Trailer Restoration

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TRAILER RESTORATION

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Professional Vintage Trailer Historian (1910-1979)

Tin Can Tourists Southeastern Representative

Tin Can Tourists Hall of Fame

Tin Can Tourists Historian

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ABSTRACT

Restoration is an important and dynamic segment of the RV industry. It represents an element of customization that is desired by many clients. It is not only a process but also ensures the quality of the build. The primary issue is not only maintaining the nature of the RV, but also adding the amenities that are demanded by today’s clients. Some clients only want the restoration to maintain the integrity of the construction and era of the RV. This individualization is what makes restoration of RVs very different, because of their passion and understanding of the RV history.

Key Words: RV Restoration, RV history, Construction Process, Vision of RVing movement

Introduction

The following is information from the interview. The primary focus of the discussion was reviewing the author’s thoughts from the past/history, present/status, and future influences and issues. It was a stream of conscience process. The interview was open-ended and as a result addresses the issues as the author perceive their importance. The primary focus of the interview was the history and restoration of RVs. The historical information was provided from a personal family perspective.

PAST ISSUES

Type of Equipment

My collection consists of a variety of rigs, all of which I restore and maintain to use for camping and historical display. As of today’s date, my oldest rig is a 1941 Palace Royale 26’, but I have many camping rigs from the 50s and 60s. The late 50s are my favorite, I honestly think, this is
where you find the best of the best. This is why I prefer to collect the trailers manufactured during this period.

I have grown up camping my entire life, as a matter of fact my first camping trip I was only 4 weeks old.

**Outcomes**

My family is very close because of the camping experience. I'm very fortunate, it's not a large family, but we've always been pretty close to each other. I am 40 years old and was able to have both sets of grandparents alive and well into my early thirties. This is a little unheard of, and all of them were in good physical condition, my paternal grandparents continued camping well into their eighties. We'd have annual camping trips, you know, just so we could get together, and it kept the family very close. (My paternal grandmother is now 94 and in an assisted living facility, but her mind is as sharp as ever. She loves to reminisce about all of the camping trips and the number of campers she and my grandfather owned. At last count, they owned over 38 recreational vehicles during their 60-year marriage. Everything from trailer coaches, conversion vans, pop-ups, pull behinds, and motorhomes. They crossed the United States several times, toured all 49 continental states, and even belonged to several camping clubs dating back to the 1960s.)
Importance of RVing in the development of American Culture

I believe RVing was important in the development of American culture. Historically RVing has been overlooked in its importance. It is essential to understand the history to develop plans for the future.

It started in 1906 when a family rebuilt a Conestoga Covered Wagon into mobile living quarters (Complete with interior kitchen) for a rig they could take on vacation from Ohio to Tampa Florida. Unlike the Conestoga Wagons of the past which were more of a utility trailer to carry supplies, this family would end up building the very first recreational vehicle. This family would start a trend of seasonal vacation travel that still survives today, 118 years later!

The availability of an affordable automobile increased the accessibility of the average person/family to be able to travel farther than they had ever ventured. The Travel Trailer gave way for families to travel even farther than a one-day car trip. During 1910-1940, the desire for travel, exploring, and freedom to see the country only increased the popularity of recreational trailer usage.
History

The trailer industry evolved based on consumer needs. However, to begin with, trailers were being designed for a single-use audience. I feel that the industry did not have a good understanding of what the needs of the consumer were. During 1920-1942 many manufacturers had smaller type trailers that were geared more for overnight or weekend camping. The sportsmen, the fishermen, you know, just that quick getaway, but you also had the rigs that were a bit longer in the range of 20-30 feet long. These units were a little bit more livable at that period. They were being called house trailers, because they truly were houses on wheels, even though they may not have bathrooms or a lot of ‘modern’ conveniences…. but neither did many of the houses at that same time. Because of this lack of understanding the industry struggled in the early forties however WWII would stop the production of trailers and many of the manufacturers of trailers, like many other industries, would focus on wartime efforts in manufacturing.

Diversity of Use

I think around 1953/1954 is where the RV Industry truly excelled.

There was an explosion after WWII and the primary question was what the future of the trailer industry would evolve into for the consumer. That is when companies had to decide whether they
were going to stick with larger trailers that were more of a “house trailer” or going to produce trailers to be used for vacation, traveling cross country, and seeing the sites with the kids.

