

## Introduction

In the United States today the mention of trailers and mobile homes brings to mind hurricane victims and the impoverished—people in dire economic straits with no other available housing options. Far from being the status symbol it once was, the trailer bears a stigma of lower-class squalor. The word itself has become part of a vernacular put-down: “trailer trash.”<sup>1</sup>

This current popular perception of the trailer belies the history of the trailer industry in America. In 2010 the industry marks its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In that span of time, mobile homes have undergone several transformations in design, marketing and image, as the industry has been forced to re-imagine and reinvent its product. In fact, trailers and RVs have proven to be extremely adaptable to dramatic shifts in consumer demands, dreams, and desires. As a result, the mobile home can be read in relation to social, historical, technological and cultural changes in the United States over the last century.

Major design and marketing changes in the trailer industry correspond to significant occurrences in the history of twentieth-century America. Events such as the Great Depression and World War II have altered the design, marketing and image of trailers and RVs. Significant transformative periods in the history of the trailer mirror cultural shifts from the 1950s to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the trailer can be read as a symbol of

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Irby. “Taking Out the Trailer Trash: The Battle Over Mobile Homes in St. Petersburg, Florida”, *The Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 79, (Fall 2000), 182.

freedom and adventure, community and family togetherness. The marvels of small-space living and the sheer thrill of traveling on newly built roads were experiences coveted by Americans eager to fulfill dreams of autonomy, and of seeing their country. Even the President of the United States, Warren Harding, hopped aboard a trailer for a 1921 camping trip, such was its appeal and prestige.

But as the country changed, trailers changed along with it. While trailers and trailer parks were primarily for vacationers in the 1930's and earlier, during the Great Depression, they became homes for newly unemployed workers forced to travel to find jobs wherever they could.<sup>2</sup> This shift in the primary use of trailers—from an option for vacationing nature-lovers to homes for desperate itinerant workers—changed not only the focus of the trailer industry but also the geographical location of the majority of trailer parks. Many trailer parks moved from beautiful forests and lakesides to the desolate edges of urban areas. The image of the trailer changed again, however, after the end of World War II, when newly optimistic citizens sought the American dream as it came to be defined as home ownership in the 1950s. In her study of postwar America, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, Lizabeth Cohen writes, "At the center of Americans' vision of postwar prosperity was the private home, fully equipped with consumer durables."<sup>3</sup> And as Elaine Tyler May points

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Hurley. *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in Postwar Consumer Culture*, (United States of America: Pegasus Books, 2001), 202.

<sup>3</sup> Lizabeth Cohen. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 73.

out in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, while spending in the postwar period increased overall by 60 percent, money spent on items for the home and appliances went up 240 percent.<sup>4</sup> After close quarters in barracks and years of living with extended family, GIs wanted fully-appointed homes of their own. Viewed within the postwar construct of 'home', trailers became viable housing options and symbols of mainstream success.

The civil rights movement, however, and the social upheavals of the 1960s changed attitudes towards America's new consumerism, and trailers and their owners were soon marginalized and out of the mainstream again. College-age students became politically relevant by their involvement with protests and work for social change. African-Americans were fighting not only for social equality, but also for consumer equality; demanding job opportunities, access to fair loans, and upward mobility.<sup>5</sup> According to Robert Inglehart, a professor of political science and program director of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, the high visibility of these groups changed the values of the purchasing middle class, bringing Americans into a place of post-materialism.<sup>6</sup> The mobile home, as historian Gary Cross writes, would also become identified with the 'older generation' or retirees. This made the trailer a victim of the "generation gap" and it became an emblem of age, and the lower class.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Elaine Tyler May. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 157.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, 166-167.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Inglehart. "Post-Materialism in an Environment of Insucurity", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 75, (Dec. 1981), 880-900.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Cross. *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 70, 187.

trailer has, to some degree, never been able to shake this image. In 1906, the American tourism industry, spurred by the establishment of National Parks and the burgeoning auto industry that brought city dwellers out into the country, used, as its slogan, “See America First”.<sup>8</sup> But today those who rely on trailers for shelter are often referred to as “The Unseen America”, as described by Erika Snyder in her article on the *Bread and Roses Cultural Project*, an organization dedicated to the poverty-stricken and victims of natural disaster—or those who often wind up living in trailers.<sup>9</sup>

This dramatic shift in the value set associated with trailers—from a status symbol to an icon of squalor—is to some extent a direct result of an ambivalence within the American psyche itself regarding mobility and the idea of “home”, concepts both related to the character of the country itself. In his 2006 book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, John Storey writes that what unifies cultural theorists such as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams is their belief that by analyzing the culture of a society—its textual forms and documented practices—it is possible to “reconstitute the patterned behaviour and constellations of ideas shared by the men and women who produce and

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<sup>8</sup> Hurley, 198.

<sup>9</sup> Erika Snyder. “Photos focus on damage of hurricane: Albany Free School students document devastation still evident in New Orleans”, *The Times Union*, (Albany, NY), November 2, 2006, B3. This was the title of a country-wide photographic project that began in 2002 and continues to document the lives of migrant workers in the United States. It is sponsored by the Bread and Roses Cultural Project: <http://www.bread-and-roses.com/galleryindex.html>. The project expanded to include displaced people after New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in August of 2005.

consume the texts and practices of that society.”<sup>10</sup> Storey also writes that popular culture can be viewed as a “contradictory mix of competing interests and values: neither middle nor working class, neither racist nor non-racist...with always a shifting balance between the two.”<sup>11</sup> This thesis asserts that the trailer—as a piece and part of popular culture—is a unique combination of two primary, yet opposing American values—mobility and stability, the desire to travel (freedom) *and* the desire to settle (put down roots), a conflict illuminated by Michael Aaron Rockland first in his 1978 essay “Mobility in America” and continued in his 1980 book *Home on Wheels*. As Rockland writes, “Mobility, perhaps more than any other factor, has formed the American character.”<sup>12</sup> Likewise, the American cultural historian Warren Susman, in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, described the role of mobility in 1930s’ America as “overwhelming”. In fact, writes Susman, “Of all the new words and phrases of the period [the 1930s], none perhaps better symbolizes the problem that faced many Americans than the ironic idea contained in the concept of ‘mobile homes’ and the growth of the trailer industry during the Depression years.”<sup>13</sup> The writings of Elaine Tyler May and Dolores Hayden, among others,

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<sup>10</sup> John Storey. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 9, 29, 65. See also: Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Michael Aaron Rockland. *Home on Wheels*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 16.

Michael Aaron Rockland. “Mobility in America”, *Forces in the Shaping of American Culture*, Edited by Joseph M. Collier, (Los Angeles, CA: Hwang Publishing Company, 1978), 77.

<sup>13</sup> Warren Susman. *Culture As History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 193.

reflect the equally ideological significance of the 'home in American life.'<sup>14</sup> Given the contested relationship between mobility and home, the trailer can be viewed as a cultural artifact that materially embodies competing American values—values that shift in relation to one another in response to the realities of major historical and socio-economic events. Because mobile homes—a term encompassing both the trailer and, later, the recreational vehicle or RV—are combinations of both automobiles and homes, they have had to adjust between being primarily one or the other. In order to keep up with the expectations and interests of the American people. Because of the volatility of the design, function and image of the trailer, the development of the trailer reflects changes in the American psyche. This thesis explores how the trailer illustrates the relationship between design and national identity.

How does the ever-shifting design, marketing and perception of the trailer reflect the social, moral and cultural changes in twentieth-century America? This thesis will examine the mobile home in a way not done before. Though historians such as Allan Wallis and Andrew Hurley have examined the history and socio-economic ramifications of the trailer and the trailer industry, and several mobile home-enthusiasts have created anthologies of the objects, there is little exploration into the design and reputation of the mobile home in relation to the American psyche.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, few have used the industry archives in the

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<sup>14</sup> For writings on the American idea of 'home', see bibliography under, Field, Hayden, Marling and Spigel.

<sup>15</sup> For anthologies of trailers and RVs from enthusiasts see Keister, Hesselbart and Gellner in Bibliography.

RV/MH Library in Elkhart, Indiana to gain perspective on these objects through their original marketing and advertising material, and the internal information of the mobile home industry. In his book *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, Roland Marchand writes: “Once we have placed advertisements in the same category as many traditional historical documents, it may be possible to argue that ads actually surpass most other recorded communications as a basis for plausible inference about popular attitudes and values.”<sup>16</sup> The promotional materials in the RV/MH archive, along with other advertisements for mobile homes found in popular magazines, were studied with Marchand’s ideas in mind. Combining these sources with an analysis of dramatic changes in trailer design, it will be established that the trailer, as a manufactured American product, mirrors the shifting mores and values of the United States in relation to social and cultural forces prompting those changes. As such, the trailer offers a unique illustration of the relationship between design and culture. As Kenneth Haltman writes in the introduction to Prownian analysis in *American Artifacts*, “While only some of culture takes material form, the part that does records the shape and imprint of otherwise more abstract, conceptual, or even metaphysical aspects of that culture they quite literally embody.”<sup>17</sup>

Chapter One will discuss the evolution of the trailer from European sources and those original influences that still find a place in the trailer industry.

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<sup>16</sup> Roland Marchand. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xix.

<sup>17</sup> Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman. *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000), 1.

Chapter Two will explore the developments in trailer design, marketing and image in the United States in the twentieth century. For the purpose of clarity, those developments are divided into two distinct periods during which I see the most significant changes in the image and design of the trailer: 1900 through 1940 and 1945 through the end of the century.<sup>18</sup> A coda to these two periods is the modern era of trailer design in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which will be discussed in Chapter Three. In this chapter it is illustrated that the mobile home industry continues to try to respond to the contradictory values of Americans while facing the challenges presented by the biggest natural disaster the United States has ever seen: Hurricane Katrina.



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<sup>18</sup> This thesis is perhaps rather broad in its approach to an entire century. It was important, however, to address each of the small changes that effected the direction of the mobile home industry. While this did not allow room to expand fully on each of these many historical moments, the breadth of the transformations made by the industry is important to reinforce the crux of this paper and the cultural importance of the mobile home.

## Chapter One

### The Mechanization of America

There were three shifts in the United States, technologically, socially, and historically that led to the evolution of the trailer: motorization of vehicles, new available leisure time for American workers, and the opening of National Parks. A brief history of large-scale transport leading up to the advent of the motorized mobile home will be helpful in understanding its significance in twentieth-century America. The trailer seems a distinctly American invention, born of the restless spirit and immigrant ancestry of the United States, but it is actually rooted in the European Gypsy caravans of the nineteenth-century.<sup>19</sup> The European Gypsies, who were originally called the Roma people, entered Eastern Europe and parts of the former Russian Empire in the Middle Ages from India. Because they possessed considerable skills as metal craftsmen, musicians and soldiers, the Gypsies therefore enjoyed relatively short periods of time living agreeably with people in their respective countries. However, during the first half of the sixteenth century, as the Turks became hostile towards much of Eastern Europe, and the Gypsies were perceived as in allegiance with them, the Gypsies were subjected to various restrictions on their lifestyles and trade. To avoid these unfair laws, and sometimes to avoid being forced into slavery, the Gypsies adopted a strictly nomadic, migratory lifestyle that kept them on the fringes of society and, for the

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<sup>19</sup> There are a number of histories on the European Gypsies. Comprehensive volumes used in this paper include David M. Crowe's *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*, and Zoltan D. Barany's *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics*. See bibliography.

most part, on the road.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, they traveled in caravans—homemade and often whimsically designed horse-drawn wagons—and moved from community to community to avoid either being maligned, or mistreated.<sup>21</sup> According to Carlton M. Edwards, an industry historian and the founder and Director of the Michigan State University Mobile Homes Education Program in the 1950s and '60s, there is evidence that these caravans were used as early as the fifteenth century, but the first documentation of a live-in caravan, a two-ton, two-horse wagon, dates to 1886.<sup>22</sup> Due to the death rituals of the Romany people—a ceremony in which the deceased is burned or buried in his caravan—only a small number of gypsy caravans are extant today.<sup>23</sup>

These caravans were often perceived in the same negative fashion as the Gypsies themselves—as symbols of rootlessness and criminality. But in the late nineteenth-century, in what could be considered the original advent of mobile homes into the cultural mainstream, the aristocracy in Great Britain adopted the Gypsy caravan as a sort of folly, buying decorative wagons and taking them out on the road for trips. Upper-class Britons commissioned wagon builders like Dunton and Sons of Reading to custom-build wagons based on the design of ornate Gypsy caravans. Caravans like the Reading Wagon, housed now at the

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<sup>20</sup> David M. Crowe. *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*, (New York: St. Marten's Griffin, 1994.), xi.

<sup>21</sup> W.M. Whiteman. *The History of the Caravan*, (London: Blandford Press, 1973), 17.

<sup>22</sup> Carlton M. Edwards. *Homes for Travel and Living: The History and Development of the Recreational Vehicle and the Mobile Homes Industries*, (East Lansing, MI: 1977.), 1.

<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to be absolutely certain, but it seems that less than a dozen original Romany wagons are available for public viewing. For further information see the following collections: Glasgow Museum of Transport, Reading Museum, Gordon Boswell Romany Museum, Milton Keynes Museum, York Castle Museum, and the Bristol City Museum. There are numerous English "Gentleman Gypsy" caravans available for viewing in these collections.

Glasgow Museum of Transportation and dating to the early twentieth century, featured elaborately fashioned and gilded exteriors as well as ornate but functional interiors. (*figure 1*) This particular caravan provided its owner with the freedom and folklore associated with the Gypsies, but in a customized, and artistically rendered design. Far from being rickety or threadbare, Gypsy caravans like the Reading Wagon caught on quickly among the aristocracy in early twentieth-century Great Britain, and soon so-called “gentleman gypsies” were fitting their horse-drawn caravans with cast-iron coal stoves, lavatories with running water, ingenious cabinetry and even pianos. A Gypsy wagon built by King James Stanley of the Stanley Tribe of English Gypsies and proudly exhibited at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 featured, among other luxurious amenities, a four-poster bed.<sup>24</sup> Hence, Americans would have at least been aware of this type of caravan after its showing in the World’s Fair.

Another wagon enthusiast, William Gordon Stables, a Scottish born doctor and popular adventure-fiction writer, commissioned the Bristol Wagon Company to create a wagon, which he named *The Wanderer* and used to travel across Great Britain in 1885. (*figure 2*) *The Wanderer* was well appointed with imported mahogany wood and featured a Victorian-style interior including bookcases, a china cabinet, and musical instruments. At eleven feet tall and nearly seven feet wide, *The Wanderer* weighs two tons and required two horses to be pulled—a

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<sup>24</sup> Allan D. Wallis. *Wheel Estate: The Rise and Decline of Mobile Homes*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). p. 37

fact that surprised and annoyed Stables once he received it.<sup>25</sup> Although his caravan could scarcely be turned on most roads and often sunk on less-than-hard-packed roads, Stables published a book about his journeys in *The Wanderer* in 1891 and called it *The Gentleman Gypsy*, which was narrowly available in America.<sup>26</sup> A group of men inspired by the romanticism of Stables' Caravan despite its mammoth size and impracticality created their own wagons and founded the Caravan Club of Great Britain and Ireland, first housed in a private home on London's Stamford Brook Road.<sup>27</sup> The prestigious Club, charged with listing suitable camping sites, improving the quality of wagons and looking after all the interests of caravaners, continues to operate today and counts over 375,000 trailer enthusiasts among its members.<sup>28</sup> The Caravan Club is a forerunner to the many such clubs devoted to trailers and mobile homes that sprouted up throughout the United States in the early twentieth century as roads were built and citizens set out to see their country. American clubs such as the Tin Can Tourists and Wally Byam's Caravan Club International were based on the same ideals as the original Caravan Club to build positive, family and nature-oriented clubs that promote the trailerite lifestyle. Most importantly, the goal of the Caravan Club was to foster camaraderie among its members and organize group

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<sup>25</sup> Whiteman, 18. See also: The National Motor Museum Trust. Beaulieu, New Forest, England. [http://www.nationalmotormuseum.org.uk/The\\_Wanderer\\_Caravan\\_Photo.html](http://www.nationalmotormuseum.org.uk/The_Wanderer_Caravan_Photo.html)

<sup>26</sup> William Gordon Stables was in the Navy and his vast travels allowed him to distribute his books during his travels. See, S. Graham. *An Introduction to William Gordon Stables*, (Berkshire: Twyford and Ruscombe Local History Society, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Christine Ellis. *The History of the Caravan Club*, (West Sussex: The Caravan Club, 2006), 10.

<sup>28</sup> *The Caravan Club*, <http://www.caravanclub.co.uk/about-us/the-caravan-club/club-facts>

trips across Europe, a goal that is still a part of modern trailer clubs in the United States today.<sup>29</sup>

### **The American Caravan**

An early version of the mobile home became part of the American cultural mainstream by the end of the nineteenth-century.<sup>30</sup> The next step in its evolution was motorization. The invention of a lightweight four-step combustion engine in the late nineteenth-century paved the way for the automobile, and insured that wagons and caravans, once powered only by horses, would become self-contained motor vehicles.<sup>31</sup> The earliest motorized caravans were top-heavy and cumbersome, and traveled at roughly ten miles per hour. They were more akin to tall vans or buses than to the sleek, lightweight trailers of today. Early motorized caravans of this kind had few meaningful applications, though some were used in Europe as mobile military stations during World War I. Before them, military officers were forced to rely on mules and horses to transport artillery and ammunition. Combustion engines had been developed years earlier, but were not yet developed or tested for reliable military use.

In the United States, motorized caravans can be viewed as the direct descendants of the classic American transport vehicle—the covered wagon.<sup>32</sup>

Mid-nineteenth-century pioneers pushed west and opened up the country using

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<sup>29</sup> Ellis, 12. It should be noted that while there is no evidence of a direct connection between the British caravanning clubs and the American trailerites clubs that started later, they were based on the same ideals, which sprouted independently from the inherent difficulties and pleasures of life in a mobile home.

