

Tears of Joy

From Roads to Adventure, Fall 1998

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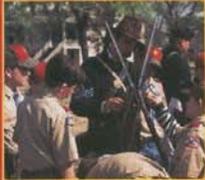
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THE MAGAZINE OF FAMILY CAMPING

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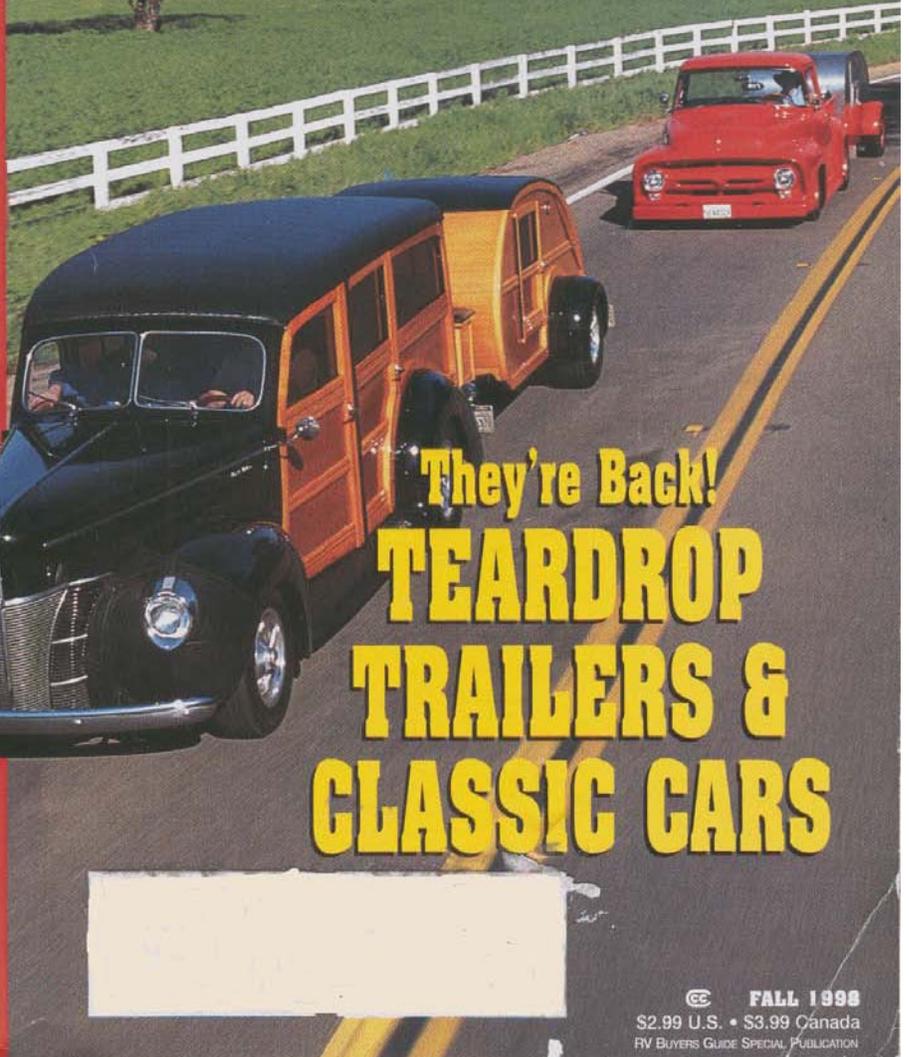
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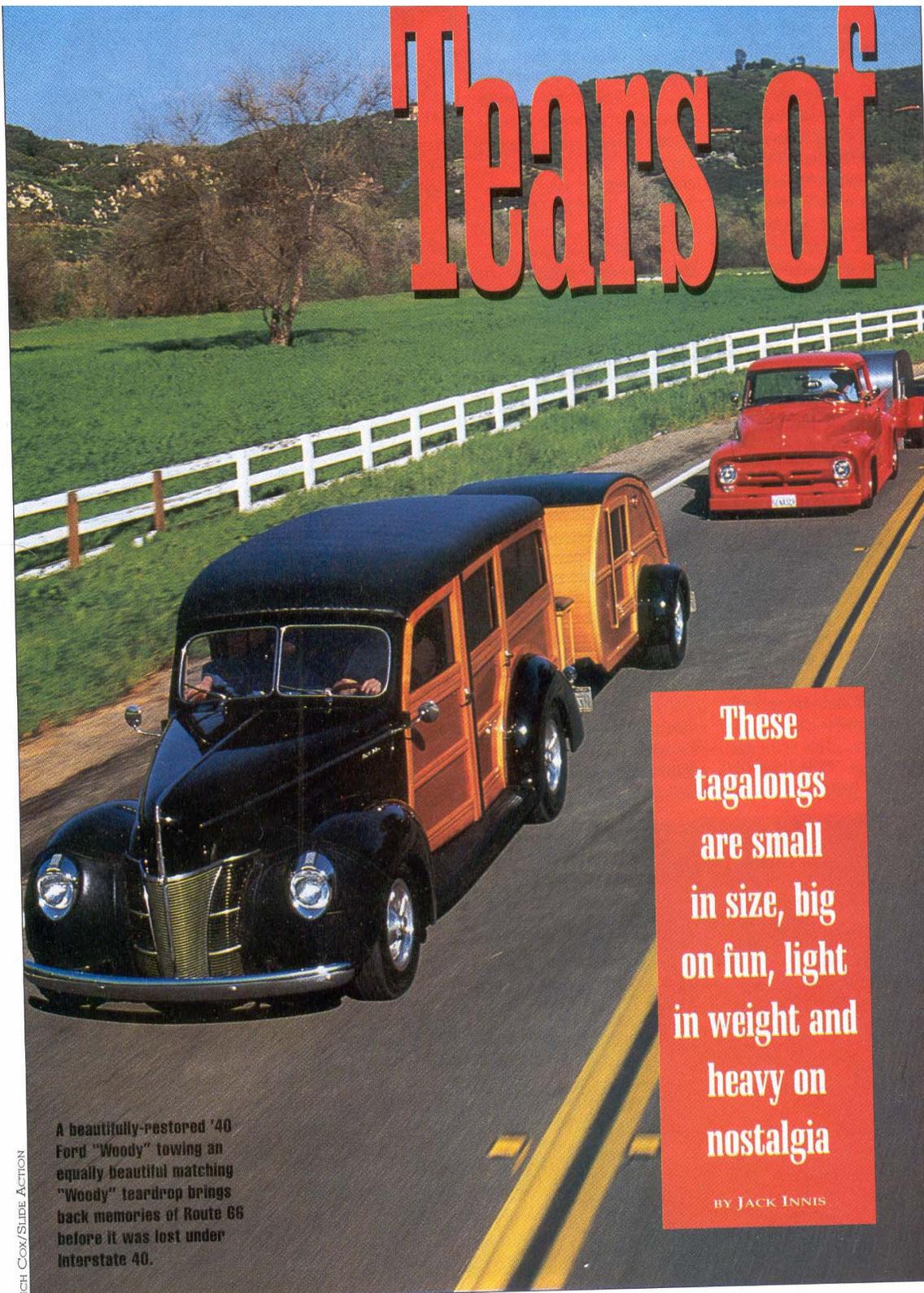
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Tears of