When the soldiers returned home from World War II, there was a significant shift in attitude regarding those traveling with trailers. There was a more open position toward travel costs and a desire to see more of the country and experience it. This attitude helped revive a positive position towards trailer life which had taken a hit before the war with depression era trailer camps where homeless and those struggling to make a living may end up.

Manufacturers

There were thousands of trailer manufacturers before the war, but when the war started, just like many of the other industries, they would either shut down production or get government contracts to build basic trailers for the employees who were working at the war camps. Many trailer manufacturers did not survive wartime shutdowns and would not reopen after WWII. Some companies expanded during the war and were looking for new endeavors and many developed travel industries. A good example is the Spartan Aircraft Company. Spartan was based out of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and was an aircraft manufacturing company dating back to the 1920s. They were struggling to build their aircraft, the thing that saved them during the war was a big government contract to provide parts for Boeing and McDonnell Douglas. This allowed the
company to grow from a small company to a massive manufacturer. The Government preferred
their location of Tulsa, Oklahoma as it was the center of the country, safe from being attacked,
and centrally located to both the east and west coasts. By late 1945 Spartan knew the war was
about to come to a complete stop, they contemplated what to do with 4000 employees and all the
machinery. They could try to enter the plane business once again, which was already overinflated
with all the other companies that were building planes for the war. They also thought about
going into the automobile industry like Ford and Chevrolet which had increased in size during
the war but decided that would be too competitive. So, their third option was to build a traveling
trailer. They started building a 25’ Spartan Manor in 1946 because they already had all the
employees and equipment. Spartan also kept the design and construction very similar to the
planes they had experience building to minimize re-tooling and to build on the existing employee
talent. They became successful because the key to this industry is adaptation and Spartan
realized that a shift was coming in the trailer industry. Manufacturers, like Spartan, saw a trend
toward the need for a more livable trailer still capable of being pulled and/or relocated. These
would be known as House Trailers.

**Family History during the 1950s-1970s.**

House Trailers would grow larger throughout the 1950s and 1960s. By the late 1950s, it was not
uncommon to find house trailers up to 45-50 feet long. Today people will see these vintage
house trailers and say, that is a mobile home that was never meant to be pulled, it was not road-
legal. Well, historically speaking that was not the case, and that is where I get a little frustrated
as a historian. This aspect of the trailer history is being lost. My grandparents had a 1958 Skyline Deluxe 8’x45’ that they pulled with the family car for 25 years, very much like the movie ‘The Long, Long Trailer’ with Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. My grandparents had to travel from job site to job site, and having the Skyline kept the family together. This 45-foot Skyline had 2 bedrooms, a front bedroom, and a rear bedroom. My grandparents used the rear bedroom and all 3 children shared the front bedroom which had a set of bunk beds. It was my grandparent’s only residence until they moved to assistive living in October of 2008. I still own this trailer today.

Early mobile home/house trailers of the 1950s-1960s had trailer brakes, running lights, onboard propane, and locking cabinet doors for travel. It was a way of life, and it wasn't until the late sixties that mobile homes produced by the industry became used more for permanent location living. I feel as a historian that the industry should have introduced the term ‘Manufactured Home’ in the early 1970s as this is the period when the house trailers switched from a more mobile living unit to a permanent and stationary housing option.

All the mobile homes and house trailers of the 40s, 50s, and 60s were truly built for travel. This sideline in the trailer industry (House Trailers) early on was all about keeping the family together and enjoying travel together. My mother and her siblings were all at the top of their class, even though my uncle had the record of 7 schools in one year. The concept of trailer trash was very prevalent during these early years, but this was not true in most cases. Hearing my family talk
about trailer parks, is very much like the movie, ‘The Long, Long Trailer’ in 1953. They would pull in and it was full service. There were extensive amenities including swimming pools, it was more like a resort. It was a higher-scale lifestyle and much different than most people would assume.

My grandparents Skyline cost about $5,000 in 1958. Most small houses during that same period had a similar cost. It was not low-class living but a luxury lifestyle that also allowed the freedom of travel.

