies. By employing their creativity and problem solving, they gave birth to novel technological artifacts, eventually to be known as recreational vehicles.

It is worth noting here that recreational vehicles are by definition a fusion of highway travel and household technologies. This fusion of road vehicle with shelter has led to a diverse nomenclature, including house car, trailer, travel trailer, mobile home, camper, motorhome, and caravan. Each of these terms suggests a slightly different technical configuration, but each remains a recreational vehicle in practice. Although the European gypsy wagon and the American pioneer wagon are often nostalgically and somewhat misleadingly cited by enthusiasts as actual predecessors to the recreational vehicle, it must be noted that the recreational vehicle is explicitly a technology of the automobile age. Its creation was made possible by mass automobility. The automobile-highway system both enabled recreational vehicles to flourish and also forced the technology to conform partially to the standards of a preexisting highway travel system. Additionally, recreational vehicles often had to respond to users' expectations about household conveniences. The end result is the inescapable trend towards increasing technological sophistication and the inclusion of more household gadgets in recreational vehicles over time.

The historical circumstances that created the recreational vehicle industry also coincided with the history of what today is called "manufactured housing." Manufactured housing, unlike recreational vehicles, served as a replacement for traditional static housing stock with semi-mobile or entirely immobile housing structures that were built offsite in factories. This creates the potential for confusion and therefore cries out for a way to differentiate recreational vehicles

from manufactured housing technology. This can be done by considering the term "recreational automobility" to be an essential tool to demarcate the boundaries of what is and what is not a recreational vehicle. Recreational automobility might best be defined as the use of automotive technology as a major form of recreation and/or leisure travel. The term then builds on the emotional, pleasurable, and recreational aspects of automotive tourism and travel. It also deemphasizes a common presumption built into the term "automobility," which suggests that automobile technology is primarily a utilitarian technology. It draws a clear line of demarcation between the mostly static nature of manufactured housing and the truly mobile nature of recreational vehicles.

Historiography

As suggested previously, the historical scholarship on recreational vehicles is incomplete and fragmented.[5] Also, much of the early scholarship on the automobile barely discusses recreational automobility, much less specialized pleasure transportation technology like the RV. Early automotive historians such as John Bell Rae and James Flink deal extensively with issues associated with adoption of the automobile, the car's economic impact, and the debates surrounding the merits of America's car culture. However, from time to time in these histories one finds a glimmer of interest in recreational automobility topics. Rae's general survey history of the automobile, *The Road and the Car in American Life* (1971), does deal with topics of recreational use, but not RVs directly. He makes it clear that he believes that the automobile has allowed for a greater amount of recreational travel. He also argues that the coming of the automobile allowed for not just more recreational travel, but also more flexibility in timing and

[5] Portions of my historiographic study of the recreational vehicle has been published see David Burel "In Search of the RV, *Mobility in History* vol 8. (2017), 133-140.

destination for Americans on vacation.[6] According to Rae, the automobile's influence was deeply significant to the creation of a new kind of travel that represented "the beginning of a major transformation in recreational habits."[7] Although they disagreed on a range of topics, Rae and fellow historian James Flink tend to agree in how they view the recreational use of the automobile. Flink also connects the automobile and the road network to mass tourism: "With the advent of the Model T and improved roads, the automobile outing and the automobile vacation became middle-class American institutions."[8] Both of these scholars tend to highlight the automobile as a tool for recreational conveyance, not recreational in and of itself. They also certainly do not delve into the important history of recreational vehicles. However, they do highlight the need for mass automobility and quality roads to allow the automobile and later recreational vehicle to have a chance in American life. Although more recent surveys have cast their net more broadly in studying the automobile, none have significantly addressed the blind spot of the RV.

In looking beyond the surveys of automotive history, a careful study of the scholarship on the American roadside illuminates some of the history of recreational vehicles by demonstrating the common autocamping origin story for both roadside accommodations (fixed shelter rented on the roadside) and mobile accommodations (mobile shelter brought with the traveler). Both types of accommodations share common origins dating back to the first three decades of the twentieth century. One of the major works on American automotive technology for leisure travel is Warren Belasco's *Americans on the Road* (1979), which sheds valuable light on the early years of

[6] Rae, *The Road and Car* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 137-138.
[7] Ibid., 138.
[8] James Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1988), 169.

automobile travel and the rise and fall of autocamping.[9] His book presents an evolutionary story of roadside accommodations from early autocamping to roadside businesses over the course of thirty-five years from 1910 to 1945.[10] Although his story interconnects with the history of autocamping, Belasco's focus on roadside accommodations causes him to miss the long-term significance of developments in *mobile* accommodations technology. He therefore misses the significance of the ongoing evolution of the RV. The same is true of John Jackle, Keith Sculle, and Jefferson Rogers, who expanded on Belasco's work on early motels in *The Motel In America* (1996).[11] The trio presents an authoritative history of the motel's growth in America, including its architecture, business models, and patronization. Read together, these books provide a thorough history of roadside accommodations, but very little on the technology of mobile accommodations. This literature is relevant because of the clear common origins of both types of accommodations and the unambiguous state of competition between roadside and mobile accommodations in winning the hearts, minds, and dollars of America travelers.

Kathleen Franz's *Tinkering: Consumers Reinvent the Early Automobile* (2005) interfaces well with the history of early recreational vehicles by looking at a diverse assortment of automotive tinkerers.[12] She considers how early users of the automobile modified the technology to suit their desires, situating her analysis in the context of the time: "In the decades between 1900 and 1930, a wide cultural discourse of ingenuity inspired popular enthusiasm for technology and cemented the relationship between technological know-how, national progress,

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[9] Warren Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1979).
[10] Ibid., 3.
[11]John Jackle, Keith Sculle, and Jefferson Rogers, *The Motel In America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
[12] Kathleen Franz, *Tinkering: Consumers Reinvent the Early Automobile* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

and the average American and particularly the male consumer."[13] This enthusiasm frequently centered on modifying one's car for recreational travel, which she recognizes as an increasingly popular automotive activity. She notes that "for many of the white men and women who wrote about auto travel, the social benefits of the new technology were clear: the car provided a means to leave the city and enter what journalist Wilber Hall described as the democratic, regenerative, and unifying space of the open road."[14] This emphasis on the intrinsic qualities of the open road helps explain why recreational automobility played such an important role in Americans' experience with the automobile as well as explaining their desire to modify it. Given this historical focus on recreational trips taken by automobile, Franz spends a great deal of time discussing the numerous solutions created and bought by early users to make their automobiles into a range of more camping friendly vehicles.[15] Her narrative in this instance fits quite well within the historical record of autocamping enthusiasts who looked to improve their autocamping experiences through even more extensive innovations and tinkering, which included constructing fully customized camping bodies and radical conversions of road vehicles into RVs.

The existing histories of the recreational vehicle produced up to this point paint a fragmented picture of the American RV phenomenon. Each contributes to the overall picture, but none explicitly and directly historicize recreational vehicles' place in American culture with an eye to understanding the entire process and its historical consequences. One example is Roger White's book, *Home on the Road* (2000). It is the closest thing to a monograph about recreational vehicles in the historiography, but is limited in its scope and analytical rigor. It stems from the author's work on an exhibition from 1985 at the Smithsonian Institution's

[13] Franz, *Tinkering*, 15.
[14] Ibid., 3.
[15] Ibid., 19-42.

National Museum of American History titled *At Home on the Road: Autocamping, Motels, and the Rediscovery of America*. The book chronicles the development of self-propelled recreational vehicles and deliberately excludes recreational trailers.[16] It does offer insightful descriptions of early house car autocamping and the popularization of motorhomes, and it even considers the counter-cultural use of self-propelled recreational vehicles in the 1960s and 1970s. However, his failure to consider the importance of the trailer in this history, as well as his narrative rather than analytic approach, prevents the book from serving as a comprehensive survey of recreational vehicles. This dissertation suggests that scholars should build on White's work by adopting a more holistic approach that focuses on all recreational vehicles (self-propelled and towed). Why and when users choose different technical layouts is a vital part of this story.

Homes For Travel and Living: The History and Development of The Recreational Vehicle and Mobile Home Industries (1977), by Carlton Edwards, represents an insider's attempt to take on this history.[17] Edwards was a professor of engineering at Michigan State University who studied and offered classes on manufacturing, sales, and park development for the mobile home industry education program. The book appears to be a self-published compilation of Edwards's knowledge of various aspects of the industry. The book's organization deals with topics within discrete and typically short chapters, painting a very fragmented overall picture. Interestingly, Edwards shows no hesitation at mingling the technologies of recreational vehicles and manufactured housing within the same book, as he is well aware of their common origins.[18]

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[16] Robert B. White, *Home on the Road: The Motor Home in America* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000).
[17] Carlton Edwards, *Homes For Travel and Living: The History and Development of The Recreational Vehicle and Mobile Home Industries* (East Lansing, Michigan: Carl Edwards & Associates, 1977).
[18] For example, Amazon does not even have a listing for this book. However, Edwards's book should prove very useful for this dissertation as a go to source for hard facts and numbers. It also has an extensive bibliography to consult for primary sources.

Like Edwards, *Homes on Wheels* (1980) by Michael Rockland takes a broad view of the RV phenomenon in America.[19] This book approaches the study of the RV via chapter-long vignettes into different aspects of RV culture. His sense of what a recreational vehicle is is fairly broad and inclusive. Rockland makes astute observations about the RV in America through his attempt to pin down the appeal of various forms of RVs, from large-sized manufactured homes and mobile mansions to smaller, more rudimentary models and even customized van culture. He suggests that Americans feature both individualistic and communitarian urges and that these urges represent "an extraordinary need to be both loners and joiners simultaneously."[20] He believes that the RV can suitably sustain both appeals. He continues: "Better than any artifact of our civilization, these hybrids embody both our individualistic and our communitarian instincts, our solitary and our gregarious ways, our desire to be free and on the road yet take our homes along with us."[21] Rockland's book is effective in its broad study of different aspects of RV or near-RV technologies. *Homes on Wheels* does not attempt to layout a detailed chronology of the history of the technology overall, but its strengths are its wide-ranging perspective and eminently approachable style. What's more, its publication in 1980 corresponded with the beginning of an era in which recreational vehicles became a more mature technology with more clearly defined roles and types that warranted separate study in individual chapters.

Understanding RVs and their users has not remained the exclusive (or even primary) purview of historians and engineers. The study of recreational vehicles and the "RVers" who enjoy the activity has also interested anthropologists. The definitive work in this category is *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America* (2001) by Dorothy Ayers

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[19] Michael Aaron Rockland, *Homes on Wheels* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1980).
[20] Ibid., 17.
[21] Ibid.

Counts and David R. Counts.[22] This book seeks to understand the growing phenomenon of retired Americans taking to the road on a permanent basis with recreational vehicles. It attempts to understand this group of people through direct interaction and self-assessment, rather than allowing them to be defined by outsiders' often narrow social preconceptions. The Counts's contribution is significant in that the retired RVers studied within their work are the spiritual descendants of vitally important groups like the Tin Can Tourists of the World, an important enthusiast group that pioneered this type of travel and lifestyle during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.[23] Although mostly focused on the near past, this book is invaluable in understanding the enthusiasts involved in recreational automobility in the present.

Beyond the traditional academy, the recreational vehicle has been the subject of more than a handful of enthusiast books seeking to capture an authentic and lived history of the RV. One of the more recent studies of recreational vehicles by an academic-turned-enthusiast is *Winnebago Nation: The Peculiar Place of the RV in American Culture* (2014) by James Twitchell.[24] Although an English professor by trade, his book is one part personal commentary and one part cultural study of recreational vehicles in America. He notes that, despite a large historiography on the automobile, "there has not been much academic interest in the RV."[25] The book covers quite a bit of ground and appeals to a popular audience. Although it does not attempt a systematic study of the history of recreational vehicles, it does offer a refreshing view of the

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[22] Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of Rving Seniors in North America* 2nd ed. (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2001).
[23] The Tin Can Tourists were the central subject of my master's thesis and remain an important part of my ongoing dissertation project. David Burel, "The Comradeship of the Open Road; The Identity and Influence of the Tin Can Tourists of The World on Automobility, Florida, and National Tourism" (master's thesis, University of Central Florida, 2012).
[24] James Twitchell, *Winnebago Nation: The Peculiar Place of the RV in American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), kindle edition.
[25] Ibid., loc 2251.

RV phenomenon from someone cognizant of both the world of RV culture and academia. Another book that is representative of a work geared to a popular or enthusiast crowd is Al Hesselbart's *The Dumb Things Sold …just like that!* (2007). Hesselbart works for the RV/MH Hall of Fame in Elkhart, Indiana. His book presents a very brief history of the industry as well as short chapters on various industry figures and founders.

One of the most significant areas that must be included in our understanding of the RV is its sister technology, the manufactured home. The history of recreational vehicles and manufactured housing run concurrently from the early 1930s until the late 1950s. The best scholarly work on the latter is *Wheel Estate* (1991), written by a professor of public administration, Allan Wallis.[26] Wallis argues that the history of mobile homes unfolded through an iterative process of invention by manufactures, developers, and users that was negotiated with often hostile governments, regulators, and zoning authorities.[27] Ultimately, this process has made mobile homes less attractive and has limited their competiveness against other housing forms. Wallis's study provides a valuable context by providing the history of a technology that diverged from common origins. Although they have improved in construction over the years, mobile homes have been made increasingly immobile. Today, they are largely permanently installed manufactured housing.[28] Wallis is interested in understanding how mobile homes have, or in many cases have not been accepted as a conventional alternative to static, site-built homes.[29] Clearly, the history of these alternatives to static housing will inform our understanding of the

[26] Allan Wallis, *Wheel Estate: The Rise and Decline of Mobile Homes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
[27] Ibid., vii.
[28] Ibid., vii-viii. Wallis notes that "manufactured housing" is the official name for the industry today. He also notes that he prefers the term mobile home "because it conveys better than any other the basic hybrid character of the innovation and the essential basis for the conflicts it has engendered."
[29] Ibid., 12-29.

history of recreational vehicles, which serve as a vacationer's alternative to roadside motel accommodations. This comparison will also potentially illuminate ways in which two different technologies with similar origins can diverge and trigger substantially different outcomes.[30]

This dissertation contributes to these wide-ranging discussions in the historiography while also providing a much-needed assessment of how the recreational vehicle became part of American life. The overall approach focuses on an inclusive view of the RV phenomenon, which provides the clearest trace to its origins in society and culture. The RV resulted not from a flash of genius in the mind of single inventor nor was is the creation of an R&D department in Detriot's Big Three. As mentioned before it resulted from a long-term and diffuse group effort to match the appropriate technological solutions to the diverse traveling desires of the American public. In a sense, the history of the RV has been an open-ended process of invention with increasing diversity of forms for the technology over time. This dissertation directly demonstrates the adaptability of the RVs as well as suggesting that the RV developed distinctly within the shadow of the automotive transportation system that had preceded it by several decades. The recreational vehicle may be a spinoff technology in that sense, but it warrants as serious a treatment in the historiography as any other facet of automotive history. This dissertation will bring these stories to light in one integrated account.

More broadly, this dissertation contributes to a growing body of scholarship on automobile enthusiasts. Among the first of these is Robert Post's *High Performance* (1994), an extensive study of the sport of drag racing that has found broad appeal among academics and

[30] For further reading on mobile homes in America one should consult a book written by geographers John Fraser Hard, Michelle J. Rhodes, and John T. Morgan, *The Unknown World of the Mobile Home* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

enthusiasts alike.[31] *The Business of Speed* (2008) by David Lucsko takes aim at the pursuit of automotive performance outside of the narrow lens of drag racing and within the everyday enthusiasts' driveway, and at the same time demonstrates that enthusiasts have significant histories that warrant scholarly attention.[32] This dissertation asserts that recreational vehicle enthusiasts are similar, and have an important history of their own.

Chapter Outlines

The dissertation is organized in roughly chronological chapters. The first chapter surveys recreational automobility from its origins until the end of the autocamping era in the late 1920s. It synthesizes various primary and secondary sources about different forms of early automobile travel, including touring, gypsying, and autocamping, and considers what these types of travel meant to the formation of a tradition of recreational automobility in America. The Tin Can Tourists of the World formed in this era and represent the coalescence of the first wave of RV enthusiasts to protect and further their interests.

The second, third, and fourth chapter all collectively address the vital formative period in recreational vehicle history known as in this dissertation as the "Trailer Revolution," which occurred from the late 1920s up until just prior to America's involvement in World War II. The second chapter focuses on the first type of recreational vehicle, called the house car, as well as how the Great Depression birthed a more viable mass-market alternative, the travel trailer format. It considers how autocamping activities contributed to the creation of the first recreational vehicles, custom creations called house cars. By the end of this period the arguably

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[31] The book was originally published in 1994. It was revised slightly and republished in 2001. Robert Post, *High Performance: The Culture and Technology of Drag Racing 1950-2000*, Rev. ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
[32] David Lucsko, *The Business of Speed: The Hot Rod Industry in America, 1915-1990* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

more flexible car-and-trailer set up entirely replaced the self-propelled house car format for the vast majority of travelers using mobile accommodations. The chapter also examines how this era of custom production by individuals and small-scale shops influenced the design and spread of the technology. It shows that enthusiasts building their own trailers started the recreational vehicle on the path to widespread diffusion into American culture. The technology allowed these users to conveniently and appealingly bring their own accommodations with them on road trips without many of the downsides of the house car. It was in enthusiasts' hands that the trailer grew as a technology and out of those same hands that the RV industry would be born.

Chapter three looks at the birth of manufacturing firms specializing in travel trailers. It would be a wide variety of specialty companies and not the big auto companies of Detroit that would begin to mass produce this automotive spinoff product. Although a period of economic hardship for many, the Depression era was unmistakably the vital formative period for the trailer industry as well as an age of growth and excitement for recreational vehicle technology. Toward the end of the 1930s the availability of lower cost, mass-produced trailers supplanted much of the custom vehicle production done in the previous decades. This chapter also considers how trailer shows and trailer manufacturer organizations acted as platforms to launch travel trailers as a mainstream consumer product by gaining positive promotional attention, educating the public, and expanding the market access for these first mass-manufactured RVs. The chapter also considers how information about these travel trailers was disseminated into public knowledge through featured articles in popular magazines.

Chapter four considers how the trailer become an object of speculation and hope for a new, mobile American society in the midst of the Great Depression. Although rarely accurate, this futurism was nonetheless ideologically important in defining the appeal of the trailer and

RVs more generally. As a technology, the trailer had not yet undergone a process of institutional and cultural classification, leaving its uses and purposes open to user interpretation. Therefore, a trailer leaving a factory might just as easily become a tool for seasonal travel, a vacation cottage, temporary housing, or a year-round alternative to traditional housing stock. The importance and consequences of this interpretive flexibility is considered in terms of the long-term history of recreational vehicles. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the futurism of the 1930s gave way to the practical needs of the United States government during World War II. World War II both diverted resources away from the manufacture of recreationally focused trailers and, through rationing, restricted fuel and rubber resources available for the vacationing public. The industry largely remained in business by building the numerous trailers needed for temporary housing around the wartime industrial plants. As the war ended, the industry began years of steady growth and innovation.

Chapter five investigates the postwar boom, as the recreational vehicle finally became a mainstream and fully acceptable form of travel for Americans. The 1950s and 1960s saw the continued success of the travel trailer as well as the reinvention of self-propelled recreational vehicles. Wally Byam, Airstream's President, organized several world promotional trips for his trailer caravans, which secured his brand's status as a high-end, high quality maker of travel trailers. Additionally, firms such as Winnebago played vital roles in reinvigorating self-propelled models, now known as motorhomes instead of house cars. This chapter also considers how the recreational vehicle industry finally split from the manufactured housing industry in the late 1950s and early 1960s as technical designs (trailer width) finally dictated separate production. This was an era of enthusiasm for the recreational vehicle in both mass culture and among second wave enthusiast groups. The Hollywood comedy *The Long, Long Trailer* will also be

used to explore the contradictions between ideological benefits of RV life and the realities of attempting to live it. This grand era of growth runs roughly until the oil crises of the 1970s presented new challenges to the industry. It suggests that the RV Industry confronted a substantial crisis in the face of rising gas prices, which threatened the economic viability of their products. It chronicles what steps were taken to make recreational vehicles an economically competitive option for vacation travel under a regime of higher gas prices such as the promotion of conversion van options. It finally concludes by wrapping up the story of the Tin Can Tourists by considering the original group's legacy of roughly sixty years promoting living on the road.

The final segment explores how both mainstream cultures and countercultures have embraced recreational automobility, from the hippie generation to more recent movements such as the Burning Man festival as well as tailgating creations and modern "tiny homes" groups. Some individuals within the tiny home community continue to value mobility and often achieve it by producing or modifying road vehicles to operate much like recreational vehicles. This epilogue serves to demonstrate the extreme adaptability of the RV by looking at the outer boundaries of recreational vehicle technology and culture.

However, the story of the RV begins not with the Tin Can Tourists or these later enthusiast groups, but instead with the cultural, social, and technological developments that took shape even before the era of mass automobility.

CHAPTER ONE: THE CREATION OF RECREATIONAL AUTOMOBILILTY AND THE ROLE OF THE TIN CAN TOURISTS OF THE WORLD

To fully understand the recreational vehicle one must consider the time before the first homes on wheels rolled across American highways. The story begins in earnest with the coming of mass automobility and the construction of long-distance highway systems. It also starts with the enthusiasts who envisioned the RV as the best vehicle to suit their growing highway-travel desires.

On such group of enthusiasts was The Tin Can Tourists of the World, who spent over sixty years practicing recreational automobility by living on and near the American roadway. The circumstances and events that preceded the organization's formation demonstrated some remarkable shifts in Americans' lives, and in particular their relationship with the new technology of the automobile. These circumstances led to the group's formation as the first recreational vehicle and autocamping organization in the prominent tourist destination of Florida. The Tin Can Tourists then went on to play an important role in the history of recreational vehicles. They are therefore a useful case study of an early group of recreational automobility enthusiasts.

Autocamping was the first form of long-term recreational automobility, and it developed concurrently with the Tin Can Tourists of the World. The tin-canners who once shared the roads and autocamps of Florida and America grew in numbers and then virtually disappeared or merged with the Tin Can Tourists at the onset of the Great Depression. As the economics of the 1930s forced all but the most committed or prepared out of autocamping, the Tin Can Tourists

remained active and began to define themselves through their activities and ideas. They put together tightly organized yearly rallies and looked to expand the extent and duration of their travels. This chapter traces the story of the Tin Can Tourists and recreational automobility through the end of the 1920s autocamping boom. It highlights the importance of the Tin Can Tourists' dedication to their hobby and organizational abilities during the 1920s, both of which helped it remain an active and relevant part of American tourism for decades to follow. The group's story gives us a revealing glimpse into the creation of a recreational vehicle culture in the Unites States.

Early Automobility, Developing Roads and Highways and Foundations for Recreational Automobility

The story of the Tin Can Tourists of the World began several years before its founding. Explaining its formation is best done through studying national, regional, and local trends and events that helped create the conditions for a group like the Tin Can Tourists. These events and trends also added to the momentum and longevity of the group across six decades and help explain the ascendance of the recreational vehicle as a cultural icon.

The most important trend in setting the stage for the Tin Can Tourists was the development of the automobile from a wealthy person's toy into a practical and useable form of transportation at prices affordable to more Americans. During the first decade of the 20th century, most Americans considered the automobile to be a toy for the rich. It was both expensive to purchase and impractical to use. The purchase price alone often exceeded an average worker's annual income many times over, and the cost of maintenance each year, be it mechanical

breakdowns or replacement parts or tires, could equal up to half the original purchase price.[1] As John Jackle and Keith Sculle also noted, "Cars initially served mainly for pleasure, not for commuting. An auto was a recreational thing. A family might pack a picnic lunch and, either alone or in a caravan with others, motor out of town."[2] These early day trips served as the foundation for recreational automobility's further development.

If touring was the primary activity that early auto owners hoped to accomplish with their vehicles, then it can be argued that this touring focus directly helped the internal combustion engine come out on top as the power plant of choice for the American automobile.[3] It does appear that wealthy owners' emphasis on touring must have had a considerable, but not absolute impact on the internal combustion engine's eventual triumph over other propulsion systems. Arguably, the lack of practicality and utility of early automobiles in and of themselves defined their use as recreational vehicles, but it was not necessarily recreational use that initially created the shift toward mass automobility. As demonstrated later, the eventual emulation of the wealthy's tradition of touring by far more numerous groups of middle and lower class Americans greatly shaped the evolution of recreational automobility. People outside the upper class may have bought their cars first for utility, but it wasn't long until cheaper new cars and used models inspired longer road trips for more Americans.

As America's automotive orientation today suggests, automobiles would overcome these problems in time and become a technology of mass use. Cars increasingly could empower an individual to travel great distances more quickly with little or no attention to anyone else's

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[1]John Jackle and Keith Sculle, *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 9-10.
[2] Ibid., 25.
[3] David Kirsch, *The Electric Vehicle and the Burden of History* (New Brunswick, NJ: The Rutgers University Press, 2000).

schedule. This freedom to travel overland quickly without the encumbrances of scheduled arrivals and departures simply was not possible on railroads (or even overwater on steamships). The privacy and autonomy of the automobile was unmatched by any other industrial form of transportation. The automobile therefore had the potential to be the first real challenger to the railroad industry, offering flexible times and routes of travel. Areas deemed too remote or inaccessible by the railroad industry were accessible by car. This was particularly true of the more rugged vehicle designs that were developed with America's rough roads in mind. Cars like the Ford Model T were able to function adequately on rough roads, opening large stretches of previously inaccessible or difficult to access areas to auto tourist enjoyment. Finally, if government support could be rallied, the enabling infrastructure could be subsidized by tax revenue. This meant that the capital costs of the roads—essential to the automobile's success—could be hidden from the average user.[4] Roads as well as automotive technology and mass production techniques became the lifeblood of the automobile boom.

The automobile's move from toy to commonplace happened rapidly as manufacturing shifted toward mass production and cars became cheaper and increasingly reliable. The classic example has always been Henry Ford and his Model T. His goal was to reduce the cost of the automobile through mass production techniques while increasing reliability and the ease of maintenance.[5] The correlation between the Model T's selling price and the number produced becomes apparent when looking at the available data.

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[4] See Steven Goddard, *Getting There: The Epic Struggle between Road and Rail in the American Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) for a full detailing of how historic forces tended to favor the automobile over rail transportation.
[5] Jackle and Sculle, *Motoring,* 16.

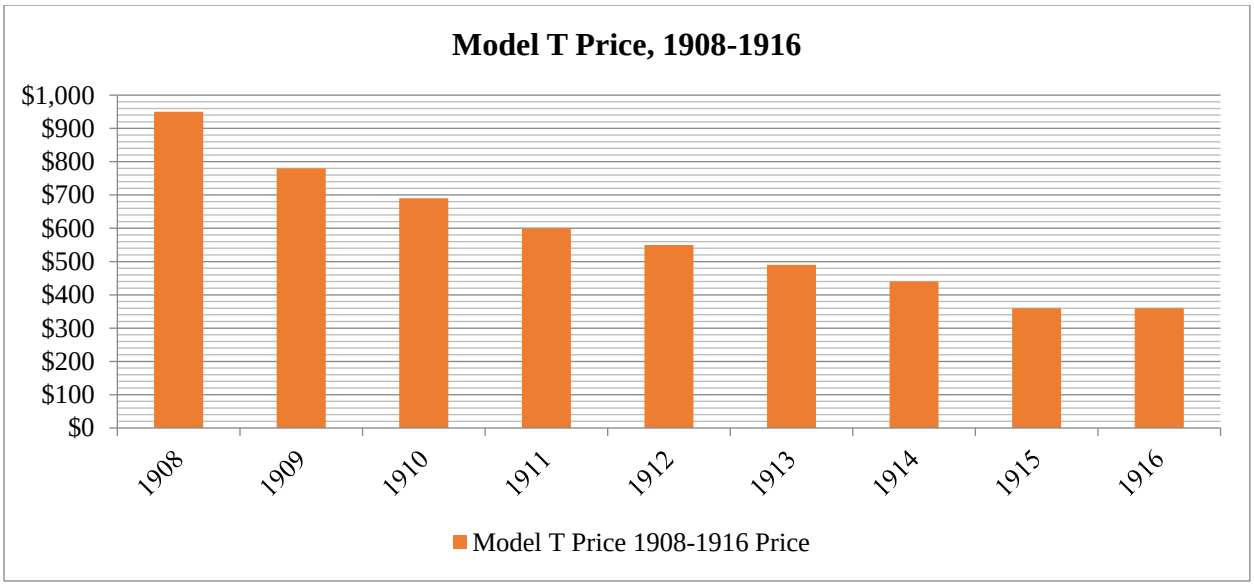

Figure 1: Model T Price, 1908-1916[6]

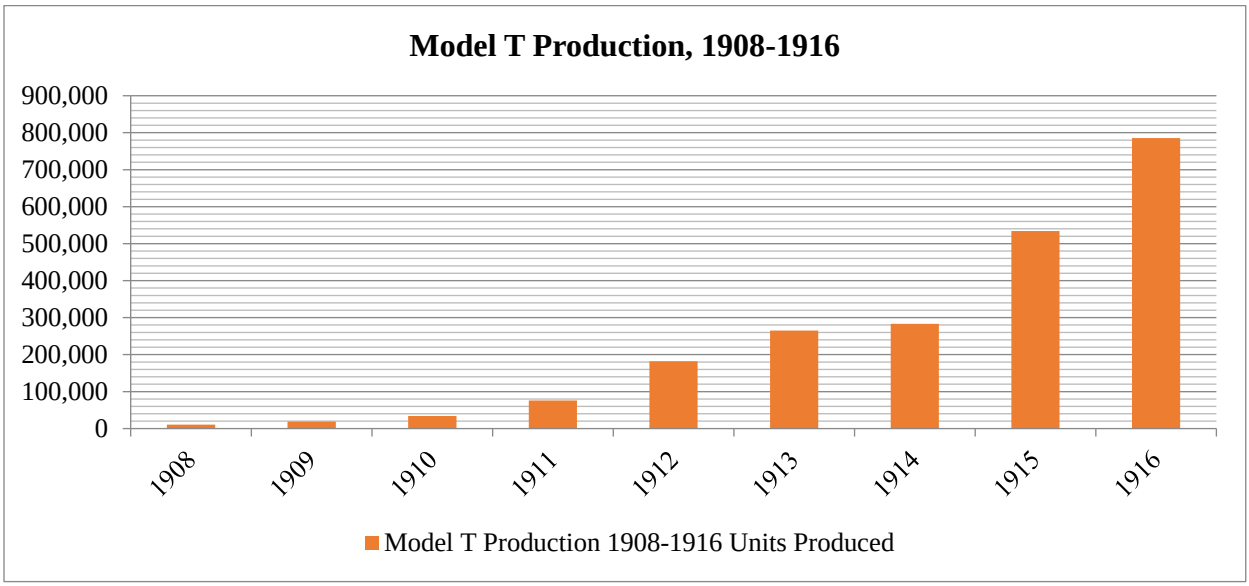

Figure 2: Model T Production, 1908-1916[7]

The sale price of a new Ford Model T dropped each year from its debut in 1908 to 1915. These drops in prices demonstrate the success achieved by Ford in creating an affordable mass-

[6] Graph derived from Model T data in Robert Casey, *The Model T: A Centennial History*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 51.
[7] Ibid.

produced automobile. The 1915 selling price of $360 was just over a third of the original $950 purchase price when the Model T debuted in 1908. This meant that each year more people would be able to afford a Model T, resulting in increased sales each year. The Ford Motor Company perceived greater demand for the Model T and produced more each year. There was a clear inverse relationship between price and the production to meet market demand. It appeared that the demand for the Model T was highly price sensitive. Small drops in price correspond to a large increase in production, suggesting increased demand. The downward shift in automobile prices helped drive mass automobility through increased ownership. The end result was that, as prices were dropping year after year, more people could afford to purchase them. Importantly, as previous car owners began to upgrade and purchase new automobiles, used cars could be had at even lower prices. This combination resulted in a dramatic increase in automobile ownership.

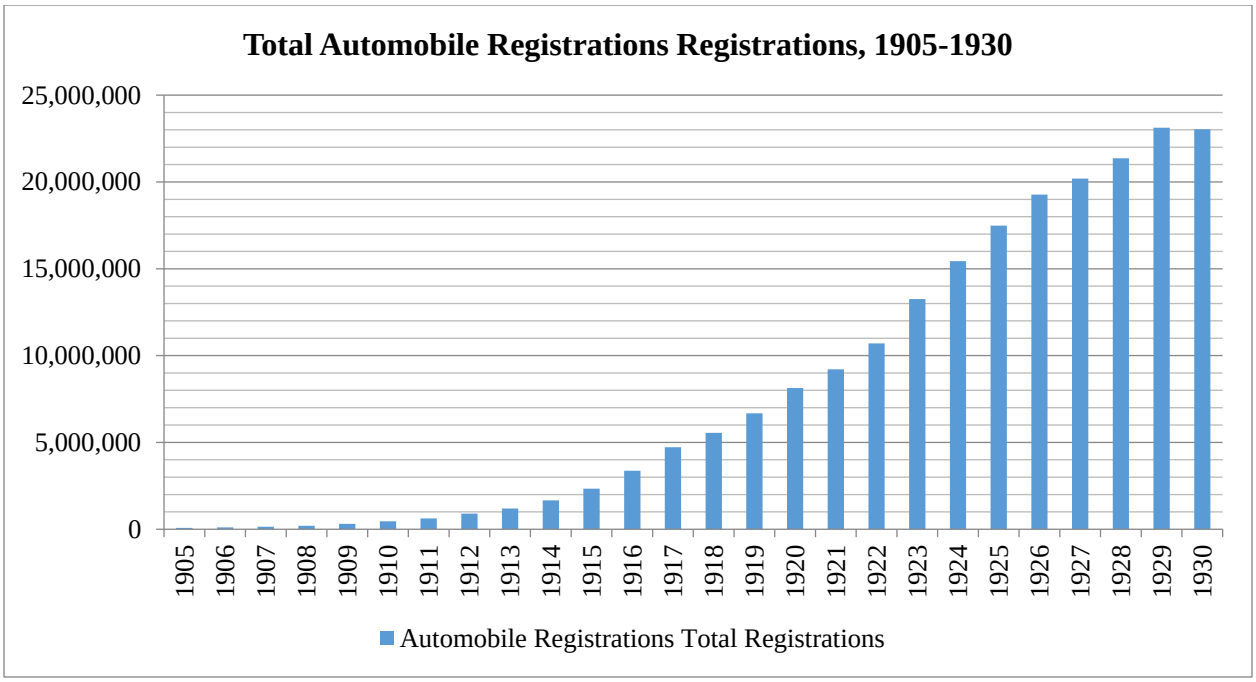

Figure 3: Registration of Automobiles in the United State, 1905-1930[8]

Looking at automobile registrations indicates the trend toward mass automobility, as automobile ownership picked up momentum beginning in 1915 and peaked in the first half of the 1920s. Between 1916 and 1929, over 1,000,000 new car registrations were added each year, with the exception of 1918 and 1927.[9] More than 2,500,000 registrations were added at the peak in 1923. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the number of vehicle registrations was negligible, as the automobile continued to be a toy of the rich. Although these low numbers reflect the lack of registration requirements in some states, it is arguable that the expense and impracticality of automobile ownership was more responsible for the low registration numbers. The number of automobile registrations increased dramatically from 1914 until the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. In 1919, the year the Tin Can Tourists of the World formed, there

[8]Graph derived from statistics from Louis Cain, "Motor-Vehicle Registrations of Automobiles," *Historical Statistics of the United States: Volume 4 Economic Sectors*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 830.
[9] It is important to note that both the end of World War I (1918) and Ford's discontinuation of the Model T (1927) directly influenced new automobile registrations in those years through reducing new car production/sales.

were 6,679,100 registered automobiles; five years before, in 1914, there were only 1,664,000 registrations. By 1924, just five years later, there were a total of 15,436,100. Over this ten-year period from 1914 to 1924, there was an astonishing growth in vehicle registrations of 928 percent! The Tin Can Tourists' formation came just as mass adoption of the automobile was taking off. The climate was advantageous for recreational automobility, as new automobile owners who saw it as a utilitarian alternative to other forms of transportation also began to consider it as an alternate method of recreation.

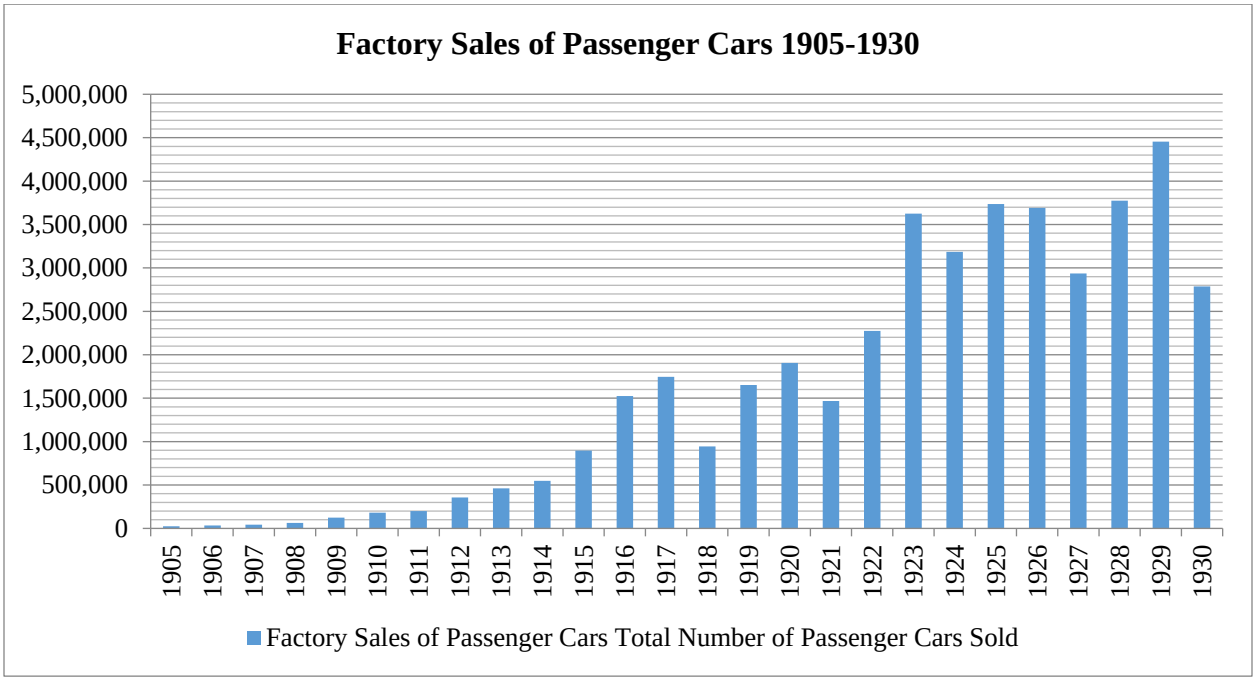

Figure 4: Factory Sales of Passenger Cars per Year, 1905-1930[10]

Whereas vehicle registration information can illustrate the number of Americans driving and using automobiles, examining factory sales of automobiles along with registrations can better demonstrate the year-to-year growth of the market as well as the emergence and growth of a used car market. Factory sales remained low until the 1910s, when more cars reached lower

[10] Graph derived from statistics from Cain, "Motor-Vehicle Factory Sales of Passenger Cars," *Historical Statistics of the United States,* 831.

prices, making a new automobile accessible to more people. The increase in production of automobiles occurred in the years prior to the United States' formal involvement in World War I. A decline in sales can be noticed in 1918 as a result of the country's shift toward war production. Following the war, the numbers of units sold largely returned to pre-war levels and then increased further as prosperity set in during the 1920s. Vehicle registrations increased between 1918 and 1921 even as factory sales declined, indicating the growth of a used car market. Americans kept and maintained their cars for longer period as reliability increased. Overall, the automobile market was growing steadily during the period when the Tin Can Tourists of the World were forming.

The outbreak of World War I had a powerful impact on the tourist industry. First, the closure of continental Europe during the war effectively separated many Americans from popular European destinations. Second, it intensified patriotism and nationalism in the United States, thus popularizing domestic tourist destinations.[11] "See America First" campaigns began to promote national travel, gained traction in 1914, and continued even after the armistice. With this inward focus in the tourist industry, many Americans began to consider using their automobiles as the mode of transportation for a vacation or even making the car trip a vacation itself. The automobile was well positioned to take up the slack in Americans' travel ambitions. John Jackle and Keith Sculle comment with respect to World War I, "The automobile offered a viable alternative [to European travel]. Americans could now wander their own roads to explore strange localities and discover just how many different kinds of people made up their nation."[12]

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[11]Marquerite Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001) 100-101,
[12] Jackle and Sculle, *Motoring*, 27.

To get to their destination these newly motivated automobile owners-turned-tourists required improved roads.

There is a distinctly positive correlation between roads and automobiles. Generally, more automobiles being driven created a greater demand for suitable improved roads. This relationship was readily apparent in the first decades of mass automobility. The state of roads in America, in particular rural roads, in 1900 was abysmal. The vast majority of American roads amounted to nothing more than dirt tracks. It was only with great difficulty that one could travel large distances across country. Horatio Nelson Jackson's trailblazing sixty-three day continental crossing by automobile in 1903 proved how difficult it was to complete automobile journeys on bad roads and in the unreliable early automobiles.[13] Early automobile enthusiasts such as Jackson also provided inspiration and a model for other adventurous people to attempt these long journeys.[14] Travel remained difficult for many years as roads proved to be somewhat difficult to bring up to minimum standards for automobile use.

Mileage of Rural Roads and Municipal Streets, Proportion by Jurisdiction				
Year	**Total Mileage**	**Rural State Roads**	**Rural County Roads**	**Municipal Roads**
1921	3,160,000	6.4%	86.1%	7.4%
1925	3,246,000	8.5%	84.1%	7.4%
1930	3,259,000	9.9%	83.2%	7.6%

Figure 5: Mileage of Rural and Municipal Streets, Proportion by Jurisdiction [15]

[13] Horatio Nelson Jackon's journey had been filled with many problems and delays. It included frequent mechanical breakdowns, busted tires, waiting for replacement parts, and areas with little or no roads. For more on his journey or the state of American roads see *Motoring*, 27-28.
[14] Preston, *Dirt Road to Dixie*, 98.
[15] Chart and percentages created from statistics from Louis Cain, "Mileage of Rural Roads and Municipal Streets, by Jurisdiction, 1921-1979," *Historical Statistics of the United States: Volume 4 Economic Sectors*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 807.

Total mileage of roads in America did not increase significantly during the 1920s. The jurisdictional control of the highways also did not change dramatically. One important trend should be noted is a slight increase of rural state roads as various state highway departments assumed control of more roadways. The shift toward more centralized control of roads instead of independent county control favored development of interconnected roads between major population areas since smaller municipalities and county governments often did not cooperate or prioritize interconnectivity. Twenty-six states had highway departments in charge of construction and maintenance of state roads by 1910.[16] The surface of the vast majority of the mileage of these roads was dirt and mostly in poor condition. Beyond interconnection, the real focus had to be improving roads to meet the needs of automobiles through various methods of surfacing. Putting together the resources to build a truly usable and efficient network of improved roads proved difficult in many cases. Only these improved roads would be suitable to sustained mass automobility and auto tourism.

[16] Jackle and Sculle, *Motoring*, 41.

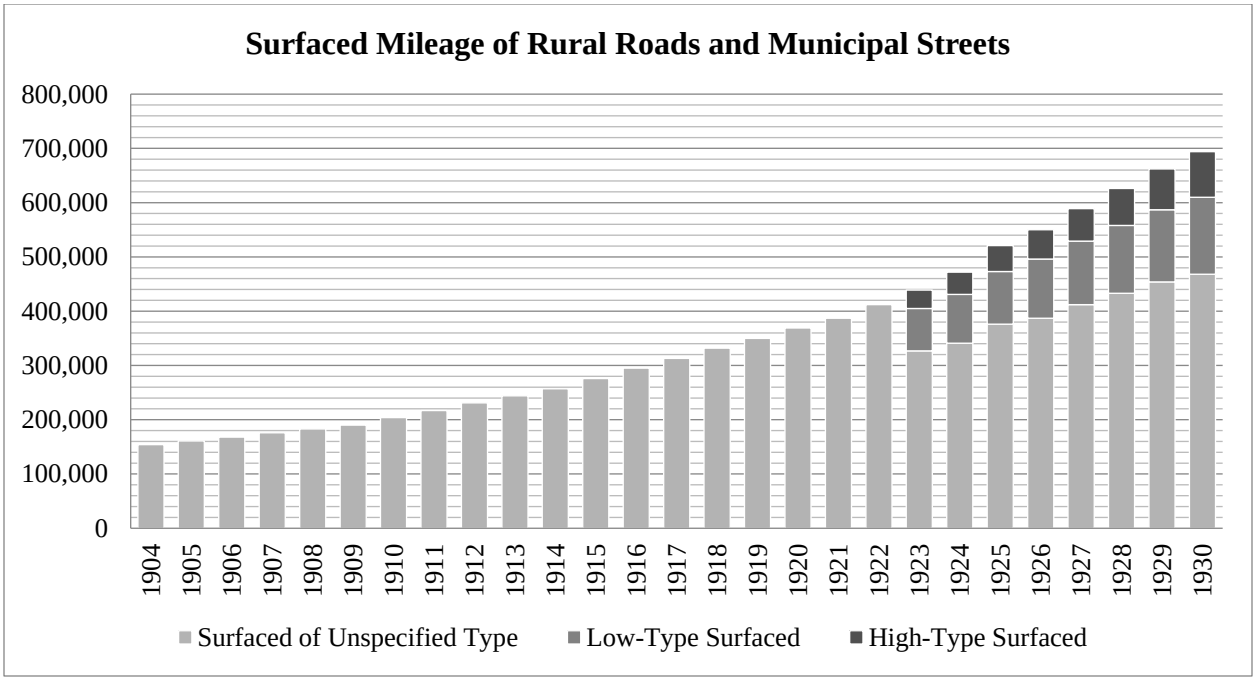

Figure 6: Surface Mileage of Rural Roads and Municipal Streets, by Surface Type[17]

Improved roadways were few and far between, and even when they were improved different standards and methods were used between localities. Overall, the mileage of improved roads increased gradually over the period, increasing pace in the 1920s. Looking at the mileage of surfaced streets, many of these roadways were of an unspecified type. These were most likely only moderately improved roads. The other two categories as reported were low-type and high-type. These categories specifically sort the roadways by the type of surfacing used to improve them. Low-type surfaces were generally roads with an added element such as sand, clay, gravel bituminous or treated gravel. These roads were not the type of hard surfaced roads Americans are accustomed to today and generally were a softer and less durable surface that could be laid down

[17] Graph derived from statistics from Louis Cain, "Surfaced mileage of rural roads and municipal streets, by surface type," *Historical Statistics of the United States: Volume 4 Economic Sectors* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 806. Low-Type surfaces included sand, clay, selected soil, untreated gravel, bituminous surface-treated gravel, mixed bituminous and chert, shale, and waterbound macadam. High-type included bituminous penetration, sheet asphalt, bituminous concrete, Portland cement concrete, vitrified brick; and block pavements of asphalt, wood, and stone.

at a cheaper cost. The other major category was high-type surfaced roads, which typically employed harder materials such as concrete, brick, block, asphalt, wood, or stone. These better quality high-type roadways were only a small minority of the ones being built, but were the best suited for automobile travel. These high quality road surfaces certainly provided better and safer travel conditions for early home-built house cars and rudimentary trailers that would have weighed considerably more than their unmodified automotive brethren.

