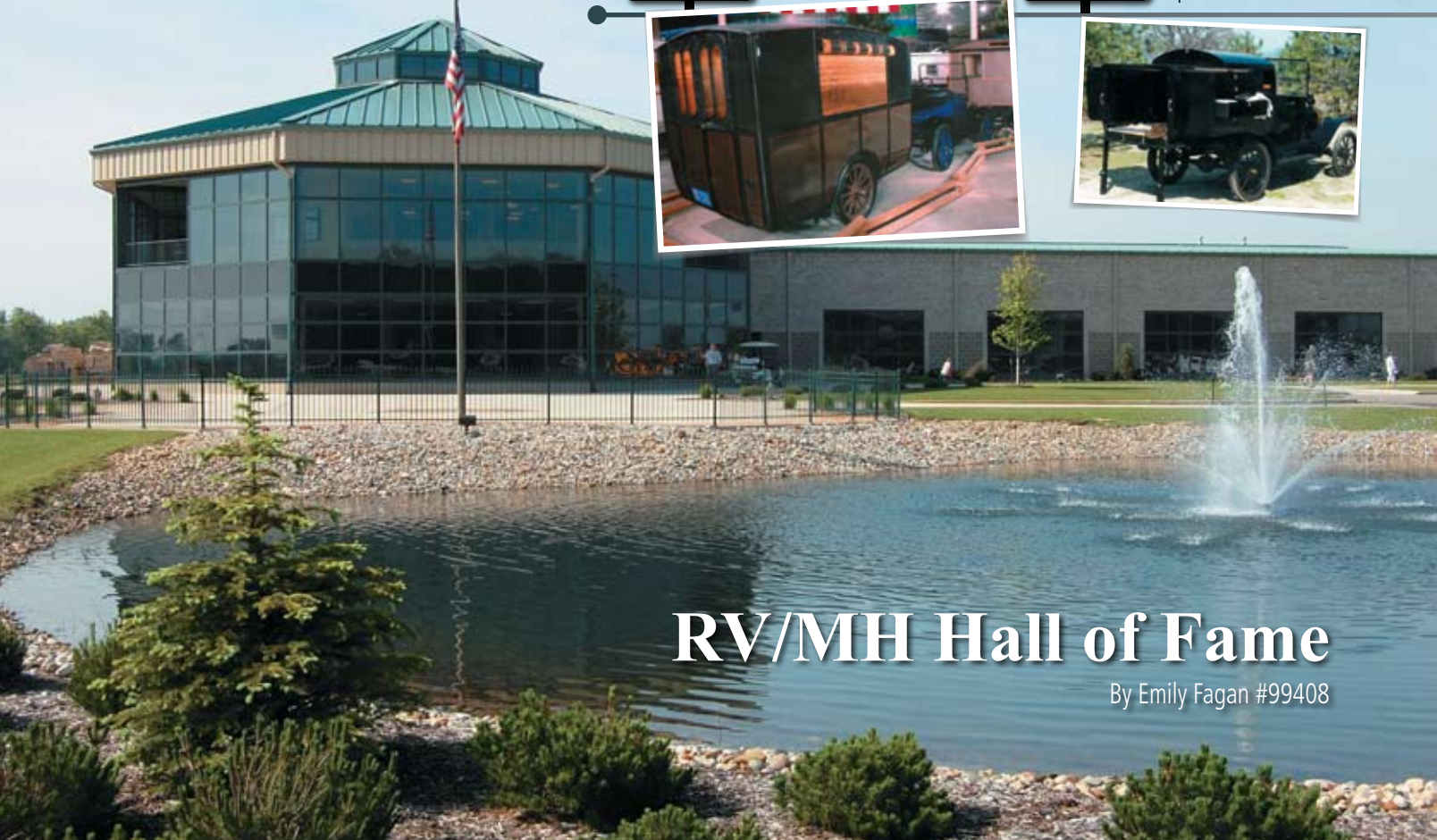


1913

World's Oldest Trailer

1915

Telescoping Apartment



RV/MH Hall of Fame

By Emily Fagan #99408

For RVers, a visit to the RV/MH Hall of Fame in Elkhart, Indiana, is like coming home. Housed in a new and exquisite octagonal building, it offers a snapshot of the nearly 100-year history of the RV industry: from its humble beginnings being towed behind the rickety cars of the emerging auto industry, to its powerhouse explosion in recent years that has filled our highways with luxury rolling condos.

When my husband, Mark, and I arrived at the Hall of Fame, I knew we were in for something special as soon as we turned onto the pretty road that winds through the meticulously manicured landscaped acres leading to the museum. Graced with fountains on both sides of the building, we were so impressed with the grand entrance that we didn't realize we were looking at the back door until we parked the car and discovered the even more dramatic entrance out front!

