

# 100 Most Influential History of

Celebrating the Inventors, Entrepreneurs and Visionaries Who —  
Made Lasting Contributions to the Inception, Growth and Success

■ BY SHERMAN GOLDENBERG

In paying tribute to the RV industry's centennial in 2010 — a year set aside for the industry's 100th birthday by the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) — the *RVBusiness* staff set out to assemble a list of the "100 Most Influential People in the History of the RV Industry."

Sounded simple enough.

We talked among ourselves about likely nominees, drawing from our own fairly deep experiences in the business. We sought nominees from *RVBUSINESS.com*, and got a decent response. And, of course, we turned to the elaborate archives of the RV/MH Heritage Foundation Inc.'s Hall of Fame in Elkhart, Ind., for backup information, and historian Al Hesselbart was a tremendous help.

From all of this, we developed a lengthy draft list of candidates who might likely qualify as one of the 100.

Again, it sounded simple and logical enough. But, frankly, the wheels came off when we passed that list around among ourselves and a bunch of other industry people to help pare things down. Everyone, it seems, has their own opinions about

who should be on this list. Fact is, we never realized from the outset what a minefield we were stepping into because we hadn't fully considered just how long a century was — and how many viable, hard-working and inventive people contributed to the inception, growth and success of this dynamic commercial sector of the U.S. economy between 1910 and 2010. Nor had we slowed down long enough to contemplate the rather ethereal meaning of "influence." Here's how we see it: People who altered the direction — even slightly — of an entire industry by what they did or didn't say over their careers, by the way they conducted themselves in commercial and association venues, by the examples and ethical standards they set, by the genius they displayed in inventing new products and services and, more than anything else, by the leadership they brought to the table.

So, with that in mind — and a realization that a lot of very influential peoples' names don't appear on the following list — we developed a draft roster of 100 people whose inventive natures, galvanizing personalities and hard-driving entrepreneurship



# ential People in the f the RV Industry

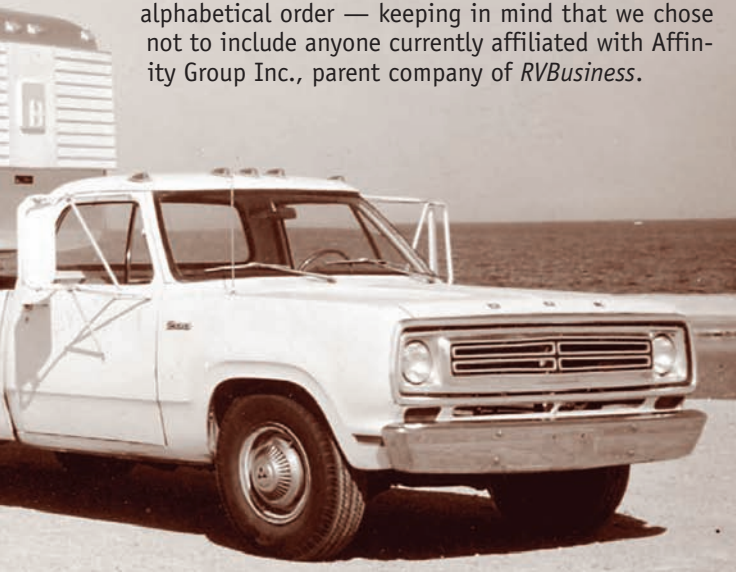
## - During the Past 100 Years — ss of the Business of Recreation

generated tens of thousands of industry-related jobs and countless innovative OEM and aftermarket products. They launched thriving manufacturing plants, successful retail stores, elaborate distributorships, effective consultancies, professional trade associations and polished publishing houses plus a universe of amenity-filled campgrounds to accommodate the masses of RV enthusiasts whose leisure activities relied to varying degrees on their efforts.

And while we realize that luminaries like Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone and John Burroughs regularly camped together in motorized vehicles from the early 1900's until the Twenties, we really tried to keep the focus of our most influential list on the industry mainstream.

So, here it is, starting with 10 individuals — or families in a couple of cases — who rather easily qualified: John K. Hanson, Winnebago Industries Inc.; Richard Klingler, Holiday Rambler Corp., the Lloyd Bontrager family, Jayco Inc.; Wade Thompson, Thor Industries Inc.; John C. Crean, Fleetwood Enterprises Inc.; Wally Byam, Airstream Inc.; Peter J. Liegl, Forest River Inc.; the Corson family, Coachmen Industries Inc.; Art Rouse, TL Enterprises Inc. (now Affinity Group Inc.); and Ray Frank, Frank Industries.

Then we added another 90. This is the whole list — in alphabetical order — keeping in mind that we chose not to include anyone currently affiliated with Affinity Group Inc., parent company of *RVBusiness*.



### Lloyd Bontrager *Jayco Inc.*



Lloyd J. Bontrager became restless after inventing a patented lift system for folding camping trailers in the mid-1960s as an employee of Star Tank and Boat Co., Goshen, Ind.

At the urging of his wife, Bertha, Bontrager in 1968 cleaned out two chicken coops and a barn on the family's farm in Middlebury, Ind., and formed Jayco Inc. to build popup trailers with 15 employees.

Lloyd ran the company while Bertha did the books.

"When mom and dad started the business, they had no long-range plans other than to do the best they could each and every day," said son Derald Bontrager, now president of Jayco, one of Indiana's largest privately held companies and one of the industry's leading towable and motorized RV manufacturers. Brother Wilbur Bontrager is Jayco chairman while son Jason currently works in sales.

The name Jayco came from Lloyd Bontrager's middle name, Jay. "He liked the idea of a Blue Jay, which became our logo because it was symbolic of the freedom that the RV lifestyle offered," said Derald Bontrager.

Jayco's first few units were delivered one at a time to a nearby RV dealership. But Bontrager, realizing that that was inefficient, soon designed a special trailer that would hold four trailers.

Jayco moved away from the farm in 1969, building a more efficient factory nearby and later designed the JayKing, the first folding camper trailer to offer full-height countertops and a 3-cubic-foot refrigerator.

Over the years Jayco, of course, has expanded into travel trailers, fifth-wheels, Class C's and most recently Class A motorhomes. Subsidiaries include Starcraft Inc., and diesel-pusher manufacturer Entegra Coach Inc.

Lloyd Bontrager, a pilot, and his youngest son, Wendell, died along with two others in a 1985 airplane crash in Muncie, Ind., while they were returning from a trip to Florida. — *Bob Ashley*

## **Wally Byam** *Airstream Inc.*



RV industry pioneer Wally Byam not only designed the iconic silver-body Airstream travel trailer more than 75 years ago, but generally can be credited with fostering the "RV lifestyle" with highly publicized caravans he led to such exotic locals as Africa, Egypt, Central America and China.

Byam built his first trailer — a box on a Model T frame — because his wife didn't like to sleep on

the ground during their camping trips.

He built the first Airstream in 1934 and two years later developed the first aluminum-shell trailer that gives Airstreams their trademark look.

World War II interrupted Airstream's manufacturing. But in 1947, Byam and a group of others formed Airstream Trailers Inc. in Van Nuys, Calif., and by 1952 the company had moved to Jackson Center, Ohio., where Airstream's headquarters remain today.

While Byam is credited with designing a trailer, the basic look of which remains the same today, his other enduring legacy is the Wally Byam Caravan Club International (WBCCI).

As Byam camped and describe his travel experiences in magazines, a reader wrote to Byam that he'd like to take a similar trip, but was afraid to do it alone.

Byam invited the man to join him on a trip to Mexico, and published the time, date and location where he planned to cross the border. When Byam arrived at the border crossing, he found 75 trailers waiting for him.

Thus began WBCCI, which today has about 7,000 members and stages numerous national and regional events annually.

Byam's 1958 caravan from Cape Town, South Africa, to Cairo, Egypt, was chronicled by National Geographic magazine. — *B.A.*

## **Melvin L. Adams** *Airxcel Inc.*

Mel Adams for years has balanced industry association activities — he's a former RVIA chairman — with his own business pursuits as president and CEO of Airxcel Inc., the Kansas manufacturer of Coleman air conditioners and Suburban furnaces and appliances. A former chairman of the RV Service Training Council and a leader in the development of the RVIA-RVDA service technician schools, he's been a visible force behind industry education and customer satisfaction.