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Edwards, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Wallis, 37.

covered wagons—basic wooden wagons topped by a bowed cover made of waterproofed canvas and held up by hickory poles—not only as transport, but also as shelter along the way. This dual-functionality—anticipating by more than a century the modern mobile home—was not comprised of two equally convenient functions. Horse-drawn wagons with wooden wheels thumping along unpaved roads made for very rough riding, and walking or riding on horses were by far the preferred modes of transportation. Yet these utilitarian wagons were indispensable to the pioneer movement, and integral to the settling of the United States. They may have been uncomfortable to ride in, but these vehicles—often referred to as prairie schooners—provided families with an excellent means of hauling their possessions over long distances. As George Shumway wrote in his history of the Conestoga wagon, they also acted as relatively comfortable temporary shelters when stationary so families could sleep and take respite from the elements.<sup>33</sup>

This contrast in functionality in early covered wagons—comfortable to live in, miserable to ride in—would, a century later, be inverted, as motorized homes came to be considered smooth transporters but cramped living spaces. Even so, the unique and basic dual-functionality of covered wagons, as both transport and shelter, would not fundamentally change with the advent of motorization, and would serve as the primitive template for mobile homes on American roads today. In fact, that tension between the two essentially contradictory functions of

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<sup>33</sup> George Shumway. *Conestoga Wagon: 1750-1850*, (New York: George Shumway, Publisher, 1964), 267.

covered wagons—mobility versus stability—and the subsequent clash of values inherent in each function, would continue to define the trailer industry after motorization.

Perhaps the most famous covered wagon of all, the Conestoga wagon, anticipated one of the key features of every mobile home to follow: ingenious exterior and interior design.<sup>34</sup> Named for the Conestoga valley in Pennsylvania, where Mennonite Germans introduced the original wagon around 1570, the wagon had a body shaped like a boat, with its sides sloped outward. This was intended to keep possessions—and people—inside the wagon as it bounced along unpaved roads and untraveled prairies. The interior of the Conestoga featured a slightly curved floor, also intended to minimize the toppling of items. Most of these wagons had built-in external barrels that held water, as well as external and internal compartments for tools needed to make repairs.<sup>35</sup> The Conestoga was an impressively utilitarian vehicle, and the ingenuity of its design—the basic imprint of a stationary shelter reconfigured to make it reliably mobile—in a sense mirrored the nascent American character at that time: rugged, sturdy, resourceful, desirous of stability, but forced to travel to find that stability. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the covered wagon, and specifically the classic Conestoga wagon, continues to be an iconic, resonant symbol of the American pioneer, and of the conquering of the wild American West. A poem

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<sup>34</sup> Arrol Gellner and Douglas Keister. *Ready to Roll: A Celebration of the American Travel Trailer*, (China: Viking Studio, 2003), 2.

<sup>35</sup> “Pennsylvania’s Conestoga Wagon: Deconstructed”, *American History*, Vol. 43, (February 2009), 25.

printed in the *Denver Post* in 1937 drew a comparison between the covered wagon and the auto-camping craze: “Time has not dulled that urge. The wanderlust lives forever in the hearts of men. Trails have grown smooth and comfort goes along, as covered wagons travel West again.”<sup>36</sup>

In popular culture the covered wagon was widely embraced. In 1923 Paramount Pictures put out “The Covered Wagon”, a silent film dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt about the hard journey of a pioneer family to “the far-off Oregon”.<sup>37</sup> Many other western movies and television programs kept the image of the Conestoga wagon alive. The still-popular “Little House on the Prairie” books first published in 1935, featured the Conestoga wagon as the Ingalls’ family home.<sup>38</sup> The 1974 television show of the same name continued to tell the Ingalls’ family tale of American perseverance.<sup>39</sup> In 1955 covered wagons were used as a part of Walt Disney World’s “Frontierland” in Disneyland in Anaheim, California, and in 1971 as part of the Magic Kingdom of Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida.<sup>40</sup> Covered wagons are seen in a myriad of advertisements, from fruits and vegetables and dairy products, to train companies and airlines.<sup>41</sup>

(figures 3-5) In the context of modern mobile homes, these early wagons exemplify how trailer design reflected contemporary American values or the

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<sup>36</sup> Charles Edgar Nash. *Trailer Ahoy*, (Lancaster, PA: Intelligencer Printing Co., 1937), 88.

<sup>37</sup> *The Silent Film Still Archive*, “The Covered Wagon”.  
[http://www.silentfilmstillarchive.com/covered\\_wagon.htm](http://www.silentfilmstillarchive.com/covered_wagon.htm)

<sup>38</sup> Laura Ingalls Wilder. *Little House on the Prairie*, (New York: Harper & Bros, 1935), 4.

<sup>39</sup> NBC. *Little House on the Prairie*, directed by Michael Landon. 1974- 1983.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Steiner. “Frontierland as Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Architectural Packaging of the Mythic West”, *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 46 (Spring, 1998), 15.

<sup>41</sup> *Pioneer Orchards*, [www.oodlesalootle.com/oodlescrate2.htm](http://www.oodlesalootle.com/oodlescrate2.htm).

*Burlington Route*, <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess.T2410/pg.1/>.

*The Airlines of the United States*, <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess.T1864/pg.1/>.

desire to settle new spaces. In the ads we can see how the wagon is associated to pioneerism, and family and American values; values that were associated to the trailer as well in the early part of the century. The ads for *Pioneer Orchards*, the *Burlington Route* trains and *The Airlines of the United States*, all use the images of pioneer wagons to associate their companies with the revolutionary spirit and resourcefulness of the earliest Americans.

With the advent of motorization covered wagons gave way to more efficient modes of transport. At the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, motorized vehicles were new. Companies such as Oldsmobile and Studebaker offered four-wheel vehicles called “runabouts” that built upon the existing popularity of bicycles as modes of transport. The Studebaker company had actually been the nation’s biggest manufacturer of Conestoga wagons prior to entering the automobile industry.<sup>42</sup> Then, in 1896, Henry Ford, operating out of a small workshop set up behind his home, developed the Quadricycle—a cushioned, two-person seat mounted atop four bicycle tires and powered by gasoline which became the prototype of the automobile.<sup>43</sup> This burgeoning mobility, coupled with the creation in 1902 of the American Automotive Association (AAA) and its campaign to build new and accessible road systems throughout the country, launched the race to create the nation’s first affordable

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<sup>42</sup> Thomas E Bonsall. *More Than They Promised: The Studebaker Story*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 14.

<sup>43</sup> Reynold M. Wik. *Henry Ford and Grass-Roots America*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 12.

automobile capable of traveling over relatively long distances in comfort.<sup>44</sup> Ford met this challenge in 1908, when he introduced the Model T. The Model T was an overnight success and was said to have “put America on wheels”.<sup>45</sup>

Motorization coincided with a growing concern about leisure time. When the AAA-supported Good Roads Bill passed Congress in 1903, a movement that had begun in the 1860’s towards federally mandated leisure time, in the form of an 8-hour day and 5-day long workweek, was making strong headway. After years of simply accepting an average eighty-hour work week, American employees began to speak out in favor of paid time off. In her study of the history of vacations in the United States, Cindy Aron writes, “Reformers concerned with the plight of poor women and children along with the businessmen interested in increasing the efficiency of their workforce began to champion vacations for working-class people.”<sup>46</sup> In 1910 William Howard Taft suggested to the *New York Times* that American workers and businesses alike benefited from vacation and should receive two to three months off a year.<sup>47</sup> Very few agreed with the length of time, but unions and forward-thinking companies across the country began to enforce the eight-hour, five-day work week.<sup>48</sup> In 1916 the Adamson Act became the first federally-mandated law to give workers this schedule, but The Ford

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<sup>44</sup> Gellner and Keister, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Nick Georgano. “Henry Ford”, *The Beaulieu Encyclopedia of the Automobile*, (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishing, 2000), 559.

<sup>46</sup> Cindy S. Aron. *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 196. For more studies of leisure in the United States see Cross, Rugh, and Sears in bibliography.

<sup>47</sup> “Taft Speaks Out for Long Vacations,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1910, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Mario DiNunzio. *Woodrow Wilson: Essential Writings and Speeches of the Scholar President*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 21.

Motor Company, The Building Trades Council, and The United Mine Workers, among others had unofficially been following it for several years. Americans were being presented with not only the means to travel long distances, but also the time to do it. As a result of this turn-of-the-century confluence of technology and leisure, Americans grew eager to explore their country, not as pioneers struggling to survive, but in essence, as recreational tourists.

### **Taking “Home” on the Road**

Eventually, the design of automobiles, and larger motorized vehicles, reflected a desire for affordable recreational travel. At first, the limited production of recreational vehicles designed to take advantage of new roads and leisure time made them far too expensive to be accessible to anyone but the wealthiest of Americans. These vehicles included the very earliest incarnations of motorized homes, including house cars—self-propelled, residence-ready vehicles built on a truck chassis—and fully enclosed trailers similar to train cars that were pulled by automobiles. In 1919 aircraft engineer Glenn Curtiss introduced the most popular of these vehicles, the Curtiss Motor Bungalow, named for the popular housing style (to be more fully discussed in chapter two). The Motor Bungalow, later called the Aerocar Land Yacht, lacked a kitchen and lavatory but was as lavishly trimmed in its interior as any mansion of the time. (*figure 6*) Each custom unit featured mahogany walls and ceilings, parquet floors, upholstered seating, scrolled iron wall sconces and stained glass panels above hand-crank operated

windows. The outer body was created with thin but strong ribs of wood, clad with lightweight plywood covered in leatherette that kept the weight on the vehicle low, while allowing for an insulated ride for the passengers. Using Curtiss' revolutionary fifth-wheel hitch, the first of its kind, the lavish trailer could be towed by a matching automobile available for purchase, or any other car with the trunk cover removed and a hitch installed. A circa 1933 pamphlet published by Curtiss Aerocar, Co. Inc. was passed out to dealers and made a point of saying that the Aerocar was not to be confused with "camping trailers" and that it should be thought of as the "sociable mode of transportation" and used for extended tours and weekend trips.<sup>49</sup> The interior of this exclusive trailer can be compared to Victorian interiors popular at the time of its creation, offering those who could afford it the best of home while on the road, with ornately and exaggeratedly appointed interiors much like their site-built homes. Thus it reveals the American desire to insert 'home' into wherever they are, even on the road.

While the yacht-like image of Curtiss's invention reflected its elite accessibility, the desire to see the country from within the comfort of one's own vehicle was not limited to the upper class. In the first decade of the twentieth century, even before these expensive early trailers became available, a third major development—along with motorization and a new emphasis on leisure time—paved the way for the growth of mobile homes. This development was a

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<sup>49</sup> Circa 1933 pamphlet published by Curtiss Aerocar, Co. Inc. The ten-page illustrated brochure gives interior views, mechanical specifications, and prices as well as giving commercial uses for the Aerocar and offering pictures of some custom models owned by notable owners such as Vanderbilts of New York. The brochure is held by the RV/MH Hall of Founders Library Archive in Elkhart, Indiana.

new enthusiasm for and appreciation of the great American outdoors, a grass roots movement that was flourishing by the turn of the twentieth century spurred by the declaration of the first official National Park. In 1832, Andrew Jackson became the first president to do this when he set aside four areas of hot springs in Arkansas for National preservation. Abraham Lincoln followed suit with Yosemite Valley and the giant sequoia area in California in 1864 (later Yosemite National Park). By 1901, when the conservation activist Theodore Roosevelt took office, the National Park System was well under way.<sup>50</sup> Resourceful citizens who now had more time to travel, and who could afford basic automobiles, began satisfying this desire to visit these parks by creating their own mobile camping units from scraps of wood and metal that could attach to their new cars. While some simply brought along tents or slept in their cars, many inventive campers created awnings or fold-out extensions to create more interior space for living outdoors and as a result extend the time they could comfortably spend in the National Parks. Therefore, the appreciation of the outdoors in combination with the desire to travel dictated the design of these early mobile homes by resourceful camping enthusiasts who were both unable to wait for manufacturers to satisfy their needs, and interested in saving money by using their own ingenuity.

When manufacturers finally did catch up, the auto-camping industry burgeoned. Even President Warren Harding, an avid outdoorsman, enjoyed

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<sup>50</sup> Douglas Brinkley. *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 450.

camping, and drew national attention to it by joining an auto-camping trip with Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, and Henry Ford in 1921. While they only disclosed certain locations along their route to the press, the goal of the group was “to get into the wildest” sections of the forests and mountains they were visiting, and their trip was indeed nationally reported.<sup>51</sup> Major U.S. automakers began to see the potential for a new industry in this new more middle-class desire to travel and camp. Capitalizing on the prevalence of homemade, patchwork auto-campers, companies like Auto-Kamp and The Covered Wagon began to create and sell trailer-building plans and kits that made fashioning a homemade auto-camper simpler. By the end of the 1920s, writes Thomas Weiss in “Tourism in America before World War II”, tent trailers were the new standard in overnight camping.<sup>52</sup>

These early, primitive versions of campers, trailers and mobile homes gave way in the 1920s to far more sophisticated incarnations. The impulse to travel—first, among pioneers, later among the gentry, and finally among middle Americans—reflected character traits and values that were being freshly uncovered and explored in the growing nation. Inventiveness, resilience, manifest destiny—these basic American imperatives were all reflected in the creation and design of vehicles that, utilizing the newest technology, allowed people to travel greater distances than any other society in history.

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<sup>51</sup> “Harding Asked to Join Ford Camping Trip: Edison and H.S. Firestone Among Auto Tourists Who Plan Washington Stop”, *New York Times*, July 23, 1921, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Weiss. “Tourism in America before World War II”, *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 64, (June 2004), 316.

But one might say that the desire to *go* somewhere, followed by the desire to *settle* somewhere represents a tension that has never been fully reconciled by the design of trailers and mobile homes. By necessity, even the earliest incarnations of non-stationary shelters had to be two things at once—effective means of transport and comfortable dwelling space. The mobile home industry has had to respond to these essentially contradictory demands. The flexibility of trailer and mobile home design is perhaps their greatest strength, but this flexibility also reflects a tension that has adversely affected the industry, both during its inception, and in the ensuing century, to be discussed in Chapter Two. This conflict between mobility and stability—the need for a mobile home to be free and rootless but also adhere to the entrenched American ideal of house and home as permanence—the design tension inherent in trailers becomes representative of a fundamental “conflict in our ideology,” explained sociologist Margaret Drury in 1972. “This conflict is reflected nowhere better than in the housing situation as seen in the mobile home. It is in this situation that the conflict of the conventional, the stable, the home-rooted environment versus the temporary, the mobile, the transient environment comes into the open.” She furthers the thought by writing, “...“home” is so sacred an American ideal that “stability” has come to be looked upon as a virtue. Conversely, lack of stability has been looked down upon as less than virtuous. But America has always been a mobile nation”.<sup>53</sup> As seen in Michael Rockland’s examinations of mobility in

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<sup>53</sup> Margaret Drury. *Mobile Homes: The Unrecognized Revolution in American Housing*, (New York: Praeger, 1972), 82.

America, and also Robert D. Putnam writes in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American* , “Compared with the citizens of most other nations, Americans have always led a nomadic existence.”<sup>54</sup> Americans in the 1920s, more than ever before, wanted the freedom to see their country. The comforts of home, however, created such an anchor, that the days of roughing it in tents along the road would simply no longer be enough.

That conflict has shaped the mobile home industry in the twentieth century—and, as a result, the industry reflects the changing mores, values and desires of American consumers. The trailer industry, initially free to design and market a vehicle based solely upon its perceptions of consumer desires and the new American dream, would soon be forced into a survival strategy dictated by historical events. Rather than create and define the image of its product, the industry reacted to catastrophic economic realities that had a negative impact on the nation’s perception of trailers. The design of these products, once free and fanciful, became largely functional. In response to the Great Depression and World War II cultural and social shifts in post-war America would once again dictate and define the image of trailers and mobile homes in the second half of the twentieth century. The next chapter will explore how these events in American history shaped the design, marketing and image of trailers in keeping with the American character.



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<sup>54</sup> Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 204.

## Chapter Two

### The Twentieth Century Trailer

At the turn of the century, the confluence of technological advancements that led to the advent of motorization, a new emphasis in and demand for leisure time, and a grassroots movement towards the appreciation of nature and rural America— had set the stage for the birth of the trailer industry. The driving force behind it was America’s growing appetite for “auto-camping,” or taking to the wilderness and camping in homemade tents rigged to their autos.

That appetite was well recognized by the chiefs of the nascent automobile industry, who capitalized on it and drew even more attention to their new machines. The well-known Henry Ford, Thomas Edison and tire-magnate Harvey Firestone— together with John Burroughs, one of the celebrated naturalists of his day, took a series of auto-camping trips beginning in 1914, traveling under the nickname “the Vagabonds.” (*Figure 7*) The nation’s press corps covered every stop of their trip. “Their well-publicized excursions spurred a national obsession with motorized camping that continues to this day,” writes trailer historian Douglas Keister.<sup>55</sup> This interest in emulating the Vagabonds and discovering unseen America was not hampered by the relative inconvenience of family travel before the advent of trailers and motorized RVs; Americans fashioned tents and makeshift trailers of their own, while waiting for an actual industry to catch up with their desires. “With a few planks of wood, some nails, a sheet of canvas and a

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<sup>55</sup> Douglas Keister. *Mobile Mansions: Taking ‘Home Sweet Home’ On the Road*, (Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2006), 21.

set of wheels, a resourceful individual could piece together a crude travel trailer fairly quickly and hitch it to the back of the car,” writes associate professor of history and environmentalist Andrew Hurley.<sup>56</sup> They could also create full-blown motor homes that, while crude, presaged the RV industry. The housecar, one of the earliest examples of a homemade RV, can be seen in a 1920 photograph, and shows what appears to be a Pierce Arrow truck remodeled into a motorized home resembling nothing so much as a one-room cabin on wheels.<sup>57</sup> (*figure 8*)

At the same time, the Schaefer Tent and Awning Company of Denver, Colorado, ran a brisk trade in tents that either stood alone or attached to parked cars at a campsite. These standard cars with billowing tents attached to them were the visual predecessors of modern, motorized RVs. It is significant to note that the demand for trailers predates the beginning of the trailer industry; first came the restlessness that set Americans out on the road and the inventiveness that allowed them to fashion crude but functional homemade versions of trailers. The manufactured trailers themselves were a response to, and a direct reflection of, their homemade ancestors, both in their design and their duality of purpose. As Lynn Spigel wrote in *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, basing her argument on the work of social historian Warren Susman, “technologies such as automobiles, radios, and computers do not simply cause social change; instead, their uses are shaped by social practices

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<sup>56</sup> Hurley, 199.