These tagalongs are small in size, big on fun, light in weight and heavy on nostalgia

BY JACK INNIS

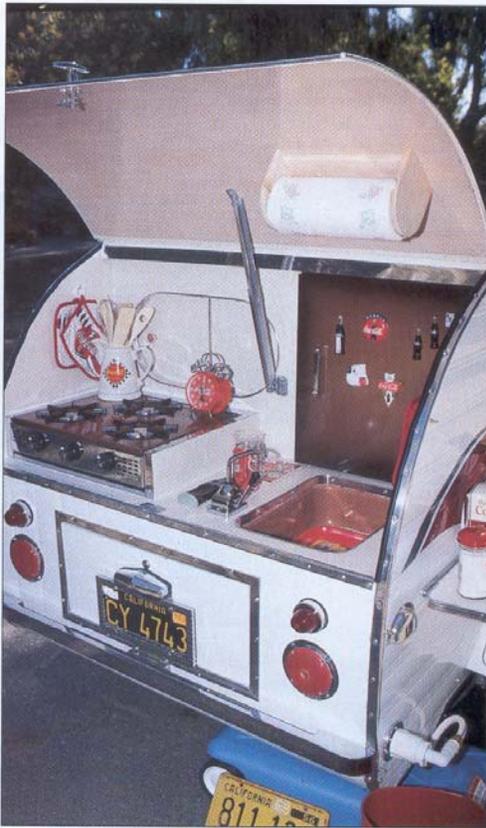
A beautifully-restored '40 Ford "Woody" towing an equally beautiful matching "Woody" teardrop brings back memories of Route 66 before it was lost under Interstate 40.

RICH COX/SLIDE ACTION

Joy

Teardrop trailers are simple, versatile, low-cost, tow-anywhere camping trailers with living space as great as all outdoors. A mere 4 feet wide by 4 feet tall and 8 to 10 feet long, teardrop trailers provide only basic accommodations: a cozy bunk with just enough room to sleep, a bit of overhead storage space and a chuck wagon-style outdoor kitchen under a rounded tailgate that swings up from the trailer's rear.

What these little tag-alongs lack in amenities, however, they make up for in ap-



peal. They compel the camper to truly be one with the environment. Pots and pans clanking in the "outdoor kitchen" harmonize with whistling breezes and chirping birds. A folding table and chairs serve as a dining room under the sky. Conversation proceeds until the campfire cedes to the stars.

Yes, they're fun, but not everyone is cut out to camp in a teardrop trailer. It's a fact: Teardrops are tiny. Little room exists for dogs, guests or kayaks. Inside most teardrops, a standard-size double bed (where mom, dad and baby can snuggle up) consumes the entire floor, leaving



Designs and decorations of the "galleys under the stars" are as varied as their tow vehicles. These are not show trailers, according to their owners; they are used in all the same ways as their larger brethren.

only a small cabinet above the bed and a shelf on the end for storage. To get out of bed, you have to get out of the trailer!

Crank-handle windows—not air conditioning—ventilate these cozy nests.

Lights (12-volt DC) wired to the tow vehicle—not a genset—provide illumination. Sleeping bags—not a heater—warm the occupants. There's room to sleep, room to sit and room to stretch out, but not to stand.

"But that's exactly what makes them fun," says Grant Whipp, publisher of *Tales & Trails (T&T)*, a newsletter that reaches out to teardrop aficionados. "Believe it or not, there are people who think

that crawling out of the sack and savoring the smell of fresh-brewed coffee blended with the scents of a pinewood forest isn't such a great way to start the day," he says. Grant believes in the teardrop's use-

Tears Are for Touring

Television shows, cover stories, photo shoots—heck, it doesn't get any better than this, exclaimed teardrop trailer lovers at the second annual SCATT (Southern California Touring Tears) Guacome Park gathering in northern San Diego County in late February.

One organizer scratched his head in amazement. "Last year we had 34 teardrops; this year, 64," said Brad Romaine. "We hate to turn people away, but this is a capacity crowd. We're trying to negotiate with the park rangers to let us double up the trailers in the stalls next March. After all, we are small."



Huell Howser spent two hours interviewing various SCATT members for his KCET-TV show, *Visiting...Huell Howser*, while sidekick/cameraman Luis Fuerte dutifully taped the results. Teardrops are a great favorite of street rodders, so they can sleep near their expensive rods.