Coming Home

Once inside, I knew we had come home, as the July/August 2007 issue of *Escapees* magazine was featured prominently at the reception desk. It contained a review of Al Hesselbart's book, *The Dumb Things Sold...just like that!*

This feeling of surprise that Americans would take to a life on the road with such enthusiasm, happily living in boxes that could be towed or driven, is

quietly echoed throughout the museum. Evident everywhere is a well-deserved sense of self-satisfaction and pride. This new industry of rolling cottages, whose founders built experimental wooden and canvas wagons in their backyards, has become so substantial that it warranted the creation of a Hall of Fame. Annually

since 1972, the RV trade's leaders have inducted a select group of industry giants into the RV Hall of Fame.

The highlight of the museum is the Road Back in Time, a charming presentation of RVs built between 1913 and the 1970s. Each trailer is "camped" alongside a winding road painted on the floor, and plaques describe the unique aspects of each unit. Wandering in and out of these trailers inspires thoughts of how earlier generations lived and of what America was like when the parents of the Baby Boom generation were mere babies themselves.

World's Oldest Trailer

You can see the World's Oldest Trailer, custom-made by a California carriage maker for a Cal Tech professor in 1913.

“For RVers, a visit to the RV/MH Hall of Fame in Elkhart, Indiana, is like coming home.”

1928

Wiedman Camp Body on a Stewart Truck



1929

Covered Wagon



1931

Mae West's Housecar



Photo by Emily Fagan #99408.

To give you an idea of its tow vehicle, it is parked next to a 1913 Ford Model-T. Beautifully crafted and elegant, this trailer offered a dignified means to adventure and travel.

By 1929, entrepreneurs saw the potential for explosive growth if they could satisfy the more modest pocketbooks of the masses. The primitive 1929 Covered Wagon resembles its namesake and launched the fledgling industry's most dominant manufacturer. The 1935 Covered Wagon travel trailer is a boxy unit complete with "genuine leatherette" siding that no longer sported pioneer-style hoops and canvas. This trailer was one of 45 to 50 "house trailers" produced every day at a single plant by this thriving company. If you've never heard of Covered Wagon—the largest RV manufacturer of the 1930s—it's because they permanently closed their doors

“One of the delights of this exhibit is that the units shown were all well used and well loved before they became museum pieces.”

during WWII. Learning about these RVs and their builders in the context of their historical era made me ponder the rise and fall of many of today's well-respected manufacturers.

One of the delights of this exhibit is that the units shown were all well used and well loved before they became mu-

seum pieces. The 1932 Gilkie Kamp King tent trailer on display was used by its owners for 56 years until 1988. Essentially a pop-up, the slides on this trailer open to either side of the main box instead of to the front and back as they do today.

Perhaps most fun for anyone who has been RVing is seeing the trailers from their youth and childhood. Mark was tickled to see the 1954 15-foot Shasta travel trailer, a trailer he spent many happy hours in as a child. Little did he know then that the "running water" was a gravity-fed system from a shelf-mounted tank through a hose to the sink. Hats off to his mom for keeping three youngsters well fed, mostly clean and very contented in that trailer.

Rare and Beautifully Restored

A special detour along the Road Back in Time takes visitors to the outstand-

Continued on next page =>

Time line photos courtesy of RV-MH Hall of Fame.

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1932 Gilkie Kamp King



1935 Bowlus Road Chief



1954 Shasta 15-foot



ing collection of rare and beautifully restored trailers owned by “Boots” Ingram, founder of Teton Homes.

Unlike the other units that seem to have come right off the campground into the museum, these RVs are one-of-a-kind rarities. Mae West’s 1931 Housecar was used to lure the star from vaudeville to the film industry, offering her a private oasis with a “back porch” where she could relax in a rocking chair while on the movie set. The 1935 Bowlus Road Chief shows Airstream’s origins. Designer Hawley Bolus created the segmented aluminum exterior to simulate the look of his famed sail-planes. Airstream bought the plans in 1936 and refined the iconic Airstream look we all recognize today.

Some of these collector’s units offered pure luxury in their day. The 1937 Hayes Motorhome boasts sumptuous woodwork and joinery throughout the interior. There is not a scratch to be seen

“If you don’t fulfill your dreams now, when will you?”

Kay Peterson, October/November 1990 *Escapees* magazine

because this RV was barely used and was kept in storage until the mid-1990s. In contrast, the 1916 Cozy Camp Tent Trailer is an ancestral pop-up tent trailer. It got you up off the ground but offered no other frills. Its wooden box rolled on wooden spoked wheels under a folded canvas tent top. But imagine how wild (and free of tourists) the nation’s public lands would have been in those days!

