"THEY'RE MY FAMILY NOW": THE CREATION OF COMMUNITY AMONG RVERS

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Abstract: This paper examines living in a recreational vehicle as an alternative lifestyle for retired people in North America. Based on fieldwork in trailer parks and on "boondocking" sites on government land, the paper argues that RVers experience a greater sense of community and fewer of the emotional problems common in old age than those who have chosen other forms of retirement living. It is further argued that the reciprocity which anthropologists have often noted as a key factor in creating social bonds is more easily achieved among RVers than in other settings in North America.

Résumé: Cet article examine la vie dans un véhicule de rentrée (RV) comme mode de vie alternatif pour les retraités en Amérique du Nord. Cette étude est basée sur des enquêtes effectuées dans les parcs pour roulottes et dans des sites de "boondocking" sur des terrains gouvernementaux. L'auteur constate que les adeptes des véhicules de rentrée ont un plus grand sens de la communauté et moins de problèmes émotionnels liés à l'âge, que les retraités qui ont opté pour un autre mode de vie. L'auteur note aussi que les adeptes des RV réussissent plus facilement à développer la réciprocité que les anthropologues considèrent comme un facteur indispensable à la création de liens sociaux.

Living either full- or part-time in a recreational vehicle has been an alternative lifestyle in North America since the 1920s when the first tent trailers were manufactured. By the 1930s, during the depth of the depression, Wally Byam's Airstream company could not keep up with the demand for his self-contained "house trailers." By 1936 there were about 200 000 "trailer nomads" (see Hartwigsen and Null 1989 for a brief history of the house trailer

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phenomenon). In the past 50 years there has been an enormous proliferation of RVers of all ages and interests, and these have formed a multitude of clubs and associations. Today there are at least 40 RV clubs with over a million members that meet a variety of needs or reflect particular interests. There are, for instance, clubs for people who own a particular type (motorhome) or brand (Airstream, Avion, Holiday Rambler) of RV. Clubs may be organized according to gender, age, marital status or social group (women, people over 50, singles, singles who drive motorhomes, blacks); clubs may appeal to people with a special interest, hobby or former occupation (the deaf, birdwatchers, Christians, submarine veterans); or clubs may be organized by people committed to a particular style of RVing (boondocking, full-timing, flea-marketing, even singles who return to boondock in a particular spot year after year). The largest organization of RVers is the Good Sam Club, which currently has 800 000 members (Estes 1992:7). Good Samers identify their rigs with a bright orange decal showing a smiling good samaritan. This organization is founded on the principle that RVers *can trust each other.*

This paper, which is a preliminary report based on a two-and-a-half month pilot study, examines RVing as a modern retirement alternative for North Americans. After a brief discussion of our research methods and the variety of RVing styles, we compare RVers who follow two markedly distinct RV lifestyles: private resort or membership park residents and boondockers. We then turn to the question of how elderly RVers establish the ties that enable them to cope with the problems that more sedentary elders solve by turning to friends and relatives. In other words, how do RV nomads form community?

Sociological and socio-ecological definitions of community traditionally focussed on shared interest in a common territory and on social organization and activities based on this shared territory (Bender 1978:5; Osgood 1982:23). However, as North American society has become more mobile, social interaction based on shared territory has become less important. Now, as Bender observes, "A preoccupation with territory . . . ultimately confuses our understanding of community" (1978:6). Besides territory, feelings of community are created by shared social organization and "we-feeling" (Osgood 1982:23). Or, as Bender says:

> A community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation. Relationships are close, often intimate, and usually face to face. Individuals are bound together by affective or emotional ties rather than by a perception of individual self-interest. There is a "we-ness" in a community. One is a member. (1978:7)

There is a concern that social change has resulted in the destruction of community in contemporary North America (Bender 1978:4). For instance, Bellah et al., argue that although Americans value mobility and privacy, these

values "rob us" of "opportunities to get to know each other at a reasonably intimate level in casual, unforced circumstances" (1985:135). North Americans' high regard for these values have, in other words, robbed them of a sense of belonging—of a sense of community. If this is true, we would expect RVers, who choose their lifestyle at least partially *for* its mobility, to be isolated, lonely people who have difficulty in establishing a network or a community to help them cope with crises. Such is not the case.

Although retired RVers do not share a common territory or a common history, they have developed strategies that allow them to establish instant community. These strategies include the use of space to define a sense of "weness" and insistence on reciprocity. RVers expect to provide help and support to others in their RV community in time of crisis, to share food when there is surplus and to engage with each other in ways that assure security of person and property. Reciprocity demonstrates the equality of those who share and expresses the principle, "We're all the same here."

RVing as a Retirement Alternative

Since the end of World War II, retired North Americans have increasingly turned to RV living as an alternative lifestyle (see Hoyt 1954 for an early discussion of trailer living by retirees). Estimates of the size of this population vary from 350 000 (see Hartwigsen and Null 1989:319; Howells 1990:64) to eight million (Born 1976:257).

The popular press has been sensitive to the interest of the elderly in RVing as an alternative lifestyle, as a casual glance through the pages of *Trailer Life* and *Motorhome* will attest. Most of the models in the advertisements in those magazines belong to the "active elderly" category. Publications outlining retirement alternatives also focus on the RV lifestyle as one of those alternatives. For example, *On the Road in an RV* is published by the American Association of Retired Persons; the August 1990 issue of *Aide* Magazine, a publication of the USAA, an organization for retired U.S. military, FBI and Secret Service agents, has an article on RVing as its lead article; the how-to-do-it book *Full-Time RVing*, published by *Trailer Life*, acknowledges that "Most full-timers are retirees" (Moeller and Moeller 1986:6) and contains several sections on retirement; Howells' book *Retirement Choices* includes information on RV retirement (1987:271-281); and the volume *Retirement Guide for Canadians* has a section on RV living (Hunnisett 1981).

Anthropologists and gerontologists have not been as sensitive to RVing as a retirement alternative. Although there is a considerable gerontological literature on seasonal migration, we found only two scholarly articles focussed on full-time RVing. One (Born 1976) was a typology of desert RVers based on brief interviews. The research procedure on which the other publication was

based was limited to questionnaires distributed to members of a nationally based camping organization with a resort format (Hartwigsen and Null 1989).

There are difficulties with a research method that depends on questionnaires distributed in private resort and membership parks. First, this approach misses entirely those RVers who avoid resort parks, preferring to "boondock" – to park with few amenities at little or no cost on public lands. As we argue below, boondockers have different assumptions about what makes a good quality of life than do people who spend most of their time in private parks. Second, in our experience many RVers – especially boondockers – are hostile to questionnaires and either refuse to answer them or lie on them. For reasons we discuss below, this attitude toward questionnaires is consistent with the values that underlie the ability of RVers to quickly form communities. Researchers who depend on questionnaires distributed in private parks would, therefore, have at best a distorted picture of a distinctive group of Rvers.

Research Method

Our field research on RVers was conducted between October 1 and December 15, 1990. Our goals were to interview as many different kinds of retired RVers as possible and to focus on Canadians travelling in the United States. We attempted to live and be like the people we wished to study. Our age and appearance facilitated this (we did not alienate potential informants by our youth, a problem encountered by some researchers attempting to work in retirement communities; see Streib, Folts and LaGreca 1984). We rented a 12-year old, 25-foot Prowler trailer and pulled it from British Columbia to the U.S. southwest with an aging van. We stayed in private and public RV parks in British Columbia, Nevada, Arizona and California. We boondocked on U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land in the southwestern desert and (with hundreds of others) we trespassed on an abandoned World War II Army training base – popularly known as The Slabs or Slab City – near Niland, California. We slept overnight in private parks, in public campgrounds, in roadside rest areas and in the parking lots of truck stops. In short, for two-and-one-half months we became RVers.