## **Dave Altman** *Altman's Winnebago*

When he passed away in January of 2008, 34-year industry veteran Dave Altman, of Altman's Winnebago in Southern California, was a recognized leader in the nation's dealer ranks. A founder and long-time president of the Southern California RV Dealers Association, he also played a role in founding or

chairing a wide variety of organizations, from the California State RV Dealers Association to the RV/MH Hall of Fame and national RVDA

## **The Baidas Family** *General RV Center Inc.*

After taking a camping trip with his family in 1962, Abe Baidas started renting folding camping trailers out of a gas station. By the end of the '60s, he and his son, the late Richard A. "Dick" Baidas, were selling 200 units a year through Michigan-based General RV Center. Now, led by Dick's son, Loren, president of the nine-store chain, as well as Loren's Uncle Rob Baidas, CEO, and brother-in-law Wade Stufft, head of operations, those annual sales are in the thousands.

## **Theodore Bargman** *The Bargman Co.*

An early trailer parts supplier, Theodore Bargman's Coldwater, Mich., firm was founded in the 1950s to become one of the best-known RV suppliers. In the process, The Bargman Co. developed door locks, water pumps, AC/DC light systems, grounded pigtail electrical plugs and a tow vehicle-to-trailer electric connection that standardized the industry. Bargman, at the same time, was instrumental in the establishment of industry wide standards.

## **Gale Banks** *Gale Banks Engineering*

Gale Banks set the world's record for the fastest diesel truck in 2002 and has applied much of that technology in developing products that improve performance, fuel economy and overall drivability for RV owners. A premier designer and manufacturer of power-enhancing products for gas- and diesel-powered trucks and motorhomes, Gale Banks Engineering has been a constant aftermarket presence for 50-plus years — and a driving force in clean-engine technology.

## **Donald R. Boles** *Boles Manufacturing*

Don Boles, an early RV manufacturer and industry activist in California in the 1950s, was a tool-and-die maker who developed many tools used in aluminum fabrication and was one of the first recreational vehicle manufacturers to provide a service facility at his plant. A strong promoter of quality construction, Boles was an active member of several trade associations and one of the first RV builders to run advertising in general media beyond trailer-related publications.

## **The Bontrager Family** *Jayco Inc.* — See profile.

## **Brian Brady** *Heartland RV LLC*

A co-founder of Damon Corp. who had been affiliated with Utilimaster, Bivouac and Coachmen, Brian Brady started Heartland RV LLC on the north side of Elkhart, Ind., just over five years ago with an innovative fifth-wheel design concept for units towed by short-bed pickups. Now Heartland — employing 1,200 workers and occupying 14 facilities and with the recent addition of Fleetwood's former trailer brands — may threaten the front-runners.

## **James Brunskill** *Kenskill Trailers/Executive Industries* Pioneer manufacturer James Brunskill in 1948 started

Kenskill, which he sold to Redman Homes in 1964. He also helped launch Executive Industries in 1969 to build luxury motorhomes while consistently promoting quality and safety standards for plumbing, heating and electrical systems on the West Coast. Brunskill also served as the Trailer Coach Association's (TCA) safety chairman, lobbyist and two-term president.

## Wally Byam

*Airstream Inc.* — See profile.

## The Caravia Family

*Komfort Industries Inc.*

Manuel and Jorge Caravia, along with their father, Carlos, parlayed a \$1,000 investment in 1967 and built Komfort Industries Inc. into a \$60 million-a-year, Top 10 towable manufacturer in the mid-1980's — and in the process injected some style and pinache into the industry, including the legendary "Pirate Girls" at the annual Pomona show. Although their company closed its doors in 1989, the Caravia's brand survives as a West Coast division of Thor Industries Inc.

## Art Chapman

*Rockwood Inc.*

Art Chapman worked for his grandfather's Star Tank & Boat (later Starcraft Inc.) plus Supreme Corp., Advantage Van and Master Fab before founding Goshen, Ind.-based Rockwood in 1972 and expanding it into everything from popups to \$200,000 Class A diesel pushers before selling to Bangor Punta Corp. "His biggest legacy to the industry was he always kept a high focus on quality and integrity," said Don Gunden, who markets Rockwood RV's today for Forest River Inc.

## Sheldon Coleman

*The Coleman Co. Inc.*

The late Sheldon Coleman, son of William Coffin "W.C." Coleman, founder of The Coleman Co. Inc., Wichita, Kan., helped make that legendary Kansas-based brand name a household word in the camping business — from downflow furnaces (that replaced convection heaters) years ago to lanterns and today's licensed Coleman-branded Airxcel air conditioners, (FTCA) folding camping trailers and new (Dutchmen-built) Coleman conventional trailers.

## Richard A. Coon

*Recreation Vehicle Industry Association:*

Although he hasn't been in the saddle all that long at RVIA, Richard Coon, a former Onan generator executive who succeeded Dave Humphreys in early 2006 as president of RVIA, has presided over one of the toughest recessionary moments in association history. And with the help of the trade association's stalwart vice presidents, Craig Kirby, Mac Bryan, Mary "Mike" Hutya, Gary LaBella, Dianne Farrell and Bruce Hopkins, he's persevered to oversee the industry's revival.

## The Corson Family

*Coachmen Industries Inc.* — See profile.

## John C. Crean

*Fleetwood Enterprises Inc.* — See profile.

## The Curtis Family

*Curtis Trailer Sales*

Portland, Ore.-based Curtis Trailer Sales opened its doors in 1948 after the late Myron Curtis, who had lived in trailers with his wife Betty after serving in World War II, decided to

## The Corson Family *Coachmen Industries Inc.*



In April 1964, three Corson brothers — Tom, an accountant with Associates Financial who financed RV and manufactured housing interests; Keith, an engineer; and Claude, a RV company manager — realized their dream and started in the small town of Middlebury, Ind., an RV manufacturing company they called Coachmen. Tom became the CEO and the others used their skills in

managing the growth of the company. They only built 13 travel trailers in that first year along with one truck camper and 80 truck caps, but a successful company was born. Along the way, their sister Rosalie joined in the marketing function and Tom's daughter, Claire Skinner, an attorney, later ran the family business.

Tom often expressed his opinion that business success was related to people and was well-known for his relationships to employees, dealers and customers.

In 1966, Coachmen became a \$1 million sales company; in 1969, it issued its first 200,000 public shares over-the-counter. Four years later, Coachmen Industries Inc. joined the American Stock Exchange and, in 1978, qualified for the "Big Board" and began trading on the New York Stock exchange. By its 20th year, 1983, having acquired seven other RV manufacturers and two housing companies, Coachmen built 26,141 RVs and 1,849 homes. When Corson retired as chairman in 1997, the company had grown to \$171 million in shareholder equity on net sales of more than \$400 million — and was well recognized as a leader in the RV industry nationally.

Corson became very active in RV industry affairs, serving on the RVIA board of directors and executive committee and as PR committee chairman, Awards Committee chairman and on the Public and Legislative Affairs Committee. He has been recognized for his industry leadership by RVIA, RVDA and the RV/MH Hall of Fame and, in 1996, was named "Indiana Master Entrepreneur of the Year" by the national business services firm Ernst & Young. — *Al Hesselbart*

start selling RVs. Then, in 1952, he tried custom trailer building by creating a 15-foot "Curtis Cruiser." An association activist, Curtis had five RV rental/sales locations by 1969. And while the Curtis name became a West Coast mainstay, daughter Cammy Pierson was the second female chairman of RVDA in 1998-'99.

