

# Where will the future rebuildable vintage camper trailers come from?

## How About Building Your Own Hand-Built "Vintage" Trailer?

By John Palmer



The Vintage Trailer hobby is just over twenty years old. I have been active in the hobby for the past twelve years and have witnessed extensive growth. For example, we now have lots of vintage rallies to choose from attending within a day's driving distance. In California this past month, we had three very large Vintage Rally's scheduled on the same weekend! We now have The VCT print magazine, we have had T.V. shows about our hobby and vintage trailer rebuilding, we have our annual Boot Camp Learning Experience "sold out" each year, and companies are now opening that specialize in the restoration of vintage camper trailers. We have parts vendors that have invested their resources into the tooling necessary to build reproduction parts to help save our old trailers. Major insurance companies are developing special policies targeted to our specific vintage trailer insurance needs. You cannot watch a primetime T.V. show or a T.V. commercial without seeing a vintage trailer used as a prop in the background. Mainline R.V. companies have tried to jump on the vintage bandwagon by releasing modern versions of the old Vintage Trailer designs.

We are seeing lots of interest in people trying to relive their youth and enjoying a simpler activity during their retirement years. Until all of us Baby Boomers are gone, I don't see much changing the high demand for vintage trailers and outdoor camping sites. Where will these restorable trailers come from? Anyone remotely watching this hobby has already seen the significant increase in prices for restorable camper trailers, only to find them already sold when you call.

We all hope to find the perfect barn find trailer. Out of the hundreds of vintage trailers I look at each year at the vintage rallies, I can tell you I have only seen a single handful of what we would call true rare Barn finds that just needed a dusting off and a little love to get them roadworthy. You will most likely need to find a good core trailer to begin your rebuild. A good

rebuildable trailer would still need a major rebuild for wood rot. I have never seen a 60-70-year-old trailer that did not have a good deal of framing wood rot, flooring rot, or a broken steel frame. A "good trailer to rebuild" is one that still has all the old vintage parts, hardware, hinges, handles, locks, windows, appliances, etc. The steel frame chassis and the trailer body are usually easily rebuilt if you have all the small parts that are hard and expensive to find. For example, a stove is not much good without the grills, burner parts, and knobs that are often missing.

You see trailers advertised by sellers with no idea what they are selling or even an idea of the correct and safe way to repair these old trailers. Many are advertised "way overpriced" because they do not understand the true costs involved to rebuild the trailer. Anytime you see an ad for a trailer that says, "already gutted", it is a red flag for an overpriced trailer that will in most cases be unsafe and unstable to tow home. The interior cabinets/closet/bed/seats are what hold a stick and tin trailer together. Paying thousands of dollars for a dry-rotted trailer that you will reduce to a small pile of parts and must haul the rest to the dump is crazy. Many of the trailers advertised for sale do not come with a clear title of ownership. It might not be a problem in your state, but here in California it's a big issue. You can purchase a trailer to rebuild, only to find out that it has delinquent DMV fees outstanding against the trailer you just purchased. In one case, I paid more to bring the CA registration to current (\$302) than I paid for the core trailer (\$300). It had a CA clear title but had delinquent registration. In California, they can go back up to seven years to collect delinquent trailer fees. The new registered owner is responsible for these back fees and penalties on a title transfer. Many of the trailers you will look at advertised for sale are incorrectly California DMV registered. In California, small camp trailers should be classified as CMP (camper), (\$25 for

a five-year PTI registration), but you will find them usually classified as C.C.H. (coach/for larger trailers) for about \$125 per year registration. California D.M.V. will not accept trailers on their "Non-Op" program (like cars/trucks/motorcycles), so the old fees add up in a hurry. That old trailer you see sitting in the field usually has expired registration, and they add penalty fees to make it more expensive. Sellers claim not to know anything about the old registrations. You will often see these trailers advertised as "Bill of Sale" only. It would be best if you did your homework before writing your check. I highly recommend that you use the services of a Privet (authorized) D.M.V. service. They will earn their small service fee many times over.

For the sake of this discussion, let's limit it to what I would call a "towable camper" length and not the longer Park Models. For me, that's a maximum 30-foot long "bumper pull" trailer. Anything longer, and it's hard to get into an ordinary gas station without dragging the curbs. That's also about the maximum limit for a ½ ton pickup with suspension modifications to tow comfortably.

*So, what are your options to just accepting the increase in cost and limited availability of core trailers to rebuild that are in popular camper sizes? How about building your own hand built vintage trailer?*

I'm not talking about a poorly designed trailer, or even the recent batch of Retro shaped copies offered by the major manufactures. The current DOT RV rules that are enforced on the RV manufactures limits them from building and offer for sale a truly vintage trailer. For example, the modern rounded corner RV windows sold today do not look remotely vintage. Modern RVs are required to have all the current DOT safety features like fire exit windows, etc.