We conducted 50 interviews with retired RVers, some who were singles and others who were couples. Of our interviews, 34 were with full-timers and 16 were with part-timers; 25 were with Americans, 24 with Canadians and 1 was with a British couple. Of the 24 Canadians, 16 were full-timers, while 18 of the 25 Americans were full-timers. We were able to ascertain the ages of 81 of our informants: 2 of these (both women married to older men) were in their 40s, 13 were in their 50s, 45 in their 60s, 19 in their 70s and 2 in their 80s. Our youngest informant was 46, the oldest 86.

We followed an interview guide and asked everyone the same questions, although not necessarily in the same order (also see Kaufman 1986:22-23).

We did not tape our conversations, which were informal and intended to encourage people to talk in a relaxed context about what was important to them. Some of our informants were curious about us and our project and asked us as many questions as we asked them; others seemed delighted to find an audience interested in RVing and talked with enthusiasm about their RVing experiences. Some of the interviews were brief, lasting only an hour or so. Others lasted for hours over several days. People were interested in our research and most were extremely co-operative and helpful. Many spoke of a need for the general population to know more about RVing and some hoped that wider exposure would dispel a lingering stereotype of RVers as "trailer trash." Others labelled themselves as trailer trash or "trailerites" with irony and fierce pride, as if daring the world to despise them. A number of people said they had thought about writing a book on RVing themselves. Some brought us magazine articles relevant to our research; others introduced us to people whose stories they thought we should hear; and some sought us out to discuss the advantages of RV retirement. One couple even led us to a park 45 miles from where we and they were camped to show us where we could find Canadian boondockers.

We initially intended to supplement interviews with a questionnaire asking questions about age, former occupation, estimated income before and after retirement, length of time retired, type of RV selected, etc. Many people were suspicious of the questionnaire and resisted it. Some flatly refused to fill it out. Others declined to answer particular questions—especially the ones about income; "I forget," we were told. One couple, themselves members of a membership park, suggested we join a membership park organization such as Thousand Trails or Coast-to-Coast (at a cost of several thousand dollars). Then we could introduce ourselves and our research at Saturday morning coffee get-togethers in park club houses. Under these circumstances, they thought, people would willingly complete a questionnaire. Another couple commented that they did not mind answering questions in conversation because this made us all equals and they could ask *us* questions too. They would, however, respond to a questionnaire either by throwing it away or by lying. And one man, when asked to fill out a questionnaire, inquired "Are you going to ask me if I eat dog food?" In his experience, he said, this was the sort of question asked by people who pass out questionnaires. We abandoned the questionnaire after two weeks.

They Speak With Many Voices: Alternative Versions of the RV Lifestyle

At the beginning we assumed that retired RVers were a more-or-less homogeneous group, an assumption reinforced by reading the mass-market periodicals that target RVers. We further assumed that they would spend most of

their time in private resort parks. We were wrong on both counts. Retired RVers are not homogeneous; there are a variety of alternative RV lifestyles.

Some people sell their homes when they retire, buy an RV and live in it; as one informant said, "Home is where I turn off the key." They call themselves full-timers, although the term is not necessarily limited to them (Moeller and Moeller 1986:16). Others retain a home base (their family home or a summer cottage) where they return for part of the year. Some regard their home base as their true residence and say they are on vacation when they are in their RV, even though they travel for more than six months a year. Others stay in permanent homes only a few weeks (or even days) a year, but keep them against the time when they will be too ill or infirm to RV.

Some RVers move from a summer site to a winter one, only travelling when moving from one settled spot to another. These people tend to return to the same place year after year, and many park on the same site – they refer to it as "our site" – each time. Others move in a annual cycle, travelling from one favourite spot to another, staying two weeks (the maximum allowed at most public campgrounds) at each place before moving on. Still others treasure life "on the road" with no planned or detailed itinerary that cannot be quickly and easily changed. "We can," said one informant, "go where we want, stay where we want, stop when we want, leave when we want or stay a little longer."

Some RVers work to supplement their retirement income and keep in touch with each other and with job opportunities through the *Workamper News*. Flea marketers, who sell everything from solar panels to knitted fly-swatter covers, are the most numerous type of working camper (Leonard 1987).

Some RVers willingly pay fees for overnight campsites while travelling and would not consider sleeping in a rest area or parking lot where they could stay free. Others make it a point of honour to pay as little as possible (preferably nothing) for an overnight stop. These folks exchange information on where safe, free camping is available in "Day's End," a regular column in the *Newsletter of Escapees*, an organization for full-timers. Others publish *A Guide to Free Campgrounds*, listing spots where RVers can camp for $8.00 or less.

Finally, some RVers prefer to camp in private resort parks or in membership parks. RV resorts provide amenities such as swimming pools, game rooms and organized recreational activities as well as full hookups – electricity, water, sewage or even phones and cable TV. They often cater to people who stay for months at a time or who rent sites by the year and leave an RV or "park model"[2] trailer set up on a permanent basis. Some resort parks actively discourage overnighters.

A membership park is one which requires residents to purchase membership in the organization with which the member's "home park" is affiliated.

Coast-to-Coast, Thousand Trails and NACO are the three membership organizations we heard mentioned most often. Members may stay at their home park for 30 days free or for a nominal fee (usually $1.00 a night), and may stay for one to two weeks at a time at other parks affiliated with the organization. Ordinarily, reservations must be made well in advance, and after spending the allowed time in the affiliated park the member must leave for a set time (usually two weeks to a month) before being permitted to return for another week. Members are often prohibited from staying in another affiliated park within a prescribed distance (from 30 to 100 miles) of their home park. Consequently, full-time RVers who spend most of their time in membership parks are constantly on the move.

Other retired RVers prefer to "boondock," to live in self-contained units and park on public land (often in desert wilderness) where they pay little ($25 to park for six months) or nothing at all and where they are provided no hook-ups. We encountered boondockers at The Slabs near Niland, California, at BLM Long Term Visitor Area (LTVA) campgrounds in California and Arizona near the Mexican border and in Quartzsite, Arizona where as many as 1.4 million people were expected to gather in January and February of 1991 to attend the annual Gemboree rock show and swap meet. Most of these people boondock on BLM land in the desert surrounding Quartzsite.

Equality, Community and the Good Life

A tension exists between the values of equality that most RVers espouse and the widely held notion that people selected their type of RVing because of their educational/occupational background or social class. Many of the private park residents we met believed that social class and income distinguished them from boondockers. In fact, former occupation and income level is significant only at the ends of a continuum. At one end are expensive membership parks and exclusive resorts that refuse entry to rigs[3] more than five or ten years old (the standards vary). These places are well known among RVers. Boondockers interpreted such policies as being supported by well-heeled snobs who were insulating themselves from association with the common folk. Certainly such parks do limit residence and membership to the affluent. At the other end of the continuum were a few boondockers at the Slabs who were living—apparently permanently—in broken down RVs (unlikely ever again to go on the road) and subsisting on welfare. Other boondockers said of these folks that you dared not smile in their presence if you had a gold tooth.

In general, however, there was no perceptible difference between boondockers and their rigs and the people and rigs to be found in private parks. Motorhomes retailing at more than $100 000 and trailers even older than ours were parked side-by-side at both kinds of campgrounds. Retired white-collar

professionals—chartered accountants, school teachers, civil servants, a communications specialist for the U.S. Apollo program—were boondocking, while residents at private parks included retired blue-collar workers—factory workers, auto mechanics, plumbers and career-enlisted military personnel. Both kinds of RVers emphasized economy as a principle, although they disagreed whether RVing is an expensive or an inexpensive way of life. In both areas some people told us that they were living in their RVs because they could not afford to live any other way. Informants in private parks stressed that living in an RV and paying rent for a site is less expensive than maintaining a house; indeed, some argued that it is less expensive even than paying property taxes on a home. Membership park residents stressed the economy of the RV lifestyle and insisted that these parks quickly become a bargain for the full-time RVer who pays only $1.00 a night to stay in affiliated parks. Otherwise, they said, park fees plus high gasoline prices and the costs of maintaining a rig made RVing extremely expensive.