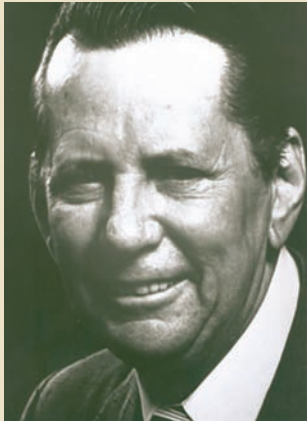
## Glenn Curtiss

*Curtiss Aerocar Land Yacht Company*

An early aviation pioneer who later partnered in the Curtiss-Wright aircraft company, Glenn Curtiss invented the fifth-wheel hitch — and trailers using it. He promoted their popularity as luxury RVs in the late '20s and '30s utilizing a light weight, aircraft type, fabric-covered construction. His Florida firm and his Detroit Aerocar Co. were among the

## John C. Crean

*Fleetwood Enterprises Inc.*



John C. Crean didn't mean to design an ugly motorhome. It just happened as he personally took charge of developing the Bounder Class A in 1986 and designed the first "basement" in a gas motorhome.

"The dealers agreed it was the ugliest thing they'd ever seen in their life — but they were really impressed with its features," Crean recalled before his passing in 2007.

"The major design innovation I came up with was to raise the height of the floor in the unit. Along with enclosing the water system, the higher floor provided lots of new storage space."

Crean is even better known for founding what would become Fleetwood Enterprises Inc. in 1950 in a southern California greenhouse under the name Coach Specialties Mfg. Co., which sold window blinds for travel trailers. He started building travel trailers after he put one together for himself and a dealer urged him to go into manufacturing.

Finding success, Crean changed the company's name to Fleetwood in 1957 and during the next decade acquired several companies, greatly expanding Fleetwood's towable business while establishing the company's presence in the manufactured housing and motorhome markets.

Fleetwood became publicly owned in 1965.

For nearly three decades Fleetwood captured upwards of 35% of sales in the major RV categories and in 1998, Crean's last year as chairman, the company reached record revenue of \$3.9 billion.

Faced in 1973 with restricted fuel supplies during the OPEC boycott, Crean, in typical "John Wayne" style, said he was confident about the future.

"When it's good, it's gonna get bad. When it's bad, it's gonna get good again," Crean was quoted as saying. "We just have to be prepared for when it gets good again."

After he retired, Crean remained active as a philanthropist while keeping his interest in the RV industry and again pursuing his passion for show business as a non-conformist chef on his successful syndicated TV show, *At Home on the Range*. — *B.A.*

## Frank DeGelas

*Mike Thompson RV Super Stores*

Frank DeGelas for the last 32 years has with his wife, Donna, owned Mike Thompson's RV Super Stores — and during that time has been a dominant factor in RV sales in Southern California, one of the largest and most competitive RV markets in the U.S. DeGelas, now with four stores, is known to place a high priority on a "goals-and-controls" management philosophy, aggressive customer service, state-of-the-art management systems and the Internet.

## Art Decio

*Skyline Corp.*

Ask anyone around Elkhart, Ind., if they've heard of Art and son Terry Decio, and they'll likely say "yes." That's because the senior Decio, chairman of the publicly held company his father (Julius) launched in 1951, has for years been a major U.S. builder of manufactured housing and RVs, a big-time local philanthropist and an influential diner at Lucchese's Italian Restaurant on Elkhart's east side. And son Terry, vice president of sales and marketing, is earning the same status.

## Kenneth Dixon

*Traveleze Trailer Co.*

Dixon was the man behind Los Angeles-based Traveleze Trailer Co., one of the first U.S. companies to make and sell travel trailers, to include gas refrigerators and to manufacture truck campers. Traveleze, founded in 1931, sold direct on the street until 1936 when Dixon began developing a dealer body. During and after WWII, Dixon's trailers were sold as assemble-it-yourself kits. In 1947, a plant was built in Burbank and the firm grew rapidly to five facilities.

## John N. Dodgen

*Dodgen Industries*

John N. Dodgen has viewed the ebb-and-flow of American business since he founded Dodgen Industries in Humboldt, Iowa, in 1947 to build automated feed and seed equipment for Midwest farmers. And he's focused on the RV business ever since, launching Born Free Motorcoach in 1969 to become the guru of the downsize Class B and C motorhome market. "We grew out of the mentality, 'make it simple and make it strong,'" Dodgen says of his roll cage-constructed units.

## Wilfred S. "Bill" Doyle, Jr.

*Western Recreational Vehicles Inc.*

Bill Doyle founded Western RV in Yakima, Wash., in 1971 and in the process refined lamination processes and aluminum-structure technology and tooled out a lot of impressive Class A motorhomes. Doyle, who served 20 years on the Washington State Governors Board for RVs and Manufactured Homes and 18 years on RVIA's board of directors, was instrumental in the merger of RVIA and RVI into one functioning organization.

## Bill Estes

*Affinity Group Inc.*

Bill Estes, who retired in 2006, was viewed not only as a leader at the company at which he served as group publisher, Affinity Group Inc., but in the industry at large from the time he left his position at the Los Angeles Times in 1968 and joined what was then called TL Enterprises Inc., publisher of *Trailer Life*, *MotorHome* and *RVBusiness* magazines. A technically minded fellow with a quiet manner, Estes was so credible that he could write a positive product evaluation and

earliest manufacturers dedicated entirely to RV production with multiple regional production locations.

## Cole Davis

*Keystone RV Co.*

While he exited the business a few years ago for an early retirement, Davis, a former Dutchmen executive, will best be remembered among industry insiders as a key player in assembling the financial and operational underpinnings for Keystone RV Co. Inc. and in helping to morph Thor Industries Inc. into the RV-building machine it ultimately became. Davis, in early retirement, can often be found working on his collector cars and making news as a charitable donor.

almost instantly put a new company on the map.

## **Tom Faludy** *Scott Fetzer Co.*

Tom Faludy was a respected executive at both Camping World Inc. and Carefree of Colorado during his respective tenures there. But Faludy, now an executive with Berkshire Hathaway's Scott Fetzer Co. in Cleveland, Ohio, will forever be remembered in the RV arena for steadfastly spearheading the Go RVing Coalition's pan-industry Go RVing marketing/advertising campaign in 1995 and serving as the popular ongoing program's first chairman from 1995 to 2004.

## **Ron Fenech** *Thor Industries Inc.*

While Ron Fenech will likely make an even bigger splash as senior group president of Thor Industries Inc.'s RV operations, a job to which the former Coachmen exec was recently promoted, he earned his way into this "most influential" list for the 12 years he spent building Keystone into the industry's top towable RV builder in an era when tow-type RVs occupy more than 90% of the market. During his watch, Keystone grew from \$450 million to \$1.3 billion in sales.

## **The Fitzgerald Family** *Venture Out RV*

Venture Out, based in Bakersfield, Calif., was a dealership with more than a local impact. G. Gerald "Jerry" Fitzgerald purchased the retail store from Gulf Oil Corp. in 1975 and subsequently operated Venture Out dealerships in and around the San Francisco Bay, the Central Valley and Southern California before its acquisition by Camping World/FreedomRoads and ultimate closure. Not to be overlooked, son Lee Fitzgerald played a role in the dealership for years.

## **The Francis Brothers, Dave and Steve** *ROUTE 66 RV Network*

The growth of dealer groups like the Overland Park, Kan.-based ROUTE 66 RV Network, founded by Dave and Steve Francis in 2003, is a dynamic new factor in the marketplace. Now the continent's largest network of independent dealers, it includes 150 locations in 45 states. In addition to captive RV insurance and finance companies run by partners Rob Merrill and Chris Boyd, ROUTE 66 has online software, auction, parts and travel club stores.

## **Ray Frank**

*Frank Industries, Dodge/Travco/Xplorer –*  
See profile.

## **The C.M. Fore Family** *Foretravel Inc.*

The high-end Foretravel motorhome, built on a proprietary chassis in Nacogdoches, Texas, was started in 1967 after C.M. Fore and son Ray assembled a 21-foot home-built coach on a Dodge chassis for a class project. It developed into the Foretravel — an early diesel utilizing a mono-coque design built by a small company with a sterling reputation. The Fores sold out in 2005 to an investor group, but the high-end Foretravel motorhome brand lives on.

## **David Garvin** *Camping World Inc.*

Starting with a small campground store in 1966, David Garvin assembled the foundation of what would arguably

## **Ray Frank** *Frank Industries Inc.*



Like many early industry pioneers, Ray Frank in 1958 built his first RV — a "motor home," to use a phrase that he coined — for his own use.

