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Individualistic Roamers Or Community Builders?:Differences And Boundaries Among Rvers

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INDIVIDUALISTIC ROAMERS OR COMMUNITY BUILDERS?
DIFFERENCES AND BOUNDARIES AMONG RVERS

By

Gloria Anne Mattingly

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
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Mississippi State University

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The number of leisure and working RVERS roaming America's highways, now conservatively estimated at over eight million, continues to increase (Curtin 2001; Sommer 2003). In spite of their growing presence and unique lifestyle, these populations remain sociologically understudied. This exploratory case study of two distinctly different RV parks is a small but significant step toward filling that research gap.

At both RV parks I found a diverse population of individualists who value self-contained travel, freedom, relaxation, and sociality. In spite of sharing a collective, subcultural lifestyle, they differed along multiple axes. Marked differences separate RVERS into three broad groups (full-timers, long-termers, and vacationers) and into multiple subgroups within those categories. I analyzed triangulated data sources using a

theoretical lens that combines subcultural and boundary work theories. I concluded that full-time and long-term RVers practice boundary work and form subcultural identities based, primarily, on levels of commitment and divergent RVing practices.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to my life partner, John “Tex” Eklond.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| DEDICATION | ii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | iii |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| Significance of the Problem | 4 |
| II. LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 8 |
| Restless Roamers..... | 8 |
| Early Twentieth-century Transients: Hobos and Tramps..... | 9 |
| Differences among Retired Winter Campers in the American Southwest | 10 |
| Communities of Interest among RVing Retirees in the American Southwest | 11 |
| Boondocking and Resort Parking among Retirees in the American Southwest | 13 |
| Escapee RV Club..... | 15 |
| Subcultural Theory | 18 |
| Boundary Work Theory..... | 18 |
| Subcultural Identity Theory..... | 19 |
| Summary..... | 20 |
| III. METHODS..... | 22 |
| The Sites | 24 |
| The Population..... | 26 |
| The Interviewees | 28 |
| Data Analysis..... | 29 |
| IV. THE RVING SUBCULTURE | 31 |
| Subcultural Characteristics of the RVing Lifestyle..... | 31 |
| Mainstream Aspects of the RVing Lifestyle | 36 |

| CHAPTER | Page |
|---|------|
| V. BOUNDARY WORK | 41 |
| Boundary Work at the RV Park Level | 41 |
| Commitment, Identity, and Boundary Work among Full-timing RVers..... | 44 |
| Differences and Boundary Work among Full-timing Sub-groups | 47 |
| Leisure Full-timers | 47 |
| Workampers | 49 |
| Transient Workers | 52 |
| Commitment, Identity, and Boundary Work among Long-terming Snowbirds | 55 |
| Commitment, Identity, and Difference among Weekend/Vacationers | 61 |
| “Outsiders” in RV Parks..... | 66 |
| Demographic Boundaries | 66 |
| Race/Ethnicity | 67 |
| Disabilities..... | 67 |
| Gender | 68 |
| Marital Status..... | 68 |
| Class | 69 |
| Age | 69 |
| Summary..... | 70 |
| VI. CONCLUSION | 73 |
| Contributions | 83 |
| REFERENCES | 85 |
| APPENDIX | |
| A RIVING GROUPS AND SUB-GROUPS | 89 |
| B-1 QUESTIONNAIRE FOR RVERS | 91 |
| B-2 QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARK MANGER/STAFF | 93 |
| C INTERVIEWEE DATA..... | 95 |

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Steadily growing numbers of leisure and working RVers roam America's highways in recreational vehicles (RVs). Millions of families and individuals use recreational vehicles for weekend and vacation enjoyment ([Recreational Vehicle Industry Association] RVIA 2003a; Curtin 2001:1, 13). Many live in their recreational vehicle for months at a time. Additional millions, conservatively estimated from one million (Sommer 2003) to between two to three million (Counts and Counts 1997:xii), have no other home. They are full-timers who live as well as travel in their recreational vehicle.

In this paper, I define RVers as people who travel in, or travel with, drivable or towable vehicles designed and sold as recreational vehicles. RV travel is known as "RVing." Most RVers are non-conventionalists who often describe themselves as modern gypsies and nomads. RVers travel for work and for pleasure. They make home in places far and near. For most, the road itself is a place of pleasure (Counts and Counts 1997:126). In spite of their growing numbers and the unique lifestyle of full-time and long-term RVers, these populations remain sociologically understudied. I located only two relatively recent social scientific studies on RVers, both by

anthropologists Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts. The first is a 1992 article based on their pilot study; the second, a 1996 book-length ethnography on RVing seniors.

In both instances, Counts and Counts (1997; 1992) focus primarily on community-making among seniors engaged in “serious” RVing in the southwestern United States. In so doing, they join several earlier social scientists who studied retired full-time and long-term RVers, most of whom were wintering in the desert southwest. Especially in their later work, Counts and Counts (1997) focus on retired full-timers and long-termers who are members of one distinctive RV club – a focus that encompasses only a minimal portion of the nearly seven million RV-owning *households* identified during a 2001 survey by researchers at the University of Michigan (Curtin 2001:1).

RVing has changed in the last several decades. Apartment complexes, for instance, steadily replace once popular RV parks in and near southwestern cities (*Economist* 2002:28). Aging campgrounds in most national parks are unable to accommodate the size and energy needs of today’s behemoth recreational vehicles (*American Demographics* 1996:15). Moreover, the RVer population itself has changed significantly over time. Since September 11, for instance, increasing numbers of Americans have started to RV (Sasser 2002; Brock 2003; Niquette 2003; RVIA 2003a). Moreover, the fastest growing market for recreational vehicles consists of baby-boomers, especially former backpackers and hikers, between the ages of 35 and 50 (*Economist* 1999:32).

Do early sociological findings, then, apply to today's leisure RVers? Do they apply to transient worker RVers or to RVers in diverse geographic locations? Can Counts and Counts's (1997; 1992) findings of community-building be generalized to a population whose restless lifestyles more closely fits that of American individualists? This comparative case study of two distinct RV parks located in the southeastern United States makes significant strides toward answering such questions. It explores the meaning and practice of RVing as well as boundary work among the diversity of RVers. The research population includes adult RVers of different ages, gender, and marital status; full-time, long-term, and weekend/vacationing RVers; RVers who work by need and by choice.

Through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis, this research provides answers the following questions among the research population:

1. Do RVers form a distinct subcultural identity?
2. What is the nature and strength of boundaries generated by the RVing population?
3. How does the practice and meaning of RVing vary among RVers?
4. How do RVers practice individualism and/or community-building?

The answers to these questions add to the data gathered by Counts and Counts (1997; 1992) and others. At the same time, it adds to the existing sociological literature on transiency, culture, boundary work, and subcultural identity. In addition, as a

microcosmic segment of the broader individualistic American society, data gathered within the RVing subculture has implications for American society as a whole.

Significance of the Problem

My sociological interest in RVers began with an overnight stay in a North Carolina RV park in December in the mid-1990s. Recently returned to “camping,” my life partner and I expected our norm of memory – a park catering to vacationers and overnighers. Instead, we found a resident park with only a few sites set aside for overnighers. More shocking was the presence of people living in one-room cabins built for short summer stays. I have since realized that another norm exists, at least among some RVers and RV parks. Many private and chain RV parks now cater to the millions of full-timers and perhaps an even larger number of long-termers who might stay in one location for weeks, months, even years.

More people buy recreational vehicles each year. Almost seven million *households* owned recreational vehicles in 2001, a record high (Curtin 2001:1). This number is expected to increase fifteen percent by 2010 (RVIA 2003b). In spite of record high gasoline prices RV shipments in 2004 exceeded those in 2003 by fifteen percent (RVIA 2005). In addition, as many as three million or more RVers have no other home; they are full-timers (Counts and Counts 1997:xii). Altogether, according to some estimates, there are more than 9.3 million RVs in the United States, with an estimated 30 million RV enthusiasts (RVIA 2001).

RVers are a diverse lot. People of all ages, incomes, and work statuses RV. Weekend/vacationers, the largest category, are overwhelmingly leisure RVers.

Traditionally, full-timers were non-working retirees, as were most long-termers who live in their RVs for months at a time. In recent years, however, full-time and long-term RVing populations include pre-retirement individuals, couples, and even families with children. Many also work, some by necessity, others by choice. Like the hobos of old, some travel to work, while others, like tramps of yester-year, work to travel.

Appendix A lists RVers by category and type.