Cheyenne, Wyoming, with his 1947 Kit Camper in tow. The Highway Patrol in Salt Lake City, Utah, turned him back due to bad weather. He drove all the way to Denver, Colorado, and was turned around again near the Eisenhower Tunnel. He finally quit and drove home, muttering something about "El Nino!@#*".

How did three teardrop trailers wind up getting their own room in Harrah's National Automobile Museum in Reno, Nevada? Well, Debbie and Mike Smith were showing their 1950 Kampmaster at a car show, and one of Harrah's museum administrators came up and asked, "What is this?" Debbie grinned and said, "I can get more." The display, titled "Home on the Road," ran for four months and featured split-rail fences and chirping crickets to capture the ambiance of early trailering lore.

Why has there been such a resurgence in the popularity of tiny tears in America?

Says Ann Marcus, "Old posters, ads, pictures and even plans keep resurfacing, piquing renewed or new interest." Ann likes to display print memorabilia along with her 1937 Gypsy Caravan.

"Ninety-nine percent of us use our teardrops for camping. I take mine on fishing trips six weeks out of the year in the high Sierra," volunteers Don Tape, who camps under the big sky with his 5-year-old canine, Samantha.

"People with street rods are looking for something extra—a fresh project—plus a place to sleep at hot rod shows," offers David Locke.

Jackie Romaine, co-director of the San Diego gathering, says, "Interest in antiques helps pull up interest in tiny tears. This includes period pieces from the '30s, '40s and '50s, such as bikes, lanterns, stoves and other cooking gear."

— JACK INNIS

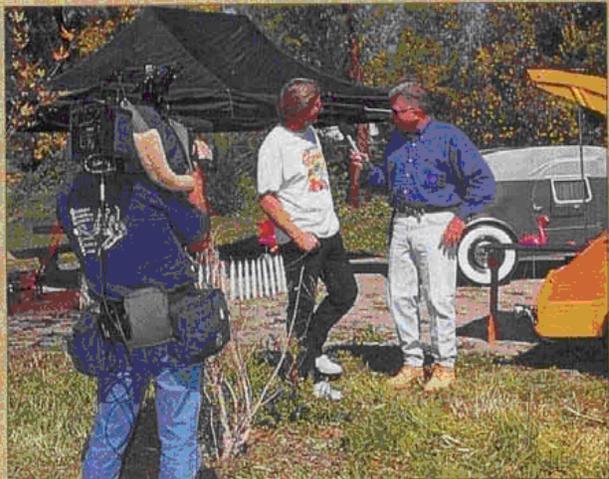


Photo ©/K. Susan Anderson

While SCATT people (they refuse to call themselves a club and have no dues, no officers, no meetings) did their thing during the three-day gathering amid the normal crowd of onlookers, Huell Howser filmed a television segment for his Los Angeles, California, KCET show, *Visiting...Huell Howser* (a counterpart to his *California Gold* documentary series). Howser and his famous sidekick/cameraman, Luis Fuerte, spent two hours interviewing people and poking around the tears.

The Guacome Park gathering also included a potluck dinner and lots of show-and-tell among the proud owners, many of whom boast matching tow vehicles for their tiny tears.

The most famous no-show for this event was Tom Hanson, who left Cheyenne, Wyoming, with his 1947 Kit Camper in tow. The Highway Patrol in Salt Lake City, Utah, turned him back due to bad weather. He drove all the way to Denver, Colorado, and was turned around again near the Eisenhower Tunnel. He finally quit and drove home, muttering something about "El Nino!@#*".

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fulness. "Save 'em, restore 'em, buy 'em, build 'em, but use 'em!" is the *T&T* credo.

Tales of trailering teardrops far and wide abound. Richard Slayden, of Whistler, British Columbia, Canada, traveled through nine countries in Europe, including Russia, Estonia and Latvia, in his 1946 Kit-brand teardrop. Including Canada, the United States and Mexico, the tiny tow-along has visited 12 countries in 49 years. Last year, Fred and Mary Dunsmoor towed their 1940s' Modernistic teardrop from Waukegan, Iowa, all the way to a gathering at Lake Shasta, California.