Improved roads in many localities were rare. Most improved roads and consequently most automobiles were found in cities in the first decade of the twentieth century. Even cities with improved roads within their municipalities often had many miles of unimproved dirt roads between themselves and other nearby cities, which served as a barrier to practical long distance automobile travel and tourism. This was due to local control and influence in the allocation of road construction funds, resulting in short non-connecting sections of improved roads.[18] This lack of connectivity between locations was not advantageous to business and hindered automotive technology from competing effectively with the railroads over long distances.

Although road improvements in many areas remained modest, the overall effect of better linked roadways with more reliable and durable surfaces was a huge boon to the automobile's success as a vehicle for recreation. As travel from city to city became feasible it was not just possible to jaunt out to the country for an afternoon, but to consider long distance travels even across state lines. This long distance automobility would be the first step in America's road towards enjoying and practicing recreational automobility. It was also an early salvo against the railroad-resort establishment.

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[18] Jackle and Sculle, *Motoring,* 42.

Railroads had dominated the long distance transport, travel, and tourism markets since the mid-19th century and represented a mature industry in America by the advent of automobility. The industry's intricately connected, standardized, and anticompetitive system made travel and transportation easier and required less individual work. But this ease of travel had its drawbacks: limited choices, higher prices, and less autonomy for travelers. In the eyes of many, the railroad also lacked freshness, as it had become a mundane part of life. As Warren Belasco notes, "To this generation raised on the railroad, the train was the all-too-familiar given. The railroad *was* the industrial establishment—arrogant, impersonal, mechanical, and monopolistic."[19] Farmers and rural residents were also not entirely satisfied with the railroad system. Many people dwelling in rural areas, especially the American South, had desired improved roads to compete with the railroad. Rural reformers had argued even prior to mass automobility that better roads could be alternates to high and arguably unfair railroad shipping rates. As Howard Preston notes in *Dirt Roads to Dixie*, "the main economic stimulus to improve farm conditions, reformers argued, was high railroad rates over which farmers had absolutely no control. Poor roads were no alternative to the railroads when it came to getting valuable products quickly to market. But good roads were."[20] Dissatisfaction with the railroad system was the mood of many groups of people in the early twentieth century. It is therefore not surprising that many were eager to try out other technological alternatives once presented with a real choice.

The railroads' domination was not just limited to the means of traveling to a given destination. The railroads themselves held direct control of the majority of the resorts and domestic travel destinations. It was therefore in these companies' best interest to promote a set of

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[19] Belasco, *Americans on the Road*, 19. Emphasis in original.
[20] Preston, *Dirt Road to Dixie*, 15.

domestic travel destinations to both boost revenue on their passenger fares as well as to gain business in their associated resorts. It was in many ways a classic example of vertical integration and monopoly power.

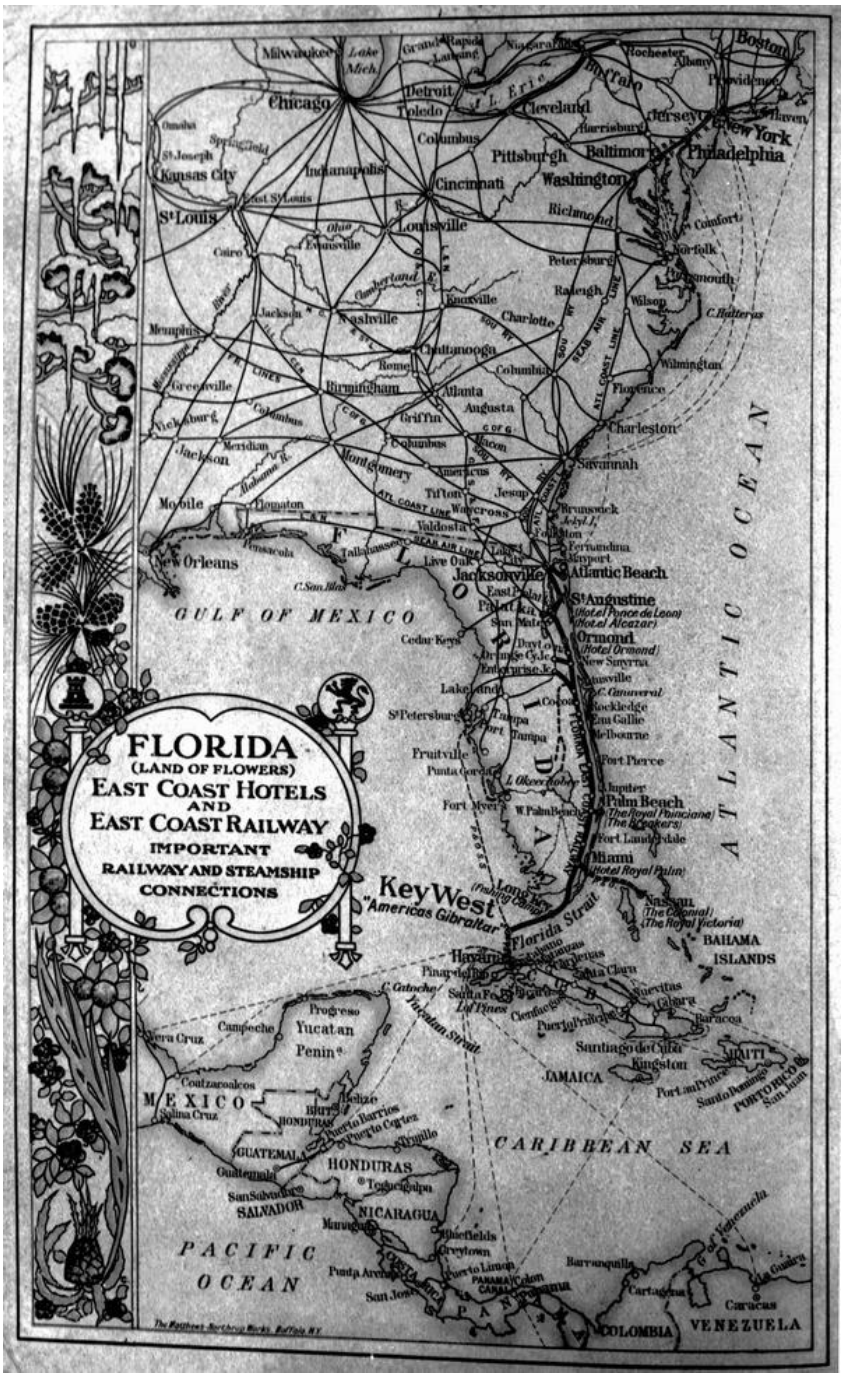

Figure 7: Map of Florida East Coast Hotels and Railway[21]

[21] "Map of Florida East Coast Hotels and Railway railroad and steamship connections" Florida Memory Collection State Library and Archives of Florida (hereafter FL Memory), https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/144628 (accessed January 1, 2016).

Turning to the Sunshine State, in figure 6, we can see that the resort hotels and railroads built in Florida exemplified this railroad-resort model. A tourist looking to visit Florida under this system would almost certainly travel via a railroad to a resort hotel owned and operated by the same railroad company. Henry Flagler's railroad and resort hotel empire built on the east coast of Florida is the classic example of the system. Flagler was an oil tycoon, having amassed his wealth as a partner of John D. Rockefeller. He chose to enter the railroad and resort business after becoming dissatisfied with the oil industry and wanting to create a business empire of his own. Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway eventually built railroads down the entire east coast of Florida to Key West. His Florida East Coast Hotel Company built the resort hotels as the new rail lines opened; these ventures have been referred to simply as the Flagler System. This interconnected system ensured that his hotels would receive guests via the railroad and the hotels would provide traffic for the railroad. Flagler modeled his resort system after earlier resort hotels built in the Northeast. He largely had no direct competition because his nearest rival, Henry Plant, operated his railroad and hotel empire on Florida's west coast, centered in Tampa. The relationship between Flagler and Plant has been characterized as that of "friendly rivals" theoretically but not genuinely competing.[22] This friendly relationship and anti-competitive territorial division created a virtual monopoly in Florida travel, which remained in place until the tourists themselves broke the railroads' grip through their use of the new automotive technology.

Despite its logistical and financial dominance since the 1800s, the railroad-resort mode of travel had also become increasingly unpopular and antiquated in the eyes of many tourists even before the automobile was a technology of mass use. The majority of the complaints stemmed

[22] For more on the Florida resort hotel system see : Susan Braden, *The Architecture of Leisure: The Florida Resort Hotels of Henry Flagler and Henry Plant* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), 5-7, 19-39, & 55-76.

from the limitations rail-resort travel created. The strict schedules and routes of the railroad felt industrial and limited spontaneity, enjoyment, and choice. Belasco described people's feelings about rail travel at the time: "Rail travel was too impersonal: anonymous passengers manipulated by officious conductors, unseen engineers, [and] faceless black porters all called George."[23] At the railroads' outset, their time schedules represented efficiency and progress, but people increasingly found the railroads' schedules arbitrary and inconvenient.[24] The railroads operated like a machine without fully taking into account human preferences and considerations. The railroad was no longer new or exciting and had largely became mundane. Furthermore, the baked-in technical characteristics that made railroads so successful in the nineteenth century as large scale movers of freight and passengers limited (and for most purposes prevented) the railroad from introducing any new or more flexible form of travel. Enticed by an automotive alternative, travelers increasingly found faults with railroad travel and began to consider seriously this alternative.

The problems did not rest solely on the side of railroads in this model; the resorts themselves seemed unfriendly and limiting to a new generation of consumers. Many resort hotels clung unflinchingly to dated Victorian ideas about gender, creating separate spheres for men and women.[25] These separate spheres made family activities difficult because they tended to parcel out family members to different locations and activities through the resorts. After all, these resort hotels had been built primarily as places for women and children to enjoy large amounts of leisure time, which left many men uncomfortable staying in them for extended periods.[26] The

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[23] Belasco, *Americans on the Road,* 20.
[24] Ibid., 20-22.
[25] Braden, *The Architecture of Leisure*, 115-121.
[26] Belasco, *Americans on the Road,* 56-57.

hotels then built on the idea of conspicuous luxury where one would visit to be seen enjoying a high end resort, which effectively demonstrated one's wealth in both money and time. Although certain parts of the resort were inaccessible to unaccompanied women, large portions of each resorts' spaces were designed for women as the primary consumer of the luxuries within.[27] Susan Braden states that "the Florida resort hotels tended to emphasize feminine domesticity and warmth over masculine urbanity and formality. These were, after all, comfortable resort hotels located in scenic areas, not formal palace hotels in urban business districts."[28] Highly regulated gender roles were more appealing to or least acquiesced to by these ultra-rich tourists of the Gilded Age, but it was increasingly easy to see why a much large and diverse segment tourists would reject these notions and practices in later decades. As the era of the automobile dawned, these gender separations felt more artificial and less desirable to many people.

Additionally, guests perceived the cost of vacationing at these hotels as high, which initially clearly had been part of the appeal. Since these resort hotels were conceptualized in the height of the Gilded Age's idea of conspicuous consumption and leisure, the price had to be high to maintain the exclusivity and high-class appeal.[29] Profits were relatively rare for the railroad-resort complex. Both Henry Plant and Henry Flagler found very little profit from their vast ventures. They tended to break even at best, which partially resulted from generating excess capacity within their own systems by constantly building updated resort to compete with their old ones.[30] Despite this systematic lack of profitability and growing cultural headwinds, this

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[27] Braden, *The Architecture of Leisure, 14-15.* Braden draws her idea of conspicuous luxury from the Thornstein Veblen's ideas of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous luxury. She views the resorts' luxury as an embodiment of both these ideas.
[28] Ibid., 16.
[29] Ibid., 40-54.
[30] Ibid., 27-29 and 38-39.

high-priced upper class appeal of resort hotels endured for many years, continuing in Florida well into the 1920s. The resort's clientele were even the target of joking criticism in Kenneth Roberts' book *Sunhunting* (1922), categorizing the lot of them as "Time-Killers." According to Roberts, these Time-Killers enjoyed paying more than what they needed to for leisure and relished in the "smartness" of doing so.[31] This satirical take on the resort clientele further pointed to the perceived inflated and unfair cost of railroad and resort travel. It also illustrated the way the Gilded Age conspicuous luxury appeared unnecessarily ostentatious or even foolish to observers in the age of the automobile. The railroad-resort model progressively had diminishing appeal even to its wealthy clientele and did little to nothing to attract new guests of other economic statuses. In fact, many more Americans of diverse economic classes felt the automobile was the best way to break the railroad-resort monopoly. They found long distance automobile travel on the named interstate tourist highway system to be one of the most effective means of reaching their planned destinations. It was precisely this long distance auto-tourist travel that was the first direct step in the development of recreational vehicles.

The realization of interstate-tourist highways made long distance car travel a more practical proposition. These tourist highways gave momentum to the automobile in the growing competition with railroad-resort travel. These early highways are often referred to as "named highways" because they were named (rather the numbered) by the promoters, boosters, or financiers of the project. As Jackle and Sculle have explained, "The group would choose a name of some distinction and mark and advertise a route that would funnel as many motorists as possible through supporting communities."[32] The groups involved in creating the highways were

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[31] Kenneth Roberts, *Sunhunting,* 3-62.
[32] Jackle and Sculle, *Motoring*, 43.

referred to as highway associations and would fundraise and lobby local governments to construct their highway. This work was usually on a non-profit basis; group members hoped instead to profit from business interests along the route and automotive product sales. These highway associations correctly predicted that creating an interconnected network of roadways would be a powerful force in shaping economic activities. The first successful named highway was the Lincoln Highway, created by the Lincoln Highway Association and built on a New York-to-San Francisco route. Its principle organizer and promoter was Carl Graham Fischer, who managed to secure corporate contributions and support from several major automobile makers. [33] The Lincoln Highway became the model of many roadways built in the 1910s and 1920s, prior to the federal government's more direct involvement.

These named highways allowed the automobile to effectively compete with the railroad over long distances for the first time. Boosters were right to think it would not be hard to encourage automobile travelers to accept the marked and reliable tourist routes as promising alternatives to reach their destinations. The boosters also hit on a great truth in the history of automobility in that the growth of roads and automobiles are integrally connected. More pavement often encourages more cars just as more cars seem to demand laying more roadways. The existence of such roads provided users with yet another reason to consider purchasing an automobile. At the same time, early successes such as Fischer's Lincoln Highway were sure to encourage imitation and expansion of the named highway model.

Returning to the American South, the region as a whole lagged behind the rest of the country in improved roads that automobiles could readily use. The poor state of roads in the South contributed to its reputation as the economic backwater of the United States. Howard

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[33] Jackle and Sculle, *Motoring,* 43-46.

Preston's study of the roads of the South in *Dirt Road to Dixie* demonstrated the evolution and implementation of improved roads in the region. Reforming the South's roadways was marketed in the pre-automobility era as a way to use farm-to-market roads to increase farmers' incomes, standards of living, and education by connecting them better to each other and to cities.[34] These improvements in the form of farm-to-market roads never materialized for two major reasons related to funding and tradition in the South. Preston identified that the farmers' aversion to taxation and government indebtedness as well as the way farmers had traditionally paid for road improvements via their labor in lieu of monetary taxation prevented these improvements from taking place.[35] In these ways, southern farmers hastened their own isolation from having a say when new roads were built in their states.

[34] Preston, *Dirt Road to Dixie*, 67.
[35] Ibid., 67.

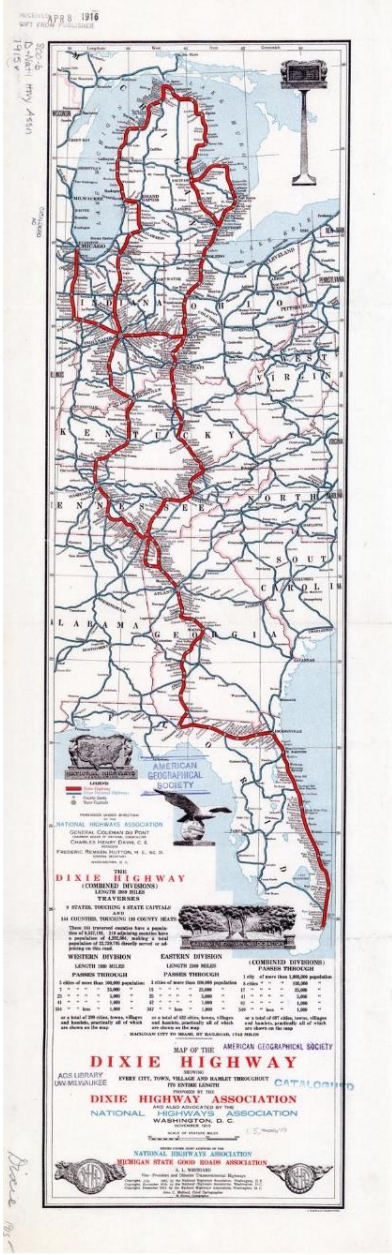

Figure 8: Dixie Highway Map 1915[36]

Instead of the farm-to-market road built for the local farmer, it would be the highway association roads built for out-of-state tourists that would reshape the American South's road system. Built to draw Northern tourists to the region, these interstate highways did not focus

[36] "Map of the Dixie Highway," World Digital Library, https://www.wdl.org/en/item/11544/ (accessed January 1, 2016).

specifically on improving farmers' access to markets, services, or education, although they may have ultimately been beneficial to some farmers. Preston felt that these highway associations hijacked the idea of good roads and recast it in their image of financial progress along narrow strips of interstate highways, creating new kinds of business and investment in the South and leaving farmers primarily out of the equation.[37] It seems that pre-automobility or even post-automobility roads for farmers were just not within the political equation for the South. It would once again be tourist-highway magnate Carl Graham Fischer who personified these new road construction efforts in the South with his Dixie Highway, which was created as a spin-off of his Lincoln Highway's success.

The Dixie Highway was the single most important road siphoning new tourists into the American South. Consisting of a series of interconnected routes from Michigan to Miami, the Dixie Highway resembled a modern highway system. Smaller east-west routes connected the highway's two major north-south axes to increase the number of towns that fell along the highway. Carl Graham Fisher envisioned his Dixie Highway as the perfect way to deliver customers to his Florida landholdings in and around Miami.[38] A highway in this case would be the perfect tool for economic development by expanding access and increasing desirability. Preston felt that these interstate tourist highways, focused solely on economics, created a façade of progress while leaving goals of genuine rural reform behind.[39] The Dixie Highway and the tourists it brought were some of the principal forces driving the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s

[37] Preston, *Dirt Road to Dixie*, 68.
[38] Ibid., 52.
[39] Ibid., 154-170.

and contributed in a real way to the formation of the Tin Can Tourists in the Dixie Highway-connected city of Tampa.

Autocamping, the Formation of the Tin Can Tourists of the World, and the Rise and Demise of Tin-Canners

Long-term recreational automobility first began to take shape, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, as autocamping. Autocamping is the use of an automobile as the primary conveyance to a camping destination where the traveler stays in or near the vehicle with shelter and camping equipment carried to the site by the automobile. Autocamping was both the first form of roadside accommodations intended specifically for automobile travelers and the first long-term recreational automobile activity.

There were two ways one could autocamp in the early years of automobility, and generally two kinds of autocampers. First, one could use autocamping for accommodations as a substitute for traditional hotels en route to a final destination. This first type has a practical appeal because it allowed automobile travelers to avoid the difficulty of finding suitable accommodations. This type of person can be described as a "convenience autocamper" because autocamping fulfilled their basic needs for shelter along the road. The lack of roadside accommodations was a serious problem during the 1910s and 1920s, as the market had not yet adapted to meet automobile tourists' needs.[40] These autocampers were the kind to embrace the latest and greatest and took to the autocamping fad because of its popularity. This group of autocampers was almost certainly the most numerous in the 1920s.

Second, autocamping itself could be the primary activity and recreation of the trip. One could camp continuously with an automobile, traveling to multiple destinations and enjoying the

[40] Belasco, *Americans on the Road,* 44.

experience of the journey. This type of activity was truly recreational and created the genre of long-term recreational automobility. It was also this second type of autocamper that can accurately be described as an enthusiast. Thus, those participating in autocamping in this way can be described as a "recreational autocampers." As the autocamping craze continued, it would be this second form of autocamping that would endure as other forms of roadside accommodations superseded the first, more practical variety. A rough division of tin-canners and Tin Can Tourists appears along the lines of "convenience autocampers" and "recreational autocampers." Tin-canners were more likely to be members of the first group of "convenience autocampers" who took to autocamping as an alternative to hotels and because of its popularity in the 1920s. Although many of these tin-canners took readily to the activity, this less committed group was certainly the first to bolt to other forms of roadside accommodations as they became available. Tin Can Tourists would normally be associated with "recreational autocampers" because they enjoyed autocamping as a leisure activity. The group's members were therefore a more organized vanguard for autocamping that would look to find technological solutions to improve their camping experiences. There was the potential for crossover between both types of autocamper, but the respective associations with each group can help to better differentiate the two when studying autocamping, understanding the Tin Can Tourists of the World's formation, and considering the development of recreational automobility enthusiasts.

Figure 9: Tin Can Tourists at De Soto Park, 1920[41]

Part of the attraction of this new activity for both convenience and recreational autocampers was the relatively low cost of autocamping when compared to other methods of travel. Autocamping promoters used this as a major selling point, sometimes even claiming that autocamping was cheaper than either staying in hotels or remaining at home.[42] In fact the cost savings claim since this period has been an ongoing trope that carried through to the RV as it

[41] Burgert Brothers, "Tin Can Tourists at De Soto Park," Florida Memory Collection State Library and Archives of Florida (hereafter FL Memory), http://www.floridamemory.com/PhotographicCollection/ (accessed August 12th, 2011).
[42] Belasco, *Americans on the Road*, 42-43.

became popular in later decades. In the case of Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners in Florida, both developed the reputation as being thrifty, even cheap. To Kenneth Roberts, if the wealthy visitors to Florida were "time-killers" looking to spend a buck, the autocamper was the "sun-hunter" seeking out sunshine and warmth in the winter at cut-rate prices. Roberts plays up this thriftiness when he describes these early autocamping sun-hunters: "The sun-hunter knows the value of a dollar. He usually knows the value of a nickel, also. It is said that before he relinquishes his hold on a twenty-five-cent piece, he gives it a farewell squeeze of such violence that the eagle on it frequently emits a strangled squawk of anguish."[43] He goes on to illuminate the stark differences between autocampers and resort hotel patrons, arguing that "The fact remains, however, that one never finds the sun-hunter throwing his money around in the loose, spasmodic manner which always characterizes the genuine time-killer."[44] This association of autocamping with thrift cut two ways. On one hand, it encouraged people to take up autocamping as a way to save money on a vacation, which was an important argument for anyone promoting the activity. In the case of Florida, low overall costs effectively lowered the barrier of entry for visiting the state on a vacation, which made it an even more accessible tourist mecca. One the other hand, it gave many locals the impression that autocampers were cheap or destitute. Tin Can Tourists in Florida and elsewhere continuously looked to counter this perception of being insolvent bums. They wanted to maintain their class image despite their affinity for saving money.

The amount of equipment needed to autocamp was simple and potentially inexpensive, with the exception of the automobile itself. Early photographs of the Tin Can Tourists autocamping, like the 1920 image taken at De Soto Park (Figure 8), demonstrate the simplicity

[43] Roberts, *Sunhunting*, 82-83.
[44] Ibid., 82-83.

of the equipment needed. The two major items were the automobile and tent. Although an automobile was a significant purchase, these autocampers certainly already owned a car for their utilitarian transportation needs, which offset the cost of using it for autocamping for part of the year. Later Tin Can Tourists initiated the shift toward vehicles with a solely recreational use as they began to modify their vehicles into house cars (the first true recreational vehicles), but initially the majority of the vehicles remained unmodified. Preparing a car for autocamping required simply strapping camping equipment, luggage, and various automotive supplies to the car wherever they might fit.

Figure 10: Tents at Tin Can Tourist Convention - Arcadia, Florida[45]

[45]"Tin Can Tourists convention - Arcadia, Florida," FL Memory, http://www.floridamemory.com/PhotographicCollection/ (accessed October 25th, 2011).

The second part of the autocampers' equipment was the tent. Tents were perhaps the most conspicuous part of these tourists' equipment, as Kenneth Roberts noted: "[some automobiles] have sprouted great tent-like wens at the side or rear."[46] Those seen in photographs typically were standard camping tents, which were small enough to pack up onto an automobile and yet large enough to be reasonably comfortable. Autocampers usually set up their tents near the automobile. In some cases, tents were set up to include the internal space of the car, which provided for the possibility of a sleeping area off the ground. The tent was by far the most common form of shelter seen in pictures of early autocamping in Florida. By the 1930s, they began to fall out of favor as autocampers began to choose recreational vehicle options and others left autocamping for roadside accommodations. The new recreational vehicle first appeared as homebuilt projects or expensive custom-built models built in small shops.[47] Factory-built trailers produced on a large scale did not emerge until the 1930s, when Tin Can Tourists in part helped create demand for them.

Miscellaneous camping items such as chairs, bedding, cooking implements, and clothes were also crammed into the automobile. Belasco described these miscellaneous items and explained the overarching questions regarding the proper amount of equipment an autocamper should carry. "In equipping themselves, for example, many autocampers never attained the desirable balance between 'going light' and being 'at home' on the road… In the end autocampers had to learn by trial and error."[48] Given the space limitations of packing a vehicle, autocampers always had to balance out this equation when choosing items for their journey. If

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[46] Roberts, *Sunhunting*, 75.
[47] Robert B. White, *Home on the Road: The Motor Home in America* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 70.
[48] Belasco, *Americans on the Road*, 79.

one packed too lightly for their life on the road, they could expect to have difficulty completing everyday activities, instead of enjoying leisure time. Alternately, if one packed too much equipment the required time to pack and unpack each night became onerous and cut into daily driving time. The folly of packing too much becomes clear in a scene Kenneth Roberts described of autocampers on their way to Florida with far too many "space-saving" camping items all crammed into their automobile:

> Their automobiles are completely stocked with folding chairs, collapsible beds, accordion-mattress, knock-down tents, come-apart stoves, telescopic dishwashers and a score of dishpans, table dinner-sets, tin cups, water-buckets and toilet articles that fold up into one another and look like a bushel of scrap-tin. There are canned goods under the seats, slung against the top, packed along the sides, tucked behind cushions and stacked along the floor. Some automobiles are so well stocked with canned things that they could make a dash for the Pole. And as one passes some of them on the road, they sound as though their owners were carrying a reserve supply of canned goods under the hood-loose.[49]

The sight of these autocampers packed with every possible necessity strapped to their car appeared comical to Roberts and many of his contemporaries. The end result of all this stowed equipment, according to Roberts, was that "some of the automobiles are bloated and swollen out of all semblance to an automobile."[50] The difficulty of packing and unpacking the autocamping equipment at each point put strains on the "convenience autocamper." These strains left "convenience autocampers" looking for better accommodations as they became available and left the true autocamping enthusiasts, such as the Tin Can Tourists, looking for better methods and technologies to streamline the autocamping experience.

Understanding autocamping requires studying the origins of the physical space designated for the activity, the autocamp. Warren Belasco examined the history of the autocamp

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[49] Roberts, *Sunhunting*, 85-86.
[50] Ibid., 75.

as part of his model of how automobile travel accommodations were established in the United States. He argued that these roadside developments took shape through an evolutionary process that led to progressive improvements and higher-levels of organization for these accommodations. He stated that autocamping activities had grown out of informal automobile trips taken by wealthy automobile owners prior to mass automobility.[51] This observation fit well with the notion of the automobile as a toy for the wealthy. These early trips did not require any specific place to camp, as one simply chose any desirable spot; he referred to this unorganized early form of automobile recreation as "gypsying."[52]

Gypsying was essentially autocamping without a sanctioned place and it relied on the patience and acquiescence of local residents. One Tin Can Tourist noted the lack of facilities during the gypsying era. "There were no public camping grounds nor parks maintained for these campers."[53] He continued by emphasizing the diversity of places these early automobile gypsies used to set up camp. "They would secure permission to stop on some private property, a village common, in a school or church yard, along the roadside, and cases have been told of camping in a cemetery."[54] Space for setting up camps had to be requisitioned on the fly and was far from guaranteed for a weary auto tourist. These campsites were not advertised or marked as such and required the automobile tourist to inquire with an unknown person to ask permission to camp or risk conflict by camping without permission. Finding a suitable legal location increasingly became difficult as locals felt that gypsy-style autocampers were destructive and impolite. Mill

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[51] Belasco, *Americans on the Road,* 17.
[52] Ibid., 1-2.
[53] Leroy Mills, *History of Our T.C.T.,* Tin Can Tourists Scrapbook 2 Box 2, Tin Can Tourists of the World Collection(hereafter TCT), Florida Library and Archives(hereafter FL Library), Tallahassee, FL. This history appears to have been a booklet originally, but appears as separate pages pasted in the scrapbook.
[54] Ibid.

elucidated the less-than-desirable situations that began to develop: “Many of these early campers were not too particular of their personal habits. Some left their camping site littered with refuse, some left their campfires burning, some used fences of their host for their firewood and too many took along some farmer’s chickens, potatoes or fruit when they left.”[55] For autocampers, then, the status quo began to become unsustainable.

As bad as gypsying was for the property owner or small town, the negative view of the gypsy was even more detrimental to the automobile tourist. Mills clearly felt there were real consequences for the autocamping community as a result of sloppy gypsying tourists. “The whole camping fraternity suffered because of those who had no consideration for those who were to follow, the whole fraternity soon became looked upon as a band of Gypsies, unwanted, undesirable and something to keep out of the neighborhood.”[56] As a result of this growing distain for the auto-gypsy Mill conceded that “it soon became difficult for any camper, no matter how honest or careful, to get permission to camp near other habitations.”[57] Gypsying had finally reached its practical ends as more people began traveling by automobile and looking for places to stay. In small numbers gypsies were tolerable or perhaps a novelty, but uncontrolled intrusions onto private property could no longer be tolerated in large numbers. It is also clear that rural dwellers saw these gypsying tourists as a homogenous group of destructive vagabonds who were not worth dealing with on an ad hoc basis. Without this on-the-fly availability of places to camp those looking to stay in their cars had to look elsewhere and communities had to respond for an outlet for auto-tourists.

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[55] Mills, *History of Our T.C.T.*
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

The new outlet for the automobile camping tourists was the autocamp. It grew out of the collapse of the gypsying tradition, but also benefited from the shift to mass automobile ownership that made recreational automobility more mainstream. This influx of automobile travelers to many localities, and the subsequent chaos and property damage, necessitated social controls in the form of formal autocamps. Policy makers saw these autocamps as an attempt to organize auto travelers by restricting them to designated camping locations.[58] Autocamps then served as a controllable space for the growing number auto-tourists that limited or eliminated the temptation to camp uncontrolled on other people's property.

These new facilities also were seen as a potential engine for economic growth from tourism. Most autocamps were initially little more than designated employ lots masquerading as free municipal campgrounds provided. In fact, most local governments provided very limited services, facilities, or supervision for these newly established autocamps. City boosters proposed these camps as a way to attract tourist income by simply providing camping space for automobile tourists. They also strengthened their argument by reminding the locals of the disturbances of unregulated gypsying.[59] In this format the autocamp was an indirect way of earning tourist dollars through capturing the presumed ancillary purchases that these tourists would make during their vacation. The Tin Can Tourists of the World first organized in one of these municipal camps, De Soto Park in Tampa.

The next generation of autocamp operated on a fee-based or paid admission system. This new form of camp was also the result of complaints, this time lodged by both locals and some autocampers, contending that undesirable people were ruining camps and that through the

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[58] Belasco, *Americans on the Road*, 3-5.
[59] Ibid., 74-79.

imposition of a fee these people could be driven out and the respectability of both autocamps and autocampers maintained.[60] In Florida, in particular, people began to reject the idea of free camps. Roberts described these attitudes in the context of increasing numbers of lower income people who could afford old cars. This supposedly allowed lower income and presumably less desirable people to join with the first wave of more affluent autocampers in the free camps:

> During the 1920-1921 season there were great numbers of free tin-can camps throughout Florida; but Florida towns found… that open-handed and unsupervised welcome to any person who can scratch up enough money to take advantage of the welcome will bring nothing but annoyances, losses and misery in its train.[61]

Although Roberts suggested that lower class individuals were to blame for degraded conditions, the local governments' failure to provide adequate services to meet higher demand might be considered the more likely culprit for the decline. Interestingly, Belasco identified one of these types of undesirable people as "year-round tourists" who fully embraced automobility by adopting a permanent existence living on the road in autocamps.[62] These "year-round tourists" were an important segment of membership in the Tin Can Tourists of the World and remain common in many RV enthusiast groups today. The lure of a permanently mobile life on the road has been appealing to many over the last century. It is also likely that even back in the early stages of the Tin Can Tourists these year-rounders remained a minority despite their importance.

By the mid-1920s, many autocamps in Florida had shifted to the fee-based model or closed down their operations, although not all of them closed immediately. In the case of Tampa's De Soto Park Roberts noted that "The Tampa camp was a success because it was very

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[60] Belasco, *Americans on the Road* ,105-106.
[61] Roberts, *Sunhunting*, 90.
[62] Belasco, *Americans on the Road, 107.*

carefully regulated and policed."[63] But even De Soto Park eventually turned against the Tin Can Tourists during their fourth convention (1922-1923). "Shortly after this convention began, all campers were ordered out of the De Soto Park on the principle that the park was a public playground and not an accredited campground."[64] The Tin Can Tourists had been defeated in Tampa for the time being and were fortunate to be invited by the city of Arcadia, Florida, to continue their activities there.[65] The Tin Can Tourists often changed their venues, but never found a shortage of towns willing to host their activities.

Autocamping was a remarkably popular activity, but autocamps were only the first mainstream form of roadside accommodations for automobile travelers. According to Belasco, "Despite the hopes of fee [autocamp] proponents, the pay camp was more a new stage in the commercialization of the roadside than a return to the original [autocamping] booster plan. Having evolved from squatter encampments to public institutions, the autocamp was now a business."[66] The transition in autocamps from a free service provided by the government to a paid service established as a business was very important to Belasco's explanation of the shift away from autocamping. These new businesses noticed that mainstream automobile travelers were looking for a place to stay that was "economical yet comfortable, simple yet convenient, and intimate yet selective"[67] He concluded that "Twenty years of experimentation with tourist camps, cabin camps, cottage camps, cottage courts, and motor courts would produce the motor hotel that came of age after World War II."[68] Belasco's arguments about autocamping's decline

[63] Roberts, *Sunhunting*, 90.
[64] Mills, *History of Our T.C.T.*
[65] Ibid.
[66] Belasco, *Americans on the Road*, 129.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.

and the shift toward the motel is consistent with the history of the "convenience autocamper" who practiced autocamping out of necessity or convenience, but ignores the "recreational autocamper" who embraced the essence of the activity through the late twentieth century as the Tin Can Tourists of the World. Even as other automobile tourists embraced advances in roadside accommodations, such as the motor court and early motel, these truly recreational autocampers continued to stay in their transported accommodations and improved them by creating increasingly comfortable motor homes and travel trailers for use in the same camping places where they originally pitched tents.

The Tin Can Tourists of the World formed in 1919, which largely coincided with the rise of autocamping's mass popularity and the founding of autocamps to provide space for these new tourists. The organization's official story of its formation can be found in the introduction of a booklet containing the constitution and bylaws.[69] It described the conditions, activities, and background of the autocampers who formed the organization.

> The closing days of 1919 found motor camping in Florida in its infancy, as evidenced by the fact that on December 1st of that year, only twenty-two camping outfits were to be found in De Soto Park, Tampa, the first public camp ground in the state. These pioneers, in order that they might become better acquainted with each other, gathered in small groups around a number of camp-fires, where they whiled away the evenings by singing songs and telling stories, as well as relating their many thrilling experiences of road life. There were at that time no worth-while highways or camps and the tourist after a hard day's drive of some forty of fifty miles often had to spend the night by the lonely roadside.[70]

Words and references used in this passage, such as "infancy," "pioneers," "new sparsely populated camps," and "lonely roadside," evoked the reality of autocamping being both new and underdeveloped, but also allowed these autocampers to emphasize that their activity was difficult

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[69] Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., *Constitution and By-Laws*, TCT, FL Library. No publisher or publication date is apparent although convention listings inside suggest an early 1960s printing.
[70] Ibid., 2.

and involved a natural element. Autocamping appeared as an exhilarating, rugged, and enjoyable activity and lifestyle in the Tin Can Tourists' story. The idea of a "pioneer" clearly referenced ideas of the frontier and individualism with autocampers freely and autonomously traveling and experiencing the "road life." The mantra of individualism became a core aspect of the Tin Can Tourist identity from the beginning. This pioneer individualism also draws comparisons with the nostalgia for the idealized American frontier. These themes expressed would later become pervasive components of recreational vehicle culture more generally, in particular the mantra of individual freedom.

Mr. James M. Morrison of Chicago, Illinois, was both the founder of the group and the first person to hold the highest executive position of Royal Chief during the 1920-1921 convention year period.[71] He laid out the objectives he considered necessary for the Tin Can Tourists to pursue:

> 1. To unite fraternally all auto campers.
> 2. To establish a feeling of friendship.
> 3. To provide clean and wholesome entertainment at all meetings.
> 4. To spread the gospel of cleanliness in all camps, as well as help enforce the rules governing all public camp grounds.[72]

These objectives encouraged a more enjoyable autocamping experience by promoting friendships and a sense of community spirit. Entertainment and public events were typically the methods Tin Can Tourists used to unite member autocampers and recruit non-members such as tin-canners. Early autocamps, in particular the free autocamps, frequently had little or no management or maintenance. The complaints lodged about autocamps as dirty and unsafe places

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[71] Officers in the Tin Can Tourists serve for twelve months from December to December of consecutive calendar years. To avoid confusion officers will be noted by this two-year system (i.e. 1920-1921) to reflect this election schedule.
[72] Tin Can Tourists Inc., *Constitution*, TCT, FL Library, 2.

threatened autocamping itself if municipalities chose to act by closing their camps. Morrison's objectives of "cleanliness in all camps" and "enforce[d] rules governing all public camp grounds" were an effort to fix this deficiency in supervision. According to the 1920s bylaws it was the duty of all Tin Can Tourist members to police other campers, members or not. "It shall be the duty of all members to insist that campers leave all grounds clean, to leave no fires, to destroy no property and to purloin nothing."[73] This self-policing could fill the gap left by the lack of management at many autocamps and represented lessons learned from the downfall of gypsying.

The last part of the official story provided in the constitution and bylaws booklet discussed the formal organization and the adoption of a name, slogan, and motto for the group. It also raises questions about the timeline for the group's organization, formation, and ratification of the constitution.

> The organization meeting was held in De Soto Park, in January, 1920, and a Constitution and By-Laws were adopted at a future meeting. The three high points were:
> 1. The Name- 'Tin Can Tourists of America'
> 2. The Slogan- 'No fees! No dues! No graft!"
> 3. The Motto- "Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you.[74]

The group was formed a month after the first meeting and the introduction of Mr. Morrison's ideas to the others at the autocamp in Tampa's De Soto Park. The exact date of adoption for the group's constitution and bylaws was not given in this booklet from the 1960s, but an original handwritten version of the constitution and bylaws dated 1919-1920 suggests they were largely the same.[75] It is clear that by the time the group incorporated officially in 1937, the constitution

[73] Tin Can Tourists Scrapbook 2 Box 2, TCT, FL Library.
[74] Tin Can Tourists Inc., *Constitution*, 2.
[75] Scrapbook 2, TCT, FL Library.

and bylaws had been established, and they remained unchanged until the 1960s. The short-lived original name of the group was the "Tin Can Tourists of America." It tended to emphasize a national scope to their autocamping activities. The Constitution and Bylaws dated to 1920 suggests that "World" had been substituted for "America" almost immediately after the group's creation.[76] The name had certainly changed by the time Kenneth Roberts wrote *Sunhunting* in 1922, since he referred to the group as the "Tin Can Tourists of the World."[77] The change from "America" to "World" does not reflect an immediate shift toward international travel, but likely reflected the Canadian or occasional European autocampers who joined the group in its recreational automobility activities across North America. However, the name change may have represented an aspirational shift for the group. The group might have accurately recognized both the potential appeal of Canadian and Mexican destinations that would become more popular in the 1930s in travel magazines. The change in naming might have even recognized the potential for the group to eventually go further afield in the world. Although the Tin Can Tourists global ventures did not come to pass as a group, the emphasis on recreational automobility as a potential global phenomenon was prescient. In fact, other enthusiasts would live out these extravagant world travel plans by following the leadership of Wally Byam and his caravanning club that undertook a significant number of international Airstream trips after World War II.

The Tin Can Tourists' slogan, "No Fees! No Dues! No Graft!," reflects distain for corruption and a desire to maintain the economics of free autocamping. The motto suggests that there was some truth to the Tin Can Tourists' thrifty reputation. Beyond the motto, kickbacks and other compensation for officers of the Tin Can Tourists were strictly forbidden later in the

[76] Scrapbook 2, TCT, FL Library.
[77] Roberts, *Sunhunting*, 87.

bylaws.[78] The motto and the club rules reflected a moral theme of ethical and kind treatment to fellow autocampers and reinforced it as a defining characteristic of the Tin Can Tourists. As the group's motto it confirmed how the Tin Can Tourists wanted to be appraised as quality people who were living a mobile lifestyle, not disreputable vagabonds.

The Tin Can Tourists had two types of officers, executive officers and a board of directors. A group of individuals elected annually by members at the winter convention in Florida controlled the Tin Can Tourists and ran the organization. Initially, prospective leaders ran for executive officer positions. After the 1938-1939 convention, a board of directors was added in addition to the executive officers. The responsibilities of running the organization were then effectively divided between the two groups. Executive officers included the positions of Royal Chief, Royal Vice-Chief, Royal Secretary, Royal Treasurer, and after the 1935-1936 convention Assistant Royal Secretary. Originally the top two executive positions were given the humorous titles of the "Royal Tin Can Opener" and the "Vice Tin Can Opener"[79] These executive officers ran day-to-day operations, group communication, and suggested measures and budgets. The constitution tasked the board of directors with approving executive officers' actions and appropriations; this served to balance the power of the executive officers. Matters such as the election of officers and the choice of location for the Summer Reunion and Winter Homecoming meetings were the prerogative of the voting members at the convention.

The Tin Can Tourists extended membership in the organization to many. Primarily, anyone staying at the convention campsite in a tent, travel trailer, or motor home (thereby meeting the definition of the "Automobile Camping Tourists") could join. The recreational

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[78] Tin Can Tourists Inc., *Constitution*, TCT, FL Library, 13.
[79] Mills, *History of Our T.C.T.*

automobility requirement was important because it prevented casual car tourists who were staying in roadside lodging from joining and diverting the group from its true mission of maintaining and promoting autocamping and recreational vehicle travel. It is also this requirement that made the Tin Can Tourists the first true RV enthusiast group in the United States. The Tin Can Tourists of the World built their two other major restrictions into one sentence of the constitution. "Active membership in the T. C. T. shall be limited to Automobile Camping Tourists of the white race and over twelve (12) years of age."[80] The restriction of membership to whites reflects the time in which the group formed and the racial policies in the American South. For all practical purposes even if the group had allowed non-white members they would have been restricted from staying in white-only campgrounds that were prevalent until the Civil Rights movement. The racial restriction remained in effect until the 1970s and contributed to the absence of any known African-American members of the group. More attention to the Tin Can Tourists' record on racial issues and issues relating racially restricted access to recreational automobility requires further consideration and will be discussed later in the dissertation.

Finally, the age restriction limited the membership of young children. Children were not a frequent sight in any Tin Can Tourist meeting, and the membership of the group was almost entirely adults with no children or older adults with grown children. Most deemed long-term recreational automobility inappropriate for younger children, and their presence was considered disruptive to other autocampers. Kenneth Roberts suggested that the ranks of Tin Can Tourists were filled mostly with farmers, contractors, builders, and carpenters. He noted that many "are people who can get away from home with the least amount of trouble; and among them one finds

[80] Tin Can Tourists Inc., *Constitution*, TCT, FL Library, 12.

retired business men of all sorts."[81] The bulk of those who joined the Tin Can Tourists had to have sufficient money to pay for the trips as well as sufficient time, perhaps at least a season, to make their trip. The number of retirees grew as the Tin Can Tourists of the World matured as an organization.

With the formation of the Tin Can Tourists of the World, the autocamper had a collective voice to further advocate for their activities and an organization in which they could find companionship with likeminded travelers. Between 1919 and 1929 Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners shared the same roads and camps. The relationship between these two groups requires consideration, as their conflation has led to inaccuracies in the historical record. Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners shared certain similarities and had some significant differences that can help illuminate the reason for the confusion and the significance behind considering them separately.

The many similarities between Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners are readily apparent. For example, both used automobiles as a primary form of transportation on their trips. Roberts described tin-canners and implicitly Tin Can Tourists as "sun-hunters" using their automobile to avoid the northern winter. "As soon as the first snow begins to fall in the North, or when the earth has tightened up under a black frost, the sun-hunters prepare for their flight to the South. Great numbers of them travel by automobile."[82] New interstate tourist highways, such as the Dixie Highway, made this southward migration possible. In this respect, these were some of the first true snowbirds in the modern sense of the term, with people from norther climates looking for the sunshine and warmer weather of Florida.

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[81] Roberts, *Sunhunting*, 85.
[82] Ibid, 85.

Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners also were similar in appearance and equipment as they stayed in the same Florida autocamps. Their clothing was distinctly casual and emphasized comfort over formality. "Clothes mean nothing in his life" according to Roberts, which usually meant a little more than a casual shirt, pair of dark trousers with suspenders, and only the addition of a coat when desired.[83] This casual clothing might not fit well in the resort-hotel scene but mattered little in the autocamps of Florida. In the autocamp of the 1920s, a vague imitation of hobo dress was indeed fashionable even though it perhaps lacked authenticity.