RVers can choose among many types and styles of recreational vehicles. Older and financially secure RVers tend to purchase “big rigs.” Motorized motorhomes bought new typically range in price from \$75,000 to \$500,000, while exclusive luxury coaches often cost over one million dollars. Towable trailers range in price from \$20,000 to \$60,000 plus the price of a high-powered tow vehicle. Younger RVers, especially families with children, might purchase less expensive fold-down trailers or, perhaps, a slide-in truck camper (Curtin 2001). RVers can choose from more than 16,000 public, private, and membership RV parks and campgrounds (RVIA 2003b). Many public and private parks offer low-cost, often short-stay, campgrounds open to tent campers as well as to recreational vehicles. Some undeveloped sites on federal lands in the American southwest, are available to RVers at little to no cost. At these sites, RVers “dry camp” without water, electric, or sewer hookups, a practice known as “boondocking.” At the other end of the spectrum are luxury motor home resorts that cater to the wealthy. Most membership RV parks and many privately owned parks tend to seek middle-class and upper-working class RVers. Such parks provide full hook-ups, usually including cable TV and telephone in addition to water, electric, and sewer

connections at each individual RV site. These parks provide a variety of amenities, including security and organized activities. Often, especially for long-term stays, these parks welcome only self-contained recreational vehicles that are no more ten years old.

As the number of RVers increase, so do industries that promote RVing and that serve RVers. These include, among others, dealerships, service centers, specialty stores, insurance companies, publishers of books, magazines, and how-to manuals, RV membership associations, RV shows, RV parks and campgrounds, and industry associations. The RV industry and RVers alike use the World Wide Web to promote their presence and their services. A “Google” search of the World Wide Web on the term “recreational vehicle” in September, 2005, for instance, located about 8,250,000 sites. This represents a 94 percent increase over the 529,000 sites located in February 2003.

The print media recognizes the growing physical and electronic RV presence in the United States. A small sampling includes feature articles in national newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal* (1997), *The New York Times* (2003; 2002; 2000; 1999), and *USA Today* (2001), large-city papers such as *The Washington Post* (2005), *The Fort Worth Business Press* (2005), *The Dallas Morning News* (2002), *San Jose Mercury News* (2001), *Tulsa World* (2005), and *Columbus Dispatch* (2003), and small-city papers such as *The Stuart News* (2002), *The Meridian Star* (2003), and *The Pensacola News Journal* (2000). Similar features can be found in periodicals as diverse as *American Demographics* (2003; 1996), *U. S. News & World Report* (2000), *New Statesman* (1998), *Money* (1996), *Dollar Sense* (1992), and *Good Housekeeping* (1998).

RVers, then, have an extensive physical, electronic, and print presence in the United States. Yet, as noted above, they remain sociological unknowns. This research adds to the scant social scientific knowledge of this mobile population that becomes more “worthy of description” (Counts and Counts 1997:xiv) as it grows. Notably, at least three categories of RVers fall outside the range of this case study. The first includes a large, seemingly unstudied, mainly stationary, often poor population living in recreational vehicles in lower-priced RV and mobile home parks or on private property. Next, at the other end of the economic spectrum, are the rich and famous who tend to park only in elite RV resorts. The third encompasses increasing numbers of urban workers who avoid long daily commutes to distant residences by residing in recreational vehicles on company property or in nearby RV parks during the work week. These populations, especially the underprivileged, are also worthy of description.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review begins with literature on transiency relevant to an analysis of nomadic RVers, followed by a deeper review of the scant social scientific research on RVing and RVers. It ends with a review of the noteworthy literature on boundary work and subcultural identity theories.

Restless Roamers

Americans, especially white American males, argued James Jasper (2000), are a restless bunch of individualists. We follow our dreams down the highway and over the next hill. Like our immigrant ancestors, many Americans seek real and perceived jobs and opportunities in far-flung locales. Others, like the tramps of yore, simply want to see new places and do new things. Yet other transients flee domestic and legal problems or feelings of entrapment. Jasper's restless Americans seek control over their lives through mobility (Jasper 2000:7), as do Counts and Counts's (1997) RVers. "The freedom RVers have to move – to be where they want, when they want, for as long as they want – is the basis of their ability to . . . control their own lives" (Counts and Counts 1997:137). RVers, then, do not "like to be told what to do" (Jasper 2000:181) – a state that Jasper (2000) defines as the essence of individualism.

Restlessness, argued Jasper (2000), “eats away at communal obligations,” (Jasper 2000:243). It erodes the transient’s sense of place, connection, or community. Nevertheless, some transient workers have no choice. Perhaps one-third of those who relocate for work are “pushed” to do so (Jasper 2000:91). Interestingly, Jasper (2000) failed to discuss hobos, those “hardy successor[s] to the pioneers” (Caplow 1940:732), or those specialists at “getting by” (Anderson 1998:66), the tramps.

Early Twentieth-century Transients: Hobos and Tramps

Distinct differences existed among the predecessors of today’s transient worker RVers – the estimated two million railroad-riding transients of the early twentieth century (Anderson 1998:99). Hobos were workers who followed a variety of usually unskilled jobs. Seasonal workers, in contrast, engaged in a particular kind of cyclic work, such as agriculture, fishing, or ice harvesting (Anderson 1998:161). Tramps, in yet another contrast, worked only as needed to see the country and enjoy new adventures. The boundaries between these transient groups were soft. “The seasonal worker may descend into the ranks of the hobos, and a hobo may sink to the level of the tramp” (Anderson 1998:67).

Unlike Jasper (2000) who warned that restlessness eats away at the familial and communal fabric of civilization, Theodore Caplow (1940) concluded the transiency had become a normal phase in the lives of many Americans. Based on the historical record and six months “on the road” in 1939, Caplow (1940) determined that the transient population is fluid. The average hobo, he found, stayed on the road no more than three years, with one and a half years being the norm (Caplow 1940:735). This rapid

turnover, he reasoned, produced a population of former transients that reached into the millions – a population who accepted transiency as an acceptable way for young men of moderate means to see the country. Caplow's (1940) findings, though informal and based on limited data, meshed with the statistics of his time. Thus, Caplow judged his sampling as "adequate" (Caplow 1940:731).

Differences among Retired Winter Campers in the American Southwest

In the winter of 1973-1974, Ted Born (1976) undertook a quantitative study to identify differences among elderly RVers winter camping in four distinct camping environments in the American southwest: private urban, private rural, public developed, and public undeveloped. He wanted to know if economic status and pre-retirement lifestyle, especially previous outdoor experience, influenced selection of a particular RV environment. Born (1976) used a printed questionnaire to collect data from 580 randomly selected RVers. His findings appear in two articles published decades ago (1976a, 1976b).

Born (1976) found that annual income, men's education, and the value of RV equipment all decline along the continuum beginning with relatively expensive private urban parks through free or low-fee public undeveloped RVing environments. Conversely, women's pre-retirement camping experience and percentage of year lived in an RV increase along this same continuum. Women's camping and RV experiences, though, failed to influence gender norms. Women RVers, observed Born (1976b), were responsible for cleaning, cooking, and doing the laundry.

Born (1976b) estimated that about 52 percent of his respondents were full-timers, many of whom had limited incomes. “Seeking to maintain their independence . . . they look to the public lands to help sustain them during their post-retirement years (Born 1976b:350). RVer, these quantitative data indicated, make choices and create boundaries based on economic status and gender. It fails, though, to provide insight into the life experiences that might suggest “why” these factors were meaningful.

Communities of Interest among RVing Retirees in the American Southwest

In 1984, almost ten years after Born’s research, sociologist Patrick Jobes (1984) added to the data on retired RVers in the southwestern United States. Jobes (1984) sought to use what he called the “new mobile lifestyles” of RVing seniors to refute at least some aspects of disengagement theory. Here I will address only those findings germane to this research.

Jobes’s (1984) main sources of data were 156 non-random, unstructured interviews, or more appropriately, conversations, of various lengths with travelers from across the country. All were conducted in developed campgrounds during RVing vacations in the Rocky Mountains and Pacific states. He supplemented his findings with data gathered through 517 voluntary, self-administered questionnaires completed during a gathering of relatively affluent RVers at the 1977 Wally Byam Caravan Club International (WBCCI) rally.

Jobes (1984) neither interviewed nor mentioned worker RVers or boondockers who RV without utilities on certain public or private lands. Rather, his full-time and seasonal interviewees were overwhelmingly white, economically secure retirees in RV

parks, with a disproportionately high number of single males. Jobes (1984) described full-timers that meet Jasper's (2000) criteria for individualists. They enjoyed a retirement "unfettered by conventional obligations" and the freedom "to do what they wish" (Jobes 1984:190); they were proud of their marginal societal status as nomadic travelers. Jobes (1984), like Born (1976b), reported conventional gender tasking among these individualists. Men maintained the recreational vehicles, while women were responsible for food preparation and planning social events. Many full-timers, especially those retired from the military, noted Jobes (1984), had few pre-retirement community commitments. Nevertheless, once committed to full-timing, most continued to RV until poor health forced them to resume more traditional lifestyles (Jobes 1984:188).

In spite of their individualistic tendencies, observed Jobes (1984), full-timers tended to form communities along lines of interest. RVing sportsmen, for example, might gather in one locale to hunt and in another to fish. Locations may change, noted Jobes (1984), but interaction networks among RVers "remain relatively stable," thereby providing "considerable stability in the lives of even continual travelers" (Jobes 1984:194; 191). Moreover, Jobes's full-timers rejected competitive and alienated interaction styles in favor of ones that were cooperative and supportive. Younger retirees, for instance, assisted aging RVers with repairs, travel, and even food preparation. These loosely linked communities, then, acted "to reinforce and protect" members (Jobes 1984:186).

