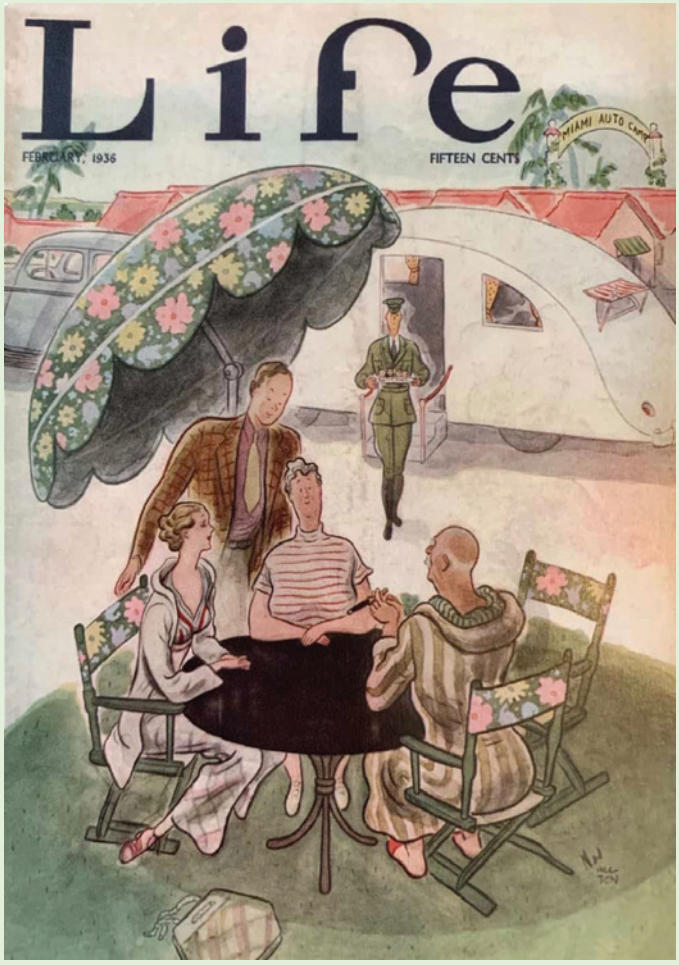
The Quaker Trailer Company

A Devon Business in the Mid 1930s

Meg Wiederseim

According to *Mobile Home Living*, 1936 was a great year for the travel trailer industry, and it resulted in one of the fastest business growths in United States history. The economy was improving after the Great Depression, and the interstate highway network provided a way for trailer owners to drive leisurely across the country for a few days or weeks and then return back home. Families everywhere were yearning to follow the "trailer trail,"[1] and Philadelphians were said to be leading the way in this part of the country.[2]



Life Magazine featured a luxury Travel Trailer on the cover of its February 1936 issue, and it is believed that such favorable press coverage was partially responsible for the trailer boom. Magazines from *Popular Mechanics* to *Woman's Home Companion* heaped praise upon the benefits of trailer camping.

Source: "The 1930s Travel Trailer Camping Craze," *The Vintage Traveler*, July 10, 2011, **thevintagetraveler.wordpress.com/2011/07/10/the-1930s-travel-trailer-camping-craze/** (accessed February 24, 2023). Image source: T*ravel Trailer, A Visual History of Mobile America.*

There was a model for every budget ranging from about $300 for an economy version—roughly $6,450 in 2023 dollars—to many thousands for a luxury option. By comparison, an American consumer could purchase a Ford sedan for about $625 at that time. The "bread loaf" was the look most associated with trailers of the era, and the interior of the more simplified versions typically consisted of thin plywood walls and Linoleum covered floors. A car battery could power fans, lights and radios—just like home.[3]

Sherman's Covered Wagon was the first business to mass-produce travel trailers, but the competition ramped up almost immediately. The Quaker Trailer Company was one of those companies.