Even short treks bring great rewards. Bill and Joyce Ruggie of Clearwater, Florida, brought their little tagalong to the 12-hour races at Sebring, Florida. Parked amid all the \$500,000 motorhomes, guess what got all the attention? The cute little tear.

While short on wheelbase, teardrops are long on nostalgia. In fact, owners derive a great deal of joy from just owning a piece of Americana. Names of models such as a '46 Lawrence, a '48 Kenskill, or a '54 Benroy are whispered with the same reverence accorded famous antiques like Chippendale or Shaker. With the teardrops' resurging popularity, enthusiasts are eagerly snatching up even dilapidated teardrops and bare-bone hulks from barns, fields and junkyards across the nation.

Often, the work and money invested in restoring a teardrop exceed the \$2,000 or so it takes to buy a custom-built one. While some restored models fetch \$2,500 to \$10,000, many are flat-out not for sale. Most teardrop restorers are motivated by craftsmanship, not what the end product is worth. Moreover, many restoration projects take on the persona of the tow vehicle and

Yes! You Can Take the Kids: Teardrop Add-Ons

Many original teardrops had add-on rooms that were fastened to the trailers. They ranged from simple awnings to large rooms that could be divided. Some are still in use.

Add-ons can be custom-designed. Do you need an extra bedroom (with floor) for the kids? An inclement-weather living room? Kitchen shade or wind protection? A place to stand up and change clothes?

Does baby make three? Early teardroppers often used a wide shelf over the lower part of the bed for a child's bunk.

Want a shower? Go for solar. These great little shower units are



Ingenuity knows no bounds when it comes to tears; whether it's a shower/potty enclosure or a zip-on tent, owners customize their trailers to fit their needs.



PETER WARD

popular for out-in-the-boonies camping and can double as potty enclosures or changing rooms.

The easiest way to attach an add-on room is to the RV awning rail, which is fastened to the teardrop. The tent material is hemmed tightly around a cord, which is then pulled through the rail, creating a spiffy watertight room. Snaps and zippers also work in certain places.—LISA WHIPP

may be painted and trimmed to match the restorer's '32 Ford Roadster, '48 Jeep or other street rod.

Even modern teardrop builders and restorers admit that it's the love of teardrops, not money changing hands, that provides motivation. Not motivated by money? Clearly, teardrops are not for everyone.

Yet the moment a teardrop pulls into a campsite, everyone in the park hustles over to take a look. It's instant camaraderie. Some lookie-loos, beholding the curious little trailers for the very first time, believe they are looking at some sort of curious luggage trailers, not functioning RVs. Those more in the know may be swept up by nostalgia. From the 1920s through the 1960s,

when teardrop popularity was at its peak, these tiny tagalongs provided many Americans with their first camping experiences.

"People see them and relive happy times," says Brad Romaine, a retired firefighter from Julian, California, who trails a restored 1956 Benroy. To Brad, a lot of the fun in owning a teardrop is seeing people's reactions to it.

Audree Gada of Modesto, California, is bringing nostalgia to life with the restoration of her Benroy teardrop. She recalls her parent's unusual use of a teardrop. It was the 1940s, she was the oldest of four children, and her parents were trying to make ends meet:

"My parents had a Kit teardrop, back when we

were dirt poor. They owned a couple acres of land with a home, but father was sort of a nomad. He didn't like working for people. Over a five- or six-year period, we traveled from one area to another, searching for work. We parked our teardrop—never in auto courts or tent cities—wherever we found work. Picking oranges in Southern California, gathering black walnuts in the central San Joaquin Valley, harvesting leaf mold and ladybugs to sell to strawberry farmers and chopping Christmas trees in Oregon—we did it all.

