

# Here's What RV Camping Looked Like 100 Years Ago

As Americans hit the road for Labor Day weekend, we salute the Tin Can Tourists—the DIY auto enthusiasts who started it all.

BY [KEVIN JOHNSON](#) AUGUST 29, 2019

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Early RV campers pose for a photo on Christmas Day, 1920, in Desoto Park, Florida—about a year after the first Tin Can Tourists' assembly. The group's ethos—an incongruous mixture of escapism and orderliness—inspired American auto campers to load up their Model Ts and drive along freshly paved roads, searching for scenic spots to camp. STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY

MR. LANDLORD HAS NOTHING ON US” begins a poem printed on a small Curt Teich postcard from 1921. Above the passage's 13 lines—which call for “Alligator shooting” and “Razor-backs rooting”—a colorized photograph shows a shaggy outdoorsman posing in an overgrown Florida campsite, surrounded by oak trees dripping with Spanish moss.

It's a dead-on depiction of the card's subject: the Tin Can Tourists, a group whose DIY naturalist spirit paved the way for today's RV campers.

Equal parts car club and camping collective, the Tin Can Tourists of the early 20th century were a membership organization based around camper travel in its incipiency—a sort of fraternity for nomads looking for a life in permanent transit. Their earliest organized meeting was in 1919 in Tampa's Desoto Park (unintentionally establishing Florida as the perennial RV vacation spot for years to come). That's where 22 campers driving their “tin lizzies” worked to establish a culture of order and high moral values while retaining a sense of freedom behind the wheels of their tricked-out Model Ts.

The group's goal was to “unite fraternally all autocampers,” and its word-of-mouth marketing led to a rapid growth in membership and annual events in the 1920s and '30s. Gatherings were held in state and local parks from Florida to Michigan (and occasionally at the base of the Washington Monument in D.C.). Attendees numbered in the thousands, and as more American workers lost their jobs during the Great Depression, there was more time to attend Tin Can Tourist conventions around the eastern U.S. According to news reports, the club counted 150,000 members by the mid-1930s.

The Tin Can Tourists hit their stride during this period thanks to highway improvements across the U.S.—a precursor to the Interstate Highway System, authorized in 1956 by President Eisenhower—and affordable, mass-produced vehicles (between 1908 and 1927, Ford built some 15 million Model Ts). Families found an affordable new way to travel and camp overnight, while other enthusiasts found a new hobby: redesigning cars to suit campers' needs. Many of the group's annual conventions—most took place in Florida, though Michigan and other states played host as well—doubled as expositions for displaying cars modified to carry kitchen equipment, barrels of water, and, in some cases, all the luxuries of a family home.



With the onset of World War II, however, the group's decline seemed inevitable. As a national war-first mentality took hold and rationing began in earnest, Tin Can Tourist membership dwindled. (According to a *LIFE* magazine article, attendance at an annual meeting in 1936 was over 1,500. By 1939, a mere 645 campers showed up for the same event.) At the same time, campers' tastes were migrating toward spiffier mobile offerings, factory-designed for car camping.

Yet the Tin Can Tourists remain influential today—a group whose humble beginnings as a gathering of virtuous vagabonds managed to pioneer recreational mainstays such as group camping, summer trips to Florida, and modern-day RVing.

The archival photographs below capture the group's heyday in encampments throughout the U.S.—barbecues, campground games, and all—and attest to their long-lasting influence on America's holiday roads.



Camping in the shadow of the Washington Monument and Smithsonian Institution might be a little tricky today. But in 1921, these Tin Can Tourists did what most motorists of the time did: set up camp wherever they liked. State and national parks didn't establish formal campgrounds near main thoroughfares until U.S. highways were developed and car travel had increased. NATIONAL PHOTO COMPANY COLLECTION / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION,



2016823766 The Tin Can Tourists sought to form a community at the campground. What better way to do that than through communal cooking? Here, volunteer cooks at a convention in Arcadia, Florida, circa mid-1920s, labor over meats on a dugout pit cooker. T. ERICSON / STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY



When it came to modifying camper vans, the Tin Can Tourists pulled out all the stops. This house car from 1929—belonging to Harriett Warren, Flora Kavanaugh, and Westel Ashe, all of Brattleboro, Vermont—was nicknamed “Harriett.” Cars like these were common sights at Tin Can Tourist campsites. As RV camping grew more popular, auto shows became more frequent, and campers began to trick out their cars and buses to impress other group members. STATE



ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY A group of dapper campers share a watermelon on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., circa 1921. The Ford Model T was built with size in mind. According to Henry Ford, the pioneering design was “large enough for the family, but small enough for the individual to run and care for.” The built-in trunk—a first for automobiles at the time—allowed tents, cots, and other gear to share space with a family on long road trips. NATIONAL PHOTO COMPANY COLLECTION / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, 2016823765



Cars, trailers, and recreational vehicles stipple the grounds in Arcadia, Florida, during the 12th-annual Tin Can Tourists convention, in 1931. The group’s meetings were a boon to local economies, leading cities to compete with one another for the right to play host each year. STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY





One of the Tin Can Tourists' guiding principles was that entertainment for campers should be clean and wholesome. Shuffleboard—being played here in Dade City, Florida, circa 1936—was a perfect example. Camp games of all sorts gained popularity as road-tripping families and groups looked for more amenities where they stayed. T. ERICSON / STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY



The Beach Boys didn't enshrine "woodie" station wagons into surf culture for another 15 years, putting these campers in 1949 well ahead of the curve. American car culture exploded in the years after the Tin Can Tourists formed. In fact, a straight line can be drawn from the early days of outrigging Model Ts for comfort and style to the hot-rod subculture of the mid-20th century. STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY



Family vacationers of the 1950s and '60s furthered camping's mass-market appeal and created an industry built around holiday travel in luxury recreational vehicles. Here, a family of five share a meal in a pop-up camping trailer, circa 1966. STATE ARCHIVES OF



FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY The teardrop trailer—affectionately called a “canned ham”—was a popular option for families after World War II, beloved for its simplicity, affordability, and easy towability. Above, a teardrop trailer sits hitched at a campsite in the Florida Keys, circa 1969. STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY





A family picnics outside a pop-up camper trailer near Panama City, Florida, in 1977. Though far removed from the Tin Can Tourists' heyday, modern RV campers have roughly the same ethos as those early campers did—the desire to hit the road, get back to basics, and feel lost in a familiar world. JAMES L. GAINES / STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY