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Life on the Road: A Personal & Public History of RVing

AMERICANS ARE A RESTLESS PEOPLE, CONSTANTLY ON THE MOVE, always expecting greener grass and greater opportunities over the next hill, beyond the horizon. For our predecessors, the covered wagon served as a traveling home, despite its lack of luxury. Tent camping provided a little more comfort for exploring America, but still slowed down the footloose wanderers.

Once the automobile came into everyday use, pioneering RVers didn't wait for specialty camping vehicles to be invented—they began to create their own motor homes just after the turn of the 20th century, in 1901. We discovered RVing in the early 1990s and, after an initial shakedown period, learned to love our life on the road. Our only regret now is that we didn't start earlier.

Excerpts from a Road Diary; or, If We Can Do This, Anyone Can

After more than 25 years on the road as travel writers, we've taken just about every mode of transportation known to man, including hot-air balloons, elephants, and dugout canoes. But our lives changed when we set out for the first time in an RV, a leased 27-foot Winnebago Brave motor home, on a 6-week trip. We visited more than 100 remote ski areas all over the United States in order to research a guidebook.

In an earlier life, as film and television actors, we had spent many long days in RVs changing clothes and studying scripts—they are used as dressing rooms on film locations and studio sound stages—but we had never been in one that moved. In selecting an RV, we took into account what we could deal with in terms of the size of both the inside and outside spaces; then we compromised. Here are some notes from that first time, written in the passion of the moment.

AUGUST 12

At the California dealer from which we are leasing the motor home, a young man named Daryll, with sun-bleached, shoulder-length hair and a (first) Persian Gulf War T-shirt, walks us through the RV, noting how easy everything is and how nothing can go wrong. We nod wisely and make frantic scribbled notes like "circuit breaker and fuses in bedroom" and "generator runs off gas tanks" and "water pump—switch off while moving." When he leaves us alone for a while, we go into a frenzy of measuring and drawing diagrams.

AUGUST 14

The day before we are scheduled to leave, we lay out newspaper sections on the floor of our apartment, folded to fit the measurements of the RV's cupboards. Then we set out the items we intend to put in each cupboard and pack only those items in a box labeled for it.

AUGUST 15

Unfortunately, life isn't that rational and orderly. On packing day, we are forced to double-park in our crowded urban neighborhood and carry boxes of books, cartons of pots and pans, and hangers of clothes back and forth from our apartment to the street. One of us keeps a constant eye on everything so nothing is stolen, dumping things wherever there is space in the RV, most of it on the plastic-wrapped mattress and in the bathroom shower.

When Daryll saw us off at the dealer's, he turned on the generator so the rooftop air-conditioner could cool down the interior and chill the refrigerator and freezer, but neglected to tell us whether to keep it on while driving, or turn it off. At some point, we remember him saying it's capable of running 16 hours straight with no problem, so we leave it on.

The soothing noise from the air-conditioner drowns out many of the small crashes and thuds from the back as our possessions settle in on their own, with only an occasional loud *thunk* causing us to glance furtively backward.

AUGUST 15 (FROM THE DRIVER'S SEAT)

The first impression is that you're way above the traffic and at the same time divorced from the road itself. Suddenly, you realize you're looking down at the middle of your lane and half your vehicle is in the next lane. To keep from slipping over into an adjacent lane, you have to hug the left-lane line. The back of the vehicle seems to have a mind of its own and wants to turn at a shorter distance than does the front end. We soon learn to make wide turns, particularly to the right. Another problem is that at any bump or rut, the vehicle leans to the right or left, then rolls back to the other side. Our fingers and arms are stiff from white-knuckling the wheel after several hours.

AUGUST 15 (NIGHTFALL)

It is after dark when we stop for gas in Kingman, Arizona, and Harry goes into a state of shock as he watches the numbers on the tank turn and turn and turn, as gallon after gallon flows in. The pump turns off automatically at \$50 and the tank still isn't full. (Obviously, this was some time ago!)