<sup>57</sup> Keister, 17.

and cultural expectations.”<sup>58</sup> The American trailer, therefore, is not only a reflection of the changing American psyche in the twentieth century, but represents an early cultural shift of the period—the vast, national impetus to flee the urban centers built around nineteenth-century industries, and experience, at least for a few days at a time, a more peaceful, bucolic, unseen America. Without the modern motels and resorts that surround the natural wonders and National Parks of the country today, those anxious to spend time at lakes, in forests and near places like the Grand Canyon had to bring safe and comfortable places to stay with them. The attachable tents that created auto-camps, and the homemade trailers attached to the cars of such nature-seekers were the only suitable options.

Indeed, to some extent, the trailer industry traces its roots to a single rural vacation in 1928. When an Indiana bacteriologist named Arthur Sherman watched his tent get swamped by a rainstorm, he set out to construct a sturdier alternative. He hired a carpenter and built a rudimentary hard-sided trailer that his children interestingly called the “Covered Wagon.”<sup>59</sup> Sherman displayed his boxy but relatively sturdy trailer at the Detroit Auto Show in January 1930—and received 118 orders. Sherman’s company, the Covered Wagon Trailer Company, went on to manufacture the first commercial, affordable hard-sided trailer, and dominated the industry throughout the 1930s. There was little difference between the homemade trailers of the 1930s and their commercially built successors. The

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<sup>58</sup> Lynn Spigel. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>59</sup> Keister, 28.

wooden frames created by do-it-yourselfers and the earliest frames by Covered Wagon were indistinguishable but for the logo. It was the interiors of the Covered Wagon trailers that set them apart. (*figure 9*) With beautiful wood cabinetry set with leaded glass windows, modern upholstery and homey touches like café curtains and swivel-arm reading lamps, the interiors suggested the comforts of home rather than a tent in the wilderness like their homemade ancestors.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, unlike the Curtiss Aerocar, which was specifically marketed to the upper-class as a luxury object, the Covered Wagon, according to a 1935 brochure found in the Archive at the RV/MH Hall of Fame Library, was marketed specifically to those looking to travel for “a cost that is only slightly more than staying at home”.<sup>61</sup>

By the time Sherman exhibited his Covered Wagon in 1928, camping and trailer enthusiasts already represented a major commercial force in the U.S. In Florida—a long-time tourist destination for “snowbirds” looking to escape the winter weather of the Northern Midwest and Northeast—entrepreneurs and local governments began to realize the potential by catering to and specifically targeting trailerites.<sup>62</sup> Auto parks sprouted across Florida, as well as in other warm-weather destination areas around the country. In 1919, at a gathering of twenty-two families at the DeSoto Auto Park near Tampa, Florida, James M. Morrison put forth the idea of creating an association for the benefit of campers

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<sup>60</sup> Covered Wagon brochure, 1935. RV/MH Hall of Founders Library Archive: Elkhart, Indiana.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Bryan Burkhart, Phillip Noyes and Allison Arieff. *Trailer Travel: A Visual History of Mobile America*, (Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2002), 26.

everywhere. That discussion—literally held around a campfire, spurred the formation of the Tin Can Tourists of America (TCT). Though the phrase “tin can tourist” was originally a derogatory slur against campers (and a reference to their reliance on canned food instead of meals made from scratch, not to their aluminum mobile homes as often thought), TCT reclaimed the name and created an identity around it. The group wanted to ensure that there were always clean, safe campgrounds and wholesome entertainment available for all trailerites, and to enforce neighborly behavior and an unending appreciation for outdoor life. Above all, the TCT hoped to foster a fraternal relationship between trailer-enthusiasts who shared these spaces and the roads.<sup>63</sup> Their official theme song may sum up their philosophy best: “The more we get together, together, together. The more we get together, the happier we’ll be.”<sup>64</sup>

Much like the Caravan Club of England, the TCT and other clubs like it created communities for those who preferred to take their homes on the road, providing a sense of stability and roots while traveling. While these trailerites prized their freedom and communion with nature, as soon as they arrived at the rally site with their respective clubs, street signs went up, committees were formed, elections were held, potlucks were organized, and a communal life was established—even if just for a weekend.<sup>65</sup> In his article “Mobility in America”, Michael Aaron Rockland wondered if some of the most mobile Americans in

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<sup>63</sup> Al Hesselbart. *The Dumb Things Sold...Just Like That*, (Benton, Kentucky: 2007.), 37-38.

<sup>64</sup> The TCT official theme song is “More We Get Together”. In 1919, the only prerequisite to joining the club aside from trailer ownership was to sing the two-verse song to the highest ranking official at a TCT campground and pay a small fee. Burkhart, Noyes and Arieff, 31.

<sup>65</sup> Rockland, *Home on Wheels*, 16.

history—people like Daniel Boone and John Steinbeck—were not actually somewhat anti-social; using the ability to be mobile to avoid setting up viable communities.<sup>66</sup> While the TCT and other trailer clubs like it were formed as a matter of self-preservation, the communities that it created among strangers became one of the most prized parts of the trailerites lifestyle. The four objectives of the TCT were laid out by the founders of the club in 1919: 1) To unite fraternally all auto campers; 2) To establish a feeling of friendship between them and a friendly basis with local residents; 3) To provide clean and wholesome entertainment in camps and meetings; and 4) To spread the gospel of cleanliness to all camps, as well as enforce the rules governing all public campgrounds.<sup>67</sup> These goals not only formed the basis for the TCT, they inspired many later clubs such as the Good Sams. Furthermore, they illustrate a desire for community on behalf trailerites, rather than a wish for separatism, albeit perhaps a desire for intermittent community.

The appeal of these auto parks and trailer clubs was not limited to middle-class masses. All across Florida, and in other warm weather spots, upscale trailer parks sprang up. These parks—clean, comfortable and easily accessible to trailers—were also set up as luxury resorts. Recreational areas with shuffleboard, swimming pools, organized barbeques and community dances created a general air of community that was crucial to their success. Eventually, even celebrities got involved. In 1953, Bing Crosby founded and became the

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<sup>66</sup> Rockland, "Mobility in America", 77.

<sup>67</sup> Edwards, 272.

president of Blue Skies Trailer Village in Palm Springs, California, recruiting forty-eight members of the entertainment community, including George Burns, Gracie Allen, Barbara Stanwyck, Jack Benny and Frank Sinatra, to be investors and then naming streets after them.<sup>68</sup> The park offered unobstructed views of the surrounding mountains from each of its eighty-six lots and access to The Blue Skies Club—a clubhouse as exclusive as any Country Club in the United States. A 1953 advertisement for the park pictures the stylized entry sign complete with the “Bing Crosby: President” plaque and the phrase, “America’s Most Luxurious Trailer Park”. (figure 10) In the background the street signs with celebrity-named roads stand before a glittering pool surrounded by trampolines, sun umbrellas and deck chairs. Bathing beauties and elegant gentlemen fill the chairs and appear to be enjoying their luxurious surroundings. With the mountains and palm trees completing the setting, the ad gives the impression that the trailer has finally “arrived”.

Thus, as the national auto-camping craze took hold, spontaneous clusters of campers gave way to commercially managed auto parks, just as homemade housecars gave way to commercially manufactured trailers. All of these positive developments, as well as the accompanying marketing of the trailer lifestyle in magazines, books, and movies, pushed the trailer industry into full swing by the beginning of the 1930s. A 1936 survey by *Fortune* magazine asked, “Would you like to own your own trailer and spend part of the year traveling in it?” 49.3

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<sup>68</sup> Rancho Mirage Chamber of Commerce, “Bing Crosby Trailer Park”, <http://www.ranchoirage.org/pdf/bingcrosbypark.pdf>

percent of Americans answered, “yes”. The same year, AAA forecasted that by 1940 there would be 5 million trailerites on the road, while the famed Wall Street pundit Roger Babson (who had predicted the stock market crash of 1929) boldly declared in the 1935 premiere issue of *Automobile and Trailer Travel* that “within two decades, one out of every two Americans will be living in a trailer.”<sup>69</sup> These predictions of a veritable explosion in trailer ownership—with nearly half of all Americans saying they would like to own one, and a famed Wall Street analyst believing that roughly half *would* soon own one—are all the more remarkable considering that the mobile home industry came into existence only a decade or so before the forecasts were made. The enormous popularity of trailers within just a few years of their initial commercial manufacture reflects the intensity of the American desire to be mobile, its desire to see and explore the country, as well as, perhaps, a vast sense of hope and promise with regard to social mobility. These feelings of hope manifested themselves in other cultural forms. In books such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 *The Great Gatsby*, for example, the focus was on the idea that any American could achieve any level of wealth and any station in society, despite what one was born into. The nightly radio comedy series *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was first broadcast in 1928, and detailed the adventures of two black men leaving their Atlanta, Georgia, farm jobs with twenty-four dollars and heading to Chicago to start a new business and a new life.<sup>70</sup> While the series was extremely racially prejudiced, the message of hope and possibility was

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<sup>69</sup> *Automobile and Trailer Travel*, (Jan/Feb, 1936), 10.

<sup>70</sup> Melvin Patrick Ely. *The Adventures of Amos ‘n’ Andy: The Social History of an American Phenomenon*, (New York: Free Press, 1991), 49.

clear—*anyone*—even a black man—could make a new life for themselves with enough aspiration and effort. New technologies such as the automobile, movies, and radio were increasingly accessible to a greater population of the country and optimism about modernity and the opportunities that came with it was a prevalent sentiment.

The design, marketing and image of trailers at this point in the early twentieth century reflected two key developments in American design of the period—a shift away from the ornate or towards a less formal aesthetic, and the advent of prefabrication. The emphasis on informality was evident in the design of new middle-class American homes at the turn of the century, and the popularity of what came to be called the American Bungalow. The term “bungalow” encompasses a general impression and image, as much as it does a set of architectural details, the bungalow was essentially a small, practical, cottage-style home that eschewed extra rooms and superfluous spaces in favor of a streamlined, informal functionality. This gradual shift away from grandiose design and towards a cozy, cottage-style aesthetic in the early years of the twentieth century produced changes in the architecture of American homes that were “inherent in the bungalow idea, and that brought about the transition to what we know today as the modern house,” wrote Clay Lancaster in *Common Places*.<sup>71</sup> Specifically, these changes reflected “a desire for a simpler and far less formal style of domestic life.” Bungalow-style homes, for instance, featured a

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<sup>71</sup> Clay Lancaster. “The American Bungalow,” *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 79.

“living room” rather than a more formal parlor, reflecting a design principle that valued functionality over stylization, and that popularized the concept of homes that had “general attractiveness without being pretentious.”<sup>72</sup>

The second development—new experiments in and emphasis on prefabrication, or the practice of building structures out of standardized parts assembled in a factory, also had an impact on the design of American homes. Though they never entered into the realm of prefabrication, the magazine *Ladies' Home Journal* published several articles on this practice. Outselling their closest competitors by nearly one million readers, the *Ladies' Home Journal* was the point of dissemination for middle-class tastes at the turn of the twentieth century and presented its housing-reform campaign in 1895. The magazine, led by editor Edward Bok, offered complete building plans to an affordable and well-designed home to its readers for one to five dollars. As Leland Roth write in his essay in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architects*, architects such as Gustav Stickley and Frank Lloyd Wright made their plans available to readers in hopes of creating a revolution in home design by allowing the middle class an affordable option for the highest-quality designed homes.<sup>73</sup>

As this practice gained popularity before World War I, companies like Sears and Aladdin took it one step further by prefabricating all the necessary materials and offering mail-order home kits. Sears and Roebuck sold mail order house-building kits to between 70,000 and 100,000 Americans between 1908

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<sup>72</sup> Lancaster, 82.

<sup>73</sup> Leland M. Roth. “Getting the Houses to the People: Edward Bok, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and the Ideal House”, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Vol. 4 (1991), 187-196.

and 1940. Brought about by the end of the Industrial Revolution, the United States saw a 50% rise in population between 1890 and 1910. This rise, coupled with the end of World War I in 1918 created a significant housing crisis that Sears capitalized on with their release of the *Book of Modern Homes and Building Plans* in 1908. Consumers could choose from twenty-two plans in the book, and for between \$650 and \$2,500 Sears would provide the full building instructions and precut and predrilled materials; down to the nails and screws. Everything arrived flat-packed and numbered at the train station closest to the customer's building site.<sup>74</sup> Sears, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and major architects of the time were all interested in streamlining home-building techniques and materials and making attractive, affordable homes available to the public.

Both of these burgeoning design aesthetics—smaller, less formal bungalow home design, and a new interest in prefabrication—lent themselves to the trailer and mobile home industries, which, by their nature, depended on the appeal of small, functional living spaces. And, because mobile homes were a combination of both home and auto, they uniquely reflected the assimilation of these design principles. No home designed by an architect could ever get quite as small and streamlined or as perfectly functional as could a mobile home. In essence, the mobile home represented the purest, most miniaturized version of the aesthetic. Similarly, no automobile could ever incorporate as many elements of these new design principles as could a mobile home. The architect

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<sup>74</sup> Amanda Cooke and Avi Friedman. "Ahead of Their Time: The Sears Catalogue Prefabricated Houses", *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 14 (2001), 53-54.

Buckminster Fuller recognized the unique appeal of the mobile home as a canvas for his design philosophy, which focused on the conservation of the earth's resources through more efficient and thoughtful design, including his 1920's conceptualization of the prefabricated and mass-produced Dymaxion House. Although the house was not built until 1945, Fuller followed his Dymaxion Home with plans for a Dymaxion Car in 1933.<sup>75</sup> (*figure 11*) The Dymaxion Car is a sleek, streamlined vehicle, intended, said Fuller, to be “a first stage experimental vehicle leading to eventual omni-medium wingless transport.”<sup>76</sup> Fuller envisioned his creation as either a transporter or—with the right accessories—a housecar. Clearly futuristic, the Dymaxion had an aluminum-bodied, steel aircraft chassis, as well as aircraft shatterproof glass. Inside, the car was more akin to a modern-day mini-van than a housecar, but because the car never went into production, the housecar side of the project was never realized. With its impressive interior size and 30 miles to the gallon, the Dymaxion Car would have been a comfortable and affordable option for those looking to take home on the road. It had a profound influence on automobile design; one of its lasting innovations, for instance, was the use of front-wheel drive.<sup>77</sup> The Dymaxion Car also perfectly encapsulated the nascent concept of streamline design, or an emphasis on sleekness, simplicity and functionality.

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<sup>75</sup> Robert W. Marks. *The Dymaxion World of Buckminster Fuller*, (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960), 98.

<sup>76</sup> Victor Danilor. *The Design Science of R. Buckminster Fuller*, (Chicago, Museum of Science and Industry, 1973), 11.

<sup>77</sup> Marks, 29.

There were other experimental housecars that embodied streamlined design as it came to influence car and trailer manufacture in the early 1930s. The Australian designer Alexius Pribil fashioned a sloped, teardrop-shaped mobile home he called the Aircar in 1935. Built two years later with the help of a racecar driver, the Aircar—or, interestingly, the Trailmobile, as it later came to be known in a blending of future and past iconography—was specifically intended to improve upon the cumbersome design of early travel trailers, and to herald a new kind of simple, comfortable motorized home. It, too, never made it to the road.<sup>78</sup> But the Aircar, along with the Dymaxion and other experimental housecars, embodied the nation's flourishing sense of optimism and forward-thinking, in a design aesthetic expressive of a desire for a sleeker, simpler, streamlined style of living and transport. In his overview of American design, *Design in the USA*, Jeffery L. Meikle describes streamlining as America's national style, and explains its roots:

based on the new science of aerodynamics and borrowed from the emerging technology of aviation, where it was both functional (essential to efficient flight) and organic (inspired by natural forms such as birds, whales, and even a hen's egg). Within a few years streamlining spread from planes, cars and trains to non-moving artifacts at every scale—from radios, and vacuum cleaners to store fronts and restaurant interiors. Streamlining swept past other expressions of modernity with an irresistible metaphoric power.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Keister, 63.