Working with his son, Ron, in a barn on the Frank farm in Brown City, Mich., the duo mounted a waterproof wood-and-aluminum body on a Dodge chassis.

The boxy-looking vehicle — today known as a Class A — so enthralled Frank's neighbors that by 1961, the Franks had formed Frank Industries Inc. to sell Frank Motor Homes and built 160 units.

However, it was a formal alliance with Chrysler Corp.'s Dodge division in 1962 that cemented Ray Frank's spot in RV industry lore with the introduction of a 26-foot motorhome with the first molded fiberglass body, an innovation adopted by many motorhome builders during the last five decades.

The design was revolutionary, not only because of its use of fiberglass sidepanels attached to a steel superstructure, but because of its aerodynamic design — described by some as looking like a Silly Putty egg — and features like an inside toilet.

Unfortunately, Frank turned out to be a better engineer than he was a businessman; in 1965 the company went bankrupt and was acquired by Detroit businessman Peter R. Fink at Chrysler's urging and renamed Travco. Travco, although having some success — and early Travco's being revered by vintage RV aficionados — ceased production in 1979.

Frank went on to form Xplorer Motor Homes in Brown City to build small, garagable motorhomes. Frank retired to Florida in 1975 while Xplorer continued to be operated by his family for 20 years.

In 1995, son Ron Frank sold Frank Industries to custom builder Startrack Technologies and the Xplorer operation was moved to Goshen, Ind., where it exists today, extending the Frank legacy into the 21st century. — B.A.

develop into the world's largest retail aftermarket RV parts & accessory network — Camping World Inc. — today consisting of 75 stores. Through his personal service-oriented philosophy of "No unhappy customers — not one," Garvin changed the face of the RV industry's aftermarket parts-and-accessories business at dealerships throughout the U.S.

## **Dan George** *Georgie Boy Mfg. Inc.*

One of the hottest Class A motorhome-building companies during the '90s was Georgie Boy Manufacturing Inc., which in 1993 was churning out eight motorhomes a day with 350 employees, including entry-level Swingers and Cruise Masters, mid-priced Encounters and Cruise Aires. Behind it was founder and chairman Dan George, along with Art Colvin, Denny Russell and Fred Emmert. George retired in 1997 after selling his company to Coachmen Industries Inc.

## **John K. Hanson** *Winnebago Industries Inc.*



When Iowa mortician and entrepreneur John K. Hanson and a group of local businessmen in 1958 convinced California-based Modernistic Industries to open a factory in Thor, Iowa, they set in motion a series of events that led to Winnebago Industries Inc. becoming the nation's largest motorhome manufacturer and its product a national icon.

With Modernistic later filing bankruptcy, Hanson took control of the company and opened a factory to make travel trailers in an empty plant he owned in Forest City, and in 1966 the first motorhome rolled off Winnebago's production line.

The Winnebago brand was soon so popular that it became synonymous with the word "motorhome," its coaches easily recognizable for the "Flying W" on their sides.

Born in 1913 on a farm in Thor, Hanson starting working in his father's farm-implement store as a youngster.

After owning a furniture store he bought from his dad and an International Harvester/Oldsmobile dealership, Hanson in 1957 became a Mallard travel trailer dealer and a year later got involved with the Modernistic Industries venture.

In 1972, he took Winnebago Industries public.

The company biography noted that Hanson had three hobbies — reading, marketing and people. "He turned these hobbies into a career," the biography added.

In 1983, Hanson was inducted into the RV/MH Hall of Fame and, in 1984, received the prestigious national Distinguished Entrepreneur Award from Babson College, which noted in a profile that Hanson's philosophy always was to seize on opportunities.

"If I miss an opportunity," Hanson's Babson profile noted, "the blame is mine for having failed in some manner or another; and then I try to live with it the best way possible, yet always looking ahead."

Hanson founded the Winnebago and Hanson Family foundations, both of which provide assistance to the communities where Winnebago employees live. — *B.A.*

## **Larry Girard** *Girard Systems*

Another heavy-hitter who experienced success in the supplier ranks wherever he went, Larry Girard became president of A & E Systems in 1973, an awning supplier for which he assumed 100% ownership in 1984, boosting sales from \$500,000 to \$50 million with 500 employees. He then moved on to Hydro Flame, where he was a majority shareholder in the late '80's, then on to Girard Systems in 1996 with his wife, Marcia Girard, as CEO. They've added Girard Products LLC.

## **John K. Hanson** *Winnebago Industries Inc.* — See profile.

## **J. Brown Hardison** *Trailer Dealer Magazine*

A pioneering publisher of trade journals including RVBusiness predecessor RV Dealer, Illinois resident J. Brown Hardison established the first national market survey, statistical production figures and shipment data for the RV arena. A founder and first board chairman of the RV/MH Hall of Fame, he published trade magazines for the housing, RV, aftermarket, and park development industries before his company was acquired by TL Enterprises Inc.

## **Bruce Hertzke** *Winnebago Industries Inc.*

Bruce Hertzke, like current Winnebago Industries Inc. Chairman Bob Olson, who will likely wind up in the next "most influential" list himself, rose from the ranks of hourly production worker at the Iowa motorhome manufacturer to captain Winnebago through some of its best years. He also chaired RVIA's board of directors and served on RVDA's Education Foundation board. When last heard from, Hertzke, who retired in 2008, was shooting ducks in a Canadian bog.

## **David Hoefler** *Earthbound RV LLC*

Dave Hoefler, in more ways than you can count, has exerted his presence in the RV (and MH) industry since he helped start up Gulf Stream Coach Inc. in the mid-1980s and turned Dutchmen Mfg. Inc. into a high-volume, towable-building juggernaut marketing "packaged" towables. He also had a hand in Four Winds International, Hart Housing, Dutch Housing, Friendship Manufactured Housing, Pilgrim and now green RV manufacturer Earthbound RV LLC in Marion, Ind.

## **Rick Horsey** *Parkview RV Center*

A soft-spoken individual, Rick Horsey's contributions to RVDA — and the RV Learning Center — cannot be overlooked, especially in an era when a recession is testing the industry's ability to focus on education. This well-known Delaware retailer has chaired the RVDA and RVDA Education Foundation boards while serving 10 years on the RVDA-RVIA Service Technician Certification board and helping to set up the Go RVing Coalition's Committee on Excellence.

## **David J. Humphreys** *RVIA*

As president of RVIA from 1979 until his retirement in early 2006 and as chairman of the American Recreation Coalition as well as the Travel Industry Association of America, Dave Humphreys clearly was an industry changer who helped meld RVIA into a financially and politically strong, Washington D.C.-based trade organization for RV manufacturers and suppliers nationwide before turning RVIA's reigns over to Onan exec Richard A. Coon and moving on to other ventures.

## **Robert "Boots" Ingram** *Teton Homes*

After starting a company called Strato Track in 1954 to make sliding door tracks for the MH industry, Boots Ingram in 1967 founded Teton Homes in Wyoming, a company that helped redefine the high-end fifth-wheel market for nearly 40 years. Ingram, once a key stockholder in Marathon Homes, was also an RVIA and RVDA loyalist for years and arguably did more as a donor for the RV/MH Heritage Foundation Inc.'s

Hall of Fame than any other individual.

## **Craig Jensen** *Blaine Jensen RV*

Craig Jensen's father, Blaine, started selling truck campers at Blaine Jensen & Sons' used car dealership in Kaysville, Utah, in the 1970s. The Jensen family opened a second dealership as Craig, a respected industry voice, served as president of the Utah RV Dealers Association and chairman of RVDA. Both stores were sold to Camping World/FreedomRoads in 2003 and Craig, after serving as president of FreedomRoads, returned a year ago to church and family life in Utah.

## **Tom Johnson** *Tom Johnson Camping Center*

The example Tom Johnson has set in terms of customer service through the years since he started retailing RV's off his North Carolina front yard probably outweighs in our eyes all of the obvious accolades that go with a dealer who has been one of the most dominant in the Carolinas for years. With active partner Gary Stroud, he operates an expansive Marion "destination" facility plus a satellite outlet at Lowe's Motor Speedway in Concord — with 69 service bays combined.

