The Comradeship Of The Open Road: The Identity And Influence Of The Tin Can Tourists Of The World On Automobility, Florida, And National Tourism

2012

David Michael Burel
University of Central Florida

Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd

University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

Part of the History Commons

STARS Citation

https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/2352

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact lee.dotson@ucf.edu.

by

DAVID MICHAEL BUREL
BA. University of Central Florida, 2009
B.S. University of Central Florida, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of History
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term,
2012
ABSTRACT

The identity of the Tin Can Tourists of the World, the first recreation automobile organization, has been poorly defined in the historical discourse, the factors contributing to the 1919 formation of the organization in Tampa, Florida represents a landmark shift in tourism in America towards the automobile.

The group’s subsequent solidification of a distinct identity gives insight beyond their organization. The thesis defines their identity as well as looks at their impact on American automobility and tourism. The thesis therefore focuses on the previously undefined concept of recreational automobility giving it definition and showing how the group helped to define it.

The group’s early role in mass use and adaptation of the automobile for recreation represents the first steps in creating a market for recreational vehicles. The imposition of organization on the camping experience by the Tin Can Tourists and their influence on creating special places for the practice of their activities helped define recreational automobility.

The footprint left by the Tin Can Tourists helped shape part of America’s modern tourist industry. The legacy of their ideas about recreational automobility also suggests influence they had on later groups using recreational vehicles. This thesis examines and clarifies the identity and influence of the Tin Can Tourists of the World as a window on important trends in automobility and tourism.
I lovingly dedicate this thesis to my fiancée and soon to be wife Jennie Miller. She supported me through the whole thesis and her support made the process so much better.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all of those who helped me through the process of writing my thesis. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Amy Foster who served as my advisor on this thesis and helped make this final product infinitely better. I would like to thank also my committee members Dr. Connie Lester and Dr. Ezekiel Walker for the valuable input they gave me. I also would like to thank the rest of the excellent faculty I have had at the University of Central Florida in particular the history department that have taught me so much and helped me move forward in my academic goals.

On a personal note I would like to thank my mother for her support throughout my schooling providing housing, food and numerous other things for me and making pursuing my degrees at UCF that much easier. I also want to thank my dad who has supported me through the years with tuition, vehicles, and input. I would also like to thank Jennie Miller my fiancée and soon to be wife for all of her help and support in writing my thesis.

I would like to thank the staff at the Florida Library and Archives for their help and for allowing me to access the valuable Tin Can Tourists records at their facility in Tallahassee, Florida. I would like to thank the University of Central Florida library and staff for providing me with resources, books and a great place to do much of my writing for this thesis.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. viii
LIST OF TABLES ..................................................................................................................... ix

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... 1
  Terminology & Definitions .................................................................................................... 2
  Historiography & Research Questions ................................................................................. 6
  Chapter Outlines ................................................................................................................ 11

  Early Automobility, Developing Roads and Highways and Foundations for Recreational Automobility ................................................................................................................................. 15
  Autocamping, the Formation of the Tin Can Tourists of the World and the Rise and Demise of Tin-Canners .................................................................................................................. 32

CHAPTER TWO: THE TECHNOLOGY OF RECREATIONAL AUTOMOBILITY AND FINDING “HOME” ON THE ROAD ........................................................................................................... 58
  The Birth of the Recreational Vehicle .................................................................................. 60
  The Travel Trailer Era: Manufacturing Mainstream Recreational Automobility ................. 64
  Trailer Shows: Expanding Recreational Automobility and Manufacturer Relationships ...... 74
  Recreational Vehicle Campgrounds and Community Relations .......................................... 78

CHAPTER THREE: TIN CAN TOURIST IDEOLOGY AND RETIREMENT ON THE ROAD .................................................................................................................. 86
Auto-Nomads in the Sunshine State and Retirement on the Road ...........................................87
Mobility as the Basis for Freedom, Autonomy and Democracy .................................................94
Maintaining Respectability, Issues of Race and Women’s Roles..............................................97
CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF THE TIN CAN TOURISTS OF THE WORLD ........104
The Demise of the Tin Can Tourists of the World and Rebirth of “Tin Can Tourists” ...........107
LIST OF REFERENCES ..............................................................................................................111
Primary Sources ......................................................................................................................111
Archival ..............................................................................................................................111
Books .................................................................................................................................111
Images ..............................................................................................................................112
Periodicals ..........................................................................................................................112
Secondary Sources ..............................................................................................................113
Books .................................................................................................................................113
Miscellaneous ......................................................................................................................114
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Model T Price, 1908-1916.................................................................17
Figure 2: Model T Production, 1908-1916......................................................17
Figure 3: Registrations of Automobiles in the United States, 1905-1930 ........19
Figure 4: Factory Sales of Passenger Cars per Year, 1905-1930 ......................21
Figure 5: Surfaced Mileage of Rural Roads and Municipal Streets, by Surface Type ....24
Figure 6: Tin Can Tourists at De Soto Park, 1920............................................34
Figure 7: Tents at Tin Can Tourists Convention - Arcadia, Florida...............36
Figure 8: Royal Chief Otho Granford Shoup at Gainesville ........................51
Figure 9: Map and Mileage Record for a Trip to Florida.................................54
Figure 10: House Car of L.N. Barlow at Tin Can Tourists Convention in Arcadia, Florida, 1929 .................................................................61
Figure 11: 1931 Tin Can Tourists Convention in Arcadia, Florida with Trailers ........63
Figure 12: Tin Can Tourists with Trailers in Arcadia, Florida, 1933 ...............65
Figure 13: Coach/House Type Trailers Production ......................................71
Figure 14: Tin Can Tourist Trailer Show in Tampa, Florida, 1949 .....................77
Figure 15: Tin Can Tourists Convention at Payne Park in Sarasota, Florida, 1936 ......80
Figure 16: Tin Can Tourists' Convention Hall during the 1940s .........................83
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Mileage of Rural Roads and Municipal Streets, Proportion by Jurisdiction ..................23
INTRODUCTION

Fellow tourists. I greet you in the comradeship of the open road. In six years’ time your number had grown to almost 500,000. We took the name of ‘tin-can’ tourists, first applied to us in a derisive spirit, and made it the most democratic organization in the world. There are those who prefer the life on the ocean wave; others who dwell on farms or in cities, but as for us, give us the life on the bounding springs and the balloon tires.1

- O.G. Shoup, Royal Chief Can Opener, Tin Can Tourists of the World, 1926

In December of 1919 Tampa, Florida saw a congregation of automobile enthusiasts camping in the municipal camp at De Soto Park. The sight of automobiles and tourists would not have been considered entirely remarkable at the time. More people were driving than ever before, particularly in the American South. These tourists’ choice of camping in the local municipality’s campgrounds was also unremarkable, as this activity had been recently encouraged by the locals. What was significant was that this group of automobile enthusiasts turned autocampers organized and formed the first autocamping and recreational vehicle society to promote, protect and provide order for the new autocamping movement. During a crucial point in the mass adoption of the automobile, the Tin Can Tourists of the World helped define recreational automobility and popularized both a new form of tourism and a mobile lifestyle. The original group existed for over sixty years, from the end of 1919 into the early 1980s.

Recreational vehicles are a significant part of modern American life, economy and culture. The mobility and lifestyle made possible by these vehicles appeals to many Americans who take to the road in them each year. The recreational vehicle industry was worth nine billion

dollars annually in 2010. Despite the size of market and its cultural significant, the origins of these recreational vehicles and the activities associated with them remain largely unstudied by scholars. The Tin Can Tourists of the World as the first organization dedicated to the activity of autocamping and recreational vehicle travel offers a unique opportunity to probe the origins of this phenomenon. The history of the organization and its members illuminate how and why people took to the road and chose to stay on the roadside in their own mobile accommodations. Their activities constituted a new form of automobility focused on recreation and leisure, not simple utilitarian transportation. The Tin Can Tourists helped reshape aspects of America’s roadside during the early years of automobility. They did this by creating demand for specialized places and equipment as well as creating rules and imposing order on themselves and other autocampers. This affected both their host state of Florida and the entire country. People’s ideas about recreational vehicles come from various post-World War II groups practicing recreational automobility first pioneered by the Tin Can Tourists. These groups owe a heritage of both direct and indirect influence by the Tin Can Tourists of the World. The group provides a strong basis for a detailed examination of the history of recreational automobility.

Terminology & Definitions

In this study of the Tin Can Tourists of the World, some attention must be given to the terminology used to identify and describe them. The Tin Can Tourists of the World adopted and modified their name from an informal name for early automobile tourists. The nickname “tin

can tourist” associated early automobile tourists with the numerous gas and food cans they carried with their automobiles. This nickname predated the organization’s creation and continued in usage afterwards. Therefore, accounts and references to “tin can tourists” could refer to either members of the formal group or non-members travelling in cars. Previous authors have not addressed this distinction nor have they attempted to contemplate the importance of it. In some cases, it has led to erroneous conclusions about the group and their duration.

For this study, the capitalization of Tin Can Tourists refers to the formal group or actual members. Frequently, references to the group in primary sources often include the full name of the organization or alternately reference scheduled Tin Can Tourists of the World activities and events. For example, local newspapers tended to announce or describe annual gatherings of the formal group. Alternatively, there are some situations in which determining the status of people described is difficult, usually in earlier sources when “tin can tourist” was a more common name.

The name “tin can tourists” had also been used generally to describe people participating in early autocamping or car travel. Other early names for autocampers included “motor-hobo” or “auto-vagabond.” These unaffiliated “tin can tourists,” autocampers and car travelers represent a group that has confused the historical research of other scholars to this point. Kenneth L. Roberts’s Florida-promotional book Sunhunting published in 1922 provided a term to help conceptualize this group. In his book, the Florida autocampers and car tourists were identified generally as “Tin-Canners.” He described the Tin Can Tourists of the World as “safeguarding”

4 Kenneth Roberts, Sunhunting: Adventures and Observations among the Native and Migratory Tribes of Florida, including the Stoical Time-Killers of Palm Beach, the Gentle and Gregarious Tin-Canners of the Remote Interior.
the activities of the “tin-canners” through their “flourishing” organization. In order to avoid confusion, unidentified “tin can tourists” or non-member automobile tourists will be referred to as tin-canners in this study. During the 1920s, the tin-canners can be generally understood to be a larger and less defined set of people travelling in parallel with the Tin Can Tourists.

Tin-canners participated in autocamping for a wide range of reasons including a lack of automobile-oriented accommodations, the establishment of free municipal camps, a distaste for the railroad hotel industry and as a response to the burgeoning popularity of autocamping. Tin-canners also included families with small children, businessmen and Florida real estate speculators groups who were not typically members of the Tin Can Tourists. As the 1920s ended, a combination of increasing numbers of roadside accommodations, autocamping becoming associated with displaced and dislocated workers, and a decline in money for travel virtually eliminated the majority of this group. As the mainstream turned away from autocamping it seems likely some unassociated tin-canners joined the Tin Can Tourists to continue their activities during harder times. The Tin Can Tourists then became the standard-bearers for autocamping, particularly utilizing the new innovation of factory-built travel trailers during the Great Depression through the end of World War II. Clarifying the distinctions between Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners demonstrates a clearer picture of the Tin Can Tourists’ impact on recreational automobility.

Recreational automobility is a central aspect of this study and requires specific definition. By itself, automobility can be defined as “the use of automobiles as the major means of

---

5 Roberts, Sunhunting, 87.
transportation,”⁶ but that definition strips automobility to its most utilitarian definition by focusing on the transportation aspect of the automobile’s impact on society. In the historical study of the automobile, historian James Flink has popularized as well as defined the word automobility to have broader meaning: “The term [automobility] conveniently sums up the combined impact of the motor vehicle, the automobile industry, and the highway plus the emotional connotations of this impact for Americans.”⁷ Flink’s definition is more precise in describing American automobility but remains focused primarily on the utilitarian aspects of the automobile except for the addition of “emotional connotations” to the equation.

The Tin Can Tourists of the World did not consider their automotive activities purely or even primarily utilitarian. The main thrust of automobile tourism has always been typically recreation. The term “recreational automobility” is necessary to show a separation from utilitarian transportation. Recreational automobility builds on the emotional, pleasurable, and recreational aspects of automobile tourism and travel. Therefore, recreational automobility means the use of automobiles as a major form of recreation and leisure travel. Recreational automobile activities range from the casual Sunday drive around town to a life spent living a mobile lifestyle in a car trailer or motorized camper. The Tin Can Tourists themselves certainly are associated with the later long-term genre of recreational automobility. Their organization helped to create this genre and idea of long-term recreational use of the automobile. This form of recreational automobility is the primary focus of this study.

---

Historiography & Research Questions

Warren Belasco’s 1979 book *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* has served as the basis for most of the literature on the Tin Can Tourists of the World even though he did not include the formal organization in his study. Instead, he used the nicknames “tin can tourist,” “motor-hobo,” or “auto-vagabond” as one of several words for autocamper. He suggested the demise of autocampers, in particular the use of traditional names such as “tin can tourist.” Additionally, his book focused heavily on the existence of evolutionary stages of the use of automobiles for travel and compared auto travel with rail travel. He identified those stages beginning with “gypsying” on the side of the road, to municipal autocamps and finally from private autocamps to the early motor court/motel. Belasco’s analysis was excellent in respect to the average American travelling on the road, but he ignored the birth of recreational autocamping and recreational vehicle use in the 1910s and 1920s. His stages, when applied to the Tin Can Tourists, suggested an end to Tin Can Tourists in the late 1920s as mainstream America turned away from autocamping. Yet the historical record indicates that this period is when the Tin Can Tourists solidified their organization and culture.

The first major work to include the Tin Can Tourists of the World specifically was Howard Preston’s *Dirt Road to Dixie: Accessibility and Modernization in the South, 1885-1935* (1991). Preston studied the Good Roads Movement in the American South, arguing that the Good Roads Movement, which began in the late nineteenth century by “Good Roads Progressives” to market reform through local farm-to-market roads, was later hijacked in the

---

8 Belasco, *Americans on the Road*, 114.
1910s and 1920s by the “Highway Progressives” who built interstate tourist roads to bring economic growth while ignoring rural communities’ needs.  

9 He negatively viewed the interstate tourist roads, such as Carl Graham Fischer’s Dixie Highway (constructed 1914-1927), because he felt that it hid the backward nature of the American South behind a veneer of a romanticized New South. Preston used the Tin Can Tourists of the World organization as an example of a group drawn to Florida by the new interstate highways and boosterism. He discussed its formation in 1919 and success in the early 1920s.  

10 However, his argument focused on the organization’s formation alone as evidence of northern tourists’ attraction to the south by the tourist highways. He was the only historian who appears to have looked at the records of the group in Tallahassee and his book helped frame the origins of the Tin Can Tourists in the history of the American South.

Nick Wynne’s 1999 book *Tin Can Tourists in Florida 1900-1970* was the only book that represented itself as a history of Tin Can Tourists. It did a respectable job of portraying the life of a possible Tin Can Tourist during the 1920s through the images of Ernest Meyer, an automobile tourist in Florida.  

11 Rather than focusing on the Tin Can Tourists of the World precisely, he broadened his definition of a “Tin Can Tourist,” which included nearly anyone visiting Florida via car from the 1920s to the 1970s. Wynne in fact used the terms “tin can tourist” and his term “tin canner” interchangeably, which was problematic with the majority of the historiography. His description of Tin Can Tourists in the book fit more closely with this

10 Ibid., 121-123.
thesis’ term tin-canner. Wynne’s analysis possibly pointed to the greater impact the Tin Can Tourists had on Florida tourism as others emulating them as tin-canners flocked to the state.

The most recent book on the history of Florida tourism is Sunshine Paradise: A History of Florida Tourism (2011) by Tracy Revels. Her chapter “Tin Can Heaven” discussed the Tin Can Tourists of the World only briefly. She claimed that Tin Can Tourists of the World played a minor role in the 1920s Florida tourist industry and incorrectly suggested their demise with the bust of the land boom and the Great Depression in 1929. She stated, “By the late 1920s, the days of the happy-go-lucky tin can tourist … were over.” This statement can be categorized as partially untrue or simply wrong depending on her use of the phrase “tin can tourist,” which again remained undefined. If she indeed meant the organization’s members, this is not true as they continued to meet uninterrupted until the 1980s. More likely, she was referring to the less defined label of tin-canners. Her book contradicted Wynne’s ideas of continuity of tin-canners.

This work seeks to build from where others have left off or left major developments unexplained. Warren Belasco’s work Americans on the Road highlighted the autocamp as a step towards the motel. Building off that premise, this work argues that autocamping was in fact the beginnings of recreational automobility and a new form of tourism, even a new way of living. This work will also expand the field of the history of the automobile by focusing on recreational instead of utilitarian uses that have dominated the historiography.

The confusion of terminology is one of the most difficult issues within the historiography. No one has clearly separated or defined the Tin Can Tourists and the tin-canners.

13 Ibid. 77.
Preston was the only author to consistently and exclusively talk about Tin Can Tourists. The issue of chronology for the Tin Can Tourists of the World also presents some problems. Both Revels and Belasco suggested the demise of the Tin Can Tourists in the late 1920s, which is clearly not true. Wynne extends his discussion of the tin-canner phenomenon into the 1970s and Preston is silent on the issue of dating the group’s end. The historiography dealing with the Tin Can Tourists has left fundamental questions unanswered outside of their formation in De Soto Park Tampa, Florida in 1919.

There are many unanswered or partially answered questions about the Tin Can Tourists, such as: Who were they? What were their values? Where were they from? Many of these questions have been addressed only tangentially by other historical inquiries and have been limited in scope further, through assertions that have been inferred without direct study. This thesis addresses the issue of terminology, which previous authors failed to do. This leads to one fundamental question: Why has the history of the Tin Can Tourists of the World so often been misinterpreted?

Understanding that the Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners are not the same people raises questions such as: What relationship did the organization Tin Can Tourists of the World have on the perception of tin-canners? Did Tin Can Tourists substantially differ from tin-canners regarding values and expectations within popular culture? How did the relationship between the two influence social and cultural trends in tourism both in Florida and nationally? How did the decline of tin-canner activities during the Great Depression affect Tin Can Tourists and recreational automobility? These questions require answers to clarify the direction of early recreational automobility and auto tourism. Without a clear picture of the identity and boundaries
between the organization and the common tin-canner, any further research will inevitably be confounded.