Jobes (1984) described inclusionary and exclusionary behavior among full-timers, long-termers, and vacation/weekenders. Full-timers, for instance, camped and traveled in circuits that brought them in contact with friends throughout the year. As RVing activities and community members became central to their lives, these full-timers reduced contact with outsiders. Retired seasonal travelers often broke through those boundaries to develop relationships with full-timers. Their primary social ties, though, remained in their home communities, as did those of weekenders/vacationers. The social world of full-timers, in contrast, tended to become a subculture that included only family and other full-timers.

Jobes's (1984) work drew sharp criticism from Peter E. Murphy (1985), who questioned his theory, research design, definitions, and conceptual linkages (Murphy 1985:244). Murphy took special exception to Jobes's (1984) assertion that "the spatial dimension only questionably applies to retired mobile communities" (Murphy 1985:245). Rather, in Murphy's (1985) view, full-timers and seasonal RVers "develop definite spatial communities within private campgrounds" when they camped for a month or longer. Moreover, he argued, owners gave these long-term residents preferential rates and campsites, resulting in the formation of "their own mini-community within the campsite" (Murphy 1985:245).

Boondocking and Resort Parking among Retirees in the American Southwest

Retired RVers in the American Southwest "define themselves and are defined by others by where they park" (Counts and Counts 1992:169). So decided anthropologists Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts (1992) during their pilot

study of retired RVers in the American southwest. Using a research strategy that combined participant observation, 50 unrecorded interviews based on an interview guide, and quickly-abandoned questionnaires, these researchers described distinct differences between retired RVers in resort and membership parks and those who boondocked in public, mainly desert lands.

RVers in resort or membership parks, observed Counts and Counts (1992), were a homogeneous bunch who sought security and comfort in the company of other RVers of similar social and economic status. Boondockers branded them as conformists who traded a rules-driven life in suburbia for one in an RV park. Conversely, boondockers came from all social and economic strata. Nonconformists and individualistic, many lived in Long Term Visitor Areas (LTVA), undeveloped areas of the desert with no utilities and no rules. There, like Jasper's (2000) individualists, they sought room, privacy, and the ability to live life on their own terms. Interestingly, Jobes (1984) found that RVers in developed settings also believed themselves "unfettered" by rules and free "to do what they wish" (Jobes 1984:190).

In both their works, Counts and Counts (1997; 1992) described divisions among serious RVers. Like Jobes (1984), Counts and Counts recognized full-timers, mainly retirees, as a distinct RVing population. The unique experience of giving up home and possessions sets full-timers "apart, even from other RVers, and creates among them a sense of community" (Counts and Counts 1972:176). Serious full-time and long-term RVers shared experiences and values and thereby created a common culture. Most believed in equality and demanded reciprocity. They sought freedom and adventure,

but also the “old values” of friendship, sharing, and cooperation (Counts and Counts 1972:161). Both boondockers and RVers in private parks experienced feelings of coming home in certain parks and made friends who become “family.” Some RVers in both settings made choices based on economic frugality. Excepting the very affluent and very poor, noted Counts and Counts (1972), RVers from both settings occasionally crossed fluid boundaries to spend a night or two, or perhaps longer, in a resort or a boondocking area. Most could choose where they park and with whom they cluster and form community. In so doing, they also chose lifestyle and identity (Counts and Counts 1972:169). Counts and Counts (1972), though, only implied that economically challenged boondockers had fewer choices about where to park and with whom to cluster, had fewer lifestyle and identity choices, and that they endured exclusion from other boondockers as well as RV park residents.

Escapee RV Club

Counts and Counts’s (1992) primary research method during their 1990 pilot study had been one of observation during short stays in a variety of RV encampments. In 1993-94, they joined the Escapee RV Club. They became ‘real’ Skips, as members of the Escapee Club are known, and fully participated in club activities in Escapee parks. Their field visits ranged from ten days to two months per park. Kay and Joe Peterson founded the Escapee RV Club in 1978, a time when few RVers, especially young RVers with children, adopted the full-time RV lifestyle. Early members, a small group of young, working full-timers, banded together for support, companionship, and low-cost camping. They soon adopted an ethos of sharing and caring. Over time, the

friendliness and economic advantages of the Escapee Club attracted the diversified membership that greeted Dorothy and David Counts in the early 1990s. Over time, too, RVers increased in numbers and uniqueness until they made “up a subculture” (Counts and Counts 1997:xiii).

Counts and Counts’s (1997; 1992) field data included 105 interviews, seemingly nonrandom, collected during both research projects and 369 nonrandom questionnaires, mainly from the later effort. Ultimately, this data provided the basis for their book, *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America* first published in 1996. They completed most of their fieldwork among retirees in the American southwest. Only about 13 percent of the RVers in Counts and Counts’s (1997) database of serious full-time and long-term RVers were 55 or younger. Most RVers in all studied locations were between 60 and 65, white, and married. Day-to-day duties broke down along traditional gender lines, with men maintaining the rig and women occupying themselves with inside chores. Single RVers tended to feel excluded among the 85 to 88 percent of RVers who are married (Counts and Counts 1996:92, 82, 123).

RVing among retired seniors, Counts and Counts (1997) discovered, often follows a cycle of one to two years of travel, followed by periods of longer stays in one RV park, concluding in a decision to “hang up” their keys (Counts and Counts 1997:88/9, 234). Some senior RVers settled in resident RV parks; others returned to a conventional lifestyle. Notably, this discovery adds strength to Caplow’s (1940) conclusion that transiency had become a normal phase in the lives of many Americans.

Also notable is the fact that Counts and Counts's (1997; 1992) research was among retired, mainly married RVers while Caplow's (1940) transients were primarily young, single men in their twenties.

Counts and Counts (1997) observed squabbling "in every place we visited where people spend months" (Counts and Counts 1997:193). Such squabbles often caused some RVers to do what RVers do: namely, leave. For most, observed these researchers, shared values, interests, and activities, the common bonds and challenges of RVing, and the leisure to become acquainted resulted in friendships and in community. Sharing and caring, especially among groups such as the Escapees, fostered feelings of family. These bonds, implied Counts and Counts (1997), resulted in a mobile community among retired individualists committed to a lifestyle of freedom, independence, and adventure. Possibly, as Jobes (1984) concluded, shared values, interests, and activities result in individualistic communities of interest with like others.

Counts and Counts (1997; 1992), like Born (1976a, 1976b) and Jobes (1984) before them, focus on retired full-timers and long-termers in the American Southwest. Both Counts and Counts (1997; 1992) and Born (1976a, 1976b) include RVing seniors who boondock on government-owned, mainly desert, land found only in California and Arizona (Bureau of Land Management n.d.). Yet, like Jobes (1984), these researchers pay minimal attention to transient workers or to the largest group of RVers, weekend/vacationers of all ages, who RV in those same areas. This early research, then, omits a significant percentage of the RVing population.

Subcultural Theory

Subcultural groups vary from, or challenge, the cultural mainstream along one or more cultural dimensions. They tend to differ from the dominant culture in “such things as language, values, religion, diet, and style of life” (Yinger 1960:626). RVers, for instance, share interests, norms, rituals, and language unique to RVing. Nevertheless, like members of all subcultural groups, they participate in a variety of cultural doings in the broader culture. To provide an example, RVers tend to adopt mainstream norms of dress that would make them indistinguishable in a local grocery, theater, or similar social setting. A subculture, then, might be described as “a world within a world” (Gordon 1947:41). Nevertheless, mainstream society often labels such “worlds within worlds” as marginal cultures. Countercultures, in contrast, oppose the cultural mainstream. They are best identified by the sharply conflictual element that marks their interactions with the larger society (Yinger 1960).

Boundary Work Theory

Boundaries “define and separate people into classes, communities, working groups, genders, and many other classifications” (Epstein 1992:233). In the most basic sense, boundary work is a process of inclusion and exclusion, of categorizing people, along with objects, practices, and spaces, as desirable or undesirable (Lamont 1992). When RVers make choices of where to park and with whom to cluster, for instance, they also “draw the line that delimits an imagined community of ‘people like me’ who

share the same sacred values and with whom they are ready to share resources” (Lamont 2000:3; also Anderson 1991).

Stated differently, boundary work is an inclusive process of bonding with “people like us” and the exclusion of unlike others. Boundary lines, or symbolic boundaries, can be based on classification criteria as diverse as economic status, race, gender, religion, physical appearance, education, social position, honesty, employment, manners, interests, sports, hobbies – or the type of recreational vehicle one owns. Boundaries, claimed Michele Lamont (1992), can be: (1) moral (based on moral character); (2) socioeconomic (based on social position); or (3) cultural (based on “education, intelligence, manners, tastes, and command of high culture”) (Lamont 1992:4). Boundaries vary with each person’s life circumstances, including the cultural resources available to that person, and the structural conditions in which they live.

Symbolic boundaries spring from and maintain an individual’s identity. “Boundary work,” argued Lamont, “is an intrinsic part of the process of constituting the self,” a process that also leads to the formation of inclusive groups and communities ((Lamont 1992:11-12). These processes, then, are intertwined.