One difference between private park campers and boondockers is their attitude toward what makes a good quality of life. When we asked RVers "What kind of campground do you like and why?" those who preferred private resort parks stressed the comfort and convenience of full-hookups. Some talked about being on an "endless vacation." Others warned that the "endless vacation" mentality often results in overeating or alcoholism. They also emphasized their concern for security—both from "the crazies out there" and from possible theft or violence from their RV neighbours. They wanted the security of living in a park that was separated from the outside world by a fence or wall and patrolled by a security guard. One resident of a membership park that had gone bankrupt and was admitting anyone who could afford $14 a night, commented that before the park opened its gates to the public he could leave his doors unlocked and his belongings out on his picnic table while he was gone. Now he worried about "the type of people we get in here. Anybody can come in now." He referred particularly to the fact that in the park there were "trailers with flat tires and people live in them anyway."

In contrasting answers to the same question, boondockers talked about the space they enjoyed, space lacking in private parks. One woman explained her preference for boondocking by telling of her visit to a friend in a resort park. Her friend's RV was so close to her neighbours' that when the women sat outside to talk the neighbour sat in a chair by her window and listened. She continued, "When I first read about Quartzsite 10 years ago or so [in the *National Geographic*] I thought, 'How can they sit out there in the desert like that?' Now, we have some friends who are coming down but they're going to stay in an RV park. I can't imagine staying in an RV park."

Boondockers also liked their freedom from rules, pointing out that nobody told them where to park, where they could walk their dog or limited the

amount of time they could be visited by their grandchildren. One man expressed it eloquently:

> I don't have to be here at a certain time or there at a certain time. If I want to stay up until 2 o'clock in the morning I can, if I want to sleep until noon I can. If I don't like it here I can go somewhere else. I have no worries, I save $700 a month over the expenses I used to have. It's money in the bank and I'm enjoying life. If I have food to eat and gas to travel, then I'm happy. If I spend a little too much one month, I spend a little less the next. If more people were doing it, there'd be fewer of them laying up in nursing homes.

Boondockers also stressed equality: they asserted that all those who boondock are equals, no matter what their income, previous occupation or the cost of their RV. One man said he liked boondocking specifically because "the fellow next door to us has an $80 000 rig but we're all the same here."

There are also important qualities shared by boondockers and those who stay in private resort parks. First, RVers share values. Boondockers and private park campers alike speak of the freedom RVing gives them, of a sense of adventure, of equality and of their appreciation of nature and the out-of-doors. RVers told us that they were living the "old values" of friendship, sharing and co-operation on which North American society was built and which has, for the most part, been lost. These values create a set of attitudes and a quality of life for retired RVers of all types that contrast markedly with those reported for other elderly people, both those living at home and those living in retirement communities. Jacobs comments, for instance, that residents in settled retirement communities pursue a passive way of life and are characterized by a pervasive "sense of social and physical isolation, apathy, and loneliness" (Jacobs 1974:101).

Another researcher reports that when she asked her elderly informants, "What do you look forward to now?" she found that the answer was always some variation of "There is nothing to look forward to now. I just live from day to day" (Kaufman 1986:111). She concludes: "The vast majority, even those in their early 70s, do not think in terms of the future, do not make long-range plans, and assume their own future to be short. The future is not perceived as a source of meaning" (ibid.).

These feelings of isolation, apathy, loneliness and the absence of a future were not true of the retired RVers we met during our research. Although our informants admitted that boredom and excessive alcohol use was a problem for some people, only one man, alienated from his wife and children and living on Social Security, complained of being lonely and isolated. This man talked about weeping over his estrangement from his family and added, "I've got no place to go and nothing to do when I get there."

Instead it was typical to hear the life of the RVer assessed as in the following description offered by a full-timer: "A full-timer is an adventurous soul,

a saddle trap who wants to go and see what is over that hill." When asked why he chose to retire to an RV, another full-timer responded, "I didn't want to sit around and watch the boob tube 24 hours a day!"

Most people compared RV life favourably to retirement in a house or apartment. In response to the question, "What do you do all day?" one full-timer said, "I have my sewing machine, my crafts, my computer. What else do I need?" Then she added, "What do you do all day if you're retired and in your house?" In the same vein, a full-time boondocker answered, "People ask me what I do all winter—Hell, I'm so busy doing nothing that I haven't got time to worry about it."

Others described sight-seeing trips they had taken or planned to take or spoke of the pleasure they found in shopping or selling in the flea-markets that are ubiquitous in many boondocking areas. Still others spent hours each week gleaning harvested fields, collecting pop and beer cans to sell or taking adult-interest courses offered in local schools. Some commented that volunteer work was available for all with time on their hands. In brief, unlike some other seniors, most retired RVers seem to have social vitality: they are vigorous, look forward to the future and feel in control of their lives.

A second characteristic shared by RVers, one of special interest to us here, is a sense of community. Indeed, comments about friendship and community made by RVers contrast markedly with those cited by Kaufman, whose informants are saddened by the loss of "close" friends whom they have known for 20 years or more. She says:

> All of those who discuss friendship state that one does not make close friends when one is old. They feel that friendships depend upon building a life together, looking forward to the future and sharing expectations. When one is old, there is no future, few expectations, and thus no basis for the creation of friendships. (Kaufman 1986:110)

She quotes an 81-year-old woman:

> The friends I've made recently I consider very much on the surface. When you're older you don't go deep into friendship. You aren't relying on them in the sense that you did at 35 or 40.... You have no place to grow together. When you're younger you do.... When you're older, you've heard it all before ... and anyway, what more is there to say? (1986:110)

As the following quotation from Kay, one of our informants, illustrates, RVers are aware of the transitory quality of their friendships. "Full-timers," she said, "strike up immediate bonding. Within an hour you'll know everything you wanted to know about each other. Your lives touch, bounce, and then off they go. Some people we tend to stay with. Others we may never see again." RVers do not seem to feel that these friendships are superficial, futile or useless. Rather, they speak with pride about their many friends, about the

places where they may stay for a night or two in the driveway of someone they met in an RV park the year before, about the many RVers on their Christmas card list with whom they exchange greetings but whom they may never see again. They share the attitude of Kay who added that she and others like her are "going back to the old time values." Although they highly value mobility and the freedom to "turn on the key"and leave incompatible neighbours or an uncomfortable situation, RVers like Kay insist that they quickly make friends with whom they share community. Indeed, as one RV park manager suggests in a statement quoted below, some people apparently adopt the RV lifestyle *because* it provides them with a sense of community lacking in the suburbs where they lived for decades. A selection of quotations from our informants and from the RVing literature illustrates this feeling of community. Particularly note the use of the words *family*, *trust*, *home*, *friend*, *help*—terms that describe the essential relationships of community (Nisbet 1966:48).