Exhausted, we agree it's time to stop. In front of us, between the gas station and the freeway, is an RV campground—we can see the sign—but we can't figure out how to get to it since a used-car lot and a mall are in the way. (About now, we give up the fantasy of waking to birdsong and the breeze wafting through the pine trees.)

Not far away, we find a second campground and something better than birdsong—a space called a “pull-through,” which means we can drive the motor home in one side, plug it in, and then drive out the other side the next morning without backing up—something we haven't yet learned how to do. We begin to speed-read the

instruction manual and learn that it is necessary to turn off the generator before plugging in the electricity. That part is a snap—our plug fits into the campground's receptacle.

We make a long, fruitless search by flashlight through the outdoor storage bins for a hose so we can hook up the water connection. (Harry is positive Daryll pointed one out, but Shirley thinks Harry has located the sewage hose instead. Harry thinks that maybe we should get a divorce or at least go check into a motel with running water. As it turns out, we have plenty of water in the storage tanks without having to use the external hookup.)

We studiously ignore the sewage hookup. The refrigerator has been turned down to the coldest setting—obviously, Daryll wanted it to get chilled quickly—and we find frozen romaine lettuce, eggs, and chicken breasts inside. Instead of a gourmet dinner, we settle for soup warmed in the microwave.

Stunned, almost stupid with exhaustion, we wash the dishes, close the blinds and curtains, and move back to the bedroom to make up the bed. Clearing it is easier than we expect, since most of the gear piled on the bed has already fallen onto the floor.

We raise the mattress to remove its plastic cover, and the hinged supports lock into the open position, leaving the bed set at a rakish 45-degree angle. By this time we're so tired that we probably could sleep in it anyhow, but we get out the toolbox and unscrew the supports so we can flatten the mattress. Somehow we manage to simultaneously make up the bed and fall asleep in it!

AUGUST 16

The skies have opened up in the high desert of western New Mexico, dumping so much water in the streets of Socorro that the intersections are flooded ankle-deep. Although our campground guidebook promises there is an RV park in town, we spot the flickering light of a Motel 6 just ahead and, with no discussion, pull in behind a battered truck camper from Texas. If the veterans can't weather the storm, we amateurs can't be expected to either.

AUGUST 17

The sun comes out. We stop at a hardware store and buy a water hose, which we hook up, but for some reason it never fills the tank. Later, we realize we hooked the water hose to the outside connection that feeds water directly into the system. While we're still not able to make the TV work, we've gotten very good at plugging in the electric cord, once we realize our large three-prong plug has to fit into a three-prong 30-amp receptacle.

We studiously ignore the sewage hookup.

AUGUST 18

While checking out the ski resort at Crested Butte, we make a left turn uphill into the parking garage of the Grande Butte Hotel, which causes the tow-bar connection at the rear of the motor home to drag and stick fast in the asphalt. The concierge arrives and says a Greyhound bus got stuck there only last week, and then asks if she should call the tow truck again. Harry congratulates himself on taking out Auto Club emergency insurance, and the tow truck duly frees us. We vow never again to turn into a hotel driveway that heads uphill.

AUGUST 19

In the ski town of Breckenridge, we spot a locksmith standing beside his truck talking to a pretty blonde, and ask if he could help us get into our outdoor storage area because either the lock is broken or the key doesn't fit. The locksmith takes one look at the key and says we're using it upside down. At Dillon Reservoir, we settle down to lunch beside the lake, opening a couple of the roof vents for air, when a sudden gust of wind tears across the roof of the motor home and takes off one of the white plastic roof vents. Harry chases it down and climbs on the roof to replace it, just as the rain begins. At a nearby gas station, we buy a roll of duct tape and batten down the vent. We vow never again to open the roof vents on a windy day.

