

The Dumb Things Sold

...just like that!



A History of the Recreational
Vehicle Industry in America

Al Hesselbart

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Chapter 1

The Development Of The Recreational Vehicle Industry In America

The Recreational Vehicle industry, popular in both America and abroad, has its roots in camping, hunting, and outdoor activities that were common long before the advent of the automobile. Travelers, including the American Plains Indian travois, loaded tents, provisions, cooking and sleeping equipment and pulled them around the countryside on wagons and carts long before there was any mechanical means of propulsion. Nomadic people around the world made such travel their lifestyle. American hunters camped to get provisions. American city dwellers camped for recreation. The horse-drawn houses used in gypsy caravans traveled around Central Europe more than a century before the advent of the horseless carriage. In modern time, fulltime RV'ers have lifestyles that parallel those early gypsy campers.

The advent of the automobile, in the early 1900's, greatly increased the range of travel for campers and vagabonds alike. Mechanical power made it easier for them to take more supplies and comforts along on their adventures. At first, these early "auto campers" simply piled their tents, equipment, and supplies in and on their vehicles and headed for their retreats. It did not take long for the enterprising travelers to realize that carts and trailers could to be attached to their cars, increasing the carrying capacity many times over. The earliest trailers were, in most cases, simply modified horse drawn carts with wooden cartwheels. But the lighter wagon wheels could not endure the bouncing caused by driving 10 to 15 miles per hour on the ruts in the dirt roads that were the early highways. Soon, the cartwheels were replaced with heavier automobile-type tires. This comfortable mode of travel, coupled with the ease in which travelers



An early Yellowstone auto camper.

could haul and store their camping equipment, was the beginning of the modern RV lifestyle and its related industry.

By the early teens, trailers were being built not only to transport camping supplies and equipment, but to also be used as “house trailers” or mobile cabins. These earliest units were designed to store provisions, as a place to prepare and eat meals, and as a comfortable, relatively bug-proof sleeping area. “Living rooms” and most daytime activities were still relegated to the great outdoors. These first “house trailers” were usually homemade or custom built by local handymen or carriage makers. At first, no brand name companies were involved in the commercial production of camping trailers.

By the mid teens, imaginative campers were creating “house cars” by motorizing their camping vehicles. These units were primarily one-of-a-kind, custom built for personal use by the owner. Some were permanently built on auto or truck chassis. Others were exchangeable. A passenger body could be used for daily travel and then switched with a camping body for vacation travel. Early auto bodies were bolt-on structures added to a rigid frame and therefore could be removed and exchanged. Until the mid 1920’s, almost all such units were homemade or one of a kind, usually built by local craftsmen. Then, a few manufacturers began building multiple units for resale. The rush was on.

With the rapid growth in numbers of these early “auto campers” came a corresponding demand for safe and scenic places to camp and enjoy the out-of-doors. This need was one of the primary motivations for the development and growth of the U.S. National Park system in the early 1920’s. City and county operated camping sites were becoming popular at the same time. Communities began to realize that the travelers usually brought money with them that would be spent at local businesses.

The stock market crash of 1929, and the economic disaster that followed, slowed the rise of the new industry. But the rapidly growing body of enthusiastic “trailerites”, as early RVers were identified, wouldn’t be slowed for long, even by the Great Depression. In some ways, the Depression created a new need for the mobile homes. Home-owners who lost their houses were forced into an itinerate lifestyle by economic conditions. Very shortly, the popularity of trailers was back on a meteoric rise. By the mid 1930’s, one manufacturer, The Covered Wagon Company of Mt. Clemons, Michigan, was building 40 to 50 units per eight-hour shift from a single factory. Industry production records indicate that, in 1936, one sixth of the nation’s total recorded trailer production came from that single, Detroit-area, factory.

By 1939, there were well over 100 trailer coach manufacturing companies and an even larger body of suppliers and parts distributors. Associations of manufacturers were becoming organized on both the local and national scale. These associations lobbied lawmakers and worked to promote the industry’s image. Large national and international organizations of trailer owners were also springing up. Leaders in these organizations were experts at promotion who hosted popular events that were well attended by owners. Local and national retail and wholesale trailer shows were also organized, attracting large crowds. At first, all of the larger shows were held in conjunction with equally large consumer rallies and events. The Tin Can Tourists of the World, organized in 1919, had by this time become the largest of the consumer groups with hundreds of thousands of members representing both the USA and Canada. At one Tin Can Tourists rally and retail show in 1936, there were well over 1,000 units and nearly 3,000 participants in attendance.