In an article on the RV lifestyle and under the subheading entitled "Campgrounds are Communities!" Paula and Peter Porter write:

> It didn't take us long to realize that the RV parks along our favourite north-south and east west routes were the friendliest places we had ever stayed on vacation. Everywhere we travelled, people were open and helpful, sometimes insisting on setting up our awning for us, or helping Pete level the trailer. On a couple of occasions, when we forgot the technique for setting something up, we knew that there was always a neighbour ready to lend a hand. It was like joining a club . . . every RV couple we met wanted to drop by and say "welcome to the campground." (1991:13)

In another article, the welcome RVers receive when they arrive at the home park of Escapees is described as follows:

> Your first act at Rainbow's End is to pull the rope on the big ol' bell. As the tones ring over the grounds, people with smiles as big as Texas appear, and they're there for one reason: to welcome you. Hugs all around. Handshakes and introductions. Invitations to happy hour, dinner, a trip into town. Offers to help find a spot, hookup, settle in. Oh, boy, your tired bodies say gratefully, this feels like home! And that's exactly the intent. (Courtney 1991:76)

In *Highways*, the official publication of the Good Sam Club, a senior who is a long-time RVer writes: "RVing . . . is about a way of life that has revolutionized recreation for a vast number of people . . . it has taken senior citizens out of their rocking chairs and created a travelling community with a camaraderie that can't be matched" (Edwards 1991a:55). During a discussion about why people become full-time RVers, Dwayne—a full-time RVer and a part-time manager of a resort park—explained that it is possible to live in a subdivision in southern California for 20 years and not know the name of the people next door. "Here, and in RV parks generally," he observed, "you get a real sense

of community and people becoming friends and helping each other. It is as if people see others living like themselves and feel they can trust them."

Another RV resort owner-manager, in response to our observation that people in the park were friendly and all seemed to know each other, explained, "That's what they come here for. They have it here and they don't have it back home. They get back home and they miss it. That's why they keep coming back. Almost all of our people come back here every year. When they come back here they're coming home."

When we asked Vanessa, a full-timer, why she and her husband returned to the Slabs every year she explained, "It's like coming home. They're your family." It was also important to her that

> We can trust the people in our area because they're like we are. They try to make the area look homey. They want it to look like home and smell like home. Everybody watches out for everybody else. Everybody's so eager to help. When you get situated in one group it's like a family, but we don't have a name yet.

On what is this sense of community based? As we noted above, in modern, mobile North American society people who have a sense of community are likely to base it on something other than shared territory and history. Indeed, as Bender observes, "Community, then, can be defined better as an experience than a place. As simply as possible, community is where community happens" (1978:6). What makes it happen for RVers?

Community and Reciprocity

One basis for the creation and expression of community among RVers is the principle of balanced reciprocity among equals (Sahlins 1972). This notion is strong, pervasive and so important to the establishment of community among RVers that it is for them a key principle. Ortner says that something—be it a symbol, a principle, a value, an idea, a practice—is "key" to the culture or way of life of a people if more than one of the five indicators of keyness is present (Ortner 1973:1339). The principle of reciprocity between equals has at least three of Ortner's indicators: our informants say it is important; they become aroused about it, particularly if it is violated in a way that suggests that they are inferior; and it arises in many different contexts: for example, in giving and receiving food, goods and help, in the exchange of information and in the response to questionnaires.

Many RVers, and most full-timers, are retired. They share with other elderly folks the problems of trying to live on a fixed income in an inflationary economy, declining health, concern about violence and isolation from family and friends. In addition they have problems unique to a nomadic lifestyle: difficulty getting access to funds; illness far from one's own physician; me-

chanical breakdown; the fact that they spend much of their time among strangers. It is critical, therefore, that RVers develop a strategy for coping with crisis and they have, indeed, done so: the strategy of and mutual assistance. RVers expect to be able to give and receive help from each other in an emergency; reciprocity is essential to the success of this strategy.

The principle that RVers can expect reciprocity and mutual assistance from each other was the basis for the establishment of the Good Sam Club, the largest and most influential of the RV clubs in North America. In a reprint of the original letter to the June 1966 issue of *Trail-R-News*, Joens describes the founding of the organization on the assumption that if you are an RVer and are in trouble you can safely call on other RVers for help (Joens 1991:4). Good Sam was begun in 1966 by people who agreed to carry a sticker on their car or RV. The sticker identified the bearers as club members who were willing to stop and help, and to accept the help of, others also carrying the decal (Joens 1991:4). Today most of the RVs on the road carry the emblem, which portrays a smiling face with a halo. Joens states that he has often given and received help from other "trailerists," and has "yet to find an unfriendly trailering family." By giving and receiving help he says he has "made many life-long friends." Extension of trust and expectation of reciprocity are essential to the success of the enterprise. In spite of a pervasive fear of violence from strangers, from "the crazies out there," Good Sam members extend trust to, and expect help rather than violence from, other RVers. We were repeatedly advised to seek out other RVers in rest areas and truck stops for mutual security. In isolated areas, we were warned, we should park beside other RVers so that we could look out for each other. This trust and the expectation of reciprocity are created in a number of ways.

Exchange of Personal History

First, as the earlier quotation from Courtney suggests, the introduction of an RVer into a community begins as soon as the newcomer arrives, particularly where people may be expected to stay for several weeks or months. Rituals of greeting and of parting occur both in private parks where people rent sites by the month or season and in boondocking areas. During the greeting ritual, neighbours surround the new RV to provide assistance in parking and setting up, to offer the loan of needed equipment and to swap biographies. There is an immediate exchange of personal histories and information. People are careful to let newcomers know the rules: where you may not walk your dog in a resort park, the location of the nearest "glory hole,"[4] and instructions on how to use it, at the Slabs. As our informant Kay observed above, this exchange results in "immediate bonding," a fact that provides security for boondockers. One Canadian man in an LTVA area told us: "I always go right over and get to know people when they first pull in. If they don't know me

they might rip me off, but once we know each other they'll even look after our things while we're gone." RVers also have rituals of parting. Because we were not present when people dispersed during the spring, we observed only part of the full parting ritual, carried out when we left sites after a stay of several days. During the ritual, neighbours gathered around to help with unhooking and hitching up, make photographs, exchange addresses and invitations to visit, make suggestions about desirable routes and places to stay overnight that are both safe and free, and offer gifts of food. Parting rituals at the end of a season of shared community are said to be lengthy and elaborate and involve planning future reunions and exchanging gifts as well as food and addresses.

Ritual Sharing of Food

The food-giving that occurs when RVers part brings into focus another aspect of reciprocity that reinforces the feeling of community: the ritual sharing of food. RVers recognize the importance of food-sharing in establishing community (Sahlins 1972:218) and the necessity of trusting those with whom one shares meals. This latter point as well as one about instant community was articulated by Karl. Discussing his pleasure in the potluck dinners organized by the campground hosts at an Arizona state park, he said, "I'm not big on eating stuff made by people I don't know, but it doesn't take long to get to know these people and then it's OK."

RVers exchange and share food both formally—as a part of ritual, for example, Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners—and informally. Newcomers are often given food within the first 24 hours of their arrival but not, in our experience, as part of the greeting ritual. Among boondockers especially, food-sharing has great social importance, for it permits the redistribution of an essential resource without challenging the ideal that "we're all the same here." Contrast the following accounts of the charitable distribution of free food at Slab City with the resident-run system of food-sharing at another boondocking area. The attitudes of the residents illustrates the importance of self-reliance and equality to RVers and the role of reciprocity in maintaining these attributes.

Slab City is a place with no formal organization or system of control. No park rangers or hosts patrol the area, there are no amenities and no one is required to check in or out of the area when arriving or leaving. Indeed, everyone parked there is technically trespassing, though the State of California and the U.S. government generally ignore them and no one is sure how many people are actually there at any one time. As the sign welcoming newcomers says: "SLABS Population Unknown Most Residents Live Somewhere Else." The only institution linking Slab residents with the outside world and external organizations (such as state government agencies and charitable groups) is

the Christian Center. The Center is staffed by a resident missionary and by Slab residents who volunteer their time. It is located in a trailer positioned near the entrance to the Slabs. People who want information are referred there, and on entering the Center's trailer newcomers are asked to register, identify the named area where they are parked and give the names and addresses of their next-of-kin in case of emergency. State officials go first to the Christian Center to locate Slab residents being sought by members of their family and to get information about rumoured illegal activities. Slab residents registered with the Center can pick up their mail there and get help for others who are ill. The Center also serves as a distribution point for food provided by the Salvation Army and other charities. People wishing to receive the food must sign forms declaring their income and stand in line to get it. Few do so.