AUGUST 20

We get lost in Kansas City looking for Arthur Bryant's famous barbecue restaurant, so it is once again after dark when we check into a small RV campground in Independence. A kindly campground manager with a flashlight loans us a sewage hose (ours is too short for the hookup) and talks us step-by-step through the dumping procedure for the holding tanks, which have reached their capacity. The same helpful manager shows us where to push a black button that activates the TV set.

Harry, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore.

AUGUST 27

It is almost with a sense of relief that we return to Winnie (for some reason, we have begun calling the vehicle that lately) after staying overnight in the lavish West Virginia country cottage of some friends. Their gardens are lovely and their hospitality warm, but Winnie has become home.

AUGUST 29

It has taken us 2 weeks to discover why the bedroom in the back of the motor home gets so hot while we're traveling, then cools down once we stop for the night. It turns out Harry thought that a control switch was turned off, only it wasn't! It was actually the "low" setting for the bedroom heater.

SEPTEMBER 1

There is great comfort in riding along and listening to the sounds inside the motor home behind us. We recognize the sharp clatter of the cutlery drawer suddenly swinging open, the more subdued sounds of the mug of wooden utensils spilling onto the stove top, and the rolling thud of the canned foods swaying back and forth in their bin. Then there's the rattle when the bedroom blinds come unhooked from their pins and are swaying, the bump when a camera forgotten and left on a chair falls onto the floor and breaks its wide-angle lens, and the swishing sound of the cardboard box containing water jugs sliding on the plastic floor covering. (We did not remove the plastic over the carpeting, figuring that was one way to keep it cleaner inside.)

After we have the bed supports repaired, the bed develops a mind of its own and pops up occasionally, as if to have a look around.

SEPTEMBER 15

We drive into Yellowstone Park, suddenly aware of how special it is to travel in a motor home with wide scenic views through the big windows, as if we're looking down from a high bus seat. Herds of bison shamble around in the roadway, in no hurry, and our vantage point is ideal for photographing them. We stop for lunch by the Yellowstone River in a grove of trees, their leaves turned golden, and, for the first time, discuss buying a motor home of our own.

SEPTEMBER 27

Partly because we despair of ever having to unpack Winnie, we buy her from the dealer. That was more than 50,000 miles ago. When not on the road, she resides at a Winnebago dealer's storage area in Carson, California, not far from the Goodyear blimp.

How to Give Backing-Up Directions Without Destroying Your Marriage

Whenever possible, request a pull-through campsite and postpone the agony of a back-in site as long as possible.

When no pull-throughs are available, we prefer to start with a quick chat about the broad general aims of the driver, particularly in regard to where the RV will end up, along with some general observations about the presence of boulders, picnic tables, and low-hanging tree limbs. Unfortunately, if the vehicle is blocking campground traffic, this prologue step has to be eliminated.

It is critical to establish a mutual signal that means "Stop immediately before you back into that _____" (fill in as applicable: truck, tree, utility post, fence, fire grate, and so on).

The first step is for the signaler to learn to stand where the driver can see him or her in the side mirror. The same rule applies here as for cameras: If you can see the mirror, the driver can see you.

Next, the signals should be clear and decisive. The fewer signals used, the simpler it usually becomes. We use a two-hand beckoning signal for "keep coming back," a right-hand signal to move toward the right, a left-hand signal to move toward the left, and a dramatic thrust of hand up and palm open toward the driver that means "For God's sake, stop!"

If all else fails, you still have a couple of options: Invest in a closed-circuit TV backup system that shows the driver exactly what is behind the RV as he or she backs—expensive, but effective (although these, too, have their limitations)—or a CB radio system with one unit in the cockpit and the second hand-held. Inexpensive walkie-talkies can be found at Radio Shack, but get one with more than a single channel. It seems like everybody and his brother have the same one-channel system, and you'll wind up having overlapping conversations with your neighbors.