## **Warren F. Jones** *Hehr International Inc.*

A viable supplier and RVIA activist who for years was a familiar face at industry and association functions, Warren Jones once served on the national boards of TCA, MHMA, MDNA, MHI, RVI, and RVIA and was the first chairman of the TCA service clinics. At the same time, he was selected as an industry representative on the HUD Manufactured Home Advisory Council. He certainly left his mark, and RVIA's long-term loyalists remember him well.

## **The Kaplan-Sunshine Families** *Stag-Parkway Inc.*

Under the leadership of Ted Kaplan and Stan Sunshine, Atlanta-based Stag-Parkway Inc. (co-founded in 1968 by Ted and Ann Kaplan and partners) acquired HRC's Parkway Distributors in 1989 and built Stag into a leader in RV aftermarket parts & accessory distribution. Sunshine, an ex-RVAA president currently on the RVIA board, has served for years as chief executive of Stag, the sale of which to Ares Capital Group was completed in April.

## **The Ketelsen Family** *Ketelsen RVs*

It all started with some front yard truck camper sales in 1962 for John R. "Johnnie" Ketelsen, whose sons Randy and Gary now run Ketelsen Campers of Colorado in Wheatridge, Col, and Ketelsen RV in Hiawatha, Iowa, respectively. A legend in his own time and a big-time Coleman camper dealer, Johnnie Ketelsen was a C&W performer known for his impeccable business values and commitment to founding the Iowa RV Dealers Association and national RVDA.

## **Newton C. Kindlund** *Holiday RV Superstores Inc.*

Most will remember Newt Kindlund for having started, along with his wife, Joanne, the industry's first publicly held national retail dealership chain — Florida-based Holiday RV Superstores Inc. In 1999, the Kindlunds sold their controlling shares of the company. That same year, they established the first national RV industry college scholarship through RVDA.

## **Richard E. Klingler** *Holiday Rambler Corp.*



In 1953, Richard Klingler, with support from his parents, began building travel trailers in his father's two-car garage in Elkhart, Indiana. A woodworker by trade, Klingler built the bodies and cabinetry while his father, a metal worker, designed and built the frames. A unique feature of his early units was a flat roof, square-end design that was a departure from the

teardrop and "canned ham" shapes that were used on most early '50s models. With Richard and his father building the first trailers, interior details were developed by his wife and mother — a true family enterprise. Rapid growth promoted moves to Jimtown and then, in 1959, to Wakarusa, Ind., as larger facilities and more land were needed.

First producing only travel trailers, Holiday Rambler began producing motorhomes and fifth-wheels in the 1970s. By the late '70s, Holiday Rambler Corp. — at 25 years of age — was being recognized as the largest privately held company in the RV industry.

A major contribution to RV design by Klingler was the development of the Aluma-frame concept, replacing wooden frame members with aluminum for lighter weight and additional strength. By producing high-quality, innovative products, Klingler was able to defy industry trends; while the RV industry was suffering major setbacks in 1981 and 1982, Holiday Rambler was setting all time sales records.

Much of Holiday Rambler growth was by diversification, with the addition of Parkway Distributors as a nationwide aftermarket supply distribution company; Utilimaster, a manufacturer of cargo trailers and small delivery vehicles for UPS and FedEx; and Holiday House building permanent-site vacation homes; as well as the growth of Holiday World RV dealerships. Upon Klingler's retirement, the company was sold to Harley Davidson Corp. and later to Monaco Coach Corp.

Richard Klingler's contribution to industry associations includes service as chairman of the RVIA Standards Committee and as member of the executive committee and vice-chairman of the RVIA board of directors. — A.H.

Kindlund is also recognized today for his outstanding service to RVDA and RVIA.

## **Richard Klingler** *Holiday Rambler Corp.* — See profile.

## **Bob Kropf** *Kropf Manufacturing Inc./RPTIA*

A 50-year RV and manufactured housing industry veteran who owned Kropf Manufacturing Inc. in Goshen, Ind., Bob Kropf was a member and chairman of the RVIA Park Trailer Committee from 1984 to 1990, and, in 1993, a founder of the Recreational Park Trailer Industry Association (RPTIA)



## **Peter J. Liegl** *Forest River Inc.*



It takes one to know one. So renowned investor Warren Buffett likely knew what he was getting when he bought Forest River Inc. in 2005 from Peter J. Liegl, an almost larger-than-life entrepreneur in the RV industry.

The negotiations to add Liegl's Elkhart, Ind.-based Forest River to Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway Inc. portfolio with Liegl staying on as president are re-

puted to have taken 20 minutes after Buffett received a fax pitching the company that he'd previously never heard about.

As the deal for an undisclosed price wrapped up, Buffett told Liegl that he'd hear from him once a year and otherwise for Liegl to keep on doing what he was doing, a point that Buffett made in Berkshire Hathaway's 2005 annual report: "Pete is a remarkable entrepreneur ... You can be sure that I won't be telling Pete how to manage his operation."

Liegl, who first made his mark as an executive for Coachmen Industries Inc., founded Forest River — now the RV industry's No. 2 towable manufacturer — in 1996, more than a year after his departure from Cobra Industries Inc., a publicly held company he co-founded.

Liegl's style throughout his career has been to expand aggressively, hire the right people and let them do their jobs. "If you hire people who are somewhat competitive and want to do a good job and thrive at succeeding, you don't have to worry about them. They do what they are supposed to do," Liegl once told *RVBusiness*.

He viewed the recent recession as an opportunity to expand, and acquired Coachmen's RV division during the downturn and expanded production while other companies were scaling back.

Forest River currently has more than 70 facilities that produce a full line of towable and motorized RVs along with recreational part trailers, pontoon and fishing boats, cargo trailers, mobile offices, manufactured homes, ice houses and portable restrooms. — *B.A.*

## **Gary M. LaBella** *RVIA*

A dynamic industry promoter, Gary LaBella, as chief marketing officer for Reston, Va.-based RVIA, has for three decades overseen much of the industry's public persona as a staff liaison for both the RVIA Public Relations Committee and the all-industry Go RVing Coalition. An over-the-top-sports fanatic and tireless industry advocate, he's been responsible for planting the industry's message in countless print, broadcast and virtual formats for the all-volunteer coalition.

## **Robert B. Lee** *Country Coach Inc.*

Bob Lee's name is synonymous with high-line motorhomes at every level. He was a former chair of FMCA's Commercial Council board and of RVIA's National RV Show committee. More than anything else, of course, he's known as a founder and former CEO of defunct luxury coach builder Country Coach Inc., which he founded in 1973 as Country Campers to build pickup toppers and truck campers. It grew to employ 1,500 in a 450,000-square-foot plant in Junction City, Ore.

## **Peter J. Liegl** *Coachmen/Cobra/Forest River Inc.* — See profile

## **Gaylord N. Maxwell** *Life on Wheels*

Few individuals could claim more career flexibility than Gaylord Maxwell, a would-be actor who shifted in his 83 years from school teacher to RV dealer (he was a charter member and first president of California RVDA) to an accomplished author and "lifestyle advocate" (with his wife, Margie) for *Trailer Life* and *MotorHome* magazines. Later, Maxwell promoted full-timing through his popular series of Life on Wheels conferences throughout the U.S.

## **Joe McAdams** *Equity Lifestyles Properties Inc.*

Joe McAdams' name may not be a household word in some industry circles, but the flamboyant Arkansas native has exerted more influence than most may ever realize as a one-time president of publisher and membership marketer Affinity Group Inc. and as owner/operator of Thousand Trails resorts. He's currently president of Chicago-based Equity LifeStyle Properties Inc., an RV/MH resort-owning company dba Encore and Thousand Trails resorts.

## **John D. McCarry** *SHURflo*

McCarry's company, founded in 1968, conceived and developed the roller type "on demand" RV water pump, which changed the industry standard from diaphragm and impeller type pumps. A leader in the customer service and product-quality arenas, McCarry was a strong supporter of industry associations on behalf of a SHURflo brand that still exists today — with an Elkhart distribution center — as part of Flow Technologies Group of Pentair, Inc. (PNR).