These substantial similarities in appearance and activities, at least in terms of the outside observer, created some difficulty in differentiating between a Tin Can Tourist and a tin-canner. The confusion of the Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners has continued into the modern historiography of the group. This confusion relates directly to why the Tin Can Tourists' history has so often been misinterpreted. However, an examination of the differences between Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners can set aside this confusion and better reveal the Tin Can Tourists' legacy as a vitally important enthusiast group.

Roberts described a tin-canner as being known by the same colloquial phrase "tin-can tourist" and delineated the relationship between the two as existing side-by-side, with the Tin Can Tourists as the standard-bearers of the autocamping movement.

> It is due to the heavy weight of cans carried by these automobiles that the true, stamped-in-the-can sun-hunter is known to himself, to his friends and to his enemies as a tin-can tourist. He lives in more or less permanent settlements known as tin-can towns; and his interests are safeguarded by a flourishing organization rejoicing in the impressive title of Tin-Can Tourists of the World.[84]

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[83] Roberts, *Sunhunting*, 83-84.
[84] Ibid. 87.

Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners clearly had much in common, but even here one of the primary differences is apparent in the level of commitment and organizational abilities of those involved in the Tin Can Tourists of the World. The organization provided a voice for the broader multitudes of autocamping tourists visiting Florida and certainly helped to prevent disorder in the camps that all enjoyed.

During the 1920s, the differences between the Tin Can Tourists and the tin-canners may not have been as readily apparent as their similarities, but differences in outlook and commitment made them distinct and resilient as mainstream autocamping diminished. One difference was that Tin Can Tourists began to conceive of their autocamping activates as a long-term proposition. One Michigan man was reported as having been on the road autocamping for twenty-one months in eighteen states.[85] It was not uncommon for Tin Can Tourists to take whole months, seasons or even years for their journeys, particularly as the technology for long-term recreational automobility improved. The tin-canner instead may have taken off several weeks to a month before returning to commitments back home. The Tin Can Tourists also had the advantage of belonging to an organization that helped advocate for their activities. With an organization that also promoted socialization, the friendships cultivated on the road encouraged Tin Can Tourists to return year after year to see these friends. Finally, Tin Can Tourists enjoyed the experience of staying in camps with their automobile and their own shelter, unlike the tin-canners who were simply there because it was the latest and most popular form of travel.

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[85] "Motor Knights of the Road Frolic in Florida Camp Convention of 'Tin Can Tourists of the World' Draws Hundreds," *Reading Eagle*, Jan. 8, 1926, 20.

Figure 11: Royal Chief Otho Granford Shoup at Gainsville[86]

The one visible way to distinguish a Tin Can Tourist from an unassociated tin-canner was by the front of his car. The organization's bylaws from the 1920s specify strict rules regarding marking a member's car. "The emblem of the order shall be the Tin Can, to be worn on the front of the car; The letters T.C.T. may be placed in black on the can with same design as official button or the letters T.C.T. in place of can."[87] The TCT emblem can be seen attached to the front of the car on the right of Figure 10. With such a visible display of membership status, group association could be easily determined at both the autocamp and on the road. Failure to comply

[86] "Otho Granford Shoup at Gainesville," FL Memory, http://www.floridamemory.com/PhotographicCollection/ (accessed October 25th, 2011).
[87] Scrapbook 2, TCT, FL Library.

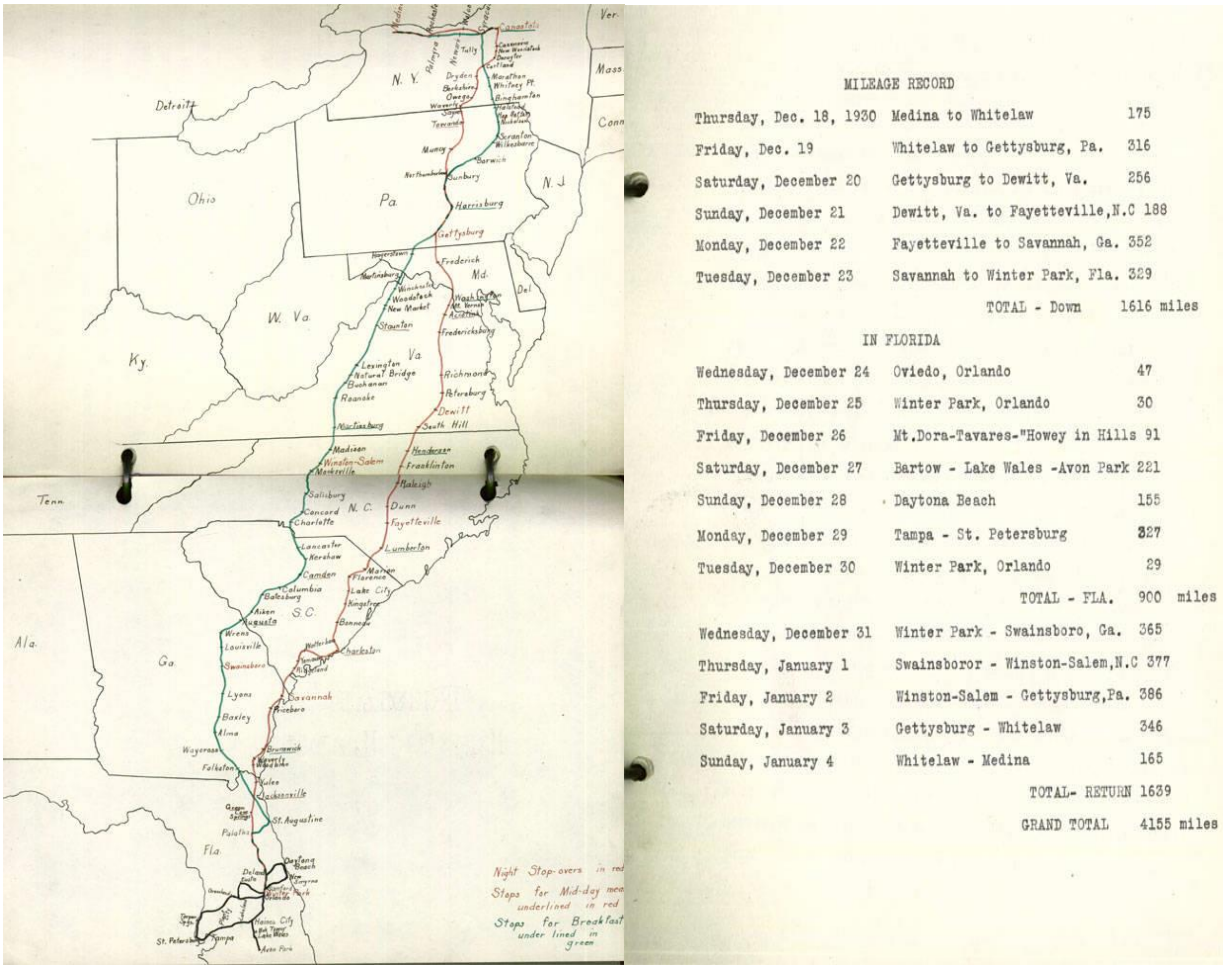
with this rule carried stiff penalties. “All members refusing to wear the official emblem on their cars while camping forfeit membership.”[88] Forcing members to present visible proof of membership benefited the entire group as it would actively encourage Tin Can Tourists to live by the ideals set forth in their constitution. It also benefited the general membership because they were obligated to help one another on the road. “It shall be the duty of each member to aid and assist all members found in trouble so far as in their power without material injury to himself or car.”[89] These outward emblems encouraged comradeship and unity among these autocamping enthusiasts, a quality that less committed tin-canners lacked. With the Tin Can Tourist the collegiality and cooperation is the forerunner of very similar feelings in modern RV enthusiast groups.

Several factors overall contributed to the decline of the tin-canners in Florida and autocampers nationally by 1930. First, the development of other options in roadside accommodations for automobiles such as the tourist cottages, motor court, early motels, or even rented rooms in private residences attracted many casual travelers. These new accommodations purposely designed to house tourists in automobiles became the latest and most sophisticated option attracting those looking for convenience. Second was the bust in Florida real estate after 1926, which had brought many enthusiastic tourists looking to make their fortune buying and reselling land. These speculators had flooded some towns during the boom, and autocamping had provided an additional outlet for temporary housing. The decline in real estate speculation meant a decline in travelers to the American South, and Florida in particular. Third, the Great Depression diminished Americans’ disposable incomes and left many jobless. As some lived in

[88] Scrapbook 2, TCT, FL Library.
[89] Ibid.

their car out of necessity during the Depression, it diminished the popularity of autocamping because doing so could wrongly indicate one's economic status. The nicknames used to describe autocamping, even the name "tin can tourist," fell out of favor. Belasco discussed how the title "tin can tourist" developed a negative connotation by the end of the 1920s, stating that, "Even [the nickname] tin can tourist was left to the riff-raff; camping tourist or motor camper became the preferred title."[90] These factors drove all but the most dedicated from the activity of autocamping. The Tin Can Tourists and their organization, however, remained on the road. Their enthusiasm for recreational automobility would not be diminished by the tougher times ahead.

[90] Belasco, *Americans on the Road,* 114.



MILEAGE RECORD

Thursday, Dec. 18, 1930	Medina to Whitelaw	175
Friday, Dec. 19	Whitelaw to Gettysburg, Pa.	316
Saturday, December 20	Gettysburg to Dewitt, Va.	256
Sunday, December 21	Dewitt, Va. to Fayetteville,N.C	188
Monday, December 22	Fayetteville to Savannah, Ga.	352
Tuesday, December 23	Savannah to Winter Park, Fla.	329
	TOTAL - Down	1616 miles

IN FLORIDA

Wednesday, December 24	Oviedo, Orlando	47
Thursday, December 25	Winter Park, Orlando	30
Friday, December 26	Mt.Dora-Tavares-"Howey in Hills	91
Saturday, December 27	Bartow - Lake Wales -Avon Park	221
Sunday, December 28	Daytona Beach	155
Monday, December 29	Tampa - St. Petersburg	327
Tuesday, December 30	Winter Park, Orlando	29
	TOTAL - FLA.	900 miles
Wednesday, December 31	Winter Park - Swainsboro, Ga.	365
Thursday, January 1	Swainsboror - Winston-Salem,N.C	377
Friday, January 2	Winston-Salem - Gettysburg,Pa.	386
Saturday, January 3	Gettysburg - Whitelaw	346
Sunday, January 4	Whitelaw - Medina	165
	TOTAL- RETURN	1639
	GRAND TOTAL	4155 miles

Figure 12: Map and Mileage Record for a Trip to Florida[91]

The state of the automobile travel experience for the mainstream had changed by 1930. A traveler's account of a visit to Florida in the winter of 1930 emphasized the many changes that had taken place during the 1920s. The unnamed traveler's log recounted his party's journey from Medina, New York, to Winter Park, Florida, where he took numerous side trips in Central Florida. The account highlighted improvements in accessibility produced by the interstate tourist

[91] *A Visit to the Land of Sunshine and Flowers*, Florida Heritage Collection, University of Central Florida Special Collections, Orlando FL. http://digitool.fcla.edu/R/LEFS6KR284ET3U5TCEYBAM21J7SNAV8PEYAXEQJJVBFGJYXBU6-01592?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=2703905&pds_handle=GUEST (accessed September 10th, 2011).

highways and local road improvements. The greater choices in accommodations for automobile tourists also was apparent, as this traveler had no difficulty finding a suitable place to stay. These positive changes for automobile tourists help to explain why autocamping was abandoned by many "convenience autocampers." Insight into the economic situation in Florida a little over ten years after the construction of tourist highways can be drawn from this account.

This traveler's log commented frequently on the state of the roadways as well as the scenery. Nearly all the descriptions of the roads were positive, with some winning special praise. As the vacationer entered Florida, the winter resort town of Winter Park also earned high praise. "Few smaller cities in the United States possess so many miles of beautiful streets as Winter Park."[92] Another road taken on the way to visit Bok Tower was described as "a splendid paved and sand highway."[93] Other roadways such as Tampa's Gandy Bridge, U.S. Highway 1, and the Coastal Highway earned equally high marks. Out of this traveler's entire journey, only one instance of an unpaved road was briefly encountered, and it was both dry and passable.[94] The highway systems of the American South and in the state of Florida had progressed significantly in a little more than a decade. Poor roads no longer hindered tourists and well-marked, surfaced roads could effectively bring tourists south to Florida. These road improvements helped both Tin Can Tourists and the increasing numbers of non-autocamping car travelers.

The traveler described the accommodations he encountered as both comfortable and convenient. The traveler stayed primarily in private homes that rented rooms to tourists for the night. Many of these rooms came with the added convenience of a free "Southern meal of hot

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[92] *A Visit to the Land of Sunshine and Flowers*, Florida Heritage Collection, 21.
[93] Ibid., 45.
[94] Ibid., 73.

biscuits and Virginia ham" for breakfast.[95] On one occasion the traveler stayed at a "tourist lodge" where he was "quite favorably impressed" with the restaurant and service.[96] There were no complaints along the journey about the lodging the tourist used or any mention of any difficulty finding it. Also absent was any suggestion of autocamping or even the suggestion of packing extra automotive or food supplies in the car. For most Americans, the roadside had evolved, and it was now easier than ever for mainstream travelers to forgo extra planning and pay to have lodging and supplies provided locally along their route. Former "convenience autocampers" abandoned autocamping and instead turned to these new businesses that offered less complicated and more fashionable accommodations designed for automobile travelers.

While both the interstate tourist highways and tourist accommodations had clearly improved for tourists, the economy of the State of Florida had not necessarily changed for the better. Florida's boom time economy of the early 1920s fully ended with a spectacular bust. Real estate values had crashed as early as 1926, and many towns and developments across Florida were completely abandoned. The traveler highlighted one such example of a place called "Inter-Ocean City."

> It is also in this vicinity that the highway passes a pitiful spectacle a remnant of the Florida boom. The place is called Inter-Ocean City but it is a city in name only. Its population is 'nil' and all that remains are the shells of a planning mill…, a couple of stores and hotels. All are deserted and cattle may roam at will about the abandoned streets. A sad ending, indeed, and a terrible catastrophe to the state, especially since there are many similar results in other parts.[97]

The boom had set back the spectacular and perhaps unsustainable progress Florida had made in development since the turn of the century. The interstate tourist highways had helped fuel the

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[95] *A Visit to the Land of Sunshine and Flowers*, Florida Heritage Collection, 7.
[96] Ibid., 13.
[97] Ibid., 44.

boom and would also contribute in an eventual recovery, but clearly in 1930 the merits of these roads and the tourists they brought were debatable.

Tin Can Tourists were among the few groups that traveled to Florida every year in the 1930s, and some towns found their presence to be a valuable source of income. There were still pockets of prosperity, such as the traveler's descriptions of Winter Park, St. Petersburg, and Daytona Beach, but all felt hard times during the 1930s. During these hard times the Tin Can Tourists both thrived and evolved as they continued their annual pilgrimages to Florida while creating and purchasing ever more comfortable and sophisticated mobile accommodations. It would be precisely during this sometimes difficult decade that the recreational vehicle would gain momentum as both enthusiasts and the general public would encounter and help shape the new trailer technology.

CHAPTER TWO: THE ORIGINS OF THE TRAILER REVOLUTION AND THE ENTHUSTIASTS' QUEST TO FIND "HOME" ON THE ROAD

A sign stating "No More House Cats" immediately caught Howard Vincent O'Brien's eye on his trip to the beaches of Corpus Christi, Texas. He was used to seeing "No More Vacancy" signs, but he "decided the congestion must be extreme. Things were certainly crowded when there wasn't even room for another kitten!"[1] Upon closer inspection of the worn lettering, O'Brien discovered that rather than dealing with a lack of room for domestic felines the sign was directed at early recreational vehicles: "house cars." This was the first time O'Brien, a Chicago area news reporter, had developed any interest in the topic of recreational vehicles. Shortly after, at the prompting of a newspaper editor and O'Brien's wife and daughter, he would begin a journey of four thousand miles in a travel trailer.[2] Like O'Brien, many other users and observers would help to define this new technology as they traveled in and wrote about trailers.

During the 1930s, the American public and especially those interested in travel witnessed and participated in the launch of an industry that focused on producing a new type of automotive technology, the manufactured travel trailer. Prior to this development, those interested in recreational vehicles had to produce their own or purchase an expensive custom setup. The travel trailer—mobile accommodations towed behind a passenger vehicle—became the dominant form of recreational vehicle during the 1930s. Early homemade units would prove themselves to be well suited as test beds for industry pioneers or as a mechanically inclined recreational

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[1] Howard Vincent O'Brien, *Folding Bedouins Or Adrift in a Trailer* (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Company, 1936), 1.
[2] Ibid., 1-5, 131.

automobility enthusiast's project. The early homemade units first in the form of house cars and later homemade trailers sparked interest in the RV for the first time. They also served a role as showcases for how one might adapt automotive technology towards recreational camping activities. When the traveling public first saw these clever house cars and trailers going down the highways, those not inclined or unable to build one themselves would go looking to purchase newly available manufactured models to meet their need for mobile accommodations.

From the beginning of the decade to the onset of America's involvement in World War II, the development of affordable factory-built trailers and the popular demand for them cemented the recreational vehicle as a lasting cultural institution. The introduction of manufactured trailer technology during this period represents a revolution in American tourism, travel, and culture. This chapter focuses on these early artifacts, the first to meet the definition of a recreational vehicle. It begins to tell the story of how and why recreational vehicles grew and evolved in the period between the onset of the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II. It begins with early house cars, the first true recreational vehicles. It then shifts to how homemade trailer units presented both enthusiasts and the public with another option. These trailers would ultimately lead to the first mass produced recreational vehicles in the form of the towed travel trailer. Throughout, this chapter emphasizes the role that independent enthusiasts, craftsmen, and mechanics had in creating this new recreational technology throughout these formative years, a key component of the story of the technology.

House Cars as the First RVs

Figure 13: House Car at Tin Can Tourists Convention in Arcadia, Florida, 1929[3]

The recreational vehicle emerged during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Its "invention" was a gradual process undertaken by many different users modifying their own cars to suit their individual travel desires. It came directly as a result of what many perceived as the shortcomings of the tent-and-car method and other intermediate strategies for tourists to maintain mobile accommodations during their travels. The first of these resembled army tents, with substantial demands on the traveler to properly stake and pack all of the required poles each day. Next came umbrella-type tents that could be folded up into more manageable forms when in transit. Besides tent solutions to the camping convenience problem, some also resorted to cutting down the back of the front seats to allow those with closed cars to simply sleep within the body

[3] "House car from Minneapolis at Tin Can Tourists convention – Arcadia," FL Memory, http://www.floridamemory.com/PhotographicCollection/ (accessed October 25th, 2011).

of the vehicle itself. In the opinion of many at the time, all of these fell short of providing quickly deployable and roomy mobile accommodations for the traveler.[4] Thus, all of these solutions fell short of being classifiable as a true recreational vehicle, but still contributed towards the creative process of improving auto travel.

The house car moved beyond half measures and limited improvements to tent-and-car travel by presenting a more fully realized travel system. It was popular during the 1920s and began to fully resemble the definition of an RV. These house cars represented the first step in the evolution of autocamping as recreational autocampers looked to improve their camping experience. As Tin Can Tourist Leroy Mills stated during the 1920s, "A few housecars, crude compartments built upon the chassis of a car or truck, began to appear among the tents."[5] They required far less time to set up for camping and usually contained at least sleeping and storage areas. These vehicles were typically homebuilt projects and were built to varying standards and sizes, with "each of these reflect[ing] the owner's ideas of craftsmanship in construction."[6] Figure 12 shows a typical house car of the late 1920s. A wooden frame was attached to the original chassis to construct the house car. Pictures of the Tin Can Tourists using house cars show that no two were exactly alike, and that each had its own distinctive flair. Mills described these variations in quality and finish:

> Some were neatly constructed and painted, while one old-timer [swore] that he saw one of those individual hog-pens mounted upon a chassis and used as a traveling home. Gradually, these house cars became better built and more convenient and were quite popular with the campers.[7]

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[4] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 2.
[5] Leroy Mills, *History of Our T.C.T.*, Tin Can Tourists Scrapbook 2 Box 2, Tin Can Tourists of the World Collection(hereafter TCT), Florida Library and Archives(hereafter FL Library), Tallahassee, FL. This history appears to have been a booklet originally, but appears as separate pages pasted in the scrapbook.
[6] Mills, *History of Our T.C.T.*
[7] Ibid.

There was also no one make or model of vehicle used by early recreational vehicle enthusiasts like the Tin Can Tourists. Generally, the only requirements were an engine sufficiently powerful to propel the vehicle and a design with adequate stability for long distance travel. Another distinctive feature of the house car was that it represented a permanent modification to a vehicle. Unlike the car-and-tent setup common among early autocampers, the house car redefined the use of the vehicle as recreational.

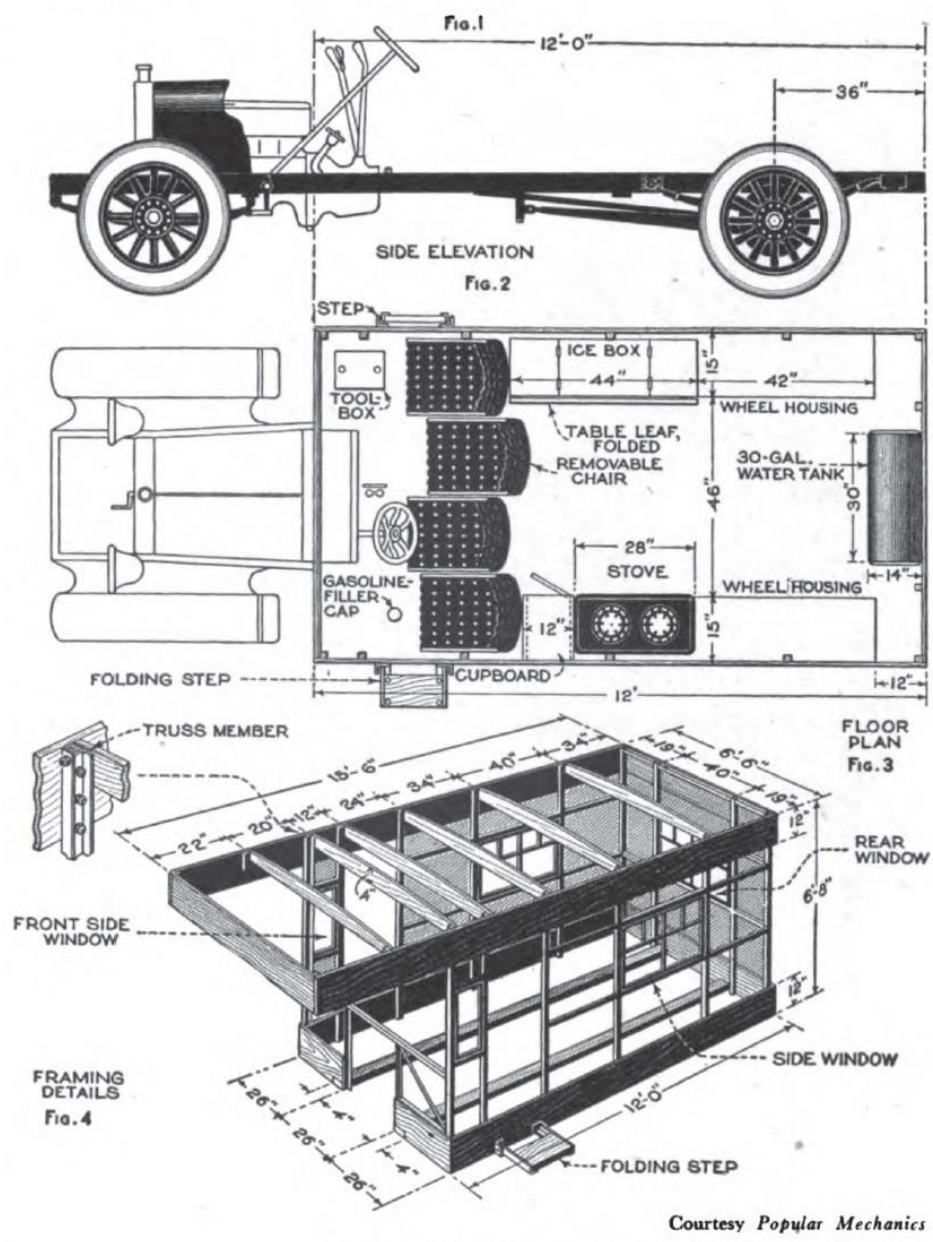

Figure 14: A 1920 House Car Diagram[8]

[8] Ray F. Kuns, *Trailer Engineering* 2nd Ed. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Ray F. Kuns, 1937), 21. The author credits Popular Mechanics with the illustration, but the exact date of its first publication is unknown.

A house car diagram from 1920 (Figure 14) illustrates how a fully mobile campsite could fit within the space of an automobile chassis. The upper part of the diagram demonstrates how house cars required the host vehicle to be taken down to the chassis to start the process of building. The bottom part of the diagram shows the newly-built wooden body of the house car that would expand and convert the useful space of the vehicle to meet camping needs. The diagram suggests the internal space of the house car design was about 100 square feet with an internal height of the living compartment of six feet eight inches. This internal space would allow just enough room to match the size of a moderately sized camping tent. Turning to the middle portion of the diagram, one can see that the seating arrangements were rather unique for a four-seater with a single row for four slightly staggered seats. The diagram also shows the house car's key amenities of an icebox, a water tank, a stove, a folded table, removable seats, and some internal storage areas. Looking at the diagram in Figure 13, this house car did accomplish the basic needs for seating, housing, storage, living space, and cooking, but appears to have been a fairly cramped design.

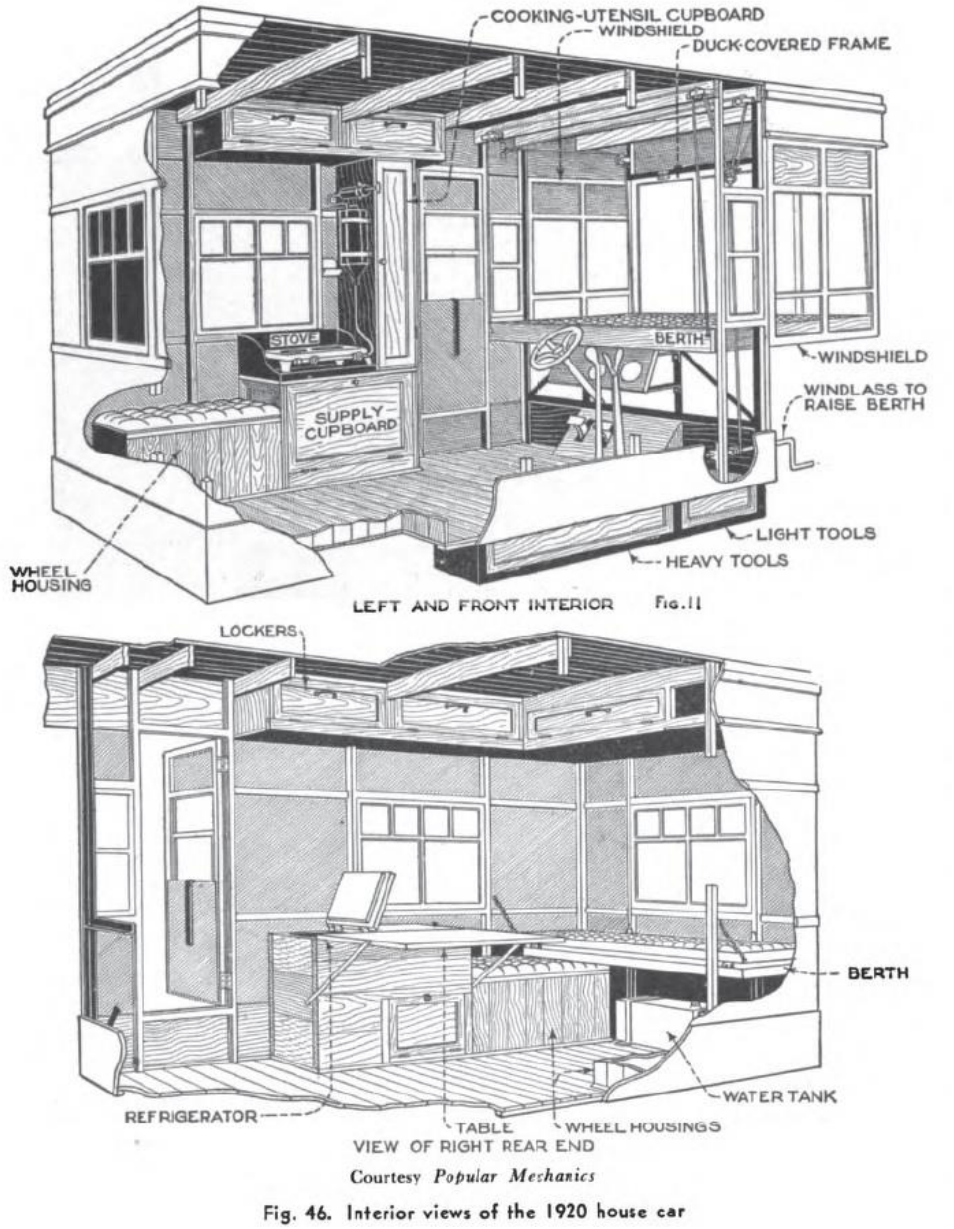

Figure 15: Interior View of the 1920 House Car[9]

Turning to Figure 15, it is apparent that the designers of this house car they came up with clever solutions to maximize the utility of the limited space. First, this second diagram shows that all the seats for the driver and passengers can be removed upon reaching a campsite. This

[9] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 22. This diagram is also credit as being from Popular Mechanics.

opens a sufficent amount of standing room to move about the cabin. Second, the storage space is placed mostly high and to the sides of the body, allowing for more space along the walls for amenities and more space around the center of the body for standing. Additionally, the refrigerator or ice chest has a panel that folds out to be a table when needed and folds back to the side when not in use. Even the wheel housings that normally would cut into interior space are repurposed as extra seating. The clever use of interior space was a characteristic of recreational vehicles from the very earliest days.

The house cars of the 1920s can best be described as a compromise between automobile technology and housing technology. As their name suggests, they directly fused house with car and created the first type of recreational vehicle. The house car's birth from this fusion did create a form of mobile accommodations that was not as mobile as an automobile nor as spacious as a house, but it did do something novel in accomplishing both at once. However, the house car was not the only possible fusion of automotive and shelter technology being dreamed up.

From House Car to Trailer

Despite being a pioneering self-propelled RV that many campers enjoyed, the house car would not be the widely adopted RV format for the 1930s (or even for many decades after). Much of the reason for its lack of success after the 1920s was that it never reached anything approaching mass-production by any serious manufacturing concern. Instead, they remained custom-built products, which meant that they continued to be relatively uncommon outside autocamping enthusiast circles. The opportunity cost for a house car conversion meant that while one gained recreational uses for the vehicle, one also sacrificed the opportunity to use the car for simple utilitarian transport. Additionally, some travelers began to lose interest because of the shortcomings of the design itself. According the one observer of the growth of mobile

accommodations, Ray Kuns, "along in the early thirties the house car and the collapsible trailer had apparently reached the limit of their service to the travel minded tourist who were then demanding something more convenient and readily usable."[10] The chief complaint lay in the cumbersome nature of the house car. Kuns explained, "it has been found that the house car was ideal when on location in the camp, but that it was not so satisfactory when it was necessary to use it for transporting the tourist party."[11] Onsite, the tourist's house car provided a home away from home, but while running it did not always succeed as comfortable transportation. This issue was made more problematic once one was securely at the camp site. "Then again it was found that if a loaf of bread had been forgotten or the icebox was empty, it was necessary to break camp and take a very large conveyance in order to secure these very small necessities."[12] The house car, then, was an imperfect compromise between automobile and shelter. It could generally do the job of both in part, but it did not do either as well as a standalone house or car.

Ultimately, the self-propelled RVs—like the house car—were not the mainstream recreational vehicle format of the near future. The conversion of car chassis into recreational vehicles even today remains rare given the space and weight limitations of relying on passenger automobile equipment. In general, self-propelled units largely remained unfamiliar to the general public until well after World War II when it was reimagined by manufacturers on a larger scale as the motorhome built on a larger truck, van, or bus chassis. Interestingly, this new class of motorhomes often presents the same set of benefits and limitations as their original house car ancestors, but their added size and other capabilities made the self-propelled format viable in the marketplace.

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[10] Ray F. Kuns, *Trailer Engineering* 2nd Ed. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Ray F. Kuns, 1937), 3.
[11] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 3.
[12] Ibid., 3.

Therefore, travel trailers offered most of the advantages of house cars without generally requiring permanent conversion to a single-purpose recreational vehicle. This was because the utilitarian vehicle could simply tow the travel trailer. One could now secure their trailer in camp and separate their vehicle to run errands into town or take short day trips with the car alone. Additionally, when the trip was over those who returned home could store their vehicle in a garage or parking place indefinitely until the next recreational outing. Together the car and travel trailer were a recreational vehicle and, when separated, the car was every bit the utilitarian vehicle it had been before. This practical advantage gave travel trailers the competitive advantage in the early market for recreational vehicles, particularly in the era of limited financial resources like 1930s America.

Figure 16: 1931 Tin Can Tourists Convention in Arcadia, Florida with Trailers[13]

The travel-trailer era of recreational vehicles began during the 1930s and reached mainstream status before the end of the decade. There were relatively few travel trailers

[13] "Tin Can Tourists convention - Arcadia, Florida," FL Memory, http://www.floridamemory.com/PhotographicCollection/ (accessed October 25th, 2011).

constructed in the 1920s, and there is little record of their presence in early autocamps. For example, the visual record of the Tin Can Tourists does not appear to show any travel trailers prior to the image from 1931 (Figure 13). Early travel trailers ranged from rudimentary examples to expensive shop-built creations. Rudimentary box-like units or folding types—amounting to not much more than tents on wheels—were the most typical type seen in use before the 1930s. Many of these were simple projects handcrafted by the end users themselves. According to Wally Byam, the early travel trailer manufacturer and founder of Airstream, "the first trailers were tents on wheels."[14] Tin Can Tourist Leroy Mills also mentioned these early tent-like trailers, describing one he called the "Covered Wagon" with a rather ponderous drop down floor, canvas panels, stove, and built-in storage cupboards.[15] He described another inconvenient early set up which required that "poles [be] placed under each corner to prevent the sides from falling off when opened and [it] took all neighbors around to operate its mechanism."[16] These early trailer tents were the forerunner of the travel trailer. Although they appeared to lack in simplicity and convenience, they effectively served as a proof of concept for companies entering trailer manufacturing in the 1930s, when the RV industry began.

By the 1930s there were also guidebooks to help people create their own automobile trailers. Frederick Collins's guide from 1936, titled *Motor Car Trailers: How to Build, Equip, and Furnish Them*, provided plans, advice, and instruction for building both "inexpensive" and "luxurious" models.[17] Overall, his guidebook was fairly similar to other guidebooks of the time,

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[14] Wally Byam, *Fifth Avenue on Wheels* (Cambridge Press: Los Angeles, 1953), 1.
[15] Mills, *History of Our T.C.T.* It is likely that Mills is not talking about the Covered Wagon brand of manufactured trailers, but instead a homemade unit that looks somewhat like or was reminiscent of a pioneer style covered or Conestoga wagon due to its canvas panels and construction.
[16] Ibid.
[17] A. Fredrick Collins, *How to Build Motor Car Trailers: How to Build, Equip, and Furnish Them* (J.B. Lippencott Company: Philadelphia, 1936).

such as Ray Kuns's *Trailer Engineering*. Many of these guidebooks were offered for sale within magazines such as *Popular Science*.[18] Collin's guidebook explains the need for trailers as a solution to the problems connected with early automobile tourism. His introduction pointed out that in the past, "when one made a long pleasure trip in a motor car… during the day meals had to be found, and at night a bed was a necessity; yet when hungry-time came it was seldom possible to find a place to eat, and when darkness fell upon the scene miles usually separated the motorist from a hotel, and there was no place where he could park his tired body."[19] Furthermore, he suggested that even when roadside options for food and shelter were available, these were often found lacking quality services at reasonable prices. Overall, the roadside accommodations "were not to be relied upon as being either inexpensive, convenient or sanitary."[20] Of course, these complains were not necessarily new or unique, but Collins's inclusion of this typical list of grievances in his preface establishes that the mobile accommodations of the trailer were seen as a solution to a these common traveler concerns.

He went on to colorfully describe the trailer's invention as a solution: "But the *Genius homo automobilicus* was equal to the difficult situation and invented a most noble way to circumvent it. This he did by building what is now commonly called a *trailer*, that is, a little box-like cabin, mounting it on wheels and hitching it—not to a star as the poet so imaginatively put it—but to his motor car."[21] Although we've seen how enthusiasts like the Tin Can Tourists first developed a technological solution to their camping woes with house cars, Collins suggested that the trailer was the answer to camping and auto travel issues with the greatest potential for

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[18] A representative example would be "Build Your Own Auto Trailer Advertisement," *Popular Science*, October 1936, 102. It advertises for a guide that can be purchased from Popular Science Publishing.
[19] Collins, *How to Build Motor Car Trailers*, 7-8.
[20] Ibid., 8.
[21] Ibid., 8.

adaptability. His reference to a post-automobile humanity as "*Genius homo automobilicus*" lightheartedly suggested automobility as not just a new age, but as a new era for humanity based on automotive proficiency, creativity, and knowledge. This reference to a new technologically infused form of humanity echoed the contemporary arguments promoted by aviation enthusiasts who proposed that manned flight would reshape people as airborne superhumans.[22] Collins completed his rationale for the guidebook by explaining that many men and women "have a native ability to use tools and, it follows, they like to build things," which meant that they might as well build a trailer that was potentially "low cost" and could be finished in one's "spare time."[23] His argument, promising lower costs and ease of construction, suggested to readers that building a trailer could be taken on without much worry or second thought.

The first design presented in the book is called the "Tourist Trailer," which comes about as close as any trailer plan of this era to being a cost-effective and simple home-handyman project. It was a relatively small unit that could accommodate up to four people. Its dimensions were a relatively narrow 6'6" width, a 7' height from the frame to the roof, and a modest 12'6" length. Collins noted that these dimensions are changeable "any way that your fancy dictates or the exigencies of the case requires," but that in practice one should only do so within "reasonable limits."[24] No doubt these cautionary statements refer to not drastically increasing the size beyond the limits of the materials, durability of the design of the trailer, and the standard width of the roads, but this flexibility also suggests that this is a trailer designed to fairy loose specifications rather than the tight tolerances that were becoming characteristic of the mass-produced

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[22] Joseph Corn, *The Winged Gospel: American's Romance with Aviation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 29-50.
[23] Ibid., 9.
[24] Ibid., 17.

automobiles being put out by the major automakers of the era. The service life of this wooden tourist trailer remains unclear and likely varied considerably from project to project.

Collins indicated that any good trailer has five distinct parts: the body of the cabin, the running gear assembly, the coupler, the electric installation, and the interior equipment. He used the breakdown of the trailer into subsystems to help organize his guide. The guide's directions also infer that these systems are ordered in their relative importance to the project as a whole. Once completed, Collins promised readers that "you will have a comfortable trailer to live in and one that will withstand the rigors of the road."[25] The comfort, sturdiness, ease and affordability of a completed trailer project would clearly vary considerably on an individuals' skills, level of tool ownership, and willingness to pay for the correct materials.

[25] Collins, *How to Build Motor Car Trailers*, 18.

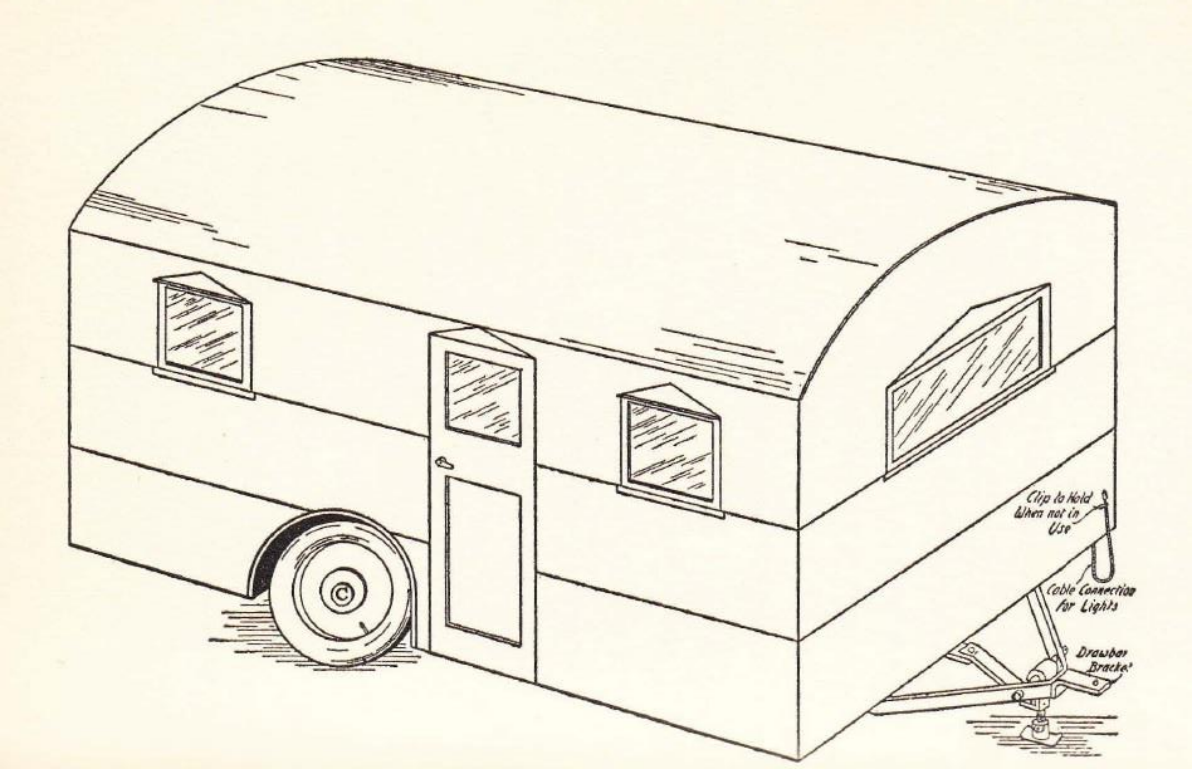

Figure 17: Diagram of Completed Tourist Trailer[26]

The end result of Collins's first set of instructions for his tourist trailer can be seen in Figure 14. As suggested previously, Collins did allow for one to add their own embellishments or design changes to his instructions, and he also offered numerous opportunities for material substitutions and short cuts. For example, his instructions on building the wooden underframe or chassis suggests that a wide range of woods could be used. Although he stated that "the best wood in every respect to use for the underframe is… oak," he said that "spruce" or even "white pine" might work as cheaper alternatives. But he is clear that all wood used "must be entirely free from knots and other imperfections" as well as "well seasoned."[27] He discusses different lumber substitutions throughout before finally instructing the reader that "you must, therefore let

[26] Collins, *How to Build Motor Car Trailers*, 85.
[27] Ibid., 19-20.

your pocketbook be your guide."[28] The relatively loose suggestions and multiple options makes this book better oriented for someone experienced in carpentry: those are the principle skills needed, because fundamentally this project required one to have the competence to build a secure and strong wooden structure. He did suggest some timesaving measures such as having "all of [the lumber] sawed to the lengths specified and dressed" to "save you considerable time and work," but these clearly would add to the overall cost of the finished trailer.[29] This trailer's wooden construction, then, was one source of the design's overall flexibility and left specific judgement on the implementation of the plan to the builder.

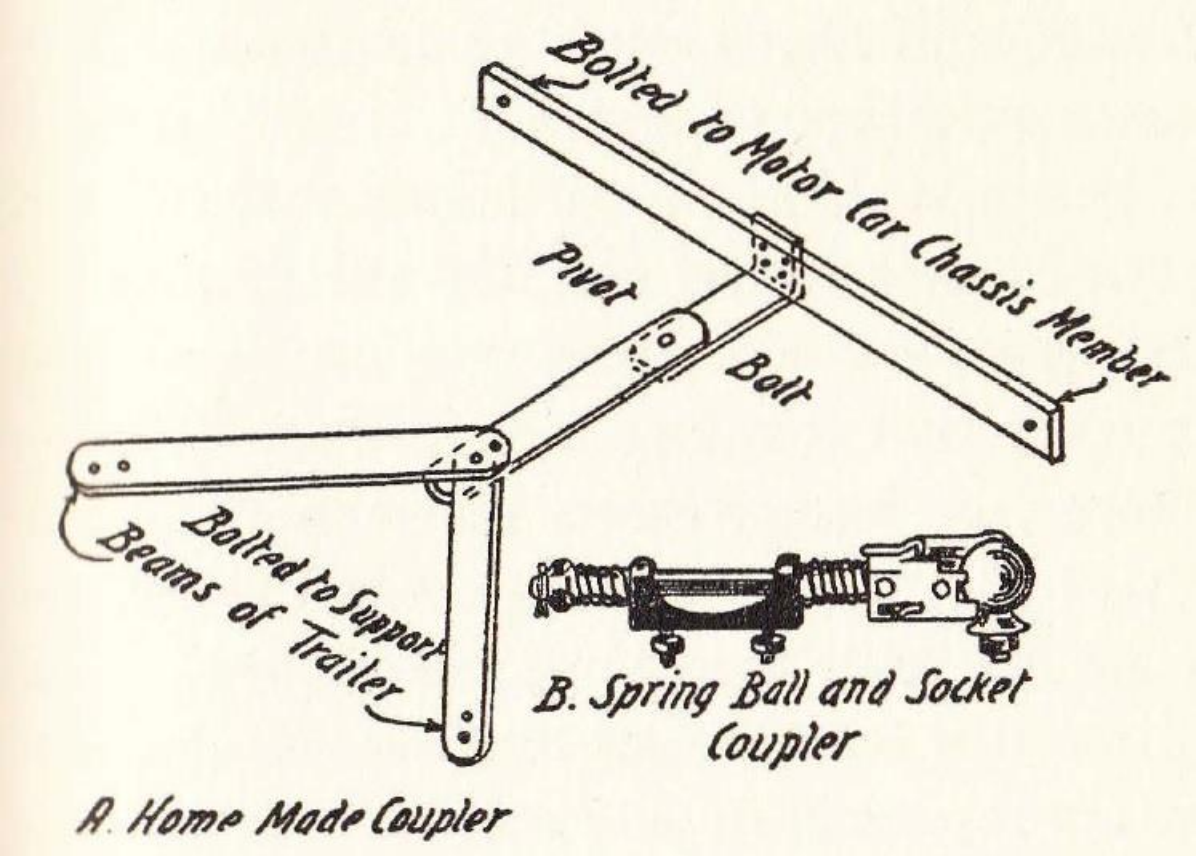

Figure 18: Coupler Options for Tourist Trailer[30]

[28] Collins, *How to Build Motor Car Trailers*, 30.
[29] Ibid., 21.
[30] Ibid., 77.

