

Trailer Trash

Whenever I hear someone talking about “trailer trash” I know they are talking about me. However, in our case, we wear that label as a badge of honor. When I was a kid, we lived for many years in a trailer—not a “mobile home,” but an RV-type trailer. Back then, most people who had trailers lived in them. If you wanted to go camping, you took a tent. Today there are still people who live in trailers, just as my mother did until recently, but most trailers are used purely as recreational vehicles.

The first trailer I remember was a very short, Masonite-skinned model called the “Alma” that was our home when we lived in Madison, Wisconsin. My dad was stationed at a nearby Army Air Corps base, a place which was home to a very large contingent of Mustang fighter aircraft. Every morning the planes would take off in huge swarms, causing our rickety little trailer to shudder and shake. But as a little kid, I loved it. Imagine seeing all those fighter planes buzzing around – it was little-kid heaven. But other than the planes, I don’t remember much about it and I doubt we lived there for a whole year.



I do remember, however, one humorous event. During a very cold and snowy day in Madison my dad bought some ear muffs. For himself he bought some Army approved, olive drab muffs and for me he bought some huge, fluffy red ones. You know what happened. The minute I eyed the olive drab “Army” ones I had to have them. The next day my poor dad showed up at his base wearing the huge, fluffy red ones. That only lasted one day as he was royally giggled for an “out-of-uniform” infraction. I

can just see this huge formation of hundreds of soldiers and then somewhere in the middle is a guy wearing red ear muffs.

There was one other memory, a tragic memory. Our trailer was parked in a very crummy trailer park (I hesitate to use the word “park”) along with several other trailers belonging to Army dependents (see the photo). As I recall, the only utility we had was electricity and apparently some of the trailers weren’t well equipped for that. One day, a nearby trailer caught on fire and was totally destroyed.

Madison is where I had my first and last experience on snow skis. A friend of dad’s lived in a nearby house located on a hill. One snowy day we visited there and got to try out a pair of his snow skis. I soon found that, as has been true throughout my life, sports that involve gravity are just not my cup of tea.



The old Alma was put into service in several other locations but I can’t recall where or when. It was so small I assume that none of our vehicles were substantially taxed in towing it.

Tragically, I have no idea what happened to the Alma. I suppose that, after the war when Dad came home for good, it was sold to some other vagabond family.

After disposing of the Alma we moved back to Nebraska on the farm my dad had bought some years before. While he was in the service, my mom's parents, Orpha and Wayne, ran the farm. The below photo shows our farm and if you look carefully you can see the Alma parked up by the windmill.



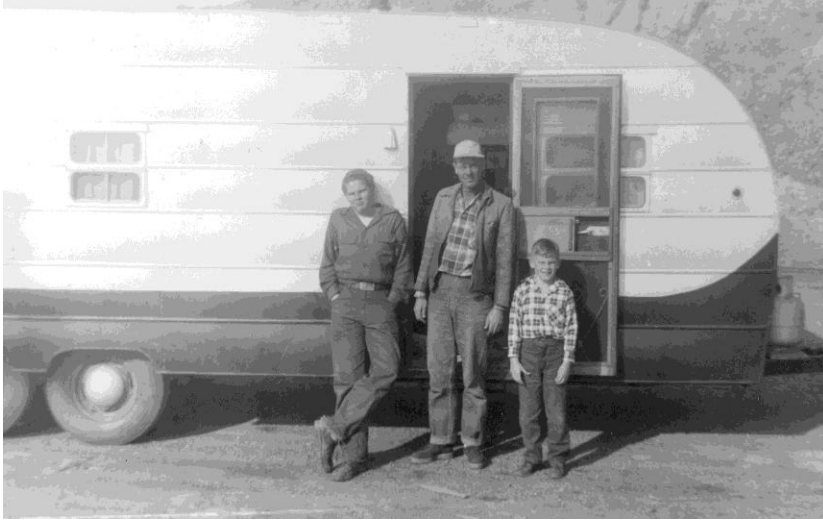
Our next trailer was really two trailers. When my dad got out of the Army he commandeered two old portable bunkhouses from his dad's construction business and made them into a home by removing their wheels and putting them together. We lived in this home on our farm for a while and then moved the whole unit into town. So I guess you'd have to say that the bunkhouses were still mobile. Unfortunately, I couldn't find any photos of this dwelling.