World War II caused a second major pause in the dynamic growth of the RV industry. With strict material rationing and the conscription of many of its workers and potential customers, RV manufacturers all but halted production. Some manufacturers converted their production to various war related items. Others produced units as temporary housing for workers at war production facilities and military bases.

After the end of the war came the good times of the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. There was a great burst of technological advances that made trailers more comfortable. Included in this were portable propane and butane cylinders that allowed gas stoves and heaters to replace the liquid fuelled models used to date. On-board refrigeration



Folding tent campers first appeared in the early 1900’s.

replaced iceboxes for food preservation. Hot and cold running water was available as were on-board toilets, showers, and 110-volt generators. All of these improvements led to an increased popularity of the self-contained traveling lifestyle as a family activity.

As “baby boomers” grew up in the 1960’s and began to look for inexpensive recreational activities for their young families, the RV industry experienced continued growth. Hundreds of new companies, including many of today’s industry giants, sprung up across the country. The growth of what had been, up to this point, a trailer-based industry was further enhanced with the advent and availability of affordable, assembly line produced, motorhomes. The development of modern pick-up trucks also enabled the creation and popularization of the slide-in pick-up carried campers and the related “type C” motorhomes. Today these are based mostly on van chassis rather than the original pick-up truck chassis.

That 1960’s boom in RV industry growth and the dramatic explosion of affordable motorized units was again nearly destroyed by economic events. The oil embargo and resultant fuel shortages and astronomically high interest rates of the 1970’s, caused more than half of the manufacturers in the industry to go out of business. To survive, many merged into companies that today are giants in the industry. Through the 1970’s, the lifestyle was more often referred to as camping. The rigs, whether motorized or towed, were still called “campers”, just as they were fifty years earlier.

In the early 1980’s, another dynamic change brought complete livability to the units. Many people, with little interest in camping and nature-based outdoor activities, became attracted to longer and larger rigs. These rigs had living room space with couches, recliners, TV, VCR, air conditioning and other home-like comforts. The lifestyle known today as RVing began to partially replace “camping” as the travel attraction. Destination-oriented trips became popular, replacing the family jaunt to a favorite



Sergeants enforced strict rules of conduct at Tin Can Tourist camps, such as this one in Gainesville, Florida.



By 1937, a 18-foot Schult Deluxe camping trailer included many of the amenities of home.

campsite. This alteration in comforts and conveniences made “full-timing” possible. Many retirees and some families sold their real estate based homes and resided full time on the road. Today, some RV’s are better equipped with modern living accessories than the owners’ permanent home. Towable rigs (travel trailers and fifth-wheel units) with prices approaching one hundred thousand dollars, not including the towing vehicle, and motorized units with high six figure and even seven digit price tags sell nearly as fast as they can be built.

From the 1930’s into the early 1960’s, units were usually less than twenty feet long. Twelve to fifteen feet were the most common lengths. Most of the motorized, as well as the towable, units of the 1960’s were less than twenty-five feet long. With improvements in both vehicles and highways, unit length grew. Thirty to forty-foot long units are common today. The added length allows the addition of more home-like features in modern RV’s.

Pricing on early units varied as widely as prices do today. Entry-level towable trailers in the Depression days of the 1930’s were sold in the \$250 to \$400 price range. Luxury trailers of that time had prices as high as \$1,000. At the same time, luxury fifth wheel rigs (which were often sold with a matching tow vehicle included) and “land yacht” motorized “housecars” up to 35 feet long started at \$25,000.

Today’s RV lifestyle has progressed from its camping roots in the horse and buggy days, through the early auto campers, the trailerites and Tin Can Tourists of the 20’s, 30’s, and 40’s. The medium-sized campers of the 50’s and 60’s were the first campers to include conveniences and comforts. But it was the upsizing of vehicles and the resulting larger units of the 70’s and 80’s that really allowed campers to become RV’ers and led to today’s luxury RV lifestyle. This has attracted a completely new group of participants who have no real interest in camping and basic wilderness outdoor activities. The RV owner of today enjoys the many benefits of self-contained travel both as a temporary and full time lifestyle.