

# Glenn Family Manorette History

05/14/23 DG

## **Family Life**

I grew up in the 1960s in the Milwaukee area. There were five of us. In addition to our parents there were three boys, just about one year apart. As people have said, my mother was a very busy person.

All three of us joined the Cub Scouts and then the Boy Scouts, which is where we were first introduced to camping. I joined the Boy Scouts in 1967 and really enjoyed camping. Although, to be honest, sometimes the all-day hikes were a bit much for a boy of my small size.

## **Canvas Tent**

Around 1969 the family decided to try camping. Mom and dad purchased a large, boxy, heavy canvas tent. The tent had thick pine poles and scratchy jute ropes. It took at least an hour to set up. We also purchased the venerable Coleman stove and lantern. And mom got a set of camping nesting pots. They were made in Wisconsin in those days. Thus began our family camping experience which was to last until the boys entered college.

## **1959 Manorette 18' Travel Trailer**

In 1973 we decided that tent camping was a bit challenging. And so mom and dad started looking for used travel trailers. At the same time dad took the family station wagon to a service station to be outfitted for hauling. Fortunately, the car was powerful enough to pull a trailer. So all we had to do was outfit it. That was when we learned about hitches, chains, electric brakes, and stabilizers, all required for safe travel.

Soon after mom and dad purchased a used 1959 Manorette 18 foot trailer made by the Chilton Trailer Company. The exterior was silver aluminum with a dark green horizontal strip from front to back. On the front window was a rounded bubble cover that hinged up and down, down for travel and up for camping. Also outside were several locked doors for storage. Cleverly, the storage areas could be accessed via these outside doors and also via inside doors. And the trailer had an escape hatch, a feature I have not seen in other trailers. The hatch was on the opposite side from the door. I assumed it could be used if the door was blocked or if the trailer tipped.

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Fortunately, we did not have to use it for those purposes. However, still being small, we were able to squeeze out the escape hatch as a fun game.

The interior featured a front gaucho (sofa), a small kitchen area, closet, and twin beds in the back. Above the twin beds was a fold down overhead bunk. The gaucho and twin beds were topped with very thick, tan, Naugahyde cushions. The windows were screened and there was also a screen door. Ventilation was delightful.

To keep the sun (and rain) off while we were outside, dad purchased a canvas tarp and carefully strung it along a groove on the side of the trailer. We lifted the tarp with several poles and had an instant porch. (More modern trailers come with a retractable canopy that hangs off the side).

And to top off the look, we hung string lights along the edge of the tarp. In those days, you could purchase outdoor lights with a variety of colorful and fun shapes. We chose the Chinese lantern shape.

Unknown to us at that time was the high quality that the Chilton Trailer Company built into its products. For example, the interior was maple veneer. The cabinets were covered in rough pine. The beds, gaucho, closet walls, and kitchen cabinets were framed with real pine wood. We felt like we were in a cabin in the north woods! A cabin we could take anywhere we wanted.

Having fallen in love with the Manorette, we took a trip to Chilton to ask about replacing the front gaucho with a dinette. The factory was more than accommodating and sold us the complete dinette set. We then removed the gaucho and installed the dinette. Now we had an official table where the five of us could eat together.

Interestingly, even though the dinette was built for new 1972 trailers, it fit perfectly into our 1959 model.

Mom and dad slept in the dinette after it was reconfigured into a bed. The dinette was only 42 inches wide, but that was just enough width to unzip and flatten one sleeping bag and then place a sheet on top. We boys took turns on the twin beds and overhead bunk.

Because this model did not have a bathroom, the closet was very generous. Below the closet were drawers. Interestingly, the biggest and clunkiest items to store in a trailer are shoes! Clothes flatten or can be hung. But shoes remain their same size. We made a rule to bring no more than two pairs of shoes each. One to wear and one spare in case the first pair got wet. We placed some of the shoes on the closet floor but most were carefully

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lined up along the aisle floor near the walls. And we used the overhead bunk for sleeping bag and pillow storage during the day. Everything fit.

## **1973 Manorette 18' Travel Trailer**

After we visited the Chilton Trailer Company to purchase our dinette, we began to long for a newer and better equipped trailer. Mom especially liked the idea that the newer models had a bathroom. So, once again mom and dad started looking for a Manorette. They even drove back to Chilton to ask about ordering a new model. Unfortunately, by that time the company was transitioning away from the classic Manorette. Instead they searched the newspaper ads. Eventually, they found an ad for a used 1973 18 foot Manorette. We were hoping to find a 20 foot model with a front overhang. The more roomy 20 foot trailer had a bigger closet and a complete bunk over the front hitch. But since Manorettes were not easy to find, we opted to purchase the 1973 model.

Unlike the 1959 model, the 1973 model had a back gaucho instead of twin beds. This extra room allowed space for a bathroom, furnace, hot water heater and a larger kitchen. In addition, there was a curtain separating the back gaucho area from the kitchen area. Amazingly, when the curtain was drawn, the back felt like a separate room. And at night the three of us boys had our own private bedroom. It also afford a bit of privacy for our parents who continued to sleep in the transformed dinette. And when anyone used the bathroom at night, they did not disturb those of use still sleeping.

The 1973 exterior was very similar to the 1959 model, except it had a gold strip on the side instead of green. And the front "bubble" had been reduced to a flat fiberglass shield. We still used the tarp strung along the side groove as our "porch." Better than the 1959 model, the 1973's seat cushions were vinyl sided, with cloth tops imprinted with harvest-colored leaves. And even though the bathroom was the size of a small closet, it had its own little sink. There were also several mirrors, one in the bathroom and a full-length version on the bathroom door. It was this attention to detail that really made the Manorette a better-than-average trailer.

