

RETRO HOMES on the Road

by Susan Thomas Springer / for The Bulletin Special Projects

From the gypsy caravan, to the tin can tourist, to the travel trailer—homes on wheels have come a long way.

But as recreational vehicles have grown in size, adding every possible convenience, some folks prefer to look back.

Today, there's a growing group of retro camper enthusiasts. Their interest may have grown out of vintage cars, and they may enjoy the process of restoration, but many simply like to vacation in style.

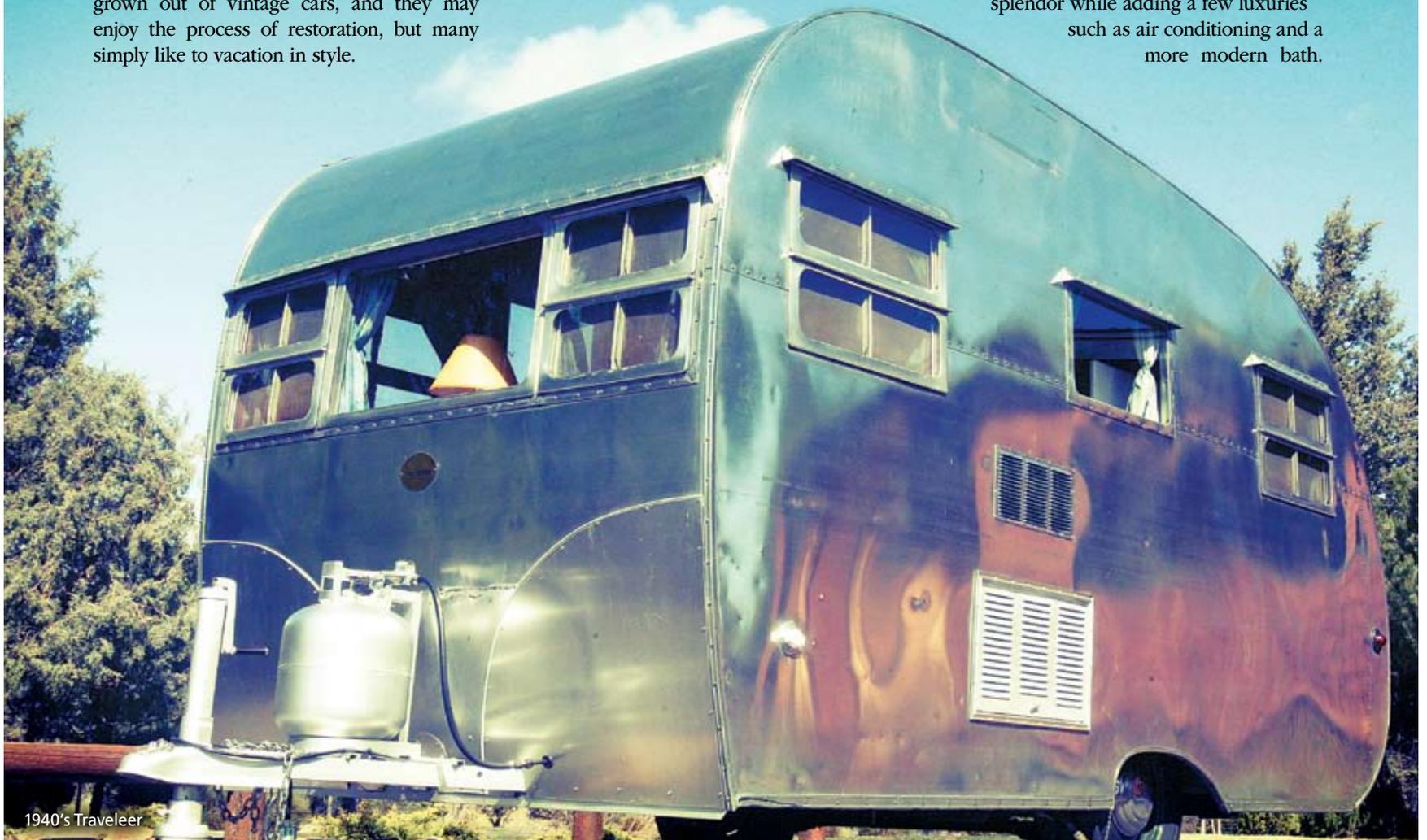
The appeal reaches through various age and income groups to a wide range of travel options from family vacations to vintage trailer rallies.

George Shebley of Powell Butte admits to being a bit “nuts” about the post-WWII era trailers he likes with birch paneling and

beautiful craftsmanship. So far, Shebley has purchased 10 trailers, restored many and sold five.

“I’m a little obsessed with it. I don’t think I need to go to a 12-step program for it yet...” says Shebley.

His favorite is his 1947 Spartan Manor which he lovingly restored to its original splendor while adding a few luxuries such as air conditioning and a more modern bath.



1940's Traveleer

Photos by Lyle Cox



1948 Spartan Manor

He takes it to vintage trailer rallies and has won a few awards.

“I’ll be buried in that one,” said Shebley, only half in jest.

Shebley thinks the current interest in retro trailers stems from sentimental reasons—that people remember the comfort and fun

of traveling in their parents’ or grandparents’ trailers.

The organizer of Oregon’s Rollin’ Oldies Vintage Trailers agrees. Jerry Kwiatkowski thinks the current down economy is sparking an interest in reliving the good old days.

“People are looking for something from the past—searching for something that brings back good memories,” said Kwiatkowski.

One pioneer of the travel trailer is Wally Byam, born in Baker City, Oregon.

In 1925, Byam published an article titled, “How to Build a Trailer for One Hundred Dollars.” That popular article spawned Airstream Inc.

In the 40s, the tiny and affordable teardrop trailers began both homebuilt and through kits, then evolved, often with sides made from the wings of bombers.

The Spartan trailer has its roots in aeronautics history led by billionaire and oil tycoon J. Paul Getty. As owner of the company during World War II, Getty was busy manufacturing bombers as well as civilian airplanes. After the war, he combined his knowledge of fabrication with a work force skilled in aircraft-grade aluminum to manufacture Spartan Trailers.

This rich history shows in the sleek and lightweight design of retro campers.

“Getty built the Cadillac of the mobile home at the time—they were like aircraft inside,” said Shebley.

Rollin’ Oldies Vintage Trailers is an informal group that shares information and meets at an annual camping spot. This group, about 170 members strong, is based in the Northwest for owners of retro trailers, teardrops and motor homes.