RV History: The Tin Can Tourists

They called themselves “Tin Can Tourists.” They braved the dust and mud to drive their tin lizzies across the United States before transcontinental roads were paved, camping by the side of the road, heating tin cans of food on a gasoline stove, and bathing in cold water.

They dressed in their Sunday clothes in the days before jogging suits and running shoes. A photograph of one 1920s camping club reveals owners in front of their Weidman Camp Body vehicles, the men in fedoras, suits, and ties, and the women in dresses, cloche hats, stockings, and high-heeled shoes.

It took ingenuity to travel across the country in those days before the first motel, which opened in 1925 in California. In 1921, for instance, Lee Scoles of Fort Wayne, Indiana, converted his 1916 Federal truck to “a house on wheels” and drove it on an 8-month, round-trip journey to San Francisco with 11 relatives aboard. Such additions as solid rubber tires, a canvas awning, cots, a stove, and washtubs added to their comfort, according to his granddaughter Alice Worman, herself a motor home owner, who chronicled the story in *Lifestyles*, one of many such publications dedicated to RVing.

According to a story in *RV West* magazine, the family of Charles Ulrich set out for California in 1929 in a General Motors truck body mounted on a Ford chassis, with built-in bunks, overhead wardrobe storage areas, and a dining table with six folding chairs. The interior was polished mahogany and on the rear was a caboose-type open platform with iron railings. After their “once-in-a-lifetime” trip, which continued on to Hawaii aboard a Matson Line cruise ship, the Ulrichs stored the camper until the 1960s, when it was purchased by a group of hunters to serve as a forest base camp.



“Tin Can Tourist” at Mammoth, 1920.



1929 Ford with Weidman Camp Body.

A fire-engine-red 1929 Ford Model A converted to a mini-motor home camper complete with pop-up top still carries the Ray Glenn family on trips around the Seattle area, according to *MotorHome* magazine.

Originally, auto camping was regarded as a rich man's hobby. The well-publicized outings of auto manufacturer Henry Ford, inventor Thomas Edison, naturalist John Burroughs, and tire manufacturer Harvey Firestone, who called themselves "the four vagabonds" as they camped in America's parks, had paved the way. Interestingly, the affordability and popularity of Henry Ford's Model T, which debuted in 1909, helped to bring auto camping to the average American.

Nobody knows more about the early history of recreational vehicles than David Woodworth of Tehachapi, California, who owns the largest collection of antique camping equipment, photography, and literature known to exist. Much of his material appeared in the Smithsonian Institution's 1986 show "At Home on the Road," which he helped to produce.

Alaska-born Woodworth attributes his fascination with RVs to his childhood memories, when his family traveled around the country in a Detroit travel trailer, following his carpenter father from job to job.

At RV shows and state fairs, he exhibits vehicles like his Art Deco-style 1937 Hunt House Car, designed and manufactured by a Hollywood cinematographer and inventor named J. Roy Hunt. (Among Hunt's many credits was the classic 1929 film *The Virginian*, starring Gary Cooper.)

The sleek, 19-foot, teardrop-shaped motor home, crafted on a Ford truck chassis and powered by a Ford flathead V-8 engine, includes a bathroom with hand-pumped shower, lavatory, and toilet (which must be manually removed to empty); a stove with



Early camping club.

two burners; an icebox; a sofa and a dinette (both of which convert to beds); and even a kitchen sink.

Woodworth proudly claims membership in the Tin Can Tourists, whose last surviving affiliates have appointed him “Grand Can Opener.”

Among the 30 or so antique camping vehicles in Woodworth’s collection are 1928 and 1931 Covered Wagon Travel Trailers, manufactured in Detroit; a 1935 York Rambler built in York, Pennsylvania; a Hays from Grand Rapids, Michigan; and a Harley Bowless, created by the builder who oversaw the construction of Charles Lindbergh’s historic transatlantic aircraft, the *Spirit of St. Louis*. Airstream later used the Harley Bowless as an inspiration for its famous aerodynamic travel trailer back in 1936, according to Woodworth.

