

A Sociology of Caravans

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Abstract

Why do caravans matter? Australians holiday in them, travel in them, cook, eat, drink, play, sleep and have sex in them. They also live in them, often involuntarily. Caravans have a longer history than this, however caravan life has almost no presence in existing historical scholarship. Our immediate interest is in caravans in Australia, modernity and mobility. Theoretical arguments about mobility have been developed by Bauman and Urry. Sociologists like Jasper have connected mobility, masculinity and automobility in *Restless Nation*. The sociologist and writer, Marina Lewycka has used caravans as the locus of everyday life study in her novel *Two Caravans*. In this paper we background some of these broader issues, and offer a case study of postwar caravan manufacturing. This paper anticipates a larger research project in these fields. We anticipate this project raising themes like freedom, mobility, escape, utopia; images of domesticity on wheels, décor and design, materials, technology, DIY production and fordism; caravan parks as homes and as itinerant and long term accommodation. These themes and images are also necessarily interwoven with class, gender, sex and age. We are interested in the possibilities of using the caravan as a carrier for making sense of postwar Australia.

Keywords: caravans, modernity, Australia, postwar, mobility, design

The caravan is, at first sight, an obvious thing. A little home on wheels, its transience can easily become permanent. Like a snail's shell, the caravan can offer protection, or comfort of a momentary kind, though some lives will also be lived out within plywood, or aluminium walls, stuck up on blocks in desolate van parks, not only trailing more happily behind the old jalopy into the sunset. For there is nostalgia about caravans, too, into retro fashionability as well as a sadder, or seamier side to van life.

Everybody knows the lineage of the word, from camels, caravans of the desert, to carts, covered wagons, to the paths of the Romany, to campers, aerodynamic beauties and boxy clunkers, to trailers, trailerparks, Eight Mile. Into the twentieth century the semantics become caught up with the idea of holiday, vacation, *les vacances*, absence, vacancy. Plainly all this depends on Fordism, and the social and geographical centrality of the automobile to modernity. Caravans suggest the itinerant, the fleeting and ephemeral, the transitional, even when these become long term, or permanent: such is the modern human condition. Home is where you hang your hat, or where the cat lives.

But if the rituals of the life cycle are lived out in caravans, and not only in more substantial homes and houses, little of this is apparent in the literature. Are we seriously suggesting something like a sociology of the caravan? The answer to this question is yes. The caravan acts as a carrier for a whole series of issues, activities, images and moments in everyday life. Like the related project *The Vinyl Age – A History of Rock Music in Australia 1945-1995* (Clinton Walker, Beilharz and Hogan) the caravan project is a way to tell stories about Australian, or antipodean modernity, especially in league with the image of Fordism as a kind of everyday life-form since World War Two. It coincides with other projects like those of Schivelbusch (1977/1980), on the relationship between modernity and locomotion and those of Clinton Walker on automobility (Walker 2005; Wollen and Kerr 2002). It extends earlier enthusiasms for the site of the kitchen as a key institution of everyday life (Supski 2007). It follows earlier interests like those of Blainey (1966) in modern history understood as transport history.

Transport seems to fall out of sociology too quickly, except in its most immediately political guise, as in public debate over the inadequacy of public infrastructure. Some sociologists, in contrast, have sought to foreground it. Marco d'Eramo, for example, connects technology studies and transport studies to marxism and social history in his study of Chicago, *The Pig and the Skyscraper* (2002). There he suggests, among other things, something like a theory of modes of transportation or movement as a complement to Marx's modes of production. Modernity shifts, on this way of thinking, from locomotion to automobility, this followed (and here the metaphor also morphs) by information. Clearly the locomotive and the automobile are powerful symbols of modernity across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as are the related powers of trucks and tractors.

Like music, surfing, or cooking, then, caravan life offers an important way into narrating the antipodes as an alternative modernity. Like music, surfing, or cooking, there is also serious money and logistics involved here.

Users of caravans are 60% families, seniors 21%, 7% international motor home visitors, and the remainder childless couples. Across the period 1996–2006 there was a 254% increase in the number of caravans registered nationally, and there remains an annual growth rate of 10%, global financial crisis notwithstanding (*Age* 2 May 2009). In 2007 there were 8.4 million domestic caravan or camping visitors and 316,000 international visitors; 23% from the United Kingdom and 13% from Germany (Tourism Australia).