## **Larry McClain** *McClain's RV SuperStore*

With strong stores in Texas and Oklahoma, Larry McClain's reputation grew from his 1962 startup within the industry. Founder of the Oklahoma State RV Show, he was active in the Central Oklahoma RVDA and was a long-time member and

after park trailer manufacturers exited RVIA. A popular individual, Kropf served as RPTIA's chairman for the first eight years of its existence.

## **Milt Kuolt** *Thousand Trails Inc.*

Milt Kuolt opened the first Thousand Trails membership campground in 1972 in Chehalis, Wash, and is generally viewed as the originator of this concept. He mixed pristine outdoors atmospheres and comfortable amenities at each of the gated parks he added to the fledgling system, which grew to about 65 parks before experiencing widely publicized financial difficulties. Equity LifeStyle Properties LLC currently owns the Thousand Trails parks and membership network.

president of RVDA. "Larry McClain was a founding member of the association and kept RVDA together in its darkest early days during the oil crisis of the early 1970s," says RVDA President Mike Molino.

## C.T. McCreary

### *Modernistic Industries*

C.T. McCreary's 1945-vintage California company, building Aljo trailers, was one of the first with production facilities in various parts of the country and grew to become the nation's No. 2 RV manufacturer in 1957. An active TCA member and show organizer, he helped launch the giant Los Angeles RV Show and was responsible for many innovations. Few will recall that Modernistic Industries of Iowa became Winnebago Industries after a change of ownership.

## Thomas R. "Tim" McGuire

### *Coast Distribution System*

Tim McGuire first went to work for the predecessor of Coast, then a sheet-metal job shop, in 1963 while a student at San Jose State University. Before long, he quit school, went to work and bought the business "on a note." McGuire's been there ever since, building Coast into a leading RV aftermarket wholesale distributor that has grown in part from more than 20 acquisitions of smaller firms, most notably Coachmen's Coach Lite and Rogers Distributing.

## Wayne Mertes

### *Dolphin/National RV Inc.*

Wayne Mertes and his father emptied their savings and borrowed against their homes to scrape up the \$6,500 needed to launch Dolphin Campers in 1964, building truck campers with lifetime structural warranties. They eventually added micro-minimotorhomes and Class A's and a wide array of towables. Renamed National RV Inc. in 1985, the company went public in 1998 and ultimately employed as many as 1,200. National RV closed its doors in late 2007.

## Mahlon A. Miller

### *Newmar Corp.*

The bare facts about Mahlon Miller, an innovative Amish-Mennonite, indicate that he is the "father of power slideouts" and that he holds several product patents. But that wouldn't begin to explain the kind of quiet strength and leadership that Mahlon Miller, who earlier rose from the cabinet shop to the presidency of Holiday Rambler Corp., brought to the table in terms of product and financial support over the years since he became sole Newmar owner in 1991.

## Milo Miller

### *Sportsman Trailers*

Was Milo Miller actually Elkhart's first RV builder? Some believe he was. Miller built his first trailer in the '30s with auto junkyard parts and sold it on his first outing, which led to the launch of Sportsman Trailers (1932-'36, later Schult Trailers), Elcar Coach (1936, later part of Zimmer) and National Coach (1937-'45), which he also sold for a handsome profit. Miller's gameplan, employing more than 500 people by 1940, garnered the nickname "School Teacher to an Industry."

## Mike Molino

### *Recreation Vehicle Dealers Association (RVDA)*

Mike Molino, president of Fairfax, Va.-based RVDA since 1996, has stood at the crossroads of a series of industry debates while serving as president of RVDA and the RV Assistance

## Art Rouse *Affinity Group Inc.*



Los Angeles advertising executive Art Rouse saw an opportunity in the growing recreation vehicle industry when he purchased *Western Trailer Life* magazine in 1958.

"I bought the magazine as a business because I thought the (recreational vehicle) industry would do well," he recalled later in life in an interview with the *Los Angeles Business Journal*. "For two years, it cost me almost every cent I had. Little by little, we passed our competitors, and I gradually bought them out one by one. The circulation grew and grew."

Indeed it did.

*Trailer Life's* circulation — about 11,000 when Rouse purchased it — grew within the next decade to more than 300,000 as the magazine became the cornerstone of a publishing group that today includes *MotorHome*, *Trailer Life*, *Highways*, *RVBusiness*, *Boating Industry*, *Powersports News* and more than 40 other recreation-related publications in addition to the 1-million-member Good Sam Club, Camping World retail stores and Coast to Coast Resorts, a membership club with 600 affiliated parks.

"His passion and commitment to the RVer, combined with his innovation and savvy business sense, played a large part in shaping today's RV community," said Mike Schneider, president of CEO of Affinity Group Inc. (AGI), which in 1988 acquired Rouse's holdings.

As the magazine grew, so did its impact on the RV industry as Rouse led efforts for public lands access and the magazine provided product reviews and technical information for RVers.

Rouse acquired the Good Sam Club in 1968 — the same year that *MotorHome* had its debut — and in 1973 published *Trailer Life's* first official Good Sam Club campground directory, the predecessor of the highly regarded *Trailer Life Campgrounds, Resorts and Services Directory*.

Having become an RV enthusiast himself, Rouse wrote a column in *Trailer Life* for many years, earning him the nickname "Mr. RV." Rouse passed away in 2007 at age 89. — B.A.

Corp., vice president of the Go RVing Coalition, treasurer of the American Recreation Coalition and as a board member of the RV/MH Heritage Foundation Inc. Molino, who succeeded Bob Strawn at RVDA, is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and the Army War College.

## Ralph Morgan *Morgan Drive Away*

Ralph Morgan's place in the RV universe is as the "father of the commercial transportation sector for RVs and manufactured homes," as the Hall of Fame so reverently puts it. Morgan, by all accounts, was the first to receive nationwide ICC authority for delivering trailers. He developed a short wheelbase "toter" truck to enable towing of the largest

## Wade F.B. Thompson

*Thor Industries Inc.*



Wade F.B. Thompson described his entry into the RV industry as a “baptism under fire” when, in 1977, he and partner Peter B. Orthwein purchased Hi-Lo Trailer Co., a small Ohio travel trailer manufacturer.

“I would stop at the local hardware store and pick up whatever parts we needed,” the audacious New Zealand native Thompson told *RVBusiness* about his early days at Hi-Lo.

After making a profit at Hi-Lo during a period that saw RV sales drop 50% two consecutive years, Thompson in 1980 convinced conglomerate Beatrice Foods literally to give him Airstream Inc., which became the cornerstone of Thor Industries Inc., today the largest RV manufacturer in the U.S.

“We put in zero — not even a dollar down — on the purchase of Airstream,” Thompson said.

Prior to Thompson’s death in November 2009, he and Orthwein — Thor is an anagram of their last names — had acquired subsidiaries that include Keystone RV Co., Damon Motor Coach, Dutchmen Manufacturing, Komfort Corp., Breckenridge, CrossRoads RV and Four Winds International Corp. in the U.S. and General Coach in Canada, the latter of which was recently sold.

Born in Wellington, New Zealand, Thompson received a bachelor of commerce degree from Victoria University and a master’s degree from New York University. In the U.S., initially he worked for Sperry and Hutchins, the S&H Green Stamp company, in corporate development, and later in acquisitions and corporate development for Texstar Corp.

That background fostered his entrepreneurial nature and served him well when, within a year of acquiring Airstream, the company made a \$1 million profit after losing \$12 million the year before.

That set a pattern for Thor, now a publicly owned company.

“From the early days, what we did was take some broken-down companies and turn them around and keep the management team and got them incentivized and motivated. We’ve always had that philosophy.” — *B.A.*

possible trailers and engineered “beavertail-style trailers” for transporting multiple smaller trailers with easy rolloff dismounting.

## Franklin A. Newcomer

*Franklin/FAN & Monitor Coach*

Frank Newcomer was a co-founder of Franklin Coach and Monitor Coach and the sole founder in 1954 of FAN Coach Co., which was said to have been among the best travel trailers and motorhomes ever built. By the way, “FAN” Coach, which was among the first self-contained towables, got its name from Newcomer’s own initials. Quality-minded, Newcomer served on the boards of MHMA, RVI, and The Gold Seal Guild.