Woodworth can also spout nonstop historical information about auto camping and the early campers. Here are some of his revelations:

- The first campgrounds were free, built and maintained by cities and towns hoping to attract affluent travelers who would spend money while they were in town. In the days before World War I, only the affluent had the time and money to go auto camping. When Ford’s Model T made auto camping affordable for everyone, campgrounds started charging fees to discourage some of the overflow crowds.
- One early pair of auto campers was a couple who were afraid their new travel trailer might pull the rear end off their car, so the husband drove the car and the wife sat in the trailer for the entire journey, watching the car’s rear end to make sure nothing happened to it.

13 Notable Dates in RV History

1901 (or so): The first motor homes are built as special-order units by auto-body builders.

1907: Henry Ford introduces the first mass-produced Model T Fords, automobiles with a 2.9-liter, four-cylinder engine, which make auto camping affordable for most Americans for the first time.

1910–15: The first manufactured, mass-produced RVs—folding camping trailers—start coming off the line from Los Angeles Trailer Works, Auto-Kamp Trailers in Saginaw, Michigan, and other pioneers.

1917: The first fifth-wheel trailer is built by airplane manufacturer Curtiss-Wright; its name probably originated from the trailer hitch, which is located in the center of the towing truck's bed and could be considered a "fifth" wheel after the four on the bottom of the trailer unit.

1919: The Tin Can Tourists gather for their first rally, in a Florida campground near Tampa called DeSoto Park, with 20 members present, most of them Model T owners; by the mid-1930s, the club numbers 150,000.

1922: Fifteen million auto campers hit the road, according to the *New York Times*, most of them sleeping on cots, in tents, or in "newfangled houses on wheels."

1923: There are 7,000 free campgrounds in the United States, including Denver's Overland Park, with 800 campsites, piped water, a garage, restaurant, beauty shop, billiards hall, soda fountain, and eight electric washing machines.


1926: Fords equipped with Weidman Camp Bodies are first produced in Tonawanda, New York; the 1929 model sells for \$1,900.

1962: John Steinbeck publishes *Travels with Charley*, a book about his RV journey around America with his elderly poodle.

1966: Winnebago becomes the first mass-production motor home assembly line, turning out its early models (with moldings above the windshield that resembled eyebrows) in lengths of 17, 19, and 22 feet.

1966: David Garvin begins selling RV parts and camping accessories at his family's campground in Bowling Green, Kentucky; by 1993, his chain of Camping World stores (which he calls "Toys 'R' Us for grown-ups") has become the world's largest retailer of camping supplies, with 29 stores, 10 million mail-order catalogs distributed annually, and a sales base of \$150 million.

1967: Charles Kuralt rents a Dodge motor home to begin broadcasting "On the Road," his famous CBS-TV series of news features that bring small-town Americans and their stories into the living rooms of people everywhere. During his 27 years on the road, Kuralt uses six different motor homes; the last, a 29-foot FMC motorcoach, is in the Henry Ford Museum near Detroit.

1976: Winnebago Industries introduces the Heli-Home, a helicopter camper for off-road exploration, which can sleep six; we note that it's no longer included in their published brochures. 

INSIDER TIP



The **Museum of Family Camping** in Bear Brook State Park (exit Rte. 28, then turn right on the road after the toll booth), 157 Deerfield Rd., Allentown, NH (☎ **603/485-3782**; www.roadsideamerica.com/story/10559), includes “typical campsites” from each decade of camping, as well as photographs and taped reminiscences of old-timers. Its Hall of Fame commemorates such pioneers as Airstream’s Wally Byam, who organized and led camping caravans all over the world. Memorial Day to Labor Day, daily 10am to 4pm. Free admission; donations accepted.