The story of the Tin Can Tourists’ formation and consolidation into a lasting group warrants further research. What events and trends in America just prior to the formation of the group contributed to an advantageous climate for the growth and longevity of the Tin Can Tourists of the World? How does development of recreational automobility fit with the history of early automobility? How did international, regional and local events of the 1920s help shape club? How do issues of race, class and gender inform our understanding of the Tin Can Tourists and recreational automobility? How did automobility fulfill their desires for individual freedom and autonomy? The Tin Can Tourists had struggled frequently with criticism by outsiders who had a negative perception of the group. How did the Tin Can Tourists defend their image and choice to live a mobile lifestyle? What significance did the group place on their organization’s name and symbols? How was their ideology of long-term life on the road with mobile accommodations created and defined? Explaining these questions can help us show how the Tin Can Tourists saw themselves apart from the mainstream tourists and what constituted the Tin Can Tourists identity and culture.

Intriguingly, numerous books as well as displays in two history museums in Florida feature the organization or term “tin can tourist.” Despite this attention, inadequate research has been done to evaluate their impact. It raises such questions as: How did the club implement developing technology and create physical places for their activities? What new ideas about

---

14 The Museum of Florida History in Tallahassee and the Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando both contain exhibits related to the Tin Can Tourists. Both feature a recreation of a converted Ford Model T house car that is associated with early Tin Can Tourists. Both reference the Tin Can Tourists of the World, but largely as an introduction to early middle class auto tourism.
American automobility did the group create? How did the club’s formation affect Florida? How did the locals interact and feel about this new group? Did the Tin Can Tourists help define the nature of a new genre of tourism in Florida and nationally? Without the further study and analysis proposed here, the true influence of the group on national tourism and recreational automobility will not be known.

This thesis will look to correct the conflicts and confusions about the Tin Can Tourists of the World while arguing that their lasting legacy was their role in forming recreational automobility. The Tin Can Tourists have always been treated as a part of another argument or casually without care to the true depth of the group’s influence on tourism. The organization offers a unique window into both Americans’ uses of the automobile to meet their recreational desires and the recreational vehicle as a major icon of American vacations and travel. The history of the Tin Can Tourists will be condensed in a single work that can serve as both a reference to the history of the group as well as to those interested in American automobility. Expanding on the historiography of the automobile through the study of recreational automobility is both pertinent and necessary in explaining the American love affair with the automobile.

**Chapter Outlines**

The relationship between the Tin Can Tourists of the World and recreational automobility will be studied across three chapters. The previous histories of the organization have not laid out a complete and accurate account. A look into the early history of the organization is the emphasis of the first chapter. This history must include a look into the early years of automobility and background to formation. The relationship between Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners will be
expanded on. Tin Can Tourists demonstrated a dedication to autocamping by 1930 as tin-canners and the mainstream turned away from autocamping and long-term recreational automobility.

In chapter one, the origins of both the Tin Can Tourists and recreational automobility will be explored here. A multitude of factors contributed to the advantageous conditions that preceded the group’s formation. Chief among these factors is the shifting in role of the automobile from novelty to practical transportation. Autocamping will also be considered in detail as well as the Tin Can Tourists’ formation out of the movement. The differences and similarities of the Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners will be explained. The eventual disappearance of tin-canners and the longevity of the Tin Can Tourists will be explained as the onset of the Great Depression left its mark of America and long-term recreational automobility.

The second chapter argues for the greater force that Tin Can Tourists represented in defining recreational automobility through highlighting the physical and economic impacts of the group. The physical spaces required to participate in recreational automobility resulted from the demands and standards set by the group during the early years of recreational automobility prior to World War II. These spaces were distinct and different from other developing roadside accommodations like the auto court or motel. Additionally, the recreational vehicles made in factories were nonexistent until the 1930s. Despite the economic difficulties of 1930s’ America, a recreational vehicle industry developed. This industry was well aware of the Tin Can Tourists of the World as the dominant recreational vehicle group and targeted them as both consumers and promoters of their products. These Tin Can Tourists therefore acted to create and maintain the demand for such products during the Great Depression until after World War II when Americans once again had disposable income to purchase the recreational vehicles. The influence of the Tin Can Tourists will be considered in both Florida and across America. The
physical footprint left by the Tin Can Tourists of the World becomes apparent with this closer examination of their role in founding recreational automobility.

Chapter Three will follow how the Tin Can Tourists solidified their culture and ideology as a group. It will identify the ways in which Tin Can Tourists defined their version of recreational automobility. The identity and ideology created by the Tin Can Tourists will be studied through the examination of various aspects of the group and its members. The group’s belief that the mobility of their travel trailers gave them freedom and autonomy on the road will be considered. The group’s democratic ideals will be evaluated particularly in the context of their shortcomings such as the racial discrimination present in the Tin Can Tourists’ constitution. Issues of gender and women’s role in the group will be examined. The Tin Can Tourists’ desire to live free and mobile lives conflicted with the ideas associated with social respectability and the class images they wished to uphold. Their adaptation and efforts to maintain these social norms and their class image while on the road is worth consideration because it represented a choice to institute conformity and order despite their efforts to find individuality and freedom. Finally, the Tin Can Tourists’ retirement on the road led to a natural decline and end for the group as the group aged and passed on by the 1980s.
CHAPTER ONE: THE RISE OF THE TIN CAN TOURISTS OF THE WORLD:
EARLY AUTOMOBILITY, FORMATION AND THE ORIGINS OF
RECREATIONAL AUTOMOBILITY

The Tin Can Tourists of the World spent over sixty years practicing recreational automobility by living on the American roadway. The circumstances and events that preceded the organization’s formation demonstrated some remarkable shifts in Americans’ lives and in particular their relationship with the new technology of the automobile. These circumstances led to the group’s formation as the first recreational vehicle and autocamping organization in the prominent tourist destination of Florida.

The activity of autocamping represented the first form of long-term recreational automobility. Out of this movement, the Tin Can Tourists developed and advanced. The tin-canners who once shared the roads and autocamps of Florida and America grew in numbers and then virtually disappeared or merged with the Tin Can Tourists at the onset of the Great Depression. As the economics of the 1930s forced out of autocamping all but the most committed or prepared, the Tin Can Tourists remained active and began to define themselves through their activities and ideas. This chapter will trace the developments and story of the Tin Can Tourists and recreational automobility through 1930. It will highlight the importance of Tin Can Tourists’ dedication and organizational abilities during the 1920s that helped it remain both an active and relevant part of American tourism for decades to follow. This chapter will also define the important differences between the Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners, as well as the similarities between the two that have confused the historical record.
Early Automobility, Developing Roads and Highways and Foundations for Recreational Automobility

The story of the Tin Can Tourists of the World organization began several years before its formation. Explaining its formation in Tampa is achievable by looking backwards at national, regional and local trends and events that help create the conditions for a group like the Tin Can Tourists. These events and trends also added to the momentum and longevity of the group across six decades.

The most important trend in setting the stage for the Tin Can Tourists was the development of the automobile from a wealthy person’s toy into a practical and useable form of transportation at prices affordable to more Americans. During the first decade of the 20th century, most Americans considered the automobile to be a toy for the rich. It was both expensive to purchase and impractical to use. The purchase price alone of an early vehicle often exceeded an average worker’s annual income many times and the cost of maintenance each year, be it mechanical breakdowns or replacement parts or tires, could equal up to half the original purchase price of the vehicle.1 John Jackle and Keith Sculle also noted, “Cars initially served mainly for pleasure, not for community. An auto was a recreational thing. A family might pack a picnic lunch and, either alone or caravan with others, motor out of town.”2 These early short day trips may have been the foundation for what would become recreational automobility. Arguably, this lack of practicality and utility of early automobiles defined their use as recreational vehicles but it was not the recreational use that initially created the shift toward mass automobility.

2 Ibid., 25.
The potential was there for the automobile to overcome these problems, but required technological innovation and mass production. Cars could empower an individual to travel great distances more quickly, something that was arguably not possible on a private and autonomous scale before. The automobile also had the potential to be the first real challenger to the railroad industry, offering flexible times and routes of travel. Areas deemed too remote or inaccessible by the railroad industry seemed accessible with the automobile. Also, if government support could be rallied, the infrastructure in the form of roads could be subsidized by tax revenue. Roads as well as technology and production techniques became the lifeblood of the automobile boom.

The automobile’s move from toy to commonplace happened quickly as manufacturing shifted toward mass-production and cars became cheaper and increasingly reliable. The classic example has always been Henry Ford and his Model T. His focus was to reduce the cost of the automobile through mass production techniques while increasing reliability and the ease of maintenance. The correlation between the Model T’s selling price and the number produced becomes apparent when looking at the available data. The Model T is an excellent example of the growth of the automobile market because it represented the largest share of the market during the expansion of mass automobility.

3 Jackle and Sculle, Motoring, 16.
Figure 1: Model T Price, 1908-1916

Figure 2: Model T Production, 1908-1916

---


5 Ibid.
The sale price of a new Ford Model T dropped each year from its debut in 1908 to 1915. These drops in prices demonstrate the success that Ford had in achieving an affordable mass-produced automobile. The 1915 selling price of $360 was just over a third of the original $950 purchase price when the Model T debuted in 1908. This meant that each year more people would be able to afford a Model T, resulting in increased sales each year. The Ford Motor Company perceived greater demand for the Model T and produced more each year. There was a clear inverse relationship between price and the production to meet market demand. In this period the price dropped only gradually and production skyrocketed particularly as the purchase price reached $360. It appeared that the demand for the Model T was highly price sensitive. Small drops in price correspond to a large increase in production suggesting increased demand. The downward shift in automobile prices helped drive mass automobility through increased ownership.

As prices were dropping year after year on the purchase of an automobile, more people could afford to purchase them. Additionally, as previous car owners began to upgrade and purchase new automobiles, used cars could be had at even lower prices. This combination resulted in a dramatic increase in automobile ownership.
Looking at automobile registrations indicates the trend toward mass automobility as automobile ownership picked up momentum beginning in 1915 and peaked in the first half of the 1920s. Between 1916 and 1929, over 1,000,000 new car registrations were added each with the exception of 1918 and 1927. More than 2,500,000 registrations were added at the peak in 1923. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the number of vehicle registrations was negligible as the automobile continued to be a toy of the rich. Although these low numbers reflect the lack of registration requirements in some states, it is arguable that the expense and impracticality of automobile ownership was more responsible for the low registration numbers. The number of automobile registrations increased dramatically from 1914 until the onset of the

---

Figure 3: Registrations of Automobiles in the United States, 1905-1930

Great Depression in 1929. In 1919, the year the Tin Can Tourists of the World formed, there were 6,679,100 registered automobiles; five years before in 1914 there were only 1,664,000 registrations. By 1924, just five years later, there were a total of 15,436,100. Over this ten-year period from 1914 to 1924, there was an astonishing growth in vehicle registrations of 928 percent! The Tin Can Tourists’ formation came just as mass adoption of the automobile was taking off. The climate was advantageous for recreational automobility as new automobile owners who saw it as a utilitarian alternative to other forms of transportation also began to consider it as an alternate method of recreation.
Figure 4: Factory Sales of Passenger Cars per Year, 1905-1930

Whereas vehicle registration information can illustrate the number of Americans driving and using automobiles, examining factory sales of automobiles along with registrations can better demonstrate the year-to-year growth of the market as well as illuminate the existence of a used car market. Factory sales remained low until the 1910s when more cars reached lower prices, making a new automobile accessible to more people. The increase in production of automobiles occurred in the years prior to the United States’ formal involvement in World War I. A decline in sales can be noticed in 1918 as a result of the country’s shift toward war production. Following the war, the numbers of units sold largely returned to pre-war levels and then increased further as prosperity set in during the 1920s. Vehicle registrations increased between

---

1918 and 1921 even as factory sales declined, indicating the growth of a used car market. Americans kept and maintained their cars for longer period as reliability increased. Overall, the automobile market was growing steadily during the period when the Tin Can Tourists of the World were forming.

World War I was a major world event that contributed in a general sense to the advantageous climate for the Tin Can Tourists of the World’s formation. World War I had disconnected Americans from overseas travel destinations forcing them to look inwards. Marquerite Shafter wrote in her book *See America First: Tourism and National Identity* that the outbreak of World War I had a powerful impact on the tourist industry. First, the closure of continental Europe during the war effectively separated many Americans from popular European destinations. Second, it intensified patriotism and nationalism in the United States, thus popularizing domestic tourist destinations. “See America First” campaigns began to promote national travel, gained traction in 1914, and continued even after the armistice. With this inward focus in the tourist industry, many Americans began to consider using their automobiles as the mode of transportation for a vacation or even making the car trip a vacation itself. John Jackle and Keith Sculle comment with respect to World War I, “The automobile offered a viable alternative [to European travel]. Americans could now wander their own roads to explore strange localities and discover just how many different kinds of people made up their nation.” To get to their destination these newly motivated automobile owners-turned-tourists required improved roads.

9 Ibid., 100-101
There is a distinctly positive correlation between roads and automobiles. Generally, more automobiles being driven created a greater demand for suitable improved roads. This relationship was readily apparent in the first decades of mass automobility. The state of roads in America, in particular rural roads, in 1900 was abysmal. The vast majority of American roads amounted to nothing more than a dirt track.\(^{11}\) It was only with great difficulty that one could travel large distances across country. Horatio Nelson Jackson’s trailblazing sixty-three day continental crossing by automobile in 1903 proved how difficult it was to complete automobile journeys on bad roads and in the unreliable early automobiles.\(^{12}\) These early automobile enthusiasts such as Jackson also provided inspiration and a model for other adventurous people to attempt these long journeys.\(^{13}\) Travel remained difficult for many years as roads proved to be somewhat difficult to bring up to minimum standards for automobile use.

**Table 1: Mileage of Rural Roads and Municipal Streets, Proportion by Jurisdiction\(^{14}\)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Mileage</th>
<th>Rural State Roads</th>
<th>Rural County Roads</th>
<th>Municipal Roads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>3,160,000</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>86.1%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>3,246,000</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>84.1%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>3,259,000</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>83.2%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total mileage of roads in America did not increase significantly during the 1920s. The jurisdictional control of the highways also did not change dramatically. The one important trend that can be noticed is a slight increase of rural state roads as various state highway departments

\(^{11}\) Jackle and Sculle, *Motoring*, 27.

\(^{12}\) Horatio Nelson Jackson’s journey had been filled with many problems and delays. It included frequent mechanical breakdowns, busted tires, waiting for replacement parts, and areas with little or no roads. Ibid., *Motoring*, 27-28.

\(^{13}\) Preston, *Dirt Road to Dixie*, 98.

assumed control of more roads. The shift toward more centralized control of roads instead of independent county control favored development of interconnected roads between major population areas since smaller municipalities and county governments often did not cooperate or prioritize interconnectivity. Twenty-six states had highway departments in charge of construction and maintenance of state roads by 1910.\textsuperscript{15} The surface of the vast majority of the mileage of these roads was dirt and mostly in poor condition. The real focus had to be improving roads to meet the needs of automobiles through various methods of surfacing. It was a difficult task to put together the resources to build a truly usable and efficient network of improved roads. Only these improved roads would be suitable to sustained mass automobility.

\textbf{Figure 5: Surfaced Mileage of Rural Roads and Municipal Streets, by Surface Type}\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Jackle and Sculle, \textit{Motoring}, 41.
\textsuperscript{16} Graph derived from statistics from Louis Cain, “Surfaced mileage of rural roads and municipal streets, by surface type,” \textit{Historical Statistics of the United States: Volume 4 Economic Sectors} (New York: Cambridge University
Improved roadways were few and far between and even when they were improved different standards and methods were used between localities. Overall, the mileage of improved roads increased gradually over the period, increasing pace in the 1920s. Looking at the mileage of surfaced streets, many of these roadways were of an unspecified type. These were most likely only moderately improved roads. The other two categories as reported were low-type and high-type. These categories specifically sort the roadways by the type of surfacing used to improve them. Low-type surfaces were generally roads with an added element such as sand, clay, gravel bituminous or treated gravel. These roads were not the type of hard surfaced roads Americans are accustomed to today and generally were a softer and less durable surface and could be laid down at a cheaper cost. The other major category was high-type surfaced roads that were typically harder materials such as concrete, brick, block, asphalt, wood, or stone. These better quality high-type roadways were only a small minority of the ones being built, but were the best suited for automobile travel.

Improved roads in many localities were rare. Most improved roads and consequently most automobiles were found in cities in the first decade of the twentieth century. Cities with improved roads often had many miles of unimproved dirt roads between other cities that served as a barrier to practical long distance automobile travel and tourism. This was due to local control and influence in the allocation of road construction funds resulting in short non-connecting sections of improved roads.¹⁷ This lack of connectivity between locations was not

---

¹⁷ Jackle and Sculle, *Motoring*, 42.
advantageous to business and hindered the automobile technology from competing effectively with the railroads over long distances.

Railroads had dominated the long distance transport, travel and tourism markets since the mid-19th century and represented a mature industry in America by the onset of automobility. The industry’s intricately connected, standardized, and anticompetitive system made travel and transportation easier and required less individual work. This ease of travel came with downsides: limited choices, higher prices and less autonomy for traveler. In the eyes of many travelers, the railroad lacked freshness, as it had become a mundane part of life. These travelers were more likely to harbor negative feelings toward the railroad system. Warren Belasco wrote, “To this generation raised on the railroad, the train was the all-too-familiar given. The Railroad was the industrial establishment arrogant, impersonal, mechanical, and monopolistic.” Farmers and rural residents were also not satisfied by the railroad system. Many people dwelling in rural areas, especially the American South had desired improved roads to compete with the railroad. Rural reformers had argued even prior to mass automobility that better roads could be alternates to high and arguably unfair railroad shipping rates. Howard Preston in Dirt Roads to Dixie wrote that, “The main economic stimulus to improve farm conditions, reformers argued, was high railroad rates over which farmers had absolutely no control. Poor roads were no alternative to the railroads when it came to getting valuable products quickly to market. But good roads were.”

Dissatisfaction with the railroad system was the mood of many groups of people in the early twentieth century.

Belasco, Americans on the Road, 19.