Center volunteers expressed frustration over the lack of participation in the food distribution program by needy Slab City residents. In the opinion of the volunteers, many people who should have been taking the food are "too lazy" or "think they are too good" to stand in line for it. Consequently, proffered food is often unclaimed and vegetables are left on the ground in front of the Center to rot.

The self-administered system for distributing free food in an LTVA area less than 50 miles from Slab City contrasts sharply to the charitable one at the Slabs. In the LTVA, the system was organized by the residents and was informal, involved reciprocal exchange and was viewed with pride. To them it exemplified their self-sufficiency, their frugality, their enterprise and their ingenuity in taking advantage of opportunity.

Imperial Valley farmers permit LTVA residents to glean their fields after harvest and farm workers—some of whom lived at the LTVA—often carried home large boxes of sub-standard fruits and vegetables. When gleaners and farm workers arrived at the LTVA with their crates of free produce they distributed the surplus first among those people with whom they shared a residence circle and then among friends who lived outside the circle (we discuss the significance of the residence circle below). Remaining food was left in boxes at the foot of the bulletin board at the entrance to the LTVA where anyone could help themselves. Recipients of the food were expected to make a return eventually, although the return did not have to be in kind but could be in the form of aluminum cans to be sold for cash, books or magazines, help with projects, loan of tools and the like. Some LTVA residents specifically gave this food distribution system as a reason for returning to the spot year after year. "If you're a vegetarian," one said, "you can live here for almost nothing." Then he added, "None of us are on charity here."

Among RVers the most common food-sharing ritual is the potluck dinner. Weekly potluck dinners are a regular event at resort parks, at many Arizona state parks during the winter season and at RV parks of all sorts at Thanksgiv-

ing and Christmas. RVers who are away from their families during the holiday season may pool their funds to buy a turkey and share a holiday meal. Some RVers travel every year to the same park where they meet friends to share Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner. Finally, any important celebration—such as a wedding—includes a potluck dinner. Newcomers join the community by participating in ritual food-sharing.

Our experience of incorporation into community through food-sharing is an example of how the system works. We pulled into an LTVA boondocking area only two hours before a wedding was to be held. Before we had unhooked our trailer we were invited to take part in the festivities. People acknowledged that we had just arrived and were not expected to provide anything elaborate, but we were advised to "bring something if you can." We prepared a small salad and took photographs of the ceremony, copies of which we gave the bride and groom. Other RVers noted our participation with approval. Subsequently we were invited to join campfire songfests and received shares of gleaned fruits and vegetables. We were also invited to join in other activities including community cleaning of the local hot spring (where residents bathed) and a weekend trip to Las Vegas planned by members of the group.

The value that retired RVers assign to the principles of equality and reciprocity are so basic, so "key" to their way of life, that any research method that fails to recognize their importance is bound to produce a skewed view of RV culture. Earlier in this essay we argued that the questionnaire is a flawed research tool. Kaufman is correct in her assertion that the use of a questionnaire forces people to structure their discussions and answers "according to the researcher's priorities rather than their own" (1986:22). In addition, questionnaires are predicated on a one-sided and unequal relationship. Informants have no part in the construction of the instrument; their needs, priorities and interests may not be addressed; there is no mechanism that allows them to ask the researcher questions. There is, in short, no provision for the give-and-take between equals that is of basic importance to RVers. The absence of this reciprocal balance is, we think, the reason why our attempts to do questionnaire-based research failed. People who willingly engaged in an reciprocal exchange of information rejected a relationship which they saw as one-way and, therefore, demeaning to them. It does not matter whether, in fact, any researcher's questionnaire ever asked about the consumption of dog food. Our informant's protest was not really about dog food; it was about his perception that he would be the inferior party in an unequal, non-reciprocal relationship.

Community, Space and Place

In one sense shared territory does not create community for RVers who treasure their mobility and their ability to turn on the key and be gone if they

don't like their neighbours. In another sense it does. As Davis observes, "People cluster together for protection, contact, organization, group integration, and for the purpose of exploitation of a particular region and the community is the smallest territorial group that can embrace all aspects of social life" (Davis 1949:312). As we have said, RVers choose different sorts of places to cluster and they define themselves and are defined by others by where they park. These definitions reinforce the sense of community among RVers who cluster together, but also emphasize differences that alienate RVers from each other. We look first at the way in which their choice of place separates RVers and then turn to a discussion of how space unites them through common values, interests and experience.

When RVers select a place to park their rigs they are also making a choice about lifestyle and about identity. Some choose private resort parks where their personal space is limited but where they feel safe and comfortable. They seek the protection of walls and guards; they enjoy the luxury of water and sewer hookups, electricity and cable TV; their space is organized into streets and blocks where each RV has its own "pad";[5] and leisure activities are organized by professionals who encourage and promote contact among park residents. Many private resort parks have strictly enforced rules about how a rig may be parked, where dogs may be walked, the conditions under which residents may have guests, and for how long and under what circumstances children and grandchildren may visit. Many of the people who choose this lifestyle see themselves upholding standards of affluence, respectability and orderliness and they particularly appreciate the fact that the other park residents are similar to themselves in age, social standing, consumption level and interests. In thinking about private resort parks one is reminded of the distinction made by Bellah et al. between "lifestyle enclaves" and communities. Lifestyle, they point out, "brings together those who are socially, economically, or culturally similar, and one of its chief aims is the enjoyment of being with those who 'share one's lifestyle'" (Bellah et al. 1985:72). In their terms, groups such as retirement "communities," organized around a common lifestyle, are "lifestyle enclaves," not communities. A community is inclusive and focusses on the interdependence of private and public life while recognizing and tolerating the differences of those within it. In contrast, "lifestyle is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity. It usually explicitly involves a contrast with others who 'do not share one's lifestyle'" (Bellah et al. 1985:72). Resort park residents make a sharp distinction between their standard of living and lifestyle and that of boondockers. Our non-bookdocking informants advised us that, as part of our research, we should go to one of the bookdocking areas. "You should spend one night there, just to see it, but you won't want to stay longer," one couple

said about Slab City. Another marvelled that bookdockers "sit out there on the desert, happy as clams," adding, "but I couldn't do it."

Boondockers agree that they are unlike the folks who live in resort parks and many of them treasure the difference. They are not a homogeneous lot, for people from all social classes, levels of education and degrees of affluence can be found boondocking. They opt for economy and simplicity, the absence of rules and organization and unlimited external space. They particularly want to avoid the crowding—what one person called sites "like cemetery plots" and another referred to as being "crammed in like sardines"—that they see as characteristic of private parks. Boondockers often used the term "freedom" to describe their way of life and many of them said that resort park residents had simply exchanged the restrictions and crowding of urban life for an RV version of the same thing.

Boondockers are regarded by others (and sometimes they regard each other) with considerable ambivalence. On the one hand, the lives of boondockers epitomize the values on which America was founded: they are independent of rules and regulations, they live simply with a minimum of luxury and expense, they embody the qualities of individualism and ingenuity and they co-operate on their own terms for mutual security and to share resources. On the other hand, they are marginal to North American society. Many of them have no fixed address—not even a mail box in an RV park. Many, particularly those who are flea marketers, participate in an underground economy that avoids regulations and taxes—a fact that is not lost on officials of nearby towns. Most instructive and, we think, representative of the attitude of civic officials toward boondocking flea marketers, is a letter cited by Errington that expresses the resentment of a small-town businessman toward transient vendors (1990:642). He bitterly resents the fact that they pay no taxes and little rent and face none of the risks and costs endured by town retailers. "Let's tax 'em," he says, "Let's set up a licensing procedure that will discourage the money hounds" (Errington 1990:642).