However, Collins's design's flexibility was not limited to the wooden parts of the trailer. He also gave options as far as mechanical and metal parts, such as providing instructions for building a "home made coupler" as seen in Figure 15. However, he intimated that purchasing a "spring ball and socket coupler," such as the other option seen in the diagram, might be better suited for the task of securely attaching the trailer to the tow vehicle.[31] On a light and relatively small trailer, a homemade coupler might perform adequately, whereas larger or heavier models might forestall this cost saving work around to buying a proper automotive part. As far as finishing the inside of the trailer, Collins suggested equipping the interior by purchasing a chemical toilet, sink, and ice box as well as buying or building chairs, tables, and sleeping areas with "the status of your pocketbook [being] the chief determining factor."[32] In Collins's guide, then, flexibility and using your own interpretation was key to getting the trailer you desired at the price you want to pay.

Collins's "tourist trailer" was mostly a carpenter's affair with predominately wood components, but his guidebook also pointed towards a more expensive trailer option with greater implementation of contemporary automotive design choices. He believed that " the [Tourist Trailer] is a comparatively easy carpenter's job, while the [De Luxe Trailer] is an automotive mechanic's job."[33] But this upgrade to metal structural components was not for the cheap or thrifty builder. Collins's tourist trailer design could be built for about 300 dollars, but this upgraded model cost nearly 1,300 dollars when completed. He likened the difference between these two models to the difference in quality between a humble "Ford car" and a high end

[31] Collins, *How to Build Motor Car Trailers*, 76-79.
[32] Ibid., 80-88.
[33] Ibid., 95.

"Pierce Arrow."[34] The emphasis on possessing the skills or services of an auto mechanic is unmistakable. Collins cautioned, "Before you start to build this trailer you should enlist the services of a good automotive mechanic unless, of course, you yourself, have had considerable experience in this specialized line, and you must also have the facilities of an adequate shop in which to do the work."[35] This need for automotive expertise suggest an important turning point in future trailer development that required more and more technical expertise in the automotive field.

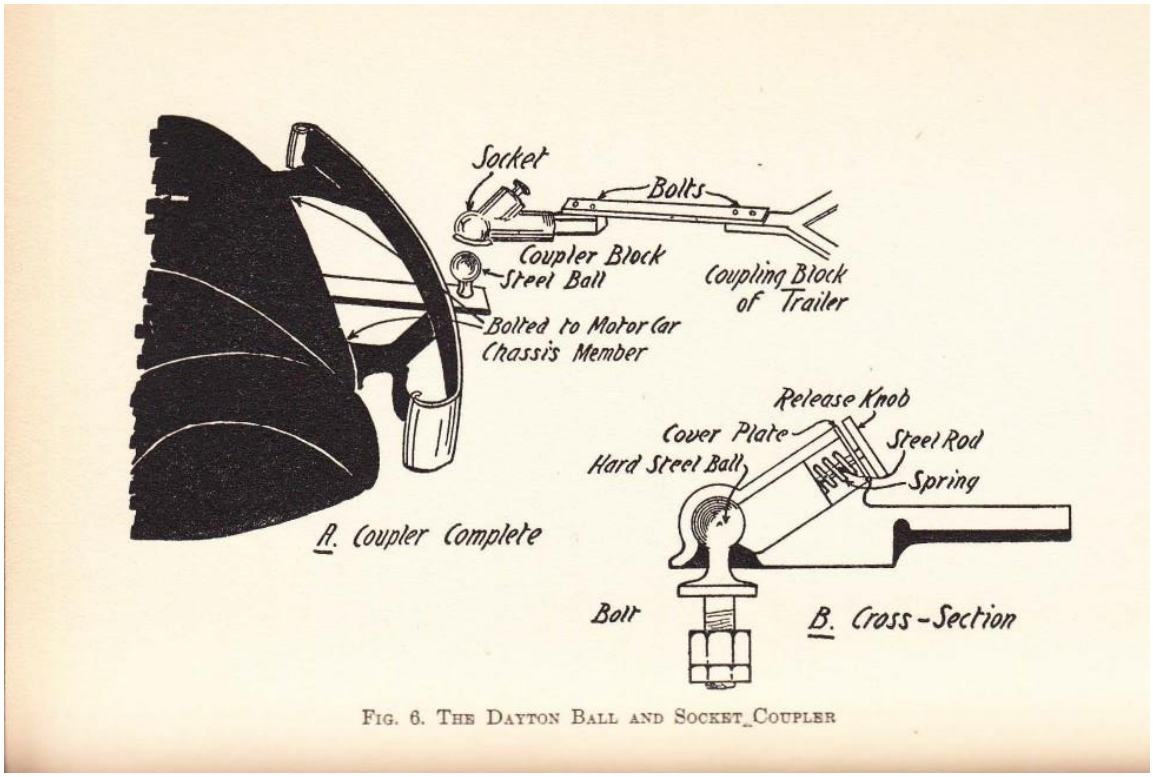

FIG. 6. THE DAYTON BALL AND SOCKET COUPLER

Figure 19: Suggested Hitch for "De Luxe Trailer" Dayton Ball and Socket Coupler[36]

Upon studying the guide, it is unmistakable that extra features as well as a good deal of metal work distinguish the design and building processes for Collins's two models. This included

[34] Collins, *How to Build Motor Car Trailers*, 17 and 95-96.
[35] Ibid., 96.
[36] Ibid., 109.

the mandatory installation of power brakes, more advanced instructions about installing axles, and a significant amount of welding. The supports for the walls and roof do use some wood components, but the siding is to be made of "plymetal," which was a type of wood product sheathed in metal that presumably provided better weather-resistance and durability. In lieu of the homemade coupler options for the smaller trailer, the guidebook presented the use of a purchased automotive coupler (pictured in Figure 16) as mandatory pronouncement, rather than an end user design decision, to accommodate the more substantial trailer size of the "De Luxe" model. This trailer model was also intended to be fitted with more sophisticated electrical work including lights and equipment that could be powered independent from the car's power source as well as a radio aerial for better reception.[37] The "De Luxe" model was certainly a more sophisticated design than its simple tourist trailer cousin, which has more in common with a carriage or wood cabin than a car. Its more complex design suggested important changes for future trailers. Once one moved away from simple tent-like trailers towards an automotive inspired design, these new trailers are much more likely to include both domestic technologies commonly found in static housing as well as being much more likely to be built with metal and specialty automotive parts.

[37] Collins, *How to Build Motor Car Trailers*, 103-116.

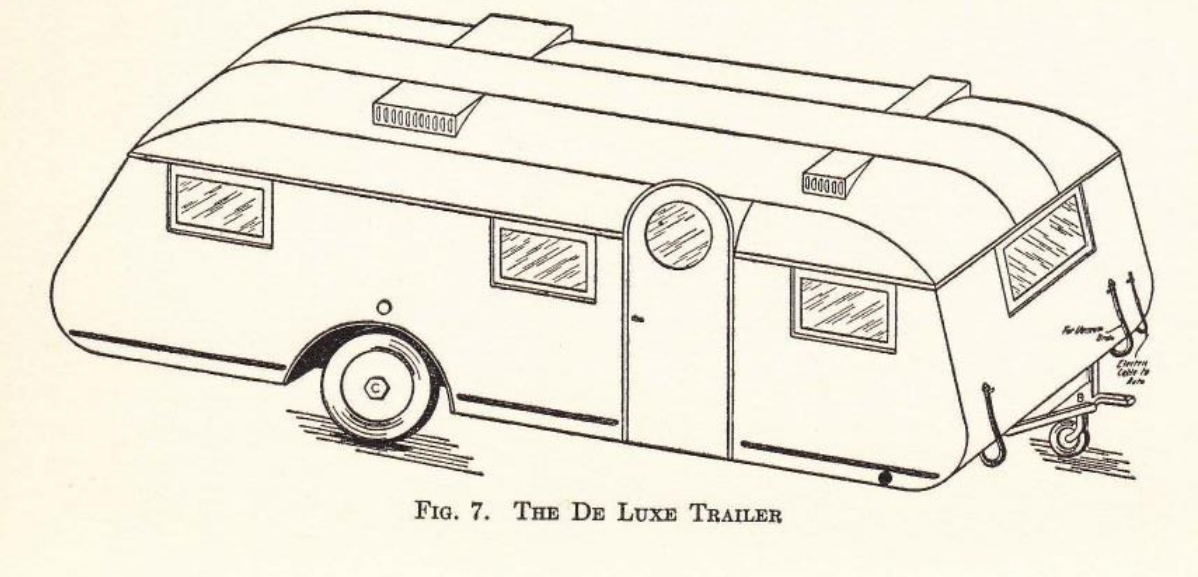

Figure 20: The Completed "De Luxe Trailer"[38]

The end result of Collins's guide shows that one could successfully build a trailer if one had the appropriate tools to work with wood and metal as well as the skills (or aptitude to learn) needed to complete the design, at least as far as the simplest tourist trailer was concerned. There is no doubt that the guidebook made a homemade trailer a realistic choice for the backyard craftsperson as basic hardware, equipment, and building supplies could be purchased relatively easily from the lists. However, one cannot help but think that this was not a project suited for those with only a passing curiosity in recreational automobility, but much better suited for the properly motivated enthusiast with the applicable skills. In fact, it is quite clear that future development in recreational vehicles would be best accomplished by those with an intimate knowledge of automotive technology, as the skills needed were better fitted to an automotive mechanic repairing cars than a carpenter or farmer building a shed. This means the Collins's "De Luxe Trailer" was playing to a much more limited audience.

[38] Collins, *How to Build Motor Car Trailers*, 113.

The Travel Trailer in Enthusiasts' Hands

There is direct connection between early craftsmen and mechanics building and designing their own trailers and the future pioneers of the RV industry. This can be demonstrated by the case of Omar Suttles. The future founder of Airfloat described in detail his first forays into the RV industry through his personal construction of a vacation vehicle for him and his wife in an era before the RV industry: "How was the house trailer in 1930? The answer is easy. There wasn't any.[39]" Suttles also remarks that it is almost impossible to know exactly who the first to build a trailer was in that era. He says this is because there were so many people "monkeying around trying to figure out a way to improve camping comfort."[40] Suttles's retrospective view fits with what is known about early recreational vehicles, in that they were nearly all one-off custom made creations and not the product of any single inventor. It also shows how a side project can provide the inspiration and motivation for industry pioneers. Suttles's story also demonstrates that he was indeed one of the earliest tinkering with building automotive trailers with fairly sophisticated automotive-inspired designs.

As far as Suttles's personal motivation for starting his custom rig, he credited his push into the trailer industry to particularly intrusive bears in the woods. "My company was Airfloat" he recalled, "But that's not where my story begins. It actually starts with bears. That's right. Bears."[41] Suttles had recently married his wife Ruth. Evidently, he and his new bride decided to go on a camping trip to the mountains in his car. Unfortunately for the Suttles's outing, his camp got "invaded by bears who wanted to share [their] food supply."[42] In a separate recollection he

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[39] Omar Suttles, "The Way It Was," News clipping in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.
[40] Suttles, "The Way It Was."
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

mentioned that "bears and insects gave us no peace."[43] This too-close-encounter with nature left a lasting impression on Suttles, in particular the threat of bears as marauding campsite raiders. He explained that "for the rest of that summer and all winter I dreamed of building a bear-proof camping outfit."[44] The bear story represents a common theme among early enthusiasts who chose to build recreational vehicles: the attempt to develop a technological fix for a perceived tent camping problem. The "bear problem" may be somewhat unique in that it emphasized security rather than personal comfort or convenience, but in a way it represents how recreational vehicles serve as a moderator between human campers and the rather unpredictable ways of nature. It also points out how the move from autocamping to RV did represent a fundamental shift that began a distinctive new genre of recreational automobility.

Figure 21: Omar Suttles' First Homemade Trailer, 1929.[45]

[43] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.
[44] Suttles, "The Way It Was."
[45] Photo in scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.

It is not surprising that Suttles decided to find a technological fix to his camping problem. In fact, he seemed particularly well positioned to accomplish this technical feat because he was equipped with both the mechanical skills and shop facilities needed to resolve the "bear-proof" camping challenge he had assigned himself. For starters, Suttles identified himself as an "automotive engineer" by trade at the time of his marriage. He was also the proud owner and operator of Omar's Garage in Los Angeles, California. He immediately satisfied his challenge to himself by constructing what he identified as a "house trailer." As a self-described Chrysler engineer, Suttles chose parts familiar to him by pulling components from a 1925 Chrysler front axle complete with wheels, hydraulic brakes, and springs to serve as the foundation for his new home on wheels.[46] His background as an auto mechanic gave him access to the skills and parts to make a roadworthy fusion of shelter and automotive technology.

Furthermore, he also wanted to fully domesticate his mobile creation by adding in approximations of a typical household. He noted that it was not enough to make a simple box on wheels for his next wilderness excursion, because his wife demanded more. "Because of the bear experience," he later recalled, "Ruth wasn't too easy to sell. Aside from protection from invaders, she insisted on all the conveniences of home."[47] In trying to bring his trailer up to the standards of a modern home, he added a Maytag washing machine's gas engine to run a refrigerator and a 12-volt generator for charging the battery. He also was able to get a heating solution for the trailer by using "flamo" gas from Standard Oil Company. He even included a chemical toilet and a water system with a reserve tank. As far as bear-proofing, he used double strength glass for the twelve windows as well as a heavy lock on the door. For a final decorating

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[46] Suttles describes himself as a Chrysler Engineer, but appears to be referring to the fact that his shop specialized in Chrysler vehicles rather than suggesting he worked for the Chrysler Corporation as an engineer.
[47] Suttles, "The Way It Was."

touch, Ruth chose a décor with a nautical theme that matched the rounded "porthole" style windows seen in Figure 21. Although the installation of interior comforts were attributed to the needs of his wife, there is no doubt Suttles also enjoyed the comforts of home on camping trips. Nor is there any doubt that he relished in the satisfaction of solving these mechanical challenges. It was not uncommon for someone like Suttles to expressly gender the comforts and convinces of home as primarily a female concern. Men often argued that they included these amenities to satisfy their female companion's requirements for domesticity. Of course, this would also allow for the duplication of gender-divided labor expectations on the road. Suttles's story illustrates that on the scale of the individual enthusiast those with the interest and skills in automotive technology were making progress in solving many of the common nuisances of tent-and-car camping.

Another example of the coalescence of trailer technology around creating a mainstream solution for mobile accommodations was Ray Kuns's survey of trailer technology called *Trailer Engineering*. He first published his book in 1934, but he subsequently republished it in an updated form in 1937. He did the update to his book because his first edition only covered the topic at "the beginning of the era of trailer coach popularity" and he believed it could use more coverage of recent developments. The author claimed that his trailer-focused book had sold well with "thousands of copies… distributed far and wide throughout the world."[48] He wanted to create the second edition of the book because "the trailer coach has come into a unique position where it is now hailed as a development destined to play an ever increasing part in American life."[49] Kuns's second edition clearly reflected the growing enthusiasm for the trailer in general.

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[48] Ray F. Kuns, *Trailer Engineering* 2nd Ed. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Ray F. Kuns, 1937), 1. This book appears to be a self-published work.
[49] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering,* 1.

It also reflected the fact that by 1937 trailers were becoming more common both as homemade projects as well as appearing in new factory-manufactured forms. "Whether you buy a trailer or whether you build one," he promised, "or even in case you are one of the millions of interested observers of this modern trend in American living, this new book is commended to you for such services as it may render."[50] Interestingly, he suggested that by the time of the second edition's publication the cost for building or buying a trailer "will cost you about the same in either case."[51] Overall, his guide provides valuable insight into how an engineering-minded observer viewed automobile trailers.

[50] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 1.
[51] Ibid.

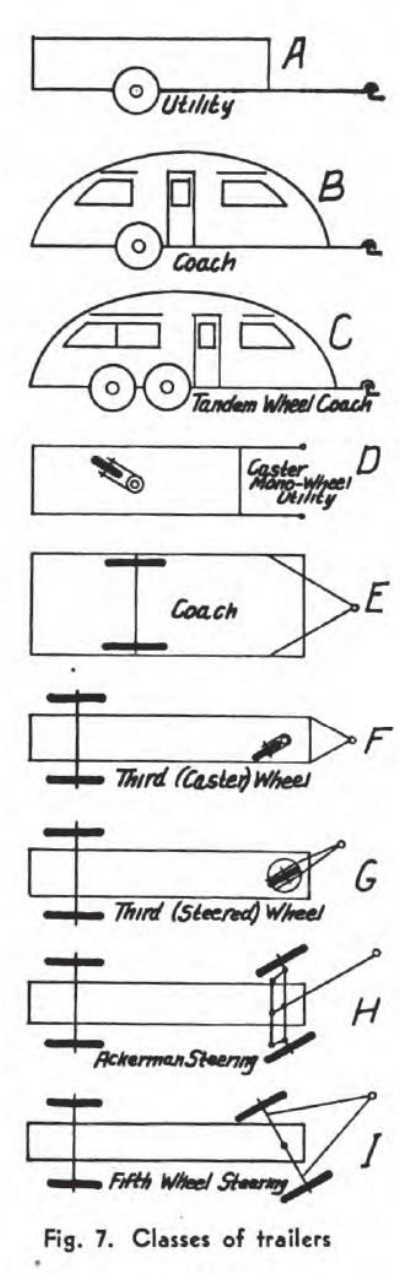

Figure 22: Kuns's Diagram of Trailer Types Categorized by Wheel Configurations[52]

Kuns's second chapter explained how different trailers were classified in the late 1930s. He acknowledged of course that "passenger trailer trailers are classified according to the use to which they are put," but he also believed that they should be further classified by their "wheel

[52] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 5.

equipment" and very importantly by "whether or not they transfer weight form the trailer load onto the tow car."[53] When one looks at his diagram of wheel configurations (Figure 22), one can see that there was a befuddling array of approaches to wheel layout and weight distribution practices at the time. He acknowledged that the most common type of trailer in that era was not a travel trailer, but instead a utility trailer for automobiles that "in reality, is a light commercial trailer."[54] Generally, these trailers were designed in such a way that most of the load was absorbed by the centralized axle. This trailer is shown in Figure 22 as the diagram labeled A. He noted that in some instance utility trailers may have wheels set farther back that would transfer more weight to the tow vehicle, but in practice most follow the center line axle design.

Unlike the standard design of the common utility trailers of the era, the typical travel trailer design of the period used a different wheel/axle layout to achieve different towing characteristics. Kuns explained, "The usual trailer coach is truly a semi-trailer in that a considerable amount of the load is transferred from the chassis of the trailer coach onto the framework of the tow car."[55] One can clearly see the change in balance by looking at Diagram B in Figure 22 that shows a much more substantial part of the load ahead of the trailer axle. The load shift "is accomplished by means of setting the two wheels, which are used to carry the coach, back from the center line, so that the farther back they are (with uniform loading) the more weight there is transferred forward to the tow car."[56] Kuns suggested that this type of design was the best choice for loading the weight of the trailer onto the tow vehicle. He contended that it was this weight distribution that made the semi-trailer the best configuration for

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[53] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 5.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

high speed travel on American roadways. The semi-trailer design therefore allows for a lower likelihood of "whipping or snaking the back of the tow car, especially at high speeds."[57] Therefore, these travel trailers emphasized long distance travel and positive towing characteristics at high speeds through a semi-trailer design, which matched the typical American users' intended journey's on tourist highways. Interestingly, we can see this semi-trailer design on both of Fredrick Collins's designs (even the larger "De luxe" model).

It is evident that most of the trailers of the 1930s era featured single axles placed in a semi-trailer configuration, but as we can clearly see from Figure 22 these were not the only options for enthusiasts or the trailer industry. Another configuration for larger trailers was the tandem-wheel semi-trailer. This sort of trailer (Diagram C in Figure 22) featured two axles and four wheels to allow for the removal of some of the weight of the trailer from the tow vehicle while still maintaining the semi-trailer axle location rear of the centerline. This design then would combine the towability of the semi-trailer coach with the greater weight bearing characteristics of the utility trailer design.[58] Although somewhat less common than the typical single axled semi-trailer coach design, these tandem wheel coaches were much more common on larger models that weighed significantly more.

[57] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 5.
[58] Ibid.

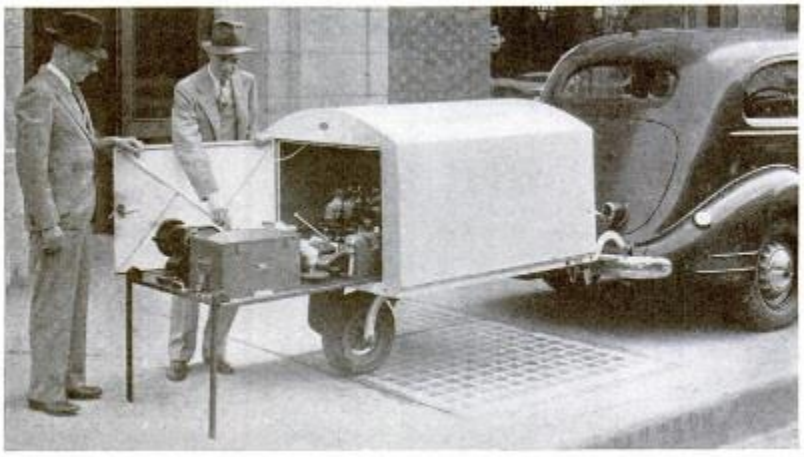

Figure 23: Single-Wheeled Utility Trailer[59]

Diagrams D through I in figure four show relatively less common axle and wheel combinations that demonstrate the flexibility of trailer designs during this era. There simply was not yet an entirely routinized approach or universally accepted best practice for all trailer designs. One of the quirkier designs to modern observers is the mono-wheel semi-trailer in diagram D of Figure 21 and seen as a utility trailer in Figure 23. These trailers are able to achieve stability through only one wheel and two attachment points to the tow vehicle. The trailer retains its ability to turn in this configuration by being mounted on a caster. Although Kuns stated that most of these trailers are used for light commercial or utility work, there were a few models of trailers in the post-World War II era that featured this design.[60] The remaining wheel configurations move the rear axle even further rearward from the centerline and add an additional steerable single or double wheel to the front of the trailer near the axle. These three, four, and fifth wheel designs largely are able to take the weight off of the tow vehicle and support them entirely by the wheels on the trailers. These remaining configurations (diagrams F

[59] The image shows a utility trailer with the one wheel configuration. "One-Wheel Trailer Clamps on Bumper," *Popular Science*, May 1937, 32.
[60] Single wheeled designs are a rarity in the trailer world, but there are today even some enthusiasts with websites dedicated to compiling information one them. See http://www.singlewheel.com/ for more details.

through I) vary only in their drivability, durability, and complexity, according to Kuns, with fifth wheel steering in particular being praised as "freeing the trailer coach from undue strain, and promotes coach life."[61] Overall, Kuns presented each of these configurations as a reasonable possibility that might be employed by the enthusiast builder or trailer manufactures.

Kuns and other experts emphasized a wide range of creativity and design innovation throughout the 1930s, but it was not just guidebooks and engineers experimenting on trailer designs. *Popular Science*, for example, promoted trailer design competitions in a January 1937 listing titled "$250 in Cash Prizes Offered for Trailer Construction Kinks."[62] The magazine asked readers to provide good first hand knowledge of tips on how best to go about building an automobile trailer. The pitch was presented with the offer for a reward for contest winners: "If you know any particularly good construction kinks to be used in build an auto camping trailer, here is a chance to cash in on them. We want you to tell us about your best, most practical, and most economical methods so we can pass them along to the many other readers who are planning to build trailers of their own this spring. To make it worth while, we will give $250 in cash prizes for the best ideas submitted."[63] The directions to the competition made it clear that they were not interested in full on trailer design, but instead tips or designs for different trailer parts or systems. They were primarily interested in advice that would be applicable to towing or frame equipment, building better trailer bodies, and how to best outfit interior equipment and fittings. One could submit as many entries for these "kinks" as one desired to be judged by the magazine editors.[64] The collected and judge tips and designs were then published in the May, June, and July 1937

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[61] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 5.
[62] "$250 in Cash Prizes Offered for Trailer Construction Kinks," *Popular Science Magazine*, January 1937, 91.
[63] Ibid., 91.
[64] Ibid., 91.

issues of *Popular Science*.[65] This contest suggests that enthusiast tinkering and construction projects were common and real sources for ideas for the growing field of trailers. It also shows yet another avenue for spreading the mechanical knowledge needed for trailer construction.

Figure 24: Tin Can Tourists with Trailers in Arcadia, Florida, 1933[66]

Looking back at the largest recreational vehicle group of the time, the Tin Can Tourists, the travel trailer clearly began to catch on as the predominant form of mobile accommodations as tents and house cars diminished in popularity within a few years after 1930. One trailer magazine commented on the direct connection between travel trailers and their popularity with the Tin Can Tourists. It suggested that their adoption has been a boon to the organization. "Each year the

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[65] "Prize-Winning Ideas to Help you Build a Better Trailer," *Popular Science Magazine*, May 1937, 86-88. "Building the Body of Your Trailer," *Popular Science Magazine*, June 1937, 78-79. "Improved Trailer Fittings: Make Life on Wheels More Comfortable," *Popular Science Magazine*, July 1937, 84-85.

[66] "Tin Can Tourists - Arcadia, Florida," FL Memory, http://www.floridamemory.com/PhotographicCollection/ (accessed November 7th, 2011).

membership of, and interest in, the organization have grown, and especially is this true since trailers have forged to the front to replace the tents."[67] By the mid-1930s, photographs of the Tin Can Tourists suggest that the group had almost completely shifted to the travel trailer as the recreational vehicle of choice. Figure 24 shows several Tin Can Tourists with their cars and trailers at a 1933 meeting in Arcadia, Florida. The exact make and origin of these 1933 trailers is not entirely clear, but it is highly likely that they were homemade models created by the enthusiasts of this group. Even more definitive evidence appeared in 1935, when the Tin Can Tourists were described as having "978 trailers, 36 house cars and 2,300 people in one camp" at their meeting in Sarasota, Florida.[68] This Tin Can Tourist meeting was made up of 96 percent travel trailer outfits, representing near uniformity among the group. This demonstrated that the travel trailer, not the house car, was the primary choice of recreational vehicle among the Tin Can Tourists by the mid-1930s. In this way, groups like the Tin Can Tourists helped create demand for manufactured travel trailers.

The beginning of mass production did not totally forestall interest in homemade creations. In fact the industry and the enthusiast community benefited from early efforts by those who built homemade contraptions. The custom made or home-built trailer were important forerunners for the industrial manufacturers of travel trailers by proving the utility of the concept and suggesting the basic designs. Just like the house car before it, homemade recreational vehicles were not enough to move interest beyond an enthusiast or tinkerer community. It required the application of large-scale manufacturing of simple and well-designed trailers as well

[67] "The True Story of the T.C.T.: The Number of Migratory Members of the Tin Can Tourists of the World Estimated at 300,000 – Their Aims and Activities," *Trailer Travel*, January-February 1936 14-15.
[68] Ibid.

as the public's realization of the natural advantages of the trailer format to make the travel trailer a viable mass market product in the 1930s.

CHAPTER THREE: MANUFACTURING THE TRAILER REVOLUTION, THE LAUNCH OF THE RECREATIONAL VEHICLE INDUSTRY, COMPARISONS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC, AND THE ROLE OF FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS

"Even during the Depression years – and partly because of the Depression—the public began to take this newfangled invention to its heart," Wally Byam, the founder of Airstream, explained.[1] He recalled: "Throughout the thirties and up to the beginning of World War II, trailer manufacturers continued to build into their trailers every appliance and gadget modern technology could produce. We built trailers that kept getting bigger, lighter, stronger, easier to tow and more comfortable to live in, and we began to build them in numbers that would have astonished us back in 1929."[2] The success was so clearly manifested they began to wonder if they would eventually gain attention and competition from the big three in Detroit. Byam said that in those days they kept "an ear cocked to Detroit, wondering when General Motors, Ford or Chrysler would recognize the trailer as a natural complement to automobile production."[3] Byam's fears were unfounded, as the auto industry shied away from extending its manufacturing grip to a spin off product like the travel trailer. Detroit would go on selling its cars to the American public, but Wally Byam and others would be happy to fill the new demand for recreational automobility in the form of mass-manufactured trailers.

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[1] Wally Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad: The New Way to Adventurous Living* (New York: David McKay Company, 1960), loc 2369. Kindle edition.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

The industry itself also warrants consideration as the trailer followed a model similar to that of the early automobile industry several decades prior: a flurry of activity, but only a scarce few hubs of companies surviving beyond the initial decade of the industry's development. This chapter focuses most directly on the technical configurations and business developments which helped lead the industry to long term success. A discussion of the cultural implications of the trailer will be introduced here, then continued in the next chapter.

The Launch of the Trailer Industry

The travel trailer manufacturing business became a distinct industry by the late 1930s. One of the clear indications that it had done so was the emergence of specialty publications that began to discuss the manufactured travel trailers in detail. There was plenty of new material being written and published in both book and magazine formats. The first magazine about travel trailers was *Trailer Travel,* the first issue of which was published in 1936. This magazine later changed its name to *Automobile and Travel Trailer Magazine* and eventually became part of the Woodall Publishing Company, which still exists.[4] In early 1936, it was marketed as the "only national magazine in the trailer field for all Trailerites… owners [present and future], operators, dealers and manufactures of pleasure and business trailers."[5] In 1937, *Trailer Travel Magazine* was joined by a competitor, *Trailer Topics Magazine*. These new publications reflected Americans' growing interest in travel trailers. Both magazines focused on the promotion of travel trailers, news of the trailer industry, the experience of living in trailers, and technical and legal information about travel trailers. They also provided firsthand accounts of the activities one might undertake while traveling by trailer.

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[4] "Woodall's History and Timeline," Woodall's Website http://www.woodalls.com/articledetails.aspx?ArticleID=2442187 (accessed 11/30/2011).
[5] *Trailer Travel,* January-February 1936. Brackets are original text.

In addition to these magazines, numerous books were also published on the travel trailer in the mid-late 1930s. Their content focused primarily on what one could do and where one could go with a travel trailer, as well as practical advice on what to expect when on the road. There were two chief practical concerns for those who considered this type of vacation. One related to the difficulty of driving a car with a trailer in tow behind it. The other involved finding parking suitable and safe for overnight stopovers, as the newspaperman-turned-trailer-traveler Howard Vincent O'Brien commented: "Well-equipped camps are available, but they are not numerous. They are in fact, comparatively rare. And candor compels me to say that the best that I have seen are not very good."[6] He elaborated that "in most cases they are makeshifts, hastily improvised to meet new demand, badly drained, awkwardly arrange and with sanitary equipment which at best may be call questionable."[7] It is not hard to imagine that many of these so-called camps were probably little more than a plot of private property that was operated by a fly-by-night entrepreneur looking to cash in on this new type of tourist. On the other hand, purveyors of trailer campgrounds were operating in a business environment with no established standards or even word-of-mouth best practices. Overall, O'Brien's harsh assessment reflects a skeptical view of travel trailers, which he maintains throughout his book, but it also likely represents a fair assessment of a real lack of sophisticated support facilities.

Others noted this deficiency as well. Jay Norwood Darling, in his book *The Cruise of the Bouncing Betsy* (1937), recounted numerous difficulties in finding adequate places to park his car and trailer for the night. Lack of suitable trailer parking forced Darling to park at automotive garages and even rent a motor court room simply to find a safe place for overnight parking. He

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[6] O'Brien, *Folding Bedouins*, 104.
[7] Ibid.

believed that the future of travel trailers depended on the status of the trailer camps: "Whether or not the trailer becomes a general practice of the average American family will depend, from now on, not so much on the practicability of the trailer itself as upon the receptive attitude of the towns, inhabitants and landowners who control the use of the land along the lanes of tourist travel."[8] He continued, "Just now they are not ready to throw open wide the doors of hospitality and let you park your caravan in their front yards or obstruct city traffic by pulling up to the curb of their streets."[9] Getting cities to admit camping motor tourism had been a problem since the autocamping days. It is therefore not surprising that these issues would continue to plague autocamping's spiritual successor. Darling concurred with O'Brien on the overall availability of camping spaces, stating that "Well equipped trailer camps, with sewer, water and electric connections are almost nonexistent; ordinary tourist camps with cottages to let are definitely hostile and the modern trailer with its manifold conveniences is a good deal in the same situation as the man who was all dressed up and no place to go."[10] The issue of where to park your trailer overnight was certainly a problem that could limit the travel trailer's growth over the long term if nothing was done to rectify the situation.

The quickest solution was the publication of trailer park locations in both *Trailer Travel Magazine* and *Trailer Topics Magazine*. These listings helped subscribers find places to stay with their trailers as they moved about the country. The ongoing problem of trailer parking was discussed in depth in a 1940 piece in *Automobile and Trailer Travel Magazine* titled "Let's Talk

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[8] Jay Norwood Darling, *The Cruise of the Bouncing Betty: A Trailer Travelogue* (New York: Fredrick A Stokes Company, 1937), 15-16.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

Trailer Parks--It's Time" by Mabel Reed LeBourveau.[11] She believed that in some areas, such as Florida, Texas, California, Maine, and Michigan, trailer camps were beginning to rise to acceptable standards with clean and safe sites featuring full utilities. However, she also noted that many areas completely lacked this kind of trailer camp. The list of states mentioned by LeBourveau suggests that better appointed camps were most likely to be found in states with high levels of tourist activity, such as California or Florida with their beaches or Michigan and Maine with their forest areas. The success of trailering depended on entrepreneurs in these locales becoming interested in opening up suitable trailer camps where trailer travelers could enjoy both modern camps and the full protections of the law. The trailer magazines also provided extensive listings for trailer camps in each issue. Similarly, books like Freedman March's *Trailers* (1937) published extensive lists of all the available trailer camps by state and even included a chart of the facilities offered at each national park and national monument site.[12] Although they did not completely solve the problem of overnight parking, location listings and in-depth analysis in the trailer press went a long way toward making traveling by trailer easier for newcomers.

The difficulty of driving a car while towing was another issue that troubled many who were thinking about buying a travel trailer. Almost every trailer book author recounted their story of their first trip with a trailer by remarking on the fear of towing a trailer on the road. But over time, they all got used to the experience. Jay Norwood Darling notef that he found very little difference between driving a car with a trailer or a car without one, "except about 15

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[11] Mabel Reed LeBourveau, "Let's Talk Trailer Parks--It's Time," *Automobile and Trailer Travel Magazine* January 1940, 11, 14.
[12] Freedman March, *Trailers* (New York: Coward-McCann Inc., 1937). He credits *Trailer Travel Magazine* as the source for most of his listings that were printed at the back of his book.

percent increase in gas consumption."[13] He did, however, criticize some state roads with small imperfections in the road surface that caused shaking, which was then significantly amplified by the trailer.[14] Howard Vincent O'Brien noted a similar initial fear that was followed by a nearly identical realization that the trailer was not too difficult to drive. At the end of his book, he has a fictional question and answer session with a policeman:

> Q.—Is it difficult to drive the trailer?
> A.—No. The women folk did most of our driving, even in the heart of city traffic.
> Q.—How fast can you go?
> A.—Faster than you ought to. We reached sixty-five miles an hour and could have gone faster. Our last day's run was four hundred and fifty miles.
> Q.—How about turning and backing?
> A.—Turning can be made in a wide street. Backing requires practice, but can be done surprisingly well.[15]

He continued by explaining that the car drives well at high speeds, consumes only slightly more gas, and that the trailer is very easy to connect and disconnect from the car. Most of the literature describing driving with a trailer follows this arc from fear to mastery. The authors usually note that the trailer does not cause extremely high fuel consumption, suggesting that trailer travel could well be relatively inexpensive.

It is also telling how O'Brien used "the women folk" mastering the trailer towing as an indicator of difficulty. Rather than stating directly that the trailer was not difficult to tow, he used female mastery of this technical skill as a signpost to indicate the simplicity of the task. This built on the erroneous male expectation that women were less mechanically and technically able to master tasks like driving and navigation.[16] This technique of using female examples to make a

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[13] Darling, *The Cruise of the Bouncing Betty*, 24-27.
[14] Ibid., 40.
[15] O'Brien, *Folding Bedouins*, 132.
[16] Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992).

technologies more approachable was not limited to automobiles. As Joseph Corn points out, women were given opportunities to fly as the aviation industry looked to break with the stereotype that flying was an overly dangerous and difficult venture, only suited for a daring male. "Paradoxically, prejudice begat opportunity," Corn argues in that women pilots "appear to the public as less capable than the really were, women fliers became marvelous advertisements for the ease of piloting and the safety of flying."[17] Just as the emblematic aviatrix signaled flight was safe and easy, the females in O'Brien's party found themselves deployed in a similar vein.

Indeed, besides alleviating concerns over the availability of trailer camps and the difficulty of driving a car and trailer, it was widely held that traveling by trailer was quite economical. O'Brien stated, "Meanwhile, the trailer has a long list of advantages to offset its disadvantages. First and foremost is its economy. It makes possible wintering in the south for less than the cost of staying at home in the north."[18] The idea that one could live out of a trailer for cheaper than living out of one's home might have had some plausibility in a few limited circumstances, but trailer writers so widely repeated this claim as to make it seem like a law of nature. Blackburn Sims's book, *The Trailer Home: With Practical Advice on Trailer Life and Travel*, reflected this common refrain regarding costs. He argued that "trailer travel opens the way to a fascinating array of new horizons without the usual attendant bugaboo of vast expenditure. The places where you have always wanted to go and the scenes you have always wanted to view can be yours at a daily cost actually lower than living at home."[19] According to

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[17] Corn, *The Winged Gospel*, 76.
[18] O'Brien, *Folding Bedouins*, 104.
[19] Blackburn Sims, *The Trailer Home: With Practical Advice on Trailer Life and Travel* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1937).

many of these writers, trailers seemed to circumvent the normal economics of travel by somehow always saving money.

Authors writing about travel trailers often noted that the price of admission for taking part in these new trailer vacations was practically only the cost of the trailer. They also stressed that the cost of a trailer was within the reach of most people. When O'Brien started his journey, the trailer dealer told him that there were options even to rent a trailer, but in effect, everyone who came back ended up buying it outright.[20] In *Trailers Ahoy!* (1937) Charles Edgar Nash noted, "The lure of the trailer has made itself felt among all classes of people. The home mechanic is just as proud of his $300 rolling bungalow as the millionaire is of his $15,000 mobile mansion."[21] Nearly all of the manufacturers' magazine ads of the later 1930s have prices from around three hundred dollars for base models to well over one thousand for "deluxe" models. This price range made travel trailers accessible to more people, while allowing the manufacturers to build higher-end models. In many ways, the selection of different sizes and models continues on today with modern recreational vehicle manufactures having a similar diversity in sizes and prices.

Census statistics illustrate the success of the industry. Manufactured travel trailer sales began to gain government attention by the late 1930s, and in 1937 trailer manufacturing became a category of manufactured goods tracked by the United States government, demonstrating recognition of the new trailer market's size. In 1937, trailer production stood at 18,130 units, followed by a decline in 1939 to 11,782.[22] The decline connects to the economic ups and downs

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[20] O'Brien, *Folding Bedouins,* 4-5.
[21] Charles Edgar Nash, *Trailers Ahoy!* (Lancaster, PA: Intelligencer Printing Company, 1937), 7.
[22] *Census of Manufactures 1939.* (*Washington, D.C.:* U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1939). No census data available for 1938. Manufacturing census data is only available for this period at irregular intervals.

of the 1930s, in particular the recession that occurred in 1937 and 1938. It is also unclear exactly how trailer production numbers had looked prior to the 1937 Census of Manufactures, but the industry must have experienced considerable growth to warrant its inclusion in 1937. Wally Byam suggested that "more than 250,000 trailers were in use by 1936."[23] With the trailer industry producing over 10,000 units a year of goods valued at $9,712,195 and $7,890,898 for 1937 and 1939 respectively, the government had to pay attention to this new industry.

Very much like the early automobile, the 1930s saw a wide range of manufacturers entering the new market. Many of these manufacturers did not last for very long, but some would survive and play vital roles in the post-World War II era. One example of an early trailer entrepreneur who was initially successful, but then later failed, is Arthur Sherman and his company, Covered Wagon. Sherman was an early entrant into the field of travel trailers, starting production in 1929. By the trailer boom of 1936, his production line was capable of producing thirty-five units daily.[24] The scope of his business can be seen in the numerous ads he purchased in both *Trailer Travel Magazine* and *Trailer Topics Magazine* during the mid to late 1930s. According to Allan Wallis, the Covered Wagon trailers had a modern design, solid, home-like compartmentalized spaces, and a side-mounted door for easy access. "More impressive than the design of the Covered Wagon," Wallis continued, "was the method of production, patterned after Ford's assembly line. Units moved down the line, end-to-end, on their own wheels."[25] This emulation of the automobile industry and Fordism was no accident. Carlton Edwards notes in his study that "One particular accomplishment of the Covered Wagon Company was their design

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[23] Wally Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad: The New Way to Adventurous Living* (New York: David McKay Company, 1960), 20.
[24] Wallis, *Wheel Estate*, 50.
[25] Ibid., 51.

and engineering planning for all the various components enabling them to have a very extensive production line."[26] This ability to produce large numbers of trailers on automobile style assembly lines was principally because Sherman hired directly from the automobile manufacturers so as to intentionally emulate their quantitative achievements. His 100,000 square foot factory in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, was able to manufacture thirty-five units daily in 1936. This amounted to one in every six trailers produced in 1936 being a Covered Wagon. These production choices (along with a dealer network and a delivery services to sell the output) allowed the company to increase year-to-year production by 300% from 1936 to 1937. [27]

Despite this success, Covered Wagon would be a victim of a shift in consumer preferences and an economic downturn. The company's trailers were six-and-a-half feet wide, but by the late 1930s, its competitors had begun to produce eight-foot models that were increasingly popular. Covered Wagon would be caught trying to update their line to eight foot wide production at exactly the same time the economy turned downward again in 1938.[28] Covered Wagon advertisements would disappear from both *Trailer Travel* and *Trailer Topics* by the early 1940s. The company would be used for its productive capacity during World War II, but would never produce travel trailers again and be fully liquidated by 1945.[29] Perhaps emulating Fordism too closely bears some responsibility for Sherman's failure. Ford-style mass production often proved inflexible and difficult to retool as Ford's River Rogue plant demonstrated when company switch from the Model T to the Model A.[30]

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[26] Edwards, *Homes*, 126.
[27] Ibid., 125-126. Edwards is unclear about the numbers produced in each year total, but at the rate Covered Wagon was capable of it appears to have been into magnitude of tens of thousands of units.
[28] Wallis, *Wheel Estate*, 51-52.
[29] Edwards, *Homes*, 126-127.
[30] Steven Watts, *The Peoples Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 370-372.

Figure 25: Airstream from the 1930s[31]

Unlike Covered Wagon's spectacular boom and bust, Wally Byam and his company, Airstream, would start small in the 1930s and blossom into an iconic manufacturer in the post-World War II period. Some of his success might be attributed to his well-defined idea of what kind of trailer product he was building and how they were to be used. Byam was not in the business to just build any old box on wheels, but in fact to build the sort of trailer he would want to use himself. He recalled that he "started building trailers only because there were none on the market at the time" and that he "designed and built several for myself and wrote a booklet on how to do it" prior entering the business as a manufacturer.[32] Byam positions himself as a true enthusiast, stating that "my enthusiasm for traveling by trailer took precedence over my commercial interests in them – and still does."[33] This enthusiasm appears to have been genuine,

[31] "Airstream from 1930s, "Airstream Corporation, https://www.airstream.com/wp-content/uploads/archive/085259c39ba15b4a.pdf, (accessed October 7th, 2016).
[32] Wally Byam, *Travel Trailer Here and Abroad* (New York: David McKay Company, 1960), kindle edition loc 2134.
[33] Ibid., loc 2134.

as Byam would build a career on producing trailers he thought to be superior to the rest and would promote them by guiding his consumers on how to use them.

Byam believed that travel trailers should specifically be built and used for vacations, and not as an alternative to standardized housing. "The travel trailer is a compact apartment designed to be towed by an automobile," he once said. "Its basic purpose is to provide the comforts of home to the vacationing tourist, freeing him from dependence upon transportation schedules, hotels and restaurants."[34] He also believed they should be high in quality. The extensive use of aluminum in his trailers resulted in units that weighed less than his competitors' steel models. This reduced weight meant lower fuel consumption for the tow vehicle and easier handling on and off the road. He explained the significance of the relationship between size and weight for early trailers as he recalled the era before World War II:

> The first trailers were very much smaller than the cars that towed them, and the cars in those days were much smaller than the cars of today. Then the trailer began growing larger, and larger, and larger, until today many trailers dwarf the anti-like car that waltzes them around. And with this size has come increased weight. And with this increased weight and size, the less useful they are for traveling.[35]

Byam then understood that trailers—as mobile accommodations for vacations—were only as good as they were practical to tow. Thus, it is understandable how his brand-defining obsession with weight came into being as it was a practical solution to creating more comfortable and larger trailers without ruining one's ability to tow the unit.

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[34] Wally Byam, *Travel Trailer Here and Abroad* (New York: David McKay Company, 1960), 15.
[35] Wally Byam, *Fifth Avenue on Wheels* (Cambridge Press: Los Angeles, 1953) kindle edition loc 133. Note this book is particularly rare. The only available edition available later on in this project was an ebook format on Kindle.

His innovations did not end with low-weight materials. As evident in Figure 25, his aerodynamic, streamlined travel trailers also self-consciously followed trends in aviation.[36] This adoption of a streamlined, lightweight body that was so conspicuously inspired by aircraft materials and design would have certainly resonated with the higher-end consumer looking for a trailer built out of the most "modern" materials. Mimicking aircraft fit well the positive feelings towards everything aviation, such as the contemporary notion of airmindedness and the almost religious belief in the potential benefits of the technology.[37] Evidently these efforts to create a visually recognizable appearance for his brand paid off as Airstream trailers still use similar shapes and materials even today. In fact, most modern consumers would tend to think of the Airstream look as "retro" (due to this continuity) rather than cutting-edge or modern.