Preston, Dirt Road to Dixie, 15.
Railroads also held control of the majority of the resorts and domestic travel destinations. The resort hotels and railroads built in Florida exemplified the railroad-model. A tourist looking to visit Florida under this system would most likely travel via a railroad to a resort hotel owned and operated by the same railroad company. Henry Flagler’s railroad and resort hotel empire built on the east coast of Florida is the classic example of the system. He was an oil tycoon having amassed his wealth as a partner of John D. Rockefeller. He chose to enter the railroad and resort business after becoming dissatisfied with the oil industry and wanting to create a business empire of his own.\textsuperscript{20} Flagler’s Florida East Coast Railway eventually built railroads down the entire east coast of Florida to Key West and his Florida East Coast Hotel Company built the resort hotels as the new rail lines opened; these ventures have been referred to simply as the Flagler System.\textsuperscript{21} This interconnected system ensured that his hotels would receive guests via the railroad and the hotels would provide traffic for the railroad. Flagler modeled his resort system after earlier resort hotels built in the Northeast.\textsuperscript{22} He largely had no direct competition because his nearest rival Henry Plant operated his railroad and hotel empire on Florida’s west coast, centered in Tampa. The relationship between Flagler and Plant has been characterized as that of “friendly rivals” theoretically but not genuinely competing.\textsuperscript{23} This friendly relationship and anti-competitive territorial division created a virtual monopoly in Florida travel.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 5-7.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 55-76.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 19-39.
Despite its dominance since the 1800s the railroad-resort mode of travel had become increasingly unpopular to many by the time the automobile was introduced. The majority of the complaints stemmed from the limitations rail-resort travel created. The strict schedules and routes of the railroad felt industrial and limited spontaneity, enjoyment, and choice. Belasco described people’s feelings about rail travel at the time: “Rail travel was too impersonal: anonymous passengers manipulated by officious conductors, unseen engineers, [and] faceless black porters all called George.”

24 At the railroads’ outset, their time schedules represented efficiency and progress, but people increasingly found the railroads’ schedules arbitrary and inconvenient. 25 The railroads operated like a machine without fully taking into account human preferences and considerations. The railroad was no longer new or exciting and it largely became mundane. Enticed by an automotive alternative travelers increasingly found faults with railroad travel and began to consider seriously this alternative.

The problems did not rest solely in the railroads; the resorts themselves seemed unfriendly and limiting. Many resort hotels clung to the increasingly dated Victorian ideas about gender, creating separate spheres for men and women. 26 These separate spheres made family activities difficult. These resort hotels had been built as places for women and children and leaving many men uncomfortable staying in them. 27 As the era of the automobile dawned, these gender separations felt more artificial and less desirable to many people. Additionally, guests perceived the cost of vacationing at these hotels as high, which initially had been part of the appeal. The resort hotel was conceptualized in the context of the Gilded Age’s idea of

24 Belasco, Americans on the Road, 20.
25 Ibid., 20-22.
27 Belasco, Americans on the Road, 56-57.
conspicuous consumption and leisure. As such, the price had to be high to maintain the exclusivity and high-class appeal.\textsuperscript{28} This high-priced upper class appeal endured for many years continuing in Florida well into the 1920s. This resort clientele was the target of some joking criticism in Kenneth Roberts’ book \textit{Sunhunting} (1922), referring to them as the “Time-Killers.” According to Roberts, these Time-Killers enjoyed paying more than what they needed to for leisure and relished in the “smartness” of doing so.\textsuperscript{29} This satirical take on the resort clientele further pointed to the perceived inflated and unfair cost of railroad and resort travel. The railroad-resort model increasingly had limited appeal even to its wealthy clientele and did very little to attract new guests of other economic statuses. As more Americans of different economic classes found taking vacations possible they looked toward long distance automobile travel on the named interstate tourist highway system.

The concept of interstate-tourist highways made long distance car travel a more practical proposition. These tourist highways gave momentum to the automobile in the growing competition with railroad-resort travel. These early highways are often referred to as “named highways” because they were named by the promoters, boosters or financiers of the project. Jackle and Sculle wrote, “The group would choose a name of some distinction and mark and advertise a route that would funnel as many motorists as possible through supporting communities.”\textsuperscript{30} The groups involved in creating the highways were referred to as highway associations and would fundraise and lobby local governments to construct their highway. This work was usually on a non-profit basis; group members hoped to profit from business interests

\textsuperscript{28} Braden, \textit{The Architecture of Leisure}, 40-54.  
\textsuperscript{29} Kenneth Roberts, \textit{Sunhunting}, 3-62.  
\textsuperscript{30} Jackle and Sculle, \textit{Motoring}, 43.
along the route and automotive product sales instead.\textsuperscript{31} These highway associations correctly predicted that creating an interconnected network of roadways would be a powerful force in shaping economic activities. The first successful named highway was the Lincoln Highway, created by the Lincoln Highway Association and built on a New York-to-San Francisco route. Its principle organizer and promoter was Carl Graham Fischer, who managed to get corporate contributions and support from several major automobile makers.\textsuperscript{32} The Lincoln Highway became the model of many roadways built in the 1910s and 1920s prior to the federal government’s more direct involvement. These named highways finally allowed the automobile to compete effectively with the railroad over long distances.

The American South as a region lagged behind the rest of the country in improved roads that automobiles could readily use. The poor state of roads in the South contributed to its reputation as the economic backwater of the United States. Howard Preston’s study of the roads of the South in \textit{Dirt Road to Dixie} demonstrated the evolution and implementation of improved roads in the region. Reforming the South’s roadways was marketed in the pre-automobility era as a way to use farm-to-market roads to increase farmers’ incomes, standards of living, and education by connecting them better to each other and to cities.\textsuperscript{33} These improvements in the form of farm-to-market roads never materialized for two major reasons related to funding and tradition in the South. Preston identified that the farmers’ aversion to taxation and government

\textsuperscript{31} Jackle and Sculle, \textit{Motoring}, 43.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 44-46.
\textsuperscript{33} Preston, \textit{Dirt Road to Dixie}, 67.
indebtedness as well as the way farmers had traditionally paid for road improvements via their labor in lieu of monetary taxation prevented these improvements from taking place.\textsuperscript{34}

Instead of the farm-to-market road built for the local farmer, it would be the highway association roads built for out-of-state tourists that would reshape the American South’s road system. Built to draw Northern tourists to the South these interstate highways did not focus specifically on improving farmer’s access to markets, services, or education, although they may have ultimately been beneficial to some farmers. Preston felt that these highway associations hijacked the idea of good roads and recast it in their image of financial progress along narrow strips of interstate highways creating new kinds of business and investment in the South and leaving farmers primarily out of the equation.\textsuperscript{35} Carl Graham Fischer personified these new road construction efforts in the South with his Dixie Highway, which was created as a spin-off of his Lincoln Highway’s success.

The Dixie Highway was the single most important road that siphoned new tourists into the American South. It resembled a modern highway system, the Dixie Highway consisted of a series of interconnected routes built from Michigan to Miami. Smaller east-west routes connected the two major north-south roads to increase the number of towns that fell along the highway. Carl Graham Fisher envisioned his Dixie Highway as the perfect way to deliver customers to his Florida landholdings in and around Miami.\textsuperscript{36} A highway in this case would be the perfect tool for economic development by expanding access and increasing desirability. Preston felt that these interstate tourist highways, focused solely on economics, created a façade

\textsuperscript{34} Preston, \textit{Dirt Road to Dixie}, 67.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 52.
of progress while leaving goals of genuine rural reform behind. The Dixie Highway and the tourists it brought were some of the principal forces in driving the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s and contributed in a real way to the formation of the Tin Can Tourists in the Dixie Highway-connected city of Tampa.

**Autocamping, the Formation of the Tin Can Tourists of the World and the Rise and Demise of Tin-Canners**

Long-term recreational automobility first began to take shape in the late 1910s and early 1920s. The Tin Can Tourists of the World grew out of autocamping as well as expanded this activity. Autocamping is the use of an automobile as the primary conveyance to a camping destination where the traveler stays in or near the vehicle with shelter and camping equipment carried to the site by the automobile. Autocamping was both the first form of roadside accommodations intended specifically for automobile travelers and the first long-term recreational automobile activity.

There were two ways one could autocamp in the early years of automobility and generally two kinds of autocampers. First, one could use autocamping for accommodations as a substitute for traditional hotels on route to a final destination. This first type has a practical appeal because it allowed the automobile travelers to avoid the difficulty of finding suitable accommodations. This type of person can be described as a “convenience autocamper” because autocamping fulfilled their basic needs for shelter along the road. The lack of roadside accommodations was a serious problem during the 1910s and 1920s as the market had not yet

---

37 Preston, *Dirt Road to Dixie*, 154-170.
adapted to meet automobile tourists’ needs.\footnote{Belasco, Americans on the Road, 44.} These autocampers were the kind to embrace the latest and greatest and took to the autocamping fad because of its popularity.

Second, autocamping itself could be the primary activity and recreation of the trip. One could camp continuously with an automobile, traveling to multiple destinations enjoying the experience of the journey. This type of autocamper’s activities and outlook made the automobile experience truly recreational and created the genre of long-term recreational automobility. Those participating in autocamping this way can be described as a “recreational autocamper.” As the autocamping craze continued, it would be this second form of autocamping that would endure as other forms of roadside accommodations superseded the first more practical variety. A rough division of tin-canners and Tin Can Tourists appears along the lines of “convenience autocampers” and “recreational autocampers.” Tin-canners were more likely to be members of the first group of “convenience autocampers” who took to autocamping as an alternative to hotels and because of its popularity in the 1920s. Tin Can Tourists would be normally associated with “recreational autocampers” because they enjoyed autocamping as a leisure activity. There was the potential for crossover, but the respective associations with each group can help to better differentiate the two when studying autocamping and the Tin Can Tourists of the World’s formation.
Part of the attraction to this new activity for both convenience and recreational autocampers was the cost. Autocamping promoters used this as a major selling point, sometimes even claiming that autocamping was cheaper than either staying in hotels or remaining at home. In the case of Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners in Florida both developed the reputation as being thrifty, even cheap. To Kenneth Roberts, if the wealthy visitors to Florida were “time-

40 Belasco, Americans on the Road, 42-43.
“killers” looking to spend a buck, the autocamper was the “sun-hunter” seeking out sunshine and warmth in the winter at cut-rate prices:

The sun-hunter knows the value of a dollar. He usually knows the value of a nickel, also. It is said that before he relinquishes his hold on a twenty-five-cent piece, he gives it a farewell squeeze of such violence that the eagle on it frequently emits a strangled squawk of anguish…. The fact remains, however, that one never finds the sun-hunter throwing his money around in the loose, spasmodic manner which always characterizes the genuine time-killer.41

The association of autocamping with thrift cut two ways. On one hand it encouraged people to take up autocamping as a way to save money on a vacation, which was an important argument for anyone promoting the activity. Alternately, it could be used against autocampers as some locals would gain the impression that autocampers were cheap or destitute. Tin Can Tourists continuously looked to maintain their class image despite their affinity for saving money.

The amount of equipment needed to autocamp was simple and potentially inexpensive with the exception of the automobile itself. Early photographs of the Tin Can Tourists autocamping, like the 1920 photograph of Tin Can Tourists at De Soto Park (Figure 6), demonstrated the simplicity of the equipment needed. The two major items were the automobile and tent. Although, the automobile was a significant purchase, the autocamper probably owned it for utilitarian transportation, which offset the cost of using it for autocamping for part of the year. Later Tin Can Tourists initiated the shift toward vehicles with a solely recreational use as they began to modify their vehicles into house cars, however initially the majority of the vehicles remained unmodified and capable of their original uses. Preparing a car for autocamping

41 Roberts, Sunhunting, 82-83.
required simply strapping camping equipment, luggage, and various automotive supplies to the car.

Figure 7: Tents at Tin Can Tourists Convention - Arcadia, Florida.\textsuperscript{42}

The second part of the autocampers’ equipment was the tent. Tents seen in photographs typically were simple camping tents that were small enough to pack up onto an automobile and large enough to be reasonably comfortable. Autocampers usually set up their tents near the automobile. In some case, tents were set up to include the internal space of the car that provided

a possible sleeping area off the ground. Tents were a distinctly noticeable part of an autocamper’s equipment as Kenneth Roberts noted, “[some automobiles] have sprouted great tent-like wens at the side or rear.” The tent was by far the most common form of shelter seen in pictures of early autocamping in Florida. By the 1930s, tents began to fall out of favor as autocampers began to choose recreational vehicle options and others left autocamping for roadside accommodations. The new recreational vehicle firsts appeared as homebuilt projects or expensive custom-built models built in small shops. The concept of factory-built trailers produced on a large scale did not occur until the 1930s when Tin Can Tourists in part helped create demand for them.

Miscellaneous camping items such as chairs, bedding, cooking implements, and clothes were also packed in the automobile. Belasco described these miscellaneous items and explained the overarching questions regarding the proper amount of equipment an autocamper should carry. “In equipping themselves, for example, many autocampers never attained the desirable balance between ‘going light’ and being ‘at home’ on the road… In the end autocampers had to learn by trial and error.” Given the space limitations of packing a vehicle autocampers always had to balance out this equation when choosing items for their journey. If one packed too lightly for their life on the road, they could expect to have difficulty completing everyday activities, instead of enjoying leisure time. Alternately, if one packed too much equipment the required time to pack and unpack each night became onerous and cut into driving time daily. The folly of packing too much becomes clear in a scene Kenneth Roberts described of autocampers on their

---

43 Roberts, Sunhunting, 75.
45 Belasco, Americans on the Road, 79.
way to Florida with far too many “space-saving” camping items all crammed into their automobile:

Their automobiles are completely stocked with folding chairs, collapsible beds, accordion-mattress, knock-down tents, come-apart stoves, telescopic dishwashers and a score of dishpans, table dinner-sets, tin cups, water-buckets and toilet articles that fold up into one another and look like a bushel of scrap-tin. There are canned goods under the seats, slung against the top, packed along the sides, tucked behind cushions and stacked along the floor. Some automobiles are so well stocked with canned things that they could make a dash for the Pole. And as one passes some of them on the road, they sound as though their owners were carrying a reserve supply of canned goods under the hood-loose.46

The sight of these autocampers packed with every possible necessity strapped to their car appeared comical to Roberts and many of his contemporaries. The end result of all this packed equipment according to Roberts was that “some of the automobiles are bloated and swollen out of all semblance to an automobile.”47 The difficulty of packing and unpacking the autocamping equipment at each point put strains on the “convenience autocamper.” These strains left “convenience autocampers” looking for better accommodations as they became available and left the true autocamping enthusiasts, such as the Tin Can Tourists, looking for better methods and technologies to streamline the autocamping experience.

Understanding autocamping requires studying the origins of the physical space designated for the activity, the autocamp. Warren Belasco studied the history of the autocamp as part of his arguments about the evolution of roadside accommodations and the history of automobile travel. He stated that autocamping activities had grown out of informal automobile trips taken by wealthy automobile owners prior to mass automobility.48 This observation fit well

46 Roberts, Sunhunting, 85-86.
47 Ibid., 75.
48 Belasco, Americans on the Road, 17.
with the notion of the automobile as a toy for the wealthy. These early trips did not require any specific place to camp, as one simply chose any desirable spot; he referred to this unorganized early form of automobile recreation as “gypsying.”

Gypsying was essentially autocamping without a sanctioned place and it relied on the patience and acquiescence of local residents. One Tin Can Tourist noted the lack of facilities during the gypsying era. “There were no public camping grounds nor parks maintained for these campers.” He continued by emphasizing the diversity of places these early automobile gypsies used to set up camp. “They would secure permission to stop on some private property, a village common, in a school or church yard, along the roadside and, cases have been told of camping in a cemetery.” Space for setting up camps had to be requisitioned on the fly and was far from guaranteed for a weary auto tourist. These campsites were not advertised or marked as such and required the automobile tourist to inquire with an unknown person to ask permission to camp or risk conflict by camping without permission. Finding a suitable legal location eventually became increasingly difficult as locals felt that autocampers were destructive and impolite.

Many of these early campers were not too particular of their personal habits. Some left their camping site littered with refuse, some left their campfires burning, some used fences of their host for their firewood and too many took along some farmer’s chickens, potatoes or fruit when they left.

As bad as gypsying was for the property owner or small town, the negative view of the gypsy was even more detrimental to the automobile tourist.

49 Belasco, Americans on the Road, 1-2.
50 Leroy Mills, History of Our T.C.T., Tin Can Tourists Scrapbook 2 Box 2, Tin Can Tourists of the World Collection(hereafter TCT), Florida Library and Archives(hereafter FL Library), Tallahassee, FL. This history appears to have been a booklet originally, but appears as separate pages pasted in the scrapbook.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
The whole camping fraternity suffered because of those who had no consideration for those who were to follow, the whole fraternity soon became looked upon as a band of Gypsies, unwanted, undesirable and something to keep out of the neighborhood. It soon became difficult for any camper, no matter how honest or careful, to get permission to camp near other habitations.\textsuperscript{53}

Gypsying had finally reached its practical ends as more people began traveling by automobile and looking for places to stay. In small numbers gypsies were tolerable or perhaps a novelty, but uncontrolled intrusions onto private property could no longer be tolerated in large numbers. Without this on-the-fly availability of places to camp those looking to stay in their cars had to look elsewhere.

The new outlet for the automobile camping tourists was the autocamp. It grew out of the gypsying tradition and benefited from the shift to mass automobile ownership that made recreational automobility possible. This influx of automobile travelers to many localities and the subsequent chaos and property damage, necessitated social controls in the form of formal autocamps. Policy makers saw these autocamps as an attempt to organize auto travelers by restricting them to designated camping locations.\textsuperscript{54} Autocamps were initially little more than free municipal campgrounds provided by local governments with very limited services, facilities, or supervision. City boosters proposed these camps as a way to attract tourist income by simply providing camping space for automobile tourists. They also strengthened their argument by reminding the locals of the disturbances of unregulated gypsying.\textsuperscript{55} The Tin Can Tourists of the World first organized in one of these municipal camps, De Soto Park in Tampa.