Yet caravan life is invisible, in scholarly terms, barely presented in social history or sociology. Graeme Davison, whose credentials as a sociologist are as high as those of any Australian historian, does not mention caravans in his major study *Car Wars* (2004). This even though the book includes a photograph of his Dad's Chevrolet ute

and the family van of his boyhood. The caravan remains a kind of appendage, something that is carried in the wake of the car. Richard White (2005), for his part, refers passingly to caravans in his study of Australians on holiday. The international literature picks up theoretical aspects of mobility, but not always on particular stories, times or places. The recent work of Zygmunt Bauman has done much to popularise the metaphor of liquidity, which indicates movement, uncertainty, fragility, precariousness. Postmodern city life is mercurial, unpredictable, slippery (Bauman 2000). But liquidity is a metaphor, not a theory, and it threatens easily to stand between us and the phenomena of everyday life, to obscure rather than to illuminate its details or specific forms. John Urry opens some of these issues further in books such as *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000), where travelling refers not only to tourists or to theory but also to subjects and processes. Urry wants to characterise the present in terms of networks and flows. The idea of networks works better and has a longer lineage in addition. Mobility is not only vertical, it is also horizontal. The idea of the nomad, similarly, has been given recent exercise by postmodern academics, though the figure of the nomad also looks a little like the self-conception of the postmodern sociologist as hero. Thinkers like Urry, however, seem also to ontologise the image of fluidity. When he writes, for example, that ‘what seems to be developing are various fluids’, the metaphor has come to stand in for the object or subject of analysis (Urry 2000: 44).

In one sense, this interest in movement is nothing new. Marx (1857) observed, in the *Grundrisse*, that capitalism had two major revolutionary effects on the plane of everyday life: it introduced the revolution of geographical and social mobility. The more general issue is that culture is constituted in and by movement. This should be a norm, rather than a revelation for sociologists (Beilharz 1997). Global travel is routine

for about a fifth of the global population (Davidson 2009). But our interest here is closer, smaller, more local or more precisely, more regional. It is with those whose hopes, dreams, fears or circumstances see them living in small mobile boxes, whether as regional tourists or as vagabonds. The novelist Marina Lewycka, who also happens to be a sociologist, manages to capture something of this in her second book, *Two Caravans* (2007). So does James Jasper in more conventional scholarly form in *Restless Nation – Starting Over in America* (2000). Two recently published books, *Adventures in Caravanastan: Around Australia at 80km* (Bearup 2009) and *A Short History of Caravans in the UK* (Hammond 2009) offer further examples of popular enthusiasm for caravans.

Urry sometimes seems to write as though he has discovered mobility. Others, however, have also argued persuasively that if sociology finally became a statics, its proper object is movement (Touraine 1989). Before the rot set in with modernization theory, it was commonsense to speak of the restless spirit of modernity, from Marx and Tönnies to Simmel, and *fin-de-siecle* interest in socialism and other social movements showed that the idea of movement was normal. Modernity moved then, and it moves now (Beilharz 1994). As the dominant background image of modernity, American social forms were born mobile; even Tocqueville was onto this. It is still especially apparent in cities like Detroit or New Orleans a century after the west was closed. Being able to walk away affects not only personal relationships but also the fate of cities. If a city fails, most Americans can still walk, or drive away. And this is, of course, still a largely masculine story. Men walk. Women are more often trapped. This is what Jasper seeks to capture in his image of American modernity as a culture of flight. America is a U-Haul civilization. The obvious, and gendered as well as racialised contrasts in experience are all evidenced in work like that of Barbara

Ehrenreich (2001). Alongside the symbol of freedom, or escape, or exit, the most powerful symbol and fact of modernity remains that of entrapment.

One of the great transients in the history of Australian sociology, Agnes Heller (1995), once wrote home was where the cat was. Caravans, on this definition, will also be homes, and there will be good stories to tell about them as well as the bad news that comes with the dark side of modernity. Home, as Heller tells, is or can be mobile. A mobile home is still a home. This much by way of introduction to the local story.