<sup>79</sup> Jeffrey L. Meikle. *Design in the USA*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115. See also: Meikle's book, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

The American impulse toward streamline design, and the ingenuity on display in experimental housecars, would lead to the production of new and better trailers that went on the road. The best-known early trailer of this kind is the Airstream, and it has become an iconic design in the trailer industry. (Today, the Ohio company that manufactures Airstream trailers is the oldest company in the industry and the most frequently recognized.) In 1936, the first Airstream trailer to hit the market was dubbed the Airstream Clipper- borrowing the term “Clipper” from the aeronautic trade. The Clipper was designed by Hawley Bowlus, the engineer who led the design team that created Charles Lindbergh’s famous *Spirit of St. Louis* airplane.<sup>80</sup> The Airstream was made of aluminum and was distinctly rounded, two features that would remain its trademark to the present day. Boldly futuristic, visually aerodynamic and clearly sturdy though surprisingly lightweight, the Airstream captured the imagination of the American public, after springing from that very American imagination. Following in the footsteps of the twentieth-century limited train and the use of aluminum in industrial design, the entrepreneurial force behind the Airstream, a lawyer named Wally Byam, started by building trailers in his backyard, similar to other restless Americans. Byam then marketed how-to kits to trailer enthusiasts, before taking his amateur insights into trailer design and turning them into the Airstream. Together with Bowlus, he created the Clipper, which had a body of riveted

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<sup>80</sup> Dennis Karwatka. “Wally Byam and His Airstream Travel Trailer”, *Tech Directions*, Vol. 66 (October 2001), 8.

aluminum, making it light enough to be towed by a mid-size car, and even, in a memorable publicity stunt staged by Byam—by the well-known French bicyclist Latourneau. (*figure 12*) Bowlus's innovative use of aluminum solved one of the obstacles to making trailers a mass-market consumer product—how to make them strong and sturdy but also light enough to be towed at high speeds.<sup>81</sup>

The Airstream exemplified American values of the period—the demand for smaller, sleeker and more functional living spaces coupled with a desire for freedom of mobility expressed through design principles associated with speed. The appeal and mystique of the futuristic Airstream provoked a particular kind of brand loyalty, leading to the formation of hundreds of clubs, with the official club founded in 1955, devoted to the culture of camping, road travel and adventure in the Airstream trailer. They called themselves Airstreamers, and they were bound not only by a practical interest in the trailer, but in what its design and functionality *represented*—a sense of freedom, of community, of adventure, and of the future. The Wally Byam Caravaners Club still exists and functions today as the official and premiere club for Airstreamers, sending quarterly newsletters, creating club functions on four continents, and keeping the history of the organization.<sup>82</sup> The devotion of Airstream enthusiasts, and its enduring appeal as a cultural icon, reflect how the American trailer was in a distinctive position to capitalize on and reflect American values and mores of the time. Advertisements for Airstream touted adventure and family togetherness. Images in the ads

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<sup>81</sup> Sarah Nichols. *Aluminum By Design*, (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2000), 222.

<sup>82</sup> Airstream Caravaner History, <http://www.wbccci.org/index.cfm?pageSRC=History>.

almost always picture a family enjoying their Airstream. In a 1938 ad, for example, the family shown is enjoying the sunshine with a bucolic forest background on the makeshift patio they have constructed outside their trailer.<sup>83</sup>

*(figure 13)* The group of two women and a man have opened the built-in Airstream awning and set their folding chairs about the trailer and are shown smiling and relaxing in the sun. Next to the photograph the copy reads: “The Silver Cloud makes a comfortable home. The awning makes a front porch.” This early advertisement focuses on the ease and relaxation associated with the Airstream lifestyle, and the concept of home and the backyard. Interestingly in later years the ads became more focused on adventure, as Americans became more interested in, and financially able to, travel to more exotic locales and further from home. In a 1959 ad, a family sits on the sand in their bathing suits with palm trees and a grass hut in background while the copy reads, “A Fun Way to Travel!”. *(figure 14)* In the copy below the picture, the ad mentions “excitement” and “independence” and also says, “Want to relax on a sun-drenched Florida beach? Or maybe you’d prefer the majestic Canadian Rockies or quaint Old Mexico. Perhaps you know a road somewhere that you’d like to follow to the end.”<sup>84</sup> In this ad, rather than just touting relaxation and rootedness, Airstream allows for the imagination and new upward mobility of the American

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<sup>83</sup> 1939 Airstream Silver Cloud Advertisement,  
<http://www.vintageairstream.com/archives1/38SilverCloud/index.html>.

<sup>84</sup> 1959 Airstream Advertisement,  
<http://www.adflip.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/addetails.php?adID=317>.

family and lets them go *anywhere* they can dream of, all without “time-tables, tickets, or packing”.<sup>85</sup>

By the 1970’s ads placed in *National Geographic* for Airstream showed families in unidentifiable, but exotic and foreign looking locales: an American Western desert scene, a waterway in an Asian-looking setting, and a backdrop that reads as vaguely Moroccan.<sup>86</sup> (*figure 15*) While the language had not changed much at this point, the backdrops for the ads communicate the idea that more Americans would want to take their Airstreams as far as possible, even if that included shipping them overseas, a practice that became more popular as Airstream founder Wally Byam published his writings about his trips abroad.<sup>87</sup> Most notably, and certainly the most in-depth travelogue was Byam’s 1960 book *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad: The New Way to Adventurous Living*. This book detailed Caravaner trips Byam led through Mexico, Central America, Western and Eastern Canada, Cuba, Europe, Turkey and various “See America First” trips to the United States National Parks. It culminated with his most adventurous trip to Africa in 1959. Though the foreign Airstream trips were out of reach for many Americans, the trailer became synonymous with adventure and travel and gave even the most local Airstream traveler the feeling of being a part of something larger. More than an ordinary car, and certainly more than a stationary home, the

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> 1970’s Airstream Advertisements, [http://www.ldservice.com/tim/airstream/vintage\\_airstream\\_ads.htm](http://www.ldservice.com/tim/airstream/vintage_airstream_ads.htm).

<sup>87</sup> In addition to his 1960 book *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad: The New Way to Adventurous Living*, Wally Byam published several books and countless articles about his travels abroad in his Airstream from the early 1950’s until his death in 1962.

Airstream and all trailers allowed Americans to satisfy their wanderlust, interest in modernity and optimism about their country. Wally Byam's motto well sums up his philosophy, as well as the lasting appeal of his Airstream trailer: "Adventure is where you find it, any place and every place, except at home."<sup>88</sup>

Today, the Airstream remains a symbol of American ingenuity. In 1999, *I.D.* magazine placed it among the top 40 American designs that contributed to "aerodynamic living."<sup>89</sup> Back in the 1930s, Byam's company was one of hundreds of American companies manufacturing trailers for the public. But such was the strength of its design, and of its identity and image, that the Airstream was the only trailer to survive the Great Depression.

### **The Trailer and the Great Depression**

The Great Depression, which started with the stock market crash on October 29, 1929 and continued with varying degrees of severity for more than a decade, can be considered a watershed moment in the history of the United States—and of the American trailer industry. The vast economic downturn created a seismic shift from which the industry would never fully recover. This economic disaster coupled with the Dust Bowl—a series of devastating dust storms in the 1930s that were caused by over-cropping and droughts ruining huge stretches of the Great Plains caused unprecedented migrations that

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<sup>88</sup> Nichols, 222.

<sup>89</sup> Bryan Burkhart and David Hunt. *Airstream: The History of the Land Yacht*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), 20.

profoundly changed the design, marketing and image of trailers in the United States.<sup>90</sup>

During the Depression, rather than a recreational product, the trailer became permanent housing for millions of downtrodden Americans.<sup>91</sup> This fundamentally changed the identity of the trailer and mobile home within American culture, and it thrust the industry into a period of decision-making and image-crafting that altered its nature. At the same time, these decisions and image changes show how the trailer adapted itself to the shifting demands of the American consumer, both in its resulting design and image.

As the Depression worsened in its early years, more than thirteen million Americans found themselves out of work.<sup>92</sup> Trailers that had been used for visits to places like the beach and National Parks were now more commonly filled with families searching desperately for itinerant work. Mobility, once a recreational concept, became, in many cases, essential for survival. Much like the fictional Joad family in John Steinbeck's 1939 classic, *The Grapes of Wrath*, out-of-work citizens packed their pickup trucks with their possessions, or towed cheap or homemade trailers behind old, beat up cars, and set out looking for work.<sup>93</sup> As Susman writes, "Such mobility, long characteristic of civilization in the United

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<sup>90</sup> James N. Gregory. *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-6.

<sup>91</sup> Due to a lack of record keeping before there were official regulations relating to home-built trailers, it is impossible to give the exact number of home-builts on the road in the 1920's and 1930's. In 1936 the American Automobile Association estimated that the total number of trailers in use that year was 250,000. Taylor W. Meloan. *Mobile Homes: The Growth and Business Practices of the Industry*, (Homewood, Illinois: Indiana University School of Business, 1954), 8-9.

<sup>92</sup> Harris Gaylord Warren. *Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 237.

<sup>93</sup> John Steinbeck. *The Grapes of Wrath*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1939).

States, became even more part of the way of life in the 1930s”.<sup>94</sup> Very quickly, trailers and mobile homes saw their secondary function—that of permanent housing, become their primary function. As a result, factory-manufactured trailers once intended for families on the quest for affordable leisure, were now forced to consider marketing their products to the disillusioned masses living on the road as they moved from odd-job to odd-job.<sup>95</sup> As a result the trailer industry faced the question of how to market itself to two very different socioeconomic groups—vacationers and migrant workers. Perceived initially as symbols of promise, adventure and optimism, trailers were clearly now something else—symbols of desperation and of struggle. This drastic image shift—mirroring, as it did, the nation’s dire economic downturn—forced the trailer industry to make a choice: would it embrace its new image as permanent housing, or would it continue to market itself as a vehicle for exploration and recreation?<sup>96</sup> Based on the advertising and marketing after 1930, the industry clearly made a choice to distance itself from the idea of trailers as permanent housing.

While the industry made the decision to keep focused on the recreational market, they could not completely, however, disregard the new trailer-dwellers of the depression-era. The advertisements remained positive and recreationally slanted, playing to the *aspirations* of prospective customers of any

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<sup>94</sup> Susman, 193.

<sup>95</sup> Wallis, 70.

<sup>96</sup> While there was no direct evidence from the industry of this decision being faced, the advertisements I encountered in the time before the Great Depression began as opposed to after it was under way lead me to believe that the industry could not simply ignore the economic climate and continue on the marketing path that they had followed in the past. The advertisements moved away from the highlighting of leisure and adventure, and focused on the financial and practical benefits of trailer living.

socioeconomic status. Images and wording, however, were toned down considerably. Whereas the earliest ads used images of seaside and forested resort areas with people in bathing suits and with fishing gear, images in the 1930's were simplified, oftentimes just showing the trailer against a color-field.<sup>97</sup> And unlike the declarations of "fun in the sun" and family togetherness that peppered the language of early and later ads, the ads of the 1930's also contained more restrained wording. Phrases ranged from the benign to the morose. A late 1920's ad for Outers Equipment Co. in Chicago, for example, says simply, "Sleep in Your Car", and the Kozy Coach company said, "Home Sweet Home, Wherever You Roam" in 1936.<sup>98</sup> The ads stayed positive and allowed both itinerant workers and prospective vacationers to imagine themselves in a trailer.

In *Automotive Industries* in December 1936 however, a distinctly different tone was taken. The publication exclaims, "Go anywhere, stop anywhere, escape taxes and rent—this is irresistible. Nothing but death has ever before offered so much in a single package."<sup>99</sup> This endorsement for taxless, gypsy-like living—made not by the trailer industry, but by an unaffiliated group—did nothing positive for the trailer's image. In fact, opinions like this coupled with the multitude of shoddy-looking, home-built trailers on the road in the early 1930's reinforced the greatest fears of the public. In 1936, P.H. Elwood in an article entitled "Trailer

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<sup>97</sup> Examples of 1930's ads can be found in several places. The best examples can be found in the library of the RV/MH Hall of Fame in Elkhart, Indiana in early issues of *Western Trailer Life* and *Trailer Travel*. Also: Burkhart, 38-57. Gellner, 5, 14, 29, 34.

<sup>98</sup> Gellner, 5. Burkhart, 40.

<sup>99</sup> Burkhart, 39.

Test” in *Time* magazine wrote of the concern that vagabond trailerites without civic pride would come into the communities in which tax-paying citizens lived and set up their substandard camps, leaching resources from the neighborhoods in which they stopped and creating disgraceful eyesores with their trailing monstrosities.<sup>100</sup> In 1936 the American Automobile Association estimated that the total number of trailers in use that year was 250,000. A casual observer remarked the same year that two of every three trailers he encountered “seemed to be made in somebody’s backyard”.<sup>101</sup> This remark may accurately reflect the rundown appearance of factory trailers meant for part-time use being used fulltime during the Depression, but it also betrays the generally negative view of trailers during the Depression.

The trailer industry, like the country itself, was struggling with strong economic forces and was not able to fully control its image or its future. The migration of out-of-work citizens led to the migration of trailer parks themselves, from countrysides and lakefronts to the edges of urban areas.<sup>102</sup> While the original parks were scenic, well run and orderly, newer parks were far more rundown and less appealing, for two specific reasons. Firstly, trailers that were not designed for constant daily use quickly became shabbier than the gleaming silver bullets people were accustomed to admiring on the highway.<sup>103</sup> As the style and elegance of trailers eroded, so too did the pride of ownership experienced by

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<sup>100</sup> P.H. Elwood. “Trailer Test”, *Time*, XXVIII (November 23, 1936), p. 66.

<sup>101</sup> Meloan, 30.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 30-31.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

most trailerites. Secondly, up until 1930 most people with trailers were members of at least one of the many fraternal clubs and associations that formed across the country, fighting for good conditions in the parks and on the roads. The new breed of trailerite had no one fighting for his or her rights—these were displaced, drifting hordes bound not by a sense of adventure and community but by desperation to find work and survive. Furthermore, in order to maximize profit, the owners of muddy vacant lots used as trailer parks typically squeezed in as many inhabitants as possible, while offering few or no services.<sup>104</sup> (*figure 16*) Often these lots had no running water and only shoddy electrical power from extension cords connected illegally to power poles near the sites. All of these factors led to filthy, unsafe, and unsanitary conditions in these makeshift trailer parks that became associated to trailers and their inhabitants.

And because these parks were no longer in remote, bucolic areas, but rather on the edges of densely populated urban areas, the makeshift parks were more visible than ever. Inevitably, the image of these parks, and of trailers in general, began to change along with the condition of the parks and trailers. The words once associated with trailers—sleek, clean, gleaming, futuristic—were replaced by a new ones: squalor, desperation, shabbiness as the piece in *Time* magazine showed. A stigma attached itself to the trailer, so thoroughly that the industry has not been able to shake it to this day. The current image of trailers and trailer parks is far closer to their negative Depression-era perception than to

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<sup>104</sup> Wallis, 70-73.

the positive image carefully fostered by the industry in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

This new use for makeshift and manufactured trailers in the 1930's—as both shelter and transport for migrating unemployed laborers looking for work—created a demand across the country for space in which to park them. Hundreds of hastily created so-called “Tent Cities” cropped up to house temporary workers and other itinerants.<sup>105</sup> The sudden emergence of swarms of people traveling with their possessions and congregating in poorly maintained lots was a cause for concern for the communities around which they emerged. An intense resentment towards this type of trailerite took hold across the country. During the Depression trailer living spawned fears of the development of a freeloading class of itinerant hobos who would exploit resources from host communities and intimidate respectable citizens.<sup>106</sup> It was one thing to be visited by middle-class vacationers who spent money and supported local commerce, but it was quite another to be overrun by vagabonds who neither spent money nor paid real estate taxes. The image of American trailer life changed dramatically, from a positive one to an entirely negative one. Despite industry efforts to discourage the perception of trailers as permanent housing—mainly through positive articles and ads depicting wholesome family life in a mobile home in publications like *Trailer Topics* (1938-1971) and *Western Trailer Life* (later, *Trailer Life*, 1936-

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<sup>105</sup> Gregory, 305, 309.

<sup>106</sup> This fear was voiced and made official in a 1937 report called *The House Trailer, Its Effect on State and Local Government*, Report No. 114, February, 1937. This report was a joint effort between the American Municipal Association, the American Society of Planning Officials, and the National Association of Housing Officials.

today)—trailer manufacturers were essentially powerless to curtail the descent of their image from providers of desirable recreational vehicles to providers of permanent, less-than-desirable housing.

### **The Mobile Home and World War II**

While the advent of World War II hastened the end of the Depression by reinvigorating the manufacturing industry, the trailer industry crisis, and its unfortunate association with shantytown-like trailer parks, did not come to an end with the Great Depression in 1939. Instead it raised a new and distinctive group of issues for the trailer industry.

As Allan D. Wallis writes in his essay in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, before the war began, 75 percent of commercially manufactured trailers on the road were used for vacationing even though the homemade versions were automatically associated with the industry and therefore did major damage to the trailer's reputation.<sup>107</sup> The industry heads, however, that had pressed so strenuously to market the trailer for recreation rather than permanent housing during the Great Depression were forced to declare that trailers were indeed housing in 1941 in order to receive the rationed materials that were needed to continue manufacturing them. No longer able to characterize its product as a "non-necessary" object of leisure, the industry had to abruptly change direction in order to stay operational. With war workers needed in new

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<sup>107</sup> Allan D. Wallis, "House Trailers: Innovation and Accommodation in Vernacular Housing", *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*. Vol. 3, (1989), pp. 28-34.

and undeveloped areas, the Trailer Coach Manufacturers Association sent a delegation, headed by James L. Brown, to represent its interests before the Council of National Defense.<sup>108</sup> Brown's presentation to the Council was accompanied by a short magazine prepared by the Trailer Coach Manufacturers Association entitled *Mobile War Housing: Saving Manpower, Materials, Money*.<sup>109</sup> In looking through their copy of this fully illustrated pamphlet, each councilmember saw an outline of the arguments for mobile homes as housing for defense workers. The chief argument was that building new, permanent housing would, once the War was over, create veritable ghost towns when temporary wartime workers went back home. The low cost of constructing trailers, however, would allow them to either be scrapped or repurposed when they were no longer necessary. The *Mobile War Housing* brochure also provided the Council with a number of articles written about happy trailerites and their lives in their mobile homes and highlighted the high speed and great magnitude at which trailers could be manufactured compared to site-built homes.<sup>110</sup> These arguments were a complete about-face from the trailer industry's stance prior to the War, but they were also highly persuasive. The Council agreed and began ordering trailers, and by the end of the first year of the War, the industry had produced 20,728 units, doubling the previous year's production. In 1942 alone the industry built 50,000

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<sup>108</sup> Wallis, *Wheel Estate*, 88.