## The Nill Family

*Guaranty RV*

Herb Nill first launched Guaranty as a used car lot in 1966 after graduating from the University of Oregon and eventually nurtured it into the largest dealer in Oregon. A one-site store with the recent closure of its I-5 location in Coburg, Guaranty today sits on 40 acres in Junction City shared with Guaranty Chevrolet. “One of our main secrets over the years has been top-notch service,” says Shannon Nill, general manager, whose brothers, Eric and Marty, also work at Guaranty.

## I.B. “Irv” Perch

*Aristocrat Travel Trailers*

Irv Perch personally had a hand in the founding of Aristocrat Trailers — more than 170,000 of which were built between 1958 and 1970 — plus American Clipper minimotorhomes (1974-’80) and unique Fold n Roll towables. Perch claimed to have debuted the first motorhome sliding windows, fold away “gaucho” beds, RV “potty drawers,” garagable “lo-liner” travel trailers, short tandem wheel trailers and trailers with doors behind the axle.

## David Peterson

*Ultra Van Corp.*

David Peterson’s another individual whose influence was projected through innovative product — in his case a memorable, light-weight Ultra Van that was perhaps way ahead of its time. Peterson, a California aircraft designer, developed the Ultra Van on GM’s new 80-hp Corvair in 1960. Production models (\$8,995) followed, as did subsequent units powered by brawnier Corvette and Oldsmobile V-8 Rocket engines — all coveted by collectors to this day.

## Joe & Kay Peterson

*Escapes RV Club*

The Petersons wanted to see America. So, at age 43, when most people are home working, Joe and Kay Peterson set out on a 15-year, 27-state trip during which they worked (he as a union electrician) on the road. Along the way, they hatched the Escapes RV Club, a one-of-a-kind outfit that operates its own parks and otherwise services a loyal crowd of wanderlust-stricken members from its Texas base with mail forwarding, books, magazines, message-forwarding, etc.

## Harold D. Platt

*Platt Trailers, Platt RV Sales*

A well-known individual in Elkhart business circles, Harold Platt began building trailers in 1935 and was a member of the committee for the first national show. He built the first known full-bath unit and was the trailer industry representative on the War Production Board during WWII. His career as a manufacturer and, later, a retailer continued into his ’90s. He was the first dealer to sign up for both Coachmen and Jayco lines when they were started.

## Donald R. Pletcher

*Fleetwing Traveler, Mallard, Damon Corp.*

The RV/MH Hall of Fame refers to Don Pletcher as “a long-time industry leader as a supplier, RV manufacturer and housing manufacturer (who) distinguished himself as a champion of industry integrity and unity... for nearly 40 years.” We can’t argue with that. There are plenty of industry observers who will also remember Pletcher, a former RVIA executive

committee member now in retirement, as having been a pretty aggressive business competitor.

## **Dan Pocapalia** *Kit Manufacturing Co.*

Dan Pocapalia and the Long Beach, Calif.-based company of which he was chairman and CEO — Kit Manufacturing Co. — were major players in their day, churning out towable lines like Road Ranger, SunChaser, Companion, Millenium and Patio Hauler from plants in Caldwell, Idaho, and McPherson, Kan. Pocapalia was an active TCA member before RVIA and MHI and before his company, dating back to 1945, closed its RV operations in 2003.

## **Terrell J. Reese** *Reese Products Inc.*

An active member of RVIA, WDA, RVDA, Terrell Reese developed the Reese stabilizing jack, Reese weight-distributing hitch, automatic sway control and many other accessories which added greatly to the ease and safety of trailer transportation. And the hitch brand he helped build, under the corporate umbrella of Cequent Commercial Products, a TriMas unit that markets several other hitch brands as well, is still very much alive and well today.

## **Jim Rogers** *Kampgrounds of America (KOA)*

KOA Chairman and CEO Jim Rogers is arguably the industry's most relentless marketeer. A former Harrah's Entertainment Inc. executive and national Boy Scouts advocate, he has etched KOA's yellow brand into the American psyche and now looks to grow the franchise and change the face of KOA's 465 parks — and the American campground business along with it — with the infusion of Internet-based systems and destination-style camping "cabins" and "lodges."

## **Kelly L. Rose** *EverGreen Recreational Vehicles LLC*

As a supplier at Rose-Irions and ASA, as a heavy-weight van converter at Starcraft Automotive and now as a key investor in EverGreen Recreational Vehicles LLC — a Middlebury, Ind., manufacturer of state-of-the-art "green" towable RVs — few individuals have had a longer and more varied career in and out of the RV business than the ubiquitous Kelly Rose. A past RVIA chairman, he's also noted for the development of handicapped vans and RVs.

## **Art Rouse** *Affinity Group Inc. — See profile.*

## **The Roy L. Sampson Sr. Family** *Arizona State Trailer Sales Inc.*

Roy Sampson's love of camping led him to open Arizona State Trailer Sales Inc., later called Little Dealer Little Prices RV in Mesa, Ariz. While Sampson's wife, Vivian, and extended family helped out at the growing Coleman dealership, Roy's daughter, Debbie, gradually stepped up to the presidency of the three-store dealership and to the current chairmanship of RVDA. All of Debbie Brunoforte's six siblings have worked at Little Dealer Little Prices, as have grandchildren and others.

## **Frank Sargent** *Thetford Corp.*

Frank Sargent and sons Charles "Bud" and Ron Sargent grew their legacy from a garage shop called Thetford Engi-

neering Co. in 1963 into Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Thetford Corp., "the world's leading supplier of sanitation products for the RV, marine and heavy-duty truck industries." While Thetford continued to make its mark with RV toilets, Aqua-Kem holding tank deodorants and its legendary "Porta-Potti," Frank Sargent quietly passed away in September at the age of 100.

## **John Serro** *Serro Scotty*

John Serro, another foundational manufacturer, started building small 10-to-13-foot-long garagable trailers in 1956 and in 1957 "stole" the Midwest RV Show in Elkhart with a nifty new 13-foot Sportsman lineup. While growing into a three-plant operation in 1962, he started the Serro Scotty Owners Association in 1962 that by 1973 had 56 chapters. Serro served on the RVIA and Pennsylvania RVCA boards and was the first RV builder to open a campground exclusively for his owners.

## **The Shea Family** *Gulf Stream Coach Inc.*

Whether it's a towable or motorized RV — or a manufactured home for that matter — there's been no more consistent and savvy survivor of the ups and downs of the RV arena than Nappanee, Ind.-based Gulf Stream Coach Inc. And the Shea family, the late Jim Sr., Jim Jr., Brian and Dan, have been the driving force through thick and thin, having entered the housing business as Fairmont Homes in 1971 and the RV side as Gulf Stream in '83.

## **Arthur G. Sherman** *Covered Wagon Co.*

The person to whom most historians attribute the first successful, mass-produced, contemporary-style American trailer is Detroit scientist and former pharmaceutical maker Arthur Sherman. His first unit, like many others, was built in his backyard. In 1928, the legendary Covered Wagon Co. was formed, building 35 to 40 units a day from one plant as early as 1935. Sherman broke new ground in floorplan financing (with CIT) and developed new laminating processes.

## **Paul R. Skogebo** *Robert Crist & Co./REDEX*

Paul Skogebo sold his first trailer when he was 14 years old at his dad's small Minnesota dealership. He later went to work for — and became a partner in — Robert Crist & Co., a salient Southwest dealership in which he currently serves as president. In 1996, meanwhile, he helped launch the REDEX Recreation Dealers Cooperative, now doing business with 42 principals and 84 stores under the Priority RV brand, and was REDEX president until this spring.

## **The Smalley Family** *Cruise America Inc.*

Founded in Miami, Fla., in 1972 as American Land Cruisers Inc. — the name it adopted when going public in 1984 — Cruise America saw an opportunity in setting up a national-scale rental and sales operation for the growing RV market. Launched by one-time Hertz President Robert Smalley, Sr. and sons and co-owners Bob and Randy Smalley, the Mesa, Ariz., outfit built a coast-to-coast rental operation, with 150 U.S. and Canadian locations and a fleet of 3,700 motorhomes.