Subcultural Identity Theory

“The very idea of a ‘subculture,’” wrote Christian Smith (1998), “itself suggests a peculiar group identity” (Smith 1998:93). Drawing on a variety of sociological principals, Smith developed what he calls the “‘subcultural identity’ theory of religious strength” (Smith 1998:90). Subcultural groups such as evangelical Christians, he argued, use symbolic boundaries to separate themselves from outgroups. They develop

a collective subcultural identity, at least in part, by “knowing who they are not” (Smith 1998:92). In today’s pluralistic society, subcultures can be havens of “meaning and belonging,” even among a widespread membership (Smith 1998:118). Modern transportation and communication systems, argued Smith, allow the maintenance of “reference groups with many members spread far and wide through occasional interaction” (Smith 1998:106).

Leisure and sport lifestyles, claimed Belinda Wheaton (2000), are also sites of subcultural identity and community in today’s fragmented, postmodern society (Wheaton 2000:255; also see Beezer 1992). In the windsurfing subculture, argued Wheaton (2000), commitment, rather than equipment or style, is central to both participation and subcultural identity – to the point that core members only “partially” recognized less committed windsurfers as members of the subculture (Wheaton 2000:261). Like Counts and Counts’s (1992; 1997) serious RVers, Wheaton’s (2000) core windsurfers were deeply committed to their subcultural lifestyle. Windsurfing became their “whole way of life”; it centered work, leisure, and all else (Wheaton 2000:254, 256).

Summary

Boundary work and subcultural identity theories provide theoretical tools well suited to answering my research questions within a diversified and divided RVing subculture. Boundary work theory, for instance, illuminates the processes of inclusion and exclusion that create and maintain symbolic boundaries separating groups and subgroups such as those within the case study

population. Subcultural identity theory, in turn, sheds light on identity formation within such bounded subcultural groups. Wheaton's (2000) research within a leisure subculture and her findings of commitment as central to the creation and validation of subcultural identities is especially relevant to this work. As will be seen in the next chapter on methods, I combine conceptual categories from both boundary work and subcultural theories for analytical purposes.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

For this case study on subcultural identity and boundary work among RVers, I used triangulated data sources, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis, to gather data during three seasonal field trips to two distinctly different RV parks. I augment this site-specific data with participant-observation data gathered at a national RV rally sponsored Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA). Fieldwork began in May 2004 and ended in March 2005.

Within an exploratory framework, I studied the subcultural nature of the RVing lifestyle and the formation of subcultural identities. I looked for boundaries between RVers and the mainstream culture and for the creation and maintenance of symbolic boundaries among the diverse RVing populations in the both these parks. I looked for indications of community-building and individualism among RVers. I considered the selection of RV parks and explored differences in the meaning and practice of RVing among bounded groups. I also looked for evidence that findings, or concepts, from earlier research apply to my research population.

The case study method was well suited for these research tasks. The case study, wrote Howard Becker (1970), seeks

a comprehensive understanding of the group under study: who are its members? What are their stable and recurring modes of activity and interaction? How are they related to one another and how is the group related to the rest of the world” (Becker 1970:26 in Snow and Anderson 1991:153).

This method, then, provided the tools to learn about, and compare, the daily activities of RVers in the two selected parks. It revealed differences and commonalities among these RVers, the creation of boundaries through inclusion and exclusion, and the relationship of these RVers to each other and to the cultural mainstream. In addition, the “open-ended, emergent quality” of the case study method (Snow and Anderson 1991:162) also provided appropriate tools for seeking data among understudied populations, such as transient worker RVers and weekend/vacationers.

Like the case study method itself, the use of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed for emergent findings. Such open-endedness encouraged interviewees to draw on personal feelings, opinions, and experiences. Answers to these questions reflect the RVing practices of each interviewee and what RVing means to them. By asking all interviewees the same question, I ensured that each addressed the same issues, thereby providing a comparative database. Questions for both RVers and park personnel can be found as Appendix B-1 and B-2.

Participant observation added breadth to this research. It gave me an opportunity to observe the daily doings of the diversity of leisure RVers, working

RVer, and managers in each case study park. Participant observation also provided the possibility of determining how and if interviewees put their words into action.

Documentation about each park, in turn, added data about each park's fees, restrictions, rules, ways of advertising, and so forth. Here, participant observation allowed me to compare such documentation with the actuality found within these parks.

In sum, the proposed case study method was uniquely suited to answer my research questions on meanings, differences, boundaries, subcultural identity, and the practice of RVing among RVing groups and subgroups in the studied population. In addition, the use triangulated data sources strengthen the probability that my findings are accurate.

The Sites

Highway RV Park and Beach RV Park, the sites for this comparative case study, are both located in the greater Gulf Coast area. Highway RV Park's large, open sites provide a fairly uninhibited observational view across a large section of the park. From any one spot in Beach RV Park, in contrast, one's visual access is limited to a few sites.

Beach RV Park's location in a beach and tourist area makes it a destination park. Highway RV Park is a transient, overnight park located near a busy highway. These parks, then, tend to attract a wide variety of RVers. In spite of their differences, both parks are large and well established; both have sites with full-hook ups for RVs, swimming pools, playgrounds, community buildings with kitchens, cable TV, and wireless internet service; both charge fees at or above the area norm; both offer monthly rates. Highway RV Park offers two categories of sites, Standard and Executive, each

with a different fee scale. Limited in number and somewhat larger than Highway's already spacious sites, Executive sites include a phone line, a gas grill, and swing. .

Beach RV Park offers these two site categories plus an additional four, based primarily on size and distance from the beach. Surprisingly, the limited number of Executive sites are located at the end of the park most distant from the beach. Like many RV parks along the Gulf Coast, Beach RV Park designates some sites as "monthly" or long-term sites. These have their own electric meters, allowing monthly patrons to pay for electricity separately. Excepting those in Executive sites, RVers in both Beach and Highway RV Parks requesting phone service must pay for it individually. Anyone connecting to Linkspot wireless internet service also pays individually. In offering a variety of sites and amenities, both Highway and Beach RV Parks seek to attract, in the words of one workamper, or park worker, "a certain clientele."

At Beach especially, that clientele tends to request sites based on a variety of factors, of which cost is only one. Many vacationers, for instance, want to be close to the beach in spite of the higher cost. Other RVers prefer sites away from the high winds and constant comings and goings in that area. Yet others may request sites close to the recreation complex which includes the pool, playground, community building, and restrooms. Groups of RVers, such as extended families, often request sites close together.

To provide a larger comparative to the case study parks, I also attended an RV rally sponsored by the Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA) in March 2005. This

national rally attracted RVers in 5,127 motorhomes plus long lines of walk-in attendees to the fairgrounds in Perry, Georgia. Exhibits included 1,340 coaches, numerous outdoor vendor displays, and exhibits housed in four buildings. Rally doings included 125 seminars on topics ranging from transmissions, engines, and inverters to crafts and RV cooking to line dancing and RV travel opportunities. Free coffee and doughnuts warmed each chilly morning, while Thursday afternoon's Ice Cream Social proved to be one of the more popular events. Evening entertainment included big mainstream names such as Mac Frampton and the Hollywood Hills Orchestra, Pam Tillis, and the Oak Ridge Boys.

The Population

RVers at Highway and Beach RV Parks include three broad RVings groups and several subgroups. RVers themselves designate names for several groups; others are less clearly defined. The RVing community, for instance, identifies RVers who make an RV their only home as "full-timers." A second group, which I designate "long-termers" for research purposes, includes RVers who live in their RVs for months at a time. Park managers and staff, in contrast, call all RVers who stay a month or more "monthlies," while some RVers use the term "part-timers" to identify any group of RVers who are not full-timers. The term "snowbird" is widely used to describe RVers who spend their winters in the south. In using the classification "weekend/vacationers," for the third group, I follow the lead of RVers who call these overlapping groups weekenders or vacationers.

The full-timing and long-terming groups include three sub-groups:

1. Leisure full-timers who are usually non-working retirees.
2. Workampers who move from job to job in RV parks across the nation.
3. Transient workers who move from job to job with mainstream companies outside RV parks.

Of these three, leisure full-timer and transient workers are research terms, while the word workamper originated among RVers.

The research population includes two additional groups, park managers and a group I call utilitarian non-RVers. The park managers in this case study are former workampers or, in one case, transient workers. These full-time managers tend to spend several years in one park before rotating to a new one. In fact, transient managers in both parks changed during the course of my fieldwork. The second group, utilitarian non-RVers, uses recreational vehicles as stationary housing.

A variety of campers can also be found in both case study parks, though none are included in this study. When I began my fieldwork, both Beach and Highway RV Parks accepted tent campers. By the last field trip, however, only Highway RV Park welcomed tent campers. Both parks, but especially Beach RV Park, rent comfortable, well furnished camping cabins of several sizes. All have high occupancy rates. Especially in Highway RV Park, individuals will occasionally overnight camp in vehicles not designed for RVing.