<sup>109</sup> Trailer Coach Manufacturers Association. *Mobile War Housing: Saving Manpower, Materials, Money*, 1941.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

units, all of them to provide housing for the War effort.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, even though the industry was completely halted in manufacturing new trailers for leisure, they hoped to keep up their momentum throughout the war and focused their marketing material on the patriotic benefits of buying and using trailers already in the market. Advertisements for trailers in periodicals such as *National Geographic* and *Western Trailer Life* used slogans like, “100 PERCENT FOR DEFENSE WORKERS”, and a 1943 cover of *Western Trailer Life* used no words but simply pictured a trailer being used as an aircraft commissary on a military base.<sup>112</sup> In this sense, trailer advertising paralleled general advertising during the war when companies aligned their products with patriotic goals.<sup>113</sup>

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the government ordered an estimated 50,000 trailers to cover housing for governmental and war workers who would work and live in the port cities in the United States throughout 1942. The extreme speed with which the industry built housing trailers, and the rationing of critical war-related materials, however, led to a sharp decline in the quality of the trailers. Wood was substituted for the stronger and more durable steel that was usually used wherever possible, ribs were covered with painted canvas, electrical wiring was reduced and, in some cases, chassis were made detachable so they could eventually be returned to the manufacture.<sup>114</sup> The hurried construction and makeshift design of wartime trailers only strengthened

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<sup>111</sup> Wallis, *Wheel Estate*, 90.

<sup>112</sup> The slogan is from Pacific Coach ad in the October 1942 issue of *Western Trailer Life*, 16. The description of the cover comes from the January 1943 issue of *Western Trailer Life*.

<sup>113</sup> Cohen, 28.

<sup>114</sup> Wallis, 91.

the public's prewar impression of the trailer as a shoddy and imperfect answer to the housing shortage. Wilbur J. Schult, the President of Schult Trailers, Inc. and an industry leader, went so far as to write an open letter to the trailer industry and trailer enthusiasts in the March 1942 issue of *Trailer Travel* hoping to temper their concerns by explaining the extent of the rationing and its consequences for trailer construction.<sup>115</sup>

While the industry became a part of the war effort, they anticipated the imminent end of the War, and continued marketing trailers as recreational products alongside their patriotic ads. They had been forced to concede that trailers were housing as a result of the War, but they did not have to accept that trailers would *always* be housing. An advertisement for the Schult Luxury Liner in March 1945 described how "the convenient, livable home of today" could be converted to "the resort of tomorrow."<sup>116</sup> Ads like this showed that the hybridity of the trailer was alternately highlighted or ignored depending on the industry's need and the emotional temperature of the American people at any given time. Interestingly, as soon as they were cleared for non war-related manufacturing, companies that had once made aircrafts began designing trailers that were small, simple and mobile, rather than larger units that would be suggestive of permanent housing. They took advantage of the technology of the airplanes they had built during the war to reduce drag on trailers and make them more road-worthy. One such company was the Tulsa, Oklahoma-based Spartan Aircraft

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<sup>115</sup> Wilbur J. Schult. "Looking Ahead With Trailers", *Trailer Travel*, March 1942, 2.

<sup>116</sup> Hurley, 205.

Company, which in the years after World War II produced a sleek, aluminum-skinned trailer called the Spartanette. Spartan was able to stretch the aluminum to provide a more spacious interior, while also curving the outer shell for a more aerodynamic appearance. Spartan's background in airplane production gave the firm fabricating expertise well beyond most of its competitors.<sup>117</sup>

Manufacturers hoped that an end to the war would bring families back out to lakesides and wildernesses on the family vacations that they had missed in the lean wartime years. The trailer industry was waiting for its old market for recreational travel vehicles to reemerge following the War. Trailer manufacturers had managed to stay in business during the War by providing year-round housing options for that part of the population that required mobile homes—namely, defense workers and low-income families. Once the War ended, however, the image of trailers as low-quality housing persisted, now reinforced by images of shoddy wartime trailers for impermanent workers. Nevertheless, the demand for quality trailers for recreational use did reemerge—except that now, in response to the negative attachment with trailers, there was a demand for self-propelled recreational vehicles, or RVs, rather than trailers that had to be towed.<sup>118</sup> Trailer makers needed to confront the reality that their industry had changed, putting them in the business of housing rather than transport. With very few exceptions—most notably, Airstream—trailer businesses were forced to go in one of these two directions, housing or transport, and by 1963, when the industry

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<sup>117</sup> Gellner and Keister, 70

<sup>118</sup> Hurley, 220.

officially split between RV and mobile home manufacturing, they all had.<sup>119</sup> The very strength of the trailer in its early heyday—its dual purpose as transport and shelter—was also its vulnerability; the industry was simply unable to clearly define itself as one or the other. This finally put an end to the business as a unified group, and in the years after World War II the two new branches went forward on their own: as vehicles and housing.

By 1945, the Depression and the War had changed the design, marketing and image of the trailer—as it had changed the nation itself. In the postwar era the country became increasingly defined by consumerism, and, as Lizabeth Cohen has written, the country would become a “consumer republic”, defined by Cohen as “an economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption, both in terms of material life and the more idealistic goals of greater freedom, democracy, and equality”.<sup>120</sup> The mobile home industry would become part of this republic demonstrating its adaptability to changes within American culture.

At the turn of the century, when Americans optimistically wanted to explore their country, the trailer industry positioned itself to satisfy those desires. When the Great Depression began and American life changed, the industry survived precisely because of the dual-nature of trailers, as both transport and housing. And when the Second World War required a new value-set—patriotism, country

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<sup>119</sup> John Fraser Hart, Michelle Rhodes and John T. Morgan. *The Unknown World of the Mobile Home*, (Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press: 2002), 17.

<sup>120</sup> Cohen, 7. For further discussions of postwar consumerism see bibliography under Inglehart and Rosenblatt.

first, a national pitch-in and can-do attitude, the trailer industry quickly aligned itself with these new values, by providing trailers to serve as temporary and permanent housing for wartime industries during the War. How is it that the disastrous image of trailers during the Depression and World War II did not doom them to extinction? What is it about mobile homes that have made them so adaptable to vast changes in the American psyche? An examination of mid-century and post-War trailer design, marketing and images will show how the trailer functions as a graphic embodiment of American cultural values.

### **The Mid-Century Trailer**

On a September morning in 1960, the American writer John Steinbeck scooped up his lanky French poodle, Charley, climbed into his new model GMC pick-up truck and set off from Sag Harbor on Long Island, New York on a four-month trip across the U.S. “I’m going to learn about my own country,” he wrote to a friend before his journey. “I’ve lost the flavor and taste and sound of it.”<sup>121</sup> The celebrated author of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* rigged his truck with a custom camper made by the Wolverine Camper Company of Glaswin, Michigan—“kind of like the cabin of a small boat; bed, stove, desk, ice-box, toilet—not a trailer, what’s called a coach”—packed it full of clothes and books and liquor, and, at the age of 58, began to satisfy what he called one of the great urges of his life: “the urge to be someplace else.”

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<sup>121</sup> John Steinbeck. *Travels With Charley In Search of America* (New York: Penguin, 1961), ix.

Steinbeck sought to find what America was all about. He drove clear across “this monster of a land, this mightiest of nations”—through the White Mountains of New Hampshire with their “roadside stands piled with golden pumpkins and russet squashes”; through the whole Northeast until he reached “the rooftree of Maine”; through Minnesota and Wisconsin and “the upraised thumb of Idaho”; through the redwoods of California and the panhandle of Texas and the bayous of New Orleans; through dozens of tiny towns and backwater hamlets and big cities, all in search of a constant thread that he called “the great American instinct”. He found it, finally, in a trailer park in Michigan.

There, he encountered a new kind of community, a place filled with “shining cars long as Pullmans,” row upon row of “wonderfully built homes, aluminum skins, double-walled”—creations that struck him as nothing less than “a revolution in living.” In that trailer park, where he stayed for a dollar a night, Steinbeck hit upon his theme:

Could it be that Americans are a restless people, a mobile people, never satisfied with where they are? In every part of the nation there is a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, anyplace, away from Here...to move about, free and unanchored, not toward something but away from something...I saw this yearning everywhere in every state I visited. Nearly every American hungers to move.<sup>122</sup>

Steinbeck decided there was only one word that could even begin to summarize such an unwieldy nation. If America has a theme, he concluded, it must be “*mobility*.”

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<sup>122</sup> Steinbeck, 80.

Steinbeck's discovery of mobile America happened in 1960. The one constant in both this era and the first half of the century before it, it seems, is Steinbeck's concept of mobility as America's defining construct. In her essay on design in the postwar era, Mildred Friedman links the car to the nomadism "that has been a significant facet of American life since Native Americans roamed the Plains and intrepid newcomers initiated the nineteenth-century movement westward."<sup>123</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, that mobility was literal—Americans were eager to see the country and travel newly built roads. However, it appears that the concept of mobility became something less geographic and more about social maneuverability—upward and downward mobility. To be an American meant to have the chance to leave your social and financial station and, in essence, to travel to another, higher class. This American impulse and its class-consciousness was fueled by a powerful post-War cultural doctrine: the doctrine of American consumerism.

It is noteworthy that while these post-War years were not the period when the most trailers were purchased in the United States, it was the time during which mobile homes became a highly visible part of American popular culture through movies, periodicals, and advertising. This was due largely to the post-War housing shortage. In order to make trailers a viable option for the thousands of young families who had to choose between owning a mobile home or continuing to rent or share a house with extended family, trailers were, for the

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<sup>123</sup> Mildred Friedman, "From Futurama to Motorama", *Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age, 1940-1960*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 164.

first time, extensively marketed across the country. This marketing capitalized on the culture of consumerism that emerged after the War along with the deep desire for private homes. Manufacturers hired young bathing beauties to pose around the latest models or mobile homes at auto shows, while advertisements in newspapers and magazines overtly linked buying a trailer to being successful. An ad for the Elcar Sun Coach, for example in 1947 called it “The Home of Your Dreams” and showed a modern, well-to-do family living inside the upscale trailer, which featured a screened-in porch, “large domestic-type windows with gay shutters” and a roomy kitchen perfect for baking cookies. (*figure 17*) “A dream cottage to be proud of,” the ad declares and references the nation’s newfound, post-war pride in itself.<sup>124</sup> The advertisement pictures the Elcar Sun Coach being pulled by car—“Traveling is fun, and Easy”—and also on a wide lawn behind a white picket fence, with children playing in the yard and a neighbor waving hello, a characteristic trope of American suburban life. The interior scenes in the ad focus on efficiency for the housewife and private space and comfort for each of the family members. In the one page the company had available to them in whichever publications they had chosen to buy advertising space, Elcar tried to get across that the Elcar Sun Coach had it all; from comfortable, affordable travel to a home life the neighbors will envy. In one 1954 promotional handout for the Schult Dwellvan trailer found in the archives of the RV/MH Library, a mother and her two small children are shown playing in the “living room” of their 37 foot

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<sup>124</sup> Burkhart, Noyes, and Arieff, 119.

trailer. While some of the smaller text explains that Schult trailers offer “full quality, size and comfort”, the larger headline of the leaflet simply reads, “MORE...MORE...MORE!”—perhaps a reference not only to the extra options available in the Dwellvan, but also to the American desire to obtain material things at such a time of prosperity.<sup>125</sup> A *Saturday Evening Post* cover from August 15, 1959 illustrates the dreamy desire for goods in the postwar world. The image shows a couple nestled together stargazing. The constellations that they see are not the Big Dipper or Orion however; instead among the stars they see a television, a vacuum cleaner, a new washer and dryer, and other trappings of the postwar consumerist society. These Dwellvan and Elcar ads, and certainly the *Saturday Evening Post* cover, demonstrate the sense of entitlement being felt across the country—an entitlement that was powered by consumerism.

The phenomenon of postwar American consumerism refers to the inception of a mass consumer culture in the United States, or what has been called “Populuxe” by Thomas Hine.<sup>126</sup> Following the deprivation of the Great Depression and the rationing of World War II, Americans enjoyed an uninterrupted fifteen-year period of economic prosperity.<sup>127</sup> In 1960, the year Steinbeck took his trip, three-quarters of all American families owned cars, ninety percent of homes wired for electricity had TV sets, and consumer commodities once considered luxuries were now commonplace in middle-income homes.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Schult Corporation. *Dwellvan* Promotional Handout, 1954.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas Hine. *Populuxe*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 10.

<sup>127</sup> Hurley, 273-274.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

The average American family was lead by the doctrine declared by *Fortune* editor William H. Whyte in 1947: “thrift is now un-American”.<sup>129</sup>

Attaining material abundance and owning a home became nothing less than the *new* American Dream. This was particularly true when it came to housing. Home ownership had been a mainstay of the American ethos since the 1920’s, when Herbert Hoover referred to owning a home as the most important ingredient in the recipe for social responsibility. Hoover reasoned that only when one has permanent roots in an area does that person have a vested interest in community wellness and civic affairs. Home ownership, writes Elaine Tyler May in her study of American families, was not only seen as the answer for reinforcing upwardly mobile aspirations, but also diffusing potential social unrest as well.<sup>130</sup> Hoover’s successor Franklin Delano Roosevelt took this rhetoric even further with his New Deal legislation. Through a series of economic acts—including the 1937 creation of the United States Housing Authority, which provided funds for the low-cost construction of hundreds of thousands of homes for low-income citizens—Roosevelt essentially made durable and secure housing a basic human right in the United States. Roosevelt’s administration established fair mortgage programs with affordable insurance, and by the beginning of World War II Americans generally associated home ownership with citizenship, social success and responsibility. Owning a home was now paramount to being a “good American”. The wish to own a freestanding, single family home was within reach to a vast

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<sup>129</sup> Cohen, 121.

<sup>130</sup> Tyler May, 157.

new group of Americans who aimed to “move up” in their social standing.<sup>131</sup>

Though they might not go straight from the lower class to the upper class, being part of the middle class was viewed as *respectable* in the eyes of American society.

After the end of World War II the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, removed the last remaining obstacle to home ownership for thousands of Americans.<sup>132</sup> This program allowed returning war veterans to buy homes with grants that brought the down payment to one dollar. Young couples who would otherwise have had to save for an average of ten years to accumulate a down payment were given the chance to buy into the American Dream for only a few cents more than a gallon of milk.<sup>133</sup>

This large group of new purchasers entering into the housing market created a demand for single-family homes that was much greater than the supply.<sup>134</sup> Depleted material caches and a lull in construction of homes during the War created a need for new alternatives—and the mobile home was a practical solution. At other times in American history, including the present era, a mobile home would not be perceived as a desirable option by most aspiring home owners. But the mobile home was a vehicle uniquely suited to cater to a generation influenced by post-War movies and advertisements that presented the mobile home as “home” as seen in the ad for the Elcar Sun Coach and the

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<sup>131</sup> For a discussion of social mobility see: Marchand, 194-200.

<sup>132</sup> David G. Delaney. “The G.I. Bill of Rights”, *Major Acts of Congress*, Vol. 1, (NY, NY: Macmillan Reference, 2004), 66.

<sup>133</sup> Average price of a gallon of milk in 1950 was \$0.82. *Historical Consumer Price Index*.

<sup>134</sup> Tyler May, 160.

promotional materials for the Schult Dwellvan. One only has to note the name: *Dwell-van*. Such ads and movies imbued them with a new sense of optimism. The American mobile home was thus adapted to the emerging American desire for upward class mobility through home ownership. In addition, by basing the design of mobile homes on the architectural fashions of the time, the post-War mobile home industry attracted Americans newly intent on home ownership.

Trailer manufacturers had worked to brand their product as recreational vehicles and not permanent housing in the early part of the twentieth century. But after the War they switched to defining their products as housing with ads that presented them this way. In one Spartan trailer ad from the 1950s a couple is shown in the foreground with their trailer, set up inside a white picket fence and set against a set of steps and front walkway. The couple is pictured taking flowers out of pots and planting them in the ground; literally *planting roots* in their community. The copy accompanying the ad reads: "You may not find a house in every place you roam, But when you own a Spartan, You always have a Home."<sup>135</sup> Comparatively, in 1934 an ad for the Silver Dome Trailer Coach shows the trailer hitched to a car and reads: "Take Your Hotel Along!". The copy below the image explains that the Silver Dome Trailer "pays for itself in hotel bills waived". Nowhere in the ad does the word "home" even appear. At the end of the War, the industry recognized and catered to this new segment of consumers who

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<sup>135</sup> Ad for sale on Ebay. Item #140399837020. Auction ending May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010. <http://cgi.ebay.com/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=140399837020&ssPageName=ADME:B:EF:US:1123>

wished to live in their trailers year-round. As a result, trailer design became less suggestive of transport and more suggestive of housing.