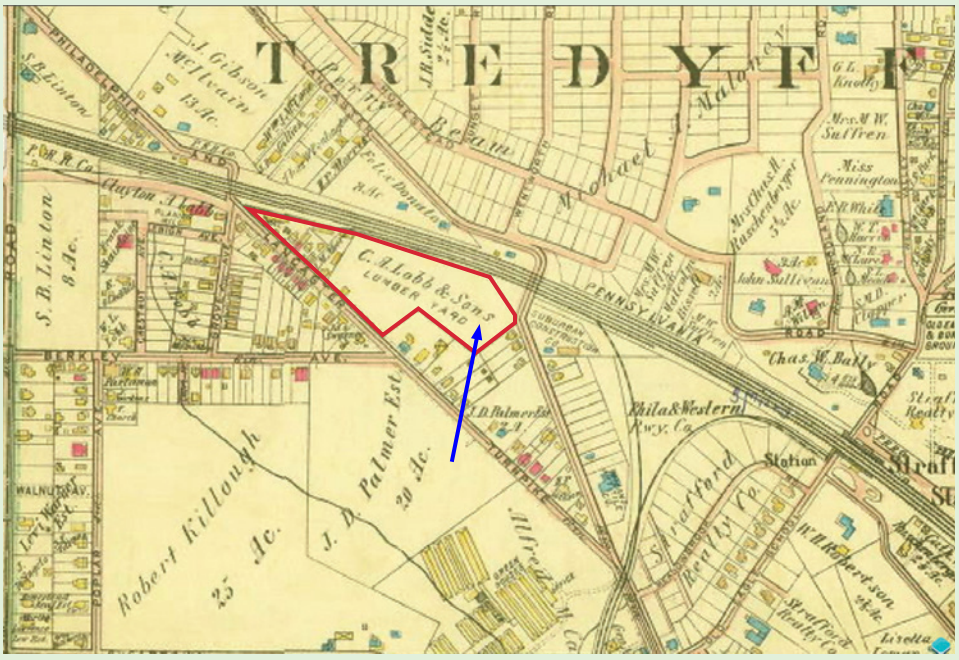
Quaker Trailer Company's Beginnings

In December of 1935, Quaker Trailer leased a two-story garage building in Philadelphia,[4] and it began placing ads in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for trailers priced at $395 and up, offering a living room, bedroom, kitchen and bath.[5] The company shared a showroom on North Broad Street with the Equitable Automobile Finance Company, a business dealing in repossessed cars.[6]

Two months later the *Philadelphia Inquirer* quoted Quaker Trailer President H.T. Larzelere:

> *"While trailers have been in more or less general use throughout the West for the past several years, the demand for the 'homes on wheels' in this section of the country has far surpassed all our expectations.*
>
> *What better way to travel than by trailer? Make as much time each day or as little as you wish; make as many side trips as you like; if you find a spot that particularly enchants you, stay there as long as you like. When you travel by trailer your schedules are a pleasure, because they are of your own making and breaking, if you choose.*
>
> *After a day's comfortable driving, pull into one of the numerous trailer camps for the night. If the camp you choose is situated near a lake, take a dip while your dinner is cooking on your trailer cookstove. After dinner more than likely, you'll chat with other trailer travelers about roads and spots of Interest in the vicinity, about destination, or where to find the best fishing. Some of*

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On this 1926 map, the lumber yard area was owned by Clayton A. Lobb & Sons (including Walter L. Lobb), and it was located between the railroad and the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike, also known as the Lincoln Highway. In 1936, the eastern portion of this property would become the new home of the Quaker Trailer Company.

Source: 1926 *Map Atlas of Properties on Main Line Pennsylvania Railroad from Overbook to Paoli*, 1926, Plate 27.

your fellow campers may be playing bridge or ping-pong in the game rooms at the camp, or dancing in the auditorium. You return to your trailer, relaxed, and turn in for a refreshing night's sleep to awake the next morning and you're off again over new roads, the lure of what's over the next hill ever beckoning."[7]

Quaker Trailer's Move to Devon

Quaker Trailer Company must have felt it needed a larger space almost immediately, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published a notice in early June announcing a proposal to increase its capital stock from $10,000 to $100,000.[8] Shortly afterward, on June 22, 1936, the company paid $30,600 to Walter L. Lobb & Co., Inc. for roughly 4 ¼ acres (and several existing structures) in Tredyffrin Township in the area where Lobb operated a lumber yard. The purchased acreage was between the highway and the Pennsylvania Railroad in the area occupied by today's Whole Foods Market and neighboring businesses.

In August, Quaker Trailer officially announced that due to increased manufacturing demand, it had relocated its general offices, factory, and display rooms to a site on over five acres of land on the Lincoln Highway in Devon. (They must have somehow added an additional ¾ acre.) The main manufacturing building contained 35,000 square feet of floor space and was designed for assembly-line production. The facility also included a machine shop, paint shop, forge and easy access to the Pennsylvania Railroad.[9]

Prompted by the news of the move, Charles Devaney, president of the Main Line Airport in Paoli, flew his open-cockpit Waco 10 biplane over Devon to see for himself the new manufacturing company being so widely advertised, and photograph the site from the air. (For helpful perspective, see his photograph in the sidebar "Charles Devaney's August 2, 1936 Aerial Photograph" on page 12, and a more recent view in "Roger Thorne's October 9, 2009 Aerial Photograph" on page 13.)