This research focuses on RVers and RVing in Beach and Highway RV Parks, rather than campers. That is, I confined my research attention to people traveling and living, full-time, long-term, or occasionally, in motorized vehicles or towable units designed and sold as recreational vehicles.

The Interviewees

My goal of interviewing diverse types of RVers negated random sampling among this RVing clientele. Rather, I sought volunteers in each RVing group and subgroup through personal contact and flyers. This method generated twenty-four interviews (eleven in Highway RV Park and thirteen in Beach RV Park) with a broad range of volunteer RVers, skewed toward RVers over forty and single RVers. Fifteen interviews were with individuals and nine were with two people, for a total of thirty-three people. Twelve interviews with full-timing RVers included three leisure full-timers, three workampers, one snowbird, and two transient workers. Six interviews were with long-termers, including five snowbirds and one workamper. I also interviewed five weekend/vacationers, three managers, and one utilitarian non-RVer.

To provide a different breakdown, ten interviewees had RV'd less than six years, while seven had RV'd six through fifteen years. Another six boasted an RVing history that extended over fifteen years. One, a resident who had never RV'd, will not be included in the following statistics. Geographically, interviewees are from the southern United States, New England, and the Midwestern states.

Interviewees were also demographically diverse. They range in age from 41 to 70. Of the two minorities, one is White Hispanic and the other Native American.

Incomes among interviewees begin with the “less the \$20,000” range and end with the “greater than \$100,000” range. Among the fourteen RVers who interviewed individually, six are female and eight are male; eleven are married. A summary of data from my short, preliminary surveys can be found at Appendix C. At the FMCA rally, to provide a comparative sketch, RVers were overwhelmingly white, apparently married, and relatively affluent.

As a white, non-traditional returning student in her early senior years, I easily blended in with the RVing population at all three research sites. Nevertheless, as a long-time camper and RVer, I remained alert to the need to hear each interviewee’s voice rather than my personal interpretation of their words.

Data Analysis

Interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, sorted, and coded for analytical purposes, as were participant observations made throughout each day. I used a theory-driven framework to combine conceptual categories from boundary work theory with that of subcultural identity theory. I coded and sorted based on subcultural and boundary work indicators, but also on cultural markers identified by earlier researchers, such as individualism, community-building, and transiency. I analyzed the data for patterns, including those of commonality and difference, unity and disunity, between parks and across seasons, and among RVers and RVing groups. This analytical method provided rich data on the subcultural nature of the RVing lifestyle, the presence and

character of boundaries among RVers and between RVers and the mainstream culture, and the formation of subcultural identities – data that I discuss in the following chapters.

CHAPTER IV

THE RVING SUBCULTURE

Subcultural groups, as discussed in Chapter II, differ from the dominant culture along one or more cultural dimensions; they remain within the mainstream on others. In this chapter, I use a subcultural/mainstream lens to explore aspects of RVing that volunteer RVers at Highway and Beach RV Parks presented as central or important to the RVing lifestyle.

Subcultural Characteristics of the RVing Lifestyle

According to most interviewees, recreational vehicles provide the freedom to travel in a distinctive manner. In contrast to mainstream vehicles, the RV is more than a mode of travel; it is a “home” and a lifestyle. For some the RV is home for a weekend or vacation; others make it home for months at a time; yet others, in sharp contrast to the cultural norm, make it their only home. In the words of Grace, a workamper:

It’s a cool way to go. You can make it home, put all your stuff in it.

When you get to the campground you’ve got *your* things, you sleep in *your* bed. You can go *anywhere* you want to go. Um, prices are pretty good.

“This is better than a motel . . . dragging your luggage and stuff every night . . . having to go into strange places,” asserts full-timing workamper, Ann. Her husband, Sam, adds: “Wherever you go, you’re at home.”

RVers, then, shun impersonal, mainstream motels and condominiums for pleasures and conveniences of their homes on wheels. They also seek the sociability and feelings of community found in RV parks and among RVing groups. Sixteen out of thirty-one, or about 51 percent of the respondents who answered the question “What do you find most enjoyable about RVing?,” included “meeting people” among their replies. Abe, a vacationer who RVs in a pop-up trailer, enjoys “the meeting of people like yourself.” Workamper Sam likes “meeting the people, different people,” while manager Dave most enjoys “meeting all the people from around the world.”

In contrast to the world of strangers one typically finds in mainstream accommodations, RVers are “part of a community almost instantly, as soon as you drive in. People,” declares full-timer Jack, will “come up and start talking.” Several respondents, including workamper/manager Judy, describe the RVing environment and the RVing lifestyle as “different.” Full-timing workamper George sums it up. “It’s quite a different atmosphere . . . I don’t know what it is . . . you feel different.”

For some, that difference includes the freedom of hassle-free traveling with their pets. “They all have dogs, sometimes many dogs,” remarks full-timer Hank with a hearty laugh. “If they don’t have a dog, I guarantee you they have a cat or two.” Unsurprisingly, then, snowbird Traci most enjoys “being able to see the country and being able to take the dogs along with us,” while vacationers Janice and Donny began

RVing because “we’re retired and we’ve got the puppies.” When selecting an RV park, “number one” for these and other dog owners is, “Do they take dogs?”

In addition to traveling differently, RVers tend to travel more frequently and for longer periods than their more settled mainstream counterparts. Moreover, their travel is more spontaneous. Full-timing Raymond, for instance, likes “being able to just pick up and go if we want to go somewhere.” Others, including full-timing workamper George, value the freedom to leave when things are “not working out. All I have to do,” shares George, “is turn my key on, pull up my jacks, hook up my car, and drive out the gate.” Snowbird David likes “going out and discovering new places, new people. . . . I may have a little gypsy in me” he quips. Full-timer Jack speaks for the many RVers who experience “this sense of wanderlust. Wandering around,” he shares, “is my style.”

Being self contained gives RVers the freedom to engage in the markedly subcultural practice of “boondocking.” Some RVers, for instance, reduce their expenses and/or their time on the road by parking overnight in public places without water and electricity. Of these, many boondock in Flying J Travel Centers and Walmart parking lots. Workamper George, to provide a specific example, has been stopping for naps at state rest areas “for, well probably 35 years. . . . I’ve never had a security problem. Never.” After a “very bad experience” overnighing in a Walmart parking lot, though, snowbirds Joe and Denise “prefer a campground.” Only one interviewee at Beach and Highway RV Parks mentioned long-term desert boondocking of the type that Counts and Counts (1972) describe. Even then, it was only a brief episode. Several

interviewees, though, attend RV rallies where they might dry camp in fields or parking lots.

“A lot of people,” shares full-timing snowbird Frances, “just go from rally to rally to rally.” At the big national rallies, I discovered at the Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA) rally in March 2005, they join thousands of other RVers in a total RVing environment. Based on the high percentage of large, expensive motorcoaches dry camped at the FMCA rally, it would seem that most attendees were relatively affluent. Social class, however, was hidden by the uniform of the week – jeans, often worn with an RV club shirt. Similarly, there was no way to visually ascertain which RVers were full-timers, long-termers, vacationers, or even interested non-RVers.

The predominance of white RVers, broken only by a scattering of African Americans, was more obvious. Though I saw a few RVers who appeared Asian or Hispanic in the case study parks, I observed none at the rally. Most attendees were couples of retirement age and, in contrast to the young retirees at Beach and Highway RV Parks, a sizable number were older seniors. Many of these wore handicapped ribbons that gave them access to door-to-door transportation to rally events in specially designated golf carts.

The fairgrounds, the jostling crowds, the noise, the displays, the many food booths, and even the smells in the cattle barns evoked feelings of being at a fair. Rallies, though, differ from mainstream fairs along several dimensions. For one thing, interested RVers were able to park their motorhomes in designated areas within the fairgrounds. For another, rallies combine sociality and fun with opportunities for

attendees to learn and grow as RVers through seminars and vendor displays. Technical seminars, I found, filled up quickly. A seminar on generators, for instance, had standing room only, while long lines waited for a spot in an already packed seminar on invertors. The same was true of food preparation seminars. A decidedly smaller group enjoyed line dancing and, later, spectacular slides of Copper Canyon in Mexico shown during a seminar promoting RV tours. Yet, many RVers are drawn to such tours.

Vacationers Kathryn and Don at Beach RV Park, for example, anticipate an RV tour that combines subcultural travel and mainstream sightseeing. Next summer, they exclaim, “we’re going to Calgary . . . for nine days,” with the RV tour group, Tracks to Adventure. RVing, shares Kathryn, allows her and her husband to “do things we would never have done.”

In sum, interviewees reveal a lifestyle that differs from the cultural norm in “values . . . and style of life” (Yinger 1960:626). The lifestyle they describe centers on self-contained travel, freedom, relaxation, and sociability. Rather than the mainstream mode of leaving home behind when traveling, RVers take their home and belongings with them. They shun strange motels and impersonal others in favor of community and sociability within RV parks. Most of the RVers I interviewed travel more extensively than the average vacationer; several described themselves as gypsies and wanderers. Some engage in the markedly subcultural practice of boondocking, or parking in places without utilities.

Two additional subcultural practices, long-terming and full-timing, proved popular among the interviewees in this case study. Both these groups tend to roam.