Boondockers are also marginal because of the kind of place they park and the kind of life they lead: they camp on the desert—often in the shade of a creosote bush or small thorn tree—without amenities, recreation facilities, or external protection from ruffians who might harass or rob them. In the Slabs at least many of them dump their sewage into glory holes, a practice that private-park residents consider to be filthy. They are in charge of their own lives. No one else organizes their neighbourhoods, tells them where or how they may park their rigs or guarantees them a pad. And no one else is responsible for their comfort or their entertainment.

For some boondockers the absence of amenities is a source of wry humour. In the Slabs, for instance, several people parked side-by-side had gone to elaborate trouble to fit out their rigs with fake hook-ups. Electric cords led

from their RVs to metered posts, hoses led from water taps to water tank inlets and sewage pipes drained into concrete pipes that appeared to lead into septic tanks. The realistic-looking setup was a joke designed to fool the unwary newcomer. When we asked our neighbours how hook-ups were possible our ignorance was met with guffaws of laughter. Although they say that "We're all the same here," boondockers do make distinctions among themselves and are ambivalent about those whom they perceive to be different. In the Slabs, for example, people warned us about others in the "wrong" areas who had turned the space surrounding their RVs into junk yards. They were not "like us" and, therefore, not to be trusted. As one woman cautioned, "Be careful where you park. The people on "vendors row" are the children of God just like I am, but I wouldn't want to camp with them." Another person distinguished between "permanent" Slab residents and RVers who lived there only during the winter. "Most full-time Slabbers are OK," he said, "but with some of them you don't want to smile if you have a gold tooth." He then identified those Slabbers who were "OK," and pointed out the sections where those who were not to be trusted congregated. We should, he advised us, avoid going into those areas.

The belief (unfounded, as we discovered) of our resort park informants, that boondockers are likely to be poor, dirty and lawless is widespread. In an article on campground etiquette, Gordon Symons notes that it is often assumed that one can tell which campers are "the filthy ones by looking at their rigs," and that "people with older model trailers and motorhomes—the less affluent, in other words—were most likely to be the worst offenders." He observes: "I haven't found that to be true" (Symons 1991:11).

The categorization of boondockers as embodying despised characteristics, and the ambivalence felt toward them by other RVers, is reportedly characteristic of the attitude of members of mainstream society toward those on the margins. In his discussion of places on the margin, Shields observes: "The social definition of marginal places and spaces is intimately linked with the categorisation of objects, practices, ideas and modes of social interaction as belonging to the 'Low culture,' the culture of marginal places and spaces, the culture of the marginalised" (1991:4-5). He maintains that the marginal is categorized as being "at the 'edge of civilisation'" and that the "high" or dominant culture is ambivalent toward it: "The social 'Other' of the marginal and of low cultures is despised and reviled in the official discourse of dominant culture and central power while at the same time being constitutive of the imaginary and emotional repertoires of that dominant culture" (Shields 1991:5). The ambivalence cuts both ways. Some boondockers take exception to resort park rules that they think are designed to keep them out. Valerie—a state campground host and active member of Singles International (SI) who spends her non-working months either at SI rallies, in public parks or boon-

docking—candidly admitted that she would love to spend her time in a park with a swimming pool and a spa. She was prevented from doing this, she said, by the age of her motor home and by the high fees that would strain her limited retirement income. Valerie also avoids resort parks because the people there are "cliquish." They are, she said, "all better fixed than I am, and I wouldn't be welcome. So I don't do it."

Boondockers bitterly resent RVing acquaintances who live in resort parks and who make remarks such as "How can you live out here like this?" They ridicule these people as being ignorant, fearful, wasteful of money and resources and prejudiced. They also maintain that people who "badmouth" the boondocking way of life usually have not tried it, arguing that those who do give it a chance often find, to their surprise, that they like it.

Some boondockers are of the opinion that boondocking is for the youthful in spirit while resort parks are for the old. This was the attitude of Mabel, a woman in her mid-70s who had boondocked for a decade but who, for health reasons, was now headed for her second year in a private park. She wryly observed that resort parks cater to "the blue rinse bunch" and complained (with an ironic chuckle) that the problem with resorts is that they are "full of old people." Another boondocker commented that people who spend six months at a time in RV resorts are "just waiting to die." He went on: "When I get so old that I can't [boondock], then I'll go into one. They have schedules up on the wall to tell you what you can do and when you can do it. Not me!" A friend, listening to the conversation, chimed in: "Me neither."

The most scathing, and articulate, critique of resort park residents was made by Randy and Rachel, working RVers. This couple had dropped out of society when they were in their 40s to boondock and work as flea marketers. Now in their late 50s, they are still "hustling" to survive. One of the ways they make a living is by providing entertainment in resort parks in exchange for parking space and hookups. Although they were dependent on them for a livelihood, they were contemptuous of their resort park neighbours whom they scornfully categorized as "snowbirds" who "would like to live in Sun City but can't afford it." They described the residents as "people who have no imagination and no sense of adventure and who continue living the constricted lives they've always lived, taking orders." They added that although they live in RVs, resort residents typically try to re-create living in a house and pretend they own their territory. They do this by placing lawn ornaments in their "front yards," putting down artificial turf for grass and bounding their "yards" with portable fences. Randy characterized snowbirds as conformists who "always do their laundry on Monday" because "they have followed orders all their lives and are still doing it."

Part of the tension existing between resort park residents and boondockers derives from the image of "trailer trash" that is left over from the stereotypi-

cal association of trailer parks and poverty. Thus, although RVers espouse a philosophy of equality ("we are all the same here!"), they distance themselves from those who are categorized as "trash." An excellent example of the rejection by RVers of any suggestion that they are "lower class slobs" is found in a collection of letters to the November 1988 issue of *Trailer Life* magazine. The letters were in response to an advertisement published in the May 22, 1988, issue of *Advertisement Age* for *US Magazine*. It consisted of a two-page spread showing an RV campground peopled with aging, slovenly men and women sitting in disarray around shabby RVs. The caption noted the high median income, the active social life and the generally upscale lifestyle of *US readers*. Though nothing was said in the caption about the RVers in the photo, the contrast was clear from the ad's title "Definitely Not *US*!" The advertisement was reprinted in *Trailer Life* because the magazine editors considered it to be "insulting to all RVers." Readers were asked to send letters to the publisher of *US Magazine* with copies to *Trailer Life*. Some of the letters characterized the advertisement as intolerable, "condescending snobbishness" (*Trailer Life* 1988:7) and focussed on the value of an alternative lifestyle based on simplicity and love of nature. "RVers are adventurous, fun people, a class unto themselves," said one correspondent (Montelpasse 1988:7). Another responded:

> You will often see my husband and me relaxing in camp, but usually after a day of hiking nature trails, bird watching, breathing fresh air and just plain enjoying nature. My idea of relaxation is definitely not going to an expensive resort crawling with snobs showing off their expensive clothes. (Noon 1988:169)

And another: "We are college-educated, affluent, active, healthy, outdoor-loving, trim, family-loving, book-and-Bible-reading, retired happy people" (Green 1988:165). Others emphasized their affluence and their credentials both as typical RVers and as members of the upper-middle class. For example: "As a typical RV person, I am 60, own a $75 000 home on a half acre, have a $22 000 truck and a $30 000 fifth-wheel trailer. My retirement income, completely disposable, is well over $31 000 a year" (Lewis 1988:165). And:

> The average RVer today is . . . educated and affluent. He actually buys second cars or thirds, coats, and clothes. He "goes out like crazy" in a variety of locales. He isn't necessarily retired, but may very likely be a professional and even single. His RV probably has an air-conditioner and furnace, TV (and a satellite dish on top), a microwave oven, stereo, full bath, etc. (Robinson 1988:165, 169)[6]

Although RVers reject the "slob" image, they are not agreed on whether they place more value on equality (and eschew snobs) or on a hierarchy of respectability evidenced by affluence and lifestyle and expressed by conspicu-

ous consumption. There is tension here in the notion of place that both creates and destroys community: there is a contradiction between the notion that all RVers are equal and the recognition that they are not. We have already referred to the desire of people in resort parks to avoid sharing space with people who, because of their consumption level (older trailers) or their lifestyle (those who live in trailers with flat tires) are likely to be untrustworthy. This directly contradicts the egalitarian ideal, the notion that, as one RVer put it: "The biggest adjustment that RVers have to make is getting used to the idea that everybody is equal."