Another major influence in the 1950s was the development of the interstate system. This allowed for easier movement of trailers over longer distances. As the trailer industry started to split in two, ‘Travel Trailers’ and ‘House Trailers’ (Mobile Homes) you have the issue of size. Travel Trailers tend to stay under 30/35’ and House Trailers tend to range in the 30-60’ range and even start expanding in width. Travel Trailers maintain their widths under 8.5’ even to this day but House Trailers of the 50s start expanding not only in length but widths of 8’, 10’, and even 12’ wide by 1959. While Travel Trailers maintained a size that was not an issue, the house trailers and mobile homes were getting quite large for regular highway travel. By the mid-1950s you started seeing a lot of highway, State, and Federal laws regulating speeds, heights, lengths, and even widths of trailers. Some manufacturers would try to combat these restrictions with some very ingenious designs. I have owned several trailers from the 50s that were two-story trailers. They had full-height rooms upstairs and downstairs. But these rigs still maintain street-legal
dimensions. Manufacturers could get more room inside, but not have to worry about over-restrictive laws.

**PRESENT**

**Economy**

I see a major slowdown in some parts of the industry and a boom in other parts. It directly depends upon the company and how it adapts and envisions the future. They need to be more proactive and less reactive. I see a slowdown in the recreational side because of less vacation travel. This currently is a direct result of the economy. There are higher gas prices and cost increases that limit one’s budget for vacations although I still see people buying RVs to pursue their dreams as “Full Timers.” They do not want the house, the mortgage, power bills, etc. They are thinking about full-time RVing as a lifestyle. They want to scale down and still be able to travel. However, some of the individuals are not doing their research and their travel costs are much higher than expected. The cost of propane, lot rent, upkeep, etc. is unexpected because they have little experience with travel trailers. The cold weather and other environmental problems are not anticipated, it affects one’s comfort level, as well as cost. Some individuals have experience and have a great understanding of RVs and their costs in addition to the expected travel issues. This type of “unpreparedness” of consumers will likely affect the RV industry.
It may be time for the Recreational Industry to go back and review the old house trailers of the 40s and 50s. These trailers of the past had greater livability and fewer issues and are very viable for those interested in the full-time traveling lifestyle.

**Repairs**

Other issues include wreck and damage repairs, etc. If there is damage to the RV those with the full-time RVing lifestyle are without a place to stay. If repairs are needed, they can take a long time because there are not enough qualified repair persons and once a repair is started it can still take 4 to 6+ months.

It is important to have a realistic approach to full-time RVing and have the appropriate experience to deal with the issues in this lifestyle. Part of the full-time RVing lifestyle is a great degree of frustration at times.
Some full-timers who are dedicated to this lifestyle homestead in some of the better parks for a period of three or four months. Owners of private parks many times prefer to rent to the long-term RVers. The recreational individual is often left trying to find places to camp because of the limited space taken up by full-timers. Everything is filled, everything's booked, and there is nowhere to camp.

Because of the limited camping spots, due to full-timers, there is an increase in people who want to just “boondock” or camp without any type of hookups. There is a great need to understand this type of camping as well.

I think a lot of people do not understand it is not as simple as going out in the middle of a field and flipping a switch. I get phone calls and emails stating “I just bought this brand-new RV, it's got one solar panel on the roof, and we're burning up in a 120-degree heat because I can't run my air conditioner.” I must inform them that one solar panel is not going to run their air conditioning and all the other electrical needs. We also hear a lot of people tell us “The seller
told us that it would run the air conditioner and all the electrical needs.” This is due to a lack of general understanding of RV systems. People need to understand low-voltage and high-voltage needs as well as all the other systems in their rigs.

Many do not understand the basic structure of an RV or the infrastructure of camping and they affect the efficiency and effectiveness of the hobby. It takes a while to mature and evolve into an effective RVer. It also takes a tremendous amount of patience. Enjoyment is not always instantaneous.

Age Differences

There is a difference in the RVers by age. The older population still is dominated by “snowbirding.” Snowbirds are senior citizen retirees escaping the cold weather of winter in the north. This is a tradition for many RVers, especially when traveling to different regions of the South and West. This massive influx causes a tremendous demand for services. Again, one of the issues is the number of sites available. Park owners want to rent to long-term residents as opposed to those who are just seeking a short-term rental. The number of camping sites is limiting the growth of the industry. Older retirees take the same spaces year after year and even the new retirees have difficulty finding places to camp. Because of the increased demand prices are going through the roof. We are seeing some parks here in Florida charge as much as $2,500 a
month and that does not include the cost of electricity. This is far more than if they stayed at home. Because of this new high cost of camping, younger retirees do not want to try RVing. They can get a mortgage for much less at home. The price point and demand are two significant issues. The older population, in terms of the rigs, wants to include all the comforts of home. They are very attached to the amenities. They want their 40 to 45-foot and fifth wheels with every comfort they find in their house.

I also see an increase in the younger RVer population, that is, Generation X and the Millennials. Many desire the nomadic lifestyle. They want the freedom to go when and where they want and to have unique experiences. They often think that the RVing lifestyle is carefree and do not have a complete understanding and maturity in the lifestyle. They are persistent and learn the ropes. We see a lot of them gravitating toward smaller units and vans. They are converting them to a little house on wheels. The basic design of their units is not as comfort-oriented as the older population. Their primary concern is technology and their ability to stay connected with their phones, internet, etc.

It amazes me how the older generation wants residential mattresses, king-size beds, and recliners instead of sofas. They want retired life comforts where the younger generation is putting a hard surface in the back and throwing out a blanket to sleep on. They are not concerned with putting bathrooms/showers in their vans. They get gym memberships that are national and just go and use the gyms for their showers. They sacrifice a lot of comfort for the compact nomadic life.
Migration

The primary influence is the makeup of the world today. They’re getting frustrated with the cities they live in, the politics, etc. and you are seeing a mass migration. I can see the same trend in the RV industry. I think politics plays a role in influencing the RV lifestyle just as much as weather has in the past with those trying to escape the harsh climates. There are still many seasonal employment opportunities that allow the individual to travel and continue to bring in revenue.

Many state parks in Florida have a volunteer system. There are campsites within or next to the park and the rent is free for volunteer services. This is just in the winter months. It is more like a work and travel program.

FUTURE

Quality

One of the things in the future that the industry is going to have to address is quality. Production numbers are often more important to manufacturers than quality. Even some of the major brands are having issues today. If there is a warranty, the time for repair is often very long. I am seeing an increase in people who are having problems with brand-new RVs. After their first trip, they have got a list of repairs that need to be fixed under warranty. There are not enough repair
people at the factory or even repair facilities creating a 6, 8, or 10+ month waiting period to get those repairs done. This is a tremendous amount of frustration that has and will continue to affect the industry. The high price of the units accentuates this problem, the focus seems to be on profit vs quality. This is an issue that the industry must address.

**Electrification**

Another major issue is the electrification of vehicles (Battery and Hybrid powered engines). This at present is not practical because of the weight of the batteries and limited range. Technology is improving rapidly with lithium batteries and solar panels…. but the technology still needs much improvement. This limits the distance that an individual can travel to a few hundred miles at best. The objective of the new technology is to develop self-sustaining units so that camping can be done off the grid. There are many operational issues with the development of electric vehicles. These may be resolved in the future, but they will also bring a different set of issues. For example, if there is inclement weather and the charging ability is decreased due to lack of solar charging it will put a strain on the operation of the system. Other new technologies are beginning to be explored and have great potential. I do not think the electrical systems that we are exploring today are going to be efficient enough.
Customization

Another interesting trend is the customization of the RV. Custom vehicles are from smaller shops that can focus on quality, not the mass-produced units that are put together quickly. People are getting tired of calling the factory and asking for changes to be made to customize their units. There is a definite move toward specialty shops that can provide individualized services. Our shop can provide customization and we have extensive experience. Custom rigs can have all the modern amenities and are well-appointed to individual needs. Custom shops only build one or two rigs at a time. And they are built to the customer's specifications. The customer is king.

Regulations

Another influence is government regulations. There are good and bad regulations. Most have good intentions and indeed keep the consumer safe but there can be too much regulation. You need a system of checks and balances. I do think some of the laws need to be tightened. I also do not think there is enough testing of RVs. I think a lot of the test requirements are outdated and still from 30 or 40 years ago. We have the interstate system and there are variable speeds based on the state. Some of the states have speed limits as high as 80 miles an hour with some areas in Texas as high as 85 mph. These speeds and additional conditions cause wear and tear on the rigs.
The standards have not caught up with the conditions that these rigs are experiencing on the road, or even in their usage.