Along with the newer trailer mom and dad purchased a newer car, this time a 1974 Buick Electra. Dad said we needed a car with a large engine to pull the trailer. In those days, the only possible non-car available was an International. Families who pulled trailers always purchased large Chryslers, Fords or GM car models. Our Buick sported a 455 cubic foot engine, the largest GM made for its Buick line.

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We were also fortunate to find someone to buy our old 1959 Manorette. One of mom's coworkers wanted the trailer for her and her husband to use. This would be a sort of retirement cabin for them. They initially moved the trailer around and then eventually they settled on a trailer park community in central Wisconsin. We were glad our trailer had found a good home.

## Long Trips

As we boys matriculated to high school and then college, mom and dad would go off on their own camping adventures. Often they would meet up with friends at camp grounds around the state.

Then in 1977 they suggested we take a very long trip, to Florida. My older brother had gone to Florida a couple years early as part of a high school band event at Disney World. (In fact, he visited Disney the year it opened!) The rest of us had never visited the state. We readily agreed. In addition to the usual camping preparation, mom researched Florida state parks and dad visited AAA for maps and routes.

Hillsborough River State Park was the finalist. It is located just east of Tampa. The park had easy access to Tampa (e.g., Busch Gardens) and fairly close to Disney and other state attractions. In May, after school was out, one very early morning (to avoid Chicago rush hour), we departed Milwaukee for the Sunshine State. We traveled for two-and-a-half days, stopping at truck stops for the nights, before arriving at Hillsborough River State Park, located in Zephyrhills, Florida. The next two weeks we played nonstop tourist, visiting all the attractions and taking in all the Florida sunshine, food and citrus goodies. While some of the attractions were definitely "kitsch," we nonetheless enjoyed our first family trip south. One highlight was seeing alligators in the Hillsborough River, which happened to be directly behind our camp site.

## Camping Days

From tent days to Manorette days, we always took along aluminum folding chairs. One for each of us. We would enjoy sitting in our campsite, reading, or playing games. When not at the site, we loved to go swimming. We boys started swimming lessons around age 4, and so by the time we were pre-teens, we were very good. In addition I had learned life saving as part of my Boy Scout merit badge. We even had our own snorkels, masks and fins! Wisconsin's state parks are known for clean lakes and we took full advantage. We also had fun digging in the sand and sunbathing.

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Generally my family would mount long weekend campouts. Mom and dad worked and would take off Fridays. The process was quite efficient. We would load our own clothes into the trailer the week before. Mom kept staples in the trailer all summer, such as spices and canned goods. So all we needed to purchase was perishable foods. Dad made sure the car and trailer were in tip top condition, testing the lights, brakes, and ensuring the car's service was current.

A typical dinner would consist of roast chicken (baked in the trailer's oven), potatoes and vegetable, just like we had at home. However, on camping trips we were allowed special treats. One item we would bring along is Kringle. Fortunately, this Racine, Wisconsin bakery specialty was available in our local Milwaukee area Kohls Food Stores.

## **End of an Era**

After I was out of college mom and dad wanted something simpler to take on vacations. Both were retired and wanted to travel the US. So, they put the 1973 Manorette up for sale and purchased a micro-mini motor home, a 1978 Sunradar. The Sunradar was fashioned onto a small 6 cylinder Toyota pickup truck. It was molded fiberglass and was even *more* equipped than the Manorette. For example, it had two air conditioners, one for the driver and passenger up front, and one in the roof for the campers. It also had the latest and greatest stereo component: an 8-track tape player, complete with speakers throughout! Now mom and dad could now drive anywhere they wanted and not think about hitching and unhitching, or have to back up a trailer. And the Sunradar was small enough to fit into a standard parking lot slot. Mom and dad took the Sunradar from coast to coast often staying in the warmer states all winter.

The 1973 Manorette was sold, and unfortunately I don't recall the circumstances. I suppose it was listed in the want ads and another eager camping family scooped it up. I wonder where it is now?

By the time we sold the 1973 Manorette, travel trailers had lost their wood interiors. Now laminates were being used. Kitchen cupboards were become mere holes cut into a panel. The walls very thin. The workmanship that was embraced by the Chilton Trailer Company was just not important to other trailer manufacturers.

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Today's modern trailers are now often framed with foam to reduce weight. And while they have many more electronics and gadgets than the Manorette, they are sterile by comparison. The warm wood interior, hand-crafted cabinets, funky escape door, and "cabin feel" are gone. Fortunately, I still have photos and my many memories to revisit and relive the days when we would camp as a family in our Manorette.

Dave Glenn

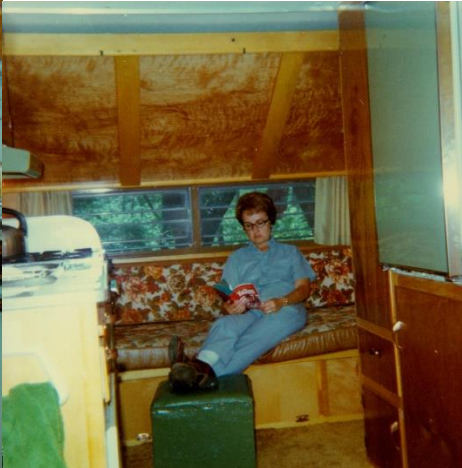
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