- Highways were notoriously bad in the early days. Woodworth quotes from the memoirs of some 1924 auto campers who termed themselves “Modern Gypsies” and wrote about a local resident telling them, “That’s a good road; somebody just made it through there yesterday.” Later, he says, the travelers commented, “When we left New York for Chicago, we were motorists. When we left Chicago for California, we were pioneers.”

Six Common Misperceptions About RVs & Their Owners

As Gary Cooper said in the movie *The Virginian*, “When you call me that, smile!” Because we enjoy our freewheeling life on the road so much, we shudder at every false stereotype perpetuated by some uninformed person. Here, then, are a few common misperceptions, followed by the reality.

- **Misperception No. 1:** We find misperceptions particularly hard to take when the perpetrator is a fellow travel writer who should know his nomenclature. A writer in a popular travel magazine, who described driving in Utah, noted that Arches National Park “makes even the most remote rock formations visible to wheezing geezers willing to take a short walk from motor home to overlook.” (The same writer spent much of his article bragging about the speed of his \$40,000 Nissan Infiniti on the empty highways and complaining about the dearth of gas stations and fast-food outlets in southern Utah.) **Reality:** *Puh-leeze*, wheeze us no geezers! A Recreation Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) study states that the average RV owner is 49 years old, married with children, owns his own home, and has a household income of around \$68,000 a year. At present, 1 of every 12 motor-vehicle-owning families in the United States has an RV. In the 35-to-54-year age group, it’s 1 out of every 9. In fact, the RVers between ages 35 and 54 outnumber those older than 55. During the next decade, the highest RV ownership category by age will be college-educated baby boomers between ages 55 and 64. At present, there are 8.2 million RVs on the road in the U.S.

- **Misperception No. 2:** Another writer, describing a lonely highway he drove, says he met “only a few Winnebagos” along the way. **Reality:** While he might have met a series of RVs that were produced by Iowa-based Winnebago Industries, he probably used the term Winnebago to mean recreational vehicles. While all Winnebagos are RVs, not all RVs are Winnebagos. Out of today’s 64 million campers, nearly half use a recreational vehicle.
- **Misperception No. 3:** A real-estate developer friend inquiring politely about our RV passion asked about our “mobile home” and was startled to be so instantly and vehemently corrected. **Reality:** Our motor home is not a “mobile home.” The latter is not a recreational vehicle, but manufactured residential housing that is infrequently moved after initially being set in place.
- **Misperception No. 4:** Well-meaning environmentalists like to say that, unlike backpacking and tent camping, RVing pollutes the environment and guzzles gas and water resources. **Reality:** Having graduated from the ranks of backpackers and tent campers, we’re acutely aware of this “purist” attitude. A Recreation Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) poll shows that 98% of all RVers practice one or more forms of “green” RVing. In our case, our low-water toilet and quick showers use much less water than public facilities in the parks. We put all wastewater into holding tanks and then properly empty them at dump stations, rather than pouring anything on the ground or into streams. We never build a campfire that leaves layers of pollution hanging in the atmosphere, never dig up the ground or tie anything to trees and bushes, and recycle everything possible. RVing is probably very “green” when compared to other travel, such as flying by plane or staying in hotels (all that water to wash linens and take showers).
- **Misperception No. 5:** According to a University of Michigan study, some 14% of all potential RVers believe their state requires a special license to drive an RV. **Reality:** No state requires a special license to operate an RV; your normal driver’s license is all you need.
- **Misperception No. 6:** When city officials of the former naval base town of Port Hueneme in Southern California proposed to bolster the town’s sagging economy by building an oceanfront luxury RV resort, the proposal passed. It happened despite a handful of residents at a town meeting, who claimed “typical” RVers are “homeless, jobless, use drugs, commit crimes, belong to gangs, and desecrate any area they happen to park in,” according to a journalist on the scene. **Reality:** Wow! And we thought our neighbors in the next campsite were just toasting marshmallows!

