

# *LIFE ON WHEELS: THE NEW AMERICAN NOMADS*

Photography by David Gardner

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography  
October 23 – December 15, 2017

A reception for Mr. Gardner will take place in the  
Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography, 5:30 – 7:00  
p.m. Wednesday, November 8, 2017



### About David Gardner...

Photography for me has always involved the landscape in one way or another.

On a summer day in 1962, my 8-year-old self became lost in the Santa Cruz Mountains during an outing with family. Wandering for hours through the forest, crying and terrified, I was found by a young couple who calmed me by teaching me how to drink from a stream. Later hung a camera around my neck to let me make a photograph. The process captured me; my terror became joy in minutes as I clicked around the clearing. After being returned to family, the incident was left behind, but in that moment, the natural world and photography became embedded in my being. Several years later, the couple sent a blurry transparency they made of me where I was found. I still have it.

Following that experience, photography didn't grab me until much later. In my working-class family, photography was not considered a livelihood. Art was never discouraged, but neither was it encouraged. It just wasn't on the radar. Cameras were always around (a box, a Brownie, a Polaroid SX-70). The boy in me loved the machine-ness of it all, but artistic aspirations remained dormant until I was out of school and working full-time in construction.

Through my own investigations, I discovered Ansel Adams. His work spoke to me in a way I felt deeply, but didn't understand. Adams' work led to Edward Weston, and especially to his son, Brett. These three primarily directed and fueled the drive in my interest.

My formal photographic education began at 25 when I enrolled in a beginning photography class evenings and weekends at local community college. On day one the young instructor, Stephen Johnson, walked to the blackboard, drew a rectangle and said, "This is your universe, and you control everything in it." Through class sessions and field workshops in places like Mono Lake and Death Valley, I slowly gained insights into how I could use photography to expand my understanding of the environment. Johnson has been a teacher, mentor, employer and friend. His influence and encouragement continues to drive me to this day. I also met my future wife in that class.

In Mary, I found a partner who shared my attraction to the landscape and was willing to make life changes to explore where it might lead. We'd bought a house together soon after meeting, but after a year or so we'd begun to feel restless. What we'd both come to learn about each other was a desire to experience the outdoors in a more immersive way. In 1982, we sold the house and bought a Chevy van. I outfitted it for camping and we headed off to Alaska. Our plan was to travel for a year to test our travel and photography aspirations, and to see if we could live together in a small space for that long. It was a successful experiment. We married in 1989. What didn't work out afterwards was my efforts to market the images made while traveling. It wasn't as vital a market as I had hoped. We managed to get our former jobs back and resumed our lives from where we left off before traveling.

By now (1984) I knew I wanted to make photography a meaningful part of my life, but I had to be content with photographing in spare time and on vacations. I applied and was accepted to the San Francisco Art Institute, hoping to make time for it at night, but ultimately it felt too late in life for art school, and I couldn't quit working to attend. I continued working construction until 1994 when I enrolled at San Francisco State University Multimedia Studies Program (night school again). I used my photography skills to transition to a production artist, and by



2000 I was working in the industry first to produce CD-ROM edutainment titles, then when the internet arrived for the masses, worked for dot coms until the dot-bomb.

In 2005, after many years of planning, Mary and I retired early from full-time work so we could give full attention to photography. We downsized our lifestyle by moving to a smaller home, selling a car and buying a motorhome. Our discussions about traveling and photographing the west inspired us for years, and now we have realized it.

The experience of living and traveling through the landscape for months at a time has affected me in unexpected ways. Photographing every day for hours has improved the quality of my compositions and images. I was at first content to photograph the grand landscape in a “Sierra Club” fashion. That is, no sign of man. But as I began entering juried competitions, attending portfolio reviews and seeing what so many fine photographers were doing, it was clear I needed to push myself more.

At about the same time, I began to notice troubling changes in the landscape I saw. Human intrusions were attracting my attention more than the beauty before me. I felt compelled to explore the human impact on the landscape in a project titled, *Marking Our Place in the World*. Over time, while working this project, I became aware of people who inhabit this same landscape in recreational vehicles. As I got to know some of them, I saw a unique opportunity to photograph a lesser known group of people doing something compelling with the time of their lives. This became *Life on Wheels: The New American Nomads*.