Moving even further from mainstream norms, full-timers make the recreational vehicle their only home; they have no permanent “brick and mortar” homes. They treasure the freedom to live and wander where and as they please. Nevertheless, observes manager Dave, vacationers practice “the same lifestyle” as full-timers and long-termers. All RVers, he claims, “want the peace, the quiet, and chance for relaxation. It’s just basically, you have folks that can enjoy it for two weeks and folks who can enjoy it for six months or longer.”

Mainstream Aspects of the RVing Lifestyle

Though RVers engage in a subcultural lifestyle, they also draw from and participate in the mainstream culture. The recreational vehicle itself, observes snowbird David, “has just evolved as, you know, people’s homes.” Both have increased in size and amenities. “You can get an RV that’s, that’s just like home,” comments full-timer Raymond, “. . . on a more compact scale and a lot less hassle.” Unsurprisingly, then, full-timer Jack thinks “an RV today is more comparable to a condo in many ways. . . . It doesn’t look like a motorhome when you go inside.” In fact, full-time and long-term RVers often spend day-to-day time in a manner similar to the societal norm. Snowbird John enjoys “living somewhat like we do at home,” while vacationer Kathryn declares, “I have all the luxuries of home.”

Several respondents, though, noted the downside of these changes – a downside that can also be attributed to “normal” living among today’s RVers. Kate and others, for instance, bemoan the loss of camping times when “people would be outside by the fire.” Now, she continues, “they get these fancy campers and everybody stays inside

and just watches TV.” Snowbird Dennis laments that it has become “harder to get to know people.” His wife, Rita, adds, “They go inside and you never see them.”

Nevertheless, Kate would not “like to go back to the old camping.” Modern RVing, agrees snowbird David with laughter, is about as much “‘roughing it’ as we want to do at our age.”

RVers, especially married RVers, tend to adopt mainstream, or traditional, gender norms. Their gender practices vary little from those described by Born in 1976 and Jobs in 1984. Vacationer Dan sums it up. “I handle the outside, she handles the inside.” The one exception was a stay-at-home spouse of a transient worker who “works a lot of hours.” Betty and her daughter Joan do “just about everything that needs to be done.” Nevertheless, most couples share certain tasks and almost all share trip planning. Vacationer Abe’s wife, to provide one example, “will always hook up the water and electricity. . . . I’ll do more of the physical, really physical labor . . . and I’ll clean it when we get through.” Single RVers, like single mainstreamers, tend to be less traditional. Some, observes workamper Grace, are full-timing women “who are not necessarily macho women. I mean little old ladies that you wouldn’t even think about being by themselves.”

Like people in general society, then, RVers are diverse lot. “People,” observes manger Judy, “have their own quirks. . . . It’s the same in RVing as in anything else.” The personal tendency to be a joiner or a loner provides an example. Some RVers “seem to have been loners all of their life” comments snowbird George. A few snowbirds, for instance, “don’t even come to the dinners.” Others, though, “participate

in all the games . . . [and] the dinners.” Most, it seems, quickly accept the many invitations to participate; some, like vacationers Janice and Donny, don’t like to “mix with a whole lot of people you don’t know.”

Loners and joiners alike, though, follow the American traditions of early explorers and a long line of adventurers and travelers. The spirit of a “true RVer,” proclaims workamper Ann “is the spirit of exploring our wonderful country. . . . They’re adventurous and they’re good people.” RVers, then, seem to have inherited wanderlust as part of their American heritage. Manager Tami, for instance, believes that RVers have the “inborn gene of a rolling stone wanting to see what’s on the other side of the fence.” Such restlessness and the tendency “to just pick up and go” in adverse circumstances fit Jasper’s (2000) profile of yet another American type – the individualist.

In spite of their individualistic tendencies, RVers are part of the American consumer society. RVers, for instance, tend to upgrade. RVers “who travel all the time,” proclaims manager Judy, “want bigger and better and bigger and better. . . . And, I, for one, am guilty.” Vacationers display the same tendencies. Vacationer Dan and his wife, for example, began RVing in a small trailer. Later, shares Dan, they “kind of upgraded a little [to a] Sunnybrook with the slide-out. And we’re looking forward to upgrading again soon. Whenever we can, you know.”

A surprising number of interviewees mentioned two very mainstream aspects of RVing: manufacturing and the business side of RV parks. Vacationer Don, for instance, realizes that the changes in RVs have been “tremendous . . . the technique, the

knowledge. . . . This is big, big business.” Owning an RV park, too, is a “competitive business,” according to workamper Sam. If an owner offers “more accommodations [and] hospitality,” he explains, “more people are going to come.”

Unsurprisingly, then, there has been a “tremendous burst of private parks with a lot of amenities.” In addition to owning Highway and Beach RV Parks, “Bill and his wife, Ruth, own several parks,” shares full-timer Hank. “But they are a private, entrepreneur-type operation. I mean, he comes down here. I mean, I *know* him. I know his wife.” Moreover, declares Hank, Beach RV Park, “right now probably has the best management team ever.” Manager Judy’s job, in turn, is “really a lot of fun.” Managing an RV park, she asserts, is “like running a small city in a busy time. . . . We do just about everything.”

In spite of a strong individualist streak, many RVers recognize that they, like mainstream Americans, are consumers in the large and competitive world of business. RV manufacturers and RV parks, alike, compete for their business. RV manufacturers, like home designers, continually enlarge and modernize recreational vehicles. “Even entry level,” claims full-timer Jack, “is luxurious compared, you know, to what they used to build.” RV parks, in turn, observes vacationer Abe, “are making larger facilities for the larger RVs. The facilities are better.”

In sum, interviewees in Highway and Beach RV Parks describe a lifestyle that converges with the mainstream along some cultural dimensions and diverges from it along others – a lifestyle that theorists such as J. Milton Yinger (1960) would define as subcultural. Modern RVs, for instance, come equipped with modern conveniences that

allow RVers to maintain a day-to-day lifestyle similar to that at “home.” On the road, nomadic RVers tend to follow the American tradition of early explorers and adventurers. They do so, though, in the comfort of their “homes on wheels.”

CHAPTER V

BOUNDARY WORK

RVers, as discussed in Chapter IV, share a collective, subcultural lifestyle. They value travel, freedom, relaxation, and sociability. They treasure their homes on wheels and a lifestyle of mobility and adventure. Nevertheless, heterogeneous groups and subgroups make up the RVing population in both Highway and Beach RV Parks – groups for whom RVing mean different things; groups who practice RVing differently; groups who draw symbolic boundaries, often in subtle ways, between themselves and others. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which diverse RVers in Beach and Highway RV Parks practice RVing and how they practice boundary work. Using the work of boundary work and subcultural identity theorists discussed earlier, I look at how they form distinct RV groups through processes of inclusion and exclusion and how they form subcultural identities within those groups.

Boundary Work at the RV Park Level

Symbolic boundaries, argues Michele Lamont (1992), can have moral, socioeconomic, or cultural basis. RVers, as we will see, incorporate all three in their boundary work. RVers, for instance, often practice socioeconomic boundary work when selecting RV parks. Snowbird Rita places RV parks within a “class system.”

There are parks, she argues, “for super-duper rich people” and parks for people “who don’t have any money at all.” Beach RV Park, in her evaluation, offers “middle-class camping.”

Manager Mark, in contrast, offers a cultural – or in this case, subcultural – classification based on the recreational vehicle itself. He and his wife, for instance, own a 1995 motorhome that “looks like brand new.” Nevertheless, their rig “just didn’t fit” among the “more expensive rigs” in some “upper class” RV resorts they visited. “A lot of people don’t realize,” states Mark, that “there are RV parks where you go and there are RV parks where you *don’t* go.” Mark’s comments reveal class boundaries among RV parks and among the RVers within them. Highway RV Park, continues Mark, is neither an RV resort nor a rustic campground. Rather, “it has a lot of the amenities of a resort . . . [and it is] rustic like a campground.

Like RV resorts, though, Highway and Beach RV Parks impose boundaries of exclusivity, though to a lesser degree. Neither park, for instance, accepts recreational vehicles over ten years old on a monthly basis. Moreover, according to several interviewees, both are “a little more expensive.” Unsurprisingly, then, manager Tami doesn’t “see a lot of lower income . . . not here.” Rather, this financial boundary attracts at least some RVers who “like to go to RV parks that cost a little money,” thereby keeping “the rif raf out.” Selecting a park with higher fees also guards against entering a bottom-line park.

Snowbirds Rita and Dennis, for instance, happened into a park in which about twenty people lived in “shacks of RVs, you know, falling apart. Dirty, rusty, moldy.”

Such low end parks perpetuate the image of “trailer trash” – an image that Beach and Highway RV Parks work to avoid. To that end, these case study parks use the exclusionary boundaries, such as higher fees and RV age limits mentioned above, to deter low-income RVers in old RVs. Rather, these parks seek to attract a “higher caliber of people.” They strive to maintain their status as middle-class parks and to ensure continued high ratings by “the best” RV park directories.