In the 1950s, in keeping with this desire for 'home', the industry trend towards small and sleek trailers gave way to a new post-War breed of larger, sturdier, more home-like trailers. Manufacturers began increasing both the length and width of standard trailers. In 1928, the state-of-the-art trailer might have looked like the Road Yacht, a rounded, streamlined unit with a small kitchenette and two sleeping areas. But the Road Yacht, billed as "A Complete Home," was not much bigger than an average van. Likewise, the typical Airstream trailer in the 1940s was only about 22 feet long. But in the 1950s, jumbo-sized trailers—some as long as 55-feet—came on the market. Trailers grew from a standardized eight-feet wide to a new "ten-wide" standard. All this extra room was necessary to accommodate a new aesthetic in interior trailer design—a replication of the permanent American home. Trailers like the Skyline Mobile Home featured this massive width and length in order to accommodate a corridor with separated rooms rather than simply the open space that had been standard in the past. (*figure 18*)

For the first time designers approached the interior space of trailers with an eye towards providing some small measure of privacy to multiple users, and towards sectioning off what could be considered "rooms." They began dividing interiors into distinct, well-defined areas, turning sleeping bunks, for instance, into "bedrooms." Some of the bigger trailers of the 1950s had as many as three

bedrooms, defined by dividers. Similarly, these trailers featured “kitchens,” many with full-sized stoves, refrigerators and other appliances. Linoleum and carpeted floors and Formica countertops with wood-paneled walls and cabinetry mirrored the trends of the site-built American homes interior. In a 1957 Schult pamphlet that a potential customer would have mailed away for, the full color photos show the woman of the house in each of the trailer’s rooms. (*figure 19*) Without a small picture on the back of the brochure of the exterior of the trailer, it would have been indistinguishable from any site-built home. The rooms appear spacious and full of storage, and feature the most updated interior design of its time.<sup>136</sup> All these features, however, were merely enlargements of features that existed in earlier trailers. The one truly significant design change, which heralded a new age in trailers, was the addition of an interior bathroom.

Trailer design in the first half of the twentieth century did not offer plumbed interior bathrooms. The spacious (and deliberately misspelled) Flexible trailer of 1941 featured a full kitchen, roomy sofa and dining area—but no bathroom. Even when the industry defined its product as permanent housing during the Second World War, its product differed from conventional homes in this very significant way—there was no bathroom. Trailer users driving from one destination to another relied on rest stops, while those who parked in trailer parks for long periods used communal washrooms provided by the park. Over the years, the only improvement over these often dirty and unsanitary washrooms was the

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<sup>136</sup> Schult Mobile Homes Corporation. *Enter the Luxurious New World of the Schult Custom*, 1957.

portable potty seat, which still had to be emptied in communal sewage disposal areas. A small room may or may not have been included to provide privacy to someone while they used what was basically a chamber pot. Without this very basic amenity, trailers could only offer consumers an approximation of the true home experience, as opposed to a miniaturized but faithful representation of it.

This changed markedly in the 1950s, when for the first time bathrooms were added to trailers. By the mid-1950s, interior bathrooms were a standard feature on most consumer trailers. These rooms often included full-sized showers and sinks, and sometimes bathtubs. Furthermore, the plumbing could be easily hooked up to facilities provided at trailer parks. Innovations in trailer bathrooms soon followed: the Travco, one of the most desirable motor homes of the '50s and '60s, featured an optional gas-powered sewage-incinerator system that nearly eliminated the need to empty sewage holding tanks and was dubbed “the Destroilet.”<sup>137</sup>

The impetus for these sweeping design changes—away from small, sleek interiors and towards deluxe accommodations, full-sized appliances and bathrooms—was clear: post-War Americans intent on home ownership wanted trailers that cost a fraction of real homes but looked as much like stationary homes as possible. Owning a deluxe mobile home was something like a loophole in the American Dream—the illusion of true home ownership for hundreds of thousands of Americans who could otherwise not afford it. In 1960, the average

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<sup>137</sup> Keister, 108.

trailer cost between one-fourth to one-third of the average home. The trailer industry fundamentally altered its design principles to suit the new values and desires of its consumers, toggling away from the literal mobility aspect of trailers, and towards a figurative mobility that enabled trailer owners to “travel” into a new social class by owning their own home.

This was the focus of trailer industry marketing in the 1950s, with manufacturers touting trailers as not only an approximation of the conventional domestic living situation, but often an improvement over it. Mobile homes were described as safer in the event of a nuclear attack, simply because they were less likely to collapse and more likely to roll on impact; “afterall”, said a 1951 article in *Trailer Topics*, “trailers are built to absorb a great deal of knocking about on poor roads.”<sup>138</sup>

Moreover, trailers were often marketed directly to women as being far easier to clean and maintain than the average conventional home, leaving more time for mothers to socialize, take classes or otherwise pursue their own interests and dreams. Nearly every major trailer-related periodical featured a section devoted to cleaning, cooking, and the other household concerns for the housewife. *Trailer Topics* magazine provided the “Trailer Housekeeping” section for housewives, while *Western Trailer Life* offered its “Chafing Dish” section. In *Automobile and Trailer Travel*, recipes and tips on keeping housework simple were given in a monthly section entitled “Housekeeping on Wheels by The Trailer

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<sup>138</sup> D. Warwick Brown. “The A-Bomb and Trailer Safety”, *Trailer Topics*, (March 1951), 23, 74-75.

Wife”.<sup>139</sup> With recipes like “Altitude Caramel Cake” and “Creamy Potatoes- Trailer Style”, these magazine sections and the ads that supported them were effectively reproducing the gendered design of the 1950s, when women were expected to be wives, mothers, homemakers, and very little else, even after their increased presence in the workforce during the War.<sup>140</sup> As Lynn Spigel describes in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*, perhaps one of the greatest influences a woman in the 1950s and 60s possessed was her to power to “evoke her economic mobility”.<sup>141</sup>

In this way, the post-War image of the American trailer improved greatly over its ragtag version as perceived during the Depression and the War. Countless periodicals of the 1950s, such as *Mobile Living*, *Family Motor Coaching*, and *Trailer Life*, among others, were devoted to trailers and the trailer lifestyle, all of them heralding the exciting new adventure that awaited families daring enough to live on wheels. Movies such as *The Long, Long Trailer* (1953) with Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz brought trailers to the mainstream viewers. In *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*, Karal Ann Marling writes of the movie, “...the Western landscape through which the honeymooners drag their home on wheels pales in comparison to the trailer’s colorful interior,

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<sup>139</sup> These housekeeping sections were offered in nearly every trailerites magazine from their earliest issues in the late twenties until the present. While they were exclusively presented to women until well into the late 1960’s, they are currently more gender-neutral. A wide selection of these periodicals can be found in the library of the RV/MH Hall of Fame in Elkhart, Indiana.

<sup>140</sup> Edward A. Strecker. “What’s Wrong With American Mothers?”, *Saturday Evening Post*, (October 24, 1946), 14. Amram Scheinfeld. “Are American Moms a Menace?”, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, (November 1945), 36, 38, 140.

<sup>141</sup> Lynn Spigel. *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 78.

replete with built-in sectionals and appliance, and the camera's pastel views of luxurious roadside trailer courts...".<sup>142</sup> Even the epitome of the American family in the 1950s, "The Nelsons" in ABC's *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* had a trailer.<sup>143</sup> By the time John Steinbeck set out to rediscover America in 1960 and happened upon "a revolution in living" amid the shiny aluminum mobile homes lined up in a pristine Michigan trailer park, the country was in the throes of a love affair with trailers and the trailer lifestyle. Trailers were believed to uniquely represent the best of two core American values—the freedom to travel, and the right to own a home.

Nevertheless, the single biggest drawback of motor homes when compared to conventional homes was the inability to deviate from a basic narrow, shotgun layout design, thus severely limiting the amount of privacy offered consumers. This would prove to be a problem the trailer industry could not overcome. No matter how spaciouly trailers were designed, or how exciting they were made to seem in advertisements, life in a trailer represented a significant compromise, even when compared to the smallest conventional home.

Opponents stressed there would be great difficulty striking the appropriate balance between family togetherness and individual privacy in the unavoidable trailer layout.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, many trailer families could not own pets—an iconic member of the typical 1950s American family—since many trailer parks banned

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<sup>142</sup> Karal Ann Marling. *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>143</sup> Keister, 76.

<sup>144</sup> Hurley, 235.

pet ownership. As Wanda MacKinnon writes in “Parks and Dogs”, an article in *Trailer Life* in June of 1951, trailer park proprietors were faced with the tough choice of forbidding pets altogether when rules requiring dogs be kept on leashes were not followed. Small indoor pets were sometimes allowed, but the 1950s ideal of “Lassie” was still sought after.<sup>145</sup> Even the industry saw this, as illustrated by a 1962 advertisement for the Geurdon Van Dyke mobile home.<sup>146</sup> A boy walks a large dog across the front lawn of a new, blue mobile home, obviously enamored of his family pet. Inevitably, these limitations to trailer living led to the marginalization of the trailer family in the 1960s—a phenomenon that was hastened by social forces of this period.

The 1960s in the United States brought social unrest marked by the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements. Exacerbated class and racial tensions raised the level of class-consciousness in America.<sup>147</sup> This sharper division between classes wound up narrowing the image of the American trailer and tipping it out of one class and into a lower one. The mobile home no longer stood up to the image of the suburban, site-built home nor did it promise class mobility. During the 1960s trailer living again devolved from a mainstream trend that was attractive to respectable middle-class families, and into a subculture that branded trailerites in an increasingly negative way reminiscent of the Depression. By

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<sup>145</sup> Wanda MacKinnon. “Parks and Dogs”, *Trailer Life*, (June 1951), 41-42, 50.

<sup>146</sup> Ad for sale on Ebay. Item #250447986892.

<http://cgi.ebay.ca/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=250447986892&ssPageName=ADME:B:EF:CA:1123>

<sup>147</sup> Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 37, 50.

1971, people who lived in trailers were considered “a notch below the widely publicized Middle America,” according to the popular literary magazine *Horizon* that ran from 1958 to 1989. The author claimed that the trailer park was a “subculture” all its own that was “out of step with the times”. She described the “fashions” of trailer park inhabitants—clean-shaven faces and peaked caps for men and sprayed hair and girdles for women—and wrote that they were, “more reminiscent of the 1950s than the post-Beatles era” in which they lived.<sup>148</sup>

Trailerites slipped from the middle class to the lower middle class, and the trailer became a lower-class consumer product. The inherent restrictions of trailer living—cramped quarters, erratically maintained trailer parks—wound up confirming the beliefs the industry had clung to before and even during the War: that trailers should not be marketed as permanent housing, but rather as a combination of both transport and shelter.

Another social phenomenon of the 1960s added to this new crisis for the trailer industry. The post-War consumerist boom that took hold so firmly in the 1950s was also slowed by the social unrest of the sixties and seventies. The notion that by adding more and more material goods and buying bigger and bigger cars and homes a family could achieve true and lasting happiness began to unravel as a counterculture movement became a part of the country’s social landscape. A new set of socio-political values—civic responsibility, anti-war sentiment, generational divides, the sprouting of alternatives to crass

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<sup>148</sup> Elaine Kendall. “The Invisible Suburbs”, *Horizon*, (Winter, 1971), 105-111.

consumerism such as spiritualism and communal living—began to run in direct contrast to the driving ethos of the post-War trailer industry: that bigger was better. Post-war American consumerism was not in fact *inclusive*; a great many citizens inevitably wound up with less.<sup>149</sup> When America began to question its consumerist ethic—and counter-culturalists began to suggest that materialism provided only an illusion of comfort and happiness, devoid of real American values—the country began shifting away from the cookie-cutter suburban model that defined success and achievement in the 1950s. The appeal of deluxe trailers as a symbol of middle-class accomplishment was lost.

Thus, the second, post-War heyday of the trailer—when plush interior design and aggressive marketing made them an object of desire among typical middle-class consumers—proved to be very short. This is not to say that consumerism and materialism did not retain their hold on America. Both the 1980s and the 1990s were decades categorized by the pursuit of happiness through affluence, and an aggressive capitalist/consumerist ethos that continues to be associated with the United States today. As Gary Cross points out in *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*, in 1981, the year Ronald Regan was inaugurated, “...a cover of *U.S. News and World Report* trumpeted, ‘FLAUNTING WEALTH: IT’S BACK.’<sup>150</sup> The idea, however, of a sprawling, somewhat homogenous middle class in America—comprising the bulk of the country and entitled to the same sort of upscale trappings as the country’s

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<sup>149</sup> Cohen, 166-167.

<sup>150</sup> Cross, 201.

elite, or Hine's "Populuxe", diminished notably, after the social upheavals of the 1960s, the Vietnam War and the economic slowdowns of the 1970s.<sup>151</sup> Trailer companies could no longer position their product as a ticket to the American Dream; instead, trailers shed most of the positive imagery they acquired after World War II while retaining all of the negative aspects that had plagued them since the 1930s. A sequence of *New Yorker* cartoons from 1941 to 2010 demonstrates the popular culture perception of this change in the trailer ethos. The February 8, 1941 cover of the *New Yorker* shows tourists among their trailers rendered in bright colors enjoying a sunny day. Some work together cooking, some play cards, and children play in small groups as smiling mothers watch them happily. Colorful striped awnings are open on most trailers giving the cheery scene a backyard barbecue-like feeling. In 1951, another cover illustration shows a woman in a teardrop trailer in an idyllic forest scene. She holds a pie and gazes contentedly at the apple tree just outside her trailer door that provided the main ingredient—significant references to the all-American nature of the trailer and trailer life. In 1973, the June 9<sup>th</sup> cover shows two adult children standing in front of their house as their senior parents pull away with a large trailer hitched to their car. This illustration of role-reversal as children watch their aged parents leave home exemplifies the association with trailers and senior citizens that was prevalent in the 1960s and 70s. In 1996, a cartoon in the September 23<sup>rd</sup> issue shows a man and woman in front of their tarnished trailer

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<sup>151</sup> Cohen, 388.

drinking from bottles of alcohol. The pair and their dog look as miserable as their trailer, and the man says to his wife, “*Let’s tow the trailer to a new state and make a fresh start.*” A more recent illustration commenting on the mobile home in the *New Yorker* dates from May 10, 2010. It shows two men sitting on the front step of their trailer with a sad-looking dog on the ground next to them. The trailer sports a satellite dish and a laundry line and sits in an empty desert. The caption reads, “*Not sure how long we can live off the proceeds from your gold tooth.*”<sup>152</sup> Clearly these illustrations demonstrate completely different views regarding the image of the trailer in America.

However, the secondary branch of the trailer industry created in 1963—the recreational vehicle, or RV, industry—enjoyed increasing success as the second half of the twentieth century unfolded. A newfound place in the mainstream was created for the RV when companies like Volkswagen put out their camper bus, and General Motors and Cadillac started manufacturing conversion vans. In 1971 even Barbie got her own RV similar to that of the hugely popular—and very boxy—Winnebagos that were being produced at the same time.<sup>153</sup> (Figure 20) The materialistic 1980’s and 90’s pushed the RV as a type of mini-mansion on wheels to match their owners “McMansion” counterparts.<sup>154</sup> These RVs, still popular today, sported Corian countertops, king-sized beds, plasma televisions, and slide-out sides that allow the interior to double in size when stationary. They

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<sup>152</sup> All *New Yorker* illustrations are from the *New Yorker* online store. <http://www.cartoonbank.com>

<sup>153</sup> Keister, 132.

<sup>154</sup> Cathleen McGuigan. “The McMansion Next Door: Why the American House Needs a Makeover”, *Newsweek*, (October 27, 2003). <http://www.newsweek.com/id/61935>

were generally out of reach to the average casual traveler with price tags nearing one million dollars and suggest the abundance of the 50s combined with the cutting edge technology of today. Unlike the trailers that preceded them, these mega-RVs signify affluence and inaccessibility.

Technological developments, globalization and terrorism continue to change America and the world at a pace that seems much faster than the shifts of the previous century. The design, marketing and image of the trailers of today are being transformed in technological and visionary ways that will be examined in the next chapter.



## Chapter Three

### The Modern Age of “Trailerling”

In 2010, the recreational vehicle industry will mark its hundredth anniversary in business. Dating its beginnings to the first campers introduced in 1910— the Pierce-Arrow Touring Landau, Auto-Kamp trailers and other more primitive campers, the industry will celebrate its centennial with a host of events that will not only exploit the nation’s nostalgia for the early and mid twentieth century, but will also highlight the enduring and fundamental appeal of motorized travel. “Think about how far we’ve come in the past 100 years in terms in technology, yet the reasons to RV remain the same,” Richard Coon, the president of the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association said in a recent newsletter. “RVing has been able to thrive and grow because people still enjoy the *freedom* that it provides.” [emphasis mine]<sup>155</sup> The industry’s celebrations, are designed primarily to draw attention to the RV lifestyle, to promote its products and to continue to shape, as much as possible, the image of the recreational vehicle as a lasting symbol of core American values: mobility, ingenuity, freedom. “Celebrating our centennial will create excitement and pride throughout our made-in-America industry,” said Coon. “For 100 years, we’ve been helping Americans explore their scenic treasures and heritage more comfortably, affordably and enjoyably. That’s something to celebrate.” The celebration will include a yearlong media-blitz meant to bring the positive sides of the mobile

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<sup>155</sup> Recreational Vehicle Industry Association press release (September 1, 2009).

home back into the American consciousness, as well as caravan events and parties thrown by individual clubs and brand names.

The sense of adventure that trailer companies touted in the 1920s and '30s; the desire for mobility that John Steinbeck wrote about in 1960; the “freedom” that Richard Coon calls the essential appeal of RVs today—these basic values associated with trailers and RVs have not fundamentally changed in the span of one hundred years. But left out is the notion of an RV as home. The contemporary RV retains the single most positive aspect of its image: the notion that it affords everyday citizens an opportunity to see their country in a safe, comfortable and self-determined way. The appeal of the RV today is based not simply on nostalgia for a bygone era but on the RV as a desirable, affordable, and even patriotic option for most people who want to fully partake in the American experience—an experience that derives from the Founding Fathers’ promise of the opportunity to pursue happiness however one sees fit. “It’s a rare homeowner who has not dreamed now and then of walking away from the mortgage and the yard work and taking to the open road,” Joyce Wadler writes in an August 13, 2008, *New York Times* article, “At Home on the Road.”<sup>156</sup> The article tells the story of two married New York City professionals who sell their one-bedroom brownstone apartment and buy “a vintage 40-foot motor home with a queen-size bed, drapes that can be opened with a flick of a switch and a kitchen bigger and better designed than the one they had in New York. “Living in

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<sup>156</sup> Joyce Wadler, “At Home on the Road” (*New York Times*, August 13, 2008).

an R.V. park is pretty stress-free,” says Trudy Lundgren, the wife in the article. “You don’t have to worry about crime, you don’t have to worry about getting packed into the subway, we get to have campfires almost every night if we want.” This modern couple’s version of the American dream—mainly involving a notion of escape—is realized inside a vintage RV.