It was a difficult decision to pursue this project. I am an introvert, and thoughts of approaching people to ask to photograph them terrified me. Each time I walked away from a visit, I would castigate myself for not making a portrait. The fear was always present to some degree, once I began, it became easier. The doing was always easier than the fear made it out to be. If my aim in photography was to push and explore myself, I had to take on this work. Ultimately, I came to understand some of my trepidations stemmed from my own advancing years, and so the exploration became a catharsis as well. The journey with them has brought me to unexpected realizations of how the older generation has adapted and embraced the world around them, and changed my own attitude of who and what I might become. Only photography could have done this for me.



### About my photography...

Life on Wheels: The New American Nomads, looks at those Americans who have willfully traded traditional lifestyles of home and property for a nomadic existence of full-time life on the road in recreational vehicles.

For much of any given year, I can be found traveling cross-country in my motorhome photographing the landscape. Each day I return to an established base camp at a state park, National Park, BLM camp, or RV Park that is nearest my photo location. Over time, I began to notice fellow campers who seemed somehow different from the typical vacationer I expected to see in these environments. They tended to camp for long periods before moving. Instead of furiously rushing about to see local attractions, they stayed in camp more. Most were older and, strangely, often seemed to be from Texas or South Dakota. Many knew one another like old friends, and would often gather in the evenings to socialize. Invited to some of these gatherings, my curiosity compelled me to gently begin asking into their doings.

I learned they refer to themselves as “fulltimers.” They are most often retired, but some do still work – using the advantage of mobility to increase flexibility and improve prospects. It seemed to me their fierce independence and positivity toward life made a compelling argument against the porch and rocking chair. Their actions challenged my perceptions of the aging process, and I was moved by a strong desire to frame this time of their lives.

Photographing them in the environment with their rigs – sometimes traveling with them for extended periods – affords a unique look into both the people and lifestyle that breaks down traditional notions of home and retirement. Many children of fulltimers are not happy with their parents’ decision to leave the nest.

Through this contact I have come to realize that as I stand on the brink of the “Golden Years”, that they are me. This journey with my generation has brought me to unexpected realizations of how this group has adapted, evolved and embraced the world around them, and changed my own attitude of who and what I might become as I age.

Oh yes, the reason many seem to be from Texas or North Dakota is that vehicle registration is free in those states. Since fulltimers have no home state, they go there to save that cost.

-David Gardner  
October 23, 2017





Roger & Elaine. Death Valley, CA 2014

Roger and Elaine have been campground hosts at Stovepipe Wells campground for several years. They do not own cell phones, but did tell me if I drove to a certain highpoint down the highway, I could get a signal. They host in another park during summer - moving to cooler locations as the seasons change.



Leanne and John traveling with Hoa Le Thi. Bend, OR 2011

It was just a brief meeting with John, Leanne and Hoa Le Thi. In this image he looks stern, but was actually a very sweet guy. Hoa Le was visiting from Viet Nam and was traveling with them for a time. I know there was a story there - John told me he was a retired Army Sargent and I thought, about the age to have served in Viet Nam - but it seemed too personal to pry at that moment, so I let it pass.



Jason & Nikki's Boondock site. Mono Lake, CA. 2013

In 2010, Jason & Nikki were living in Dallas Texas wondering what to do with themselves. They both had successful careers, Jason as photographer, Nikki as a makeup artist, but felt something was missing. Both were outdoor enthusiasts and longed for some sort of back to nature experience. They were no longer satisfied with the day to day grind of urban living, but being in their late 20's still needed to make a living.

They downsized from a 4000 sq. ft. home and mortgage, to a 32 ft. Monaco diesel class A motorhome. Using their individual professional skills, they've put together a traveling audio/visual business. They interview full-timers who make a living while on the road, and blog their experiences. They have created an RV following that has sustained their new lifestyle. In 2014 they partnered with RV manufacturer Fleetwood which allowed them to move up to a 33 ft. Fleetwood Excursion Class A diesel pusher. They continue to travel the country and can be followed online at *Gone With The Wynns*.

Update 2016: Jason and Nikki traded their motorhome for a 43 ft. catamaran and are currently sailing in southern waters.



Debra & MaryAnn. Nehalem Bay State Park, OR 2011

I met Debra and MaryAnn at a Lazy Daze group get-together in Oregon. They were worried about being kicked out of the group - because they sold their Lazy Daze motorhome and bought a 40' diesel-pusher. They lobbied the other members hard, but in the end it was decided they must leave.