My favorite was the 1916 Telescoping Apartment, which was created as an add-on for early Model-T trucks. There

are two side slides, one with drawers like a dresser, for clothing, and the other with shelves for kitchen accessories and food storage (a clever table folds out of this side as well). Both sides slide into the truck bed. Meanwhile, there is an end extension, which contains the owner’s mattress. This glides between the two side slides and telescopes back into the truck. This unit even had a water shower whose water was heated by the engine radiator.

Walking the Campground Loop

These kinds of ingenious designs are what enchanted early buyers and launched the industry. Walking up and down this historic road reminded me of walking the loop at a campground, admiring fellow campers’ rigs. It seems to me that, besides offering a ticket to freedom and adventure, there is a captivating doll-house element to RVing that keeps us all coming back. We’re just lucky to have much more sophisticated doll houses to play in these days.

Another outstanding exhibit in the museum is a 1/24 scale model under glass of a fifth-wheel manufacturing plant. Taking a plant tour (another great diversion in Elkhart), it can be confusing to understand the various stages of building a trailer as the workers’ air hammers and electric saws drown out the words of the tour guide. However, this scale model, complete with miniature cardboard boxes labeled “Dometic” lined up in the refrigerator installation area, makes it all very clear. There is also a vendor display exhibit devoted to all the manufacturers of RV appliances, hitches and accessories.



Photo by Emily Fagan #994108.

1957 Serro Scotty
10-foot Tear Drop



1962 Mallard 13-foot
Travel Trailer



1976 Cadillac Eldorado-based
Homemade Moto



Industry Titans

Upstairs we paused for a long while in front of the actual Hall of Fame where photos of all the inductees fill the walls. The first was Wally Byam, founder of Airstream, honored in 1972.

To our great delight, we discovered the photo of Joe and Kay Peterson, founders of Escapees, who were inducted in 2001. They were the first Hall of Famers who were not equipment manufacturers but whose other contributions to RVing place them among the industry's titans.

Around the corner, we found the library. We could have stayed here for days. It is an open and airy room filled with bookshelves lined with every issue of every RV-related publication since the backyard wagon building days. All visitors are encouraged to take whatever yellowed camping magazine or aging industry trade rag catches their eye and sit down in a comfy chair to thumb through it. We were fascinated to peek at some of the periodicals from 50 years ago and more.

We found advertisements for some of the antique RVs we had just seen downstairs, boasting of unparalleled comfort and luxury, the latest systems designs and the finest quality components.

We chuckled at trailer reviews that described lavish hand-pump water systems and eye-popping inventions such as "tip-outs."

It seemed, as we browsed through these magazines, that the concerns of RVers in the past were much the same as they are today. We read articles focused on where to go, how to keep the children busy and happy and how to make yummy meals in a miniscule kitchen.

There were descriptions of clever contraptions that innovative campers devised while sipping a cold one over a fire and grievances about miserable holding tank horrors. There were even advocacy articles supporting RV use on public lands.

The best moment for me, however, was when I randomly grabbed an issue of *Escapees* magazine from the shelf. Dating from October/November 1990, it was small and thin compared to today's beautiful, colorful magazine. But the overall format was much the same. Up front, Kay Peterson put her stamp on the issue with her characteristic good humor and charm. Just as she does in her column today, she was urging us in that issue to get out there and start living our dreams while we can: "Because we have no way of knowing how long our life's cycle will last, it upsets me to hear people, young and old, who are waiting for a particular event to start doing whatever it is they want to do... If you don't fulfill your dreams now, when will you?"

Wow. What great, sage and timeless advice for all of us.

As I put the magazine back on the shelf, it occurred to me that fulfilling our dreams is the very heart and essence of the RV lifestyle. How fortunate we are that the crazy little backyard RV industry that gave us small, creaky wood and canvas retreats nearly 100 years ago has grown up to provide beautiful, spacious rolling homes today. Now we can pursue our dreams in style. 🐾

The official RV/MH Hall of Fame
Website: www.rvmhhalloffame.org

Phone: 800-378-8694

Hours of operation: Monday-Saturday, 9-5.
Allow a minimum of two hours for your visit, preferably a little more as there is a lot to see.

Fees: Adults \$8/person
Seniors \$6/person
Children ages 6-16 \$3/child

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For more stories and pictures from our visit to the RV/MH Hall of Fame, check under Elkhart, Indiana.



50th Escapade—Goshen, Indiana September 12-17, 2010

If you are attending Escapade, be sure to stop at the RV/MH Hall of Fame during your time in Indiana. For more information about Escapade, turn to page 7.

For event details, visit:
www.escapees.com/ESCAPADE