\textsuperscript{53} Mills, \textit{History of Our T.C.T.}  
\textsuperscript{54} Belasco, \textit{Americans on the Road}, 3-5.  
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 74-79.
The next generation of autocamp was that of the fee-based or paid autocamp. This new form of camp was also the result of complaints, this time lodged by both locals and some autocampers contending that undesirable people were ruining camps and that through the imposition of a fee these people could be driven out and the respectability of both autocamps and autocampers maintained. In Florida, in particular, people began to reject the idea of free camps. Roberts described these attitudes in the context of increasing numbers of lower income people who could afford old cars. This supposedly allowed lower income and presumably less desirable people to join with the first wave of more affluent autocampers in the free camps:

During the 1920-1921 season there were great numbers of free tin-can camps throughout Florida; but Florida towns found… that open-handed and unsupervised welcome to any person who can scratch up enough money to take advantage of the welcome will bring nothing but annoyances, losses and misery in its train. Interestingly, Belasco identified one of these types of undesirable people as “year-round tourists” who fully embraced automobility by adopting a permanent existence living on the road in autocamps. These “year-round tourists” were an important segment of membership in the Tin Can Tourists of the World. The Tin Can Tourists’ efforts to maintain their reputation and respectable place among their host cities will be expanded upon later.

Many autocamps in Florida shifted to the fee-based model or closed down their operations, although not all of them closed immediately. In the case of Tampa’s De Soto Park Roberts noted that “The Tampa camp was a success because it was very carefully regulated and

56 Belasco, *Americans on the Road*, 105-106.
policed.”  But even De Soto Park eventually turned against the Tin Can Tourists during their fourth convention (1922-1923). “Shortly after this convention began, all campers were ordered out of the De Soto Park on the principle that the park was a public playground and not an accredited campground.” The Tin Can Tourists had been defeated in Tampa for the time being and were fortunately invited by the city of Arcadia, Florida to continue their activities there.

According to Belasco, autocamping was an extremely popular activity, but autocamps were only the first mainstream form of roadside accommodations for automobile travelers. Despite the hopes of fee [autocamp] proponents, the pay camp was more a new stage in the commercialization of the roadside than a return to the original [autocamping] booster plan. Having evolved from squatter encampments to public institutions, the autocamp was now a business.

The transition in autocamps from a free service provided by the government to a paid service established as a business was very important to Belasco’s explanation of the shift away from autocamping. These new businesses noticed that mainstream automobile travelers were looking for a place to stay that was “economical yet comfortable, simple yet convenient, and intimate yet selective” He concluded that “Twenty years of experimentation with tourist camps, cabin camps, cottage camps, cottage courts, and motor courts would produce the motor hotel that came of age after World War II.” Belasco’s arguments about the autocamping’s decline and the shift toward the motel is consistent with the history of the “convenience autocamper” who practiced autocamping out of necessity or convenience, but ignores the “recreational autocamper” who

59 Roberts, Sunhunting, 90.
60 Mills, History of Our T.C.T.
61 Ibid.
62 Belasco, Americans on the Road, 129.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
embraced the essence of the activity through the late twentieth century as the Tin Can Tourists of the World. Even as other automobile tourists embraced advances in roadside accommodations, such as the motor court and early motel, these truly recreational autocampers continued to stay in their transported accommodations and innovated them by creating increasingly comfortable motor homes and travel trailers for use in the same camping places where they originally pitched tents.

The Tin Can Tourists of the World formed in 1919, which largely coincided with the rise of autocamping’s mass popularity and the founding of autocamps to provide space for these new tourists. The organization’s official story of its formation can be found in the introduction of a booklet containing the constitution and bylaws. It described the conditions, activities, and background of the autocampers who formed the organization.

The closing days of 1919 found motor camping in Florida in its infancy, as evidenced by the fact that on December 1st of that year, only twenty-two camping outfits were to be found in De Soto Park, Tampa, the first public camp ground in the state. These pioneers, in order that they might become better acquainted with each other, gathered in small groups around a number of camp-fires, where they whiled away the evenings by singing songs and telling stories, as well as relating their many thrilling experiences of road life. There were at that time no worthwhile highways or camps and the tourist after a hard day’s drive of some forty of fifty miles often had to spend the night by the lonely roadside.

Words and references used in this passage, such as “infancy,” “pioneers,” “new sparsely populated camps” and “lonely roadside,” evoked the idea of autocamping being both new and underdeveloped. Autocamping appeared as an exhilarating, rugged, and enjoyable activity and lifestyle in the Tin Can Tourists’ story. The idea of a “pioneer” clearly referenced ideas of the

65 Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., Constitution and By-Laws, TCT, FL Library. No publisher or publication date is apparent although convention listings inside suggest an early 1960s printing.
66 Ibid., 2.
frontier and individualism with autocampers freely and autonomously traveling and experiencing the “road life.” The mantra of individualism became a core aspect of the Tin Can Tourist identity from the beginning. This pioneer individualism also draws comparisons with the nostalgia for the idealized American frontier.

Mr. James M. Morrison of Chicago, Illinois was both the founder of the group and the first person to hold the highest executive position of Royal Chief during the 1920-1921 convention year period. He laid out the objective he considered necessary for the Tin Can Tourists to pursue:

1. To unite fraternally all auto campers.
2. To establish a feeling of friendship.
3. To provide clean and wholesome entertainment at all meetings.
4. To spread the gospel of cleanliness in all camps, as well as help enforce the rules governing all public camp grounds.

These objectives encouraged a more enjoyable autocamping experience by promoting friendships and a sense of community spirit. Entertainment and public events were typically the methods Tin Can Tourists used to unite member autocampers and recruit non-members such as tin-canners. Early autocamps, in particular the free autocamps, frequently had little or no management or maintenance. The complaints lodged about autocamps as dirty and unsafe places threatened autocamping itself if municipalities chose to act by closing their camps. Morrison’s objectives of “cleanliness in all camps” and “enforce[d] rules governing all public camp grounds” were an effort to fix this deficiency in supervision. According to the 1920s bylaws it was the duty of all Tin Can Tourist members to police other campers, members or not. “It shall

67 Officers in the Tin Can Tourists serve for twelve months from December to December of consecutive calendar years. To avoid confusion officers will be noted by this two-year system (i.e. 1920-1921) to reflect this election schedule.
68 Tin Can Tourists Inc., Constitution, TCT, FL Library, 2.
be the duty of all members to insist that campers leave all grounds clean, to leave no fires, to destroy no property and to purloin nothing.” This self-policing could fill the gap left by little or no management of many autocamps and represented lessons learned from the downfall of gypsying.

The last part of the official story provided in the constitution and bylaws booklet discussed the formal organization and the adoption of a name, slogan, and motto for the group. It also raises questions about the timeline for the group’s organization, formation, and ratification of the constitution.

The organization meeting was held in De Soto Park, in January, 1920, and a Constitution and By-Laws were adopted at a future meeting. The three high points were:
1. The Name- ‘Tin Can Tourists of America’
2. The Slogan- ‘No fees! No dues! No graft!’
3. The Motto- “Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you.”

The group was formed a month after the first meeting and the introduction of Mr. Morrison’s ideas to the others at the autocamp in Tampa’s De Soto Park. The dates that the constitution and bylaws were adopted was not given in this booklet from the 1960s, but an original handwritten version of the constitution and bylaws dated 1919-1920 suggests the constitution and bylaws were largely the same. It is clear that by the time the group incorporated officially in 1937, the constitution and bylaws had been established, and they remained unchanged until the 1960s. The short-lived original name of the group was the “Tin Can Tourists of America.” It tended to emphasize a national scope to their autocamping activities. The Constitution and Bylaws dated to 1920 suggests that “World” had been substituted for “America” almost immediately after the

---

69 Tin Can Tourists Scrapbook 2 Box 2, TCT, FL Library.
70 Tin Can Tourists Inc., Constitution, 2.
71 Scrapbook 2, TCT, FL Library.
group’s creation.\textsuperscript{72} Definitively, the name had been changed by the time Kenneth Roberts wrote \textit{Sunhunting} in 1922 since he referred to the group as the “Tin Can Tourists of the World.”\textsuperscript{73} The change from “America” to “World” does not reflect a shift toward international travel, but likely reflected the Canadian or occasional European autocampers who joined the group in its recreational automobility activities.

The Tin Can Tourists’ slogan reflects disdain for corruption and a desire to maintain the economics of free autocamping. Kickbacks and other compensation for officers of the Tin Can Tourists were strictly forbidden later in the bylaws.\textsuperscript{74} The motto reflected a Christian and moral theme of ethical and kind treatment to fellow autocampers and reinforced it as a defining characteristic of the Tin Can Tourists. As the group’s motto it confirmed how the Tin Can Tourists wanted to be appraised as quality people who were living a mobile lifestyle, not disreputable vagabonds.

The Tin Can Tourists had two types of officers, executive officers and a board of directors. A group of individuals elected annually by members at the winter convention in Florida controlled the Tin Can Tourists and ran the organization. Initially, prospective leaders ran for executive officers positions. After 1938-1939 convention, a board of directors was added in addition to the executive officers. The responsibilities of running the organization were then effectively divided between the two groups. Executive officers included the positions of Royal Chief, Royal Vice-Chief, Royal Secretary, Royal Treasurer, and after 1935-1936 convention Assistant Royal Secretary. Originally the top two executive positions were given the humorous

\textsuperscript{72} Scrapbook 2, TCT, FL Library.  
\textsuperscript{73} Roberts, \textit{Sunhunting}, 87.  
\textsuperscript{74} Tin Can Tourists Inc., \textit{Constitution}, TCT, FL Library, 13.
title of the “Royal Tin Can Opener” and the “Vice Tin Can Opener” These executive officers ran day-to-day operations, group communication, and suggested measures and budgets. The constitution tasked the board of directors with approving executive officer’s actions and appropriations; this served to balance the power of the executive officers. Matters, such as the election of officers and the choice of location for the Summer Reunion and Winter Homecoming meetings, were the prerogative of the voting members at the convention.

The Tin Can Tourists extended membership in the organization to many. Primarily, anyone staying at the convention campsite in a tent, travel trailer, or motor home (thereby meeting the definition of the “Automobile Camping Tourists”) could join. The recreational automobility requirement was important because it prevented casual car tourists who were staying in roadside lodging from joining and diverting the group from its true mission of maintaining and promoting autocamping and recreational vehicle travel. The Tin Can Tourists of the World built two major restrictions into one sentence of the constitution. “Active membership in the T. C. T. shall be limited to Automobile Camping Tourists of the white race and over twelve (12) years of age.” The restriction of membership to the white race reflects the time in which the group formed and the racial policies in the American South. The racial restriction remained in effect until the 1970s and contributed to the absence of any known African-American members of the group. More attention to the Tin Can Tourists’ record on racial issues requires further consideration and will be discussed later. Finally, the age restriction limited the membership of young children. Children were not a frequent sight in any Tin Can Tourist

75 Mills, History of Our T.C.T.
76 Tin Can Tourists Inc., Constitution, TCT, FL Library, 12.
meeting and the membership of the group was almost entirely adults with no children or older adults with grown children. Most deemed long-term recreational automobility inappropriate for younger children and their presence was considered disruptive to other autocampers. Kenneth Roberts suggested that the ranks of Tin Can Tourists were filled mostly with farmers, contractors, builders and carpenters. He noted that many “are people who can get away from home with the least amount of trouble; and among them one finds retired business men of all sorts.”\(^7\) The bulk of those who joined the Tin Can Tourists had to have sufficient money to pay for the trips as well as sufficient time, perhaps at least a season, to make their trip. The number of retirees grew as the Tin Can Tourists of the World matured as an organization.

With the formation of the Tin Can Tourists of the World, the autocamper had a collective voice to further advocate for their autocamping activities and an organization in which they could find companionship with likeminded travelers. Between 1919 and 1929 Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners shared the roads of Florida and elsewhere in the nation. The relationship between these two groups requires consideration as the confusion of them has led to inaccuracies in the historical record. Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners shared certain similarities and had some significant differences that can help illuminate the reason for the confusion and the significance behind considering them separately.

The many similarities between Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners are readily apparent. For example, both used automobiles as a primary form of transportation on their trips. Roberts described tin-canners and implicitly Tin Can Tourists as “sun-hunters” using their automobile to avoid the northern winter. “As soon as the first snow begins to fall in the North, or when the

\(^7\) Roberts, *Sunhunting*, 85.
earth has tightened up under a black frost, the sun-hunters prepare for their flight to the South. Great numbers of them travel by automobile.”

New interstate tourist highways, such as the Dixie Highway, made this southward migration possible.

Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners also were similar in appearance and equipment as they stayed in the same Florida autocamps. Their clothing was distinctly casual and emphasized comfort over formality. This was true to the extent that Roberts commented about sun-hunters that “Cloths mean nothing in his life.” This usually meant a more casual shirt and pair of dark trousers with suspenders and only the addition of a coat when desired. This casual clothing might not fit well in the resort-hotel scene but mattered little in the autocamps of Florida. In the autocamp of the 1920s, a vague imitation of hobo dress was indeed fashionable even though it lacked authenticity.

These substantial similarities in appearance and activities, at least in terms of the outside observer, created some difficulty in differentiating between a Tin Can Tourist and a tin-canner. The confusion of the Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners has continued into the modern historiography of the group. This confusion relates directly to why the Tin Can Tourists’ history has so often been misinterpreted. However, an examination of the differences between Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners can set aside this confusion and better reveal the Tin Can Tourists’ legacy.

---

78 Roberts, Sunhunting, 85.
79 Ibid., 83-84.
Roberts described a tin-canner as being known by the same colloquial phrase “tin-can tourist” and delineated the relationship between the two as existing side-by-side, with the Tin Can Tourists as the standard-bearers of the autocamping movement.

It is due to the heavy weight of cans carried by these automobiles that the true, stamped-in-the-can sun-hunter is known to himself, to his friends and to his enemies as a tin-can tourist. He lives in more or less permanent settlements known as tin-can towns; and his interests are safeguarded by a flourishing organization rejoicing in the impressive title of Tin-Can Tourists of the World. 80

Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners clearly had much in common, but even here one of the primary differences is apparent in the level of commitment and organizational abilities of those involved in the Tin Can Tourists of the World.

During the 1920s, the differences between the Tin Can Tourists and the tin-canners may not have been as readily apparent as their similarities, but differences in outlook and commitment made them distinct and resilient as mainstream autocamping diminished. One difference was that Tin Can Tourists began to conceive of their autocamping activates as a long-term proposition. One Michigan man was reported as having been on the road autocamping for twenty-one months in eighteen states. 81 It was not uncommon for Tin Can Tourists to take whole months, seasons or even years for their journeys, particularly as the technology for long-term recreational automobility improved. The tin-canner instead may have taken off several weeks to a month before returning to commitments back home. The Tin Can Tourists also had the advantage of belonging to an organization that helped advocate for their activities. With an organization that also promoted socialization, the friendships cultivated on the road encouraged

80 Roberts, Sunhunting, 87.
Tin Can Tourists to return year after year to see these friends. Finally, Tin Can Tourists enjoyed the experience of staying in camps with their automobile and their own shelter, unlike the tin-canners who were simply there because it was the latest and most popular form of travel.

The one visible way to distinguish a Tin Can Tourist from an unassociated tin-canner was by the front of his car. The organizations bylaws from the 1920s specify strict rules regarding marking a member’s car. “The emblem of the order shall be the Tin Can, to be worn on the front

---

of the car; The letters T.C.T. may be placed in black on the can same design as official button or the letters T.C.T. in place of can.\textsuperscript{83} The TCT emblem can be seen attached to the front of the car on the right of Figure 8. With such a visible display of membership status, group association could be easily determined at both the autocamp and on the road. Failure to comply with this rule carried stiff penalties. “All members refusing to wear the official emblem on their cars while camping forfeit membership.”\textsuperscript{84} Forcing members to present visible proof of membership benefited the entire group as it would actively encourage Tin Can Tourists to live by their ideals set forth under the constitution. It also benefited the general membership because they had a duty to help one another on the road. “It shall be the duty of each member to aid and assist all members found in trouble so far as in their power without material injury to himself or car.”\textsuperscript{85} These outward emblems encouraged comradeship and unity among the Tin Can Tourists, a quality that tin-canners lacked.

Several factors overall contributed to the decline of the tin-canners in Florida and autocampers nationally by 1930. First, the development of other options in roadside accommodations for automobiles such as the tourist cottages, motor court, early motels or even rented rooms in private residences attracted many travelers. These new accommodations purposely designed to house tourists in automobiles became the latest and most sophisticated option attracting those looking for convenience. Second was the bust in Florida real estate after 1926, which had brought many enthusiastic tourists looking to make their fortune buying and reselling land. These speculators had flooded some towns during the boom and autocamping had

\textsuperscript{83} Scrapbook 2, TCT, FL Library.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
provided an additional outlet for temporary housing. The decline in real estate speculation meant a decline in travelers to the American South and Florida, in particular. Third, the Great Depression diminished Americans’ disposable incomes and left many jobless. Poor people living in cars because of the Depression diminished the popularity of autocamping as some lived in their car out of necessity. The nicknames used to describe autocamping even the name “tin can tourist” fell out of favor. Belasco discussed how the title “tin can tourist” developed a negative connotation by the end of the 1920s, stating that, “Even [the nickname] tin can tourist was left to the riff-raff; camping tourist or motor camper became the preferred title.”86 These factors drove all but the most dedicated from the activity of autocamping. The Tin Can Tourists and their organization, however, remained on the road.

86 Belasco, Americans on the Road, 114.
The state of the automobile travel experience for the mainstream had changed by 1930. A traveler’s account of a visit to Florida in the winter of 1930 emphasized the many changes that had taken place during the 1920s. The unnamed traveler’s log recounted his party’s journey from Medina, New York to Winter Park, Florida where he took numerous side trips in Central Florida.

---

The account highlighted improvements in accessibility produced by the interstate tourist highways and local road improvements. The greater choices in accommodations for automobile tourists also was apparent, as this traveler had no difficulty finding a suitable place to stay. These positive changes for automobile tourists help to explain why autocamping was abandoned by many “convenience autocampers.” Insight into the economic situation in Florida a little over ten years after the construction of tourist highways can be drawn from this account.