The Powerhouse Museum, which has a number of caravans in its collection to date provides the most comprehensive information on caravan history in Australia. Its website indicates that homes on wheels have their origins in Australia with simple covered wagons drawn by bullocks or horses, used in the nineteenth century by settlers, gold prospectors and drovers. In the early twentieth century Ashton's Circus used caravans, although it is not known by whom these were built (Powerhouse Museum).¹

The first caravans in a shape familiar to us began to appear in the 1920s and were homemade, a trend that would continue into the 1950s (cf White 2005). In the 1930s it was more common to build caravans DIY as commercially produced caravans were out of reach for many. There were a number of publications available to the handyman, which included detailed plans and instructions on how to build a caravan, including at least one elaborate and nonsensical example from English writer, Heath Robinson (1936). In his book, *How to be a Motorist*, Robinson includes a chapter on

‘Foreign Touring and Caravan Life’, which details a ‘home-made trailerette for touring deserts’ such as, the ‘drier bits of Australia’ (1936: 102-113). Robinson claimed his trailerette was ‘useful and inexpensive’ and could be constructed from,

such humble materials as a superannuated bicycle, a disused perambulator and a barn door borrowed from a kindly neighbour, it costs but a few shillings, *ex works*, and enables a small party to enjoy the benefits of fresh air, regular meals and perpetual motion without any expenditure of energy (1936: 109).

On a more serious note, Keith Winser wrote several books on cars and caravanning in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s which had detailed plans for the do-it-yourself handyman—*Plans for caravans, caravanettes, trailers and plyboats: a complete handbook for the caravan owner and builder*, published in 1953 and *Plans for Australian caravans*, 5th edition 1958, with an updated 6th edition in 1959 which had additional chapters on remodeling and building aluminium caravans. In the late 1960s Winser included plans to build motor caravans and 8-10ft caravans (1953; 1958; 1959; 1967).

The beginnings of a commercial caravan industry were evident in the late 1920s and 1930s in New South Wales and Victoria. Winser states that caravan production can be traced back to 1928 when R J Rankin, a Sydney businessmen built his first caravan. Rankin’s caravan was so successful that he began commercial production in a workshop in Newtown in late 1929. The Powerhouse Museum records that ‘(b)y 1934 Rankin had a hire fleet of 25 vehicles and had founded the company Carapark Ltd’.² Other early manufacturers’ included John Jennison who built the ‘Jennison Road Cruiser’ in 1932. Jennison’s company later appropriately became Nomad Caravans. In Victoria, the *Don* company established by Don Robinson began as a backyard business in 1934.

With the postwar boom caravans (along with cars) became more affordable, and holidaying a leisure pursuit now in reach of the working class. As such, by the early 1950s caravan companies such as Propert, Ambassador, Southern Cross and Castle were flourishing. The Powerhouse Museum website observes that:

Between 1950 and 1953 there were at least 60 registered caravan manufacturers in Australia including Viscount and Millard in NSW, Franklin and Coronet in Victoria, Chesney in Queensland and Tru-Line in Western Australia. By 1969, Viscount Caravans of Liverpool was said to have the largest production line in the southern hemisphere incorporating many technological innovations beyond the capability of the small, home builder. Competition was strong, with each company trying to produce better vans. Soon the bond wood vans disappeared and aluminium clad vans took over. The interiors altered dramatically, with ice boxes and oil stoves giving way to gas and electric refrigerators and stoves. Electric lighting also quickly became standard. (Powerhouse Museum)³

Design innovation is characteristic of caravan development, as of automotive design. One innovation in particular made caravanning in Australia affordable to many. The folding caravan, designed by the Propert company based in Sydney allowed many more Australians to participate in cheap and comfortable caravan holidays. The Propert folding caravan was patented in 1952 by the Propert Body Building Works, which was established by Thomas Propert (1889–1969) in 1910. Until the 1930s the ‘company built car bodies for imported chassis but, partly in response to the economic downturn and changes in the car assembly industry, it moved into caravan building in the 1930s’ (Powerhouse Museum).⁴ A pink Propert folding caravan is in the National Museum of Australia collection complete with a 1950s ‘colour scheme that covered much of the known spectrum’ (National Museum of Australia).⁵ Similar patterns of colour diversification occurred in kitchens and cars.

Other companies soon capitalised on Propert’s innovation and into the 1950s also

began to produce folding caravans, including the ‘Foldvan’ by C T Woods of West Preston, Victoria, and the ‘Smal-a-Van’ in Unley, South Australia (Powerhouse Museum).⁶ Further innovation occurred in the late 1970s with companies, such as Windsor, developing the compact ‘pop-top’ caravan, which was designed to maximise interior space,⁷ whilst remaining comfortable, lightweight and aerodynamic.

