

GOLDEN OLDIES

VINTAGE CAMPING TRAILERS STOKE OUR COLLECTIVE LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE MID-20TH CENTURY AND CONNECT ENTHUSIASTS FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE

With the popularity of vintage camping trailers exploding over the past decade, more and more enthusiasts are participating in the hobby, and still more are dreaming of getting a classic trailer of their own someday. Now deemed retro, trailers manufactured in the mid-20th century are easily recognized with their iconic “canned-ham” and “silver Twinkie” shapes and cozy *Leave It to Beaver* ambience. If you already appreciate these nostalgic pieces of our past, spotting them is comparable to finding a pot of gold hidden among the thousands of modern trailers roaming along North America’s highways and byways.

Our family is immersed in the vintage-trailer scene. While traveling, we often play our own version of Slug Bug, seeking to be the first to spot a vintage trailer. In reality, it is three against one, as Paul, my husband, is the dominator of this game. Our two children try to take down the king for no reason other than to have bragging rights for having bested their dad.

Identifying trailers is natural for Angelo, 13, and Grace, 11, as they have

been camping in vintage trailers for the past 10 years. When both were in diapers, I wanted to go camping but was reluctant to return to a tent. In 2006, Paul found a 1962 DeVille trailer for sale just a few miles from our home. He purchased it for \$500 and excitedly towed it home, declaring it perfect for our family. We had no road map and no idea what the future held for us, as we started our adventure in this little trailer.

EARLY DAYS

In the early 1900s, Henry Ford’s assembly line was pushing out cars at an unheard-of rate, making them more attainable for the middle class. Road conditions were continually improving, and towing a trailer behind a vehicle seemed like a convenient way for a family to vacation and see the country while bringing the essentials of home along with them. (I am sure I wasn’t the only mother thinking I didn’t want to sleep on the ground with small children.)

The earliest travel trailers were little more than a tent on wheels, and by today’s standards, they left much to be desired in the way of creature comforts. These campers were often home-built trailers made to meet the individual owner’s needs. Around 1916, several manufacturing companies were established, and camping trailers



Vintage-trailer rallies are a chance for enthusiasts to gather and enjoy the weekend at their mid-century-inspired campsites.

began being mass-produced. By the late 1930s, these small-box trailers had evolved into homes on wheels. Units were being built with full kitchens, flushing toilets and exquisitely detailed designs to meet the needs of couples and families wanting to hit the road or have affordable housing.

Camping-trailer construction methods have long had close ties with the aircraft industry. The first riveted-aluminum camping trailer, the Road Chief, was built by William Hawley Bowlus in 1934. At Ryan Airline Company (later renamed B.F. Mahoney Aircraft Corporation), Bowlus supervised construction of Charles Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis*. With his expertise in aircraft manufacturing, Bowlus used known technology to design an aluminum trailer that was emulated by many of the future trailer manufacturers, including Airstream.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, domestic manufacturing shifted to meet the demands of World War II.

With aluminum on the critical war-material list, travel trailer production was put on hold.

After the surrender of Germany and Japan, returning servicemen and their families were in need of homes, jobs and mobility. The camping-trailer industry boomed. Brands such as Silver Streak, Alaskan, Dalton, Boles Aero, Kenskill, Shasta and Aristocrat that are now coveted by trailer enthusiasts were all start-up companies during this time. Many were started in backyards, garages and empty sheds, while some, like Spartan, were a war manufacturing company's answer to how to use their facilities and materials in a postwar industry.

Wally Byam, the founder of Airstream, was a visionary in sharing the dream of trailer ownership. He wanted to open up the world to his customers and show them the possibilities. Byam left two manufacturing facilities in the hands of employees and took off on caravans around the globe.



This soon caused the Airstream name to be synonymous with adventure. After traveling across postwar Europe on a three-month tour, Byam led caravans into Central America, Asia and Europe. Airstreams and their owners were lined up and ready to see the world. The joy of exploration in a trailer has never wavered.

In the early 1980s, I was a young girl growing up in a small town in south-central Alaska. I remember being in

(Far left) Nick, Nicole and two-month-old Levi are the third and fourth generations of Lamb family trailer enthusiasts. (Left) Rich and Debbie Hershey tow a 1955 Roadliner with a classic '57 Ford Country Sedan Wagon.



Charles and Virginia Diffey are the proud owners of a Scotsman trailer, which Virginia named Lottie-Dah, and a matching 1960s Chevy pickup.



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awe when the Airstream caravan came to town. Hundreds of silver bullets landing overnight in the middle of our small town presented a feeling of exploration. What were those things, and who were those people who had come to Kenai? As an adult, I now understand the wanderlust of caravanning and gladly join in the journey in one of our restored vintage trailers.

ESPRIT DE CAMPING

With childhood memories wrapped up in trailers manufactured from the 1940s through the late '60s, many baby boomers have a love affair with mid-century Americana. Vintage trailers' pink-sparkle Formica, boomerang laminates, curved wood paneling and aluminum wings are the epitome of what is idolized from that era. Walking into an old trailer triggers memories that may have been shelved for many years as individuals recall summers spent on the road with their families, playing cribbage with Grandma while eating cookies baked in the camp stove or fishing with Grandpa at a remote lake high in the hills.

Today, rallies and car shows across the continent give people the opportunity to reminisce about their time spent in a "trailer just like this." Rallies are typically weekend gatherings where owners bring trailers manufactured prior to the mid-1970s and spend the weekend camping together. Often rallies have an open house that allows the general public to come join in the fun as they look at the various models

of trailers that have survived and been brought back to life, trailers that can once again be enjoyed as they were originally intended.