This traveler’s log commented frequently on the state of the roadways as well as the scenery. Nearly all the descriptions of the roads were positive with some gaining special praise. As the vacationer entered Florida, the winter resort town of Winter Park also earned high praise. “Few smaller cities in the United States possess so many miles of beautiful streets as Winter Park.”88 Another road taken on the way to visit Bok Tower was described as “a splendid paved and sand highway.”89 Other roadways such as Tampa’s Gandy Bridge, U.S. Highway 1, and the Coastal Highway earned equally high marks. Out of this traveler’s entire journey, only one instance of unpaved road was briefly encountered and it was both dry and passable.90 The highway systems of the American South and in the state of Florida had progressed significantly in a little more than a decade. Poor roads no longer hindered tourists and well-marked, surfaced roads could effectively bring tourists south to Florida. These road improvements helped both Tin Can Tourists and the increasing numbers of non-autocamping car travelers.

The traveler described the accommodations he encountered as both comfortable and convenient. The traveler stayed primarily in private homes that rented rooms to tourists for the

88 A Visit to the Land of Sunshine and Flowers, Florida Heritage Collection, 21.
89 Ibid., 45.
90 Ibid., 73.
night. Many of these rooms came with the added convenience of a free “Southern meal of hot biscuits and Virginia ham” for breakfast.⁹¹ On one occasion the traveler stayed at a “tourist lodge” where he was “quite favorably impressed” with the restaurant and service.⁹² There were no complaints along the journey about the lodging the tourist used or any mention of any difficulty finding it. Also absent was any suggestion of autocamping or even the suggestion of packing extra automotive or food supplies in the car. For most Americans, the roadside had evolved and it was now easier than ever for mainstream travelers to forgo extra planning and pay to have lodging and supplies provided locally along their route. Former “convenience autocampers” abandoned autocamping and instead turned to these new businesses that offered less complicated and more fashionable accommodations designed for automobile travelers.

While both the interstate tourist highways and tourist accommodations had clearly improved for tourists, the economy of the State of Florida had not necessarily changed for the better. Florida’s boom time economy of the early 1920s fully ended with a spectacular bust. Real estate values had crashed as early as 1926 and many towns and developments across Florida were completely abandoned. The traveler highlighted one such example of a place called “Inter-Ocean City.”

It is also in this vicinity that the highway passes a pitiful spectacle a remnant of the Florida boom. The place is called Inter-Ocean City but it is a city in name only. Its population is ‘nil’ and all that remains are the shells of a planning mill…, a couple of stores and hotels. All are deserted and cattle may roam at will about the abandoned streets. A sad ending, indeed, and a terrible catastrophe to the state, especially since there are many similar results in other parts.⁹³

---

⁹¹ *A Visit to the Land of Sunshine and Flowers*, Florida Heritage Collection, 7.
⁹² Ibid., 13.
⁹³ Ibid., 44.
The boom had set back the spectacular and perhaps unsustainable progress Florida had made in development since the turn of the century. The interstate tourist highways had helped fuel the boom and would also contribute in an eventual recovery, but clearly in 1930 the merits of these roads and the tourists they brought were debatable. Tin Can Tourists were among the few groups that traveled to Florida every year in 1930s, and some towns found their presence to be a valuable source of income. There were still pockets of prosperity such as the traveler’s descriptions of Winter Park, St. Petersburg, and Daytona Beach but all felt hard times during the 1930s. During these hard times the Tin Can Tourists both thrived and evolved as they continued their annual pilgrimages to Florida while creating and purchasing ever more comfortable and sophisticated mobile accommodations.
CHAPTER TWO: THE TECHNOLOGY OF RECREATIONAL AUTOMOBILITY AND FINDING “HOME” ON THE ROAD

The 1920s had seen an autocamping boom that—similar to the decade’s economic boom—came on strong and went out with equal vigor. In contrast, the Tin Can Tourists found themselves more unified than ever and continued to advance recreational automobility. They desired not to settle for maintaining the status quo for their activities. The group looked for new technologies to make their long-term recreational automobility more enjoyable, pleasurable, and increasingly hassle-free. The primary development that was responsible for these improvements was the introduction of the manufactured travel trailer. Even in the volatile economy of the 1930s, a market for new travel trailer products established itself as manufacturers found that there was sufficient demand to warrant the risk. In the seven years between 1930 and 1937, the travel trailer went from an obscure homebuilt curiosity to an established manufactured product being bought by increasing numbers of people. During the Great Depression, the travel trailer also represented a significant purchase and a potential symbol of respectability for its owner. This was because travel trailer ownership differentiated the Tin Can Tourists from displaced and jobless people living in their automobiles who could not afford such a purchase. More than any other group during the 1930s, the Tin Can Tourists created demand through their own purchases and their popular travel trailer shows attended by manufactures and dealers. The pattern of travel trailer ownership and promotion founded in the 1930s continued into the post-World War II era for the Tin Can Tourists.

Travel trailers offered improved mobile accommodations. However, much like the tent-and-car setup of 1920s autocamping, these new travel trailers needed places to park and stay
overnight. In campgrounds and autocamps Tin Can Tourists also looked for improvements to make appropriate spaces for their travel trailers. The Tin Can Tourists therefore refused to accept the status quo, and insisted instead on moving beyond the autocamp of the 1920s. They wanted improvements in the spaces they used for recreational automobility and lobbied for improvements, particularly for the locations where they held their conventions and official events. In Florida, the leadership cultivated relationships with local governments, which they then used to lobby for improvements of camping spaces in exchange for Tin Can Tourist patronage of local businesses. These efforts to find friendly and supportive local governments became a focal point of the organizational activities of the Tin Can Tourists in this period. These efforts were largely successful as they always found towns willing to host their conventions and the facilities available to them continued to improve.

The Tin Can Tourists, the recreational vehicle market and the technology of recreational automobility all developed alongside each other during the 1930s. Studying the evolution of the Tin Can Tourists and the recreational vehicle create a better understanding of the origins of modern recreational vehicles. The equivalent evolution in campgrounds also helped to make recreational automobility in a travel trailer more practical and comfortable. Combining these improvements of travel trailers and campgrounds made the Tin Can Tourists’ long term recreational automobility an appealing and readily achievable lifestyle, which the group would promote and continue for the remainder of its existence.
The Birth of the Recreational Vehicle

The definition of a recreation vehicle in terms of recreational automobility is important to the discussion of technology and the Tin Can Tourists. The dictionary definition of a recreational vehicle is "a vehicle designed for recreational use (as in camping)."1 For the purposes of this study a recreational vehicle is any readily mobile vehicle or vehicle attachment, which is both road-worthy and constructed to provide shelter in support of camping style activities. This definition allows for a little more clarity and specifically includes both the motorized house car or motorhome and the travel trailer that is towed by an automobile or other road vehicle. The Tin Can Tourists advanced the technology of recreational automobility by both individually producing early house cars and being early purchasers of manufactured travel trailers. The Tin Can Tourists became inseparably associated with their recreational vehicles. This was because the recreational vehicle became a home to the Tin Can Tourists while living their mobile lifestyle. The members who took recreational automobility and made it a permanent existence increased their reliance on recreational vehicles as a home, even in some cases making it their only home.

Figure 10: House Car of L.N. Barlow at Tin Can Tourists Convention in Arcadia, Florida, 1929

The first type of automobile to meet the definition of a recreational vehicle was the house car, which was popular during the 1920s. These house cars represented the first step toward the evolution of autocamping as the recreational autocampers looked to improve their camping experience. Tin Can Tourist Leroy Mills stated during the 1920s, “A few housecars, crude compartments built upon the chassis of a car or truck, began to appear among the tents.” They required far less time to set up for camping and usually contained at least sleeping and storage areas. These vehicles were usually a homebuilt project and were built to varying standards and

---

3 Mills, History of Our T.C.T.
sizes with “each of these reflect[ing] the owner’s ideas of craftsmanship in construction.”

Figure 10 shows a typical house car of the late 1920s. A wooden frame was attached to the original car chassis to construct the house car. Pictures of the Tin Can Tourists using house cars show that none was exactly alike and each had its own distinctive flare. Mills described these variations in quality and finish:

Some were neatly constructed and painted, while one old-timer [swore] that he saw one of those individual hog-pens mounted upon a chassis and used as a traveling home. Gradually, these house cars became better built and more convenient and were quite popular with the campers.

There was also no one make or model of vehicle used by the Tin Can Tourists who built their own house cars. Generally, the only requirement was to have a vehicle that was sufficiently powerful enough to propel the vehicle forward and a long enough wheelbase for stability. Another distinctive feature of the house car is that it represented a permanent modification to a vehicle, making the change was virtually irreversible. Unlike the car-and-tent setup of early autocamping, the house car redefined the use of the vehicle as recreational. The house car was an advanced and eye-catching piece of recreational automobile technology, but questions remained about the form that would limit its success as an early recreational vehicle over the long term.

Ultimately, the house car was not the mainstream recreational vehicle format for the future, and it largely remained unknown until well after World War II when it was reimagined by manufacturers on a larger scale as the motorhome built on a larger truck, van or bus chassis. One reason for this was that house cars never reached anything near mass-production. Instead, they

---

5 Ibid
remained custom-built propositions, which was detrimental to their success.\textsuperscript{6} Because the house car conversion was permanent, the opportunity cost was higher to the individual as they could not use the vehicle for its previous utilitarian transportation role. The opportunity cost for a housecar conversion meant that while one gained recreational uses for the vehicle, one also sacrificed the opportunity to use the car for simple utilitarian transport. Both the failure to mass-produce the house car and its high opportunity cost combined to push the Tin Can Tourists to embrace another recreational vehicle format, the travel trailer.

\textbf{Figure 11: 1931 Tin Can Tourists Convention in Arcadia, Florida with Trailers}\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{6} White, \textit{Home on the Road}, 39.
The Travel Trailer Era: Manufacturing Mainstream Recreational Automobility

The travel trailer era of recreational vehicles began during the 1930s and reached mainstream status before the end of the decade. There were very few trailer type recreational vehicles in the 1920s and the visual record of the Tin Can Tourists does not appear to show any travel trailers prior to the image of the 1931 convention at Arcadia, Florida (Figure 11). Early travel trailers were rudimentary, specifically the ones built before the 1930s and those built by hand. Wally Byam, the early travel trailer manufacturer and later founder of Airstream, noted, “the first trailers were tents on wheels.”8 Tin Can Tourist Leroy Mills also mentioned these early tent-like trailers, describing one called the “Covered Wagon” with a rather ponderous drop down floor, canvas panels, stove and built-in storage cupboards.9 He described another inconvenient early set up that required that “polls [be] placed under each corner to prevent the sides from falling off when opened and took all neighbors around to operate its mechanism.”10 These early trailer tents were the forerunner of the travel trailer, but appear to be lacking in simplicity and convenience. It required the application of large-scale manufacturing of simple well-designed trailers as well as the public’s realization of the natural advantages of the trailer format to make the travel trailer a viable product in the 1930s.

Travel trailers offered most of the advantages of house cars without generally requiring permanent conversion to a single-purpose recreational vehicle. This was because the utilitarian vehicle could simply tow the travel trailer. One could now secure their trailer in camp and

9 Mills, *History of Our T.C.T.*
10 Ibid.
separate their vehicle to run errands into town or take short day trips with the car alone. Additionally, when the trip was over those who returned home could store their vehicle in a garage or parking place indefinitely until the next recreational outing. Together the car and travel trailer were a recreational vehicle and, when separated, the car was every bit the utilitarian vehicle it had been before. This practical advantage gave travel trailers the competitive advantage in the early market for recreational vehicles, particularly in the era of limited financial resources of 1930’s America.

Figure 12: Tin Can Tourists with Trailers in Arcadia, Florida, 1933

---

Among the Tin Can Tourists, the travel trailer began to catch on as the predominant form of mobile accommodations as tents and house cars diminished in popularity. One trailer magazine even commented on the connection between travel trailers and its popularity with the Tin Can Tourists. It suggested that their adoption has been a boon to the organization. “Each year the membership of, and interest in, the organization have grown, and especially is this true since trailers have forged to the front to replace the tents.” By the mid-1930s photographs of the Tin Can Tourists suggest that the group had almost completely shifted to the travel trailer as the recreational vehicle of choice. Figure 12 shows three travel trailer setups each with a different make and model of trailer and car, highlighting the increasing choices in travel trailers even by 1933.

The travel trailer manufacturing business became its own distinct industry by the late 1930s. Magazines about travel trailers began to be published in 1935. The first such magazine was Trailer Travel with the first issue published in 1935. This magazine changed names to Travel Trailer Magazine in 1937 and eventually turned into the modern recreational vehicle and travel guides published by the Woodall Publishing Company. In early 1936 it was marketed as the “only national magazine in the trailer field for all Trailerites… owners [present and future], operators, dealers and manufactures of pleasure and business trailers.” In 1937 Trailer Travel Magazine was joined by a competitor Trailer Topics Magazine. These new publications reflected the growing interest in the travel trailer in 1930’s America.

14 Trailer Travel, January-February 1936. Brackets are original text.
Both magazines have substantial similarities in terms of a focus on travel trailer promotion. The content of the two magazines reflects two very similar views on what would be important to someone traveling with a trailer. *Trailer Travel* and *Trailer Topics Magazine* focused heavily on news of the trailer industry, experiences of living in trailers, technical and legal information about travel trailers as well as other activities one could do while traveling by trailer. Only *Trailer Travel* published the news of the largest trailer group of the day, the Tin Can Tourists, through most of its 1936 and 1937 issues. Both also suggested possible trips and destinations such as "*Trailer Vacationing In Our National Parks*" in *Trailer Travel* and "*Motoring in Mexico*" in *Trailer Topics Magazine*. Magazines therefore represented the popularity of both travel trailers and, in the case of *Trailer Travel*, the importance of the Tin Can Tourists of the World as the primary group associated with the activity.

Optimism about the trailers was pervasive in these early trailer magazines. One article titled “We’ll Soon Be Living on Wheels” by Roger W. Babson argued that America was headed toward having a population living in trailers instead of conventional homes and that astonishingly “within twenty years, more than half the population of the United States will be living in automobile trailers!” Babson’s article is both boosterish and utopian, stressing all the purported advantages of trailer living for everyday Americans. Although the scale of his argument may seem unrealistic, he did correctly foreshadow the eventual creation of the manufactured mobile home (although far less mobile, largely permanent housing) that diverge into a distinctly separate product from travel trailers in the post-World War II era.

---

Although the manufactured mobile home was reflective of Babson’s ideas, purists within the travel trailer community felt that manufactured mobile homes should not be considered as part of recreational automobility because these housing units are virtually immobile and do not fit the definition of a recreational vehicle. Airstream founder Wally Byam, the most outspoken opponent of manufactured mobile homes as recreational vehicles, felt they detracted from travel trailers:

“Jerry” builders found that a trailer which did not have to be subjected to the rigors of the open road could be built very cheaply, actually and truthfully “cracker boxes” with wheels under them. Most of them were too big and too flimsy to tow very far behind a car. And it would take a mighty big car to tow them. They were actually submarginal housing built without the restrictions of the building codes. They were a disgrace to the industry.  

Wally Byam’s description of early mobile home “trailers” demonstrates this divide between mobile homes and true travel trailers. Byam continued,

And new eyesores began to pop up on the outskirts of American towns and cities, “trailer camps” not meant for trailer travelers and vacationists, but for permanent occupancy. And many of them were so disreputable and junk that trailers began to get a black eye. The high esteem that they had gained by their design was lost in the squalor of their filthy surroundings.

It took some time before the two products would be truly distinct products from the viewpoint of laws and public image. Like Byam, the Tin Can Tourists associated themselves with the travel trailer and did not look to incorporate the mobile home into their group’s focus. Although the Tin Can Tourists’ lifestyle likely did fall somewhere in between the casual trailer vacationers and the permanent mobile home dweller, Tin Can Tourists wished to live in their trailers in a semi-permanent to permanent basis, but never wanted to live in rundown trailer parks or in totally

17 Byam, Fifth Avenue on Wheel, 2-3.
18 Ibid., 3.
immobilized trailers. Their yearly meetings in both Florida and the North (often Michigan) kept them constantly touring and moving in proper travel trailers.

*Travel Trailer* magazine offers an excellent tool for studying the Tin Can Tourists of the World’s influence on the culture surrounding travel trailers. It provides solid evidence to show the group’s acceptance of the travel trailer as the primary recreational vehicle form. In one issue, the Tin Can Tourists were described as having “978 trailers, 36 house cars and 2,300 people in one camp” at the February 1935 meeting in Sarasota, Florida.¹⁹ This Tin Can Tourist meeting was made up of 96% travel trailers outfits representing near uniformity among the group, demonstrating that the travel trailer, not the house car, was the primary choice of recreational vehicle among the Tin Can Tourists by the mid-1930s. The Tin Can Tourists’ adoption of the travel trailer helped to explain why they were so prominently featured in the periodical.