"The teardrop served as a focal point. We kids slept in the trailer, while our folks slept in the truck. We bathed in streams and received whatever education we could, some-

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TEARS OF JOY

times enrolling in five different schools throughout the year. None of us kids ever fell behind, which proves Dad's insistence that travel is just as educational as school.

"When both our parents went out to pick in the fields, they'd draw a big circle in the dirt around the teardrop and promise us a hard lickin' if we dared venture outside the boundary. Then they'd trudge out into the fields in the morning and not return until dusk. But, somehow, they always knew if we had left the circle. Little did we know then that all they had to do was check for footprints outside the circle and size up the footprints to know who the culprit was.

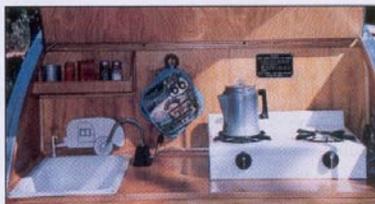
"I remember the last time we used the tear, just before we sold it in 1950. Dad was leading big-game hunting trips up to the Bozeman River in Montana. I think I was 12 or 13 at the time. We'd caravan with cars, trucks, horse trailers and the teardrop. They'd leave us camped by the river with just the mosquitoes as our baby-sitters and pack into the hills for four weeks at a time. They'd come back for a week, then pack up and do it again."

Few teardrop tales such as Audree's exist. But then again, teardrops are not for everybody.

Interior decorations always add personal touches to RVs—no matter what size. "Coffee's done! Time to socialize around the campfire with our friends."



JACK INNIS



BRAD ROMAINE

While the teardrop's popularity ebbed to the brink of extinction between the '60s and the '80s, their modern resurgence has left many wondering whether there is a practical side to these improbably tiny trailers. One proponent is Lance Deibler, an upholsterer from Ramona, California. Lance bought his teardrop in 1980 for \$100 from friends who emigrated from Canada in it. It was so neglected that the restoration ran about \$2,500, including a desert-tan paint job that matches his Willys Jeep.

"Everybody laughs, but everybody's envious," Lance says. "Teardrops are easy to tow and easy to park. You can do everything in it except stand up." Lance is known within teardrop circles for hitching up his trailer and spending up to a week at a time exploring notorious Death Valley.

"I love the compactness of a teardrop," he says. "It seems to be a good fit with the Jeep. One time, just outside of Death Valley, I was trying to find a shortcut to Providence Mountain. I wound up following a power-line trail—it was so rough I think the 40-mile trip took six hours—and I camped at dusk near an old

Buying Tears

There are three ways to obtain a teardrop: Find an old one, build one from scratch using instructions from a 1947 *Mechanics Illustrated* magazine, or get one from a modern builder. Used ones can be found in the *Tales & Trails* newsletter's classified ads section; contact Grant and Lisa Whipp, 12442 Maria Drive, Redding, California 96003; (916) 275-6728. Plans and information also can be purchased through ads in the newsletter's classifieds. Modern builders include:

Larry's Tears Inc., 35917 Enterprise Road, Creswell, Oregon 97426; (541) 895-2754.
CIRCLE 179 ON READER SERVICE PAGE.

Lj'l Bear Tagalongs, 12442 Maria Drive, Redding, California 96003; (916) 275-6728.
CIRCLE 180 ON READER SERVICE PAGE.

Mac Bilt, 718 Durham Road, Riegelsville, Pennsylvania 18077.
CIRCLE 181 ON READER SERVICE PAGE.

Mullins Teardrop Reproductions, 3330-D Mary Lane, Auburn, California 95602.
CIRCLE 182 ON READER SERVICE PAGE.

Quick 'N' Easy Tear Drop, P.O. Box 491871, Redding, California 96049.
CIRCLE 183 ON READER SERVICE PAGE.

TEARS OF JOY

nickel mine. In the morning, I strolled around a bit, only to discover an unmarked open-pit mine nearby. It was more than 800 feet deep and had water and who knows what else in the bottom!"