RVers seldom “happen” into Beach RV Park. Rather, people from across the United States and even “Japan and France and Sweden and Germany and Denmark – just about everywhere” learn of it through resources such as RV park directories, the internet, and word of mouth. Vacationers typically stay “anywhere from a week to two weeks,” while snowbirds and other long-termers settle in for periods ranging from one to six months, or even longer.

Highway RV Park, in contrast, is “an overnight park. . . . We don’t have many destination people,” shares manager Mark. “It’s the signs on the highway” that attract overnight RVers to this park and “our biggest complaint is ‘It is too expensive.’” Nevertheless, diverse types of RVers select both parks. Many transient workers, people with personal business, and weekenders tend to choose Highway RV Park. According to workamper Sam, “you’ve got your vacationers, you’ve got your ‘true RVers’ who just love to travel and look at the scenery, and you have your RV workers.” And, based on my observations, you have your utilitarian non-RVers who use recreational vehicles as temporary, stationary housing.

Notably, management and workampers at both Highway and Beach RV Parks position members of certain RV groups together – to the extent that space, price, and RVer requests allow. This practice tends to create boundaries that “define and separate people” (Epstein 1992:233) and to promote mini-communities within each park. Locating all workampers in one area, for instance, results in a spatially oriented “little community” of workampers. “They are all workampers except for me,” remarks full-timer Hank, who is also parked in the workamper section. “We visit, visit back and forth and all that.” Similarly, both Beach and Highway RV Parks tend to park “monthlies” in one area and overnights and short-term transients in another. New arrivals, then, often share commonalities with their neighbors, the very people with whom they are most likely to interact and, possibly, form communities of interest.

Commitment, Identity, and Boundary Work among Full-timing RVers

In spite of having RV'd for ten years, only this spring did vacationer Terri meet an RVer whom she could identify as a full-timer. Full-timers, she concluded are “a different form of RVer.” Full-timers agree. “There’s a difference in somebody that has a home they have to go to,” explains manager Judy, “and somebody who has their home with them and they are enjoying themselves. There’s a big difference.” Giving up home and possessions, in the words of Counts and Counts (1992), sets full-timers “apart, even from other RVers” (Counts and Counts 1992: 176).

Full-time RVers leave mainstream lives at different ages and for different reasons. Stress-related health problems, for instance, prompted managers Judy and Dave, workamper Ann, and full-timer Hank to retire from high-stress mainstream jobs

at an early age. These young retirees chose a slower-paced, “carefree” lifestyle in the RVing subculture. Many, perhaps most, full-timers, though, wait until they reach full retirement age to follow their dreams of full-time travel and adventure. Manager Tami speaks for the many RVers who have “always wanted to do this.” Tami and her husband “saved our whole working life to buy this rig so we could retire and take off.” Notably, some interviewees began RVing only after they retired, while others have a long RVing history.

Full-timing, explains Hank, “replaces *regular living*.” “People like us,” clarifies Judy, no longer “live in the ‘real’ world.” That withdrawal from the “real” world makes the full-timing lifestyle more distant from mainstream culture than that of other RVers. Like Belinda Wheaton’s (2000) subcultural windsurfers discussed earlier, most full-timers give total commitment to the RVing lifestyle and they draw their identity from the RVing subculture. In terms of this research, such full-timers erect symbolic boundaries based on their level of commitment – boundaries that separate them from RVing “others” as well as from the mainstream culture.

Full-timers, especially full-timing workampers, often imply that they are “true” or “real” RVers. That is, they adopt lifestyle characteristics that they consider central, even critical, among RVers – characteristics that become signs of their commitment to the RVing lifestyle. At the same time, these characteristics distinguish “true” RVers, such as themselves, from uncommitted “others” who simply use recreational vehicles for travel. “Real” RVers, workamper George told me, are “the ones that are dedicated” to the RVing lifestyle. Notably, these roaming individualists gain recognition as “true”

RVers through their respect for other RVers, their compliance with park rules, and their adoption of the RVing norms of equality and sociality. “True” RVers are not “boisterous and nobody tries to tell you how important they are.” Rather, explains workamper George, “true” RVers seek “freedom and enjoyment of life. They love the community. They enjoy life . . . like to mingle with other folks . . . [and] they like to travel.” “True” RVers, declares Sam, are “looking for the relaxation of it . . . an easier life.” For workamper Ann, “true” RVers have “the spirit of exploring our wonderful nation and the liberty to do so. They are adventurous and they are good people.” Though some full-timers claim, at least implicitly, to be the only “true” RVers, manager Dave believes that most RVers “share the same life-style.”

Full-time and long-term RVers label other RVers by their recreational vehicles and they measure commitment by the type and cost of those RVs. At the same time, they tend to measure economic worth and, perhaps, the class of the RVer. “You’re a fifth-wheeler, a travel trailer, or an RVer, you know. And there’s a *major* difference” shares manager Judy. Because pull-behind trailers are less expensive, she explained, new or less committed RVers frequently become travel trailer people. Other RVers implied that less affluent RVers also select travel trailers. Usually, fifth-wheelers are younger, committed RVers who opt for the additional room and storage space provided by these trailer-type recreational vehicles that tow on a connecting apparatus mounted in the bed of a pickup truck. Seniors often move up to motorhomes for their luxury and ease of set up. At that point, they are simply called RVers. Motorhomes are also the most expensive. Ownership, then, indicates affluence as well as commitment.

“There’s no way you can justify camping for that much money” argue snowbird Dennis and others. “I think it has to be that it’s something you love to do, you like to do.” Or, in leisure full-timer Hank’s words, “Anybody who pulls in in a Class A [motorhome] will have an investment in their RV lifestyle, whether it’s full-time, or whatever, leisure time.” In other words, as manager Dave implies, long-termers and vacationers can also be “true” RVers committed to the RVing lifestyle.

Differences and Boundary Work among Full-timing Sub-groups

Full-timing RVers in Beach and Highway RV Parks, as elsewhere, include three sub-groups – leisure full timers, workampers, and transient workers. Commitment to the RVing lifestyle unites most full-timers. Yet, as we will see, the meaning of RVing differs among them and they practice RVing in divergent ways. Some continue to work, for instance, while others are leisure RVers.

Leisure Full-timers

Traditionally, in my RVing experience, one thinks of leisure RVers when one thinks of full-timers. Like the three interviewees in this case study, leisure full-timers are usually retirees with an income sufficient support their chosen lifestyle. Notably, one leisure full-timer reported an income greater than \$100,000, while a second had adequate assets to provide an income that is “what I deem it to be.” High retirement incomes and education levels of 16 to 20 years place these three interviewees solidly within the middle-class. Two, who are single, began full-timing at ages 55 and 56. The third is married and began full-timing in his early sixties. (Summary statistics for all

sub-groups can be found at Appendix C.) Only the third full-timing interviewee resembles Counts and Counts's (1997) research population who were, on average, retired full-timers "ages 60 to 65 and married" (Counts and Counts 1997:92). Notably, each of these three interviewees also differ in the ways they RV.

Beach RV Park has been leisure full-timer Hank's home park for several years. He enjoys his location in the workamper section where "we all know each other . . . [and] visit back and forth." Such is not the case with leisure full-timers, Jack and Raymond, in Highway RV Park. Jack has been wintering in Highway RV Park, while personal business kept Raymond and his wife in the park for several months. In spite of having been in this same park for months, there were no verbal or visual indications that these full-timers sought out the other's company – or even knew each other. Nor did either of these interviewees mention any acquaintanceships with full-timing workampers.

Rather, Jack and Raymond enjoyed fleeting relationships with a wide variety of people who "come and go" in the undemanding community of transient RVers. Jack, for instance, defines himself as a loner who most enjoys "short-term friends." Raymond also enjoys the casual friendliness found among roaming RVers. In terms of boundary work, neither of these full-timers displays a need to bond with other full-timers "like themselves." Rather, both bridge fluid boundaries to interact with a diversity of RVers. Raymond believes that RVing "usually brings out the nicer side of people." "Some," he notes, will "tell you their life stories." Raymond also talked about a relatively new friendship with long-terming couple he and his wife met in New

England – a couple who will soon be full-timing and with whom they will “probably travel for a couple years.”

Jack “travels mostly in the summer [and is] pretty stationary in the fall and the winter and the spring.” Hank, who is “laying back a little while,” mainly takes short trips. Raymond and his wife are roamers. “There are quite a few like us who basically just ramble,” explains full-timer Raymond. The largest sub-group of full-timers, in his experience, is the “north-south snowbird type.” The leisure to ramble, opines workamper Barb, separates, or comprises a symbolic boundary, between full-timers and workampers. “They don’t have any obligations,” she says, “and they are free to move.”

Workampers

Workampers “may stay here for three months and then go to South Dakota for three months,” shares Judy. It gives them a way “to see the rest of the country.” Workamping notes long-terming Grace, “is *just* enough to keep you busy, yet not tie up all your time.” Workamping couples at Highway RV Park, for example, “work twenty hours, between the two of them, a week for their free RV site and hookups. Any time over that, they are paid \$6.00 a hour.” Workamping, comments manager Tami, “is a job for fun . . . you couldn’t live off of this.”