Byam was also aware that travel trailers were in a constant state of flux when it came to internal equipment and gadgetry. Besides his emphasis on reduced weight, he also was surprised by the "apparently unlimited number of gadgets and 'improvements' that could be incorporated into [trailer] design" during the early years of the industry.[38] These improvements turned out to be not just technical puzzles for manufacturers who enjoyed solving them, but very strong selling points in a flooded trailer market. Byam remembered "as our customers lay awake nights figuring out new gadgets to add, we lay awake nights so as to incorporate them into our designs, and thus—make use of every inch of space."[39] His company was not a heavy advertiser in this period, but he did purchase some space in *Trailer Travel Magazine*. The case of Wally Byam's

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[36] Byam, *Travel Trailer Here and Abroad*, 15-26 and Wally Byam, "New Stream-lined Coaches Use Modern Principles: Recent Scientific Engineering in Transportation Fields Finds Expression in Automobile Travel-Coaches" *Trailer Travel* (January, 1936): 20-21.
[37] For more on American's positive outlook and belief in aviation see Joseph Corn, *The Winged Gospel: American's Romance with Aviation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).
[38] Byam, *Fifth Avenue on Wheels*, loc 133.
[39] Ibid.

company demonstrated one of several industry pioneers that learned about the technology and marketing of trailers during the 1930s, but it is clear he was not the only one.

Figure 26: Omar's Garage before Airfloat[40]

Omar Suttles, the auto mechanic who happened into the trailer business through his steadfast desire to improve his new family's camping experience, provides valuable insight into the thinking of early RV pioneers. He stated that his company emerged from two influences: ownership of "a business where I could put to use my present business background" and having access to "a building where I could also have an experimental laboratory."[41] His first efforts in automotive technology were apparently attempts "to build an automatic transmission and many

[40] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.
[41] Ibid.

other things that those times demanded" around 1925 and 1926.[42] Clearly, Suttles's interest in automotive tinkering and invention provided him the skill set to a take on his trailer projects based in part on adapting existing automotive parts.

His initial auto business was located at 720 South Lake Street in Los Angles in a smaller rented space, but he noted that he planned to get "a larger building" to fit his needs if "my business justified it."[43] Evidentially, his mechanic shop was successful enough to justify expansion and a new building was built two years later with four times the capacity of the original. This was the "experimental laboratory" discussed above in the form of Omar's Garage seen in Figure 26. Once can observe from the outside that his business was multifold with a specialization in Chrysler servicing, a lubrication service, and paid parking. He further avoided putting any space to waste by renting out "a tennis court on the roof."[44] The shop demonstrates that Suttles was not one to miss a good opportunity or shy away from entrepreneurial growth.

He emphasized throughout his retellings of his company's origins story that it was indeed his ill-fated camping trip with his new wife and his subsequent trailer side project that shifted his interests from automotive repair and equipment to factory-made travel trailers. He explained that "This was a complete new turn for me—from automobile to trailer."[45] This timely turn from automobile to trailer played out well for Suttles's career by allowing him into the industry as part of the first wave of manufactures that got to work in an ad hoc manner in the late 1920s and early 1930s. His company, Airfloat, would go on to become one of the earliest west coast firms as well as a major player in the market well into the post-World War II era. "From then on," he

[42] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

continued, “and for the next twenty-five years, I felt like I had that ‘bear by the tail,’ for it was most exciting to be a part of a new, fast-growing industry which filled so many needs—not only for recreation and travel, but eventually housing for millions.”[46] His recollection of the situation benefits from hindsight in that the industry would eventually provide both recreation and housing for many Americans, but in its earliest days it certainly was a risk to turn his side project into his main business focus.

[46] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.

Figure 27: The First Suttles Trailer on Display[47]

He recalled that after taking out "our baby" (the trailer) it caused quite a bit of publicity. The trailer was noticed by multiple members of the Southern California Automobile Club who

[47] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.

asked if Suttles would display it in the group's parking lot. Several images (including Figure 27) from Suttles's scrapbook show fairly sizable crowds surrounding his one-off project. Evidentially, there was interest in purchasing a copy of this original trailer among the crowds. Suttles did note that there was some difficulty experienced by some who purchased his first models in that they feared their cars would not be capable of towing the trailer. He recalled that "I was told by too many prospects that they knew their Packard to Cadillac could not pull my first models."[48] These missed prospects led him to the idea that would influence the name and design philosophy of his company.

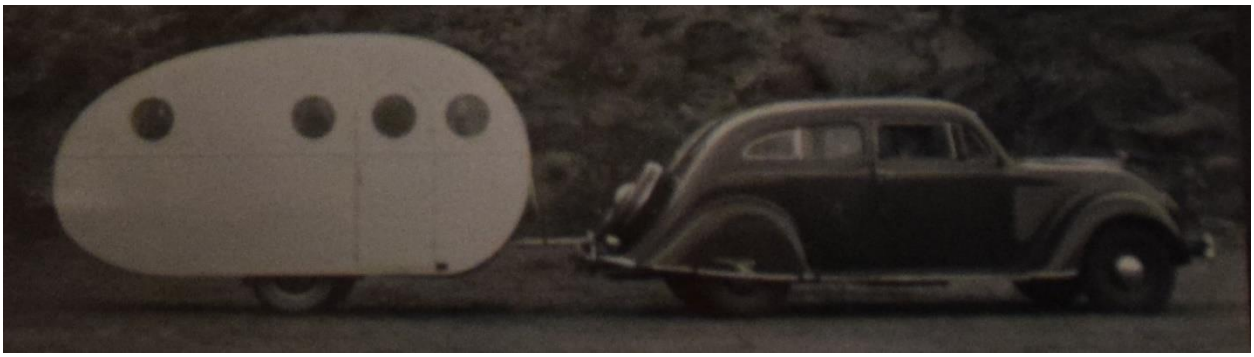

Figure 28: Omar's First "Air Float" Design Towed by a Chrysler Airflow[49]

To solve the towing issue, he explained that he reached an epiphany after reading recent journals from the society of automotive engineers that soon most cars would be built with streamlined bodies. Furthermore, he thought the best way to take advantage of this was to design his trailers to complement this design shift. He recounted his process of inventing his company's signature design feature:

> So I bought a Chrysler Airflow Car, and started experimenting with different shapes and widths with differing cambered roofs. Any by testing them behind a square-back car and then behind the Chrysler Airflow I found that a trailer could be aerodynamically designed so as to use the air current behind the towing car to

[48] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.
[49] Ibid.

> stabilize trailer for smooth performance and safety, with less weight on the rear of the car.[50]

The idea was that the newly redesigned trailers would "float" and be lighter to tow. Perhaps the idea of the trailer floating in the wind was achieved by the subtly wing shaped cross section of his new trailers. Either way, his new trailers and his company were named for this principle. As he put it, "The Airflow car, and the Airfloat Trailer; aerodynamically compatible."[51] Suttles had not been the only manufacturer to take notice of the Chrysler Airflow's signature aerodynamic design. In fact, Wally Byam once suggested his early trailers' pointed tail was also inspired by the same car, but Suttles more expressly grounded one of his brand's key features in the idea of achieving harmony between the car and the trailer.[52]

It is clear from Suttles's view that he was mostly interested in trailers as recreational vehicles at Airfloat: "and now, Americans have accepted the motor home for their leisure, built to fit their needs and their pocketbooks: $6,000 to $90,000"[53] Suttles rightly felt his company had a hand in creating the diverse market for recreational vehicles that has become a fixture of American culture. The cases of Byam and Suttles prove how the 1930s represented a formative period which generated both the market for mass-produced travel trailers and motivated entrepreneurs looking to build an industry over the long term.

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[50] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad*, loc 2406. It is worth noting here that Byam and Suttles never mention the other nor do they ever reference the other's company in the materials I have reviewed. Certainly, the two must have been aware of each other given their proximity as Los Angles based manufacturers operating at the exact same time. Even their company's names bare a clear resemblance.
[53] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.

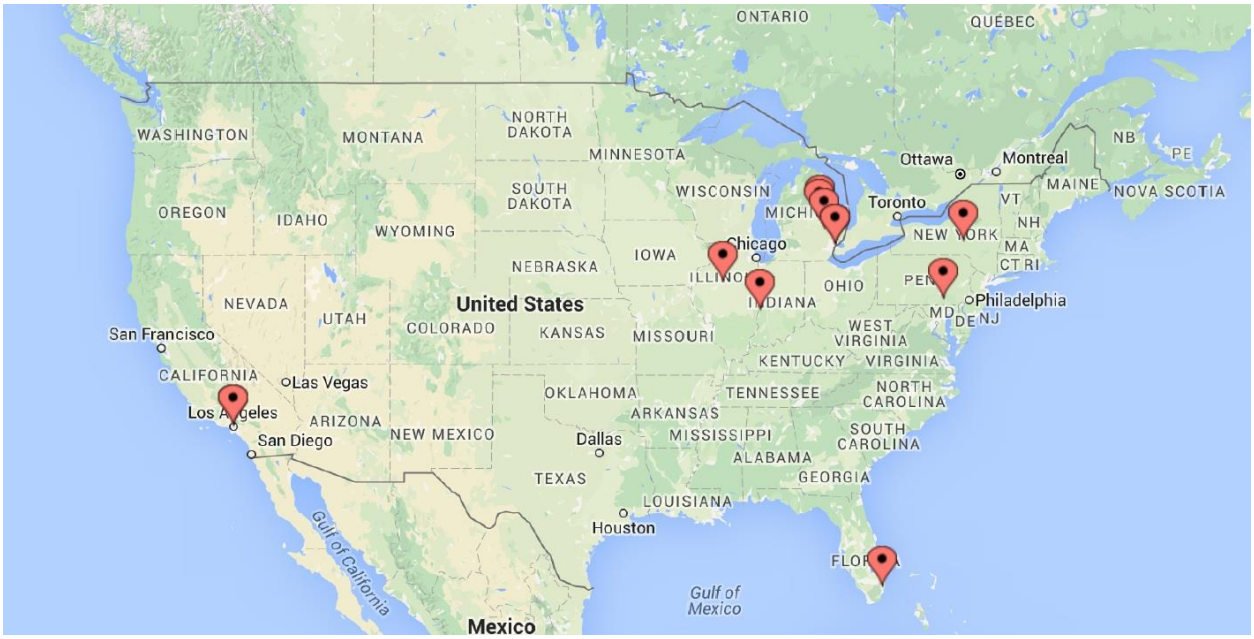

Figure 29: Geographical Distribution of Trailer Manufacturers before 1930[54]

Looking beyond this review of pioneer RV companies, the geographical distribution of the early trailer industry reveals trends in the development of the industry as well as presaging a nexus of today's trailer industry. Figure 29 plots out the locations of companies that were making trailer products before 1930. Notice that most of the twelve firms were geographically scattered around the Mid-West, without a strong center of gravity. During these very earliest days, only two firms (including Suttles's company, Airfloat) operated out of the West Coast, both in the City of Los Angeles, with only a single firm operating in the South, Curtiss Aerocar of Opa-Locka, Florida. During this early period, many of these shops may have grown from enthusiast one-off projects (like Omar Suttles's first trailer) or at least emulated enthusiast built projects as they shifted towards becoming small specialized or custom production shops. It is also likely that these dispersed manufacturers tended to serve local markets rather than regional or national ones.

[54] Location information derived from Carlton Edwards, *Homes for Travel and Living*, 103. Map generated using www.mapcustomizer.com

Obviously, this list of manufacturers does not account for the majority of RV production in these years, with many taking shape in individuals' backyards, garages, and barns.

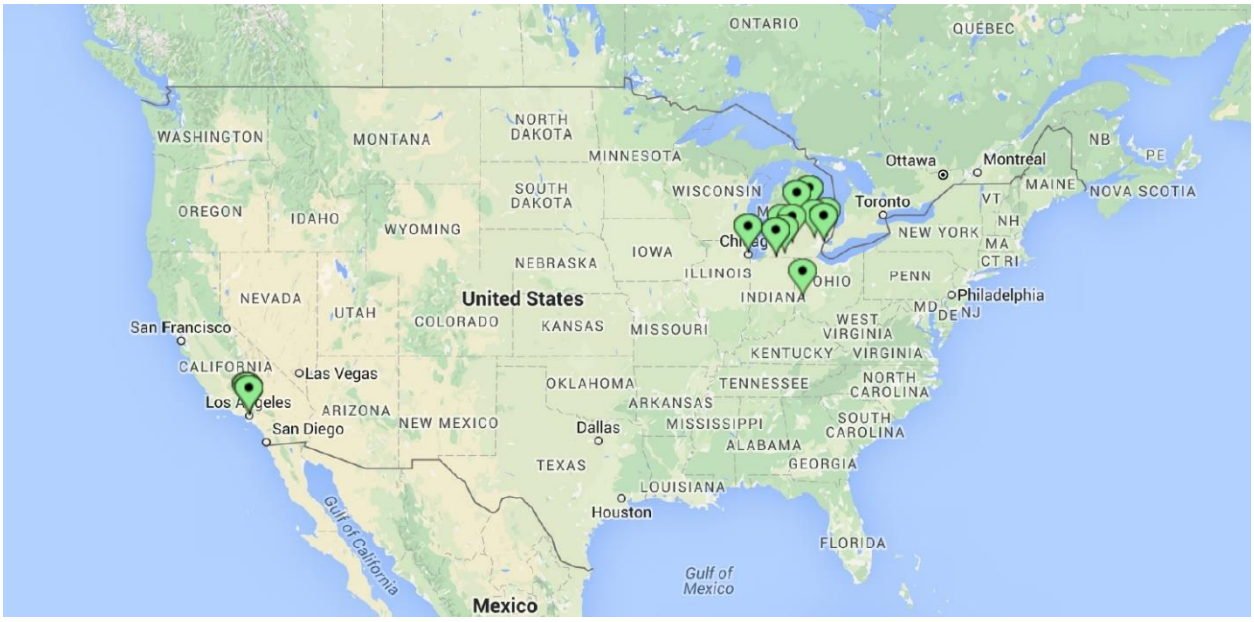

Figure 30: Geographical Distribution of Trailer Manufacturers during the 1930s[55]

Turning to Figure 29, one cannot help but notice a trend towards consolidation around two core manufacturing regions for the burgeoning industry of the later 1930s. The first major region centers on the state of Michigan, which was by then the established home of the more consolidated major automotive manufacturers. This regional cluster includes eleven firms in Michigan itself, with an additional three in Elkhart, Indiana, near the Michigan border. To those familiar with the modern RV industry, the emergence of several firms in Elkhart is no surprise, as it is one of the largest manufacturing centers of the industry today. It is also clear that Los Angeles was becoming its own hub of activity, with a total of at least seven firms (probably more) operating in and around the city.[56] This regional consolidation fits well with long proven

[55] Location information derived from Carlton Edwards, *Homes for Travel and Living*, 103-104. Map generated using www.mapcustomizer.com
[56] See Appendix I for details.

examples throughout the history of technology. One can quickly call on of many examples of newly maturing industries clustering around geographic centers such as the textile mills of Manchester, the automotive industry around Detroit, Cold War era defense industries in the Sun Belt, or computer and software companies in Silicon Valley. Perhaps the closest example to the trailer industry of this period would be the speed equipment manufacturers in Los Angles that supported the development of groups of Southern California hot rodding enthusiasts.[57] From these centers of activity in California and in the Midwest, the trailer industry would grow up to serve both local enthusiasts as well as large portions of the country through trailer shows, dealerships, and distribution networks that drove their products onto a national scale.

Early Tin Can Tourist and Manufacturer Sponsored Trailer Shows

Although the Tin Can Tourists' role as a large group of consumers was important in creating demand for the travel trailer, they were more than silent consumers of manufactured units. As period publications demonstrate, the industry knew they were the largest and most active recreational vehicle group, potential customers, and valuable promoters. Their promotional role came in the form of the trailer shows they organized and hosted at many of their annual conventions, both in Florida and at their summer events in the North. According to a 1936 *Trailer Travel* issue, "a prominent manufacturer recently referred to the members of the T.C.T. as 'the salt of the earth.'"[58] The Tin Can Tourists' trailer shows grew from humble beginnings in the early 1930s. "No commercial aspect of these [convention] gatherings was contemplated [at first]… Then a trailer manufacturer or two joined and asked for the privilege of exhibiting his models at the encampments."[59] It only took a few years for both the Tin Can

[57] David Lucsko, *The Business of Speed*, 40-64.
[58] "The True Story of the T.C.T," 14-15.
[59] "The Circus Moves In And Then Out," *Trailer Travel*, September 1936, 19.

Tourists and trailer manufactures to realize they could mutually benefit from these "trailer shows," as they came to be known.

One of the earliest documented full-scale Tin Can Tourist shows occurred in Sarasota in 1936. At this show, *Trailer Travel* noted that it included a "Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's mammoth circus tent" to house trailer displays.[60] It was also well attended, with Michigan heavily represented among the presenters with thirteen exhibitors and thirty-two trailer models.[61] The show did not just provide education to the public about trailers, but also offered a chance to purchase the products displayed. Even heavy rains at the Sarasota show did not dampen sales, as record numbers were sold, thirty-three by one vendor alone.[62] When it was all over, the show "constitute[ed] the largest trailer show ever held up to that time."[63] Tin Can Tourists therefore provided both a promotional venue for recreational vehicle products and facilitated others in their purchases and presumably joined them on the road.

The group's trailer shows were not limited to Florida. Even as news of the Sarasota show was being published, plans were already under way for a large trailer show during the summer of 1936 in Sandusky, Ohio. The show was hosted by the Tin Can Tourists, along with the Sandusky Chamber of Commerce, and was promoted as a large gathering with "many of the manufacturers of coaches and equipment [signifying] their intention of making extensive displays of the very latest designs."[64] As the Tin Can Tourists of the World summer reunion and trailer show approached, there was great excitement as numerous members and non-members planned to

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[60] "Fifty *New* 1936 Coaches *on* Display *at* Florida Shows: Thirteen Exhibitors Present from Michigan Alone, Entire Country Represented," *Trailer Travel*, March-April 1936, 26.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] The Circus Moves In," 19.
[64] "Sandusky 1936 Summer Mecca for Trailerites: Famous Ohio Resort Center Selected for T.C.T. Encampment August 3-17," *Trailer Travel*, March-April 1936, 27.

attend "the largest conclave of Trailerites ever gathered together."[65] The Sandusky trailer show turned out to be huge, with a total of seventy exhibitors of both trailer manufactures and trailer suppliers.[66] This critical mass of trailer manufacturers represented perhaps the biggest such congregation of the new industry to date and also reflected the products' growing popularity.

The Sandusky show drew in many visitors, some of whom had never previously examined a travel trailer closely, "Except in the early morning hours and late at night," *Trailer Travel* magazine notes, "there was a constant tramp, tramp of lines of humanity winding in and out of exhibits – seasoned and embryonic Trailerites, people from all walks of life whose imagination had been stirred and their interest aroused, and the curious who merely came to see what it was all about."[67] The Sandusky show therefore confirmed the utility of trade shows and public demonstrations to attract attention to new technologies. Overall, these trailer shows were an effective way to introduce travel trailers and recreational automobility to the public at large. Interestingly, the magazine noted that the Sandusky show also provided an opportunity for those interested in entering the trailer dealership business to make connections with manufacturers. "By far the bulk of the sales made were to dealers. New distribution channels were formed and outlets increased."[68] With these new dealers and distribution channels, the travel trailer could spread further to areas beyond local shows to new retail outlets in entirely new locales.

Omar Suttles's story can give valuable insight into how these trailer shows were vitally important to the foundation of the RV industry. As previously mentioned, Suttles's first sales

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[65] "T.C.T. Reunion Promises to Set Record: Trailer Exposition at Sandusky Also Will Be Largest Yet-Cedar Point Opened to Trailerites," *Trailer Travel*, May-June 1936, 30.
[66] "Summer Trailer Shows Attract 50,000 Visitors: Automobile Dealers Turn to New Industry on National Scale as Major Companies Enter Field," *Trailer Travel*, September 1936, 22.
[67] "Summer Trailer Show," 22.
[68] Ibid.

resulted from his willingness to display his original bear-proof trailer to the public, but his efforts to expand using publicity did not stop there.

Suttles helped to organize one of the early manufacturer associations for the growing trailer industry, the Western Trailer Coach Manufacturers Association.[69] It was founded in 1935 with the goal of "showing the public how they could take their families on a clean comfortable vacation to see what a beautiful country we have to live in and enjoy."[70] The impetus for the formation of the organization was an effort to better organize trailer shows. Suttles explained that "a show was what brought us [trailer manufacturers] together in Southern California – and nearly pulled us apart."[71] Suttles described the first major show in 1931, called the "Outing Show," as a sponsored event by the Southern California Automobile Club in which he was the only displayer. However, by 1934 the show had grown tremendously and was filled with a wide range of trailer manufacturers aggressively boosting their products. As he later recalled, "each year manufacturers stood by their trailers bragging about all the features and making wild promises. Believe me, there were chips on a lot of shoulders."[72] Soon, sponsors and organizers began to feel like the show was not achieving the desired orderly atmosphere. Suttles himself supports the notion that there was a lot of animosity between manufactures throughout his narrative.[73] If left unaddressed, the chaos caused by the industry's growth threatened to scuttle the show itself, which would be detrimental to all involved.

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[69] Suttles references to the Western Trailer Coach Manufactures Association by several different names throughout his collection's scrapbooks. He also called it multiple times the Trailer Coach Manufacturers Association or the Trailer Coach Association. The varied reference result likely from group name changes over the years he was in the industry.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

The message from the officials at the show left no quarter for status quo: "Suttles, you trailer fellows are going to have to appoint a committee of two or three we can deal with. To deal with you individually is impossible."[74] This message pushed Suttles into action. He (and another trailer firm owner named Hal Smith) called up the previous year's show participants and set up a meeting for the group at a local Elks club with the goal that "we would try to bury the hatchet, get acquainted, and hopefully form a trailer coach manufacturers association."[75] These effort by Suttles bore fruit with the formation of a manufacturer organization of mostly West Coast firms, which would eventually be formally called the Western Trailer Coach Manufacturing Association. This cooperative attitude embraced by the group of manufactures proved efficacious by creating the atmosphere for a much more orderly show in 1935.

The show had a total of 130,000 attendees visiting the manufacturer displays. Suttles stated, "I think [the companies who attended] were: Aerocar of Detriot show by Mr. Salisburg of the Auto Club, Airfloat, Airline, Airstream, American Trailer of L.A., Auto Trailer, California Trailer Coach, Covered Wagon Trailer (made in the east), General Body Trailer, Gypsy Caravan, Greyhound, Halsco, Highway Pullman, Hollywood, Masterbilt, McLaren, Pulmobile Carry-All (Bryon Nease), Rolling Home, Silver Lark, Smicky, Traveleer, Traveleze, Travelo, Travel-Ome, Wanderer and World Roamer."[76] This extensive list of attendees demonstrates several points. First, the auto club organizers of the event were correct that the sheer number of manufacturers looking to attend was probably getting out of hand, virtually guaranteeing an unruly show in the absence of a centralized organization. Second, the early trailer industry, like the early auto industry, had a glut of manufactures jumping into the business in the early days. Third, Omar

[74] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

Suttles clearly believed he played a decisive role organizing these early forays into manufacturer cooperation. It appears that he leveraged the appeal of tradeshow access to get traction with an otherwise uncooperative set of manufactures. Although there is no evidence to cast doubt on Suttles account, his collective reflections about the matter certainly verge on the level of self-congratulatory praise. No matter the scale of Suttles influence, manufacturers associations were the future for the industry as cooperative competition became the way forward for the industry.

The Trailer Coach Manufacturers Association formed by Suttles would eventually add the word "Western" to its title to differentiate itself from an eastern manufactures group that included "Covered Wagon, Hayes Body, Kozy Coach, Kabin Coach, Federal Motor Truck, Auto Cruiser, Bender Body Co., Pierce Arrow, Nash Motors, Schult Trailer Co., Silver Dome, Split Coach Motor Corp., Vagabond Coach, Quaker Trailer, General Trailer, Aladdin Company, and Tallo-Ho Co."[77] Suttles suggested in his recollection that this eastern manufacturers association came about at approximately the same time as his organization centered in California.

Organizations such as these were vital to the wellbeing of the trailer industry's future because, as Suttles recollected, much like the early automobile industry all manufacturers in the same product area tended to face similar problems. Suttles was proud of the fact that it took the automotive industry "12 years to see the need of organizing the Society of Automotive Engineers," but the trailer industry did it in less than half of the time. This does suggest that Suttles understood that automotive trailers, as a spinoff technology, needed to replicate successful practices used by the root industry. He believed back in the 1930s "it was probably better that we couldn't foresee the challenges ahead. Sure, there was legislation both to fight and foster, standards that we were unsuccessful in adopting, and a public relations effort that was

[77] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.

never ending."[78] These organizations, first inspired by trailer shows, thus would help to bring the industry forward through the rest of the interwar period and beyond. As it turned out, an individual like Suttles who was one part automotive engineer with a sense of the industry itself, one part enthusiast who enjoyed traveling in trailers, and one part businessman who had previously run a successful shop had the skills and vision necessary to lead the organization at its outset.

A Look Across at Europe

Although this study is primarily concerned with understanding American recreational vehicles and culture, it can be helpful to consider contemporaneous developments in Europe. It is widely known that the British call their RVs caravans, and their activities caravanning.[79] This dates to the English tradition of taking trips in horse-drawn wagons, also called caravanning, a type of travel undertaken by wealthy aristocrats and gentry at the end of the nineteenth century.[80] Interestingly, today the motorized variant of this activity is often associated with lower-class or middle-class individuals rather than the landed elites.

The creation of automobile-drawn caravans began after the First World War. Directly after the war, some enthusiasts in Britain used surplus vans from the war as host or tow vehicles for homemade conversion projects. [81] It is quite likely then that the British Isles saw the invention of recreational vehicles at the same time or perhaps even slightly before the United States. It is not entirely clear if the wealthy horse-drawn caravans provided any technical inspiration for the earliest vehicles in Britain, but they certainly provided conceptual inspiration

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[78] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1.
[79] The term "caravan" generally refers directly to travel trailers and is consequently more narrowly defined than the more general term "recreational vehicles."
[80] Edwards, *Homes for Travel and Living*, 1.
[81] Ibid., 2.

in a much less ambiguous way than the American frontier past did for American trailer designs. The size of British Caravans lined up fairly well with American practice in the 1930s. According to Edwards, "by the late thirties caravans [in Britain] were being made in lengths from 8 to 19 feet"[82] This would not be that much bigger or smaller than the typical unit in the United States. Sources suggest that the biggest divergence involved the shape of the trailer designs.

In Ray Kuns's book, *Trailer Engineering,* he does categorize different "American" and "English" designs for trailer coaches based on the shape of the outer structure. He suggested that "The American coach is patterned more or less after other transportation units used on the highways of America."[83] He later clarified that he was referring to the streamlining of trailer coaches to match common shapes of American automobiles: "the [American] automobile which has for many years been built with a pointed end towards the front and a larger and bulkier rear has had a definite influence on the trailer."[84] He believed that the American trailer has been heavily influenced by these streamlining ideas, and that trailers even embodied the same principles of "splitting the wind" as much as "some of the very nicely streamlined buses" that were contemporaries of these designs. He also saw similarities to commercial trailers on the American highways with "their rounded front or vee nose" to improve aerodynamics. This distinctive shape, while efficient in the wind, often limited the utility of the front and rear portions of the designs, for it tended to cut into internal space for sleeping or other areas.[85] According to Kuns, the English design did not take the same external design cues as the American models. The English models were designed such that "the starting point was not the

[82] Edwards, *Homes for Travel and Living*, 2.
[83] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 3.
[84] Ibid., 3-4.
[85] Ibid.

appearance of the coach on the outside but a consideration for the usage of the coach. This is somewhat after the order or the manner in which we proceed to build a house."[86] The end result was that the overall shape of the coaches of English design tended towards square shapes with only the horizontal, instead of both horizontal and vertical, streamlining of the American coach designs.[87]

The other major difference, according to Kuns, was in the placement of the trailer's axle. He noted that "most European trailers have the single axle set approximately at the center, thus removing almost all weight from the tow car."[88] In this respect then, the European travel trailer tends to resemble the weight and towing characteristics of American utility trailers that also tend to put load on the trailer axles rather than shifting the load to the tow vehicle. Kuns's main explanation for the difference is that each type of trailer is suited to the typical use the trailer was likely to receive. Whereas American trailers are taken on long distance trips on higher speed highways, he argued that Europeans tend instead to cover much smaller distances at comparatively lower speeds.[89] Another explanation for the different load characteristics of the trailers is that the American automobile industry tended to produce larger cars than the European industry, which meant that European tow vehicles in some instances would have been less capable of taking on the extra loads transferred to them by semi-trailer designs. Although not drastically different, these design characteristics point toward the eventual points of departure for American and European/British designs.

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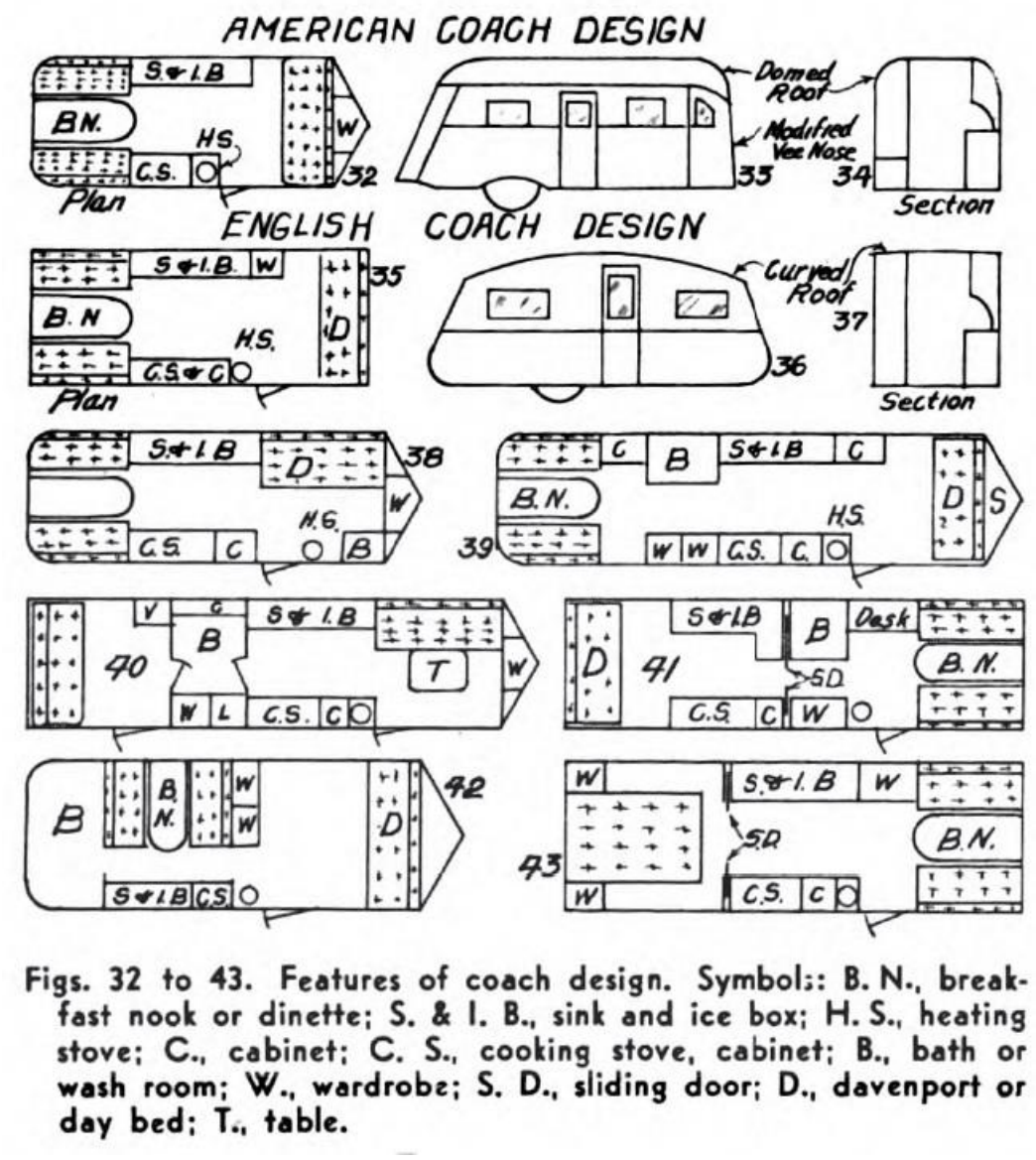
[86] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 4.
[87] Ibid., 3-4.
[88] Ibid, 5.
[89] Ibid.



Figs. 32 to 43. Features of coach design. Symbols: B. N., breakfast nook or dinette; S. & I. B., sink and ice box; H. S., heating stove; C., cabinet; C. S., cooking stove, cabinet; B., bath or wash room; W., wardrobe; S. D., sliding door; D., davenport or day bed; T., table.

Figure 31: Diagram of American vs English Coach Designs[90]

Edwards described the range of internal equipment, stating that these caravans came "equipped with paneled and finished interiors, in a quality comparable to any luxury flat (apartment) including gas cooking, chemical toilet, shower bath, a bureau (chest), cocktail cabinet, etc."[91] The overall design choices also ranged from folding to solid walled units that

[90] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 20.
[91] Edwards, *Homes for Travel and Living*, 2.

reflected a similarly diverse set of possibilities by the mid-1930s. Figure 31 shows the vast array of different trailer layouts possible in both the American and British contoured designs. It's unmistakable that the extra streamlining did cut into some of the space of the American designs, but both were able to fit living accommodations fairly comfortably into their floorplan layouts. Perhaps the greatest advantage noticeable for the English design was its ability to fit more sleeping space in either end of the trailer.

Lastly, it seems that the British tended to see their caravans as extensions of the horse-drawn activity rather than a truly new invention. The similarities between the American trailer and British caravan seem to hold true at least throughout the 1930s. For in this early era of recreational automobility, there were still deep similarities between the two cultures of recreational vehicles that differed in form more than the function of the technologies. Although the distance and scope of European or British travel might have been more limited, it was not a fundamentally decisive divergence in design before World War II. In the postwar era British road and tow car limitations would usher in an era of divergence, with American models growing bigger and British models remaining smaller and lighter.[92] The absolutely fundamental formative period for the recreational vehicle appears to run concurrently in America and Britain, but it is clear that the momentum and enthusiasm for the RV in the United States would continue to carry it to new heights.

"Five Weeks on the Gypsy Trail"

Edwin Teale wrote enthusiastically in 1937, "FIVE WEEKS on the gypsy trail; 4,671 miles in a 'rolling home'! That completed for the readers of Popular Science Monthly."[93] Teale's

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[92] Edwards, *Homes for Travel and Living*, 2-3.
[93] Edwin Teale, "Five Weeks in a Trailer," *Popular Science*, April 1937, 46.

journey saw him and his wife travel great distances to observe and report about the travel trailer's growing popularity, the states and camps he visited, and the people who took part in the pastime of trailering.[94] His journey and experience reveals just how far the recreational vehicle had come by the late 1930s, as well as the still growing interest in trailers as a novel addition to the traveling scene. His journey would be retold through a three-article series from April to June 1937. He repackaged and presented many of the universal maxims of trailer marketing as well as common enthusiast beliefs about trailers that had been discussed in specialty trailering magazines. In short, travel trailers reached mainstream audiences through a publication like *Popular Science* and undoubtedly began to be regarded as a completely acceptable travel solution for many more Americans.

Popular Science chose a writer who was a true novice to the activity, which allowed him to portray trailer travel as approachable to newcomers. "When we commenced planning our trip," Teale recalled, "all we knew about trailer life was that it must be fun."[95] He recalled that he and his wife reviewed catalogues from trailer companies, discussed trailer life with those already familiar with it, and contacted salesmen from various manufacturers. He appeared openminded about trailer brands in that he considered "the relative merits of Covered Wagons, Kozy Coaches, Vagabonds, Nomads, Zpherys, Auto Cruisers, Travelodges, Silvermoons, Mayflowers, Travel Mansions, and Tally-Hos"[96] Even this long list of manufacturers seemed to just scratch the surface of the "nearly 700 manufacturers" that are "turning out stock and made-to-order models" at the rate of "150,000 new trailers" in the previous year of 1936.[97] As has been

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[94] Edwin Teale, "Five Weeks in a Trailer," 46-47.
[95] Ibid., 47.
[96] Ibid., 47.
[97] Ibid., 46.

discussed previously, this era was one of a huge diversity of makes and models with a nearly equally large amount of variation in design. He itemized this diversity: "We found an infinite variety of trailers on the market. There are two-wheelers, three-wheelers, four-wheelers. They run the gamut from a $300 streamline "pup tent," only a few feet long, to $5000 "road yachts," thirty feet long and weighing 7,000 pounds."[98] He noted that all sorts of amenities were also available in all of these trailer types. As he put it, "It is possible to get trailers with hot and cold running water, with vanity dressers, with water-closets, with telephones connecting trailer and towing car, with oil-burning heaters and gas stoves, with air-conditioning and hot-water-heating systems. Some are equipped with two-way radios, with electric refrigerators, with batteries charged by midget windmills on the roof. One even has a fireplace![99] Amenities, gadgets, and novel features were potentially a strategy for brand differentiation and market competition in such a crowded field, but also might have related to the adaptability of the trailers to diverse user demands. It seems the limits to one's recreational automobility desires was only one's imagination and one's bank account. As is the case today, Teale was recongized that one of the recreational vehicle's strengths as a technology was its adaptability and ability to conform to end users' desires.

Teale could not help but notice the industry's size and diversity from the consumer's point of view, but he also made direct references to enthusiast and manufacturer groups. He briefly described the Tin Can Tourists and their rival, the Automotive Tourist's Association, and their activities and annual conventions. He also commented on the National Coach Trailer Manufacturers Association. He contextualized the industry's interesting history of growth: "Born

[98] Edwin Teale, "Five Weeks in a Trailer," 47-48
[99] Ibid.

of the depression, the trailer boom has spread to all corners of the country. It is keeping factories humming and inventors busy."[100] The trailer community and the industry had greater public exposure than ever before.

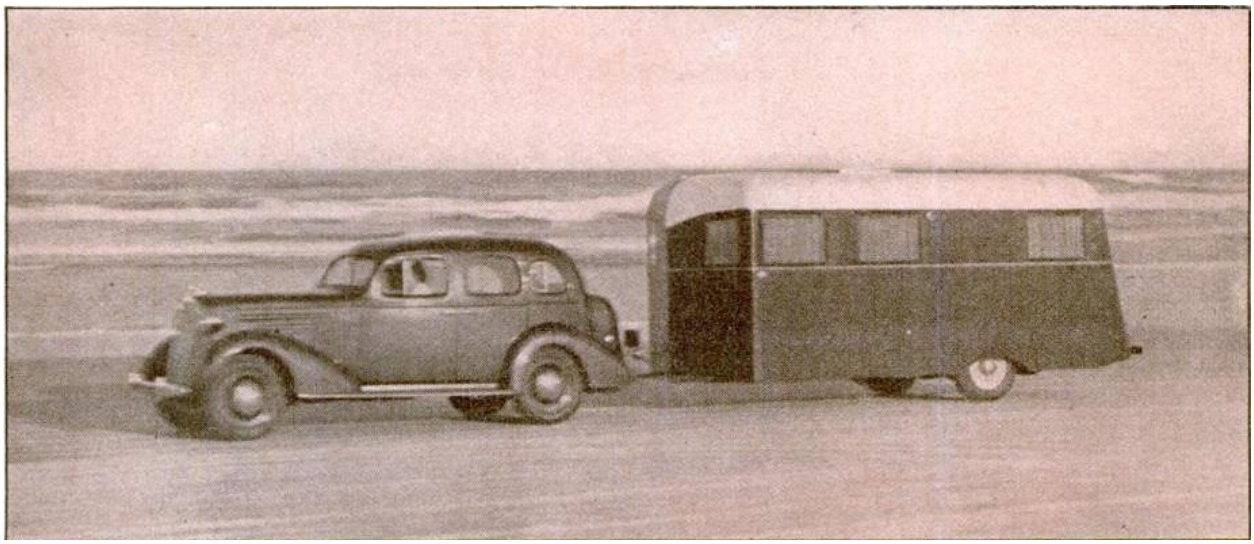

Figure 32: The Teale's Rented Trailer on Daytona Beach "Letting Her Out"[101]

Teale had the choice of more makes and models of travel trailer than he would have had in choosing a tow vehicle. He quickly found himself concerned with figuring out what things he needed to take with him on the journey. Additionally, the wide range of destinations for his trip impressed him. In the end, he surmised "we were ready for trailer life and all we needed was the trailer."[102] The article described three methods for acquiring a travel trailer as one could "buy plans and parts and build it yourself," "purchase a factory model" by "paying cash or buying it on an installment plan," or finally "rent the trailer at so much a week" plus fees (all of which can later be applied to the purchase price).[103] The Teales decided that renting their trailer was the best option for them. "In the end, after considerable shopping around, we rented a $1000 de luxe

[100] Edwin Teale, "Five Weeks in a Trailer," 48.
[101] Ibid., 47.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.

trailer from an agency near New York," which costs them about $225 out of pocket in rental fees and damage deposits.[104] This rather high-end trailer featured a bathroom with toilet, a cooking stove, sleeping arrangements for up to four people, cupboards equipped with dishes, closets, interior lighting compatible with electricity from both tow cars and from campsites, and an icebox. It was nineteen feet by six feet three inches with a standing height of seven feet two inches. All and all it weighed nearly 2,000 pounds and was configured as a one-axle semi-trailer.[105] Teale and his wife would be traveling in relative luxury for their five week "gypsy" vacation with a trailer as well-equipped as most standard fixed housing.

The delivery of the trailer to their house brought mixed feelings for Teale. On one hand, its arrival caused a good deal of fanfare and excitement, in particular he noted the small horde of children in the neighborhood who came out to investigate it. On the other hand, he began to realize that it would be his responsibility to tow the monstrosity. He recalled, "My heart sank. The trailer looked as big as a mountain. Could I even maneuver it through traffic?"[106] Like many others who wrote about trailering in the period, Teale then went to explain that this fear is common among beginners and then transitions into a formulaic conversation he'd have with friends upon his return:

> Q. How about the steering? Is it hard with the trailer attached?
> A. No you take wider turns, and you can't cut in as soon after passing a car, but otherwise there is little difference. One thing you may notice at first is a slight pull from suctions every time you meet a car speeding in the opposite direction.
> Q. Does it take longer to stop when you put on the brakes?
> A. As a matter of fact, you stop quicker, because the trailer power brakes of its own.
> Q. Do you have any trouble finding a place to park at night?
> A. Almost any tourist camp will take in a trailer. Country filling stations are often glad to let you park in the yard, if you buy gasoline the next morning. If you want

[104] Edwin Teale, "Five Weeks in a Trailer," 48.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid., 48 and 121.

electric connections, however, it is a good idea to plan your trip in advance so you will reach a regular trailer camp each night.
Q. Can you park on the city street?
A. Anywhere that there is space enough to get in and out. Usually, when you stop to make purchases, it is best to go beyond the main business district and to have either the nose of your car or the rear of trailers at the corner of a street or alley. This keeps you from being blocked in by the other cars parking close in front or behind. Always allow yourself all the room possible in maneuvering a trailer.
Q. Are any roads closed to trailers?
A. Only a very few boulevards and parkways in the biggest cities.
Q. Can you get on ferries?
A. It was our experience, during the trip that any ferry that would take trucks would take trailers.
Q. How much does a trailer cut down on your gasoline mileage?
A. It probably reduces it from two to five miles a gallon. During our 4,671-mile tour, we averaged eighteen and a third miles to the gallon of gasoline. A few side trips were made with the trailer left in camp. But, on the other hand, we were driving a new car that had just finished its first 500 miles.
Q. Is the trailer hard to attach and detach?
A. Not at all. Anyone can do it in five minutes.[107]

Overall, Teale's question and answer list resembles others that one could find in the pages of many other trailer publications including the example from Howard Vincent O'Brien discussed previously. It is important overall because to operated it mitigate many fears of those looking to take the plunge into the trailering world. It sent the message to the reader that once one purchases a trailer they will readily be able to drive with it comfortably, service it along the road, find plenty of places to stay, and not be overly encumbered in their travels by the trailer's presence. Teale likely drew his inspiration for the *Popular Science* piece from the trailer literature and was helping to spread this collected knowledge and these typical arguments in favor of travel trailers further afield. Overall, he felt that the trailer experience was not too difficult for him even at the start. The hardest part he acknowledged was maneuvering his trailer in reverse as it must be steered more like a boat by turning the wheels in the opposite direction.

[107] Edwin Teale, "Five Weeks in a Trailer," 48 and 121.