I don't remember a whole lot about living in the bunkhouses on the farm except that I spent way too much time eating dinner at Grandma's big old farm house rather than with my family. Eventually my mom raised hell about it and the practice came to an end. When the matter finally came to a head I believe my mom said something like, "He'd eat over there even if she was serving fried dog turds," or words to that effect. The other thing I remember is my mom giving me a dose of cod liver oil every single morning. The funny thing is that I now take Omega 3 capsules and I guess that's the same thing.



One other memorable experience living in the old bunkhouses was, I believe, the winter of 1948 when Nebraska had unbelievable snow storms. Dad was off flying mercy missions in his Piper Cub and Mom and I were stuck on the farm where all the roads were impassable. All I remember about that time was one morning when Mom tried to open the front doors of the bunkhouse and saw nothing but snow. She ran a broom handle up through the snow but saw no day light. We were dangerously snowed in. However, not long after, Grandpa went out of an upper story window of the farm house and dug down to our front door. Don't know how he knew where to dig.

In 1949 we left the bunkhouses, sold the farm and moved to Oregon, where we lived in a conventional two-bedroom home for about year and where Dad spent a whole year wasting his fortune going to a Dale Carnegie business school. When Oregon didn't pan out, Dad decided that we needed to have



another house with wheels under it, so we drove down to Arcadia, California, and bought a 30' Kit trailer. This would be our home until 1953 when we finally moved into a house.

I can't say that the experience of living in a trailer was just wonderful. I fairly swiftly came to have a rather low regard for our nomadic existence and especially for our trailer habitat. When you are a little kid you think living in a trailer is an adventure, but when you enter your teen years it becomes painfully evident that most

of the other kids live in houses where they can entertain and have lots of belongings.

I don't know how we survived as a family of four in a 30' trailer. After all, the actual living space was only about 28 feet by 8 feet, which meant that we lived in a 224-square-foot space, or roughly the size of the entryway in many homes. I remember, however, that we kids being outside almost all the time solved part of the problem. My brother and I were inside the trailer only for meals and later in the evening. As a result, we probably have a somewhat different view of childhood. While other children remember many of the things they did indoors, we were always engaged in outdoor activities such as playing baseball or football, or riding our bikes.

When you live in a small trailer, even if it has an indoor bathroom, you'll probably use the facilities of the trailer park instead. In our case, we used our bathroom as a closet so all bathroom needs meant walking to the park's bath house. That was also the case, of course, when you needed to take a shower. Imagine, if you will, what it is like to trudge to the bath house through the snow, take a shower, and then return to your trailer without freezing solid. I don't recommend it.

Our Kit trailer was our home in many places. Its journey started in California where we bought it, and then it found its first firm location in Laurel, Nebraska, in a lot just across the street from my grandparent's house. From there, we moved to



Denver, Colorado, where my dad worked as a carpenter and Mom as cocktail waitress. We lived in an RV park that was full of interesting people—trailer trash people. While there my brother David and I got a full education in how to survive amongst the unwashed. What I remember most about arriving there is that we only had \$50 to our name and then someone stole my mom's purse leaving us utterly penniless. After Denver we moved on to Pacific Beach, California where Dad worked as a machinist

and Mom stayed at home. When Dad got tired of that we moved back to Laurel, Nebraska, where he worked for his uncle as a gravel prospector. Gravel deposits are a very big deal in Nebraska. At that time I started my freshman year in high school and was really looking forward to enjoying a school career amongst old friends. But that was not to be as Dad got a really great- sounding job in Ukiah, California, as the foreman for a bridge construction job. So we were off to California again, only this time to a more northerly location. Everything was great until the first big rains came and the big boss came down to announce that all construction would cease until the spring. Not wishing to live on unemployment, Dad hooked up the trailer and we headed south to Anaheim, California. Dad had relatives there so he rapidly found work and so did Mom. She went to work for Robertshaw Controls as an assembler and continued in that line of work until she retired from the Hughes Tool Company.