## Let's Design and Build, a true HAND BUILT VINTAGE TRAILER

You really should have a couple of years of RV camping experience under your belt before you begin your "must-have" list of items you want to design into your new "Vintage Trailer." For example, how will this trailer be used? Will it be primarily used for dry camping, or will it be used entirely in five-star RV parks with full utility hookups? First, it's essential to understand your usage requirements so that the trailer can be designed around your needs for the best result. It's very expensive to make changes after you are well into the build. There's no reason to have multiple water tanks and the associated tow weight if camping in a modern RV Park with full utilities

How many warm bodies do you need to sleep each night? Do you want a stationary table, or can you put up with changing the table into a bed and back multiple times each day? Twin Beds, or is "the old crawling over in the middle of the night" still acceptable? The big item on most of our want lists is usually a bathroom/shower/sink. The next question is, what kind of water heater gas/electric will be used? How much water capacity? Fresh/Grey/Blackwater tanks? Every single feature needs to be discussed and resolved "before" you begin to design your new floor plan. You will need to know your weights so the trailer can be designed with a proper towing weight balance. The tongue weight percentage is even more critical on a small single axle trailer pulled by a small tow vehicle. If you need to have a self-contained trailer, modern solar systems, and \$\$\$ lithium batteries will be in your build considerations.

I have found an excellent place to start your hand built vintage trailer planning is to find an original factory sales brochure on eBay of the year, make, and model you want to replicate. That will show you what was originally available by size and floorplan, no point in trying to reinvent the wheel. The original manufacturer had

the same issues to consider with weight balance. You will be able to see on the original floor plans how they moved the amenities around to obtain the correct tow balance. Consider the advantages of building the new canned ham trailer slightly wider. Six inches of additional width generates more usable cubic space inside the trailer than six extra inches of length. Remember, the canned ham end curved shape kills the usable inside space. The original brochure will also give you a hint on what graphics and font styles to use in your final paint finish. Remember, your goal is to replicate a specific model year and make of the trailer. Any mid-fifties auto "two-tone" paint colors will look period correct. The two green color codes on our '57 Aljo trailer came from a 1957 Ford car paint chart list. When designing a canned ham-shaped trailer, make sure you consider the lost front tongue length. Every old original "Ham" trailer has bent creases just below the front window, backing them up with a modern pickup truck 6 inches of extra frame tongue length makes a big improvement in backing without jackknifing into the trailer front skin.

I know some like to do a Cad Cam design on a computer. But as an old-school guy, I like to layout the new trailer frame and floorplan in full size on the garage floor. Masking tape and 2 by 4's clamped to a coupler can replicate your new frame, and changes are cheap and easy to make until you start buying and welding metal. Laying it out in full size will make determining the correct size new axle assembly much easier to visualize. Axles are custom built to your specific order.

You need some original vintage parts that are very important to the look you're trying to achieve. It would help if you started early in collecting your parts. I usually start about one year before the actual build begins. Covid and the current supply chain issues only make for more delays. For example, just try to find a flat top vent fan in stock today! You need to collect true Vintage Windows, Vintage

"round corner" Eyebrows, a vintage door hinge for the entry door and screen door, a vintage door handle/lock, original glass lens taillights, license light, side clearance lights, vintage sink, vintage appliances, propane light, vintage slide out step, vintage jack, a vintage coupler (with a VIN # & title) from a trailer of the year you're building. Awning rails can be difficult to source new, so be on the look out for one that is long and in restorable condition. You will need to anneal the awning rail extrusion to make it soft enough to bend (or reshape).

The California DMV likes just to register it as a new trailer, and they issue you a new (small blue sticker) "assigned" VIN #. Unfortunately, that eliminates the future use of the correct vintage YOM (year of manufacture) license plate program. I like to rebuild an old existing trailer frame that had a California registration. If you can find one that has not been registered for more than seven years your golden, on back fees, because it drops off their tracking system.

You will need to make extra time for any item that will need to be "subbed out," such as re-chroming, re-porcelain, paint shops, or upholstery work. These are items never completed in the time frame as promised.

When building a common stick and tin style trailer every other part is locally available to you or reproducible in your driveway. If you're not trying to shape metal into compound curves like the corners of a Spartan Manor, Airstream, Hayes, or a Palace, you will have no problem building a Stick and Tin style design on your new trailer.

You have reference to over 70 years of trailer building history to show you what works, just take your time, study other trailers, and know what your needs are, and you will be able to design and build a trailer far superior to anything originally built to sell at a low price point. From a Return-on-Investment point of view, I recommend that you select a 1940's to





Photos by Hal Thoms



1950's period and stay in the middle of your choices. Use conservative, period-correct, tasteful colors on the exterior and interior. You might like Pink with Purple polka dots with a Guernsey cow graphic, but remember to build a durable product that you will someday be selling.

The trailer side framing profile is just a simple ellipse. It's nothing more than four intersecting circles with different radiuses and center points. You can copy the front and rear side profiles from a trailer you like, and it can be lengthened to the length or increased to the height you desire. Both wall frames need to have the same (as in exact) shapes, so it's easier to build one wall frame on top of the other. Only the kitchen window's rough opening and the entry door locations are different on each sidewall. If you end up with slightly different wall curves, it will cause you to have difficulty when you get to the metal skinning step because it causes puckers in the metal roof skin corners.

Make sure you well document your build. It's a good idea to keep all your costs posted to an excel spreadsheet. When you have the new trailer appraised, you will need this information for your Agreed Value insurance policy.



Troy and John Palmer

Visit the blog "Build a Vintage Trailer from Scratch" at [www.vintagecampertrailers.com](http://www.vintagecampertrailers.com) for more photos and a video of this trailer finished. Download the Palmers build sheets and checklists including current estimated costs. Meet John at Boot Camp in Hollister, CA in August. [www.vctBootCamp.com](http://www.vctBootCamp.com).