

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Fostering nomadic living in California

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"Trailer for sale or rent, rooms to let for 50 cents...." By the time country singer Roger Miller wrote those opening lyrics for his hit song "King of the Road" in 1964, the nationwide phenomenon of trailer travel and trailer parks was already decades old, having begun in the 1920s, and would explode in popularity with the hardship of the Depression in the 1930s.

The Desert Sun noted in 1936, "The trailer brigade is well under way. And California, long the host to the world, now plays host to a nation on wheels. The mushroom growth of these mobile homes fostering nomadic living on an unprecedented scale is no less than astonishing. Already there are more than 300,000 and by next year it is estimated there'll be half a million. And a dozen years hence, say some sociologists, a quarter of the population will be free-wheeling it hither and yon in trailer homes."

"Imagine what this can mean for California's \$200,000,000 tourist crop! It will certainly grow. It might even double in a decade. A little foresight, at this early stage of the trailer movement, will pay big dividends. California can prepare now to be a good host to the trailers by providing more auto camp and park facilities and thus get the jump on other states competing for this business."

Indeed, by the middle of the century in the desert, there was a profusion of trailer parks, trailer villages, a few trailer courts, some trailer villas and even a trailer corral.

But the advent of parks wasn't universally applauded as evidenced by various newspaper advertisements by these establishments which sought to disabuse the public of the notion that the parks were peopled by those of "means by no means" but instead were rather luxurious in affording a peripatetic lifestyle.



The Orchard Trailer Park on 1862 South Palm Canyon Drive in an undated photograph. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In 1937 the newspaper reported sixty-seven trailers parked at Ramon Trailer Park over a single weekend, "some of the new trailers are like palace Pullman cars, having every convenience and costing as much as \$10,000...many important people who are touring the country have stopped at (the) park and while here they often dine at the best hotels and cafes and spend much money with local business establishments."

The debate about trailer parks competing with traditional hotels for travelers was serious. The word "park" had an intentional double meaning: conjuring up verdant lawns as well as indicating a place to bring one's vehicle to a stop. The parks added amenities like shady ramadas, community pools, shuffleboard, dancing, private baths, restaurants, groceries, and even beauty parlors to attract visitors.

In March 1953, fourteen Palm Springs trailer park proprietors took out a full-page ad in The Desert Sun welcoming "trailerites" and urging them to demonstrate their economic impact over a two-day period dubbed "Desert Trailer Dollar

Days." Intended to emphasize that the parks were an "integral and necessary part of our community," the park residents would have an "opportunity to let their money talk for them in terms of concrete proof of their importance..." All expenditures were to be made with silver dollars dispensed at the park offices in exchange for cash or checks.

The advert trumpeted, "Two million Americans can't be wrong." It continued, "Trailerite is a new way of living. It is graphic testimony to a sociological change in America that we can not deny, restrict or prohibit because it is cradled in human desire—a simple desire for freedom, independence, practical economy, travel, adventure, and vocational mobility."

The sentiment was passionate. "When we are discussing ...trailer parks we are discussing admirable human desires and inviolable American right!"

The ad recounted there were \$300,000,000 worth of trailers sold across the country in 1952 and they expected \$100,000,000 more in just eleven western states and touted the luxurious

appointments with which trailers were now routinely outfitted. "The 'hottest' selling item on the trailer market today is a five- to six-thousand dollar unit, with full-size beds, bathrooms, the finest in electrical and sanitation engineering. Fifty percent of these homes are bought with cash, and the other 50 percent on 24 and 36 month paper. These are not credit risk people...Can any other business boast of a class of people who pay-off on a 24-month financing in 11 months? The average pay-off on 36 months' paper is 13 months."

To accompany his trailer, perhaps sometimes to haul it, trailerites had substantial, even expensive, cars. The ad notes that 38 percent of trailers were hitched to Cadillacs, Packards, Chrysler and Buicks and another 36 percent were being pulled by Hudsons, Oldsmobiles, Dodges and Pontiacs.

But mostly importantly, the park owners wanted readers to know "Another fact—80 percent of mobile home owners stay put in one place. They're working in the community in which they live. And they have money in the bank...There is more than one reason why sensible, solid American citizens have adopted this mode of living. It's the all-important reason of practical, money making economy. They are doing it because they want to stay in a position where they can keep their bills paid."

The ad then summed up, "The Desert Area Trailer Park Owners Association are proud of our people. Let the City of Palm Springs respect them! We are proud of our business." To demonstrate their economic clout, for two days that March, all trailerites would buy everything for their daily lives, "whether for groceries, amusements, clothes, gas and oil, drug store purchases, etc.," in silver dollars, and the local economy would take note. The effort would combat the "rather unhappy fact when you consider our common American birthright—the absurd snobbishness with which too many of the uninformed survey the mobile home and trailer park business."