

Rearview Mirror

BY BRENT PETERSON

The Tale of TrailManor

Thirty years after Bill Hulsey pieced together his first folding camper for his family's vacations, his innovative trailers still rise to the occasion

THEY SAY BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER. HOWEVER, IN THE case of TrailManor's early prototypes, everyone pretty much agreed.

"It was about the ugliest thing I ever saw," jokes Johnny Carter, owner of Carter's Camping Center.

"The thing was ugly," recalls Keith Hulsey, TrailManor's vice president of marketing. "It looked like a square metal box with cables and pulleys."

"I'll admit, our first model was still a little rough," says inventor and company founder Bill Hulsey. Of course, you can't blame Bill for seeing only the very best in his creation, built over the course of 1973 in his basement and backyard.

Bill says he'd grown weary of the limitations of his family's fold-down camper. There was the constant chore of set-up and take-down, a drill that took more than half an hour by himself or 15 minutes when camping with his wife and four children, all of whom were usually fast asleep upon arrival at the campground. And then there was the issue of the soft canvas top, which always let in moisture from rain and humidity.

Finally—and most compellingly—his wife wanted a bathroom on board, a rarity in the pop-up offerings of the time. Since no one wanted to tow a big trailer, Bill put his doctorate degree in metallurgical engineering to work and set about building the perfect light-weight family towable.

What he came up was, well, different. "This wasn't your typical pop-up," says Bill.

Dubbed the Nokomis, from the Longfellow poem "The Song of Hiawatha," Bill's trailer exceeded the family's wish list in terms of size, amenities and towability. While the boxy windows and bare aluminum exterior drew some looks, the hard-sided unit over-achieved. Just over 19 feet in transit but 26 feet fully deployed, the Nokomis managed to deliver a bathroom and shower, a small galley and a place for the kids to sleep.

Where it truly excelled, however, was in its patented lift system, utilizing spring-loaded torsion bars attached to two top sections that could easily be put into place. Set-up time was less than a minute.

"There were always people coming up to us saying, 'We've never seen that before,'" says son Keith, who also recalls total strangers asking his Dad if they could buy it.

After receiving an offer from a brand new Airstream owner to trade trailers, Bill sought to license his creation to an



TRAILMANOR'S 26-FOOT TRAILER CAN BE TOWED BY A MINIVAN OR AN SUV AND STOWED IN THE GARAGE.

RV manufacturer. The closest he got was with Jayco, who helped him refine his design into a couple of new prototypes over a two-year product courtship that ultimately didn't go beyond that.

Years of travel had convinced Bill that the market for his unique folding trailer was real and that his product was superior to conventional pop-ups, offering greater towability than traditional travel trailers. It was a hybrid that turned as many heads for its curious looks as its innovative engineering.

Although a little apprehensive about launching a new business, Bill established TrailManor in 1983 to showcase the towable that had been such a hit with fellow campers on all those family trips.

"I saw it at a trade show, and I walked by it about a half-dozen times," says Johnny Carter, owner of TrailManor's first dealership. "It was engineered beautifully."

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