This *Morning Post* photo collage shows the Quaker Trailer Company buildings at the new Devon location—the Office attached to the end of the large Plant (LEFT), the Display Room (LOWER RIGHT) and an additional building located between the Plant and the Pennsylvania Railroad (UPPER RIGHT). Source: August 20, 1936, *The Morning Post* (Camden, N.J.) p. 17.

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The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that all of the officers and directors and most of the stockholders of the company were from Philadelphia. At age 28, Robert M. Rakestraw, Jr., who had previously managed the Equitable Automobile Finance Company at the shared N. Broad Street location, became the newly-elected president. It was noted that Rakestraw was "able and energetic" and that he would be assisted by others with demonstrated experience.[10]

1936 Growth

In September, the Egyptian Theatre in Bala Cynwyd was showing a *March of Time* documentary called *Highway Homes* featuring the development of the auto trailer industry. A Quaker Trailer was on display in front, and it was reported that "hundreds of people inspected it and marveled at its sleeping accommodations for four, its spacious quarters, electric lights, running water, modern cooking and washing facilities, etc." Americans continued to be fascinated with making trailers their "Highway Homes."[11]

As the year progressed, Quaker Trailer Company continued to pursue distributors. In October, they announced that W. M. Anderson Motor Car Co. would be the new representative for Philadelphia, Montgomery, Bucks and Delaware counties.[12] In the Washington D.C. area, Grove Travel Coach Company had Quaker Trailers on display in their showroom in November and described them as the trailer for "comfort, economy and long life!"[13]

Additional distributors were hired in various areas of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.[14] Many reps seemed to come from the used-car world.

Three new 1937 models were announced in December, and President R. M. Rakestraw reported that, "Interest in and sales of Quaker trailers have far surpassed our most optimistic hopes. Every day we are given tangible evidence of the great and growing trailer consciousness on the part of persons in all walks of life. Our job is to meet various requirements with models which, in each price class, will give the utmost in trailer value. Our sales records show, I think, that we are already accomplishing this in a manner entirely satisfactory to a trailer-minded public."[15]

The Quaker Trailer Model 47 was priced at $695 and was described as providing "outstanding luxury in the four-person trailer class." The Model 67 sold for $965 and was a "big brother" to the Model 47. It was larger and more extravagantly furnished. Lastly, the Model 97 was priced at $1495 and was described as an "exclusive English type—actually the equivalent of a modern seven room apartment."[16] There was also a horse trailer offered for $495 and a dog trailer for $145.



The ad above describes not only the Model 30 trailer for $495, but also "Dealer Week" for prospective franchise owners. Source: August 19, 1936 *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.) p. 13.

