

Hitting the Road: Motor Camping with the Early Tin Can Tourists

by Roadside Historian Daniel Hershberger

**Saturday Evening, September 23rd, 8:30 pm
at the main TCT tent**

As automobiles became more affordable in the first decades of the 20th century, Americans hit the road in record numbers. Once they discovered the freedom automobile ownership brought, individuals and families alike headed out determined to “See America First.” As many traveled using canned food along the way, “tin can tourists” was but one descriptive term applied to these motor campers.

By 1919, a more formal organization was founded calling themselves the Tin Can Tourists. The rapid growth of this new organization paralleled the explosive growth of motor camping in general during the decade of the 1920s. Because an extensive network of roadside businesses had yet to be developed, these early auto tourists found that they had to carry all of their necessities with them. From basic shelter (a tent with folding cots) to food storage (a running board pantry) to cooking and lighting (a gasoline stove and lantern), these modern gypsies traveled, for the most part, self contained and self sufficient.

This presentation will examine the early decades of motor camping – the basic concept of motor camping, the unique equipment that was carried, where folks camped and how they found their way. Profusely illustrated, this slide lecture is filled with historic photos and postcards, vintage advertisements, period catalog pages, and early roadmaps. It will also discuss the advent of the recreational trailer industry and some of the pioneer manufacturers. It will offer a most complete view of motor camping as it developed in the first decade of the Tin Can Tourists, in an informative and entertaining way.

Early Motor Camping Exhibit

During the Open House, Saturday September 23rd, Noon - 3:00 pm,

Site Number 50 (across from the Camp Dearborn comfort station)

Be sure to check out Dan’s early motor camping exhibit, during this year’s Open House. The exhibit features his 1927 Auto-Kamp trailer, an early fold-out tent rig made in Saginaw, Michigan by one of the first travel trailer manufacturers. The rest of the exhibit is filled with authentic period motor camping artifacts from his collection including folding furniture, gasoline appliances, and a deluxe running board kitchenette. Dan will be on hand to answer questions and demonstrate some of the vintage camping gear.

About Daniel Hershberger

For over four decades, Daniel Hershberger has been involved in the research and documentation of the American roadside. He has developed and taught undergraduate as well as graduate-level courses on roadside history at colleges and universities and conducted classes for the Henry Ford Museum. Over the years, he has made numerous presentations at international conferences, for historic preservation organizations, and at various museums.

An avid collector of roadside-related artifacts, images and literature, Dan has exhibited at the TCT Annual Gathering since 2008. His unique motor camping exhibit has been a feature at Greenfield Village’s Old Car Festival since 2002, and has been included in several prestigious vintage car and trailer events including the Hilton Head Concours d’Elegance, as well as the Centennial Celebrations of both the Lincoln Highway Association in 2013 and the Tin Can Tourists in 2019. Citing his efforts and accomplishments in sharing his knowledge and providing a unique perspective on early automobile camping, Dan was inducted into the Tin Can Tourists’ Hall of Fame in 2010.