A greater understanding of the Tin Can Tourists and the travel trailer can be gained by looking at the available figures surrounding the growth of both between 1930s and the 1960s. First the question of Tin Can Tourist membership can be addressed by looking at the publications that featured stories including membership data. The total number of members of the Tin Can Tourists in any period has been difficult to ascertain because of a lack of complete membership lists. This is partially due to the early informal membership practices of the early Tin Can Tourists. Initially, any member could “confer membership on anyone” without “formalities.”²⁰ This practice eventually changed as procedures were put into place to control membership. *Trailer Travel* can help to determine membership numbers during the 1930s. The

---

1936 magazine article’s title suggests that membership in the Tin Can Tourists was at 300,000. It also stated, however, that “the official register contains only about 30,000 names, but they are merely those recorded during the last two or three years.”\textsuperscript{21} It is likely that the true number of active Tin Can Tourists members was far closer to the official register than the likely inflated 300,000 suggested in the article title. The 300,000 number would only be valid if people who were casually associated with Tin Can Tourists or their activities were included in the total. This discrepancy also suggests that a smaller group of formal Tin Can Tourists of the World members could in fact influence a larger informal group of travel trailer users. Even at just 30,000 the Tin Can Tourists were by far the largest organization of its type with the next largest being the Automobile Tourists Association. The Automobile Tourists Association was a short-lived separatist group from the Tin Can Tourists that shared many of the same members.\textsuperscript{22} The creation of this offshoot organization was not at all detrimental to the Tin Can Tourists. \textit{Trailer Travel} noted this point. “There has been no diminution of the membership of the T.C.T. Instead, within the year, the membership of both groups has grown by leaps and bounds, and many members belong to both.”\textsuperscript{23} As an indicator of this shared membership, the Automobile Tourists Association often scheduled its events around the Tin Can Tourist homecoming and annual convention events. \textit{Trailer Travel} explained how the majority of the Automobile Tourists Association members travelled to the Tin Can Tourists events during the early part of 1936.\textsuperscript{24} The Tin Can Tourists continued to expand its membership through the end of the 1930s and into

\textsuperscript{21} “The True Story of the T.C.T.” 14.
\textsuperscript{22} I have found no records about the Automobile Tourists Association or any mention of them after World War II. It may be that the group either disbanded or rejoined the Tin Can Tourists of the World at some point.
\textsuperscript{23} “A New Order plus New Facilities in Traillerdom,” 12.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 13.
the 1940s. By 1948 the Tin Can Tourists of the World’s membership had reached 80,000 formal members traveling the country in trailers.25

![Coach/House Type Trailers Production](image)

**Figure 13: Coach/House Type Trailers Production**26

In 1937 trailer manufacturing began to be labeled as a category of manufactured goods by the United States government, demonstrating recognition of the new trailer market’s size. In 1937 trailer production stood at 18,130 units followed by a decline in 1939 to 11,782.27 It is unclear exactly how trailer production numbers had looked prior to the 1937 Census of Manufactures, but it is obvious that the industry experienced considerable growth to warrant counting in 1937. Wally Byam suggested that “more than 250,000 trailers were in use by

---

25 John Kobler, “People in Trailers: They find that life on wheels can be beautiful. If the scenery palls, they git,” *Life*, December 13th, 1948, 18.
27 No census data available for 1938. Manufacturing census data is only available for this period at irregular intervals.
1936.”28 With the trailer industry producing over 10,000 units a year of goods valued at $9,712,195 and $7,890,898 for 1937 and 1939 respectively, the government had to pay this new industry some attention. Many of these early travel trailers were purchased by the tens of thousands of Tin Can Tourists practicing recreational automobility, likely representing the single biggest purchasing group for the travel trailer at the time. Writing in 1960 Wally Byam drew the connection between retirees and travel trailers.

The increasing number of retired people with pensions whose children had moved away were looking for smaller living quarters and seeking to satisfy long-smoldering desires to see the country. The trailer was an ideal answer to their needs – in fact, it still is.29

Byam’s description of early purchasers of travel trailers fits exactly with the Tin Can Tourists’ primary demographic. These Tin Can Tourists became enthusiastic purchasers of trailers for exactly the reasons he described. Without the Tin Can Tourists as motivated users and purchasers of travel trailers, the industry may not have been able to get off the ground much less become a success in 1930’s America.

World War II dampened the travel trailer market as raw materials were devoted to the war effort. The trailers that were being built were not available to the public. Byam explained that trailers constructed during World War II were in fact built for the war effort. “Under the pressure of the wartime emergency, thousands of construction workers and military personnel, shifted from one military base or construction center to another, were quartered in houses on wheels.”30 The United States government purchased 35,000 trailers during the war of various

29 Ibid., 20.
30 Ibid., 21.
levels of quality, with many falling well below the quality of the pre-war travel trailers. The Tin Can Tourists suspended meetings between 1942 and 1946 and kept the same officers for the duration of America’s involvement in the war.

The end of World War II changed the trailer market forever and trailer manufacturing quickly gained ground as American families turned to the travel trailers that the Tin Can Tourists had adopted over a decade before. The surge in production of trailers in 1947 to 76,372 (nearly seven times the number in 1939) demonstrates this post-World War II adoption of the travel trailer by mainstream America. This re-adoption of recreational automobility was mostly due to the conveniences that the travel trailer had added to recreational automobility since the more rudimentary autocamping days. Gone were the days of autocamping and the difficult tasks of setting up and unpacking camping equipment, as the travel trailer now offered a self-contained camping experience that could be easily attached to most of the vehicles the family used for utilitarian transportation and removed when not needed. These new comfortable and convenient travel trailers could effectively compete with the early motels and motor courts that contributed to the demise of mainstream autocamping. For Tin Can Tourists the accommodations were so comfortable that many chose to live in their trailers year-round. For example, a Tin Can Tourist couple, Charlie and Esther Treffert, preferred their trailer to their home just “like 73% of all trailerites.” The Tin Can Tourists empowered by the technology of the travel trailer could now successfully live on the road indefinitely and in comforts almost if not equal to static homes.

31 Byam, Trailer Travel Here and Abroad, 21.
32 Kobler, “People in Trailers,” 18.
This development allowed Tin Can Tourists to truly embrace their ideas of long-term recreational automobility.

**Trailer Shows: Expanding Recreational Automobility and Manufacturer Relationships**

Although the Tin Can Tourists’ role as as large group of consumers was important for creating demand for the travel trailer, they went well beyond being silent consumers of manufactured travel trailers. As can be seen in its publications, the industry knew of them as the largest and most active recreational vehicle group, potential customers, and valuable promoters. Their promotional role came in the form the trailer shows they organized and hosted at many of their annual conventions in both Florida and the summer events in the North. In a 1936 *Trailer Travel* issue it is stated that “a prominent manufacturer recently referred to the members of the T.C.T. as ‘the sale of the earth.’”\(^{33}\) The origins of the Tin Can Tourists’ trailer shows grew from humble beginnings in the early 1930s. “No commercial aspect of these [convention] gatherings was contemplated [at first]… Then a trailer manufacturer or two joined and asked for the privilege of exhibiting his models at the encampments.”\(^{34}\) It only took a few years for both the Tin Can Tourists and trailer manufactures to realize they could both mutually benefit from these “trailer shows” as they came to be known.

The Tin Can Tourists’ trailer shows began in the mid-1930s as the manufactured travel trailer industry began to mature. One of the earliest documented full-scale Tin Can Tourist shows occurred in Sarasota in 1936. At this Tin Can Tourist trailer show, *Trailer Travel* noted that it


\(^{34}\) “The Circus Moves In And Then Out,” *Trailer Travel*, September 1936, 19.
included a “Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey’s mammoth circus tent” to house trailer
displays.\footnote{“Fifty New 1936 Coaches on Display at Florida Shows: Thirteen Exhibitors Present from Michigan Alone, Entire Country Represented,” \textit{Trailer Travel}, March-April 1936, 26.} It was also described as being well attended with Michigan heavily represented
among the presenters with thirteen exhibitors with thirty-two trailer models.\footnote{Ibid.} The show did not
just provide education to the public about trailers, but also offered a chance to purchase the
products displayed. Even heavy rains at the Sarasota show did not dampen sales as record
numbers were sold, thirty-three by one vendor alone.\footnote{Ibid.} When it was all over, the Tin Can
Tourists show “constituting the largest trailer show ever held up to that time.”\footnote{The Circus Moves In,” 19.} Tin Can Tourists
were therefore providing both a promotional venue for recreational vehicle products and
facilitating others in purchasing and presumably joining them on the road.

The Tin Can Tourists’ trailer shows were not limited to Florida. Even as news of the
Sarasota show was being published, plans were already made for a large trailer show during the
summer of 1936 in Sandusky, Ohio. The show was hosted by the Tin Can Tourists along with
the Sandusky Chamber of Commerce and was promoted as a large gathering with “many of the
manufacturers of coaches and equipment [signifying] their intention of making extensive
displays of the very latest designs.”\footnote{“Sandusky 1936 Summer Mecca for Trailerites: Famous Ohio Resort Center Selected for T.C.T. Encampment August 3-17,” \textit{Trailer Travel}, March-April 1936, 27.} As the Tin Can Tourists of the World summer reunion and
trailer show approached, there was great excitement as numerous members and non-members
planned to attend “the largest conclave of Trailerites ever gathered together.”\footnote{“T.C.T. Reunion Promises to Set Record: Trailer Exposition at Sandusky Also Will Be Largest Yet-Cedar Point Opened to Trailerites,” \textit{Trailer Travel}, May-June 1936, 30.} The Sandusky
trailer show turned out to be huge with a total of seventy exhibitors of both trailer manufactures

\begin{flushleft}
\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{“Fifty New 1936 Coaches on Display at Florida Shows: Thirteen Exhibitors Present from Michigan Alone, Entire Country Represented,” \textit{Trailer Travel}, March-April 1936, 26.}
\item \footnote{Ibid.}
\item \footnote{Ibid.}
\item \footnote{The Circus Moves In,” 19.}
\item \footnote{“Sandusky 1936 Summer Mecca for Trailerites: Famous Ohio Resort Center Selected for T.C.T. Encampment August 3-17,” \textit{Trailer Travel}, March-April 1936, 27.}
\item \footnote{“T.C.T. Reunion Promises to Set Record: Trailer Exposition at Sandusky Also Will Be Largest Yet-Cedar Point Opened to Trailerites,” \textit{Trailer Travel}, May-June 1936, 30.}
\end{itemize}
\end{flushleft}
and trailer suppliers.\textsuperscript{41} This critical mass of trailer manufacturers represented perhaps the biggest such congregation of the new industry to date and also reflected the products’ growing popularity.

The Sandusky show drew in many visitors, some of whom had not until that point examined a travel trailer closely. \textit{Trailer Travel} magazine stated that, “Except in the early morning hours and late at night there was a constant tramp, tramp of lines of humanity winding in and out of exhibits – seasoned and embryonic Trailerites, people from all walks of life whose imagination had been stirred and their interest aroused, and the curious who merely came to see what it was all about.”\textsuperscript{42} The Sandusky show therefore demonstrated the utility of a trailer show as a way to introduce travel trailers and recreational automobility to the public at large. Interestingly in the case of this Sandusky show it is also noted that it provided a venue for those interested in entering the trailer dealership business to make connections with manufacturers. “By far the bulk of the sales made were to dealers. New distribution channels were formed and outlets increased.”\textsuperscript{43} With these new dealers and distribution channels, the travel trailer could spread further to areas not local to the trailer show, and new retail outlets opened to sell the products.

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{41} “Summer Trailer Shows Attract 50,000 Visitors: Automobile Dealers Turn to New Industry on National Scale as Major Companies Enter Field,” \textit{Trailer Travel}, September 1936, 22.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
Figure 14 shows a later Tin Can Tourist trailer show from 1949 with numerous trailer models on display and available for sale to both the public and Tin Can Tourists. The Tin Can Tourists’ trailer shows continued annually for many years into the post-World War II era. Their influence on the travel trailer market was vital, particularly with these early shows that helped the new travel trailer industry take off by both introducing members of the public to the product.

---

and encouraging growth in the number of trailer dealerships as well as wider geographic
distribution. The clear reason the Tin Can Tourists embraced the trailer show and helped the
industry was that it was mutually beneficial. There were roughly 30,000 official members of the
Tin Can Tourists in 1936 and 18,130 travel trailers being sold each year in 1937. Remarkably
by 1948 there were 80,000 Tin Can Tourists members and 76,372 travel trailers being sold in
1947. The popularity of the group clearly expanded with the growth in sales of travel trailers.
The Tin Can Tourists’ promotion of with travel trailers and trailer shows in many ways mirrored
their dedication to lobbying for improvements to the campsites and trailer parks where they held
their events.

Recreational Vehicle Campgrounds and Community Relations

The advocacy role of the Tin Can Tourists of the World can be best understood through
their relationships with local communities and campgrounds. They worked constantly to
maintain a good relationship with their hosts and appeal for better facilities and benefits. Many
communities realized the potential upside of partnering with the Tin Can Tourists of the World,
similar to how manufacturers realized the benefits they could gain at trailer shows. Community
leaders understood that, despite having the reputation for being somewhat thrifty and not being
subject to property taxes, Tin Can Tourists were still temporary residents who would make
purchases in a host city of various supplies, food, and services. Tin Can Tourists needed only to
review their invitations annually and pick a location that best suited them. According to an article

45 “The True Story of the T.C.T,” 15; Census of manufactures, 1937.
in *Life* magazine, Tin Can Tourists had no problems getting these invitations. “Invitations pour in from communities only too glad to get the $200 to 300 a month which each trailerite family spends, and the members select one by majority vote.”

Also, as towns and cities began to value Tin Can Tourist patronage they were more likely to accept demands of the Tin Can Tourists for better facilities.

Even by the 1930s better venues began to be available to the Tin Can Tourists and those with the best equipment often could attract an official event. For example, the Sandusky trailer show was held as part of a summer meeting of the Tin Can Tourists. The Erie County Fairgrounds opened its facilities to the Tin Can Tourists.

For the T.C.T. encampment, the Erie County [Fairgrounds] will be used. This wooded acreage is within the city limits and every accommodation desired by trailer owners is provided, including the water supply, electrical connections, showers and baths, adequate modern toilets, laundry facilities, etc.—also convention hall, grandstand, track, diamond and athletic field.

The facilities were vastly superior to any spaces originally provided to the autocampers and Tin Can Tourists during the 1920s. The campground could accommodate the most modern of travel trailer with both water supply and electricity. Also those with more basic mobile accommodations could use the “showers and baths” as well as the “adequate modern toilets” and “laundry facilities.” Keeping clean and comfortable camps had been difficult in the early autocamps of the 1920s; modernized campgrounds alleviated many of the problems. The Erie Country Fairground’s buildings and facilities for group meetings, dances, and recreational sports were a huge draw for Tin Can Tourists who enjoyed having diverse selections of activities while

---

48 “Sandusky 1936 Summer Mecca,” 27.
Erie County Fairgrounds represented a great early example of the type of camp the Tin Can Tourists wanted and was able to get through its lobbying.

Figure 15: Tin Can Tourists Convention at Payne Park in Sarasota, Florida, 1936

Sarasota became the Tin Can Tourist Mecca of the 1930s with eight official conventions beginning with the 1931-1932 convention until the 1938-1939 convention. Figure 15 shows the Tin Can Tourist convention in Sarasota, Florida in 1936. Visible in the far left of the photo is the big tent used for the 1936 trailer show in Sarasota. The city also held several Tin Can Tourist homecomings in 1940 and 1941. Sarasota’s Payne Park, later called Sarasota Mobile Home Park, was perhaps one of the earliest such parks to host trailers. It had hosted autocampers perhaps as early as 1923. The city was motivated to attract Tin Can Tourists to increase revenue: “during the depression of the 1920s and early 1930s – magnified by the recent land boom collapse – civil and governmental leaders of Sarasota moved to increase local income.” The city decided to court the largest organization of recreational vehicle users, the Tin Can Tourists, by winning

---

51 Ibid.
them away from the town of Arcadia, Florida. “In a large parade, circus performers, animals, civic leaders and community supporters, descended on the annual meeting of the ‘Tin Can Tourists’ in Arcadia and invited them to hold their next convention in Sarasota.”52 This grand gesture was successful as “the group did [accept the invitation], and, almost overnight, the City Trailer Camp… became the largest of its kind in the world. The park held that title until the late 1950s when larger parks were built elsewhere.”53 By attracting the Tin Can Tourists for a convention, the city could gain income from them both during and after the convention as some would linger at the campgrounds for long after the convention had left. Cities willing to work with the Tin Can Tourists often could capture continuous patronage by the Tin Can Tourists, another example being Tampa, Florida. The Tin Can Tourists returned to Tampa for their 1939-1940 convention. They held annual conventions there until the 1965-1966 convention (with the exception of the cancelled conventions during World War II).

City leaders often had direct correspondence with the Tin Can Tourist leadership and warmly welcomed them to their community. In a published letter in a newspaper Mayor E. A. Smith of Sarasota, Florida welcomed the Tin Can Tourists to the community: “As mayor of the city of Sarasota, it gives me great pleasure to welcome the splendid group of people assembled here for the annual convention of the Tin Can Tourists of the World.”54 The mayor went on to

52 “Mobilehome Park Believed Oldest.” Sarasota Herald-Tribune.
53 Ibid.
54 This newscutting was found in a scrapbook in the Tin Can Tourist collection in Tallahassee, Florida. It was clipped without a date or newspaper information. It can be suggested that this article comes from the 1930s when Mayor E.A. Smith served several terms as mayor. This also makes sense in context of the mayor’s apologies for everything not being ready for the convention as this was in the early years of this sort of campgrounds. Mayor E.A. Smith, “Mayor Welcomes T.C.T.,” Tin Can Tourists Scrapbook 2 Box 2, TCT, FL Library.
explain that they had done their best to prepare Sarasota for the visit but apologized if all the
improvements that had been asked for had not been completed.

   City officials have made every effort to make things comfortable for you this year
and while there are many things still left unfinished, we have done the best we
could under the circumstances and want you to feel that our hearts have been in
our efforts to make things pleasant for you…With best wishes for the success of
your convention, the council and major of the city of Sarasota join in our
expressions of good will.55

For Sarasota and other communities the Tin Can Tourists were a valuable asset worth
cultivating. They could provide income and were well regarded by the communities that knew
them. Even communities unable to get a Tin Can Tourist convention benefited from attracting
“winter homecomings,” unofficial meetings, and individual Tin Can Tourists traveling in the
state. Florida was by far the largest benefactor of Tin Can Tourist patronage as they always met
there and many members often stayed considerable amounts of time before and after
conventions.

55 Smith, “Mayor Welcomes T.C.T.”
For the Tin Can Tourists having a building available to them for use as a “convention hall” was vital to their meetings. The convention hall could host the group’s organization meetings as well as their numerous social events held most nights of the convention. Figure 17 shows a Tin Can Tourist group photo in front of a typical hall used by the Tin Can Tourists of

---

the era. The Tin Can Tourists had a large variety of activities that would take place in the convention hall. They always had a dance one night of their convention and would put together camp bands to play. In addition, outsider entertainment was sometimes brought in for the Tin Can Tourist events. Having these available facilities provided a significant boost to the social aspects of the group.

The campgrounds patronized by the Tin Can Tourists of the World by the late 1930s onwards were a departure from the unorganized, often messy, and largely inadequate autocamps of the 1920s. The group also gained recognition as an economic boost to any community offering to host them. This led to more and more campgrounds, often city campgrounds and trailer parks, to attempt to attract Tin Can Tourists for conventions and events. In their patronage and advocacy, the Tin Can Tourists of the World promoted the creation of specific well-kept places for the practice of recreational automobility as represented by these new more modern campgrounds and trailer parks.

