

National group celebrates beauty and nostalgia of early travel trailers with campouts around country where the public can peer into history.



TIN CAN TOURISTS

BY MARLA R. MILLER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KENDRA STANLEY-MILLS

CCLASSIC CAR AND VINTAGE TRAILER enthusiast Brian McCool was selling an old pickup when a potential buyer showed up and walked past it to the 1940s Spartan Manor travel trailer sitting in his yard. The guy asked if he wanted another one, explaining he had one up north he wanted to give away for scrap. Used as a cabin and shed, the camper sat since 1960.

McCool, always looking for the next project, found the 1947 Manor in rough shape but saw the potential and pulled it home to Delton. He and his wife Kim already had restored two and knew it was worth saving.

Built by Spartan Aircraft and considered luxury in their day, the Manors are made of riveted aluminum — built to last, even park as a portable home, and withstand the elements.

“This is the keeper,” he said. “We lavished a little more money on it thinking it will be our last trailer that we do.”

As 15-year members of Tin Can Tourists, a vintage motor coach and travel trailer club that hosts gatherings and rallies throughout the state and nation, the McCools enjoy getting together with members to share the pastime, swap decorating and restoration ideas, “stage” the campers for public open houses, and relax over group meals and evening campfires.

Pink flamingos, vintage rolling carts, antique lights and awnings decorate their campsites. Step inside and find lots of turquoise, pink, yellow and red; ice boxes, antique toasters, waffle irons and retro dinnerware; and vintage pillows, metal plates, signs and camper advertisements. The events allow the public to peer into history, to admire a salvaged slice of Americana and an opportunity for the owners to showcase their hard work.

“A lot of people leave starry-eyed and think,



Left: Brandon and Liz Morrison, of Muskegon, rebuilt the back end of their Trotwood and added a permanent bed. **Below:** Forrest and Jeri-Ann Bone revived Tin Can Tourists 20 years ago and remain active in hosting and attending gatherings. **Bottom right:** Brian and Kim McCool enjoy getting together with members to share the pastime. **Bottom left:** Delores Chabot, of Brighton, joins in the vintage car parade around the campground during the Tin Can Tourist Camp Dearborn rally in Milford.



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“I’m going to get one of those without realizing the blood, sweat and tears that go into them,” McCool said.

Tin Can Tourists host gatherings and rallies throughout the state from May to October, starting with the kickoff event at Camp Dearborn in Milford. One of the largest events, it hooks many first-time visitors.

The club classifies anything pre-1945 as antique, 1946-69 as vintage and campers 20 years and older as classic, said Terry Bone, a mid-states regional representative.

Bone’s parents, Forrest and Jeri Bone, revived the club 20 years ago and remain active in hosting and attending gatherings in Michigan and Florida. The original Tin Can

Tourists organization formed at Desoto Park in Tampa, Florida, in 1919 and grew rapidly in the 1920s and ’30s.

“That was when people in the United States started traveling because they got their Model T and they could go places,” Terry Bone said. “The club kind of started back then as a way to educate people about what it meant to organize and travel and camp ... how to be good campers and make sure people wanted to have them back.”

Tin Can Tourists thrived for decades until the late 1970s and died out. In 1998, after Forrest Bone retired from teaching, he renewed the club as an all make and model vintage trailer and motor coach club. Today,

it has about 2,000 members nationwide, with most from Michigan, Florida and California.

Tin Can members retell a similar story: They often luck into one, restore it and end up owning two or three.

"We like that it's something unique, and it's fun to talk to people," McCool said. "These little trailers that we do, and our friends do, they are like little museums. We all collect things to decorate them."

The McCools are good friends with fellow members Brandon and Liz Morrison of Muskegon, even sold them their 1948 Pontiac Silver Streak convertible, which the Morrisons use to pull a 1957 Trotwood.

Brandon Morrison, also a classic car guy, had sticker shock over the price of new campers and wasn't impressed with the quality. He restored and sold a few trailers before finding a keeper in the Trotwood. He isn't afraid to stop and knock on doors, making up cards to leave when people aren't home if he spots a camper wasting

away in a yard.

The McCools and Morrisons go on caravans with the club, including a trip through the Upper Peninsula in 2015 and a multi-state tour along the East Coast last summer. They attract lots of attention on the road and when they camp solo.

"You'll have a \$300,000 motorhome parked next to you, and they will come over and ask, 'Do you mind if we look at your camper,'" Morrison said. "We tow with an old car, so there's always lots of questions."