**Change**

The public views RVs as a means of travel, adventure, and a way to visit family. I am happy to say that that is my personal experience. I think this view will continue in the future, even with the problems and issues facing RVing. The public’s view may bring the change needed in the RV industry.

**Popular Culture**

An interesting part of the industry is the popular culture perspective of the RV. This popular culture is everywhere TV, movies, commercials, clothing, etc. You see it in insurance commercials, Ford truck commercials pulling an Airstreams, etc. Commercials like this are trying to associate with the RVs in terms of their freedom and adventure. Airstream alone is an icon. I mean, everybody knows Airstream and has a concept associated with tradition and quality. I think that the RV is always going to be iconic. I have a list of all the movies that feature RVs and there are hundreds of movies. Even if the movie does not focus on the RV, they
hold a prominent position in various locations. It is amazing that just featuring an RV in a movie can draw attention to the whole RV culture. When I go to rallies one of my favorite activities is sharing different movies involving RVs. Movies such as Independence Day with Will Smith an action-packed movie about aliens, space, and world destruction. It has nothing to do with RVs, but an RV holds an important position in the movie.

Vintage

There are many subcultures within the RVing movement. The one that I am most closely associated with is vintage vehicles. I collect vintage trailers of all makes and models dating from the 1920s-1960s. Everywhere I travel with a vintage rig people are amazed to see the vintage trailer and want a tour no matter where I may be… Gas stations, food stops, rest areas, etc.!

RVers differ in many ways but are similar in a great number. One of the great similarities is that we all get along with each other. It amazes me that I can take a rig that's 75 years old to an RV Park and be camped next to a million-dollar motor coach with 48-inch flat-screen TVs on the outside, and 6 TVs inside. They will be the first people to come over to my 75-year-old trailer, wanting to sit underneath the awning to talk about my rig. They are just blown away.
Even with rigs that are 75 years different in age, we are very similar in that we love just getting out socializing, meeting people, seeing places, and having that traveling experience. Where we differ, I think in general is the vintage. Those of us in the vintage side of the RV hobby do not need all the electronics and all the modern conveniences. Some of us put them in our rigs, and you can enjoy that at times. But one of the great things with this vintage side of it is, we have vintage rallies where there can be 200 to 300 vintage trailers. We are outside enjoying nature.

We're outside listening to wildlife. We're walking the trails. We're just sitting underneath our awning and just enjoying relaxation. Sadly, you go to a lot of RV Parks, and you will see these beautiful 1 million-dollar buses and fifth wheels and travel trailers…. they are all inside still glued to the TV, and they are not leaving behind what they are trying to escape from.

Often, we will go to parks, and they will come to see the vintage rig. You do not see a 75-year-old restored rig very often. I've got all the modern conveniences at home: noise, TVs, radios, and all the chaos of daily life. It is to get away and enjoy nature and relax. I come back rejuvenated. I often wonder if those who are taking their entire house on wheels experience the same thing.
PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

Tim Heintz
Tim Heintz Vintage Travel Rally in Front of His Personal 1950 Spartanette Tandem 30'
Tim Heintz with the World’s Oldest Airstream, 1935. Tim Heintz Sold this Rig to the Siesmore Museum in Amarillo, Texas Where it Still Remains Today.
Spartan Mansion

1951 Spartan Mansion being custom restored by Heintz Designs
1951 Spartan Mansion restored by Heintz Designs
Vagabond Coach

1951 Vagabond Coach being restored by Heintz Designs.JPG
1951 Vagabond Model 34 Coach being Restored by Heintz Designs.JPG
1951 Vagabond model 34 Coach being restored by Heintz Designs.JPG.JPG (3)
Vagabond Restored

1952 Vagabond Restored by Heintz Designs (1)
Airfloat Landyacht Restored

1957 Airfloat Landyacht that was Custom Restored to Match the Client's Custom Chooped 1956 Packard Patrician (Car was Originally a 4 door coupe)
Ellsworth Restored

1959 Ellsworth Coach - Tim Heintz Private Collection
Serro Scotty

1971 Serro Scotty being restored by Heintz Designs
1971 Serro Scotty restored by Heintz Designs
1971 Serro Scotty restored by Heintz Designs (1)
Complete body off restoration of a 1960 Airstream Safari