It is important to note that the Tin Can Tourists’ spaces for recreational automobility were never owned or controlled by the organization. Their model of partnership with cities and local governments meant that the spaces they met in were public spaces. The public spaces often had other municipal uses such as the Tin Can Tourists’ convention halls (Figure 16) or baseball parks next to their camp at Sarasota’s Payne Park (Figure 15). By 1939, when the group moved its annual conventions to Tampa’s Municipal Trailer Park, sources clearly indicate shared occupancy between Tin Can Tourists and other trailer-dwellers. This model of partnership was effective for the Tin Can Tourists’ purposes, but also it explains the lack of physical markers of the group’s legacy because they never attempted to own or operate any properties themselves.
The Tin Can Tourists successfully combined the technology of the travel trailer with the improved campgrounds to revolutionize recreational automobility. They had moved far beyond the comparatively rudimentary and crude era of autocamping and by the 1940s could enjoy recreational automobility with nearly all the comforts afforded to static living. As the Tin Can Tourists had pioneered these physical improvements to recreational automobility, their promotion of the industry made it more accessible to other who might desire to try it. While creating these physical improvements to their lifestyle, they also built their organization with a very distinct ideology that helped define recreational automobility.
CHAPTER THREE: TIN CAN TOURIST IDEOLOGY
AND RETIREMENT ON THE ROAD

Beyond the physical improvement in technology of and the space for recreational automobility that the Tin Can Tourists pioneered, the group created an ideology of living a mobile lifestyle while traveling America’s roadways. The characteristics of the membership of the group became increasingly homogeneous after the 1920s. Tin Can Tourists shared significant similarities in terms of their type of travel and demographics. For example, they always migrated southward in the winter months and northward in the summer. Most of these Tin Can Tourists migrating along these lines originated from Northern states. This pattern of migratory tourism does predate the Tin Can Tourists, but they were the first to adapt it to recreational automobility. The Tin Can Tourists all had a remarkably similar background. They were mostly white married couples with some form of pension or non-wage income who had either no children or adult children living outside the home. This demographic composition of the group lent itself to another characteristic of recreational automobility as defined by the Tin Can Tourists, the idea of retirement on the road. It was potentially an appealing idea because it offered them a chance to retire into a mobile lifestyle rather than a fixed place.

Despite the strong bonds of friendship and community created by the group and numerous demographic commonalities, the typical Tin Can Tourist highly valued the individualism and the autonomy that recreational automobility offered him or her. This may appear to be contradictory on its face but in reality the individual’s association with the group was voluntary and deference to the group’s will was balanced out by the freedom and ability to leave. Individual autonomy was often understood as being found in the mobility that the travel
trailer lifestyle allowed. Recreational automobility could offer an escape from modern constraints on individuality and autonomy.

Tin Can Tourists’ rejection of static living and traditional jobs through the practice of a mobile lifestyle could create some skepticism and even criticism from an outsider prospective. To avoid being criticized the group became overly concerned with maintaining their class and social image. Tin Can Tourists stressed that living a mobile lifestyle successfully required clean living and maintaining many values from their previous lives in static communities. This presents a contradiction in that the group wanted freedom, individuality and mobility but insisted on living by a strict set of rules that imposed order on themselves. They were so concerned with not being perceived as undesirable vagabonds or freeloaders that they often held themselves to higher standards and looked to weed out those who did not match their ideals. Tin Can Tourists excluded non-whites as part of their concern for maintaining their image. They likely expressed their policy of racial segregation to conform to the policies of the principle region of activity—the American South during segregation. The Tin Can Tourists’ separation from static society and the traditional household also raises questions about gender roles. The discussion of women in the Tin Can Tourists will be discussed in context of the available evidence. This chapter will serve to better define the Tin Can Tourist ideology and identity by taking a closer look at the members of the group through their thoughts, beliefs and demographics.

Auto-Nomads in the Sunshine State and Retirement on the Road

The Tin Can Tourists living out their dreams of recreational automobility found themselves free from the restraints of a physical home, but not without one. An auto-nomad can
be defined as a person who chooses to live in a recreational vehicle for a large stretch of time (at least several months, a year or even permanently) while travelling to various destinations. To many Tin Can Tourists the state of Florida became their “home” during their life as an auto-nomad. It hosted them each year throughout the club’s existence. As auto-nomads, Tin Can Tourists were frequently older married adults without any minor children. They also tended to be retired people with pensions or investment incomes retiring on the road rather than a fixed year-round place. All of these demographic and travel patterns created a unique and fairly well defined group of people who made up the membership of the Tin Can Tourists.

A 1948 Life magazine article titled “People in Trailers: They find that life on wheels can be beautiful. If the scenery palls, they git,” featured an in-depth interview with Charlie and Esther Treffert, a Tin Can Tourist couple. Charlie had served on the board of directors (1946-1949) and later as Royal Chief (1962-1963). The couple represented very typical Tin Can Tourists and gives insight into both themselves and other members.

The Trefferts are good working examples of how trailer life stacks up against that of the static population. The Trefferts are true trailerites. They live in a rolling home, as distinct from people who inhabit trailers out of necessity. Their neighbors down in Tampa agreed that Charlie and Esther were representative of the country’s 100,000 year-round rolling trailerites in all respects. Charlie is 51, Esther 47.

Given Life magazine’s assessment of the Trefferts one can use their thoughts and experiences living in a travel trailer to help inform the understanding of Tin Can Tourists. It also highlights the way that trailer life is comparable to those living in static dwellings. Their feelings

1 Kobler, “People in Trailers,” 18.
2 Ibid.
about various issues and opinions about living on the road provide one of the best sources for analyzing what it meant to be a Tin Can Tourist.

The magazine explained the migratory nature of the couple’s mobile lifestyle, stating: “With the first nip of cold weather they head for Florida, parking usually in Tampa until spring. In May they set out for Fond du Lac and wind up in July at the summer reunion of the Tin Can Tourists of the World, Inc.”

The couple’s migration from the colder northern state of Wisconsin to sunny Florida in the winter represents the typical pattern of nearly all Tin Can Tourists. Bert Tremble, another Tin Can Tourist, stated, “We spend the winter in Florida and the summer seeing the nation.” The state of Florida was the fixed winter destination for Tin Can Tourists looking to avoid colder northern winters. This southward migration to Florida during the winter was not new as railroads and steamboats had allowed this sort of travel before, but the Tin Can Tourists were the early pioneers doing so with an automobile. Also in context of the advancements in trailer travel and campgrounds it was not only practical, but comfortable to do so. This freedom to migrate as one pleased was one of the major draws for what became the Tin Can Tourists’ retirement on the road.

It is worth noting the states the Tin Can Tourists’ came from originally. Nearly all of the Tin Can Tourists were Northerners periodically travelling south, not Southerners travelling north. Evidence exists that can suggest the origins of most Tin Can Tourists through recorded locations of their officers’ original hometowns.

3 Kobler, “People in Trailers,” 18.
4 Frank Bayle, “Life on Wheels is a Bowl of Cherries.” Unknown newspaper clipping from Tin Can Tourists Scrapbook 1 Box 2, TCT, FL Library.
5 No general list of Tin Can Tourist membership exists, but the hometowns of officers are listed in the constitution and bylaws.
Tourist officers from 1919 to 1971, most officers originated from Michigan, Ohio, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, New York, Nebraska and Wisconsin. With the exception of Florida, all of these states were northern states. It is likely that most Tin Can Tourists came from these states as they are a representative organization and vote for officers who reflect their background and interests. In the case of Florida most of these officers appear later in the organization’s history and it is not clear whether they were natives or simply previous immigrants to Florida. Clearly the group had a strong representation of Northern states, and Florida was a particularly appealing destination.

Another defining characteristic of the Tin Can Tourists was their source of income. Most Tin Can Tourists had given up earning a traditional wage or salary prior to going on the road. This was because the mobile nature of their lifestyle did not fit well with keeping a job in a fixed location. Most Tin Can Tourists were people with some sort of retirement income or investment income. Here again Charlie and Esther Treffert provide a great example of the Tin Can Tourists’ financial situation.

Charlie is retired, another typical situation. A considerably percentage of trailerites are retired farmers, policemen, firemen, civil servants living on pensions or the rent from houses they own. The Treffert’s joint annual income hovers around $3,000, which is within the trailerites range. It derives from government bonds bought when Charlie was still a workingman and the rent from three apartments in his native Fond du Lac, Wis.

6 Officers home states without double counting officers serving in multiple years or positions: Michigan 42, Ohio 24, Florida 18, Illinois 18, Indiana 14, New York 13, Nebraska 4, Wisconsin 4, Iowa 2, Massachusetts 2, New Jersey 2, Pennsylvania 2, West Virginia 2, Quebec (Canada) 2, California 1, Kansas 1, Maine 1, Maryland 1, Minnesota 1, Missouri 1, Oregon 1, Texas 1 and Ontario (Canada) 1. Data collected from Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., Constitution and By-Laws, TCT, FL Library.

7 Kobler, “People in Trailers,” 18
In the Treffert’s case they derive most of their income from investment income, but the number of retired civil servants with pensions also represented a large piece of the membership. Those who may have had ongoing work tended to be people who were farmers or working other seasonal professions that allowed for time away to travel, although these “working” Tin Can Tourists became increasingly rare over time. Having a stable source of non-wage income became an expectation of being a Tin Can Tourist. In fact it was not uncommon for many Florida mobile home parks and towns to ban working in the local community. This was the case with Sarasota, Florida, a prominent Tin Can Tourist destination:

The city has adopted a policy which prohibits those living in the park from being employed in the Sarasota area. This allows the city to maintain low cost housing for an itinerant labor supply which would otherwise compete with local citizens. It also encourages “pure tourism” with “imported money” generating fresh income for the city.

Tin Can Tourists neither desired nor were allowed to be “itinerant labor” in the communities hosting them. Consequently, most Tin Can Tourists had to be retired with some non-wage earning income to support themselves.

Many of the Tin Can Tourists, despite having income, were not extremely wealthy and relied also on the relatively inexpensive nature of trailer travel at the time. Even in the 1930s Trailer Travel magazine explained, “The fact that so many are able to indulge this wanderlust is due to their having reached the age of retirement when they can enjoy life as they will, especially at the low cost possible.”

Trailer travelling was a realistic and appealing option to those retiring with a fixed income. One was not tied down to any one location and the excitement of travel could replace the time one spent working. Charlie Treffert explained his notion about how trailer

---


travel was a great idea. “‘The way I figure,’ he was saying between sips, ‘it don’t make any difference if you’re retired on thirty thousand a year or you’re just an ordinary working man, this is the smart way to live nowadays.” To the Trefferts and many Tin Can Tourists the recreational automobility with the travel trailer was the only sensible option for their retirement.

One aspect related to the Tin Can Tourists’ retired demographic was the absence and in fact discouragement of having children in a mobile lifestyle. Life explained that the Trefferts “are childless. Most trailerites have either no children or grownup ones.” Children were not well suited for the Tin Can Tourists’ lifestyle or long term recreational automobility. It was too difficult to keep children enrolled in school if one moved constantly and throughout the year. Also the average travel trailer could not effectively meet the space needs of a large family and remain mobile. In the Trefferts’ case, they even seemed to look down on children in trailer camps. Esther Treffert commented about a young family living in a trailer with children that “They manage fine and I guess it’s a pretty good way for a young couple to get started in housekeeping. Still it’s the wrong atmosphere for children.” Like many Tin Can Tourists, she did not believe that the lifestyle was suitable for children. In fact, according to the article the camp has rules to govern and control children staying in the camp. The Trefferts’ feelings about children were far from unique among the Tin Can Tourists: “Under camp regulations children, unlike dogs, were zoned.” Families and Tin Can Tourists were physically separated in the trailer camps, probably to their mutual benefit.

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 20.
The lifestyle of the Tin Can Tourists as retired childfree auto-nomads contributed to their creation of the concept of retirement on the road. The membership settled into their retirement on the road, which both defined the group’s activates and created a distinct lifestyle. Tin Can Tourists did not shy away from explaining how much they enjoyed this lifestyle. Gus Brandt, a Royal Chief of Tin Can Tourists and retired police officer stated, “A trailer adds years to a person’s life. Having a regular home is too much work. With a trailer I can really be retired.”

Retirement on the road offered greater freedom of movement, easier housekeeping, varied forms of recreation, new locations to visit, and most importantly an affordable cost of living for fixed income retirees.

The eventual demise of the original Tin Can Tourists occurred out of a natural decline in the members as they got older. As the Tin Can Tourists passed away or were no longer able to meet, insufficient new membership was recruited to continue the group. The retirement of the road paired with insufficient recruitment therefore initiated the eventual disappearance of the Tin Can Tourists in the 1980s. Although the Tin Can Tourists themselves disbanded, they were the pioneers of this type of retirement and one can see their influence in the numerous retirees crisscrossing the country today in their recreational vehicles. These new retirees—while not Tin Can Tourists in name—are closely related to Tin Can Tourists in outlook, attitudes and demographics.

—

13 Bayle, “Life on Wheels is a Bowl of Cherries.”
Mobility as the Basis for Freedom, Autonomy and Democracy

The Tin Can Tourists’ ideas about themselves were directly tied to their concept about the meaning of a mobile lifestyle on the road. This lifestyle was infused with an ideology of autonomy, individualism and democracy, which was often understood in terms of mobility as the defining agent of these ideals. Organizationally, the Tin Can Tourists stressed democracy as a core value and emphasized the betterment of their club as a community issue, but it was always a community of voluntary membership as one was free to exercise their individual mobility by leaving. Cotton Seiler has suggested the relationship between automobility and the American concept of individualism in Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America. In the book, Seilers saw automobility as a mechanism for Americans maintaining their idea of individualism in the context of threats to individualism by external and internal forces.¹⁴ In the case of the Tin Can Tourists and their recreational automobility, the fundamental nature of their activity that guaranteed their autonomy, individualism, and freedom was their mobility, which allowed them to move themselves and their belongings at will.

Individual autonomy and freedom of trailers was a central idea even in the early days of the travel trailer. Roger W. Babson’s 1936 article “We’ll Soon Be Living on Wheels” reflected these idealized images of trailers that were present from the beginning: “In the first place, as I see it, this movement on the part of our families is a natural expression, a revolt, of our people against what they apparently feel to be a condition of oppression.”¹⁵ The trailer therefore was a

---

¹⁵ Babson, “We’ll Soon Be Living on Wheels,” 10.
tool to fulfill an inherent desire to break from restrictions and that mobility defeated “a condition of oppression.” He goes on to breakdown critically the conceptual consequences of static living:

Here are salient features of it: When a man moves with his family into a home he has the feeling that he is anchored; that he is in the grasp of his employer, to begin with. He further feels he is in the clutches of politicians. He is marked by the tax assessor and collector, and must submit to any levies made against him. He cannot be certain that the landscape surrounding his residence will remain the same from one day to another, and he has no control over the erection of unsightly neighboring structures. He must put up with objectionable neighbors, should they move close to him and cannot alter conditions detrimental to his children in this respect. Babson reinterpreted static living in terms of restraint, loss of control, and the potential for being subject to anti-democratic forces. Lack of mobility equated quite directly to his loss of freedom, autonomy and individualism, a feeling heightened by the insecurity of the Great Depression. He concluded that there was a possible solution to these problems and one way to regain the mobility lost in modern society. “Those of our people who have turned to rolling homes have been influenced by a characteristic feeling of Americans – resentment against oppressive taxation and a desire for independence and freedom of movement.” The trailer therefore offered a particularly powerful vehicle for mobility by retaining one’s individual autonomy, freedom from oppression, and American democratic ideals. Although not a Tin Can Tourist himself, Babson reflected many ideas that became a distinct draw for purchasers of trailers beginning in the 1930s.

Recalling the Trefferts’ desire for a simpler mobile life, the Life article noted their emphasis on mobility. Although they spoke in subtler terms than Babson, they still clearly emphasized its significance.

---

16 Babson, “We’ll Soon Be Living on Wheels,” 10-11.
17 Ibid., 11.
The element of trailer life that pleases the Trefferts most is its folksiness. “Don’t matter who or what you are,” is the way Charlie expresses it, “here you’re just one of the gang. Me, I talk to everybody and everybody talks to me. Real friendly. If people don’t behave right they can be asked to go some place else or if you don’t like your neighbors, you don’t need to quarrel with ‘em. Just hitch on your car, fold up your awning and git.”

Trailer life to Charlie Treffert was egalitarian, friendly, and open because the trailer ensured the option to leave. Gus Brandt, a Royal Chief of Tin Can Tourists, shared a similar notion, “I’ve lived in [trailers] 11 years and wouldn’t think of living in a house again. It’s the most carefree life there is for retired people. If we don’t like our neighbors, we hitch up and move out.”

The trailer could provide mobility that freed one from being tied down and forced to deal with problems associated with static living. Beyond an escape from annoyances or repression, the trailer’s mobility offered complete flexibility of time and scheduling. Another Tin Can Tourist, Bert Trumble, explained this freedom of time and responsibilities, “I have a house but have used a trailer 13 years for traveling. With a trailer there are no worries, no cares, no schedules. We come and go as we please and no longer live in our house.”

The retired Tin Can Tourists using a trailer, unlike the rest of the working population in static houses, could define his or even her own schedule. This freedom from a predefined working day outside of one’s control was one highly attractive aspect of being an auto-nomad and retiring on the road. The retirement along with travel-trailer life helped free Tin Can Tourists from much of the day-to-day upkeep and worries of normal house ownership.

These ideas of mobility and individualism do conflict with the group’s focus on imposing order and maintaining respectability. The individuals in the group expressed this desire for

---

19 Bayle, “Life on Wheels is a Bowl of Cherries.”
20 Ibid.
individuality at the same time they imposed strict rules to govern themselves. In many ways, they freed themselves from the traditional order of things only to re-impose that order on themselves to maintain respectability. Despite this imposition of order the members of the group largely maintained their mobility and freedom of movement that gave them the ability to travel at will, something that static society could not do as effectively.