MaryAnn was an officer in the Army reserves. She also teaches at a local college. Several years ago, she was outed by a fellow teacher and was forced to resign - and lost her pension.

Same-sex marriage was not legal in most states yet, but they traveled to every state where it was legal and had a ceremony. They each showed off their 5 wedding bands. While not technically fulltimers, they spend a large amount of time on the road.





Rich & Sherri. Full-timers and Campground Hosts, WA 2011

Mobil technologies continue to improve for RV'ers. What used to require a satellite for internet, now only needs a cell phone. Solar panels supply ample electricity, composting toilets provide a greener way to dispose of waste, and TV no longer is restricted to a few local channels. Because fulltimers don't travel long distance often, their actual carbon footprint is less than a fixed home.



Steve & Mairleen looking for work in Washington State 2011

Mairleen and Steve pulled into the space next to mine in an RV Park near Mt. Rainier in Washington. Steve was welding extra steel onto his 5th wheel and cursing about the shoddy construction. As a steelworker, he knew what he was talking about. RV manufacturers sometimes overload their rigs with heavy additions like pop-outs (sections that extend out of the main body of the RV) and high-end fixtures and finishes. This can push the legal weight limits to the max.

Steve said he was unhappy about being on the road and not finding enough work. He was just finishing up a big job, but didn't know where the next one would come from. They greatly missed their baby - left behind with parents while they traveled.



Jerry. Traveling CPA. Valley of Fire State Park, NV 2012

Jerry is a CPA who travels full-time throughout the west. He told me he gets antsy if he stays in one place for more than a couple of weeks.



Bill on his Veranda. Moab, UT

Bill became disillusioned with his job as an operating room manager. He retired early, bought an empty trailer that he filled with all his favorite things: Oscar Mayer, his dachshund, easy chair, hanging lamp, favorite books and a Buddha head. The dropdown gate of his trailer becomes a patio when lowered.





Dorothy gives Don a trim. The Palouse, WA 2013

Bouncing down a dirt road just outside Canyonlands, I came across Don and Dorothy in their rig heading to a boondock site near mine. We had the same Lazy Daze model and that served to start a conversation. But that was about the only thing we had in common.

While we've become friends, of a sort, I am not sure why. They are staunchly conservative Republicans from Alabama. We agree on nothing politically or socially, but manage to talk through issues without having to convince each

other of right or wrong. Traveling together for several weeks, they allowed me a closer peek into some of the everyday chores of travel life.



Ed and Carol, Full-timers. Quartzsite, AZ 2011

Ed and Carol, originally out of Florida, began traveling full time in their motorhome in late 2005. While they didn't actually sell their home, they were rarely there. They quickly headed west for long looping trips before coming back to Florida for family visits.

In June of 2006, while traveling in Montana, Carol suffered a heart attack and soon after, a severe stroke that left her paralyzed on the right side. Carol was insistent that this would not stop her from traveling. Her stated goal for rehab was to be able to get up and down the three steps into and out of the

motorhome. By October she was out of the hospital and on the road again continuing their travels through the west.

They adapted well to traveling with Carol's disability, and things went well for them for a couple of years. In October 2009, Carol fell while making the bed, breaking her hip. This required a partial hip replacement and more rehab. Once again, her goal for rehab was to be able to get in and out of the motorhome. Coming off the road was never considered. By April of 2010, they were once again on the road.

In January, 2014, Carol woke up one morning to find her left arm completely numb. Ed and Carol decided enough was enough and decide to come off the road for good. They sold their motorhome and moved permanently to Longmont Colorado - a place they found while traveling.

Update 2016: The couple couldn't take not being on the road, so they bought another RV and now take trips during the long cold winters in Colorado.



Lorelei. Baker City, OR 2013

Lorelei was traveling solo (except for her dog Libby), when we met at another Lazy Daze get-together. She was new to RV'ing and still trying to figure things out. She had an electrical problem with her rig on arrival and found some among the group to help track it down. The 30 other rigs, along with their occupants, are great information and expertise resources for new fulltimers. Lorelei found new skills and made friends and is still on the road in 2017.





David and Nola, Fulltimers. Quartzsite, AZ. 2014

When David and Nola decided to go full-time, they said they'd give it five years and decide whether to continue from there. Five years later, Nola misses her kids and grandchildren, and wants to stop traveling. David does not.