In 1996, Gerald McRaney starred in *The Promised Land*, a family drama on CBS that followed the Greene family. After the father of the family, Russell Greene (McRaney), loses his job, he packs up his family and takes off in an old Chevrolet Suburban towing a vintage Airstream.<sup>157</sup> Much like Steinbeck in *Travels With Charley*, the Greene family becomes closer to each other and builds relationships with people they meet during their time on the road. A decade later Robin Williams portrayed Bob Munro in the movie *RV*. Munro tries to hide his job troubles with a family vacation in a rented RV, and a number of difficulties handling the RV ends up bringing the family closer than ever before.<sup>158</sup> This movie, a mix of the plots of *The Promised Land* and 1953’s *The Long, Long Trailer*, as well as *The Promised Land* alone, illustrates that the RV and trailer are still enmeshed with notions of the American family and values. In these cases, emotional closeness becomes the measure of a family after detaching family togetherness from the necessity of a concrete or physically stable house. Instead, the trailer or RV in each case is valued for bringing family closer through shared experiences on the road while living together in a small space.

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<sup>157</sup> CBS. *The Promised Land*, Created by Martha Williamson, 1996.

<sup>158</sup> Sony Pictures. *RV*, Directed by Barry Sonnenfeld, 2006.

The appeal of the RV remains evident today in a period of economic and social instability in the United States. Shipments of RVs declined in 2009 in response to the deepest recession since the days of the Great Depression. Layoffs in industries across the country, coupled with a crippling credit crisis that made getting auto loans nearly impossible, damaged the RV industry in a way that was consistent with recession-related setbacks experienced by other businesses. RV experts are now predicting that the RV industry will rebound in 2010, and continue to prosper after that. Dr. Richard Curtin, the mobile home industry's most respected analyst and the director of consumer surveys at the University of Michigan estimates in *Roadsigns*, an industry newsletter, that RV shipments will total some 185,800 units in 2010, a 26.5% increase over the projected 2009 total.<sup>159</sup> As the credit market improves and the economy as a whole recovers, RV sales are expected to rise steadily into the foreseeable future.

There are two primary reasons for this rebound: aggressive industry marketing meant to shore up the positive image of trailers and RVs during this economic downturn, and the particular nature and devotion of RV lifestyle enthusiasts. In December 2009, the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) sponsored an event in Louisville, Kentucky, that it billed as "Outlook 2010: Let the Sun Shine." Industry officials planned to discuss how the RVIA's media efforts "kept the industry's image strong and vibrant despite a pessimistic media

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<sup>159</sup> Dr. Richard Curtin. *Roadsigns*, September 2009. Dr. Curtin is considered one of the foremost experts in the RV industry and writes a semi-monthly newsletter updating the status of the industry with economic forecasts.

environment and the gloomy economic conditions of the past year.”<sup>160</sup>

Specifically, the industry launched a national advertising campaign around the concept “Go RVing,” a campaign that industry officials believe succeeded in maintaining interest in the RV lifestyle even during the worst recession in decades. The industry also kept promoting their products as a great financial value, even under trying economic conditions. Despite record increases in the cost of gasoline over the last 2007 and 2008, for instance, RV analysts point to studies that show fuel costs would have to more than triple over current levels to make RVing more expensive for a family of four than other forms of travel.<sup>161</sup>

These studies contend that a family of four can save as much as 60% by traveling in an RV, after factoring in ownership costs and fuel—and that as many as 80% of RV owners perceive their RV vacations to be more affordable than other types of vacations.<sup>162</sup> By highlighting these core strengths of the RV—affordability, convenience, and great economic value—industry officials believe they were able to weather the calamitous economic downturn of 2009 better than other industries.

The other, and perhaps most deeply resonating, reason for the predicted bounce back of RVs in 2010 has to do with the particular nature and devotion of RV consumers. For one thing, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century this group of consumers represent a better financial risk than the average American consumer. The delinquency rate of RV loans from 1999 to 2007 was 0.95%, compared to 2% for

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<sup>160</sup> RVIA News Release. “*Outlook 2010: Let the Sun Shine*” (August 26, 2009).

<sup>161</sup> The 2008 PKF Vacation Cost comparison study.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

other types of consumer loans.<sup>163</sup> Additionally, they demonstrate an enduring devotion to the RV lifestyle, which both industry officials and analysts say can be counted on to spur sales in 2010, as economic conditions improve. As Curtin said in 2009, “Given the strong commitment of consumers to the RV lifestyle, there is no question about the favorable prospects of the industry.”<sup>164</sup>

But Curtin also predicted that the industry’s rebound would be gradual—and would require the same kind of design, marketing and image restructuring that defined the industry’s efforts following economic downturns in the twentieth century. Much like the way the trailer industry completely redefined itself during and after the Great Depression and into World War II, the RV industry will once again have to adapt to American values, dreams and demands, and reshape its product into something new, dynamic and compelling. “The transformation of the industry has only begun,” says Curtin, “and can be expected to be more comprehensive and require more restructuring than following any prior recession.”<sup>165</sup>

What are these new post-recession, 21<sup>st</sup>-century American values, and how will trailers and RVs be transformed to reflect them? A 2009 Harvard Business Review study identified four key trends that will be accelerated in the coming years by the recession: consumer demand for simplicity, a call for ethical business governance, a desire to economize, and mercurial consumption, which

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<sup>163</sup> American Bankers Association Quarterly Delinquency Bulletin 2009.

<sup>164</sup> Dr. Richard Curtin. “RV Industry on ‘Gradual Road to Recovery’ Industry Analyst Says”, *MotorHome*, (September 8, 2009).

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

is defined as a tendency to flit from one offering to another.<sup>166</sup> Another key trend—green consumption, or an interest in environmentally friendly hybrid vehicles—has been slowed by the current recession, but will likely accelerate once economic conditions improve. All of these trends reflect a sweeping “value-set” change in America following not only the crippling recession of 2008 but dating back to the events of September 11, 2001. It could be categorized as a move away from crass consumerism of the 1980s and 1990s, and towards a lifestyle that reflects entirely new assumptions about what it takes to be happy, and to live conscientiously in today’s shrinking world.

Much like the movement towards social consciousness in the 1960’s, the focus has shifted away from material goods and external means of achieving gratification, and towards more personal, simple and meaningful interactions, not unlike those of *The Promised Land* (note the title of the program) and the movie *RV*. Cultural critic Jeff Jarvis calls it “a Great Restructuring of the economy and society, starting with a fundamental change in our relationships—how we are linked and intertwined and how we act, nothing less than that.”<sup>167</sup> There is also a much greater awareness of “footprints”—the impact consumers have on society, history and the planet. Furthermore, the threat of terror in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century has forced consumers to reconsider what is valuable in their lives, and has tended to refocus them on family, community and spirituality. All of this represents what

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<sup>166</sup> Paul Flatters and Michael Willmott. “Understanding the Post-Recession Consumer”, *Harvard Business Review*, (July-August 2009).

<sup>167</sup> Jeff Jarvis, *Buzz Machine Blog*, March 7, 2009. <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2009/03/page/3/>

might be seen as a dramatic shift in American values at the start of the twenty-first century. Americans are more concerned with living simpler, less impactful, and more conscientious lives. The events of 9/11 created “a newfound understanding that life is indeed a journey, not a destination,” motivational author Rick Smith wrote in a September 11, 2009 essay.<sup>168</sup>

That family is important, and working more to afford luxuries for our children may have a price much higher than simply being there. That work is important, for it provides an excellent opportunity to contribute, to challenge ourselves and exercise our capacity to learn. That charitable endeavors are not just the right thing to do, but are requisites to our inclusion within a community.<sup>169</sup>

The RV industry has altered its design and marketing approaches to reflect this change in American values. To emphasize the unique ability of the RV to adapt to and reflect core American values, we will look at two current and alternative industry developments: the introduction of the first hybrid RV, and the impulse towards nostalgia that has led to a resurgence in interest in trailers and RVing. This want for a simpler and more innocent time has been met by the industry with a new crop of vintage-style trailers with all the comforts of and technological advances of today.

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<sup>168</sup> Rick Smith, “9/11/09: How Has Your Perspective Changed?” (*The Huffington Post*, September 11, 2009).

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

## “Green” RVs and Trailers

The overwhelming trend in the United States today is toward “greening” one’s lifestyle. For RVs, the most obvious way to do this is through the creation of a hybrid RV. A hybrid vehicle uses two distinct power sources, an internal combustion engine and an electric motor. Generally, a hybrid vehicle will feature batteries that store energy generated by applying the brake of the vehicle, and then using that energy as a complement to the standard engine. Less production demanded of the engine leads to smaller engines, which improve fuel economy and reduce harmful emissions, the primary benefits of hybrid vehicles.<sup>170</sup> The hybrid vehicle industry is still more or less in its infancy, though most of the major car companies have introduced hybrid models, such as the Toyota Prius, the Ford Escape and the Chevrolet Volt. There are also hybrid buses, vans and SUVs on the roads.

Hybrid RVs are slowly emerging as well. In 2008, the Freightliner Custom Chassis Corporation (FCCC) arrived at the National RV trade show in Louisville, KY, with the industry’s first hybrid-electric Class A motorhome chassis, dubbed the ecoFRED chassis.<sup>171</sup> The ecoFRED promises increased fuel economy and other environmental benefits stemming from its use of both diesel and electric: a diesel engine coupled with an electric motor/generator and lithium-ion batteries. To avoid a potentially ruinous obstacle—the need to stop at special stations to

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<sup>170</sup> Allen E. Fuhs. *Hybrid Vehicles and The Future of Personal Transportation*, (Carmel, California: CRC Press, 2008), 73.

<sup>171</sup> *Freightliner* press release (December 2008).

recharge the batteries—the operation of the diesel engine continuously recharges the lithium-ion batteries, making the vehicle far more attractive to RV consumers likely to drive off-road. At the same time, the chassis has been designed to provide increased maneuverability to drivers, and the driver cabin, or cockpit, has been made roomier and easier to enter and leave by the elimination of an engine hump necessary in a gas chassis.<sup>172</sup> The ecoFRED tagline—“Driven By You”—illustrates this new post-recession RV design and marketing ethic: vehicles that are more convenient, more eco-friendly, more in line with consumer values. A year later, in 2009, Winnebago Industries announced the first road-worthy hybrid RV, the Winnebago Adventurer, built with the ecoFRED chassis. (figure 21) Industry analysts expect more and better hybrid RVs to hit showrooms in the years to come, simply due to the demand by consumers that the vehicles be more eco-friendly and economical to suit the new post-recession values of simplicity, thriftiness and green consumption. As an FCCC official Jonathan Randall stated after the introduction of the ecoFRED hybrid chassis, “we designed and engineered ecoFRED to address our customers' needs and desired fuel economy improvements.”<sup>173</sup> This responsiveness to consumer needs is, of course, not unique to the trailer and RV industries; all successful products, to some degree, are built upon an awareness of and reaction to the specific desires and demands of consumers. But trailers, RVs and motor homes have

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> Jonathan Randall, director of sales and marketing for FCCC. *Freightliner* press release (December 2008).

shown an uncommon ability to quickly assimilate and adapt to changing consumer needs.

Another new “green” RV is being produced by the Canadian firm Verdier, which is reviving the classic VW bus—an iconic part of the countercultural revolution of the 1960s—and outfitting it with GPS-controlled solar panels to provide power for camping devices, on top of a hybrid diesel-electric engine that should lower carbon emissions. The RV expands sideways to create camping spaces alongside the van, and includes a galley stove that swivels for indoor or outdoor use.<sup>174</sup> It is not expected to compete with larger RVs that provide much more living space, but rather intended as an alternative for younger buyers who rank environmental friendliness near the top of their list of concerns. In this way, it directly appeals to, and assimilates, the new green consumerism.

### **RVs of the Future**

Eco-consciousness is only one of the emerging consumer trends of this century; according to the *Harvard Business Review* study, consumers are also demanding product simplicity and economy, and they are showing a greater willingness to disregard brand loyalty and sample different products to satisfy these demands, a phenomenon known as mercurial consumption.<sup>175</sup> This new value-set—increased consumer involvement and investment in the nature and provenance of the products they are buying, resulting from a desire to lead

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<sup>174</sup> “New Hybrid RVs Look Like They Belong to the “Dead Head” Generation” (*RVtravel.com*, January 2009). <http://www.rvtravel.com/blog/rvsinthenews/labels/Verdier%20RV.html>

<sup>175</sup> Flatters and Wilmot.

simpler, thriftier, and more personally meaningful lives, has generated a burst of creative, forward-thinking trailer and RV design, coming not only from major manufacturers but from future-minded independent designers around the world. Some of the designs are fanciful and far-flung; others seem like intuitive and organic forward leaps in existing trailer design. But this new creativity is leading to a new generation of trailers, campers, RVs and motor homes that will vary significantly from their predecessors and assume new roles in the lives of consumers.

Consider the Mini Cooper S Clubman and Airstream Concept, a futuristic merging of two iconic vehicle designs. (*figure 22*) Exhibited for the first time at the Salone del Mobile furniture show in Milan, Italy, in April 2009, the Concept brought together designers from Mini Cooper, Airstream and the Danish furniture design brand Republic of Fritz Hansen to collaborate and focus on a two-pronged design principle—mobility and interaction with nature. Specifically, designers considered the desires of water-sports enthusiasts, and “the yearning of surfers for absolute freedom and harmony with their surroundings”—a sort of extreme representation of the nation’s broader desire for simplicity, eco-friendliness and ease of mobility.<sup>176</sup> A modified Mini Cooper S Clubman pulls a 22-foot long Airstream trailer that has been reconceived by Danish designers to feature the option of opening up the trailer on one side with an open-air bed. An electric motor unfolds one side of the trailer, creates a platform and reveals an integrated

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<sup>176</sup> “Surfer’s Paradise: Mini Cooper S Clubman and Airstream Concept”, (*RV Motoring.com*, 2009). [http://www.rvmotoring.com/mini\\_cooper\\_airstream\\_design.html](http://www.rvmotoring.com/mini_cooper_airstream_design.html)

daybed—allowing users to feel like they are inside the trailer, or at home; it also, however, allows them to dry off and sunbathe, as if they were outside. The Airstream interior includes a high-design interior outfitted in neoprene as a reflection of the wetsuits commonly worn by water-sports enthusiasts. There are also furniture components designed to be dually purposed for indoor and outdoor use. The sleek interior furniture, exterior flourishes and flexible shell design all reflect a modernization of trailer design, based specifically on a newly intensified consumer attention to the product's design, nature and footprint. But more than that, the Concept showcases a new willingness on the part of trailer designers to deviate from the time-honored shape and structure of traditional twentieth-century trailers—to challenge the core obstacle of narrow, shotgun-layout interiors by expanding the trailer sideways and creating an identity associated with an idyllic, nature-oriented lifestyle. They are, quite literally, opening up the trailer to the outdoors—using technology to expand on the earliest impulse of trailerites to experience the outdoors and commune with nature without leaving all the comforts of home.

The iconic Airstream design was also the inspiration for a futuristic concept developed by Ford. Dubbed the “Silver Bullet” and unveiled at the 2007 Detroit Auto Show, the vehicle pays homage to Silver Bullet stainless steel travel trailers in production for decades, but reconfigured to resemble a small, sleek RV more than a trailer. (*figure 23*) There are stylistic features that suggest the romance of trailer travel—highly reflective exterior paint designed to make the

shell look like aluminum, as well as twelve decorative rivets—but otherwise the new Silver Bullet has what its designers refer to as a forward reaching, “space-pod” appearance.<sup>177</sup> Furthermore, as in its predecessors such as the Covered Wagon trailer, the Silver Bullet’s name itself is a reference not only to streamlining, but also to the very popular character *The Lone Ranger*, who was first introduced to Americans in 1933 on the radio and became a television show in 1949. In *The Lone Ranger* the theme was that good always triumphs over evil, and the Lone Ranger’s gun shot silver bullets, ridding the world of villains with each shot.<sup>178</sup> The name of the Silver Bullet trailer denotes that it can be used as its owner’s happy place, where good always triumphs over evil. The Silver Bullet trailer is rounded, not much larger than an SUV, and features porthole-style rear and side windows painted red and orange. The cocoon-like interior includes swiveling front seats and a 360-degree mini cylindrical screen that can accommodate a live feed as well as prerecorded content. For more green-power, the Silver Bullet includes a hydrogen hybrid fuel cell that provides power to a 336-volt lithium-ion battery pack and serves as a generator. Beyond the nostalgic nods to the earlier Silver Bullet trailer, and an overall desire through design to “spark a person’s passion for travel by capturing the essence of a pioneering icon like Airstream,” the designers were intent on spinning the trailer concept forward by “finding new options for tomorrow’s road trips” and “challenging the

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<sup>177</sup> Dan Prescott. “Ford’s Silver Bullet Blends Transportation History with Future Vision”, (*RVmotoring.com* 2009). [http://www.rvmotoring.com/airstream\\_concept.html](http://www.rvmotoring.com/airstream_concept.html)

<sup>178</sup> John Shelton Lawrence. “The Lone Ranger: Adult Legacies a Juvenile Western”, *Hollywood’s West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History*, John E. O’Connor, ed, (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 81.

conventional thinking about what defines an Airstream.”<sup>179</sup> And while it is unlikely to ever be mass-produced, the new Silver Bullet, like the Dymaxion Car of 1933, showcases a new flexibility in the design approach to trailers and RVs and a forward-thinking optimism not seen in trailer design since the 1950s.