RVers and the Problems of Limited Space

Although the choices that RVers make about where they will camp and how they use their space may divide them, their common experiences in adjusting to the spatial problems inherent in RVing draws them together.

One problem that every RVer must face is that space inside a trailer, fifth-wheel or motor home is severely limited. People who take up the RV lifestyle, especially full-timers for whom the rig is truly home, must adjust to the fact that the limited space affects (1) the relationships between people sharing the space and (2) the number of possessions they can carry with them. RVers are well aware of the tensions that develop between people who share restricted space. When we asked what was required for full-time RVing, a frequent reply was "a happy marriage" or "a congenial husband/wife." Some people said they were able to begin RVing only after divorce or the death of a spouse; others commented that while RVing was possible with their current mate, it would have been impossible with an earlier one. The level of stress that can develop between incompatible RV partners was brought home to us as we were ending our research when we had a brief encounter with another RVing couple who were also heading north rather than south. When we remarked that we were all going the wrong direction, the man responded by warning us never to sell our home and buy an RV. They had done this and had also purchased expensive memberships in two park organizations during the past summer. Now, only six months later, he was headed home to get divorced, having been financially ruined by the investment and "by that piece of shit back there," pointing toward the RV. The trailer was a new and expensive one, so we asked "What's wrong with it?" "I'm not talking about the rig," he snarled, "I'm talking about the woman in it."

The interpersonal problems of living in the confined space of an RV are sometimes addressed in the popular RV press. For example, in an article in *Trailer Life* one author suggests ways to organize life in order to live compatibly in the restricted space of an RV. In what he calls "the ten commandments of the psychology of living in small spaces," Jim Luce focusses on considerate behaviour, the wise and creative use of space and proper care of

one's body and spirit. The practice of these commandments, according to Luce, results in Tender Loving Concern or TLC (Luce 1991). TLC "can make even the most trying times in an RV bearable," while its absence "can let the air out of a trip like a nail does in a radial tire." It is, he says, "what puts the 'home' in motorhome" (Luce 1991:80).

In addition to the practice of TLC, an RV is also a home because, as Mary Douglas suggests, it has "structure in time" (1991:290). A home's complexity of orientation and boundary "depends on the ideas that persons are carrying inside their heads about their lives in space and time. For the home is the realization of ideas" (ibid.). Douglas argues that a distinctive characteristic of the idea of home is revealed if we "focus on the home as an organization of space over time" (1991:294). Home, she says, is "always a localizable idea," one that is located in space, but not necessarily in a fixed space. "Home starts by bringing some space under control. . . . For a home neither the space nor its appurtenances have to be fixed, but there has to be something regular about the appearance and reappearance of its furnishings" (Douglas 1991:289).

"Home" involves a response to events that happened in the past—to memory—and a prediction of events that will happen in the future. For example, people remember cold winters and respond by installing storm windows or buying extra blankets. As Douglas notes, an essential aspect of home is storage: space dedicated to memory and to planning for the future. A home contains things that will be wanted through the years and organizes them so that they can be found when they are required. The severe limitation of storage space in rigs creates for RVers the problem of anticipating their future needs in order to reduce their possessions to essentials. "No matter how large a motorhome you may own, the storage problem is soon upon you," warns Norman Lusk in a letter to *Trailer Life* (Lusk 1991:19). The ability to fit essential possessions and the artifacts of memory into a limited space is a must for full-time RVing. One full-timer, explaining the need to cull belongings, told us, "You do not put anything in here that you do not use or wear." He added that he had only three pairs of trousers: one in the dirty clothes, one he was wearing and a clean pair. His wife commented that she had reduced her formal wardrobe to one "little blue dress" for funerals and weddings. Similarly, Courtney quotes Kay Peterson, one of the founders of Escapees, who urges those on the brink of full-timing, but hesitant to give up their "things," to order their priorities. "Do you own things or do they own you?" she asks (Courtney 1991:78).

Limited storage means that RVers must restrict the artifacts containing their memories and histories to basics. With little room for nostalgia, the past must be condensed to its essence. This constraint is common to nomads. Prussin, who worked with the Gabra of Kenya, observes that for nomads the

past persists in limited boundaries. "Constancy and continuity are . . . concentrated within, and bounded by, the moving container," she says (1989:155).

In a sense, full-time RVers must relinquish the past. As one said, "It's not giving up the things that's hard, it's giving up what has been." Many RVers reduce their memories to the pages of a photograph album which they share with others within hours of their first meeting. The pictures are usually of their family members and of their RV history and RVing friends. They place the subjects in a recognizable context and permit other RVers with whom they do not share a common history to recreate their past, identify with their experiences and to share photographs, adventures and family histories of their own.

Giving up home and possessions is a rite of passage, especially for full-time RVers. Those who have done it share a unique experience that sets them apart, even from other RVers, and creates among them a sense of community. As onlookers we witnessed, but could not participate in, the comradeship shared by full-timers as they swapped stories about how they decided to give up their homes, how they established priorities in determining which of their possessions to keep and the difficulties of actually carrying through with their decision. Most full-timers said they spent a long time deciding to do it and many took several years and more than one start before they completed the process. As Randy expressed it:

> People who want to go full-time have a set of problems. The first is letting go of their house. You can't have a nest. You must strip your belongings down to the bare essentials and get rid of the rest. You can't take a lot of things with you. Too many people try to hang onto their house and rent it out. Renters tear the place up and they lose their shirts. I tell them, "Give it up and sell."

The full-timers with whom we talked had tried a number of approaches to "letting go." A few people said they had no difficulty divesting themselves of their excess property once they made the decision to do it, but—as the previous quotation suggests—many more sought some kind of compromise that permitted them to keep the treasures they could neither part with nor fit into their RV. Some people gave their homes and family heirlooms to a child with the understanding that they could return there to live if poor health forced them off the road; others called in their children to claim what they wanted of the family treasures before the rest was sold at auction; others moved things they could not part with to a summer cottage or into storage where they sat for years before finally being discarded.

After they make the decision to sell their home and strip themselves of unnecessary possessions, RVers must develop strategies for making the best use of the limited space in their rigs. Ideas on how to accomplish this are a favourite topic of conversation and whenever they get together RVers share

information on how to organize their interiors most efficiently. They spend hours exchanging views on which kinds and models of RVs have the most space available, ways in which things can be made to do double duty and ideas on how to modify one's rig to make it "livable" nomadic space. Veteran full-timers invited us inside to demonstrate how they had solved the problems of limited storage. One full-timer couple pointed with pride to the retaining bars along the upper walls of their rig that held their entire collection of music transcribed onto cassette tapes, while another described an innovative RVer who had installed his model train track along the walls of his trailer. Luce's suggestions for the creative use of wall space is a published example of this kind of information exchange (Luce 1991). Another is the article "Playing Solitaire" in *Highways* in which Edwards suggests modifications that make the space in rigs more useful to single RVers (Edwards 1991b).