One of the last steps for commencing his journey was packing the trailer with stores of food and supplies for the journey. In view of this bevy of items he concluded that "it was easy to see why trailer travelers are dubbed 'tin-can tourists.'[108] After packing his vehicle he noted that he was all ready to go except for removing his stowaway family kitten "Tarzan" and procuring a can opener he had neglected to include in his kit. Next up was his several thousand-mile journey with his wife across the country.[109]

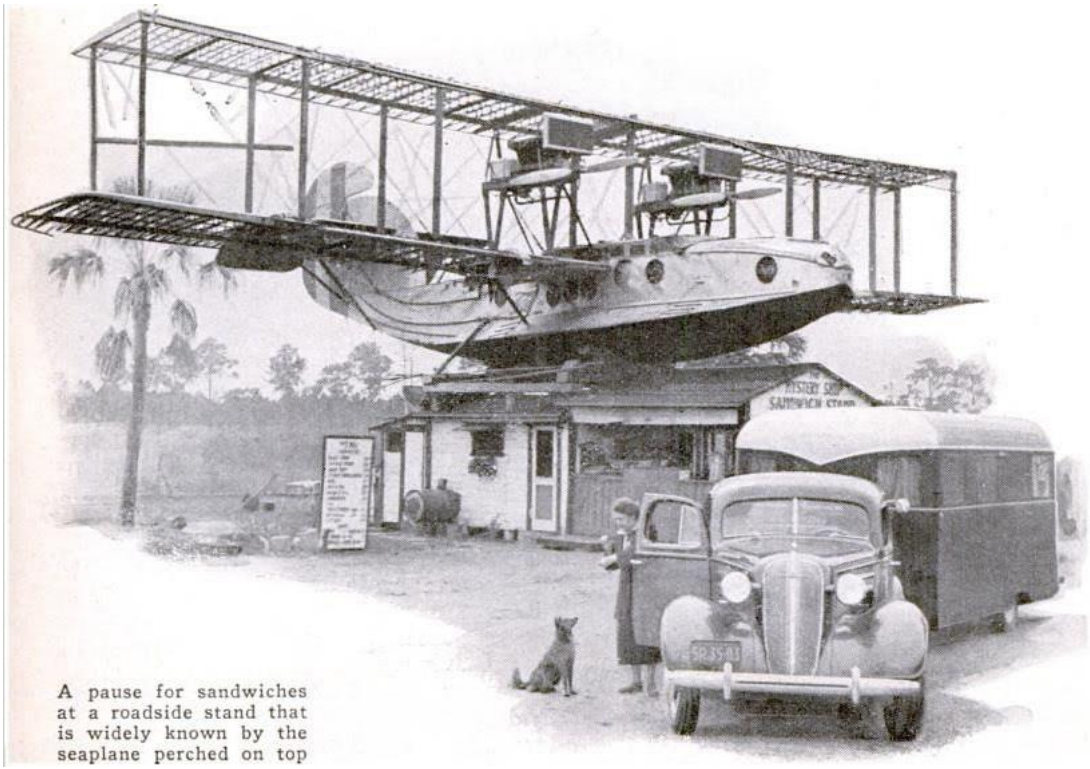

Figure 33: The Rented Teale Family Trailer at Roadside Sandwich Shop[110]

Teale revealed the events of his trailer trip in his follow-up article, titled "How to Get the Most Out of Your Trailer Trip," in the next month's issue of *Popular Science*. The final destination for the Teales was a trailer camp in Sarasota, Florida., that the couple had heard was

[108] Edwin Teale, "Five Weeks in a Trailer," 122.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Edwin Teale, "How to Get the Most Out of Your Trailer Trip," *Popular Science*, May 1937, 48.

the best of its kind and truly state of the art. They began their journey from Baldwin, New York, and looked to get through New York as quickly as possible, with the least traffic. Their journey was mostly trouble-free through New York, but a few technical issues cropped up towards Washington, DC. For starters, the bumper hitch was threatening to pull off the entire bumper from the rear of the car. This forced them to quickly seek a mechanic to alter the hitch in Washington; that fixed the issue for the remainder of the trip. Teale suggest to the reader that for longer trips it might be wise to invest in more substantial towing equipment. The second issue related to the incompatibility of electrical hookups on their trailer. The camp they stopped at provided a screw plug attachment, but the trailer had been equipped with a prong attachment from the trailer rental agency. Friendly travel trailer enthusiasts later taught them tips for electrical hookups, from such as how to secure the overhead wiring with a loop before plugging in a power source at camp. They also learned simple things like to avoid parking close to roadways, to avoid the suction effect of passing cars that would shake the trailer while preparing meals.[111] As newcomers to trailering, the Teales were heavily reliant on the proper guidance of the trailer agency from which they rented. It seems then that in some respects the Teales had to learn the hard way to adapt to conditions on the road, but some of their knowledge was supplemented by enthusiasts who had already been trailering for years. Overall, these two hang-ups early on in the trip were the worst experienced (or at least the worst admitted to) by the couple. It seems that they quickly mastered the art of camping at trailer camps, and that their equipment did not provide any additional notable issues.

Teale and his wife arrived at the Sarasota camp a few days later. He commented that it was "operated by the city, it will accommodate more than 1,400 trailers at one time. It is a Mecca

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[111] Edwin Teale, "How to Get the Most Out of Your Trailer Trip," *Popular Science*, May 1937, 49 and 102.

for motor nomads from all over the country. Some stay only a few weeks; some from fall until spring."[112] Unlike earlier municipal camps, this camp was highly regulated and full of features. When they arrived, they were questioned about whether they had pets, kids, or guns as well as their place of origin and what kind of electrical current they required for their rig. They were quickly shown to a low current lot (since they did not need the more expensive high current options) and were connected up to the power by an electrician.[113] Teale commented on the diversity of the campsite in terms of trailer shapes and sizes: "Amid long lines of palms, trailers of every size and shape and color were drawn up facing the roads, with automobiles parked close beside them. There were sleek, streamline products of the factory and sturdy, ingenious creations of owner-mechanics."[114] By Teale's account there was plenty to do at camp alone including reading, playing games, going fishing, enjoying the sunshine or an assortment of group activities with other campers with organized programing like dances, church services, and plays. The city had also gone all out in extending municipal services such as a post office, a telegraph office, sewage disposal, fire department services, and regular police patrols.[115] The camp at Sarasota, then, was cutting-edge for its time and was unlikely to have not outdone by any other. The city had bucked the typical trend of abandoning its municipal camps to private interests (common in the 1920s) and saw a clear return on investment in drawing the new trailer tourist crowd to town. In fact, the Teales found the camp so enjoyable and well serviced they did not want to leave. "It was with real regret that we loaded up one Wednesday morning and headed away from this city

[112] Edwin Teale, "How to Get the Most Out of Your Trailer Trip," *Popular Science*, May 1937, 102.
[113] Ibid., 102-103.
[114] Ibid., 103.
[115] Ibid.

of mobile homes."[116] Although the Teales experienced other roadside fun during the remained of the trip, the Sarasota municipal camp was the highlight for their trailer adventure.

In Teale's final article on trailers he hits on an important and distinguishing feature of trailer technology in the 1930s. All throughout the trip he couldn't help but notice how trailers were always in the news; on his way home, in particular, the mounting headlines pilled up. He recalled, "As we rolled north, new developments in the trailer world were adding interesting items to the news of the day."[117] Perhaps Teale was simply becoming trailer-minded and tuned into the news relating to this new technology he was about to write about, but in fact he was pointing to a growing question about trailers: What would be the future of the trailer, and just how many ways could one use it? He recalled some of the headlines that suggest the diverse range of application for trailer technology during the period of adoption:

> We heard of a musician who travels in his trailer giving concerts; of a preacher who holds services in a chapel on wheels; of the proprietor of a racing sheet who publishes it in his trailer home as he follows the horses from track to track. Barnstorming actors, grain harvesters, fruit pickers, an even a journeyman burglar has turned to the trailer. At a number of universities, students were bringing "houses" to school with them and establishing trailer colonies adjoining the campus; babies were being born in trailers; a murder had been committed in a trailer.[118]

The meaning and utility of what a trailer was still open for interpretation by the users. Although the trailer industry favored the recreation pitch, it did not forestall other uses nor discourage people from implementing a trailer for a full range of productive and non-productive activities. Some even began to think of the trailer not as a new form of travel, but perhaps as a revolutionary, society-changing technology that would rival the changes wrought by the

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[116] Edwin Teale, "How to Get the Most Out of Your Trailer Trip," 103.
[117] Edwin Teale, "Has the Trailer Come to Stay?" *Popular Mechanics*, June 1937, 41.
[118] Ibid.

automobile by transforming American cities and making all aspects of life mobile. The prophets for this trailering future will be the focus of the next part of the Trailer Revolution.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PHILSOPHIES OF THE TRAILER REVOLUTION, FROM FUTURISM TO PRAGMATISM

In modern America, new technologies have often bred excitement and extravagant promises of a brighter future. Trailers were no exception, with many advocates speaking of how they would reshape society in the future. The 1930s' trailer revolution explicitly reflected America's enthusiasm for new technologies that promise novel experiences and lifestyles. Americans' expanded desire for domestic vacations and limited Depression-era budgets fit well with the trailer industry's promises of good times at cut-rate prices. These developments were significant and conspicuous: as will be demonstrated later, the trailer itself became an object of hope that symbolized a new technological future featuring expanded vacationing opportunities as well as the promise of new mobile lifestyles. Some forward-looking individuals even began to make fantastical forecasts that the majority of Americans would one day be living in mobile trailer housing in flexible mobile cities. Although this did not come to pass, the enthusiasm associated with travel trailers created lasting links between the travel trailer's mobility and a socially constructed belief that this mobility equated to increased freedom, democracy, and individuality. However, these boosters' claims should not be dismissed entirely as flights of fancy, for their ideas contributed to the success of the travel trailer industry. They also provided the conceptual vocabulary for how trailers would be marketed and used by future generations. Some authors even correctly foreshadowed the post-World War II split between the travel trailer and the mobile home.

The futurism surrounding the 1930s was moored directly to the political and social climate of the era. It was not uncommon for those dissatisfied with America to consider various changes that might improve the country and solve its Depression-era ills. The concept of rendering one's domestic space mobile was no doubt a revolutionary idea, but not necessarily any more so than other reforms of the period. The 1930s remained an era where Americans displayed a deep willingness to trust in technological change as a force for good in society. The trailer was one of the latest artifacts that meshed well with this trust in a technologically-filled future of abstract and concrete progress.

The futurism and optimism of the Great Depression would be seriously tempered by the onset of World War II. Even before the war officially reached the United States, the American government and the country's industrial priorities were changing, but the coming of the war emphatically changed the status of the trailer and the livelihoods of early RV manufacturers. Pragmatism, not futurism, would dictate that the nascent RV manufacturers would either have to close down or devote their efforts and machinery toward building temporary housing. This temporary wartime housing was not the sexy high-end travel trailer, the posh mobile "home of the future," nor the revolutionary static home alternative that boosters had promised, but instead it was a decidedly marginal and temporary solution to dire wartime needs built using an absolute minimum of vital resources. Although there were many in the recreational vehicle industry who maligned the trailers produced during the war for housing, this period allowed the practical survival of many segments of the industry who would retool in the postwar period as separate RV and manufactured housing industries. This chapter looks to understand how contested ideas about the usefulness of trailers played out differently across the historical circumstances of World War II and the Great Depression that preceded it.

The Promise of a Mobile Society

One of the most remarkable predictions was the forecast of Roger W. Babson, the founder of Babson College in Massachusetts. Babson was a businessman, and his interest in new technologies dated back to his days at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, he felt his education there was lacking in that it "was given to what had already been accomplished, rather than to anticipating future possibilities."[1] His prediction was featured in an article published in the January-February 1936 issue of *Trailer Travel,* titled "We'll Soon Be Living on Wheels."[2] In this piece, Babson did not mince words: "I am going to make an astonishing prediction: Within twenty years, more than half the population of the United States will be living in automobile trailers!"[3] He saw the trailer as fundamentally altering the nature of mobility and freedom in American society. Babson's article is both boosterish and utopian, stressing all the purported advantages of trailer living for everyday Americans, including being able to move for employment, cheaper living costs, and no or low taxation. The pitch that trailer travel and trailer living were cheap and affordable is one of the most lasting arguments of early boosters like Babson.

Babson's influence can be seen in later publications about travel trailering. Jay Norwood Darling, in *The Cruise of the Bouncing Betty* (1937), wrote that he undertook his journey based on "a somewhat fantastical idea that if the whole pattern of American life was to be completely altered by this new device of perambulating penthouses, it was up to us to acquire some advance

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[1] "Biography of Roger W. Babson," Babson College Website, http://www.babson.edu/about-babson/at-a-glance/babsons-history/Pages/biography-of-roger-babson.aspx (accessed 10/29/2013).
[2] Roger W. Babson, "We'll *Soon Be* Living *on* Wheels: Millions-Half the Population of the U.S.-Within 20 Years Will Be Trailerites, According to Roger W. Babson," *Trailer Travel,* January-February 1936, 10-13, 26.
[3] Ibid., 10.

information about it."[4] Charles Edgar Nash's book *Trailers Ahoy!* directly addressed Babson's prediction: "Nearly a year ago Roger W. Babson, of Wellesley, Massachusetts, the great economist, rocked the public to its foundations when he predicted that within 20 years, more than half the population of the United States would be living in trailers."[5] He continued by providing additional evidence that Babson was not alone in his enthusiasm for a mobile American society: "William Bushnell Stout, former president of the American Society of Automotive Engineers and world-famous for his accomplishments in the field of airplane design, was recently engaged in a discussion of 'mobile cities.'"[6] Evidently, enthusiasm for the travel trailer was present within traditional automotive circles at the time. In some ways, the precedent of the automobile's transformative nature (as was becoming readily apparent by the 1930s) seemed to be spilling over into trailer enthusiasm. As Nash recalled, "[Stout] opened up his broadside by stating that not many were aware of it, but that a large part of the population of the United States is constantly moving. [Stout] backed up Babson's prediction with a ten years modification, by stating that within 30 years half of the population would be living in homes on wheels."[7] Nash added his own take, stating that "Mobile homes are undoubtedly going to result, in a few years, in mobile cities, living communities which will pick their locations according to the best advantages obtainable."[8] The combination of the automobile's mobility with the trailer made mobile living possible. As soon as a trailer is permanently immobilized, its ability to fulfill the dream of a mobile city is significantly diminished. In other words, this was not just a future

[4] Darling, *The Cruise of the Bouncing Betty*, 9.
[5] Nash, *Trailers Ahoy!*, 62.
[6] Ibid., 62.
[7] Ibid., 63.
[8] Ibid., 65.

of housing being produced in factories, but a future where that housing would not be tied down to a single site and could be moved by its users at will.

Explicit in predictions about the creation of a mobile society living in trailers was a promise of greater freedom. Trailer boosters and enthusiasts often trumpeted individual autonomy and independence as a central tenet of the advantages of the travel trailer. Roger W. Babson's 1936 article presented a manifesto of these idealized images of trailers: "In the first place, as I see it, this movement on the part of our families is a natural expression, a revolt, of our people against what they apparently feel to be a condition of oppression."[9] The trailer, therefore, was a tool to fulfill an inherent desire to escape from restrictions and to give one the mobility to defeat this "condition of oppression." He goes on to critically analyze the conceptual consequences of static living:

> Here are salient features of it: When a man moves with his family into a home he has the feeling that he is anchored; that he is in the grasp of his employer, to begin with. He further feels he is in the clutches of politicians. He is marked by the tax assessor and collector, and must submit to any levies made against him. He cannot be certain that the landscape surrounding his residence will remain the same from one day to another, and he has no control over the erection of unsightly neighboring structures. He must put up with objectionable neighbors, should they move close to him and cannot alter conditions detrimental to his children in this respect.[10]

Babson reinterpreted static living in terms of restraint, loss of control, and the potential for being subjected to anti-democratic forces. Lack of mobility equated quite directly to his loss of freedom, self-reliance, and individualism, a feeling heightened by the insecurity of the Great Depression. He concluded that there was a possible solution to these problems, and one way to regain the mobility lost in modern society: "Those of our people who have turned to rolling

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[9] Babson, "We'll Soon Be Living on Wheels," 10.
[10] Ibid., 10-11.

homes have been influenced by a characteristic feeling of Americans – resentment against oppressive taxation and a desire for independence and freedom of movement."[11] The travel trailer therefore offered a particularly powerful vehicle for mobility by retaining one's individual autonomy, freedom from oppression, and American democratic ideals. Babson reflected many ideas that became a distinct draw for purchasers of trailers beginning in the 1930s. His ideas about trailers were widely incorporated into the mantra and writings driving the trailer revolution.

Charles Edgar Nash conceived of the trailer experience in a similar way. Nash's accounting of the advantages of the trailer is one of the clearest in laying out the ideological creed of the travel trailer. "Each trailer spells home and the comforts of home. Each provides coziness and deluxe accommodations on the road."[12] He emphasized the idea that travel trailers provide mobility without sacrificing the comforts of home. He recounted the ubiquitous theme of thrifty living, asserting that "Each permits living at a minimum of expense and with a minimum of effort."[13] He ended by invoking freedom and the inherent American desire to travel: "Each stands for freedom and adventure, new sights, new scenes and a new outlook on life. Each means living, instead of existing. Each is the ideal outlet for an American's love of travel."[14] In *Trailer Engineering*, Ray Kuns argued along the same lines as Nash:

> Undoubtedly there are two things which have made the development of the modern coach for use with passenger cars the accepted mode of living in comfort when touring. These two things are—first, the pioneering spirit which still lives in the hearts of most American people, and, second, the lure of the open road, which has made of the American people a tribe of nomads. [15]

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[11]Babson, "We'll Soon Be Living on Wheels," 11.
[12] Nash, *Trailers Ahoy!*, 7-8.
[13] Ibid. 7-8.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 2.

Even today, these are common tropes about American culture which have a certain timelessness to them. The ideological connections between American frontier mythologies and the recreational vehicle date back to the earliest days of the technology, even if the technological connections are dubious. The second notion, the lure of the open road, ties to the idea of the automobile as an individualist machine built expressly to provide freedom of travel. This expanded freedom of travel and self-sufficiency provided by the trailer was an often repeated idea with the mainstream trailer literature of the 1930s.

Another early manual for travelling advice goes even further, likening the trailer experience to an incurable pathogen. In it, Blackburn Sims stated that "There is only one disadvantage in living or traveling in a trailer. It will bite you. It will infect you. You will never again be the same human."[16] The revelation that causes this change mirrors one of the key themes presented by Babson. Sims continued to explain the appeal arguing that "the basic reason, perhaps, is the sense of freedom which trailer life gives you."[17] Unlike Babson, Sims was willing to suggest that one might exercise one's trailer-granted freedom even for somewhat trifling reasons. "If you don't like your neighbors—if you don't like the scenery—if you don't like the temperature—if you don't like the dogs your dog has to associate with—if for even the most trivial of reasons you want to move," he contended, "when you're living trailer life you simply *move*."[18] Sims might have been right in one respect in that it seemed that trailer futurism was indeed infectious in the late 1930s. But what might the society they forecast actually look like?

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[16] Sims, *The Trailer Home*, vii.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

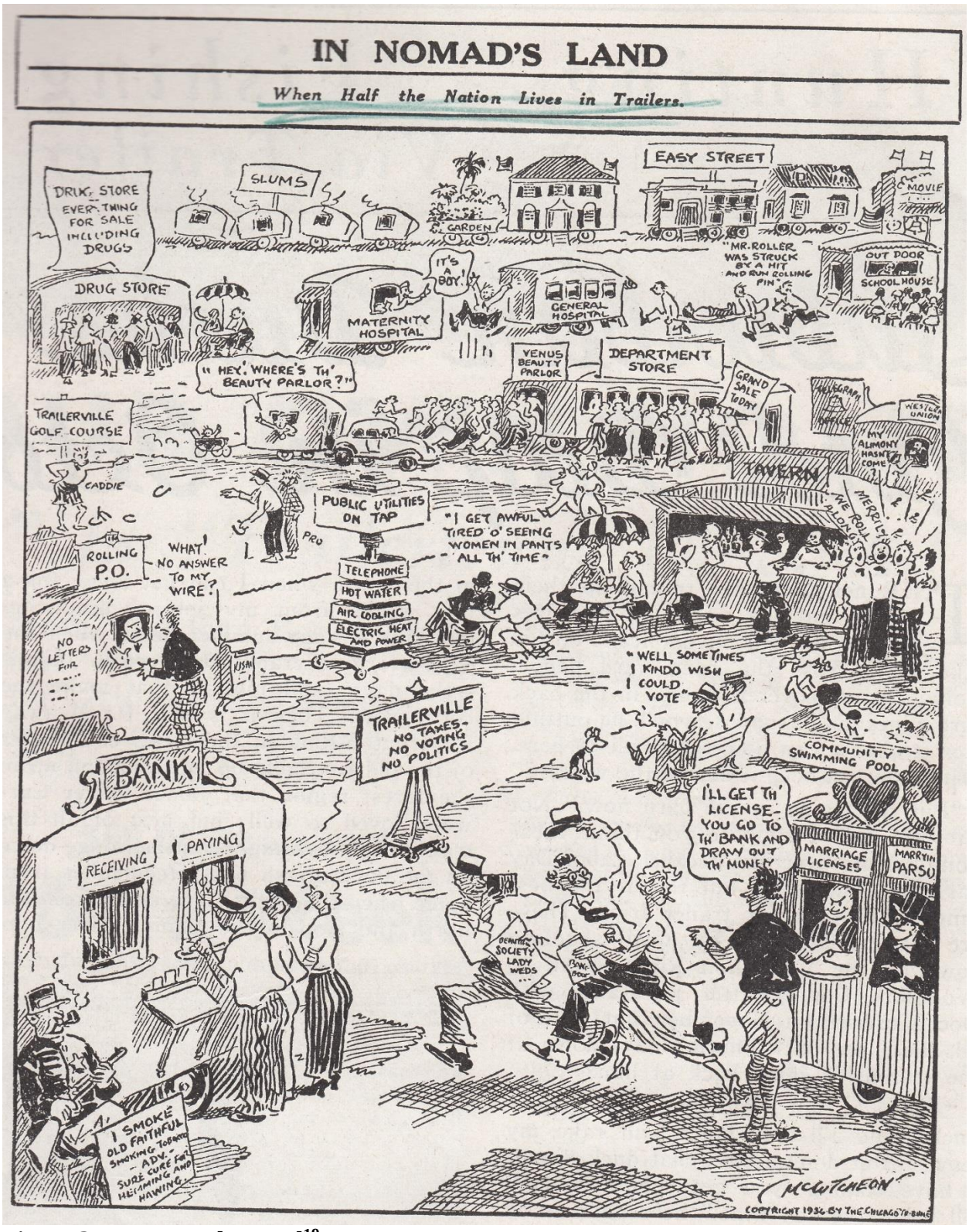

Figure 34: In Nomad's Land[19]

A conception of a mobile society, like Babson's, might have best been illustrated in a 1936 cartoon, "In Nomad's Land." The cartoon envisions an American society in which half of the country has moved into trailers. In the picture, the major municipal and business structures of the town were trailers. The most interesting aspect of the picture is how it shows the serious, practical flaws of a mobile city. One car and trailer arriving has an occupant inquiring "Hey, where's the beauty parlor?" Although seemingly innocuous, the question points to the complete confusion that a mobile city would have caused. If important businesses all were housed in trailers and constantly on the move, they would be extremely difficult to locate. Alternatively, if these businesses did not move, then building them in trailers would simply be superfluous. On its face, a city made of mobile trailers would certainly have been a novelty, but also would have ended up being any city planner's nightmare and more than a headache for most residents. It is this devious reordering of urban and geographical norms that might have contributed both to the image's appeal to some, and to its humor to others.

Perhaps more troubling is the sign that reads "Trailerville: No Taxes, No Voting, No Politics." The pseudo-anarchistic vision of the mobile city directly conflicted with longstanding conventions of American civic and political life. How could such a town function in an American system, where residence equals representation? What kind of sense of community could be built around such transience? One man sitting near the tavern on a bench brought home the point when he commented, "well, sometimes I kindo [sic] wish I could vote." "In Nomad's Land" also ironically suggested the developing idea of a trailer slum. In the rear of the image away from the activity of the business and municipal trailers, there appears a series of four shabby looking trailers standing idle without any automobile. These static trailers seem to

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[19] Chicago Tribune, "In Nomad's Land," *Trailer Travel*, October 1936, 29.

foreshadow the negative conception of a "trailer park" present in modern society. "In Nomad's Land" represented a mobile city taken to its reductio ad absurdum extreme. The modern conception of a city and the physical mobility of a trailer society remains difficult if not impossible to reconcile.

However, taking the image of "Trailerville" too literally may not be the point, as its fictional nature was not marred by the abrasive reality of actual implementation. Instead, a trailer owner might have felt a figurative connection to the spirit of "Trailerville" without actually living it, and in that perception perhaps lies its appeal. As scholar James Scott observed, fixing people into neat and visually orderly places on a map make society more legible to the state. Scott suggests mobile societies of the past, such as "nomad and pastoralists, hunter-gatherers, Gypsies, vagrants, homeless people, itinerants, runaway slaves, and serfs," are difficult groups for states to control and "have always been a thorn in the side of states."[20] It is hard to categorize those living in trailers much differently. The rather haphazard nature of "Trailerville" would have certainly been anathema to the high modernist architects and city planners of this era, like Le Corbusier. Scott describes Le Corbusier as working on "inventing the ideal industrial city, in which the 'general truths' behind the machine age would be expressed with graphic simplicity."[21] Therefore, the entity of "Trailerville" is preposterous and jarring to both contemporary and modern observers, mostly because it forgoes the norms of legibility that modern society and government take for granted. By making one's domestic association with a given place transitory, or at least reserving one's ability to vote with one's feet (or wheels in this case), the appeal of living in a mobile trailer becomes a clearer outlet for dissent or resistance.

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[20] James Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 1.
[21] Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 106.

Babson's diatribe about the loss of control in static society is not as far off the mark as it may seem, as many might try to circumvent legibility to maintain an increased state of autonomy and freedom. Although widespread societies like "Trailerville" have not come to pass, the ownership of a trailer for leisure or living can at least give a taste or hope of an escape from static, legible society and a chance to partake in a guileful reordering of the demands of their more traditional static environment.

The common chorus of generally positive futurist visions for a mobile society demonstrated that there was a level of traction for these ideas in the 1930s (including a great deal of ambiguity in the difference between part-time touring and full time mobile living). This optimistic view of people travelling and living in trailers raises the question of why, at this point in American history, did mobile housing seem to some to be a true challenger to American's primordial predilection for fixed and conventional housing stock built on private property? At least three factors contributed to the public's willingness to contemplate these futurists' predictions. First, the association of trailer technology with automobile technology was unambiguous, which meant that the automobile's image as a fresh new technology ripe with its own set of boosterish promoters, fast paced innovation, and cultural association with modernity could rub off on its more domestic brethren. Second, the 1930s era represented a near peak for technological futurism with regard to how the house of the future might look, which meant that envisioning a mobile future seemed reasonable as well. The last is that for the working families displaced by the Great Depression, it was not unreasonable to want to invest in owning a mobile home geographically unbound from the direct or indirect influence of factory owners, plutocrats, and the whims of Wall Street financiers.

It is hard to imagine any technology that was more transformative than the automobile in the first half of the 20th century, in the United States. Perhaps one could claim that electrification or aviation rivaled the car, but the impact of the adoption of the automobile was nonetheless profound, quick to take effect, and virtually permanent, especially as American culture lurched towards higher rates of mass automobility. Recreational automobility with trailers came about as a product of this shift toward mass use, as discussed previously. So, it is not hard to see that the futurism surrounding the automobile would have influenced how society viewed the automobile trailer. In addition, if one was born into a place dominated by horses and locomotives, only to see those replaced within a few decades by Model Ts and Chevrolets, it was not hard to imagine that further automotive advancement would move beyond mere transportation and into other realms, including the housing system.

Questions were already being asked by many about whether wood, stone, and brick structures were really all that housing could be in the United States. Many argued that design norms in the housing market might give way to new materials, production techniques, and designs that would mark a new "house of tomorrow." Historian Brian Horrigan argues that the phrase "house of tomorrow" held real and serious meaning during the period between the late 1920s and World War II. During that era, he explains, "At world's fairs and expositions, in department stores, and in home magazines, Americans witnessed an apparently endless parade of predictions about the shape of homes to come."[22] In this atmosphere, the trailer would also be considered a contender for the future in a rather open ended competition to become the "house of tomorrow."

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[22] Brian Horrigan, "The Home of Tomorrow, 1927-1945," *Imagining Tomorrow: History, Technology, and the American Future* ed. Joseph Corn (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), 137.

Among the futurists' visions for housing, often the only thing that all parties could agree on was that there would indeed be a "house of the future." But each had substantially different ideas of what shape that house might take. The late 1920s and 1930s were full of examples of futurism in housing. For example, Buckminster Fuller envisioned a mass produced Dymaxion House that would be built of metals, glass, and plastic with a central mast-like anchor supporting the unit on wires. Others, like Richard Neutra, preferred modernist forms and materials with handcrafted perfection that clearly sacrificed scalability as in his Lovell House. Others, like General Housing, produced homes with rather unconventional steel walls through a production method using parts suppliers and assembly lines just like the auto industry. In the end the search for the "home of tomorrow" left many Americans wanting both a futurist mansion following the forms of modernist architecture and at the same time a mass-produced unit that was affordable for the everyman. Catering to both of these desires at once did not necessarily make for a sound business model.[23] Horrigan suggests this combination "had great potential appeal in Depression America, the one offering escape into a voluptuous Hollywood future and the other promising industrial recovery and universal homeownership."[24] In the end these two models for a "home of tomorrow" were perhaps more different than they were alike, but Horrigan sees commonalities in that "they shared an ideological foundation in American technological utopianism, the two images existed in uneasy tension."[25] This utopianism found deep common ground among those, like Babson, who predicted a mobile housing future.

Displacement from one's job or farm was not universal, but it was an all-too-common experience for many in the depths of the Great Depression. Displacement and dislocation meant

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[23] Horrigan, "The Home of Tomorrow," 137-160.
[24] Ibid., 145.
[25] Ibid.

the loss of one's home, as of course you could not take it with you from place to place. This meant not just a profound loss of income and livelihood, but also the reliance on friends, family, cars, or camping to replace one's lost or geographically unsuited housing. A trailer thus could provide a sense of security to those who were afraid of transitory employment or those looking to embrace seasonal (such as farm labor) or non-static (such as construction) occupations.

An overall shortage of traditional housing stock compounded the problem experienced by Americans moving to find new economic opportunities. As Horrigan summarized the situation, "Though housing construction boomed to unprecedented levels in the 1920s, the demand far exceeded the supply, and this frustrating disparity only deepened with the coming of the Depression and the war."[26] Housing shortages remained endemic to the American market until the phenomenon of large scale suburban building reoriented America's housing stock. In the meantime, this shortage led many Americans to consider trailer alternatives, as consumers would be more openminded to product substitution.

The Mythological Origins of the RV

Some contemporary RV enthusiasts seek to trace the roots of their pastime back to pre-modern, frontier era origins. Despite the superficially attractive and often heavily nostalgic connections, the RV's roots do not date back to the pre-modern era. The RV was decidedly a product of the modern age, but it is worth considering these origin myths not simply to dispel them, but also to consider why they are attractive to many modern RVers.

Nash devoted a large section of his book to retracing the development of the travel trailer all the way back to the Native Americas and a type of cart contraption called a "travois."[27] It is

[26] Horrigan, "The Home of Tomorrow," 138.
[27] Nash, *Trailers Ahoy!*, 15-58.

hard to find much similarity between these and the travel trailers of the 1930s (much less the modern mobile McMansions of today), because, as with all traditional nomadic lifestyles, creative means of storage and transportation were keys to survival rather than simply reflections of recreational whims. More typically, Nash and others have connected the trailer's origins back to the American Frontier. Ray Kuns believed that "the story of the development of America is one of the travel of people and the transportation of their household effects with them." He expands on this, stating that "the axe and the saw, the blacksmith's forge, the Conestoga wagon, the ox team—these, coupled with the spirt of adventure and the desire to be in new places, led to the rapid and almost miraculous development of America."[28] Kuns later goes further, suggesting that somehow the Contestoga wagon played a "part in the eventual development of the trailer coach of the present day."[29] This idea that the use of an RV in the form of a trailer was similar to the conquest of the North American continent, or the long separate progeny of Manifest Destiny, reflects a clear attempt to mythologize the travel trailer in a way that would make Fredrick Jackson Turner proud. But this notion is far more myth than fact.

Additionally, watercraft analogies are less useful than one might think. Despite perhaps serving similar recreational roles, the travel trailer was largely uninfluenced by pleasure boat or yacht construction. Wally Byam, for example, stated unequivocally that "strange as it may seem, we were unable to adopt a single design feature from boats. We found boat manufacturers were limited by the designs of their hulls and put whatever living comfort they could get into them, but never designed a boat for comfort first."[30] Thus, despite similar space limitations, boats and trailers did not have common technological solutions in terms of adapting space for living.

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[28] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 2.
[29] Ibid., 21.
[30] Byam, *Fifth Avenue on Wheel*, loc 158.

Therefore, boats provided little in the way of equipment or design ideas for early trailer manufacturers. Somewhat paradoxically, this has not stopped Wally Byam's Airstream Company from naming its largest model the "Land Yacht." The real history of the RV points to the automotive origins of the technology, but this has not stopped enthusiasts (then or now) from nostalgically invoking earlier eras or other technological links.

Trailers for Living or Trailers for Travel?

In response to the use of trailers as permanent cheap housing, purists within the travel trailer faction felt that manufactured mobile homes should not be considered part of the recreational-vehicle community, because these housing units were virtually immobile and thus did not conform to their definition of a recreational vehicle.[31] Airstream founder Wally Byam, the most out-spoken opponent of manufactured mobile homes as recreational vehicles, felt they detracted from travel trailers:

> "Jerry" builders found that a trailer which did not have to be subjected to the rigors of the open road could be built very cheaply, actually and truthfully "cracker boxes" with wheels under them. Most of them were too big and too flimsy to tow very far behind a car. And it would take a mighty big car to tow them. They were actually submarginal housing built without the restrictions of the building codes. They were a disgrace to the industry.[32]

Byam's description of early mobile home "trailers" demonstrated this growing divide between mobile homes and true travel trailers. He continued:

> And new eyesores began to pop up on the outskirts of American towns and cities, "trailer camps" not meant for trailer travelers and vacationists, but for permanent occupancy. And many of them were so disreputable and junk that trailers began to get a black eye. The high esteem that they had gained by their design was lost in the squalor of their filthy surroundings.[33]

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[31] From the perspective of modern American culture, Wally Byam's definition of a travel trailer fits much closer with what society and this dissertation defines as a recreational vehicle.
[32] Byam, *Fifth Avenue on Wheel*, 2-3.
[33] Ibid.

It took some time before the two products would be truly distinct from the viewpoint of laws and public image. Byam then confirmed that he felt himself as an enforcer for proper trailering as "there were still some hardy manufactures who did not forget what trailers were invented for in the first place."[34] Airstream and other likeminded companies effectively maintained travel trailer orthodoxy and "continued to cater to that exclusive group of rugged, individualistic Americans who wished to travel luxuriously, comfortably and independently on wheels."[35] Byam's recollections, penned between 1949-1953, clearly demonstrated that he conceived of his products as something special and separate from housing trailers. He concluded that "the creed of [Airstream] is never to let a foundation be built under one and never let the wheels stop turning for more than a few months at a time." Airstreams thus were more than boxes on wheels, but a collective call to take to the road. Byam would go on to successfully market this brand ideology to the American public in the postwar era through spectacular and exotic trailer adventures.

Like Byam, the Tin Can Tourists also associated themselves with the travel trailer and did not look to incorporate the mobile home into their group's focus. Although the Tin Can Tourists' lifestyle likely did fall somewhere in between the casual trailer vacationers and the permanent mobile home dweller, they wished to live in their trailers on a semi-permanent to permanent basis, but never wanted to live in rundown trailer parks or in totally immobilized trailers. Their yearly meetings in both Florida and the North (often Michigan) kept them constantly touring and moving in proper travel trailers. A recreational vehicle, therefore, was intended to be constantly travelling. Motion was the key to its appeal.

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[34] Byam, *Fifth Avenue on Wheels*, loc 166
[35] Ibid.

The reason that the recreational vehicle became such an important part of American society was that it temporarily allowed someone to escape to this mobile lifestyle, without truly upending one's life. One could have a traditional job, community life, and political representation by living in a fixed location for most of the year, but then have the flexibility to go on trips in a travel trailer that would let them take part in the fantasy of mobile life. As even the newly minted trailer traveler and openly skeptical Howard Vincent O'Brien admitted, "the trailer is here to stay and it will make many changes in our way of life."[36] He believed that its most consequential promise was of extending the vacationing opportunities of people living in cities. "No longer will the city dweller be content with short week-end trips in a crowded countryside," he explained. "People of small means will find it possible to take inexpensive vacations far from home."[37] O'Brien correctly predicted that this new form of vacation travel had a great deal of potential in American society.

Rather than reshaping cities as the futurists had suggested, travel trailers reshaped vacation and travel. This new form of travel based on the recreational vehicle as mobile accommodations created a clear alternative to roadside motor courts and motels. Although the trailer failed to create new mobile cities, the technology profoundly changed American tourism and travel in the 1930s. It was the recreational vehicle that would inspire enthusiast groups like the Tin Can Tourists to make their traveling activities an increasingly larger part of their lives. The travel trailer of the 1930s was the first practical manufactured recreational vehicle that would have mass-market appeal. Although the Second World War would limit both the industry and the enthusiasts as resources went to the wartime economy, the recreational vehicle would

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[36] O'Brien, *Folding Bedouins*, 105.
[37] Ibid.

increase in popularity after the war in a new era of prosperity. It also was likely helped by returning veterans wishing to continue seeing the world and their country after getting a taste for travel during their participation in the various overseas theaters of the war.

The period between 1930 and American's entry into World War II had proved revolutionary for the future of American tourism and travel. Enthusiasts like the Tin Can Tourists finally saw a technological solution to their travelling needs become readily available through mass-production, which made taking part in the activities of recreational automobility increasingly obtainable and practical. Despite some difficult economic times, a group of entrepreneurs entered into a new manufacturing businesses and directly participated in the creation of the first mass-market for recreation vehicles. Finally, the ideological components of the recreational vehicle's appeal would come together in the trailer literature, which would enshrine freedom, thrift, and accessible leisure as the central tenets of the recreational vehicle creed. By the end of these pivotal years, the foundation for the recreational vehicle as a cultural institution was assured.

Interpretive Flexibility and the Contested Usefulness of Trailers

The debate over trailer technology's utility for multiple applications connects well with the concept of interpretive flexibility, which was first made relevant to the history of technology by the Social Construction of Technology approach.[38] Although this project is most interested in recreational vehicles, its useful to consider the terminological uncertainty surrounding the early phases of trailer technology. The case of the trailer in this era should be understood in terms of the usefulness of the technology being contested, or what Uli Myer and Ingo Schulz-Schaeffer

[38] Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker, "The Social Construction of Facts and Artifacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other," *The Social Construction of Technological Systems* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987), 17-50.

term "the regress of usefulness." This sort of interpretive flexibility "occurs when there are different possible answers to the question whether a technological artefact with its particular functional features will be useful and how, for whom and, in which context this will or will not be the case."[39] The trailer before World War II seems to precisely fit into this sort of situation where the utility of the technology remained ambiguous. The trailer's features and usefulness were flexible and its usage was largely undefined (regardless of manufacturers' wishes). One user might purchase himself/herself a trailer and permanently park it on a piece of property, which would be a role not unlike a permanent dwelling. Another user might use it to vacation a few weeks or a few months of the year in Florida. And yet another user (let us say a Tin Can Tourist) could purchase that trailer to live and travel in all year round. Exactly what the trailer was useful for could be largely interpreted by the users themselves.

There is no reason to think that any one of these users was "right" or "wrong" in how they interpreted the trailer's usefulness, nor was there much reason for the average user at the time to contest these different usages. Myer and Schulz-Schaeffer also point out that earlier conceptions of a technology's interpretive flexibility do not address the fact that there is no need for an adversarial dispute or forced closure for different usages. They argue this results from the fact that there is no underlying truth being debated (as in the case of science). They conclude, "In principle, there is no reason why users should agree on what purposes a technological artefact shall serve and no reason why alternative technological solutions serving the same purpose should not be deployed… And while scientific controversies are aimed at closing the debate sooner or later, closure is not a necessary feature of debates concerning different meanings of

[39] Uli Meyer and Ingo Schulz-Schaeffer, "Three Forms of Interpretive Flexibility," *Science, Technology & Innovation Studies,* Special Issue 1 (2006), 29-30.

technological artefacts."[40] The trailer technology itself (and the early RV by extension) had no intrinsic reason for closure related to usage. Wally Byam notwithstanding, this happy state of flexibility could be taken as a positive feature for the early trailer. The contested usefulness of the trailer, then, explains why it would not be until decades later that the industry would even feel the need to differentiate RVs from manufactured housing. This is not to say all interpretations of the trailer by futurists or users were accurate (Babson was clearly wrong in the long run), but to individual users there was not necessarily an incorrect conception of a trailer's utility. Even today, the adaptability of the recreational vehicle or RV-like vehicles leaves a certain amount of interpretive flexibility for users (such as those discussed in the epilogue).

Pragmatism and Wartime Housing

Even before World War II, government attempts to regulate trailers began to put the brakes on the grand schemes of futurists and trailer boosters. Early on, there were no fixed rules for how to go about regulating them or even what code was applicable to mobile accommodations like a trailer. For example, Omar Suttles recalled that back in 1929 "the first challenge [for their trailer] Ruth and I met was at the government level. And it was the motor vehicle department."[41] Suttles recalled building his first trailer to meet every possible requirement that he could anticipate in registering an automotive trailer, but since it was new territory he could not be certain of the standard by which he would be measured. He continued, "With pride mixed with trepidation, I pulled up to the California Motor Vehicle Department, our trailer tagging behind Betsy, the 1929 Chrysler. Believe me, I parked as close to the office as I could to make sure no one would miss us."[42] Suttles was correct and there was no missing his

[40] Meyer, "Three Forms," 31.
[41] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1
[42] Ibid.

creation at the office with both the officer in charge and a crowd of onlookers surrounding the creation. He then described the confrontation at the office: "the officer tried not to look impressed as we pushed our way past the people. 'What is it' he demanded. I couldn't answer. All I could see was a denial of permission to put our dream on the road. Gone were the six months of planning and work, the money, the vacation plans… and Ruth, who had to be convinced in the beginning, would realize I had built a freak that would go nowhere. Perhaps it would become an oddity, Suttles Folly."[43] Suttles was aware that automotive regulations could impact his ability to use his trailer on the roads and effectively end his trailer camping dreams.

Fortunately for Suttles, the officer turned out to be much more openminded about his creation than his initial impression let on. After a brief test drive—which included a surpise test of the brakes—the officer agreed with Suttles that they could register it in the yet-to-be-used category of "home-built trailer."[44] Suttles' first trailer was now street legal, but it would not be long until more formal regulations were implemented in many states. Interestingly, according to Suttles, the designation "house trailer" was used to "simply differentiate them from utility trailers" and from "house cars."[45]

By the time Ray Kuns wrote the second edition of *Trailer Engineering* in 1937, there were laws on the books in most states regulating travel trailers, at least in terms of their maximum size. Most of these regulations did not distinguish travel trailers from commercial trailers, but Kuns noted that "most states are considering modification to apply [to travel trailers]." [46] Whether truly commercial or not, travel trailers were now a regulated technology in

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[43] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ray F. Kuns, *Trailer Engineering* 2nd Ed. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Ray F. Kuns, 1937), 45.

the eyes of most state governments. The vast majority limited trailers to eight feet in width, but varied greatly in terms of height and length requirements. Many required rear lighting or provided varying speed limits for towed trailers. Fewer required breaks and/or weight limits for trailers, and only a select few such as Alabama required no passengers riding in the trailer while on the road. Only Oklahoma and Oregon had no applicable regulations to report.[47] Although the list demonstrates that states had not legislatively caught up with the travel trailer, it was clear that the technology was not entering a regulatory tabula rasa, but instead was being fit to different governments' preexisting interpretations about highway travel and safety. It seems, then, that the regulatory fogginess on the subject sometimes worked in the trailer's favor and other times to its detriment. This made manufacturer associations all the more important as they could attempt to clearly distinguish their product from both commercial trailers and permanent housing.

Beyond regulation, World War II dampened the travel trailer market as raw materials were devoted to the war effort. The trailers that were being built were not available to the public. The war therefore made a significant impact on enthusiast groups. For example, the Tin Can Tourists suspended meetings between 1942 and 1946 and kept the same officers for the duration of America's involvement in the war. Omar Suttles recalled that "when the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor, the government said, 'No more trailers,' and stopped us in our tracks."[48] The industry sent several manufacturers' representatives to Washington to plead their case, but were rebuffed and told there would be no allocations of resources for travel trailers. [49]

The legacy of World War II was mixed for the trailer industry. Wally Byam explained that trailers constructed during World War II were built for the war effort and did keep some

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[47] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 45-46.
[48] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1
[49] Ibid.

parts of the industry going. “Under the pressure of the wartime emergency, thousands of construction workers and military personnel, shifted from one military base or construction center to another, were quartered in houses on wheels.”[50] The United States government purchased at least 35,000 trailers during the war. These trailers were of various levels of quality with many falling well below the quality of the pre-war travel trailers.[51]

Numerous companies had to shift their production towards war-friendly production. One interesting example of this changeover is the Covered Wagon Company. Although flying high and succeeding in the early part of the trailer boom, the company was in dire straits by the time World War II enveloped the nation. The company’s new wartime production lines were significantly different than its prewar tourist trailers. Their first product was a “wooden cargo [body]” that would be placed on Army trucks and featured “a canvas top and slat seats,” which was reminiscent of house car body that had been oversized and militarized. They also built a “sectional housing” product that served as temporary housing for the Tennessee Valley Authority’s construction of the Fontana Dam. These TVA housing units in many ways resembled the manufactured housing that would become more common after the war.[52]

Such novel and sometimes innovative production changes were not limited to desperate pre-war players like Covered Wagon Company. Palace Corporation had also grown from the 1930s trailer boom. During America’s involvement in the war, the company focused on gaining government business. They were given a contract to produce a folding trailer. “The sides folded to an eight foot width for highway movement. They were opened at the site to nineteen feet six

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[50] Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad*, 21.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Edwards, Homes, 126.

inches width and eighteen to twenty two feet in length depending on the model."[53] They were fully equipped as small homes. Apparently, some of these wartime models remained in secondary uses across the country until as late as the 1970s. Palace's folding models continued to be sold after the war and the company remained in business until the 1960s.[54]

The case of the Vagabond Coach Company suggested how many of the trailer companies geared up for wartime production. They, like many others, found that they only viable purchaser of their products was the United States government, which bought units for the purpose of expanding housing for workers in key industries vital to the war effort. Although the first models sold to the government followed the standard designs of prewartime products, Vagabond later switched over to a unified wartime design that had been agreed on by several other manufacturers to meet the government's requests. It was known as the "committee trailer" and became the standard design for several contractors for the remainder of the war.[55]

Omar Suttles' firm, Airfloat, was able to maintain some business by working cooperatively with the local and federal government to meet housing needs. Airfloat was not alone in fulfilling these contracts as other manufacturers also coordinated their factories' outputs to produce for these government contacts. In one instance, the firms were instructed to produce and set up 100 units near San Diego for housing, initially paid for by the US Farm Security Administration. These units were then rented at the rate of one dollar a day. Suttles recalled these early cooperative projects led to other business and gave Airfloat access to bidding on later Congressional appropriations for trailers. The end result was over 50,000 units being purchased

[53] Edwards, Homes, 128.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., 129.

by the government from Airfloat and other firms and the units being used by nearly 100,000 different families across the duration of the war.[56]

World War II was a significant interruption to the trailer industry, as it adapted to the demands of working as a government contractor. It marked a turning point for the trailer and the recreational vehicle by at least temporality subduing the previous decade's outburst of enthusiasm for the trailer as a society changing technology with the potential to solve the housing and social problems of the Great Depression. Wartime production required pragmatism and not highflying futurism. It also made an impression on manufacturers who realized that designing trailers for wartime housing was significantly different than designing for recreational automobility. Although many firms would return to their travel trailer roots after the war, some surely realized their housing oriented wartime models might be in demand even in the postwar period as housing rather than vacation alternatives. Finally, the wartime experience living in temporary housing trailers would be some people's first experience interacting with trailer technology. Undoubtedly some found their stay in these wartime trailers unpleasant, and some manufacturers like Wally Byam would remain critical of these types of these types of trailers. However, for many the experience suggested the potential of a trailer and even encouraged many to look into buying a trailer after the war.