## **Elden L. Smith** *Fleetwood Enterprises Inc.*

For a period of decades, no one voice in the RV industry

carried more weight than that of Elden Smith, the long-time (1971-'97) senior vice president of Fleetwood Enterprises Inc.'s RV Group. In Smith's tenure, backed by executives like Larry Hughes, Bill Toy and Jim Sheldon, Fleetwood ruled the roost in this business, selling virtually millions of towable and motorized units. And while Smith's opinions were often controversial, he was a force to be reckoned with.

## Duane Spader

### *The Spader Companies*

A founder and former president (1974-'75) of RVDA, Duane Spader, an author and consultant now in retirement in North Dakota, is viewed as a wizard of retailing in the sense that he is recognized as having conceived and developed the RVDA 20 Group programs allowing dealers to network, compare notes and share best practices. "More dealers owe their business success to Spader and his training than to any other person in the industry," says RVDA President Mike Molino.

## Tom Stinnett

### *Tom Stinnett RV Freedom Center*

Few individuals have crossed the divide between manufacturers and retailers in industry affairs more deftly than southern Indiana RV dealer Tom Stinnett, of Tom Stinnett RV Freedom Center. And what Stinnett, a former RVDA chairman whose dealership just north of Louisville boasts one of the industry's largest indoor showrooms, is best known for is wielding an efficient gavel since 2004 as a respected and thoughtful co-chair of the Go RVing Coalition.

## Robert Strawn

### *RVDA*

An RV dealer since 1968, Bob Strawn was an officer in state, regional, and national associations before becoming RVDA executive vice president and then president. He led the growth of the association to more than 1,500 member dealers, developed education programs leading to RV technician certification and formulated the dealer/manufacturer sales agreement. He established the RVDA Education Foundation to assist dealers in serving their customers, and was instrumental in establishing the coalition that created the Go RVing campaign.

## Omar Suttles

### *Airfloat Coach Co.*

Forming his California company in 1930, automotive engineer and inventor Omar Suttles created one of the oldest brands in trailer manufacturing and was one of the founders and a long-time officer of the Trailer Coach Association (TCA). He designed and patented many trailer features, including an integrated dolly wheel to carry tongue weight so standard autos could pull his heavier trailers. He was also one of the first manufacturers to use all aluminum exteriors.

## BJ Thompson

### *BJ Thompson Associates*

As a high-profile Mishawka, Ind.-based public relations and advertising agent, BJ Thompson has represented a number of prominent companies in the RV industry and still does today. Moreover, he helped found the Go RVing Coalition and its expansion into major print, broadcast and virtual media and, most notably, has served — for more than 25 years — as a behind-the-scenes guardian of the industry's public persona as chairman of RVIA's Public Relations Committee.

## Wade Thompson

### *Thor Industries Inc.* – See profile.

## The Tiffin Family

### *Tiffin Motor Homes Inc.*

Talk all you want about quality service and customer satisfaction. Bob Tiffin, since building his first no-frills motorhome in 1972 in an Alabama cotton warehouse, has walked the walk. And his sons, Tim, Van and Lex, have done their best to help carry on the tradition in winning RVDA DSI honors and in handling both dealers and consumers buying the inventive and stylish Allegro-brand Class A motorhomes built by Tiffins' family-owned corporation.

## Kay L. Toolson

### *Monaco RV LLC*

After stops along the way at Kings Highway and an earlier version of Monaco, Kay Toolson served as chairman and CEO of Monaco Coach Corp. from 1986 until last year, taking the company public in 1993 and ultimately morphing it into a 5,400-employee Oregon-based concern generating annual revenues in excess of \$1.3 billion. Toolson today is president of Monaco RV LLC, a Navistar unit and a successor to Monaco Coach still specializing in motorhomes.

## M.D. "Mike" Umbaugh

### *Barth Inc.*

Mike Umbaugh liked the construction style of Barth Corp.'s trailers so much when he purchased the Barth trailer company in 1968 that the northern Indiana businessman applied the same upscale, all-aluminum, wood-free format with his Barth-brand motorhomes. And the Milford, Ind., coach builder did a heck of job of it, attracting a cult-like following of owners even after Barth's 1998 closure with an elegant, game-changing, Chevy-chassis coach.

## Eugene L. Vesely

### *Vesely Co.*

A groundbreaker in the design and manufacture of folding camping trailers, travel trailers, motorhomes and a variety of other recreational vehicles, this Lapeer, Mich., building contractor produced his first canvas-sided camper in the mid-1950s for family and friends. By the mid-'60's, Vesely, an active RVIA board member, was selling millions of dollars in RVs per year and had expanded to several factories and more than 400 dealers.

## Bobby Vincent

### *Suburban Manufacturing Co.*

Recognized by the industry as a heating pioneer, Bobby Vincent was the first to use permanent magnet motors and piezo ignition in RV furnaces. At the same time, he developed one-piece vent caps, and his promotion of DSI ignition eliminated the use of standing pilots in RV furnaces as well as in water heaters and refrigerators. And while introducing aluminum ranges for RVs, he also was a leading proponent of RV gas appliance safety.

## Donald W. Wallace

### *Lazydays RV SuperCenter*

Father H.K. and brother Ron Wallace played key roles in the early days. However, it was Don Wallace who ultimately made Lazydays all it could be — the nation's preeminent, single-site RV dealership that more than anything else has

set a shining example of how to treat customers in a “destination” setting. Huge selection, free meals, an on-site Camping World store and Crackerbarrel restaurant is still all part of the formula in the post-Wallace era.

**Bill Warrick**  
*R-Vision Inc.*

Bill Warrick made a lot of industry news, usually behind the scenes. After buying high-end fifth-wheel builder Prairie Schooner in the early '80s, he later hooked up with a couple of partners (Ron Cleland and Don Pletcher) and bought the Mallard name out of Wisconsin to assemble a 500-employee company in Nappanee called Mallard Coach Co. Inc. that was later sold to investors and closed. Then came stints with Monaco and R-Vision for Warrick, who's currently retired in Florida.

**R.A. Woodall**  
*Woodall's Publications Corp.*

R.A. Woodall, who purchased Dixon Publishing in the 1940s and renamed it Woodall's, championed the Tin Can Tourist movement and published a magazine around it and ultimately assembled what would later become one of the nation's most popular campground-rating publications — the *Woodall's North American Campground Directory*, now part of Affinity Group Inc.'s family of magazines, including *RVBusiness*, *Trailer Life* and *MotorHome*.

**Allen Yoder, Jr.**  
*Jayco Inc.*

Former Jayco Inc. President Al Yoder — retired since 1993 — is a current member of Jayco's board of directors. And he

still likes to visit industry events, where the former RVIA chairman is known as a leader in dealer relations and as one of the first to open the Canadian and Australian markets to U.S. products. Yoder, whose son Kent is Jayco's CFO, still gets a kick out of fiddling with product, as he did recently on a Triple E coach unveiled (with a Murphy bed) at the last Louisville Show.

**Clarence T. Yoder**  
*Carriage Inc.*

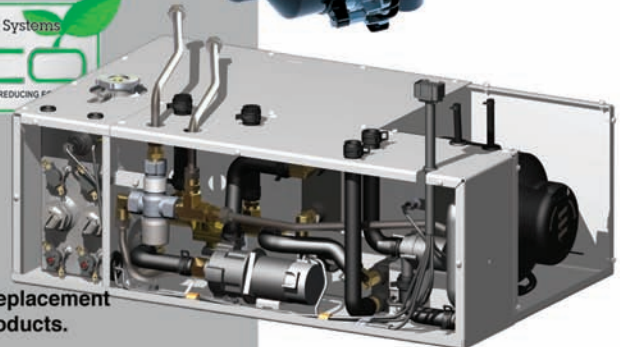
One of 15 children, Clarence Yoder left his Amish home at 16 with an 8th-grade education, a bicycle and \$3 in his pocket and parlayed his dreams into one of the most respected companies in the RV industry before he sold out in 1999 — Carriage Inc. in Millersburg, Ind. One of the 1968 founders of Carriage, a company with stylish and expensive trailers retailing for up to \$200,000, Yoder for years functioned as his company's main R & D department. Δ



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