

Home on the Road: the Motor Home in America

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compared to the railroads (remember the 1934 film *It Happened One Night*, when Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert caught a Greyhound?). Most of the book focuses on this period of development and growth, but Walsh does discuss the era of lost innocence, when the bus industry could not avoid becoming the poor person's transport after the war as aviation became the newest and most glamorous way to travel long distances. Ironically, buses were trapped in the same way they had helped trap the railroads two decades earlier, and only the charter tour side of the industry appealed to more affluent riders. Walsh's account of all this is not definitive, given the episodic structure of the chapters. Still, woven into the individual chapters is the best recent account of the rise and relative decline of a transportation alternative to both the railroad and the motor car. Because she develops cases of midwestern bus operations, the volume should be especially interesting to readers of this journal.

Home on the Road: The Motor Home in America, by Roger B. White. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000. xii, 220 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

Reviewer Keith A. Sculle is Head of Research and Education, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. His research and publications on North America's historic material culture have focused largely on the automobile road and roadside.

In *Home on the Road*, Roger B. White, land transportation historian at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, details the history of the self-propelled recreational vehicle (RV). Take note from the outset: White's focus on self-propelled recreational vehicles excludes trailers towed behind automotive vehicles. This book, the most widely shared and lasting benefit of an exhibition White curated in 1985 for the Smithsonian, will strongly attract anyone wanting to know the who, what, and when facts of the self-propelled RV in chronological sequence. White dutifully acknowledges the availability to researchers of the archive gathered for the Smithsonian exhibit, but most people will probably be satisfied with reading this well-documented monograph. The Smithsonian Institution Press and White are to be applauded for taking their work to the reading public.

White unfolds his narrative smoothly, first introducing the self-propelled RV's changing cultural reasons. In the early 1900s, those seeking respite from routinized life created a demand. The tiny number of automobile owners who actually adapted the chassis of their automobiles to carry specially adapted houses for outdoor therapy first satisfied the demand. Different rationales later justified the RV:

faddishness in the 1920s; institutionalization of the annual vacation since the late 1940s; and affluent suburbanization expressed in mobilized homes beginning in the 1960s. Production bolted from 200 to 63,500 annually between 1960 and 1973, but from this apex declined to 9,800 units in 1980 due to the energy crisis of the 1970s. The annual production average of 34,250 units from 1983 to 1996 demonstrates the type's sustained popularity with those who can afford them. Following his effective introduction, White chronicles the fortunes of the subject in seven chapters.

Two foundational assumptions about people's desires for RVs—"the intense enthusiasm of their owners and the intimate pleasure of traveling in a vehicle that was both an oversized car and an under-sized house" (8)—undercut this historical elaboration. Why painstakingly identify, pursue, and analyze sources—both archival and oral—if a universal value—pleasure—is the root of the phenomenon rather than any explanation tied to the culture of different periods? White himself clearly enjoys his subject, and he is not alone among scholars in the tendency to fondly embrace in their work various aspects of the consumer culture with which they are personally familiar. It would be absurd to strike enjoyment from the list of motives for writing. We may, however, have to wait for a change of fortunes in the consumer culture before critical analysis emerges. The summit of White's emotional commitment is reached when he pronounces in his final sentence: "No longer an experiment or fad, the comfortable, well-equipped home on the road is here to stay" (188). What has happened to those lessons from history that change is the only constant? Self-propelled RVs end up too much a natural consequence of the nation's destiny to amuse itself, it seems in White's viewpoint, for the context in which he rests the laboriously assembled details to go unchallenged.

In the meantime, Iowans as well as readers everywhere can trace in readable prose the evolution of an interesting physical expression of Americans' prevailing values of "home, family, travel, and outdoor lifestyles" (188). Midwesterners were important. In 1919, for example, Edward and Grace Renner of Des Moines, Iowa, commissioned a vehicle body maker to craft a house-car fitted onto their truck's frame. Life-Time Manufacturing, an Iowa company, helped popularize motor homes, beginning in the 1960s. And Winnebago Industries, from Forest City, Iowa, has been a key player in the industry since the 1960s. Life on the road only gets better, it *might* be assumed.

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