



Roads • BACK IN Time

Stroll down
memory lane
at Indiana's
shrine to RVing

STORY AND
PHOTOGRAPHY
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The year 2010 marks the 100th anniversary of the manufactured RV, and a trip to the RV/MH Hall of Fame in Elkhart, Indiana, is the perfect way to celebrate. Not coincidentally, the industrial town is considered the hub of the RV industry, as many RV manufacturers and suppliers are headquartered

wheeled trailers in tow, North Americans have embraced the RV lifestyle with the same goal: to escape our urban and suburban confines and breathe in the freedom of the great outdoors from the comforts of a rolling home.

Strolling down this memory lane, we discovered that many early trailers were

inexpensive housing and the lure of towing a cheap trailer to a better life made this industry one of the few that flourished during the Great Depression. But the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the United States' subsequent entry into World War II forced Covered Wagon and other firms to stop production cold as vital resources were diverted toward the war effort. Significantly, only Airstream, which still does business, survived the great conflict.

Memories of the early days of camping in national parks and forests linger in the creaky boards of the 1932 Gilkie Kamp King trailer and on the shiny aluminum sides of the 1935 Bowlus Road Chief, the inspiration for Wally Byam's distinctive Airstream trailer. How tourist-free, unstructured and magical the parks must have been in those days. What a contrast to today, where the Internet is a key-click away on your laptop, even in the most remote locations.

As we toured the vintage RVs, it became clear that these rigs were loved by their owners for many years before they were left on the museum floor. The wear marks of fingers on the cupboards, shoes on floors and of pots and pans on countertops give these trailers a tangible authenticity. Family stories and kids' secrets are hidden within their walls. For my husband, Mark, the 1954 Shasta travel trailer brought back precious childhood memories of eating cereal at the dinette while gazing out at his favorite campground lake.

Around the corner sits a collection of early RVs donated by Robert "Boots" Ingram, founder of RV manufacturer Teton Homes. Here visitors will discover Mae West's 1931 Chevrolet house car,

used by the screen siren during road trips. If the 1937 Hayes motorhome looks brand new, there's a good reason: the vehicle was barely used before being put into storage for 40 years. The RV's beautifully crafted woodwork stands in stark contrast to the synthetic materials used in most of today's rigs.

Upstairs, visitors will find displays dedicated to the people and publications that drove the RV and manufactured-housing industries over the years. The Wall of Fame hosts almost 200 plaques commemorating industry trailblazers, from executives to designers to publishers who influenced the rise of RVs and the RV lifestyle. You'll find a plaque celebrating Art Rouse, the RV-publishing pioneer who made the Good Sam Club the world's biggest RV membership organization. You'll also see Sue Bray, longtime Good Sam executive who helped drive membership to one million.

Nearby, the open and airy library houses RV-related books and periodicals dating back to the early days. Comfy chairs invite visitors to take magazines off the shelves and thumb through pages at leisure. Ancestral editions of *Trailer Life* advertise some of the very trailers parked downstairs. Half-century-old articles cover all the topics familiar to RVers today: troubleshooting onboard systems, cooking in cramped kitchens and discovering exciting destinations.

A final turn brought us to the Supplier Hall, honoring the RV-parts manufacturers and service providers that developed in tandem with RVing. Learning about the early appliances on display, we realized that the Dometic fridge in our fifth wheel occupies a special place at the end of a decades-long evolution. Those effortless campground ice cubes are the product of years of rigorous R&D.

Living full-time on the road in our fifth wheel, we had no inkling of the rich history behind our luxurious rolling condo. However, our horizons quickly broadened after spending some delightful hours inside this unique monument to the history of RVing. ● www.rvmhhalloffame.org

here and in outlying communities.

Housed in a new octagonal building amid beautiful landscaping, the museum showcases early motorhomes and trailers, vintage RV-related memorabilia and exhibits and publications on RVing's rich history. Fountains grace the building's front and back entrances, and a friendly greeter welcomes visitors with a brief orientation outlining the museum's offerings.

We were drawn immediately to the lower floor's Founder's Hall, where the Road Back in Time displays historic RVs. Set up like a campground loop, this exhibit is defined by a curvy road painted on the floor and lined on each side with RVs dating from 1913 into the 1970s. Doors flung wide, each RV invites visitors to marvel at just how much—and how little—RVing has changed since its inception. Since the early Model T's hit the roads with spoked-

close cousins to the modern folding tent trailer, with canvas covers that rose up and out over a box on wheels. However, the lack of refrigeration, lights and running hot water quickly reminded us that many luxuries we now take for granted in modern RVs were nonexistent in early models. Looking at 1916's austere Cozy Camp tent trailer, I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to camp in a long dress like the ones worn by the female RVers depicted in the photos on display. Add the harshness of wooden wheels on rough roads, and the vast untouched beauty of our great country at that time, and quite a picture emerges.

The Road Back in Time is a journey through history. As the exhibits show, the RV industry exploded during the 1920s and '30s, and at least one manufacturer, Covered Wagon, produced up to 50 "house trailers" per day in one plant. The firm went public in 1937, as

Golden Oldies

Celebrating the RV Centennial with tales from the campground

Elkhart's RV/MH Hall of Fame isn't the only place to find out about RV history. This past summer, hundreds of people posted their recollections of their first RV-camping experience on the RV Centennial blog, blog.rv.net/centennial-celebration, in an effort to win 100 gallons of gas. Contestants wrote about everything from childhood memories of tin-can camping to more recent RV adventures. In September, the public was invited to vote for the best essay from among our five finalists. Read the winning RV memory in the November–December *Highways*.

RVs in Time



Good Sam Club members can celebrate RVing's 100th birthday by joining the RV/MH Hall of Fame, one of the Good Sam Club's Smile and Save partners. Members may purchase discounted RV/MH Hall of Fame lifetime memberships, entitling them to free admission at the Elkhart, Indiana, venue.

www.goodsamclub.com/save



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