[56] Scrapbook in Omar Suttles Collection UCLA Special Collections, Box 1

CHAPTER FIVE: THE GOLDEN AGE OF TRAILERS, RETIRING ON THE ROAD, TECHNOLOGICAL DIVERSIFICATION, AND THE OIL CRISIS

The end of World War II changed the trailer market forever, and trailer manufacturing quickly gained ground as American families turned to the travel trailers that the Tin Can Tourists had adopted over a decade before. This adoption of recreational automobility by the public was mostly due to the conveniences added to the travel trailer since the more rudimentary autocamping era. Gone were the days of setting up and unpacking camping equipment, as the travel trailer now offered a self-contained camping experience that could be easily attached to most of the vehicles the family used for utilitarian transportation and removed when not needed. Gone also were the days when anyone wanting a trailer had to rely on their own mechanical skills to build their own one-off units in their home shops or garages. In this new era of mass-manufactured trailers built for both comfort and convenient travel, trailers could effectively compete with the still developing early motels and motor court networks that had previously contributed to the demise of less competitive forms of autocamping. The surge in production of trailers in 1947 to 76,372 (nearly seven times the number in 1939) demonstrates that mainstream Americans had began to adopt the trailer en masse.[1]

The 1930s trailer revolution therefore opened the door for recreational vehicles to become a mainstream avenue for Americans interested in recreational automobility. Travel trailers were a potent family vacation machine that matched the auto industry's contemporary

[1] See figure 35.

push for Americans to buy larger family cars suited for their suburban lives. In many ways, the postwar travel trailer was stripped of its potential status as a socially revolutionary force. Instead, it was remade and reimagined to conform to the contours of the time. It offered a means to extend the nuclear family's reach, that is, instead of threatening the ascendance of suburbia.

For enthusiasts like the Tin Can Tourists, these new manufactured recreational vehicles were so comfortable that many chose to live in their trailers year-round as a sustainable and practical way of life. One Tin Can Tourist couple, Charlie and Esther Treffert, preferred their trailer to their home just "like 73% of all trailerites."[2] Tin Can Tourists, equipped with the latest RV technology, could now successfully live on the road indefinitely, and in comfort almost if not equal to that of static homes. This allowed them to truly embrace their longstanding ideal of long-term recreational automobility. The ranks of the Tin Can Tourists continued to expand through the end of the 1930s and into the 1940s. By 1948 the group's membership had reached 80,000 formal members traveling the country in trailers.[3]

By the end of the 1950s the RV had achieved mainstream acceptability as a recreation and vacation option, for a substantial segment of Americans could afford the price of admission. The RV would reach this high level of acceptance at most socioeconomic levels, but its sister technology, manufactured housing, would struggle move beyond its market niche as a low-cost alternative to site built homes for rural and/or low-income communities. Their respective technologies thus diverged, and the manufacturers of RVs and manufactured housing grew into two separate industries by the early 1960s.

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[2] Kobler, "People in Trailers," 18.
[3] John Kobler, "People in Trailers: They find that life on wheels can be beautiful. If the scenery palls, they git," *Life*, December 13th, 1948, 18.

The Trailer Boom, Wally Byam's Airstream, and Trailer Divergence

After the disruptions of World War II worked through the American economy and life, the trailer began a sustained period of growth. Unlike the trailer revolution discussed previously, the trailer boom represented the wider adoption of the technology based on the conventions and ideas of the interwar founding. Innovation and improvement certainly existed, but the industry had grown steadily based on the now standardized travel trailer format. The postwar era also saw the final and complete divergence of the trailer industry into two parts, one centered on travel trailers (the RV Industry) that would eventually become the more diverse RV industry, and the other focusing on static housing substitution (manufactured housing). Although these two industries share common roots, design choices based on the technical demands from users would lead to a complete divergence.

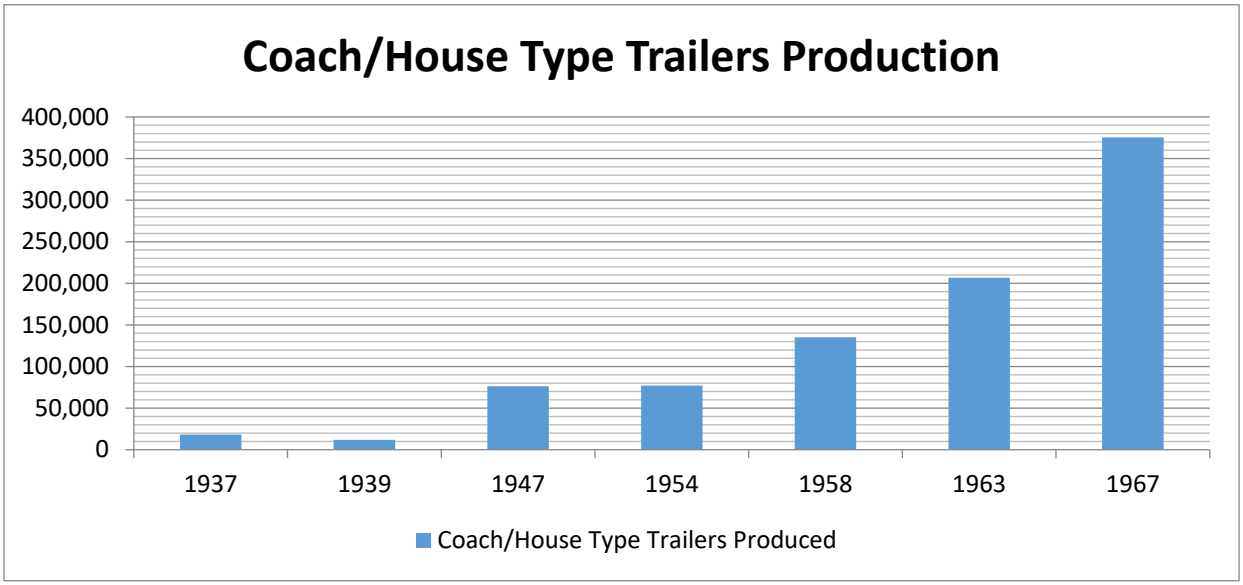

Figure 35: Coach/House Type Trailers Production[4]

[4] This graph has been compiled from multiple United States Census sources:
Census of Manufactures 1939, (*Washington, D.C.:* U.S. Dept. of Commerce 1939), *1947*, *1954*, *1958*, *1963*, *1967*.

Looking at the graph of trailer coach/house type trailer production above, one can see that the volume of trailers was greatly increased in the postwar period. This graph demonstrates the success of the products designed in the 1930s and now available for sale in a better economy to a more consumer driven population .In this case, its not entirely possible to discern the usage of individual trailers, as both coach and house type trailers are grouped together with end users determining usage, but it is clear that both traveling and living in trailers grew in a retuned civilian economy. For the purposes of this chapter, the focus will be on the trailer manufacturer Airstream, which used this boom to further popularize trailer travel within the context of a strong brand identity and with the guidance of its founder Wally Byam. The story of how manufactured housing became absolutely distinct from recreational vehicles will be discussed after reviewing this recreation oriented manufacturer story.

Omar Suttles's Airfloat, as well as other companies on the west coast and in the Midwest, were undoubtably successful in the postwar trailer boom era, but it was the masterful marketing and publicity stunts of Wally Byam that made his brand, Airstream, a true American icon. Byam's case shows how marketing a recreational vehicle lifestyle and culture was a key to the success of recreational vehicle companies in the postwar era. Byam's second book, *Trailer Travel Here & Abroad*, represents a clearly distilled manifesto of his views on trailer travel that permeated his company's designs and marketing. In the opening of the book he carefully laid out why he believed the trailer was the top choice for a large part of the traveling public: "Traveling by trailer is, in my opinion, the best way to see the world – or any part of it. Of course, I'm prejudiced. I manufacture travel trailers. But I can say, and prove, that my love for trailer travel preceded my interest in manufacturing trailers, and not the other way around."[5] Furthermore,

[5] Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad*, loc 2134

Byam explained that "I wouldn't spend a day in the factory if I could be out on the road with my own outfit; actually, I manage to do this six months out of the year, sometimes more. In this book, I should like to explain, not only why I feel that way, but why so many thousands of other Americans are beginning to share this view."[6] In Byam's view, trailer travelers (in particular his Airstreams) were developing into an ideal form of travel with a distinct culture, values, and outlook. This means that he didn't necessarily think everyone should buy an Airstream and go traveling—after all, if people did there would be "so many trailers on the road nobody could go anywhere." Instead, it should always remain "the avocation of a comparative few: people with some little means, old or young, with or without families, who want to see and experience more of the world in the most comfortable and independent way possible."[7] Byam intentionally targeted his cadre of adventurous people for his trailer brand.

Byam contended that his form of recreational automobility offered users of Airstreams four types of freedom. These "four freedoms" are not attainable through any other means of travel because "traveling by trailer is qualitatively different from traveling by plane, train, or even car."[8] The concept of four freedoms for trailering undoubtedly aimed to echo Franklin Delano Roosevelt's four freedoms expressed in 1941, which aim to be universally applicable across the globe.[9] Just as Roosevelt's were ideals for all the citizens of the world, Byam's were ideals for all trailer travelers.

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[6] Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad*, loc 2134
[7] Ibid., loc 2153
[8] Ibid.
[9] "Four Freedoms," *Britannica Online*, accessed February 22nd, 2017, https://www.britannica.com/event/Four-Freedoms. Roosevelt four freedoms included the freedom of speech, the freedom of worship, the freedom from want, and the freedom from fear.

Byam's first freedom was the "freedom from arrangements" that related to freeing one of logistical concerns and hassles related to more regimented forms of travel. Instead of worrying about making countless reservations or planning trips down to an exact schedule, one could travel in confidence with mobile accommodations available for use at any time and in virtually any place. One was also free to pick and choose what kind of roadside accommodations, restaurants, and services one wants patronize because one never has to settle with the security of a trailer's shelter and stores of food. In addition, once a trailer is packed one never had to worry about suitcases again as new clothes are readily available in a closet.[10] Wally Byam's first freedom, then, has always been an advantage of mobile accommodations: with a trailer, one is never really far from home.

In Byam's view, the appeal of travel trailers was not limited to any one age group, as he revealed in his second freedom of trailering, the "freedom from the problems of age." He argued that trailering had the greatest potential benefits for old people and young people. Byam argued that deterioration at old age is mostly the cause of lacking adequate stimulation as "out of [these] boredoms [of retirement] ailments are born," but he insists that trailer travel is the perfect cure for boredom.[11] He went onto suggest that traveling by trailer is less tiresome and requires less exertion than other forms of travel, which makes it ideal for seniors. He also pointed out that trailering often opens up opportunities to meet similarly situated individuals, which fosters a sense of companionship. Byam did not believe that his products are just well suited for the retired, but families with children as well. He contended, "And what about children? Dozens of Caravanners have told me that the vacations they took in their trailer were the best they ever had

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[10] Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad*, 2153-2180.
[11] Ibid., loc 2180

because it was so much easier to take care of and amuse their children."[12] He found that this is because the trailer accommodations allow more normalized schedules, simplified childcare, better access to entertaining diversions, and better management of "the astonishing amount of paraphernalia you have to carry when you travel with kids."[13] Byam thus had an inclusive view on trailering, but seemed to know his market well. He was well aware of those who chose to retire on the road, such as the Tin Can Tourists discussed later, as well as the growing demand for recreational vehicles that could be readily used for vacations with the typical nuclear family.

Byam's third freedom hit at the idea of achieving an authentic travel experience free from the distorted views created by other modes of travel and without the phoniness of traditional tourism. He called this the "freedom to know" in that "average tourists really never have an opportunity to get to know a country or its people very well. But if you really want to understand a country, go trailering through it."[14] He pointed out that travel trailers allow one to experience parts of a country that are typically missed by air travel, what is often referred to today as "fly over country." This situation he described represents the gist of his argument:

> Instead of flying over beautiful farmlands in a DC-4, you can pull through a farm gate and get permission from the farmer to park there all night. More often than not, you will be invited to supper, or you invitation to dine in the trailer will be accepted, and you will find yourself talking far into the night. For one night, at least, you are their neighbor and they are yours. Even if you don't speak French, Italian or German, or whatever the language may be, you will find that a few words, smiles and signs go very far. [15]

Basically, Byam argued that those traveling in recreational vehicles have better access to authentic interactions with the local population that are not filtered or mitigated by the tourist

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[12] Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad*, loc 2231
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., loc 2256.

economy or staged situations. He clearly saw his market in those looking to not just travel and see a few key destinations, but those interested in the overall journey as the primary diversion.

The final freedom was far less well defined as a distinct notion because its really just a composite of his other three, the "freedom for fun." Here Byam went in for the close to sell his ideas about trailer travel. The idea behind this "freedom for fun" was that trailer traveling allows one to experience travel carefree and to "just plain begin to relax and enjoy life to the full."[16] He even claimed that the effects of the trailer-based "freedom for fun" were manifested in those who experience it:

> I wish I had 'before and after' pictures of them. They arrive uncertain and uneasy, with a vague lusterless look in their eyes… Well you should see these people afterward… what a transformation! You hardly recognize them as the same people. They're tanned and interested in life, walk with a springy step, have a whole new batch of friends, and have taken a whole new lease on life. Nine times out of ten, within three years they are shopping for a bigger trailer, as excited as a couple of kids.[17]

Byam pitched trailering as almost a miracle elixir that performs radical transformations of individuals who experience this form of recreational automobility. Byam was obviously trying to sell the reader on the idea of trailering (and on the Airstream brand in particular), but as an enthusiast himself who spent half of the year on the road, living those four freedoms, Byam also genuinely believe these claims. To Byam, then, trailering was both a way of life and an exclusive club that reorients how one looks at the world with purchasing a recreational vehicle as the cost of entry. He surmised that "fun is the freedom to do as you please… and doing as you please means pleasure. This is a pretty good definition of trailer travel."[18]

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[16] Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad*, loc 2256.
[17] Ibid., 2273.
[18] Ibid.

Byam's marketing was not simply limited to the pages of his books, but was also lived out through ambitious worldwide tours with many likeminded companions using his Airstream trailers to cross vast distances. In the early 1950s, he planned trailer outings in the form of the Airstream caravan, which would travel together through a foreign country providing the group with support and camaraderie. His earliest trips took his caravans through Mexico, Canada, and Central America, but he raised the stakes by moving towards more exotic locations in the middle and late 1950s. Much of his book *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad* centered on this trips and his experiences. One of his longer and more exotic caravan trips took place in 1957, a journey called "Africa! Capetown to Cairo." This trip's exploits were discussed not only in Byam's books, but also a forty-five-minute-long promotional documentary film.[19]

The narrator began with an opening synopsis of the caravan journey meant to heighten the mystery and challenge of the Africa trip.

> The fascinating documentation of an unusual adventure shared by thirty six American families. What makes this particular journey so extraordinary is that these one hundred and sixty people wanted more than just a superficial look at Africa. They wanted to become intimately involved with the Dark Continent. This is why they decided to drive from Capetown, South Africa to Cairo.[20]

He emphasized the danger and mystery by referring to Africa by what was even then a mostly archaic term: "the Dark Continent." He also caught the common refrain of Wally Byam's philosophy by mentioning that caravanners wanted to "become intimately involved" with the location they were travelling through. He then proclaimed that his video documentary was true to life: "Today you share both their trials and their triumphs. Everything you are going to see is

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[19] Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad*, loc 6079. and *Africa! Capetown to Cairo*, directed by Dan Reveles (1959, Los Angles: Wally Byam Foundation) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVtA0dyAQBY accessed January 21st, 2017 with digital back up copy in author's possession.
[20] *Africa! Capetown to Cairo* (1959).

true, for this chronology is filmed just as it happened day-by-day."[21] He then went onto to list many of the challenges they faced, such as thick mud in the Congo, blinding sandstorms in the 'Nubian desert,' and the fact that "they suffered from everything from broken hearts to broken axles."[22] He also told the viewer that this trip was even more extensive than originally planned, as "they planned on three months and it took them seven." Ultimately, the trip covered over 12,000 miles. He then explained that the only equipment available to them were trucks with four wheel drive for towing and Airstream travel trailers for shelter. The movie showed that the trip was indeed a great deal of work, as the crew encountered many different types of terrain on their long journey over often poor roads. It certainly was a testament to the durability of Wally Byam's trailers. Although they do meet many Africans, including Haile Selassie of Ethiopia (and his pet lions), one cannot help but feel that many of their interactions were at least to some extent staged and not quite as authentic as Byam suggested in his book.[23] Nonetheless, anyone watching the video would certainly be reassured that their Airstream trailer (given enough finances and time) could go nearly anywhere in the world. This was remarkable advertising that certainly contributed to the near cult status of Wally Byam among Airstream enthusiasts even today.

The trailer boom not only put more travel trailers on the highways in the United States, but trailering was now a conspicuous mainstream phenomenon in the postwar decades. This new travel trailer culture was more closely connected to Cold War domestic patterns of the nuclear family and the idea of family vacationing. The association of travel trailers with temporary family vacations for the nuclear family lent it a degree of respectability in the eyes of many, as RV were no longer being discussed as a society changing technology as they had been before the

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[21] *Africa! Capetown to Cairo* (1959).
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

war. The eventual divergence between housing trailers and travel trailers in the postwar era was foretold by the 1930s dialogue on trailer usage, but was all but assured by the use of housing trailers in World War II, which further illustrated the potential of trailers as housing alternatives. Travel trailers and RVs generally would be accepted as a vacation alternative, but manufactured housing would be discriminated against by many as a static site-built housing alternative. The origin of the divergence between travel trailers and house trailers dates to World War II. According to Allan Wallis, the production of housing-type units went from 10 percent to 90 percent of production by the early 1940s. The early manufacturer associations also did not want to recognize housing as a normal usage before the war.[24] As discussed in the previous chapters, this wartime production of low-end temporary housing trailers did sustain a large number of manufacturers throughout the war (often to the displeasure of higher end manufactures like Byam's Airstream).

However, the government was not always an admirer of trailer or manufactured housing as a real alternative to site-built shelter. Roosevelt's National Housing Agency (NHA) curtailed the purchasing of trailers as temporary housing in late 1942. The orders for trailers from the government fell throughout the rest of the war and were only partly supplemented by private purchases from wartime industries.[25] According to Wallis, the mobile home was the most important form of industrial housing in the postwar market. Housing trailers took the dominant share of trailer production throughout the early postwar years. This was despite the fact that "the trailer industry had yet to fully recognize and accept that its product was industrialized housing."[26] Even as travel trailer diehards like Wally Byam knew years earlier, the trailer

[24] Wallis, *Wheel Estate*, 87.
[25] Ibid., 90-92
[26] Ibid., 96.

industry was slow to realize that its recreational vehicle segment (catering to travelers) and its housing segment (catering to low-end permanent substitutes for static housing) were better off as two distinct industries.

The origin of the final split was a technological change that made it largely impossible to substitute the two types of trailer for each other. This was the development of the tenwide housing trailer. These units were made to be ten feet wide, adding to the living space, but reducing mobility because they were difficult to tow and were even illegal (without special permits) to take on public roads. These wider, larger, and increasingly heavier units were perfectly suited for permanent or semi-permanent housing, but could not function at all as travel trailers for recreational use. As these less mobile units gave up following road standards, they could increase in all directions and in overall weight.[27] Large units better suited users who did not have mobility in mind. Wallis describes the situation clearly: "With a growing demand for longer and wider units, manufactures were faced with the choice of remaining in the travel trailer business, to product large mobile homes exclusively, or manufacturing both products, essentially for different markets."[28] This was a difficult choice as remaining in both markets would be expensive and would require either multiple production lines or flexible production, either of which could prove costly. Most manufactures had to go one way or another: "In 1963, the two industries formally split, with travel trailer manufactures identifying themselves as the recreational vehicle industry. They formed their own lobbying group, the Recreational Vehicle Association (RVA)." Wallis recounted, "As if to make the split more final, Paul Abel, who founded the RVA, scheduled its annual industry shows on the same days as the mobile home

[27] Wallis, *Wheel Estate*, 125-133.
[28] Ibid., 132.

trade shows. Many manufacturers were forced to choose which show they would attend and which industry they would affiliate with."[29] This meant that the ambiguity that had so long been part of this industry was finally falling away. The manufactured home would remain the product of those who could not afford site-built homes within an important, but often limited section of the market.[30] However the mobile home's sister technology, the recreational vehicle, would go on to be largely accepted as a vacation alternative for a more diverse socioeconomic swath of American society with many RVs parked out front, beside, or behind static build homes waiting for the next outing.

[29] Wallis, *Wheel Estate*, 132.
[30] For more on how manufactured housing was discriminated against see Wallis, *Wheel Estate*.

Figure 36: Repurposed Travel Trailers at Hicksville Trailer Palace and Artist Retreat[31]

Returning briefly to the discussion of interpretive flexibility and closure, the trailer's ambiguous usefulness finally met its end. As manufacturers responded to user desires for more specialized trailers, they seem to have made a conscious choice to enforce closure by splitting the trade shows (so long a point of industry unity). In doing so, they attempted to clearly demark each type of trailer as a distinct technological artifact with a prescribed usage. For manufactured housing trailers in particular, myriad highway safety laws entirely excluded their usefulness to users as practical RVs. However, travel trailers designs were not necessarily limited in the same

[31] "Photo of Hicksville Trailer Palace & Artist Retreat," accessed 02/20/2017, http://www.hicksville.com/joshuatree/motel.

manner. Even today, it is not unusual to see a travel trailer or motorhome converted into a permanent or semi-permanent housing solution in rural American counties (sometimes with permanent structural additions). In recent years, travel trailers have been converted to trendy roadside accommodations for non-RV tourists such as Hicksville Trailer Palace and Artist Retreat in Joshua Tree, California, pictured in Figure 35. This pseudo-motel offers several trailers permanently installed on the property with themed decorations. Despite manufacturer's choices in the early 1960s, therefore, the recreational vehicle's utility remains open for users to interpret and reinterpret.

The Long, Long Trailer

The 1953 movie *The Long, Long Trailer* represents an important moment in the history of recreational vehicles in American culture.[32] The film confirmed that recreational vehicle technology had penetrated America's postwar culture and onto the silver screen. It is important chiefly because it well encapsulates many aspects of how Americans had come to understand the automotive technology by the postwar era, as well as being playfully critical of trailer life and travel. Even allowing for comedic exaggeration, the situations and challenges presented in the movie did reflect the perceived promises and potential perils of postwar recreational vehicles. Using this film as a point of departure, this section focuses on the contradictions which emerged between the conceptual promise of recreational vehicle technology and the real-world drawbacks of their widespread use. Recreational vehicles like travel trailers (still the vastly dominant form of the time) were frequently presented as a cheap and easy way to enjoy a relaxing, harmonious, and meaningful vacation, but the realities of purchasing a new trailer, learning to tow it, and

[32] *The Long, Long Trailer*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1954, Sonora, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2006), DVD.

paying to maintain both the trailer and the tow vehicle served to challenge this common assumption. In addition to these basic difficulties, the recreational vehicle of the postwar era also attempted to recreate all of the amenities of a static home. Recreational vehicle manufacturers proved remarkably adept at accomplishing this goal, creating a mobile domestic space that was very nearly as well equipped as a static home. Nevertheless, the compact and mobile nature of the travel trailer made it difficult to actually replicate domestic life on the road. Yet even with these complications, recreational vehicle technology took off in this era.

Beyond representing the promises and perils of recreational vehicle travel, the way the movie condenses these themes potentially impacted how Americans viewed the technology. For today's viewer, the often still relevant humor shows that many of the comedic situations still ring true. The technology's popularity had deep roots in an over two decade old tradition of recreational automobility enthusiasts, which meant that although critical the movie was not actually all that detrimental to the industry itself. The expansion of this technology can only be explained through the widespread enthusiasm for the recreational vehicle and the dedicated enthusiasts who had so long served as a reservoir of support for the technology.

The Long, Long Trailer features Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz as a newly married couple, Tacy and Nicky Collini. The newlyweds purchase a travel trailer in hopes both having a relaxing honeymoon as well as using it as a mobile first home. Tacy's enthusiastic support for her idea to travel and live in the trailer almost never wanes, but Nicky finds the trailer life and his wife's hijinks extremely irritating as they take their trip from California to Colorado. In this respect, Tacy tends to represent the promises of recreational vehicle technology and Nicky the perils. Despite nearly ending their new marriage and almost selling their trailer during the trip, the

couple eventually come to terms with the trailer life, and the film ends with them reunited in a romantic embrace in their travel trailer.

One of the most common assertions about recreational vehicle travel was that it was a particularly cheap and affordable way to travel, and perhaps live. This notion dates back as far as the 1920s, but advertising writers often repeated it in the 1930s by when describing the first manufactured recreational vehicles. In the movie, Tacy pitches idea of purchasing a trailer as both their first home as well as the vehicle for their honeymoon. Nicky at first thinks she's entirely kidding, but after upsetting Tacy with his jokes, he comes to realize that she was completely serious. One of her principal arguments is that the $1700 they plan to spend on rent could be used to purchase a trailer she found in the magazine called the "Bungalette." After deciding to consider the matter, the couple go to a trailer show to view the different models available. Real shows put on by manufacturers and enthusiast groups in the postwar period had their origins in the 1930s.

At the trailer show, Tacy quickly realizes that her dream of an $1800 "Bugalette" was not realistic. The trailer is simply far too small for the newly married couple to live in for such a long period of time. Rather than give up on her dreams, Tacy notes a New Moon trailer that is much, much larger. Although aware that it would be beyond their budget, Tacy convinced Nicky to look at it just for fun. She then talks to the salesman, who informs her that the trailer is actually $5345, but the down payment would only be $1750. After some brief convincing by Tacy, Nicky relents and purchases the trailer. This begins a repeating comedic situation where the costs continued to rise and rise for Nicky. For example, the $1750 down payment quickly turns into $1932.22. He then finds out that his car's motor is not powerful enough to tow the trailer. He then has to shell out more money to buy a new car, a new hitch, and other trailer towing

equipment. All in all he mentions he ends up $7646 in debt. The ever-rising costs of Nicky and Tacy's trailer points to the disjoint between the rhetoric of cheap travel and the realities of buying all the necessities for using a recreational vehicle. Although one might save on meals or on hotel rooms, it's difficult to see how these savings could ever offset the purchase and maintenance costs. At one point while spending yet more money, Nicky reflects that "It was a question of who would give out first, me or the money."[33] Despite these added costs, Tacy sees them as minor obstacles to her dream of living on the road with her new husband.

As Tacy is making her case for the trailer in the beginning the movie, she argues that recreational vehicle technology will allow her to re-create the domestic space of a traditional static home for the newly married couple's mobile life on the road. This argument is particularly pertinent to Nicky and Tacy's situation because Nicky's job requires him to travel to different construction sites across the country. She begins to counter Nicky's arguments against the trailer by stating, "All I was thinking of was making a home for my husband, a little place we could call our own where I could take care of him, cook for him and make him comfortable. If that's a horrible offense, if that makes me a criminal, then I'm terribly sorry…"[34] She later continues to argue for the superiority of the trailer over the rental options, stating, "We'll always be living out of suitcases and using other people's things. Living in some stale little hotel or some grubby furnished room. But don't you see, if we had a trailer, no matter where we went, I could make a home for you. And when the job was over, we could just hitch up our house and go on to the next."[35] In Tacy's view, the house trailer would provide the proper setting to create a domestic

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[33] *The Long, Long Trailer*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1954, Sonora, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2006), DVD.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

space for her and her husband, whereas rented rooms and motels would not provide the same opportunity.

Throughout the movie many of the jokes grow out of the difficulties associated with actually achieving domestic parity with static living. Early on, before her wedding, Tacy and her female relatives and friends are packing all the wedding presents in the trailer. Nicky arrived to drop off a few articles of clothing only to find the large New Moon trailer already filled to the brim with cooking equipment, linens, towels, and Tacy's belongings. Nicky seems extremely uncomfortable as he tries to navigate his trailer filled with all the possible domestic goods one could ever want. He finally finds a place to store his belongings: inside the shower compartment of the trailer. The scene suggests that even the largest trailers like the New Moon could not possibly offer the storage space of even a small static home. Packing all of these wedding presents that would nicely equip a static home seems like a fool's errand in a space the size of a trailer. It also suggests that the trailer's space has been gendered as female domestic space in which Nicky feels like the does not belong. Throughout the trip many other attempts to turn the trailer into the equivalent of the static home provided comic relief. Perhaps the best example is when Tacy attempts to cook a meal while the travel trailer is in motion. The scene begins with her well underway in creating an excellent meal for her husband. But when the trailer begins to move, everything begins to fly around and Tacy is covered with flour and other foods and left unable to signal for Nicky to stop towing the trailer. Although manufacturers may have promised a domestic space complete with modern appliances and conveniences, taking that small space on the road represented a fundamentally different experience that could not entirely replicate these postwar American standards for static homes.

Another theme reflected in Tacy's ideas about the trailer is that it will provide the opportunity for an excellent honeymoon free from the constraints of typical tourist travel. She says to Nicky, "You know Nicky…what I was thinking about most of all was our honeymoon. Can't you just imagine what it would be like? Some of the most beautiful country in the world is between here and Colorado. The whole trip would be just like a dream. We'd go where we pleased, when we pleased."[36] The notion that one could go wherever and whenever one wanted was a typical reason many people bought and continue to buy recreational vehicles. It was also an idea manufacturers liked to advertise. Throughout the movie, many examples challenge this notion and show that traveling with recreational vehicles in the post-World War II era was not as free—or carefree—as Tacy's statement suggests.

One of the first places they stop on the trip is a modern, well-equipped trailer park. It seems like the perfect place to stop. All they have to do is simply pull up the trailer and the park manager neatly sets it up in its designated space. However, as Nicky is attempting to carry Tacy through the doorway of their new trailer home and have a moment of romantic time alone, they are interrupted by their trailerite neighbors. One older lady believes Tacy to be injured and soon involves the newlywed couple in an afternoon and evening long lesson in trailer park socialization. The couple's New Moon trailer, rather than playing host to a romantic and private honeymoon, becomes a social center of the trailer park community for the night. This is understandably frustrating to Nicky and Tacy, but the scene also shows one of the potential appeals of recreational vehicles: the enthusiast community that was built around them. The nosey trailerite who started the whole turn of events states, "I'd like to know what a trailerite's good

[36] *The Long, Long Trailer*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1954, Sonora, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2006), DVD.

for, if it's not to help another trailerite!"[37] The sense of community is an important part of the appeal of recreational vehicles, then and now. But, as many viewers might have noticed, dependence on these trailer parks potentially limits the freedom of the road by forcing conformity to their cultural and geographic confines.

The next night Nicky and Tacy attempt to have a romantic night out in the woods. They turn down a wooded path that is nothing more than a dirt road. True to the reoccurring themes in the movie, this promise of a forest adventure quickly goes bust as the couple's trailer becomes stuck in the mud. In the course the night, they eat dinner in a sideways slanted trailer, struggle to get to sleep, and, in separate situations, both end up covered in mud in the rain outside their trailer. Furthermore, when Nicky is attempting to follow the instructions on setting up the trailer for the night he finds that rather than providing useful direction the manual simply says to have the trailer park manager set up your trailer for the night. In sum, therefore, this scene suggests that recreational vehicles in the post-World War II era represent a part of a technological system that includes both the vehicle itself as well as the roads and support facilities necessary for that travel. If one lacked any single element of this technological system, it was difficult to have a successful trip. It also goes to show that although recreational vehicles promised the freedom of the road, they were constrained within the realities and designs of the technology itself.

One of the most frequently recurring comedic situations in the movie involves Nicky attempting to drive when he often calls the "40 feet of train" he is towing. The mechanic (who installed the tow hitch) gives him a quick lesson on how to tow his investment. Unfortunately for Nicky, the mechanic feels that towing a trailer with an independently controlled breaking system ought to be second nature and proves to be a poor instructor. Furthermore, the mechanic explains

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[37] *The Long, Long Trailer*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1954, Sonora, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2006), DVD.

that failing to use the trailer brake could result in a disastrous jackknife accident without much concern or urgency. From that point on, Nicky is haunted by the trailer brakes and never fully gains confidence driving his new car and trailer. "So we were moving," he notes at one point, but "I couldn't be sure whether I was pulling it, or it was pushing me."[38] This fear of driving car and trailer setups was a common subject in the 1930s literature about travel trailers, and it recurs throughout the movie, including a rather funny moment where Nicky appears to be suffering from a form of PTSD regarding the trailer brakes. In an interesting twist, when Tacy gets behind the wheel of the car and trailer she almost immediately masters driving it. She drives quickly and confidently across the same highways that Nicky would barely drive at a much slower pace. Tacy only relinquishes the wheel when Nicky makes a sexist comment in retribution for her suggestions on how Nicky should navigate with his map. Nicky's failures as a stereotypically masculine master of machinary is simply unambiguous given Tacy's clear superiority at the skill of towing. In this way, the movie reverses the woman-as-bad-driver stereotype so common in American culture at this time.

In the end, neither Nicky or Tacy are entirely correct. The promise of post-World War II trailering championed by Tacy surely had real limits, but the situational perils and negativity represented by Nicky still did not capture the entire experience of recreational vehicle travel for many Americans. Many enthusiasts proved willing to take the good with the bad all while also being willing to foot the bills. In doing so, they became the backbone of American recreational vehicle travel. The people they met along the way in the trailer park as well the industries associated with getting the trailer up and running and keeping it on the road represented growing American institutions centered around recreational vehicle travel.

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[38] *The Long, Long Trailer*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1954, Sonora, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2006), DVD.

Retirement on the Road and the Lives and Limits of the Tin Can Tourists

The idea that one can retire from working life, purchase an RV, and go and see the country is common in modern American culture, and is a lived reality for many retirees. But how did the idea of retirement on the road get started? Writing in 1960, Wally Byam drew the connection between retirees and travel trailers that was already becoming apparent:

> The increasing number of retired people with pensions whose children had moved away were looking for smaller living quarters and seeking to satisfy long-smoldering desires to see the country. The trailer was an ideal answer to their needs – in fact, it still is.[39]

Byam's description of early purchasers of travel trailers fits exactly with the Tin Can Tourists' primary demographic, for they became enthusiastic purchasers of trailers for exactly the reasons he described. Without the Tin Can Tourists as motivated users and customers, the trailer industry may not have been able to get off the ground, much less have become a success, in 1930s America.

Tin Can Tourists living out their dreams of recreational automobility found themselves free from the restraints of a physical home, but not without one. "An auto-nomad" can be defined as a person who chooses to live in a recreational vehicle for a long stretch of time (at least several months, a year, or even permanently) while travelling to various destinations. To many Tin Can Tourists the state of Florida became their "home" during their lives as an auto-nomads. It hosted them each year throughout the club's existence. As auto-nomads, Tin Can Tourists were frequently older married adults without any minor children. They also tended to be people with pensions or investment incomes who retired on the road rather than in a fixed year-round

[39] Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad*, 20.

place. All of these demographic and travel patterns created a unique and fairly well defined group of people who made up the membership of the Tin Can Tourists.

A 1948 *Life* magazine article, titled "People in Trailers," featured an in-depth interview with Charlie and Esther Treffert, a Tin Can Tourist couple.[40] Charlie had served on the board of directors (1946-1949) and later as Royal Chief (1962-1963). The couple represented very typical Tin Can Tourists, and their story gives insight into both themselves and other members.

> The Trefferts are good working examples of how trailer life stacks up against that of the static population. The Trefferts are true trailerites. They live in a rolling home, as distinct from people who inhabit trailers out of necessity. Their neighbors down in Tampa agreed that Charlie and Esther were representative of the country's 100,000 year-round rolling trailerites in all respects. Charlie is 51, Esther 47.[41]

Through *Life* magazine's assessment of the Trefferts, one can begin to understand this group's experiences and thoughts about living in trailers full time. It also highlights the ways that trailer life is comparable to those living in static dwellings. Their feelings about various issues and opinions about living on the road provide one of the best sources for analyzing what it meant to be a Tin Can Tourist.

The magazine explained the migratory nature of the couple's mobile lifestyle: "With the first nip of cold weather they head for Florida, parking usually in Tampa until spring. In May they set out for Fond du Lac and wind up in July at the summer reunion of the Tin Can Tourists of the World, Inc."[42] The couple's migration from the colder northern state of Wisconsin to sunny Florida in the winter represents the typical pattern of nearly all Tin Can Tourists. Bert Tremble, another member, explained that he and his wife "spend the winter in Florida and the

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[40] Kobler, "People in Trailers," 18.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

summer seeing the nation."[43] The state of Florida was the fixed winter destination for Tin Can Tourists looking to avoid colder northern winters. This southward migration to Florida during the winter was not new, as railroads and steamboats had allowed this sort of travel before, but the Tin Can Tourists pioneered the practice of visiting via automobile. Importantly, automotive travel extended the group's range far beyond what any railroad travel could achieve and allowed for much greater flexibility of route. Also, in light of the advancements made in trailer travel and in campgrounds, it was not only practical, but comfortable to do so. This freedom to migrate as one pleased was one of the major draws for what became the Tin Can Tourists' retirement on the road.

It is worth noting the states from which these tourists originated. Nearly all of the Tin Can Tourists were Northerners periodically travelling south, not Southerners travelling north. [44] Judging by the hometowns of the group's officers from 1919 to 1971, most originated in Michigan, Ohio, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, New York, Nebraska, and Wisconsin.[45] With the exception of Florida, all of these were northern states. It is likely that most Tin Can Tourists came from these states as they are a representative organization and vote for officers who reflect their background and interests. Moreover, most of those from Florida appear later in the organization's history, and it is not clear whether they were natives or simply previous

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[43] Frank Bayle, "Life on Wheels is a Bowl of Cherries." Unknown newspaper clipping from Tin Can Tourists Scrapbook 1 Box 2, TCT, FL Library.

[44] No general list of Tin Can Tourist membership exists, but the hometowns of officers are listed in the constitution and bylaws.

[45] Officers home states without double counting officers serving in multiple years or positions: Michigan 42, Ohio 24, Florida 18, Illinois 18, Indiana 14, New York 13, Nebraska 4, Wisconsin 4, Iowa 2, Massachusetts 2, New Jersey 2, Pennsylvania 2, West Virginia 2, Quebec (Canada) 2, California 1, Kansas 1, Maine 1, Maryland 1, Minnesota 1, Missouri 1, Oregon 1, Texas 1 and Ontario (Canada) 1. Data collected from Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., *Constitution and By-Laws*, TCT, FL Library.

immigrants to Florida. Clearly the group had some strong ties to Northern states, and Florida was a particularly appealing destination.

Another defining characteristic of the Tin Can Tourists was their source of income. Most had given up earning a traditional wage or salary prior to going on the road. This was because the mobile nature of their lifestyle did not fit well with the practice of keeping a job in a fixed location. Most people subsisted on some sort of retirement or investment income. Here again Charlie and Esther Treffert provide a great example of the Tin Can Tourists' financial situation.

> Charlie is retired, another typical situation. A considerably percentage of trailerites are retired farmers, policemen, firemen, civil servants living on pensions or the rent from houses they own. The Trefferts' joint annual income hovers around $3,000, which is within the trailerites range. It derives from government bonds bought when Charlie was still a workingman and the rent from three apartments in his native Fond du Lac, Wis.[46]

The Trefferts derived most of their income from investments. However, quite a few members of the club were retired civil servants with pensions. Those who may have had ongoing work tended to be people who were farmers or working other seasonal professions that allowed for time away to travel, although these "working" members became increasingly rare over time. Having a stable source of non-wage income became an expectation of being a Tin Can Tourist. In fact it was not uncommon for many Florida mobile home parks and towns to ban working in the local community. This was the case with Sarasota, Florida, a prominent Tin Can Tourist destination:

> The city has adopted a policy which prohibits those living in the park from being employed in the Sarasota area. This allows the city to maintain low cost housing for an itinerant labor supply which would otherwise compete with local citizens. It also encourages "pure tourism" with "imported money" generating fresh income for the city.[47]

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[46] Kobler, "People in Trailers," 18
[47] "Mobilehome Park Believed Oldest," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune.* Nov. 15th, 1964.

Tin Can Tourists neither desired nor were allowed to be "itinerant labor" in the communities hosting them. Consequently, most of them had to be retired with some non-wage earning income to support themselves.

Many of the Tin Can Tourists, despite having non-wage income, were not extremely wealthy and relied on the relatively inexpensive nature of trailer travel at the time. Even in the 1930s, *Trailer Travel* magazine explained that "the fact that so many are able to indulge this wanderlust is due to their having reached the age of retirement when they can enjoy life as they will, especially at the low cost possible."[48] Trailer travelling was a realistic and appealing option to those retiring with a fixed income. One was not tied down to any one location, and the excitement of travel could replace the time one spent working. Charlie Treffert explained why he believed trailer travel was a great idea. "'The way I figure,' he was saying between sips, 'it don't make any difference if you're retired on thirty thousand a year or you're just an ordinary working man, this is the smart way to live nowadays.'"[49] To the Trefferts and many others recreational automobility with the travel trailer was the only sensible option for their retirement.

One corollary of the Tin Can Tourists' retired demographic was the absence—in fact, the active discouragement of having—children. *Life* explained that the Trefferts "are childless. Most trailerites have either no children or grownup ones."[50] Children were not well suited for the mobile lifestyle, or for long term recreational automobility. It was too difficult to keep children enrolled in school if one moved constantly and throughout the year. Also, the average travel trailer could not effectively meet the space needs of a larger family and remain mobile. In the Trefferts' case, they even seemed to look down on children in trailer camps. Esther Treffert

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[48] "The True Story of the T.C.T," 14-15.
[49] Kobler, "People in Trailers," 18.
[50] Ibid.

commented about a young family living in a trailer with children that "They manage fine and I guess it's a pretty good way for a young couple to get started in housekeeping. Still it's the wrong atmosphere for children." The Trefferts' feelings about children were far from unique among the Tin Can Tourists: "Under camp regulations children, unlike dogs, were zoned."[51] Families and Tin Can Tourists were physically separated in the trailer camps, probably to their mutual benefit.

The lifestyle of the Tin Can Tourists as retired, childfree auto-nomads contributed to their creation of the concept of "retirement on the road." The membership embraced their ethos, which both defined the group's activities and created a distinct lifestyle. They did not shy away from explaining how much they enjoyed it, as Gus Brandt, a Royal Chief of Tin Can Tourists and retired police officer, stated: "A trailer adds years to a person's life. Having a regular home is too much work. With a trailer I can really be retired."[52] Retirement on the road offered greater freedom of movement, easier housekeeping, varied forms of recreation, new locations to visit, and most importantly an affordable cost of living for fixed income retirees.

Recalling the Trefferts' desire for a simpler mobile life, the *Life* article noted their emphasis on mobility. Although they spoke in subtler terms than Babson, they still clearly emphasized its significance.

> The element of trailer life that pleases the Trefferts most is its folksiness. "Don't matter who or what you are," is the way Charlie expresses it, "here you're just one of the gang. Me, I talk to everybody and everybody talks to me. Real friendly. If people don't behave right they can be asked to go some place else or if you don't like your neighbors, you don't need to quarrel with 'em. Just hitch on your car, fold up your awning and git."[53]

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[51] Kobler, "People in Trailers," 20.
[52] Bayle, "Life on Wheels is a Bowl of Cherries."
[53] Kobler, "People in Trailers," 20.

Trailer life to Charlie Treffert was egalitarian, friendly, and open because the trailer ensured the option to leave. Gus Brandt, a Royal Chief of Tin Can Tourists, shared a similar notion:"I've lived in [trailers] 11 years and wouldn't think of living in a house again. It's the most carefree life there is for retired people. If we don't like our neighbors, we hitch up and move out."[54] The trailer could provide mobility that freed one from being tied down and forced to deal with problems associated with static living. Although it is not possible to know who the group considered to be bad neighbors, the desire to be able to pick up and leave from larger cities may be in part connected to the phenomenal rates of so-called "white flight" that responded to demographic changes to housing in many cities during the postwar era. After all, the group remained restricted to whites for a long time, and whether conscious or unconscious, the shift from urban centers to mobile trailer homes was not that much different from those who left cities for suburbs. At the very least, the group's approach to life reflected the general principles of Babson's broadside against static living from the 1930s.

Beyond an escape from annoyances or repression, the trailer's mobility offered complete flexibility of time and scheduling. Another Tin Can Tourist, Bert Tremble, explained this freedom of time and responsibilities: "I have a house but have used a trailer 13 years for traveling. With a trailer there are no worries, no cares, no schedules. We come and go as we please and no longer live in our house."[55] Retired Tin Can Tourists, unlike the rest of the working population in static houses, could define his or even her own schedule. This freedom from a predefined working day outside of one's control was one highly attractive aspect of being

[54] Bayle, "Life on Wheels is a Bowl of Cherries."
[55] Ibid.

an auto-nomad and retiring on the road. Retirement, along with travel-trailer life, helped free Tin Can Tourists from much of the day-to-day upkeep and worries of normal house ownership.

These ideas of mobility and individualism did conflict with the group's focus on imposing order and maintaining respectability. The individuals in the group expressed this desire for individuality at the same time that they imposed strict rules to govern themselves. In many ways, they freed themselves from the traditional order of things only to re-impose that order to maintain respectability. Despite this, the members of the group did largely maintain a level of mobility and freedom of movement that static society simply could not match.

The eventual demise of the original Tin Can Tourists resulted from a natural decline in member numbers as they got older. As they passed away or were no longer able to meet, insufficient new membership was recruited to continue the group. This led to the eventual disappearance of the Tin Can Tourists by the 1980s. Although the group itself disbanded, its members were pioneers of this type of retirement, and one can see their influence in the numerous retirees crisscrossing the country today in their recreational vehicles. These new retirees—while not Tin Can Tourists in name—are closely related in outlook, attitudes, and demographics.

The Tin Can Tourists' mobile lifestyle was unconventional in many senses. In fact, from the group's inception in the days of autocamping, outsiders often distrusted or denigrated its members' penchant for vacationing and even living in and around their cars. This perceived judgment by the public at large made Tin Can Tourists conscious of the need to maintain their respectability and image. In *Trailer Travel* magazine in the 1930s, the Tin Can Tourists' formation was explained in precisely these terms:

> [The Tin Can Tourists of the World] was organized primarily to enable automobile wayfarers to enjoy regular "get-togethers" on the trail, but it also

> established a set of principles and a code of conduct designed to improve conditions within the ranks and camps and to remove the prejudices existing in the outside world. [56]

The Tin Can Tourists had been attacked in the 1920s on the grounds that they were cheap, destitute, and would contribute little to the communities they visited. The organization began to understand that to be taken seriously as upstanding (albeit temporary) members of a community, they needed to control their membership and define their activities in such a way as to clearly distinguish themselves from those who lived in their cars out of necessity.