Caravans have served not only as holiday homes, but also in a myriad of other purposes. One of the most iconic caravans in Australia is ‘Harry’s Café de Wheels’, established in the late 1930s by Harry Edwards. Harry’s Café is situated at the Woollomooloo naval dockyards and has become famous for its ‘pies and peas’. The National Trust classified it in 2004 as a ‘quintessential Sydney icon’.⁸ There are more prosaic uses of caravans:

homes for itinerant workers; emergency accommodation in time of natural disasters; mobile offices, units and homes for mining and other industries; extra farm accommodation for seasonal workers; mobile laboratories, workers' living quarters and mobile offices for Government departments and commissions; as well as mobile offices, studios and homes for film production crews (Powerhouse Museum).⁹

In his book, *On holidays: a history of getting away in Australia* Richard White captures one of the ambiguities of caravans: ‘The beauty of the caravan was how it combined domesticity and the flight from it in one package’ (2005: 138). The ambiguity is present in the juxtaposition of mobility and domesticity. It can be argued then that caravans are ‘homes on wheels’ and offer a temporary permanence; a travelling hearth.

The idea of a travelling hearth is attractive because it connects the mobility that caravans offer, whilst at the same time providing essential elements of home—

comfort, warmth, shelter. In this sense caravans have three central motifs— mobility, domesticity and the miniature.

The idea of the miniature is particularly appealing because elements of domestic life are integral to caravan design, but in miniature scale. Kitchen cupboards, stoves, toilets, showers, basins, tables, and beds are all scaled to fit into an average-sized caravan. In caravans of the 21st century there are miniature dishwashers and washing machines. Far from the humble 1950s caravans, the presence of these everyday appliances brings the caravan further into the realms of the domestic.

The caravan is a site of domesticity. Inherent in the notion of 1950s domesticity are strict gender relations in which ‘static home’ domestic roles are replicated and performed by men and women—men drive the car and hitch the caravan; women maintain the caravan, cook, clean and wash. As such, the flight from domesticity can be thought of as one-sided. More, as Joanne Hollows (2008) argues, mobility and domesticity are profoundly gendered. Mobility is celebrated and linked to male subjectivity; domesticity is rendered static and linked to female subjectivity. Caravan life will be experienced differentially whether in Hollows’ Britain, Jaspers’ America or our own antipodes.

Finally caravans also have much to offer in terms of design and aesthetics. Into the twenty first century the shape and purpose of caravans have inspired architects. The Norwegian architecture partnership, ‘Fantastic Norway’, for a number of years had its office in a bright red 1960s inspired caravan. The partners were invited to the Venice Biennale in 2008 and drove the caravan from Oslo to Venice. The caravan forms an integral part of their architectural practice and is intimately connected to the idea of mobility. Erlend Blakstad Haffner one of the partners of the practice explained in an interview with Wallpaper* magazine that:

the idea of it, a caravan, which is not permanent, ... works for us as a symbol and also a media tool. Even for us, there is an end to the caravan thing. We practice, we teach, but we always employ the same methodology as we did when we were only in the caravan. But it undoubtedly remains a symbol of an approach to us.

The caravan is a tool, which enables us to do projects. (26 September 2008)

The 'Fantastic' partners explain that the caravan is welcoming and opens a space for dialogue with clients because it is representative of an easygoing and friendly aesthetic reminiscent of a sense of freedom, security, comfort, and perhaps the opportunity for daydreaming. Caravans open all these horizons.

As a final articulation of a travelling hearth we leave you with the miniature, the domestic and the mobile in another familiar shape ...



The Fencl, Tumbleweed Tiny House Company¹⁰

Notes:

- ¹ <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=213452>, accessed 28 June 2009.
- ² <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=213452>, accessed 28 June 2009.
- ³ <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=213452>, accessed 28 June 2009.
- ⁴ <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=319939>, accessed 28 June 2009.
- ⁵ National Museum of Australia, Propert model caravan postcard, authors' collection.
- ⁶ <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=319939>, accessed 28 June 2009.
- ⁷ <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=213452>, accessed 28 June 2009.
- ⁸ http://www.harryscafedewheels.com.au/History_of_Harrys_Pies.aspx
- ⁹ <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=213452>, accessed 28 June 2009.
- ¹⁰ <http://www.tumbleweedhouses.com/touring-the-us/coast-to-coast-tour/>, accessed 4 June 2009.

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