Because interior space is so limited, RVers spend a lot of time outdoors and include the area where the rig is parked as part of their home or dwelling space. Interior space is private; most socializing occurs in the external space adjacent to the RV: in lawn chairs under an awning, at a picnic table or on the astroturf "lawn" in front of the rig. The notion that one's home or dwelling includes the out-of-doors is well known cross-culturally. In his definitive study of dwellings in many societies, Oliver observes that they do not require permanent structures. He says:

> To dwell is to . . . live in, or at, or on, or about a place. For some this implies a permanent structure, for others a temporary accommodation, for still others it is where they live, even if there is little evidence of building. . . . It is this double significance of dwelling—dwelling as the activity of living or residing, and dwelling as the place or structure which is the focus of residence—which encompasses the manifold cultural and material aspects of domestic habitation. (Oliver 1987:7)

As we observed above, one distinction between boondockers and resort park residents is that boondockers refuse to accept limits that restrict them to only a few feet of external space or rules defining how they are expected to use it. Typically, the area that boondockers claim for their dwelling is more extensive than the area allowed residents of private parks and greater even than the sites in many park or forest service campgrounds. Those who return to the same site year after year may stake out a considerable area for themselves. In the Slabs, for instance, we saw a "No Trespassing" sign blocking off a dirt track leading down into a shallow ravine where a trailer was parked. When we asked our neighbours whether individuals did, in fact, own land in the Slabs they confirmed that the sign had no legitimacy. As one said, "We're all trespassers here."

According to Randy, to be a full-timer it is necessary to give up notions of territoriality. "People have a lot of trouble with the fact that they don't own the land where they are parked," he said. "You can't put a fence around the place where you park." This is true and it is the source of a fascinating paradox, for although they cannot own the space outside their RV, they attempt to make it their own; as one of our informants said, to "make it like home."

Even if they plan to be in a place only a few days, many people attempt to personalize their outside space. They brush it clean and hang bird feeders and baskets of plants; they fly over it flags that proclaim their nationality (U.S., Canadian), affiliation (RV club) or ideology (Christian cross, the Jolly Roger, the Confederate Stars and Bars); they bound it with stones, bits of broken glass, small white picket fencing or strings of coloured lanterns; they plant flowers, cactus or vegetables; they put down an astroturf "lawn"; they decorate it with pink flamingos, fountains, coloured rocks, hunting trophies, cow skulls and Christmas trees; and they build patios, campfire circles and barbecue pits. In short, anything that might be found outside a suburban home to identify it as personal space may also be found in the space outside an RV. Furthermore, people who stay in one spot for months, or who return to the same site year after year—whether it is a pad in a resort park rented by the month or year or a spot in the Slabs—attempt to establish "ownership" of their space. They put up signs naming their area ("Rattlesnake Flats") and listing the names of the people who live there (recall the comment of Vanessa, "When you get situated in one group it's like a family, but we don't have a name yet"). In boondocking areas, a site that appears to be empty may in fact be "owned" by former residents who have improved it and intend to return. Newcomers who try to park in one of these sites are warned that they should move because it "belongs" to someone who will be returning to claim it. If the rights of the absent "owner" are not respected, fights may occur.

Social space for community activity is an important part of any RV setting. This is the shared area where people socialize and in which everyone involved has rights. In private parks where the requirements of water mains, sewage lines and electrical connections dictate that RVs must park in rows, social space may be formally organized. In these parks, too, the desire for privacy and the recapitulation of suburban neighbourhoods are manifested by aligning the rigs so that the entrance of each one faces its private pad and the back of its neighbouring RV. Such parks often advertise their social space such as recreation halls or swimming pools. In public parks, individual sites are usually larger and are also organized in rows along roads. Public space in these parks includes campfire circles where officials deliver talks, recreation areas such as playgrounds or swimming beaches and picnic areas where potluck dinners organized by the host are held.

In desert boondocking areas there is no imposed external organization. People may park wherever they wish, and an individual RVer's personal territory can take up as much area as she wishes or can lay claim to by establishing boundaries. Neighbourhood design is not limited by the constraints of hookups and, although they do sometimes park along access roads, people are free to form communities of whatever shape they wish. They most often arrange themselves in circles with their doorways facing inward. The circle formation seems to be spontaneous and, although no one has the authority to tell anyone else where to park, a newcomer who unwittingly disrupts a circle will be directed to "a good place to park" on the periphery. The inside of the circle is community space where circle residents may construct a fireplace or barbecue pit or decorate a tree in December. Other community spaces—used by all residents of a boondocking area—include canals, river banks or springs where people go to wash and talk or the area in an LTVA near the host's rig. Social events may be organized (a potluck dinner) or spontaneous (singing around an evening campfire) and contribute to a strong sense of belonging among the participants.

Conclusion

In her discussion of the Gabra of Kenya, Prussin observes that the repetition of fixed spatial pattern reinforces the cognitive structure of interior space for nomads (1989). We would take this further and argue that when RV nomads set up at a new site, their repetition of spatial patterns reinvents and reinforces their cognitive structure of home, society and community. Although RVers carry with them the form of their social structure, the form is empty. Because they share no history with their RV neighbours, there is no one to fill the status of "neighbour," "friend" or "family," but the ideal content of these forms is shared knowledge. Therefore, when a newcomer pulls in, the strangers who are instant neighbours immediately begin to perform the roles of friend and family by sharing substance and labour. They help the newcomer set up, bring food, give advice and exchange information and personal history. This sharing and exchange allows RVers, who have no common past, to recreate the structure of history from one park to another and to embed themselves in a familiar social structure given substance. Like the Gabra, their reconstruction of history and society enables them to insulate themselves from a hostile environment—the "Crazies" out there—and to transform the stranger who might "rip you off" into the friend who will look after you in your time of need.

Notes

1. Our research was supported by an Arts Research Board grant from McMaster University, using funds supplied by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC). All names used in the manuscript have been changed to protect the privacy of our informants.
2. A "park model" trailer is not quite a recreational vehicle, nor is it quite a "mobile home." Such fine distinctions are important in the world of Rvers. A *real* RV must be capable of being towed by the owner's private vehicle at will. A mobile home is essentially a moveable house—often 10 or 12 feet in width—and can only be moved by a proper tractor. A "park model" is no more than eight feet wide and may, therefore, be parked in an "RV" park, but it is furnished with regular furniture (rather than built-ins) and may even have sliding patio doors as one of its accessories. It is *not* meant to be moved without considerable professional planning.
3. Among RVers, a "rig" refers to the recreational vehicle *including* the tow vehicle, e.g., the truck that pulls a fifth-wheel or conventional trailer. When the RV is parked for residence, it is termed the "unit," even if it is an inseparable marriage of living quarters and motive power, as with a motor home. Living quarters that are detachable from their motive power, such as trailers, fifth wheels or truck campers are referred to as "units" when distinguishing them from the truck, van or other tow vehicle.
4. A "glory hole" is a hole in the desert, often dug by an earlier user of the site, into which one drains either sewage (black water) or wash water (grey water) or both. These holes may be as much as six feet deep and are considered by those who use them to be ecologically sound, sanitary, odourless and sensible. State health officials and RVers who prefer sani-dumps may disagree.
5. A pad is the private space that includes the place where the RV is parked and an area around it that is usually only a few feet wide.
6. "Going out like crazy" appears in this letter because in the advertisement for *US* magazine, its readership was characterized as doing just that—they "go out like crazy!"

   The point of the ad was that the slobbish RVers in the accompanying photograph were definitely NOT *US readers*—RVers and other non-*US* readers sat around in their undershirts and drank beer in the woods near their rigs.

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