This effort to maintain an upstanding image was rooted in events prior to the war, when somewhat lax rules from the group's early days give way to stricter oversight in the 1930s. According to a 1936 article in *Trailer Travel* magazine:

> The rules were loosely enforced at first, when any member could confer membership on anyone he met on the road without formalities merely if the tenets of the organization were affirmed and the nominal dues paid. Now, however, the candidate for membership must be initiated at a regular meeting, and the code of conduct is enforced so religiously that communities bid for their gatherings. [57]

With a more formal process requiring initiation at a Tin Can Tourists' meeting, new members had to endure scrutiny and demonstrate their commitment by showing up at a formal group event. Presumably these restrictions prevented loosely associated trailerites, who may or may not have held themselves to the Tin Can Tourists' lofty standards from tarnishing the organization's good image.

In fact, this fight to maintain their respectability almost cost the Tin Can Tourists their iconic name. Beginning in the late 1920s, a vocal minority of members had challenged "Tin Can Tourist" on the grounds that the phrase had fallen out of favor with the public and seemed

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[56] "A New Order plus New Facilities in Trailerdom," 11-13.
[57] Ibid. 12.

unbecoming of a well-regarded group. Name changes were put to a vote by the entire membership several times, with each attempt failing. After losing their fight within the Tin Can Tourists in 1935, a separatist group formed the Automobile Tourists Association (ATA):

> The insurrectionists against the name who felt that the old stigma still lingered because of that name formed a new organization a year ago called the Automobile Tourists Association, headed by Captain E. H. Junglas, formerly secretary of the T.C.T.[58]

The Automobile Tourists Association had to share members with the Tin Can Tourists, as many were not willing to give up the annual Tin Can meetings. The splinter group did not last, and no record of any ATA activities after World War II have been found during the course of this study. But the emergence of the ATA did foreshadow the development of more specialized RV groups after World War II. Nonetheless, the attack on the traditional Tin Can Tourist name certainly suggested that a number of its members were ready to push beyond the group's pioneering days, at least symbolically.

Tin Can Tourists were also not afraid to ask someone who was not conforming to the group's standards to leave. The Trefferts recounted one such instance as follows:

> "See that empty lot. Well, once there was a couple on it that scrapped all the time. Drank too much, too. They were warned once, then were told to move. Now that don't happen around here often. Trailer folks aren't that kind. Why, even at our dances we don't serve liquor. Nobody wants it."[59]

To the Tin Can Tourists, trailer life was better experienced soberly and with a general spirit of camaraderie. Heavy drink was certainly frowned upon by many and was never part of the typical Tin Can Tourist experience. Its members were not expressly religious, but time was often

[58] "A New Order plus New Facilities in Trailerdom," 13.
[59] Kobler, "People in Trailers," 20.

allotted on Sunday mornings for attending local churches. The group took living cleanly seriously in its effort to maintain a serious reputation.

The efforts of the Tin Can Tourists to improve and control their image paid dividends over time, as more and more local communities began to accept them. As *Life* magazine explained, "How the rest of the population has come to regard the T.C.T. and trailerites in general is reflected by the organization's method of choosing the sites for its get-togethers. It no longer has to angle for them."[60] By the postwar era, therefore, the Tin Can Tourists represented a valuable, albeit temporary, addition to many communities, particularly in Florida.

The group's major failing, especially glaring to a modern observer, was its failure to end its racial discrimination and segregationist practices. The Tin Can Tourists' records reflect that there were no African-American or other racial minority members due to the group's explicit racial restrictions. The original constitution, which was reprinted as late as the 1960s, stated that to qualify as a member one must be of the "white race."[61] The group was formed and met in the American South at a time when facilities, including recreational facilities, were not open to all racial groups. It is likely that to maintain good standing in these communities, and access to their facilities, the Tin Can Tourists did not wish to upset the racial standards of the time by admitting non-whites. Its not clear whether or not the members of the group were likeminded in their thinking about racial segregation. One might assume the membership was at least complicit in recreating the defacto segregation so common in many Northern cities before the Civil Rights movement. This mobile Tin Can Tourist community then could attempt to replicate the neighborhoods of their past while fleeing the diversifying cities of the North. As mentioned

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[60] Kobler, "People in Trailers," 18.
[61] Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., *Constitution and By-Laws*.

before, the exact identity of the "bad neighbors" the group did not wish to associate with is not entirely clear, but it is clear the neighbors they chose to associate with were intentionally chosen to be racially homogeneous. At the very least, their lack of effort to remove racially discriminatory language showed that inclusiveness and diversity was not a primary concern. The group existed well into the post-Jim Crow era but demonstrated no deliberate speed in removing the racial criteria for membership, which remained in effect until at least 1967.[62] Despite eventually removing this racial criterion, there is no evidence of substantive changes in the group's attitude towards racial inclusiveness throughout their history.

The status of women among the Tin Can Tourists was a bit more complicated. Women in the group were most often married women travelling with their husbands. In many cases, traditional gender roles were followed with the women doing housekeeping in the trailer and men maintaining and driving the recreational vehicle. The 1948 article about the Trefferts showed Esther as a typical housewife not wanting for any of the modern conveniences of static homes.

> Esther meanwhile, having washed in the ladies' quarters and dressed, gets breakfast going. In this, as in other operations of nomadic housekeeping, she is aided by nearly as many timesavers as her stay-at-home sisters. The Trefferts' New Moon [trailer] has room for a gas stove fed by bottled gas, a Frigidaire that stayed frigid 24 hours while the trailer is on the road and site outlets for gadgets like a vacuum cleaner, Mixmaster, electric blanket, electric iron.[63]

The Trefferts and many other Tin Can Tourist couples suggested that their gender roles remained the same between their lives in static housing and their mobile lives in trailers. The only purported benefit to female Tin Can Tourists was that their trailers were easier to keep clean because of their diminutive size compared to a typical home. Mrs. J. T. Allison, a Tin Can

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[62] Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., *Amended Constitution and By-Laws*. TCT, FL Library.
[63] Kobler, "People in Trailers," 22.

Tourist "housewife," was quoted as saying, "We're really thrilled with trailer life. There's so little housework and you meet such an interesting group of people."[64] The suggestion of reduced housework was one of the myriad selling points trailer manufacturers used in marketing to women. *Trailer Travel* magazine even had a recurring section on housekeeping topics related to living in a trailer. Although the gender roles appear to be the same as described in these accounts, over time Tin Can Tourist women developed greater influence and their own distinct role in the leadership of the organization.

Despite the preponderance of traditional gender roles, female Tin Can Tourists were able to influence the organization, especially by filling leadership roles primarily in the group's later years. In the early history of the organization, prior to 1925, four women served as officers seven times, filling either the position of Royal Secretary or Royal Treasurer, but this inclusive period did not last. For just over three decades, between 1925-1956, only two women served as officers four times (three as secretary and one as a director). Their situation improved from 1957 until the end of the available records in 1971, when women held thirty-five percent of total officer positions and fifty-six percent of executive officer positions. Women held the role of Royal Secretary every year, and the role of Royal Treasurer and Royal Assistant Secretary all but three times. Two women even broke into the highest leadership positions—Royal Chief and Royal Vice Chief—two times each.[65] Women in the organization may have portrayed themselves as ordinary housewives, but over time they indeed gained respect and prominence through their elected posts. The reasons behind these women's eventual successes in leadership elections does not appear to be clearly attributable to any single factor, but it does suggest the group over time

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[64] Bayle, "Life on Wheels is a Bowl of Cherries."
[65] Statistics are derived from officer listings in Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., *Constitution and By-Laws*; Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., *Amended Constitution and By-Laws*.

adopted a more open stance to gender equality. It also makes the image of Tin Can Tourist women more complex in that they too wanted to seek out more equitable access to the principles of freedom and individualism that infused the group's ideology.

By taking a closer look at the Tin Can Tourists' ideology, it easier to understand why they chose to live a life centered around recreational automobility. Their ideology of recreational automobility did prove influential in American culture. Although not exactly copying Tin Can Tourists, others have been influenced by them through such concepts as retirement on the road. It is with a greater understanding of their ideology and identity that the Tin Can Tourists' legacy can be clearly evaluated: they were one of the most important groups of early recreational vehicle enthusiasts. Their conclusions about life on the road and their trailers should not be taken as immutable laws of recreational automobility. Instead, the recreational vehicle, in its many forms, would prove to be eminently adaptable to a diverse range of users.

The (Re)Birth of the Motorhome and the Crisis of the Oil Embargo

Motorhomes were not a new idea, but in the 1960s and 1970s they did become a truly successful mass market product for the first time. The reborn self-propelled RV would be the first large scale challenger to the travel trailer in the camping market since the 1930s. As a technology, the motorhome was basically a very large house car built on a truck or bus chassis. The first motorhome-type vehicles date as far back as as the 1910s and 1920s and were extremely expensive custom creations. New production motorhome-type RVs remained rare, expensive, and custom until the 1960s. A company known as Frank Motor Homes built a motorhome with the driving controls within the motorhome body (making it a Type-A in modern terminology) in the 1960s. The choice of a Dodge chassis for this RV led to its common

moniker, the "Dodge Motor Home." Despite being pathbreaking, the Frank Motor Homes name would not become synonymous with motorhomes.[66]

Today the term Winnebago serves to not just identify a brand, but more loosely identify a whole type of RV. Carlton Edwards notes that, "In the early 1970s the name Winnebago became synonymous with the term motor home because of the popularity of their low cost units."[67] *Popular Mechanics* magazine did an article on Winnebago's growing success in their May 1970 issue titled "Why Winnebago Is Number One."[68] The author, James Liston, went to Winnebago's factory in Forest City, Iowa, to not just talk to the company's management, but to take out a loaner unit for his own evaluation. Interestingly, the unit the provided him (a Winnebago Model D-18, as shown in Figure 36) had already seen more than a year of hard use (22,000 miles) by company employees.[69]

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[66] Byam, *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad*, 38-39.
[67] Ibid., 39.
[68] James M. Liston, "Why Winnebago Is Number One," *Popular Mechanics*, May 1970, 122-125, 185.
[69] Liston, "Why Winnebago Is Number One," 122-124.

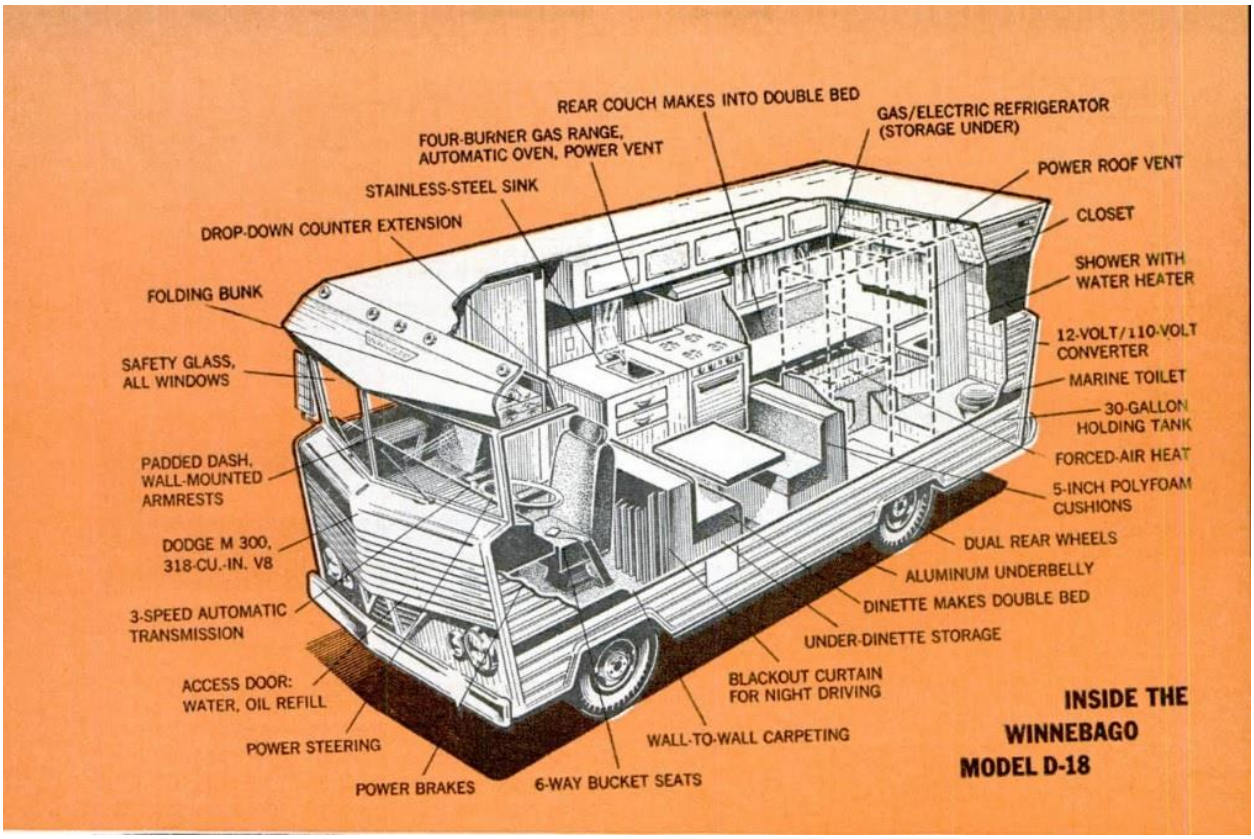

Figure 37: Diagram of the Winnebago D-18 Tested by James Liston[70]

Before taking to the road Liston spoke with John V. Hanson, the president and entrepreneurial force behind Winnebago's success. Hanson himself was a former furniture store owner who had been instrumental in bringing Modernistic Industries (a travel trailer manufacturer) to Forest City, Iowa, in 1957. When the company struggled after its move, Hanson took over the firm and steered it towards cost-cutting and mass production improvements. He also oversaw the transition from travel trailers to motorhomes. During this changeover, the company was renamed Winnebago Industries in 1960 and continued to expand throughout the decade. By 1970, Winnebago was selling four times more units than its nearest

[70] Liston, "Why Winnebago Is Number One," 125.

competitor in the motorhome market.[71] Liston noted, "I had often wondered why [Winnebago sold so many]. The Winnebago is anything but streamlined. It makes no secret of its trailer origins. It's boxy and angular—it would seem to any user of Detroit products—overdue for a redesign that would turn its sharp corners into graceful curves."[72] When Liston asked Hanson why the company was nonetheless succeeding, Hanson stated simply, "The key to our success is knowing what people want and producing it at a price they can afford."[73] In that respect, lower prices were key to making self-propelled RVs a mass market product. Recall that in the 1920s and 1930s, the motorhome's predecessor, the house car, came to an eventual demise in that it required the significant conversion of a utilitarian vehicle. Part of the problem was also the large opportunity cost compared to a car and trailer set up that could be both utilitarian and recreational at will. A motorhome thus needed to be cheap enough to effectively be a fulltime vehicle for recreational automobility, because it was not the sort of thing one would use to drive to work, take the kids to school, or go to the grocery store on a regular basis. In other words, to succeed the motorhome had to be affordable enough and feature-dense enough to warrant its purchase on top of the cost of one's daily driver.

In effect, what Winnebago was selling was relatively economic mobile accommodations that, when used often enough, could replace the costs of a motel or vacation home. They simplified the recreational vehicle rig into one unit. As Liston stated, "What people want—when they can afford it—is a vacation home they can drive. Like a good motel, it needn't be plush, but it must have all the conveniences people now consider essential: good beds, a bathroom with

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[71] Liston, "Why Winnebago Is Number One," 122 and Kenneth Gilpin "Obituary for John K Hanson," New York Times, June 29, 1996. (http://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/29/us/john-hanson-88-executive-who-built-up-winnebago.html) accessed 11/11/2016.
[72] Liston, "Why Winnebago Is Number One," 122.
[73] Ibid., 123.

shower, storage, a modern kitchen, and heat, lights and airconditioning."[74] Although these features had all long been included in travel trailers, Winnebagos (and other motorhomes) had some key features that trailers did not. For one, motorhomes allowed travelers to use the entire interior space of the vehicle while in transit. It was then and is today explicitly illegal and unsafe for passengers to ride inside a travel trailer in motion. This gives motorhomes much more of a "rolling living room" feel on the road and promotes greater comfort for passengers. Also, despite years of guidebooks and advice to the contrary, people unexperienced with towing do not like to go through the learning curve of towing a trailer long distances or maneuvering one in tight spaces. The Winnebago (in particular the more diminutive D-18 driven by the author) was far more approachable for the uninitiated.[75]

This business model was successful for the 1960s and pre-oil crisis 1970s. The author noted that at the time, Winnebago could produce 150 motorhomes a week, but that soon its production capacity would increase to a full 400 units. In addition, Forest City had proven to be a cost effective production center despite the higher freight costs for the vehicles. Winnebago purchased all of its chassis from either Ford or Dodge depending on the model. At the time, the D prefix Winnebago model designation indicated a Dodge chassis and the F prefix models indicated a Ford chassis. The full line included models ranging from 17 to 27.5 feet long.[76]

After visiting the operations at Winnebago, Liston took the loaner RV on a road trip through the western United States. "You don't test a motor home on a track" he explained, "You take it out on the road and live with it for a while."[77] His overall impression was positive, apart

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[74] Liston, "Why Winnebago Is Number One," 123.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 124.

from the vehicle's tendency to catch a strong crosswind, some allowable blind spots, and rather heavy gas consumption. He also noted favorably that his loaner unit was fully functional in almost every regard despite being well used by Winnebago employees and for other demo trips.[78] In a world of low gas prices, there was virtually nothing else one could ask for in a self-propelled recreational vehicle. Liston therefore concluded: "The motor home is fast becoming the equivalent of the vacation home, but there is a difference. Owners find that a motor home is the only vacation cottage that gives you a complete change of scenery and really lets you get away from uninvited weekend guests."[79] The Winnebago then offered owners flexible vacation options at relatively affordable prices, assuming a supply of cheap gasoline to feed these thirsty vehicles became unavailable or unaffordable.

The reckoning for Winnebago and most of the recreational vehicle industry came with the dramatic increase in oil prices during the oil crises of the 1970s. This was the direct result of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' Arab members raising oil prices per barrel at the same time they forbid the export of oil to the United States over political support for Israel. Even after this action ended the price for gasoline remained significantly higher than it had been in the previous decade.[80] In an article titled "Sales of 'Gas'-Gulping Recreation Vehicles Lag" published December 22nd, 1973 in the *New York Times* discussed how the oil crisis put significant pressure on the RV industry. "Of all the cars and trucks families drive, probably none is a bigger gas hog than a recreational vehicle" the Times proclaimed in its

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[78] Liston, "Why Winnebago Is Number One," 125, 185.
[79] Ibid., 185.
[80] Steven Kettell, "Oil Crisis," *Britannica Online*, accessed January 20th, 2017, https://www.britannica.com/topic/oil-crisis .

opening line.[81] It went on to explain that, at roughly four to five miles per gallon, self-propelled RVs—like Winnebagos—were extremely fuel thirsty. Towed or truck-bed units were also costly, although marginally better (typically around seven to eight miles per gallon). The article pointed out that once one adds in the relatively high purchase price of each recreational vehicle it became a recreation proposition few could afford or sustain during an economic downturn. The article went on to report that some dealers found their sales down up to 80% compared to the previous year.[82] An industry built on the assumption of low gas prices ran straight into a wall, the oil crisis. This sent the industry into a large-scale panic that went even beyond the magnitude experienced by American automakers, who also confronted their own need to transition to smaller and more fuel-efficient models to stay competitive.

However, out of these challenges users and manufacturers simply added to the diversity of the recreational vehicle market by increasing emphasis on smaller and more fuel-efficient models. One of these format of recreational vehicle that would fit the bill for a time of high gas prices was conversion vans. Vans converted to be camping friendly were not a new idea in the 1970s. For example, the Volkswagen Camper, or Campmobile (a modified Mircobus), had been offered in the United States since the 1950s.

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[81] "Sales of 'Gas'-Gulping Recreation Vehicles Lag," *The New York Times* (New York), December 22nd, 1973, accessed January 27th, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/1973/12/22/archives/sales-ofgasgulping-recreation-vehicles-lag-energy-crisis-spurs-more.html?_r=0 .
[82] Ibid.

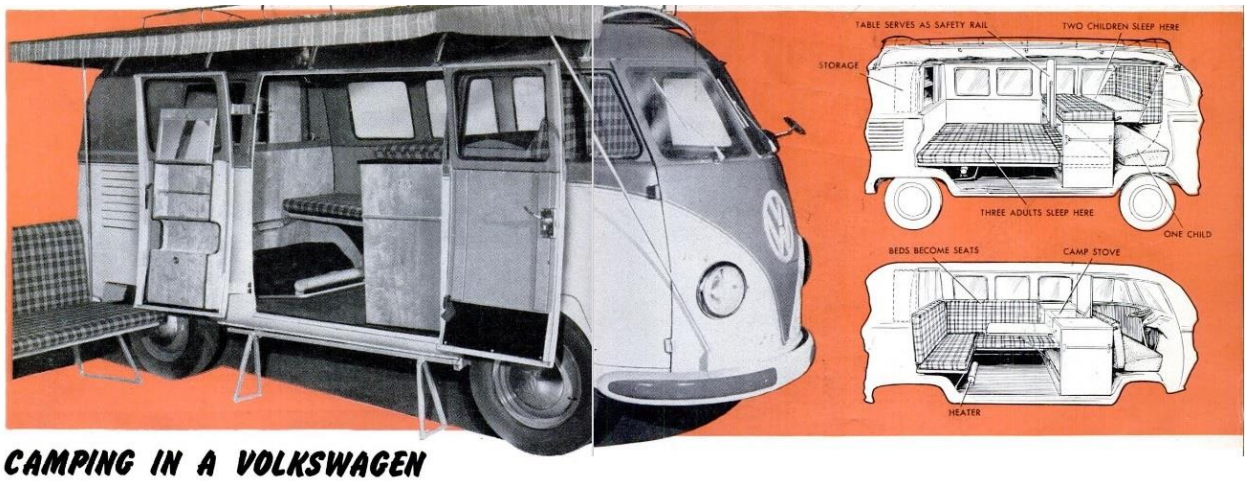

Figure 38: Popular Mechanics "Camping In a Volkswagen" Graphic[83]

In 1955, *Popular Mechanics* did a short feature on this camping bus, stating that "the VW Camper" was "an ingenious offshoot of the Micro Bus."[84] The Camper featured sleeping for three adults and two or three children (partly through folding seats), a gas stove, cabinetry, an awning, and a roof with a generous luggage rack. At the time of the article, the VW Camper sold for $525 dollars over the cost of the base Microbus, which ranged from about $2,000 to $2,700.[85]

Although vehicles like the VW Camper were available prior to the oil crisis, a renewed interest in vans as recreational vehicles of all sorts took hold in the 1970s. A 1975 *Popular Mechanics* article, titled "Vans have got a lot more going!," offers a look at this renewed interest in vans as a base vehicle for economical conversions.[86] The article pointed out the youth oriented association of converted delivery vans for a wide range of social activities, but insisted that vans are no longer just for the young looking for a mobile social space. "In the years since [the end of the 1960s]," the author explained, "vans have changed. Though still built from windowless

[83] "Camping in a Volkswagen," *Popular Mechanics*, July 1955, 84-85.
[84] Ibid., 84.
[85] Ibid., 85.
[86] Bob Behme, "Vans have got a lot more going!," *Popular Mechanics*, November, 1975 , 69,70,160

utility van rigs, they've become a whole new type of recreational vehicle that offers luxury living at relatively low cost."[87] Vans were gaining respectability as they became more popular as motorhome conversions. "They've become more respectable and law-abiding, too" he proclaimed, "you don't have to be a wandering single to enjoy the benefits of traveling in style in a rig customized to suit your own particular needs and tastes."[88] He went onto explain that one can get a van for nearly any kind of activity from hunting or fishing to camping and other outdoor recreational sports.

The key reason that vans were gaining in popularity was that they were affordable in ways that large travel trailers and motorhomes often were not. As the author of the 1975 article explained, "converted vans make good economic sense, too. While most lack the cooking, dining and storage facilities of large, more lavish motor homes and campers, they're still suitable for weekend living—at a fraction of the cost."[89] This is principally of course because these van-type RVs "deliver surprisingly good gas mileage, making them economical to operate."[90] Once the realm of hippies and amorous rendezvous, the conversion van was now an outlet for suppressed desires to enjoy recreational automobility with a more reasonable price tag during the oil crisis, but with the possible exception of the Volkswagen Camper it would have still meant a big gas bill. The article concluded by discussing several ways one might go about obtaining a van conversion that ranged from customizing one in one's own garage to purchasing one from a van specialist (many of which got their start in California). These options were not dissimilar to the options for RV enthusiasts before World War II. In many ways, the conversion van was an even

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[87] Bob Behme. "Vans," 70.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.

closer relative to the long lost house car of the 1920s than was a purpose built RV, because van conversions involved the conversion of a utilitarian vehicle for recreational purposes.

The 1970s was a crisis for the RV industry and many individual firms in particular, but it would not even come close to causing a breakup between Americans and the recreational vehicles. The shift toward smaller RV solutions proved that achieving the core recreational vehicle experience did not require massive trailers or oversized motorhomes. Even a systematic crisis could not end Americans relationship with the RV because the technology was far too adaptable and American users far too committed to enjoying recreational automobility.

The Demise, Legacy, and Rebirth of the Tin Can Tourists

Before leaving the Tin Can Tourists' story behind, it's worth considering directly how the first RV group in the country declined and what its long-term legacy has been for RV culture in America. The Tin Can Tourists' influence is multi-faceted, but centers on the concept of recreational automobility: simply put, they profoundly influenced the direction of mass automobility in America by creating and popularizing a new form of recreation using automotive technology, and at the same time they pioneered a new form of tourism. Despite the general decline of the autocamping movement at the end of the 1920s, the Tin Can Tourists persevered, creating and adopting novel forms of RV technology along the way. The durable organization that they created was an essential factor in the survival of autocamping, as well as its further technological development.

The technologies deployed by the Tin Can Tourists in the late 1920s and 1930s took the form of both the hand-built house car and the manufactured travel trailer. These new products embodied for the first time the modern conception of a purpose-built recreational vehicle. Recreational vehicles had to provide mobile shelter and amenities while they increasingly had to

be convenient, easy to use, and economical. The Tin Can Tourists' hand-built house cars helped to definite many of the requirements for future RVs in terms of their ease of use and convenience, but fell short in terms of their economic practicality as the opportunity cost of a house car conversion was high. The majority of Tin Can Tourists chose to look elsewhere for a recreational vehicle. They found the form of the travel trailer would meet their needs efficiently. The Tin Can Tourists' enthusiastic adoption of the travel trailer supported the new trailer manufacturing companies as well as helped to popularize the technology in wider circles with the Tin Can Tourist trailer shows. The Tin Can Tourists' relationship with the new technology kept the recreational vehicle market alive during the Great Depression, which was a development that benefited mainstream Americans looking to experience recreational automobility after World War II and onward. The Tin Can Tourists of the World came along on each stage of the RV's journey.

The Tin Can Tourists' influence on recreational automobility extended beyond the technology they used to facilitate their activities. They also required specialized places in the form of campgrounds and trailer parks for their recreational vehicles to park, visi,t and resupply. A testament to their effectiveness and influence was their ability to convince local city governments in Florida and other states to provide space and sometimes compete for their patronage. In Florida the Tin Can Tourists became a fixture of both Sarasota, during the 1930s, and their city of origin, Tampa, for many years after World War II. Their influence on the spaces of recreational automobility was not simply limited to the meeting locations. Their influence also continued between events, as Tin Can Tourists used their mobility to travel the country and visit all sorts of destinations and tourist attractions. Through their encouragement and patronage of these sites, the Tin Can Tourists helped develop an infrastructure for recreational automobility

for future Americans on the road. Their patronage influenced the development of the RV as aa technological system of travel.

Taken together the Tin Can Tourists' contributions to the concept of recreational automobility, the technology they employed to achieve it, and the spaces they used created a new form of tourism. Millions of Americans take to the road each year with a recreational vehicle hoping to see new sights and experience America in a new and relatively unrestricted way. Tin Can Tourists did more than any other individual group at a crucial period in the history of the automobile to develop and popularize these activities. The RVers following in the Tin Can Tourists' footsteps may not be aware of the debt they owe the group, but a remarkably clear line can be drawn between these modern Americans and the activities of these earliest RV enthusiasts.

Tin Can Tourists believed that, beyond the recreation they might enjoy through travel trailer use, they would also benefit from greater freedom, autonomy, and a way of lving more closely approximating their democratic ideals because of the mobility the recreational vehicles offered. The Tin Can Tourists chose to become auto-nomads, living full time in their recreational vehicles. Given this unconventional mobile lifestyle they often confronted outsiders who were unsure or critical of them. They confronted these challenges and became valuable temporary members of many communities by maintaining and enforcing traditional social norms and expectations. However, this solution to the public's perception issue may not have been the only choice open to them. In fact, other Americans who sought automotive freedom and autonomy deliberately choose not to seek societal approval, and instead reject social norms, a counter-culture exemplified in Jack Kerouac's 1957 work, *On the Road.* These equally compelling

counter-cultural examples of recreational automobility highlight the ways in which later groups took to the road modified and adapted the concept and the technology to suit their purposes.

Recreational vehicles offered the Tin Can Tourists (and others following in their path) mastery of America's vast spaces and increased opportunities to access both natural and man-made wonders. They could gain closer access to nature and camp in places like national parks without losing the comforts of home. In this respect the recreational vehicle masters nature, allowing its user to experience it without sacrificing technological modernity. They could also travel the country and see man-made wonders such as skyscrapers, tourist attractions, and cultural sights all while bringing their homes with them. Recreational vehicle technology remains exciting because it offers users diverse experiences and nearly infinite choices. The concepts of the RV and recreational automobility connects well with Americans' generally positive feeling towards new technological experiences. Americans often display an inclination to embrace technologies that offer novel experiences with wonderment and excitement.[91] The Tin Can Tourists were no different, and they so enthusiastically embraced the technology that, for all practical purposes, they centered their entire lives around it. The mastery of spaces and access to countless wonders still holds its appeal today, as some pursue recreational vehicle use part-time while others, like the Tin Can Tourists, make it a permanent lifestyle.

The Tin Can Tourists of the World began to decline i and eventually stopped meeting officially in the early 1980s. The group was unable to maintain its numbers. Perhaps the group was no longer representative of the mainstream of RV culture, or perhaps they simply lost out to other specialty enthusiast groups. Other groups did copy and elaborate the activities of recreational automobility that the Tin Can Tourists had pioneered. One such group was the

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[91] David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994), xi-xx.

Wally Byam Caravan Club International, created by Airstream founder Wally Byam. This group's membership was restricted to owners of Airstream travel trailers, perhaps creating an incentive to buy these luxury trailers. As discussed previously, Wally Byam effectively branded his own version of recreational automobility in terms of his own vision. Others did not necessarily need to be part of a formal group to experience RVs. Travelers with families (unwelcome in the Tin Can Tourists) could use travel trailers for family vacations. Whether formal groups or individuals, many today pursue similar interests in travel while enjoying the technologies and spaces shaped by Tin Can Tourists' influence.

Another factor in the decline of the Tin Can Tourists was the influence of the oil crisis that certainly impacted the economics of these auto-nomads. The group felt economic strains put on them in the 1970s by the decade's high inflation and the Arab oil embargo, which were represented in a decline in the recreational vehicle market. The 1970s is known generally as a decade of economic stagnation for the United States. It was an era of higher inflation that could diminish the relative spending power of retired fixed-income people such as the Tin Can Tourists. The decade also saw instability in the price and availability of oil, which led to higher, less stable gasoline prices and limited quantities. Increased prices and limited availability of gasoline would hit Tin Can Tourists especially hard in that they required it for their travels. Trailer production numbers display this general trend away from travel trailers in the 1970s (the group's favorite RV format). Recreational type trailers dropped from 241,300 units produced in 1972 to 186,400 in 1977, an almost twenty-three percent drop.[92] These economic strains may

[92] *Census of Manufactures 1972,* (*Washington, D.C.:* U.S. Dept. of Commerce 1972); *Census of Manufactures 1977*.

have left some Tin Can Tourists unable to travel and reduced the number of new retirees who could practically afford to join the group.

For a combination of these reasons the original organization withered, and ultimately ceased its formal operations. The original Tin Can Tourists of the World met officially for the last known time in 1982. The group had made remarkable contributions to American culture, but the times had changed and the original group could not continue. The group's history had been left largely unstudied or misunderstood prior to this research. This is partially due to a confusion or conflation of the Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners during the early years, which has often led to the false assumption that the tin-canners' disappearance in the late 1920s also meant the end of the Tin Can Tourists. It may also be due to the fact that this highly individualistic and mobile group left less obvious physical signs of their influence, instead leaving only ideas and ideologies that remained buried in their archival collections and in the memories of its dying membership. However, the Tin Can Tourists of the World were not entirely forgotten and since 1998 have been reborn as a new group dedicated to restoring and travelling with antique trailers and motorhomes. In doing so, perhaps they are drawing on nostalgia for their own childhood RV experiences. More broadly, however, the development of the second Tin Can Tourist organization shows how diverse the RV community interests have become. From the new group's vintage trailer interest, to those looking for the latest and greatest to those looking to reject all preconceived notions about mobile accommodations, the RV's flexibility is perhaps its greatest asset in maintaining its role in American Culture. The flexibility of the RV as cultural icon will be the focus of the final section.

EPILOGUE AND CONCLUSIONS: THE PROTEAN NATURE OF THE RECREATIONAL VEHICLE IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Despite the overall importance of the recreational vehicle industry to sustaining the RV as a cultural icon, enthusiasts, craft-oriented people, and freethinking individuals continue to build vehicles they cannot or do not want to buy from a manufacturer. Whereas the case of early house cars and homemade trailers shows that tinkering, conversion, or homemade custom production can create new technological categories [Chapter 2], the history of modification and creativity continued with other types of vehicles frequently being converted into RVs. It seems that nearly any road vehicle might find itself converted into an RV.

Almost from the beginning, observers of recreational vehicle technology have noticed the potential for self-expression within the technology. Back in 1937, the author of *Trailer Engineering*, Ray Kuns, wrote that "[those] who decide to build [a travel trailer] will find the field wide open for self expression."[1] Even today, the recreational vehicle continues to be a technology that invites craftsmen and tinkerers to both modify existing units as well as to convert non-RVs into many users' dream setups. There has not been a period in the history of RVs that has not had its fair share of vehicles born from the processes of tinkering, conversion, and creative construction. The motor bus has often been a great candidate as a host vehicle for tinkerers' and enthusiasts' ambitions. In many instances people build RVs that go well beyond

[1] Kuns, *Trailer Engineering*, 1.

simple conversions, as evident in the continued popularity of complete custom projects that spring from the imagination and skills of users and artists alike.

This section suggests just how adaptable the RV has become in American culture in terms of how they are produced, what they are used for, and what they mean to the people using them. RVs have been adapted to the ideas of counter-cultural movements throughout the post-World War II era. They have also been adapted (often in fairly similar ways) to the activities of sports fans across the country in the form of customized tailgating vehicles. If we go beyond the potentially narrow confines of what constitutes a "recreational vehicle," one can see that the technology of the RV has been adapted to various alternative living arrangements, most recently popularized in the Tiny Homes Movement. Finally, I consider here the very outer boundaries of the RV. In this regard, there is perhaps no better place to look than the art vehicles found at the Burning Man Festival: these vehicles test not just the boundaries of what we consider recreational vehicles, but even transcend the definition of a conveyance in becoming a form of art. This section also reinforces the argument, made throughout this dissertation, that the reason the recreational vehicle has become such an iconic part of American culture is its adaptability. As much as one would like to draw firm boundaries between what is and is not a recreational vehicle, the standard remains elusive as people have always looked to their recreational vehicles to meet their individualized needs on the road.

Figure 39: Original Bus Further (right) with 1990 remake Further (left)[2]

A great place to start any discussion of expressiveness in the world of RVs is by considering one of the most iconic bus conversions of all time, Ken Kesey's famed road-trip bus "Further." Its story began when Kesey and his Merry Pranksters were planning a trip to the 1964 New York World's Fair. When it became clear that Kesey's station wagon could not carry the growing numbers of the Pranksters, a bus was chosen to serve as their mobile accommodations. The vehicle, soon named Further, started out as a rather mundane 1939 International Harvester school bus. After serving its years transporting school kids, it was then purchased by a man from Menlo Park who converted it into an RV for his family. According to Tom Wolfe, in the *Electric*

[2] "Ken Kesey's son aims for 50th Anniversary Further bus tour," *The Oregonian*, http://www.oregonlive.com/today/index.ssf/2014/05/ken_keseys_son_aims_for_50th_a.html, (accessed September 5, 2015).

Kool-Aid Acid Test, "He had rigged out the bus for the children. It had bunks and benches and a refrigerator and a sink for washing dishes and cabinets and shelves and a lot of other nice features for living on the road."[3] Kesey bought this converted RV school bus for $1500, and the Pranksters set about a dramatic remodel. It was painted wildly with colorful paint, rigged to allow for on-the-go roof access, and wired with a sound system to allow for broadcasting both within and outside the bus. It would serve the group well in its journey—despite breaking down a few times—allowing the group to reach New York in acid-fueled style. The original Further was finally put to pasture in 1969 after a Prankster trip to Woodstock.[4]

The story of Further is interesting in two regards. First, it shows that bus conversions represented a viable tinkerer's (in this case Pranksters') alternative to buying a new RV in the postwar period, as the man from Menlo Park's story demonstrated. The Pranksters did not want an off the shelf travel trailer or other unit they could buy from a dealership, but instead a blank canvas for their own expression. It also shows that these vehicles can undergo multiple instances of tinkering or conversion, with each suiting the current end users' desires and intended useage. A school bus and a psychedelic road trip machine may be ideologically far apart, but in the hands of professionals, tinkerers, or even enthusiastic amateurs the transition is nonetheless readily achievable.

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[3] Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2008), 67.
[4] Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, *Magic Trip*, directed by Alex Gibney and Allison Elwood, Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2011, and "Ken Kesey's son aims for 50th Anniversary Further bus tour," *The Oregonian*, http://www.oregonlive.com/today/index.ssf/2014/05/ken_keseys_son_aims_for_50th_a.html, (accessed September 5, 2015).

Figure 40: Auburn Football Tailgating Bus the Tiger Prowler[5]

Although perhaps not realizing it, the sport enthusiasts who create modern tailgating RVs out of school buses replicate many of the same design choices as the Merry Pranksters. Take the Tiger Prowler in Figure 40 as an example. It features a top party deck, an array of colorful decorations related to Auburn Football, and even a sound system on top. Much like the Merry Pranksters, the owner of the Tiger Prowler notes that he "[gets] pulled over just so the cops can look inside."[6] The conversion of buses allow these craftspeople and tinkerers to create the RV of

[5] Amber Sutton, "Tiger fans enjoy tailgating near the stadium during Auburn A-Day (photos)" al.com http://www.al.com/auburnfootball/index.ssf/2013/04/tiger_fans_enjoy_tailgating_ne.html (accessed September 2nd, 2015).
[6] Ibid.

their dreams that they could not or would not want to purchase. These cases help in explaining why tinkering and modification has been such a persistent strand in the story of the RV in America. Understanding RV tinkering can mostly be achieved by acknowledging the potential for self-expression, creativity, and pride of craftsmanship that the tinkered RV allows users to enjoy. This drive goes beyond counter-culture road trip machines and tailgating buses. These custom creations span a wide range of diverse users building their vehicles for a wide range of purposes, which includes the desire to building one's own tiny dream.

Figure 41: Tiny House Yellow School Bus Conversion[7]

To take the examination of school buses further, Figure 41 features yet another bus conversion, but this time the users wished to create their own tiny home out of this utilitarian

[7] "Couple Transforms A Big Yellow School Bus Into A Seriously Cozy Home," Tiny House For Us, http://tinyhousefor.us/tiny-house-spotlight/couple-transforms-school-bus-into-a-seriously-cozy-home/ (Accessed August 30, 2015).

mass mover canvas. The base for the home was a 1989 International school bus, but only the very front of it gives away its origins in its current configuration. The interior design resembles a comfortable—albeit tiny—modern home with a handcrafted and retro spin. The exterior, when viewed from the rear, resembles more closely a small cabin rather than a road vehicle. When compared to Ken Kesey's Further, this bus seems tame, but still reflects the craftsperson's idea of perfect mobile accommodations. The Tiny Home Movement itself warrants further consideration as a culturally significant group of enthusiasts existing on the fringes of recreational vehicle culture. It is true that not all tiny homes are mobile. In fact, many are permanent housing built on a miniaturized scale, but all have nearly similar space considerations as recreational vehicles. The mobile tiny homes (both in the form of converted buses and homemade trailers) certainly can meet the definition of a recreational vehicle proposed in this dissertation.

Perhaps then, the retired couple living in their Winnebago year-round has quite a bit more in common with a younger hipster couple living in a tiny home bus than they might realize. There are likely connections between the Tiny Home Movement and back-to-the-land counter cultural movements popular in the 1960s and 1970s. The movement also rejects the normal assumptions of large site built housing so common in suburbia. All of these connections are worth further exploration.

Figure 42: Neverwas Haul at Burning Man Festival 2009[8]

Figure 43: Two Desert Ships at Burning Man Festival[9]

Pushing yet further, weird has truly not been left behind in the 1960s when it comes to the tinkerers and the craftspeople who build the art vehicles for the Burning Man Festival. This festival is held annually in the remote Black Rock Desert of Nevada. It attracts all sorts of artistic displays, people, and events. Figures 42 and 43 show a very modest sample of the diverse array of accommodations on wheels that annually roll into the festival. These vehicles take expression as the primary purpose for the RV and even begin to bend the lines of what truly constitutes a

[8] These are just a few of the many possible examples of Burning Man art vehicles. Scott London, "Neverwas Haul by Shannon O'Hare," Mutant Vehicles, http://www.scottlondon.com/photography/artcars/ (accessed September 2nd, 2015).
[9] Scott London, "Two desert ships, Gypsy Queen (left) and Lady Sassafras," Mutant Vehicles, http://www.scottlondon.com/photography/artcars/ (accessed September 2nd, 2015).

road vehicle. Its important to note that the Burning Man Festival is founded in part on the idea of "radical self-reliance," which means that those attending the festival in these creations need to provide for or barter for the shelter and supplies needed to survive in the desert.[10] It can be said then that many of these vehicles do indeed meet the definition of a recreational vehicle, as they do support a camping-type activity. Nonetheless, they primarily demonstrate that self-expression as well as a pride in craftsmanship persists as a value. In the case of RVs, some enthusiasts continue to find that if you cannot buy what you want you can just build one.

The recreational vehicle, then, has embedded itself in American culture because of its adaptability and because it taps into the American desire to travel on the highway system. The RV was born from this highway system and early automobile tourists looking for a technological fix for their lodging problems. It seemed through the first few decades of recreational automobility that form followed function as tent-and-car setups gave way to house cars that gave way to the travel trailer. Even as trailers began to gain supremacy after World War II, the trailers themselves began to diversify with some shifting towards travel with other shifting towards housing. In just over a decade the recreational vehicle industry began to include even more options, including a variety of motorhomes, conversion vans, and pickup bed campers. The oil crisis of the 1970s shifted emphasis away from giant gas-guzzlers to smaller or more efficient options. Today an RV can be had at nearly any price point and in nearly any configuration that one desires from multi-million dollar mansions on wheels to humble used vans. This is all without forgetting that craftspeople and enthusiasts continued to build their own vehicles that met their own desires.

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[10]"10 Principles of Burning Man," *Burning Man* accessed January 1st, 2017, http://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/

The recreational vehicle is adaptable at its core. It is a technology heavily reliant and definitely constrained by its automotive origins, but its protean nature meant that the technology never met a dead end in American society. No matter what the future holds for the automobile, whether electrical or autonomous, there is no doubt there will still be RVs in some shape or size.

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APPENDIX I

Trailer Manufacturers before 1930:

East Coast & Mid-West		
Firm Name:	City	State
Arehart Bros (Palace Corp.)	Flint	Michigan
Chenango Camp Trailer	Norwich	New York
Curtiss Aerocar	Opa-Locka	Florida
Gilke Trailers Corp.	Terra Haute	Indiana
Raymong Products Company (Travelo)	Saginaw	Michigan
Schelbro Coach	Peoria	Illinois
Split Coach Motor Corp	York	Pennsylvania
Travelcar Corperation	Detroit	Michigan
Travelon (Roycraft)	Detroit	Michigan
Zagelmeyer Auto Camp Co.	Bay City	Michigan
West Coast		
Firm Name:	City	State
Airfloat Coach Manufacturing Co.	Los Angeles	California
General Coach	Los Angeles	California

Location information derived from Carlton Edwards, *Homes for Travel and Living*, 103.

Trailer Manufacturers during the 1930s:

Firm Name	City	State
Aladdin Company	Bay City	Michigan
Alma Trailer Company	Alma	Michigan
Anderson Coach Company	Marshall	Michigan
Covered Wagon Company	Detroit (Mt. Clemens)	Michigan
Glider Trailer Company	Chicago	Illinois
Indian Trailer Company	Chicago	Illinois
Kauneel Company	Bay City	Michigan
Kozy Coach Company	Kalamazoo	Michigan
Platt Trailer Company, Inc.	Elkhart	Indiana
Prairie Schooner Trailer Co.	Elkhart	Indiana
Redman Trailer Company	Alma	Michigan
Royal Coach Company	Sturgis	Michigan
Schult Trailers, Inc.	Elkhart	Indiana
Trotwood Trailers, Inc.	Trotwood	Ohio
Vagabond Coach Company	New Hudson	Michigan
Wolfe Body Co. (Silverdome)	Detroit	Michigan
Zimmer Boat and Trailer Co.	Detroit	Michigan
West Coast		
Firm Name	City	State
Airstream Trailers	Los Angeles	California
Bowlus-Teller	San Fernando	California
Halsco Company, Inc. (Land Yacht)	Los Angeles	California
Hollywood Trailer Company (Nomad)	Los Angeles	California
Masterbilt Coach Trailer	Los Angeles	California
Traveleze Trailer Company	Sun Valley	California
Zimair Trailer Company	Los Angeles	California

Location information derived from Carlton Edwards, *Homes for Travel and Living*, 103-104.