Brandon Morrison grew up in Lansing and camped with his family at P.J. Hoffmaster State Park. After relocating to West Michigan, he reached out to the state park to organize The West Michigan Vintage Gathering. The event continues to grow, quickly selling out the 130 spots for vintage campers and attracting more than 1,000 visitors to the open house. For many, it brings back memories of camping with their families.

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— Jeanne Bosch*

the most about our vintage campers, as opposed to the new stuff that doesn't have any character. The old campers are cozy and different."

Tin Can Tourists come from all backgrounds, ages, occupations and incomes, and the group aims to have fun — sometimes pranking each other — and come together for the love of camping, vintage trailers and a bygone era. Many members have become such good friends, they get together during the offseason to celebrate holidays and shop for vintage treasures, said Jeanne Bosch, who camps with her husband Brian in a 1935 Bowlus.

"Having people that have the same interests as you do and value the same things that you do, you all kind of fit together really well," she said.

Collectors of phonographs and vintage cars and motorcycles, the Bosches found the rare Bowlus Road Chief — an early riveted

aluminum trailer made by designer and aircraft builder Hawley Bowlus — through the Tin Can Tourists blog and drove to California to buy it.

The Bosches live near Harbor Beach and built a barn for the Bowluses and their growing collection of trailers, which peaked at nine and now hovers at five. They joined the club to get ideas and tips and try to camp with the group every other weekend during the summer. It's also a good way to see the state and encourage tourism in smaller towns like Milan, Wyandotte, Vicksburg, Empire, Port Sanilac, Port Austin and others.

Many women, single, married and widowed, have taken up the hobby, too. Sherree Hartwig of Benton Harbor bought a Tin Can membership for Christmas a few years ago. Her husband prefers to stay home with the dogs, so Hartwig pulls her camper and sets it up on her own.

Now on her third vintage trailer, she

Facing page, top: A vintage camper is adorned in lights and signs during the Tin Can Tourist Camp Dearborn rally in Milford. **Right:** The McCools' renovated interior. **Below:** Mary Rodzewicz, of Garden City, sits inside her 1960 Shasta, which she named "Maggie Pie" after her mother.

traveled to Oklahoma last winter to buy a 1970 Avion Suntrail for camping this summer. Hartwig buys them mostly restored but enjoys adding her own finishing touches, like sewing the curtains and furnishing it with items from the era.

"I got into it because I wanted to make more friends, I wanted fellowship with people and I like vintage trailers," she said. "You don't just set your camper up and sit there and wait for someone to come along. You have to go out and talk to people."

Longtime campers Roger and Jennie Merkle own a 1948 Prairie Schooner and took an interest in vintage trailers after attending Camp Dearborn's open house. They started with a 1972 Airstream, then restored a 1964 Monitor and are working on a 1958 Terry, rescued from property up north, to eventually travel around the country. Roger Merkle is a carpenter, with a background in historical restoration, so he works on fixing



the inside and Jennie decorates.

"We both just retired, it's been fun because it keeps us busy and it's something we like to do together," she said. "You can research these, but they're sold old, it's hard to find a lot of information. We ask each other opinions and questions and find out answers on how to do things." ≈

Marla R. Miller is an award-winning journalist who lives in Norton Shores where she enjoys the lakeshore lifestyle.

Tin Can calendar

Recovered from backyards, lots up north and found on the internet and transported from as far away as Florida, Oklahoma and California, vintage trailers are making a comeback thanks in part to TV restoration shows and the tiny home phenomenon. It's a labor of love for most owners who enjoy restoring the campers to their original state and filling them with period-appropriate furnishings.

Get involved or see for yourself at upcoming Tin Can Tourists events:

- Aug. 3-5 — Classic Camper Caravan in the Park VI, Milan
- Aug. 16-19 — 10th annual Antique Boat and Vintage Camper Show, Port Sanilac
- Aug. 16-19 — TowJam 4 Music Weekend, Mancelona
- Aug. 23-26 — Holly Retro 2018, Holly
- Aug. 24-26 — Pontiac Lake Campout (no open house), White Lake
- Sept. 13-16 — Eaton Rapids Air 2018, Eaton Rapids
- Sept. 20-23 — Second annual Shadow of the Bear Rally, Manistee
- Sept. 27-30 — 2018 Fall Gathering Camp Dearborn, Milford
- May 14-19, 2019 — Michigan TCT Centennial Celebration, Milford
- June 17-23, 2019 — Michigan Centennial Caravan to Traverse City

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