Jolly with His Fighting Knife. Arcata, CA 2013

Jolly came out of his trailer one day while I was searching the grounds around my site for a lost tool. He goes by Jolly Eubanks, but let me know his real name involved about 10 more names that he rattled off. Jolly spoke in a stream of consciousness kind of way; where I ask him a question, and his reply involves one tangent after another and he never actually manages to answer what was asked. He would go on for 5 minutes before I would interrupt him to re-ask the question that he would never actually answer.

He later told me he'd had several mini-strokes that left him wandering the RV Park one day, not knowing who he was. He also claimed to have been Special Forces in Viet Nam, before the U.S. was actually in the war. Claimed to have been wounded twice while fleeing. When I asked to photograph him, he pulled out his fighting knife and a bottle of cinnamon whiskey and was only too happy to oblige.



Debbie with Rupert and Elliot. Alabama Hills, CA. 2013

"When I set out six years ago, it was with the intention of finding the place where I wanted to live the rest of my life. I thought it might take a year, but now, I can't see a time when I would want to stop."



Roger catches up on Facebook. Quartzsite, AZ 2011

Roger retired in 2000, but his wife Elizabeth (a California lobbyist for the health care industry) wanted to continue working. Roger couldn't wait and so lives full-time on the road. Elizabeth visits from time to time.

UPDATE 2016: Elizabeth has retired and they now travel together. Roger has lost 30+ pounds and is a happy man.





Beverly, Solo Traveler. Quartzsite, AZ. 2014

I first met and photographed Beverly in 2011 at the annual gathering of RV owners in Quartzsite, CA. She was a free spirit who spent her younger years traveling the craft fair circuit across the country with her husband selling handmade goods. We crossed paths in 2014, again at Quartzsite, when she told me she had been diagnosed with lung cancer. A genetic defect was the cause - she never smoked. This diagnosis usually means death in a matter of months, but Bev was encouraged by a new treatment she was to start after the visit to Quartzsite. I learned near the end of 2016 she had passed.



Rich & Renee (exterior), Fulltimers and Campground Hosts. OR 2011

Preparing for departure after a long stay involves going over checklists both inside and out to minimize the chance of injury or damage. Renee and Rich talked about things to check both inside and out. Rich took care of outside items, such as: Dump waste tanks, rinse and disconnect, disconnect tethered water hose, lower TV/satellite antenna and disconnect from shore power, check tire pressure all around, Check motor home wheel lug nut torque, fill water tank, attach tow car to rear hitch and test all connections, remove leveling blocks from under tires, turn off propane, check lights, check mirrors, preform a final walk around, look under RV, fuel up.



Rich & Renee (interior), Fulltimers and Campground Hosts. OR 2011

Renee advised new RVer's to imagine their house put on wheels and driven down a highway at 55 miles an hour to get an idea of how to approach securing the inside of an RV for travel. Her partial checklist: Securing items inside cabinets and storage compartments, secure items on kitchen and bathroom sink and counter, latch shower and closet doors, close and latch stove top and oven door, secure TV's and sliding TV trays and movable furniture, secure all other items in and near driving compartment which may fall on or otherwise injure passengers during an emergency, remove decorative and other items from awnings and store (lights, bird feeders, etc.), move items out of the slides' way inside the RV.



Showering. Moab, UT

Water Closet might be a better term for the size of bathrooms in many RV's, but using one's own bathroom is essential when camping in remote locations. With full hook-ups in RV Parks, fulltimers will often opt for the luxury of facilities.





Phil in His Man Cave. Quartzsite, AZ 2014

The warm, sunny climate of Quartzsite, Arizona (population around 3000), is the real draw, but every year thousands of RV'er (not all full-timers) come from across the continent to meet for the annual Rock and Gem Show. During the period of December through January, over 1 million people come through and camp on BLM acreage that surrounds the town. The additional RV show under the big tent at the end of January is the focal point.

After arriving, I quickly discovered I had somehow broken off the drain pipe from under the rig that is used to empty the gray water tank. I must have hit some sort of snag without knowing or hearing anything was amiss. I needed a quick fix, but was in the middle of nowhere. Asking around, I was directed to Phil and Ann's RV Repair. Phil is a traveling repairman who tows a 5th wheel trailer behind his workshop equipped semi truck. He and Ann travel to various RV get-togethers and was happy to help me out. He surveyed the problem, gave me a list of materials to buy and directed me to the local supply store. He had me on my way within an hour.



Down the Road. Somewhere in Nevada 2012