Maintaining Respectability, Issues of Race and Women’s Roles

The Tin Can Tourists’ mobile lifestyle was unconventional in many senses. In fact from their inception in the days of autocamping, outsiders often distrusted or denigrated their penchant for vacationing and even living in and around their cars. This perceived judgment by the public at large made Tin Can Tourists very conscious of maintaining their respectability and image. In Trailer Travel magazine of the 1930s the Tin Can Tourists’ formation was explained in terms of both the social aspects as well as solving the issue of maintaining respectability for trailer travelers:

[The Tin Can Tourists of the World] was organized primarily to enable automobile wayfarers to enjoy regular “get-togethers” on the trail, but it also established a set of principles and a code of conduct designed to improve conditions within the ranks and camps and to remove the prejudices existing in the outside world. 21

The Tin Can Tourists had been attacked in the 1920s on grounds that they were cheap or destitute and would contribute little to communities they visited. The organization began to understand that to be taken seriously as upstanding albeit temporary members of a community

they needed to control membership and define themselves as separate from those living in cars out of necessity.

In an effort to maintain a good image, some early loose membership rules eventually gave way to stricter, more controlling ones. According to a 1936 article in *Trailer Travel* magazine:

> The rules were loosely enforced at first, when any member could confer membership on anyone he met on the road without formalities merely if the tenets of the organization were affirmed and the nominal dues paid. Now, however, the candidate for membership must be initiated at a regular meeting, and the code of conduct is enforced so religiously that communities bid for their gatherings. \(^{22}\)

With a more formal process requiring initiation at a formal Tin Can Tourists’ meeting, new members had to endure the scrutiny associated with meeting with leadership and demonstrate their commitment by showing up at a formal group event. Presumably these restrictions prevented loosely associated trailerites who may or may not hold themselves to the Tin Can Tourists’ standards from tarnishing the name of the organization.

The fight to maintain respectability almost cost the Tin Can Tourists their iconic name from the early days of autocamping. A vocal minority of members beginning in the late 1920s had challenged the name “Tin Can Tourist” on the grounds that the phrase had fallen out of favor with the public and seemed unbecoming of a well regarded group. Name changes were unsuccessfully put to a vote by the entire membership several times with each attempt failing. After losing their fight within the Tin Can Tourists in 1935, a separatist group formed the Automobile Tourists Association.

\(^{22}\) “A New Order plus New Facilities in Trailerdom,” 12.
The insurrectionists against the name who felt that the old stigma still lingered because of that name formed a new organization a year ago called the Automobile Tourists Association, headed by Captain E. H. Junglas, formerly secretary of the T.C.T.\textsuperscript{23}

The Automobile Tourists Association largely had to share members with the Tin Can Tourists as many were not willing to give up the annual Tin Can Tourist meetings. The group did not last and no record of activities after World War II have been found during the course of this study. Nonetheless, the attack on the traditional Tin Can Tourist name suggested sensitivity to outside criticism among some of the group members.

Tin Can Tourists were also not afraid to ask someone who was not conforming to the group’s standards to leave. The Trefferts explained one such instance:

“See that empty lot. Well, once there was a couple on it that scrapped all the time. Drank too much, too. They were warned once, then were told to move. Now that don’t happen around here often. Trailer folks aren’t that kind. Why, even at our dances we don’t serve liquor. Nobody wants it.”\textsuperscript{24}

To the Tin Can Tourists, trailer life was better experienced soberly with a general spirit of camaraderie. Heavy drink was certainly frowned upon by many and was never part of the typical Tin Can Tourist experience. The Tin Can Tourists were not expressly religious but time was often allotted on Sunday mornings for members to attend local churches. The group took living cleanly seriously in an effort to remain well respected seriously.

The efforts of the Tin Can Tourists to improve and control their image paid dividends over time as they began to be more accepted by local communities. Life magazine explained, “How the rest of the population has come to regard the T.C.T. and trailerites in general is reflected by the organization’s method of choosing the sites for its get-togethers. It no longer has

\textsuperscript{24} Kobler, “People in Trailers,” 20.

99
to angle for them.” The Tin Can Tourists therefore by the post-World War II era represented a valuable albeit temporary addition to many communities, particularly in Florida.

The major failing in terms of maintaining respectability in the eyes of a modern observer was their failure to rectify racial segregation and discrimination in the group. The Tin Can Tourists’ records reflect a complete absence of any African-American or other racial minorities in the group due to racial restrictions. The original constitution, which was reprinted as late as the 1960s, stated that to qualify as a member one must be of the “white race.” The group was formed and met in the American South at a time when facilities including recreational facilities were not open to all racial groups. It is likely that to maintain good standing in the community the Tin Can Tourists did not seek to upset the racial standards of the time by seeking non-white membership and may have even been likeminded in their thinking. The group existed post-segregation era but took until at least 1967 to remove the racial criteria for membership. Despite removing this criteria there were no known members who were non-white.

The status of women among the Tin Can Tourists is a topic worth consideration. Women in the group were most often married women travelling with their husbands. In many cases traditional gender roles were suggested with the women doing housekeeping in the trailer and men maintaining and driving the recreational vehicle. The 1948 article about the Trefferts showed Esther as a typical housewife not wanting for any of the modern conveniences of static homes.

Esther meanwhile, having washed in the ladies’ quarters and dressed, gets breakfast going. In this, as in other operations of nomadic housekeeping, she is

26 Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., Constitution and By-Laws.
27 Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., Amended Constitution and By-Laws. TCT, FL Library.
aided by nearly as many timesavers as her stay-at-home sisters. The Trefferts’ New Moon [trailer] has room for a gas stove fed by bottled gas, a Frigidaire that stayed frigid 24 hours while the trailer is on the road and site outlets for gadgets like a vacuum cleaner, Mixmaster, electric blanket, electric iron.\textsuperscript{28}

The Trefferts and many other Tin Can Tourist couples suggested that their gender roles remained the same between their life in static housing and their mobile life in a trailer. The only purported benefit to female Tin Can Tourists was that their trailers were easier to keep clean because of their diminutive size compared to a typical home. Mrs. J. T. Allison, a Tin Can Tourist “housewife,” was quoted as saying, “We’re really thrilled with trailer life. There’s so little housework and you meet such an interesting group of people.”\textsuperscript{29} The suggestion of reduced housework was one of the myriad selling points trailer manufacturers used in marketing to women. \textit{Trailer Travel} magazine even had a recurring section on housekeeping topics related to living in a trailer. Although the gender roles appear to be the same as described in these accounts, Tin Can Tourist women over time developed greater influence and their own distinct role in the leadership of the organization.

Despite the traditional gender roles, female Tin Can Tourists did have some influence over the organization by filling leadership roles primarily in the later years of the group. In the early history of the organization, prior to 1925, four women served as officers filling either the position of Royal Secretary or Royal Treasurer seven times. It appears that in the initial years after the group’s founding that women could find leadership positions, but the availability of leadership roles for women in the organization did not last. For just over three decades, between 1925-1956, only two women served as officers only four times (three times as secretary and once

\textsuperscript{28} Kobler, “People in Trailers,” 22.
\textsuperscript{29} Bayle, “Life on Wheels is a Bowl of Cherries.”
as a director). Women had lost ground in the leadership of the organization, but with time, they retook their leadership role. Starting in the 1957 until the end of the available records in the 1971, women held thirty-five percent of total officer positions and fifty-six percent of executive officer positions. Women held the role of Royal Secretary every year of that period and the role of Royal Treasurer and Royal Assistant Secretary all but three times. Two women even broke into the highest leadership positions Royal Chief and Royal Vice Chief two times each.\textsuperscript{30}

Women in the organization may have portrayed themselves as ordinary housewives, but over time were able to gain the respect and prominence in the organization by being elected to important officer positions among the Tin Can Tourists. Women have long held leadership roles in various women’s organizations, but these Tin Can Tourist women achieved their position in a non-gendered organization. It also makes the image of Tin Can Tourist women more complex in that they too were able to seek out and benefit from the freedom and individualism of recreational automobility.

By looking closer at the Tin Can Tourists’ ideology, it easier to understand why they chose to live a life centered around recreational automobility. It is also possible to see the ways in which they envisioned it and how they lived their lives accordingly. Their ideology of recreational automobility is influential in American culture; although not exactly copying Tin Can Tourists, others have been influenced by them through their concepts such as retirement on the road. The Tin Can Tourists failed to rise above the policies of racial segregation in their creation of an organization that was not open to racial minorities. Unlike the Tin Can Tourists’

\textsuperscript{30} Statistics are derived from officer listings in Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., \textit{Constitution and By-Laws}; Tin Can Tourists of the World Inc., \textit{Amended Constitution and By-Laws}. 
failure to effectively change racial policies, the Tin Can Tourists more openly accepted women as leaders in their organization in the later decades of travels. It is with a greater understanding of their ideology and identity that the Tin Can Tourists’ legacy and be clearly be evaluated.
CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF THE TIN CAN TOURISTS OF THE WORLD

The Tin Can Tourists’ legacy is multi-faceted, but nearly always relates back to the concept of recreational automobility. This results from the way they influenced the direction of automobility in America by creating and popularizing a new form of recreation using automotive technology and at the same time pioneering a new form of tourism. Despite the initial decline of the autocamping movement at the end of the 1920s, Tin Can Tourists reinvigorated and revolutionized their activities by both creating and adopting automotive technologies built with the specific purpose of facilitating long-term travel. The durable organization that they created was an essential factor in the survival of autocamping as well as its technological development because the Tin Can Tourists kept the ideas of recreational automobility alive during the downturn in autocamping’s mainstream popularity.

The automotive technologies employed by the Tin Can Tourists in the late 1920s and 1930s took the form of both the hand-built house car and the manufactured travel trailer. These new products established for the first time conceptual goals for the purpose-built recreational vehicle. Recreational vehicles had to provide mobile shelter and amenities while they increasingly had to be convenient, easy to use, and economical. The Tin Can Tourists’ hand-built house cars achieved many of these requirements in its ease of use and convenience, but fell short in its economic practicality as the opportunity cost of a house car conversion was high. The majority of Tin Can Tourists were forced to look elsewhere for a recreational vehicle and they found it in the form of the travel trailer. The Tin Can Tourists’ enthusiastic adoption of the travel trailer supported the new trailer manufacturing companies as well as helped to popularize the
technology in wider circles with the Tin Can Tourist trailer shows. The Tin Can Tourists’ relationship with the new technology kept the recreational vehicle market alive during the Great Depression, which was a development that benefited mainstream Americans looking to experience recreational automobility after World War II and onward.

The Tin Can Tourists’ influence on recreational automobility extends beyond the technology they used to facilitate their activities. Tin Can Tourists also required specialized places in the form of campgrounds and trailer parks for their recreational vehicles to park, visit and resupply. A testament to their effectiveness and influence was their ability to get local city governments in Florida and other states to provide space and sometimes compete for their patronage. In Florida the Tin Can Tourists became a fixture of both Sarasota, during the 1930s, and their city of origin, Tampa for many years after World War II. The influence in the spaces for recreational automobility is not simply limited to the location the group held events. Their influence continued between events as Tin Can Tourists used their mobility to travel the country and visit all kinds of places and tourist attractions. Through their encouragement and patronage of these places, the Tin Can Tourists helped develop an infrastructure for recreational automobility for future Americans on the road.

Taken together the Tin Can Tourists’ contributions to the concept of recreational automobility, the technology they employed to achieve it, and the spaces they used created a new form of tourism. Millions of Americans take to the road each year with a recreational vehicle hoping to see new sights and experience America in a new and relatively unrestricted way. Tin Can Tourists did more than any other individual group at a crucial period in the history of the automobile to develop and popularize these activities. The individuals and groups following in the Tin Can Tourists’ footsteps may not be aware of debt they owe the Tin Can Tourists, but a
remarkably clear line can be drawn between these modern Americans and the activities of the Tin Can Tourists.

Tin Can Tourists believed that beyond the recreation they could enjoy from the travel trailer they would also benefit from greater freedom, autonomy, and be able to live closer to democratic ideals because of the mobility the recreational vehicles offered. The Tin Can Tourists chose to become auto-nomads living full time in their recreational vehicles. Given this unconventional mobile lifestyle they often confronted outsiders who were unsure or critical of them. They confronted these criticisms and became valuable temporary members of many communities through maintaining and enforcing traditional social norms and expectations. Their solution to the public perception issue may not have been the only choice. In fact, other Americans looking for the freedom and autonomy provided by mobility could choose not to look for societal approval and reject societies norms. Counter-culture movements and individuals who rejected aspects of American society and culture turned to recreational automobility to escape, as exemplified in Jack Kerouac’s 1957 work, *On the Road*. Although, this represents another branch of recreational automobility separate from the Tin Can Tourists, it can highlight the ways in which later groups taking to the road modified and adapted the concept to suit their purposes.

Recreational vehicles offered the Tin Can Tourists mastery of the America’s vast spaces and increased opportunities to access both natural and man-made wonders. They could gain closer access to nature and camp in places like national parks without losing the comforts of home. In this respect the recreational vehicle masters nature, allowing its user to experience it without sacrificing modernity. They could also travel the country and see man-made wonders such as skyscrapers, tourist attractions, and cultural sights all while bringing their home with them. This made using their recreational vehicle technology exciting through diverse experiences
and nearly infinite choices. The concept of the recreational vehicle and recreational automobility pairs well with Americans’ general feeling towards new technology. Americans often display an inclination to embrace a technology that could provide new wonderment and excitement.\footnote{David E. Nye, \textit{American Technological Sublime} (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994) xi-xx.} The Tin Can Tourists were no different and they so enthusiastically embraced the technology that, for all practical purposes, they centered their entire lives around it. The mastery of spaces and access to countless wonders still holds its appeal today with modern Americans, some pursue recreational vehicle use part-time and some like the Tin Can Tourists make it a permanent lifestyle.

\textbf{The Demise of the Tin Can Tourists of the World and Rebirth of “Tin Can Tourists”}

The Tin Can Tourists of the World began to decline in numbers and eventually stopped meeting officially in the early 1980s. One reason for this is that the Tin Can Tourists faced greater competition in the world of recreational automobility as their efforts had allowed other groups and individuals to follow in their footsteps without joining the organization. Another factor is that by the 1970s long-term recreational automobility may not have been as economical as it had been. Both of these reasons were likely contributors to the ultimate demise of the original organization.

Americans were increasingly confronted with an abundance of options for recreational automobility. Within a few years of the end of World War II production of recreational vehicles skyrocketed and continued for a couple of decades. Other groups could copy the form of
recreational automobility that the Tin Can Tourists had pioneered. One such group was the Wally Byam Caravan Club International, created by Airstream founder Wally Byam. This group’s membership was restricted to owners of Airstream travel trailers perhaps creating the incentive to buy these luxury trailers. Wally Byam effectively branded his own version of recreational automobility in terms of his own vision. Others not necessarily part of a formal group also took up recreational automobility. American families could use travel trailers for economical vacations. Because of their children and reliance of wage labor, this group could not participate as Tin Can Tourists of the World who were primarily childfree and retired. This created increasing competition in recruiting new committed members to the organization. Both groups with formal organizations and individuals pursuing similar interests enjoyed the technology and spaces created by Tin Can Tourist influence. The new groups absorbed a share of Americans taking to recreational vehicles.

The second factor that contributed to the demise of the Tin Can Tourists was the economic strains put on them in the 1970s by the decade’s high inflation and the Arab oil embargo, which were represented in a decline in the recreational vehicle market. The 1970s is known generally as a decade of economic stagnation for the United States. It was an era of higher inflation that could diminish the relative spending power of retired fixed-income people such as the Tin Can Tourists. The decade also saw instability in the price and availability of oil, which led to higher, less stable gasoline prices and limited quantities. Increased prices and limited availability of gasoline would hit Tin Can Tourists especially hard in that they required it for their travels. Trailer production numbers display this general trend away from travel trailers.
in the 1970s. Recreational type trailers dropped from 241,300 units produced in 1972 to 186,400 in 1977, an almost twenty-three percent drop. These economic strains may have left some Tin Can Tourists unable to travel and reduced the number of new retirees who could practically afford to join the group. The original Tin Can Tourists of the World met officially for the last known time in 1982. The group had made remarkable contributions to American culture, but the times had changed and the original group could not continue. The group’s history had been left largely unstudied or misunderstood prior to this research. This is partially due to people confusing Tin Can Tourists and tin-canners during the early years of the group and the tin-canners disappearance in the late 1920s being incorrectly associated with the Tin Can Tourists. It may also be the fact that this highly individualistic and mobile group left less obvious physical signs of their influence, instead leaving only ideas and ideologies that remained buried in their archival collections and in the memories of its dying membership. The Tin Can Tourists of the World were not forgotten entirely and since 1998 have been reborn as a new group dedicated to restoring and travelling with antique travel trailers and motorhomes. The group’s name lives on as does its legacy in the new group made up of new generations of people.

Tin Can Tourists’ history is important to the history of the automobiles because they illustrate the concept of recreational automobility. The concept of recreational automobility requires serious consideration in the history of the automobile that has been mostly focused on utilitarian transportation or the car as a status symbol and does not fully explain Americans’ relationship with the automobile. Recreational automobility could be used to help explain trends

______________________________________

in national tourism like the “See America First” campaigns and cultural heritage tourism. The concept also ties well with Americans’ desire for new and exciting experiences using technology. This thesis demonstrated the existence of recreational automobility in the case study of the Tin Can Tourists and should serve to point to further historical research about recreational automobility and the history of the automobile.
LIST OF REFERENCES

Primary Sources

Archival

Tin Can Tourists of the World Collection, Florida Library and Archives, Tallahassee, FL.


Books


Images


Periodicals


Babson, Roger W. “We’ll Soon Be Living on Wheels: Millions-Half the Population of the U.S.-Within 20 Years Will Be Trailerites, According to Roger W. Babson,” Trailer Travel, January-February 1936, 10-11.


Kobler, John. “People in Trailers: They find that life on wheels can be beautiful. If the scenery palls, they git,” Life, December 13th, 1948, 18-29.


“Summer Trailer Shows Attract 50,000 Visitors: Automobile Dealers Turn to New Industry on National Scale as Major Companies Enter Field,” Trailer Travel, September 1936, 22.

“T.C.T. Reunion Promises to Set Record: Trailer Exposition at Sandusky Also Will Be Largest Yet-Cedar Point Opened to Trailerites,” Trailer Travel, May-June 1936, 30.

“The Circus Moves In And Then Out,” Trailer Travel, September 1936, 19.


Secondary Sources

Books


Miscellaneous