Fortunately, when we arrived in Anaheim Dad made a commitment to remain in one city, at least for the duration of my schooling and my brother's. We had moved so much that neither of us had much of a chance to make friends or feel comfortable at school. My wife Carolyn also experienced a lot of moves as a child because her dad was a career Marine; however, as usual, she had a much more positive attitude about it.



A great many years later after my parents had been retired for some time, my Dad decided that, once again, they should own a trailer—not to live in but just for recreation. This led them to purchase a very small, very run down travel trailer, which my wife and I tended to regard with disdain. However, looking back, I realize that it was a joyful experience for them. They didn't take many long trips with it; often they only went to a state park in the San Diego County area. What was interesting is that they loved that park because it was somewhat isolated and not the least bit popular. What it provided was peace and quiet, and that's a commodity that's

hard to come by in most public campgrounds. As you can see in the photo above, Dad was towing their trailer with a big Ford pickup (that's another story) and carried an aluminum boat on the top. Getting that boat on and off the truck was a real challenge for him.

When they finally realized that the little trailer was too small for much comfort they purchased a much newer 24 foot model. However, it didn't take long for the new trailer to become their home instead of their source of recreation. A few years after retiring, both Mom and Dad decided that their earnings would not be sufficient to remain in their condo, so they decided to go back to living in a travel trailer. My wife and I tried to discourage this move but, looking back, it was a futile effort. I think both Dad and Mom felt that they needed to return to their roots, to do something that was quintessentially "them." So they first moved into their 24-foot trailer and then shortly afterwards into a much larger and much nicer 30-foot model. Unfortunately, shortly after the second move my dad died, leaving Mom to survive by herself in a trailer house. Mom lived in that trailer for many years until Carolyn and I retired in 1997 and moved to Santa Maria, California. Since I had been mom's sole source of transportation for many years (she had a stroke and could no longer drive), it was necessary



for her to move to Santa Maria with us. It took a lot of convincing but we finally got her to agree to sell the trailer and move into senior housing instead. A complete tour of the miserable RV parks in Santa Maria convinced her that returning to life among the trailer trash was probably no longer a good thing.



We sold her trailer while mom was still living in Anaheim at an RV park. She tried to get top dollar for it but there were no customers. We finally convinced her to lower the price considerably and that brought in a buyer—one buyer. Mom was never very good at packing so my brother and our two spouses came by the morning of the day the new owner was to pick up the trailer and we swiftly packed her goods and moved them out of the trailer. When the guy showed up to get the trailer we verified that the cash he had was of the right amount, helped him

hook the trailer to his truck, and then left the scene as fast as we could go. I'm sure my mom felt very nostalgic watching her trailer being hauled away, but my brother David and I only felt relief. Neither of us had been comfortable with the idea of our mom living alone in an RV.

Over the years Carolyn and I had owned a couple VW campers, and one of these days I'll tell the many stories that go along with those machines (we loved them). But our last big fling with RVs happened a year or two after we retired and moved to Santa Maria. We got the bug to buy a motorhome and not just a little one either. We erroneously believed that owning one of these monsters would somehow magically transform us into frequent travelers—it doesn't. We did take some trips in it but shortly discovered that instead of it enhancing our travel experiences it simply complicated them on a rather gross scale. The folks who love these things would claim that we were sadly mistaken and that motorhoming is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to them. You can believe that or take our word that nothing slows you down more on a trip than dragging around a house that weighs over 20,000 pounds, and ours was a "light" model.



We finally tired of Santa Maria (I did, Carolyn didn't) so in 2005 we moved to Sun City in Palm Desert, California. Once there it became apparent to us that we wouldn't make much use of our motorhome, so we put it up for sale. It took many months to find a buyer and by that time we had lowered the price so much that we had to write a check for ten grand just to close out the loan on the rig. You may have heard that these things don't have very good resale value—that's an understatement.

There will probably never be another trailer or motorhome in our lives, but I can't ignore the effect that trailer life had on my upbringing. Just as with my parents, there is something within me that will one day make me suggest living in a trailer. I'm confident, however, that my wife--unlike my mother--will absolutely refuse this suggestion. But I have to confess, every time I see a trailer or motorhome, it brings back many memories, and not all of them involve discomfort.