Each rally is slightly different, but they all host a group of enthusiastic trailer owners who are happy sharing stories and laughs with visitors, as well as unreservedly dressing up for dances, dog parades, pajama processions and queen contests. These events have become so popular that they sell out quickly and often have waiting lists the same day reservations are opened.

As hosts of the Trailerfest Rally in Lodi, California, we have more than 250 trailers registered for the October event with nearly another 100 on the waiting list. This hobby welcomes everyone. In our *Vintage Camper Trailers* magazine, it is not uncommon to find more than 80 rallies in 20 states inviting everyone who wants to join in the fun.

Rally-goers are as diverse as the trailers they own. This unusual cross section of the population makes for fun gatherings. While a large number of enthusiasts are retired folks and empty-nesters looking for a fun pastime, a growing number of younger families are getting into the mix. You can find almost every walk of life represented at trailer rallies. There are housewives, single parents, young families, doctors, dentists, welders, barbers, painters, chefs, working professionals and retirees.

We even have a few who enjoy making a political statement with their vintage trailers. One trailerite will

(Above, from left) Corey, Monica and Evelyn Bolen with their lovingly restored 1948 United and the miniature trailer Corey built for his daughter. Shasta owners Barry and Faye Holland pose with *Flippin' RVs* host Justin Scribner at the annual Trailerfest Rally in Lodi, California. For Tim and Pam Haworth, an aluminum 1950 Aljoa Sportsman is their home away from home. Caroline and Paul Lacinicola with daughter Grace and son Angelo, and the family's beloved 1948 Trailercraft.

change the picture of the president in his camper depending on where he is that weekend. If he is in a conservative part of the country, he hangs a picture of Ronald Reagan. If he lands in a liberal region, he puts up a picture of John F. Kennedy.

While a little quirky, these wide-ranging personalities all add to the unique feel of a get-together that is hard to match anywhere else. For several days rally-goers are living next to people they have just met. Unlike regular camping, they already have a connection to their neighbors because they all love vintage trailers.

FACES IN THE CROWD

We have met people at these outings who have become like family. Often we get together outside of rallies just to hang out and enjoy each other's company. Some have even become surrogate grandparents, aunts and uncles to our children. This is a hobby that provides the participants an occasion to enjoy a real feeling of belonging. After all, we are a rather

peculiar bunch who want to share in the preservation and joy of celebrating North America's golden past.

The Lambs are a four-generation camping family. Recently we met up with Steve and Debra, their son, Nick, and his wife, Nicole. It was a notable campout because it was the first time two-month-old Levi Lamb joined the family in vintage camping.

Grandpa Steve recalls going on outings with his father, Jim, from the time he was about five years old. In 1969 Jim came home with a 1956 Chevrolet pickup that he still owns today. Not long after that, he purchased a 1940 teardrop trailer. Over the years, Jim owned a 1963 Aristocrat Lil' Loafer and a 1978 Nomad. And when he retired, he bought a 1984 Road Ranger. Though not quite "vintage," the 23-foot Road Ranger, hooked up to the '56 Chevy, traveled more than 90,000 miles during the following 13 years, covering 46 states.

Steve bought his first camping trailer, a 1971 Cardinal, when he was 18. A motorcycle rider, he spent a lot of time riding in the desert and enjoyed having a 16-foot trailer to stay in when a sandstorm would blow through. Later, he and Debra took their two children on numerous camping trips in various vintage trailers, including a 1965 Oasis, towed with their 1966 Ford F-100.

Memories of those trips spurred Nick to acquire his own collection of trailers. Currently, he tows a 1964 Aristocrat Mainliner with his 1964 Ford Ranch Wagon. Now the fourth generation, little Levi, is on his way to



Jim and Shelley Luke bought this '59 Corvette after visiting a vintage-trailer rally. "As soon as we saw those little gems, we knew we had to get a trailer and be part of the fun," says Shelley.

making memories that may inspire him to carry on the family tradition.

Another rally-going couple, Monica and Corey Bolen, restores vintage cars and trailers as a creative outlet. When we first met the Bolens years ago, they were towing their 1957 Jewel behind a custom 1928 Ford Model A.

They had just found a new listing for a 1948 United on Craigslist. Monica decided to be courteous and wait until 6 a.m. to call the seller. She was the first to call and was able to buy the vintage trailer. As soon as the Bolens cleaned up and repaired the interior, and applied two-tone exterior paint, they started reaping the benefits of their "new" old trailer. Corey even built their daughter, Evelyn, a miniature trailer so she can be wheeled around the car shows and rallies where her dad often performs with Nick Lamb as part of the Vintage Vandals, a rockabilly band.

While writing our book, *Vintage*

Camper Trailers, Paul and I interviewed hundreds of people about why they got into the hobby. We met one woman who said she had no direction in her life once her children left the house. She found an article about vintage camping and decided to give it a try. Knowing nothing about towing a trailer, she found how-to videos online and went for it. She said she learns something every time she goes out and has found that the vintage-trailer community is more than happy to help.

From first-time owners to life-long campers to enthusiastic admirers, there is place for everyone to join in the fun of making new memories while enjoying the trailers of yesteryear. 🚐

Vintage Camper Trailers

Website, bimonthly magazine, hardcover book, rallies, related gear and classifieds for vintage-trailer enthusiasts. www.vintagecampertrailers.com



Rescuing and restoring mid-century trailers is a labor of love for enthusiasts. (Above) The woodwork shines inside a 1950s Aljoa. (Right) Another '50s classic, this Shasta trailer welcomes guests with a retro-style awning.