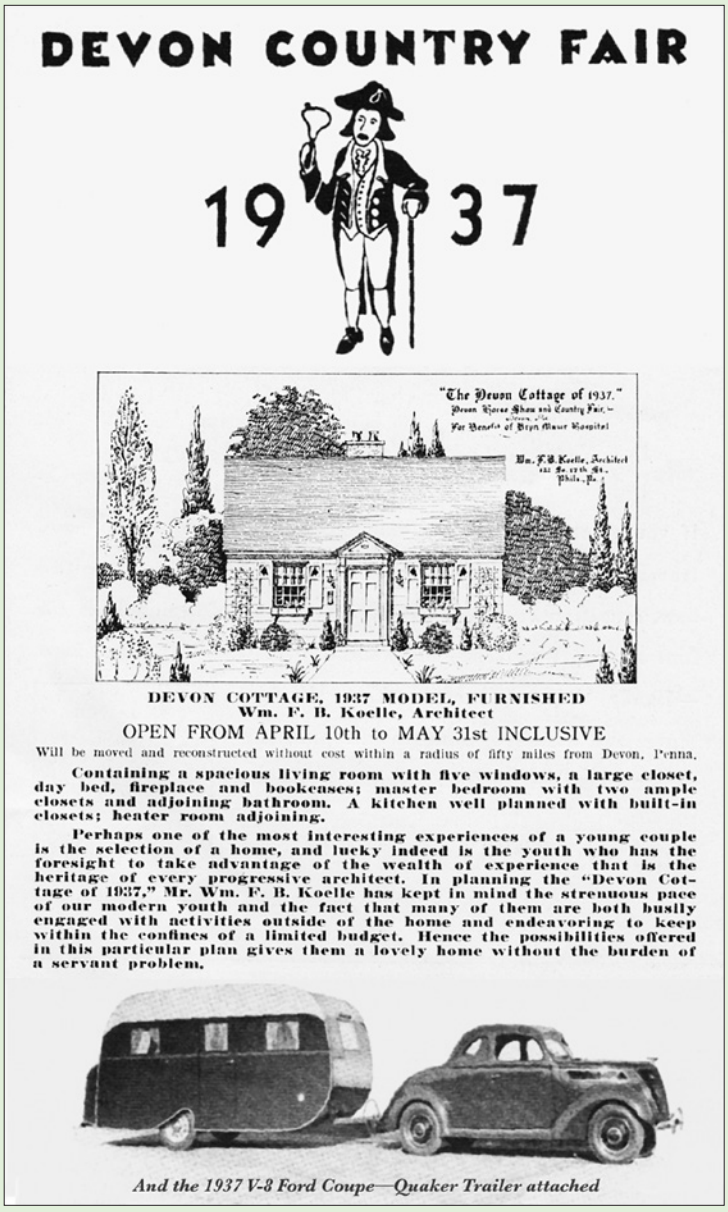


"We saw your ad in the Tulsa World—we want a car and a couple of trailers."
Source: *Tulsa World*, December 20, 1936, p. 38.

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(ABOVE) Advertisement looking for new dealers in the Lehigh Valley. Source: *Morning Call*, (Allentown), April 28, 1937, p. 20.



(RIGHT) This advertisement for the Devon Country Fair raffle (to benefit Bryn Mawr Hospital) at the 1937 Devon Horse Show includes, in addition to the "Devon Cottage" grand prize description, mention at the bottom of a 1937 Ford V-8 Coupe and Quaker Trailer, offered as another tempting prize.

1937 Boom and Bust

By the end of 1936, it was estimated that roughly 60,000 travel trailers had been built by about 300 trailer manufacturers, with a million dollars invested in plants. Projections for 1937 called for production of an additional 200,000 trailers. Although the industry was thriving, there were signs of growing pains as the year ended, and many states were expected to pass laws governing trailers in the coming months. The automobile industry had gone through similar stages.[17]

Quaker Trailer continued its rapid growth, and early in the new year, they were actively advertising in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for machinists, body, cabinet, and mattress makers.[18] An overnight watchman position paid $15 per week.[19]

Quaker's marketing indicated that it wanted to appeal to a family's "spirit of adventure [and] desire to go places." The design was made for not only "accommodating at least four or five members of that man's family, but for the purpose of taking him to places in comfort and inexpensively."[20]

Throughout the winter and early spring, Quaker continued to push for dealers. Ads in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Florida, and Pennsylvania continuously touted "big money" and "quick sales"[21] for reliable and aggressive salesmen.[22]

By late spring, it was estimated that the number of trailer manufacturers had reached 600—double the number from just five months before.[23]

Locally, the nearby Devon Horse Show and Country Fair publicized its raffle drawing that included a Ford V-8 Coupe—with a Quaker Trailer attached.

(continues with "Receivership and Sale" on page 11)

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(LEFT) Could this be the young Robert M. Rakestraw posing on the left in front of the Model 47?

(OPPOSITE AND BELOW) Selections from the 1937 Quaker Trailer Brochure.