For those who travel where no other RVer dare tread, teardrops are favorite camping vehicles. They'll faithfully follow the tow vehicle where many other trailers would be too cumbersome.

"Few people know it," Lance says, "but the desert can be windy and rainy in the winter, enough to shred a tent. But the teardrop is comfortable in those conditions."

What teardrops lack in size, amenities and storage capacity, they make up for with simplicity, charm and ruggedness. Their owners get a great deal of joy just from owning a teardrop trailer. Whether vintage or modern, tiny tears are definitely not for everybody. But size one up; maybe it's just right for you! ▶

JACK INNIS HAS PUBLISHED MORE THAN 100 ARTICLES, ESSAYS AND SHORT STORIES, MOST OF WHICH DEAL WITH THE GREAT OUTDOORS.

The Nitty-Gritty

Most teardrop trailers are designed around a 4x8-foot sheet of plywood that rests atop a steel frame supported by a single axle. A wood or steel frame supports aluminum walls, roof and the small side door. The interior is cabined and often finished with high-quality joinery. The back end of the teardrop opens like a car trunk, revealing a chuck wagon-style kitchen with a built-in cooler, cooktop, sink and faucet. Lawn chairs, folding tables and awnings provide diners with panoramic views. Portable toilets and showers are stow-away items.

Teardrop trailers were designed and developed in the '30s and '40s, an era in which most automobiles had little power. Weighing in at a lean 800 pounds average, even a "fully loaded" teardrop will easily tow behind any suitably equipped car, truck or sport-utility vehicle. Firewood and other stowables should be stacked over the axle in a manner that prevents shifting. This will help keep the tongue weight to a manageable 80-100 pounds.—*Jack Innis*

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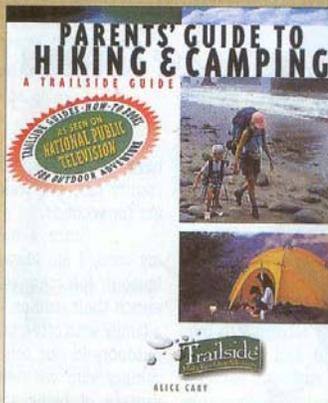
GREAT READS

Parents' Guide to Hiking & Camping: A Trailside Guide by Alice Cary; \$18.95 softcover; 271 pages

Sometimes, you really can judge a book by its cover. My maxim is: If the pages of a book smell good, if the cover is shiny and it feels like a cold pillowcase, buy it. Perhaps I'm overly tactile, or maybe I just believe that any publisher who goes to all that trouble to meet my visceral needs must have a book that deserves opening.

As it turns out, *Parents' Guide to Hiking & Camping* has plenty of substance behind its style. Here's all the information you'll need to plan your next family camping trip, from planning meals and snacks children will eat, to choosing hiking trails and campsites that are family-friendly. "Ages and Stages" sections focus on age-specific issues and "Parent-to-Parent" sections highlight trail-tested tips from experienced hiking and camping families from across the country.

Important tips that only a savvy insider would know are sprinkled throughout the book. How-tos,



such as how to learn to read between the lines of campground directories; how to get your child up the mountain; how to pick a trail; and, most importantly, how to turn your kids into helpers, not whiners, are invaluable.

An entire whole chapter is devoted to choosing age-appropriate gear for your children, with ratings on specific brands. So before you go out and spend a fortune on hiking boots for your children (if you have any money left over after buying yours), read what Alice Cary recommends. It will save you time and money.

Because there is so much information to absorb, I suggest that you read this book long before

you actually go on your vacation. That way, because you will be so well prepared when you leave for your journey, you might actually feel like you've been on a vacation when you return.

Published by W.W. Norton, *Parents' Guide to Hiking & Camping* is available from Adventurous Travelers Bookstore, (800) 282-3963.—*JENNIE KEAST*