Perhaps most interesting in its relationship to urban living and prior to the showing of the Silver Bullet, is General Motors Corporation’s template-shattering design that won first place at the 2006 Los Angeles Design Challenge (part of the L.A. Auto Show). The competition asked entrants to come up with innovative solutions to the problems of urban living, and the designers at GMC’s West Coast Advanced Design Studio specifically targeted the need for affordable housing in Los Angeles. Interestingly, their entry was a futuristic, diesel-electric powered “urban apartment with mobility,” which they christened the GMC PAD (a reference to the colloquial name for a dwelling).<sup>180</sup> (*figure 24*) Conceived as a kind of apartment on wheels—or as its designers saw it, “an upwardly mobile loft”—the PAD was considered so revolutionary in design and appearance that the competition’s judges believed it might create a new category of vehicle—a segment between the RV and the SUV that they called LAV, or Living Activity Vehicle. Its appeal, said the judges, would extend to “corporations, future homeowners, traveling business people and constant travelers looking to go beyond

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<sup>179</sup> Jordan Bennett, “Ford Exterior Design Manager”, (*RVmotoring.com*, 2009).  
[http://www.rvmotoring.com/airstream\\_concept.html](http://www.rvmotoring.com/airstream_concept.html)

<sup>180</sup> “The RV of the Future?”, (*RVmotoring.com* 2009).  
[http://www.rvmotoring.com/gmc\\_pad\\_rv\\_concept.html](http://www.rvmotoring.com/gmc_pad_rv_concept.html)

the stereotypical RV.”

An impressive amalgam of sleek appearance, cutting-edge technology and American vernacular home design, the GMC PAD is not likely to be on the roads anytime soon; for the moment, it exists only as a computer design. By some estimates, were it to be actualized it could cost as much as a million dollars, and no less than a few hundred thousand dollars.<sup>181</sup> It is designed to serve as both transport and permanent housing, just as so many trailers and RVs have in the past, spreading its exorbitant cost over two basic needs. And while its interior represents a huge leap in its representation of the conventional American home, particularly in its inclusion of a variety of electronic devices and huge LCD screens, the dimensions of the vehicle—it is roughly the size of the deluxe RVs on the road today—continue to make it a less-desirable alternative than conventional housing for a majority of non-RV enthusiasts. Whether a vehicle like the PAD could emerge as a legitimate, mainstream housing option for the American public remains to be seen. But in its willingness to expand on and even obliterate trailer and RV conventions of the past—and strive to provide users with a personalized, streamlined and economical approximation of domestic life—the GMC PAD reflects the industry’s ability to recognize and absorb the shifting values and demands of the American public for flexible living space. As Lynn Spigel would say, the continued invention and research into the form of the moving home (and now moving office as well) represents

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<sup>181</sup> Ed Grabianowski. “How the GMC PAD Works”, (*Howstuffworks.com*, 2006). <http://auto.howstuffworks.com/under-the-hood/trends-innovations/gmc-pad.htm>

technologies that are shaped by “social practices and cultural expectations.”<sup>182</sup>Spigel bases her ideas on those of the cultural historian Warren Susman who argued that “the genius of Henry Ford lay not in his invention, but rather in his ability to create cultural form that meshed with central values of American social life”. Technologies, Susman sustains, are “part of a cultural and social context, and we need to analyze them as such.”<sup>183</sup>

### **Mobile Homes On the Road Today**

Two new mobile homes actually on the road more recently are the Coachmen Captiva Ultra Lite and Capri Micro. (*figures 25-26*) Both are light enough to be towed by minivans and crossover vehicles, yet still provide ample interior space and exterior storage. Due to a lightweight aluminum cage frame, the roomy Captiva can weigh as little as 4,000 lbs., while the Capri is only 2,500 pounds. Inside, the Captiva has a flexible floor plan that can be configured nine different ways, with various combinations for queen beds, multiple bunks, a sofa, barrel chairs and slide-out living area. The smaller Capri has three different available floor plans, and can hold 36 gallons of fresh water—the largest capacity in its class. According to Coachmen sales reports the Captiva has been enormously popular, with first-half sales in 2007 up 138% over the same period

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<sup>182</sup> Spigel, 4.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

in 2006. The newer Capri is also up 61% percent from 2006.<sup>184</sup> Certainly, Coachmen's success in streamlining trailers to make them lighter and more economical without overly compromising interior spaciousness and design is a reflection of how much the company, and indeed the industry, is attuned to the changing needs of its consumers. Both of these trailers boast an incredibly high fuel economy not seen before in towable models.

These new RVs and design concepts demonstrate the industry's remarkable flexibility and adaptability in offering new products that reflect shifting values and developing trends. The high importance now placed on ecologically conscious living in the United States is seen first and foremost in the new designs for trailers and RVs today. Closely followed by the value placed on individualism by consumers, the modern mobile home has once again adapted to the changing inclinations of the American psyche.

But there are some design concepts that go even further in anticipating the future of the industry—innovative and daring design ideas that dramatically reshape the RV while maintaining its core duality of purpose and central functions as transport and shelter. Consider the amazing Rolling Stone Eco Capsule, the brainchild of Slovakia-based Nice Architects. (*figure 27*) In the shape of a three-dimensional oval and inspired by the gypsy wagons of the nineteenth-century, the Eco Capsule is designed as a mobile living and working

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<sup>184</sup> "Coachmen's Ultra Lights Offer What RVers Want", (*HybridExplorer.com*, Sept. 2007). <http://www.popupexplorer.com/news/story.php?record=14>

space. When closed, it operates as a living room with a kitchenette, but when the front quarter of the vehicle is swung open and outward, the unit functions as a workspace and terrace. It can be powered by several different systems, including a wind turbine, solar panels and electric motor, or some combination of all of these. Its hardwood frame features wood paneling on the inside, but the exterior is fashioned from the tiles of aluminum cans, creating a shimmering surface that reflects the surrounding environment and allows the Eco Capsule to literally blend into its natural surroundings. "The unit will become invisible," claim its designers. "We tried to compose units as stones on a field."<sup>185</sup> The capsule's remarkable combination of a rounded, energy-friendly shape, reliance on alternative energy sources, expandability into an exterior work space and reflective exterior surface exemplify the adaptability of the basic trailer shape and structure into a cutting-edge eco-friendly vehicle. The Eco Capsule also relies on an interior intimacy that suggests American vernacular home design; though it is only 270 square feet, it features a bedroom with a double bed and closet, a bathroom with a toilet, shower and sink, and a living room. In a way, it mirrors the play between public and private space as discussed by Penny Sparke in her most recent book on design *The Modern Interior*. Sparke maintains that as technology became more and more a part of daily life from the nineteenth-century onwards, the separation between public and private spaces in the home

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<sup>185</sup> Bridgette Meinhold, "Rolling Stone Eco Capsule Home", (*Inhabit* website, April 1, 2009). <http://www.inhabitat.com/2009/04/01/mobile-rolling-stone-eco-capsule-home/>

became increasingly blurred.<sup>186</sup> This idea can be seen no clearer than in the modern trailer with its channeling back and forth between the private and public or inside and outside life.

Taking this concept and the idea of personal customization a step further is the Mehrzeller Caravan, which literally allows consumers to design the product themselves. (*figure 28*) The organic, polygon exterior, a geodesic-like shell that resembles natural mineral crystals, represents the most visually-daring departure from traditional trailer and RV design to yet emerge from a computer. But just as novel and innovative is the interior: consumers can log onto an online configurator and create their own design, which is then translated into parameters that the team's architects use to create an actual personalized vehicle. Mehrzeller designers call it "mass customization," which allows "both the individual wishes of the customer to be accommodated while producing the caravan with series methods."<sup>187</sup> The impetus behind this futuristic concept is as old as the very first trailers and indicates the continuing appeal of the trailer as both mobile and a home. "People want to be mobile but at the same time have a strong desire for a lasting home and their own personal four walls," Mehrzeller designers say. But added to this is a new consumer value specific to the start of the twenty-first century: a desire for more personalized and more meaningful trailer design that reflects America's shift towards simpler, more conscientious

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<sup>186</sup> Penny Sparke. *The Modern Interior*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 57.

<sup>187</sup> "Mehrzeller Concept", (*Mehrzeller website* 2009). <http://www.mehrzeller.com/>

lifestyles following 9/11 and the 2008 recession. “In the camper market there is strong demand for new design and personalized, tailor-made solutions,” say Mehrzeller designers. “Individualist tourists want a caravan that is made just for them.”<sup>188</sup> This also echoes Phil Patton’s construct of the American penchant for the kit and customization illuminated through products that speak to a democratizing impulse at the same time that they promise individualism.<sup>189</sup>

Moreover, the Mehrzeller Caravan reflects a major cultural impulse in the twenty-first century: a mass trend towards user-generated content. From the personalized play lists made possible by iPods, to websites like Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia that depend entirely on content provided by users, to the grassroots internet campaign that helped elect President Barack Obama, there is a burgeoning emphasis on personalization and user-control.<sup>190</sup> New and daring trailer and RV designs, such as the Mehrzeller Caravan and the Eco Capsule, reflect this new emphasis in their extreme flexibility and personalized design features. Perhaps it will be possible for future RV enthusiasts to quite literally pick and choose every single feature of their vehicle and drive off with a completely unique RV, just as it’s possible for iPod users to create unique play lists based on their individual tastes.

Finally, two new RV design concepts represent an unprecedented

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> Phil Patton. *Made in USA: The Secret Histories of the Things That Made America*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992), 4.

<sup>190</sup> Michael Scherer. “Obama’s Permanent Grass-Roots Campaign,” *Time*, (January 15, 2009), 23.

departure from the traditional narrow, shotgun shape of past trailers and RVs. These new trailers do not just feature foldouts or descending patios—they literally transform into wide and square living areas, unlike anything ever before seen in the trailer and RV universe. Dutch designer Niels Caris has unveiled the Foldoub Trailer, which when collapsed is roughly three feet wide.<sup>191</sup> (*figure 29*) But when it is parked, the flip of a switch makes it unfold into a large rectangular living space accessible through circular passageways. Its mechanized metamorphosis suggests nothing so much as the clanky auto-to-robot switches of the Transformers. For obvious reasons, the Foldoub does not feature a bathroom or even storage space: as a concept, it serves mainly to introduce a new approach to space creation. But it is possible to imagine future designs that adapt this mechanized unfolding technology to a larger, more standard-sized trailer or RV, doubling or perhaps even tripling the living area once the vehicle is parked.

There is also the experimental 252° Living Area, a fully-functioning mobile home fashioned by four graduate students from the Superior Institute of Design in France.<sup>192</sup> (*figure 30*) Once again, when the three-wheeled trailer is compressed it is only a few feet wide, and can easily be towed by an SUV or even Mini Cooper. But when it is parked, it expands like an accordion—the lightweight outer shell splits open as the base fans into a semi-circle, with different “rooms”

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<sup>191</sup> Lloyd Alter, “Foldoub Trailer Travels Small, Lives Large”, (*Treehugger.com*, July 23, 2008). <http://www.treehugger.com/files/2008/07/foldoub-trailer-travels-small.php>

<sup>192</sup> Naresh Chauhan, “252° Living Area: Mobile Mini House for Modern Nomads”, (*The Design Blog*, March 6, 2009). <http://www.thedesignblog.org/entry/252%C2%B0-living-area-mobile-mini-house-for-modern-nomads/>

emerging as the trailer widens and widens. Inspired by the Chemosphere, a modernist octagonal home built by the American architect John Lautner in 1960, the 252° Living Area is designed to be a house on wheels, and features a bathroom, living room, bedroom, kitchen and office. All of the walls and floors run on rails and can be easily pushed and pulled to define the size and accessibility of whatever room is needed most at the time. A sliding screen also wraps around the open quarters to keep everything secure. On top of showcasing the new lateral expandability of modern trailer design—a radical departure from the narrow, shotgun layout that dominated trailer and RV design for a century—the 252° Living Area represents the ultimate in personalized RV interior design: consumers are not locked into any single design strategy even after purchasing the vehicle. The shape and structure of their RV can change on a whim, depending on their immediate needs and moods.



## Conclusion

### The Mobile Home as Necessity

This cutting-edge fluidity and flexibility in the design of the mobile home is in stark contrast to a more traditional trailer function necessitated by the largest natural disaster in American history—Hurricane Katrina. The hurricane tore through New Orleans on August 29, 2005, killing nearly 2,000 people and displacing more than 300,000 residents, creating unprecedented social and economic calamity.<sup>193</sup> One of the most pressing immediate needs in the hurricane's aftermath was creating temporary housing for the tens of thousands of evacuees who returned to New Orleans in the weeks and months following the devastation. The Federal Emergency Management Agency stepped in with a time-tested solution—the construction of low-cost trailers. Just as it had done after Florida's Hurricane Andrew in 1992, FEMA shipped thousands of trailers to New Orleans, alleviating a disastrous housing shortage.

The FEMA trailers are as basic and rudimentary as the Eco Capsule and Mehrzeller Caravan are futuristic. Mass-produced and essentially identical in design, the trailers feature a master bedroom, living area, bathroom with shower, air conditioning, indoor heating and propane-powered stove and oven. Typically, FEMA mounted them on concrete supports either outside a damaged home, or in a designated trailer park. The trailers undoubtedly spared thousands of people

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<sup>193</sup> Douglas Brinkley. *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006), xxiv.

from further harm and suffering; at one point, some 143,000 households along the Gulf Coast were located in temporary housing units.<sup>194</sup>

There were, however, significant problems. For one, FEMA was slow in setting them up, due to strict Environmental Protection Agency requirements for an environmental impact study. Three months after the hurricane, “inundated city inspectors are behind on approving utility hookups” for the trailers, *Time* magazine reported in November 2005.<sup>195</sup> “We have a lot of good workers who have been displaced, a lot of good workers with loss-of-family issues, loss-of-spirit issues,” UPS sales-training manager Leo G. Doyle told *Time*. “If we had housing, they would return.” A more alarming problem involved a design flaw in some FEMA trailers: they were found to expose inhabitants to the gas formaldehyde, which is the airborne form of a chemical used in the production of composite woods and plywood panels. “Air quality tests of 44 FEMA trailers conducted by the Sierra Club since April 2006 have found formaldehyde concentrations as high as 0.34 parts per million—a level nearly equal to what a professional embalmer would be exposed to on the job, according to one study of the chemical’s workplace effects,” *MSNBC* journalist Mike Bruner reported.<sup>196</sup> The cancer-causing gas sickened close to one hundred trailer inhabitants, and a class-action lawsuit was filed on their behalf. Becky Gillette, co-chair of the

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<sup>194</sup> “FEMA Offers Katrina Survivors Federal Trailers for \$1”, *Fox News*, June 10, 2009.

<sup>195</sup> Cathy Booth Thomas. “New Orleans Today: It’s Worse Than You Think”, (*Time*, Nov. 28, 2005).

<sup>196</sup> Mike Bruner. “Are FEMA Trailers ‘Toxic Tin Cans’?”, (*MSNBC.com*, July 25, 2006).

Mississippi chapter of the Environmental Protection Agency, employed a term used to describe trailers in the early years of the twentieth century—tin cans—when discussing the dangers of FEMA’s Katrina trailers: “It’s simply wrong that the government would spend billions of dollars to poison people in these toxic tin cans.”<sup>197</sup>

It is worth noting that for all the sleekness and futurism of contemporary trailer and RV design, they can still be considered rudimentary, utilitarian products, or tin cans. In this way, their basic function and perception has not fundamentally changed in a century of existence, even as their design and marketing have changed to keep in line with shifting cultural values. This flexibility is, in essence, a defining characteristic of the trailer and RV since their inception in the twentieth century—an ability to be transformed, if not on a whim, then certainly on the heels of shifting consumer values, dreams and demands. All of these futuristic design concepts reflect a remarkably flexibility inherent in the composition of trailers and RVs, both literally and in terms of their role and function in society. Similarly, the FEMA trailers reflect an unchanging function—cheap, affordable housing. For as long as they have been around trailers and RVs have managed to be whatever it is that their consumers wished them to be—transport for vacations, a ticket to adventure, a home in dire times, an avenue for upward mobility, a traveling office, a combination of all of these things. And because of this uncanny adaptability and functional fluidity, they can be seen

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<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

to uniquely reflect the changing values of American consumers in the last century, and the American character or psyche. As Phil Patton writes, “To assemble, denote, abbreviate one’s world was to assert your control over it—and take it with you. The American obsession with mobility—in space, in time, in class, in identity—so deep that it seemed to extend into the individual bones, lay behind the shape of all sorts of American things.” The American trailer or mobile home is one of those American things.<sup>198</sup>

This paper has set out to delineate and illustrate the precise ways that new technologies, along with historical and social changes in the United States have changed and influenced the design, marketing and image of trailers—and how, in turn, a historical and design analysis of trailers and RVs reflects the ways in which Americans as adventurers, homeowners, and consumers have changed. From the early impulse towards adventure and the turn-of-the-century trailer pioneers, to the desperation of migrant workers and the unemployed during the Great Depression, to the wish for upward mobility seized by trailerites in the 1950s, to the ambitious, innovative ideas of modern designers intent on creating a new world of RVs, the varied dreams, desires, fears and hopes of Americans throughout the decades have found their way into the design and manufacturer of trailers and RVs. “The virus of restlessness begins to take possession of a wayward man,” wrote John Steinbeck in his cross-country classic *Travels With*

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<sup>198</sup> Patton, 4.

*Charley*.<sup>199</sup> “The road away from Here seems broad and straight and sweet.”

Perhaps, it is simply the trailer at rest that conflicts with the more exciting vision of the mobile home traveling as a “silver bullet”. In any case, when we glimpse these wayward men and women in their trailers and motor homes and RVs, eating up miles on Midwest highways or parked near shimmering lakes, we are seeing in these people and their vehicles something deeply ingrained and yet contested in the American character.



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<sup>199</sup> Steinbeck, 3.

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