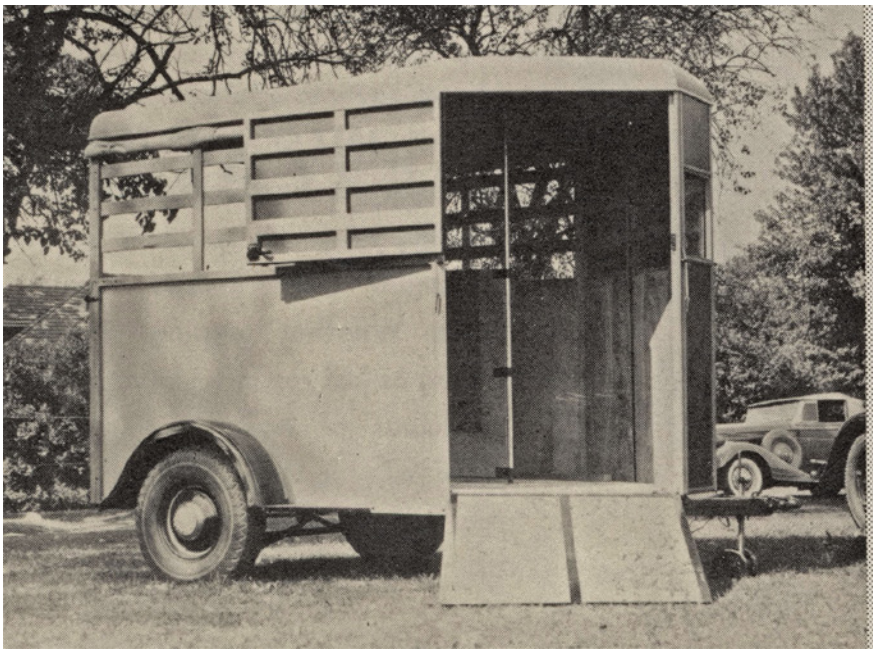
Courtesy of Meg Wiederseim

QUAKER DOG TRAILER

Will comfortably accommodate several large dogs. Door has windows for light and ventilation, barred for safety, with wind deflector to avoid drafts. Rear compartment holds guns, game, dogs' food, etc. Sturdily built, attractively finished. A trailer to make any dog happy.

Price $145 F. O. B. Devon, Pa. Shipped crated.





QUAKER HORSE TRAILER

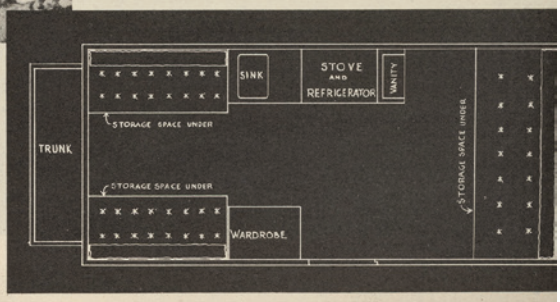
Provides the utmost in comfort and safety. Two stalls with rear entrance and front exit. Seat inside for attendant's use when desired. Exceptionally sturdy throughout. The latest word in horse trailer construction.

Price $495 F. O. B. Devon, Pa. Brakes and brake axle extra.

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Inspection of the Model 47 QUAKER TRAILER will make you wonder how so much can be offered for such a low price! In contour and finish, it rivals the most expensive models and its appointments measure up in every way to the high standards of quality, convenience and comfort that distinguish the entire QUAKER line.



QUAKER TRAILER
Model 47

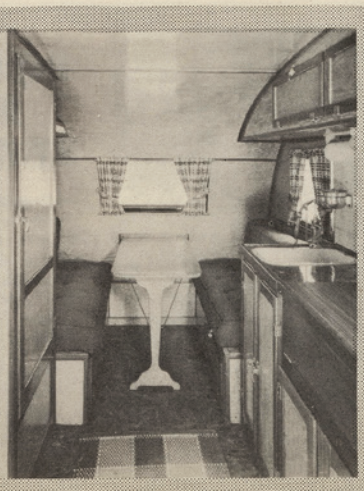
Specifications: Over-all dimensions — 17' 5" long, 6' 7" wide. The steel chassis extends from "hitch" to bumper with insulated floor. Sleeps four. All mattresses inner-spring, heavily padded for comfort. Standard dinette for four, convertible, forming one double bed. White porcelain refrigerator, fully insulated. Concealed 2-burner gasoline stove. When not in use, stove is covered by folding top which serves as work table. Twenty-gallon water tank of rust-resistant metal, piped (copper) to sink. Sink is porcelain, recessed, with a cover which forms additional working space. Front and rear windows, easily opened, provide clear rear vision.

Ample storage space is provided under beds; and there is a large wardrobe with hat shelf and full-length mirror on outside of door. A chest of three drawers is located at forward end of kitchen cabinet.

Above, there is a small but complete vanity, formed by raising lid having plate glass mirror on under side. This discloses a tray for cosmetics.

Price $695 F. O. B. Devon, Pa., which includes complete brake installation, trunk, curtains, screen door, large cooking stove, inlaid linoleum, and many other desirable features.





Living accommodations in each of the new 1937 QUAKER TRAILERS represent a new achievement in utilizing minimum space to secure maximum comfort and convenience. Whether sleeping, cooking, dining or just resting, you are never conscious of being cramped or crowded. No detail has been omitted that would add to your feeling of always being "right-at-home."

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