Six workampers volunteered for interviews, two individually and four as couples. All are either “semi-retired” or young retirees. One long-terms and five are full-timers; five are married and one single. Though I discuss only the six workampers in this section, I am adding one full-time snowbird who workamps and three married managerial interviewees here for statistical purposes. Seven out of ten workamping and

managerial interviewees are in their fifties; one is 63. The remaining two, at 68 and 70, tend to be old for workampers. In workamper Lem's experience, to provide a benchmark, the typical workamper age is about 60.

With five out of six workamping interviewees reporting incomes of \$30,000 or less annually, workampers, as a group, have the lowest incomes among the RVing groups and sub-groups in this case study. Managers claim only slightly higher incomes. These incomes seem to reflect reduced retirement incomes due to early retirements rather than levels of education or earning potential. While one interviewee has only a ninth-grade education, six of ten workampers and managers report fourteen to eighteen year of education. Based on education and income potential, then, workamping and managerial interviewees belong to both the middle- and working-classes. Notably workampers stretch their income by working for their RV site, utilities, and when possible, extra income. As full-time RVers, they also avoid the cost of maintaining a mainstream home.

In contrast to workamping interviewees, six of the eight weekend/vacationers interviewed earned over \$60,000 a year. Little wonder, then, that workampers tend to erect symbolic boundaries between themselves and the liberal sprinkling of RVing "others" who brag about their "\$200,000 rigs," who both complain and demand service, who think they're suppose to be treated special, or who break park rules. Mainly though, shares workamper Sam, "you meet some nice people coming in through here." The majority are what Sam calls "'down-to-earth'" people . . . your blue-collar people

. . . [who] socialize more than, than people that dress up.” RVerS such as Sam perform boundary work based on both moral and class, or cultural, factors. Other RVerS, such as snowbirds Rita and Dennis, join Sam in class-based boundary work. Like working-class Sam, these middle-class RVerS identify the majority of RVerS in Beach and Highway RV Parks as a blue-collar population.

In spite of diverse cultural backgrounds, workampers enjoy the unity that comes from leaving their pasts behind and sharing a “fascinating” lifestyle of travel, freedom, and work. Barb, though, was surprised to find that many workampers are formerly military transients. In fact, she shared, six of eight workampers in one park “had some military background.” Less surprising, perhaps, is that fact that four workamping interviewees said that they had had little time for friendships during their years as mainstream workers. Now, like Grace, most have many RVing “friends from here to California to Canada to Alaska to . . . just everywhere.”

Workampers share a “camaraderie” not found “among part-timers,” in spite of moving to new RV parks every three to six months. Especially at Highway RV Park, declares Barb, “there’s just a cliquy, wonderful camaraderie.” Among workampers, explains Grace, “everybody is the same and everybody does the same jobs.” Nevertheless, workampers reach across the boundary-building potential of such solidarity to savor the joy of “meeting people” and “helping” them, at least to a limited degree. During the winter at Highway RV Park, for instance, only a “select few” outsiders were invited to workamper-initiated functions. As worker spouse Betty

observes, workampers “mingle more together . . . [perhaps] because they work together.”

In short, workampers frequently form exclusive “mini-communities” similar to those Murphy (1985) describes. Such communities, though, are fluid and short-term. First and foremost, workampers are transient RVers. Like full-timer Jack, they enjoy “just like moving on.” Nevertheless, shares Barb “one of the hardest parts [is] leaving friends.” Unsurprisingly, then, workampers join other RVers who keep in touch with a few special friends. George, for instance, e-mails “a couple he worked with last year . . . about once a month.” Workampers might also arrange their travel schedules to allow meetings with workamping and other RVing friends. Other times, workampers may simply run into each other at different parks.

Transient Workers

In contrast to workampers who typically work twenty hours and have “the rest of the week to do whatever they want to do,” many, but not all, transient workers are full-time workers as well as full-time RVers. “They’re worrying about their paycheck,” explains workamper Barb, “and we’re not.” Unlike the core full-timers in this case study and Wheaton’s (2000) core windsurfers, many transient workers seem to self-identify as workers first and, possibly, RVers second. In worker Miguel’s words, “I’m here just working . . . going to work, coming home; going to work, coming home.” Miguel full-times now, but he plans to have “a home base to come home to” when he can afford to maintain both a home and an RV. Miguel is one of the transient workers who, like the non-RVers we will meet later, use their recreational vehicle for utilitarian

purposes. It allows him to go where his job sends him and to take his family with him. Moreover, living in a recreational vehicle eliminates the expense of a mainstream home. In spite of being a full-timer, Miguel shows minimal commitment to the RVing subculture. Lifestyle and class differences, low levels of commitment to RVing, and high commitment to mainstream employment separate workers like Miguel from the general RVing population.

In addition to Miguel, transient worker spouse Betty volunteered for an interview. Miguel is 42, while Betty is 56. One reports an annual household income of \$20,000 to \$30,000; the other \$50,000 to \$60,000. Miguel, one of two minority interviewees, travels with his wife. Betty's family includes a working husband and a daughter whom she home schools. Betty's husband, like Miguel, is a blue-collar worker in the construction field. Like Miguel, too, Betty's family full-times in a travel trailer. Betty, a former camper who has "never been able to . . . travel much," enjoys "visiting different places . . . and meeting different people." Betty and her family represent those transient workers who embrace the RVing lifestyle while continuing to identify as mainstream workers.

We "have our own family style" of RVing, explains Betty. "We go do the pool table thing. Or we play pinball. And you don't find a lot of people that do those types of things, you know." Mainly, though, Betty's boundary work rests on lifestyle differences between her family and other RVers in the park. She and her husband, explains Betty, are family people who "pretty much stay to ourselves" – at least among the diverse population at Highway RV Park.

It was a different story at their last RV park, which was “a work campground pretty much.” There, construction workers and spouses who “made up most of the park” were like “one big, happy family” – a family that “kind of just took us in.” Park staff and workers engaged in boundary work that was spatial as well as social. Management parked workers in “one area,” explains Betty. Worker families, in turn, “mingle together” as a mini-community rather than with the overnights and older people. For them, this RV park was “home.”

Company logos, bucket trucks, tool boxes, and such make most construction workers easily identifiable. Other transient workers, such as the engineers, insurance adjusters, salespeople, and similar workers at Beach and Highway RV Parks tend to blend with the general park population. At least in part, their professional, middle-class backgrounds make this possible. Leisure full-timer Raymond believes construction workers are the primary worker population in RV parks. “In some places,” observes Raymond, “two-thirds of the park were people working. . . . They’re pretty much everywhere.” Most, he notes, are people “who travel full-time with their partner and/or spouse or family. . . . A lot of [them] home school, too.”

Unlike “polite . . . people like us,” shares Raymond, those “people who work . . . often squabble and get mad and slam a door or something.” They also “tend to be a little clannish.” Here class-based boundaries come to the fore. Middle-class RVers are “polite”; blue-collar RVers “squabble.” Notably, Miguel mentioned those same boundary-building differences. RVers at Highway RV Park, in his words, “are older people . . . [who] seem real polite. . . . They’re not rowdy type people [and] they seem

more family oriented.” Class differences, then, join levels of commitment and divergent RVing practices as sources of a deep cleavage between “true” RVers like Raymond and at least some working “others.” Nevertheless, Raymond enjoys short visits with transient workers and even tenters, provided they are “friendly.”

Unlike these workers who travel in order to work, many RVing transients work in order to travel. The latter are committed to the RV lifestyle; many exhibit the characteristics of “true” RVers. Prior to going into park management, for example, Tami and her husband “just traveled around for about two and a half years.” This couple “had wanted to travel” for years. After their last child left home, explains Tami, they “sold everything, bought the RV, and I began travel nursing. . . . It was really fun!” Other committed RVers work at RV shows, craft fairs, and flea markets. “We see people with big motorhomes pulling huge trailers behind them,” declares workamper Grace. “What they’re doing is going to shows.” In addition, she notes, “a lot of people that are full-timing now . . . work off their computers.” These transient workers, like workampers, are RVing travelers first and workers second.

Commitment, Identity and Boundary Work among Long-terming Snowbirds

RVing snowbirds in Beach and Highway RV Parks who volunteered for interviews include nine long-termers (four couples and one individual interviewee) and one full-timer. The latter, like workampers, is working in the park in exchange for a site and utilities. This interviewee and her husband, however, are snowbirds who were hired as seasonal workers outside the workamper system. Frances’s input as a snowbird

is included with that of long-terming snowbirds in this section. Her statistical data, though, appears with the data for other full-timing workampers.

Rather than staying a month or the winter, most snowbirds simply pass through Highway RV Park on their way further south. Using data provided by workampers in the park office and personal observation, I estimate that twenty or more mainly senior, presumably snowbird, travelers checked into Highway RV Park each day during my winter field trip. Most stayed only one night. “A lot of them [snowbirds] come here and stay for a month,” shared Manger Tami, but “we don’t have any snowbird monthlies right now.” Rather, as a result of several hurricanes hitting the Gulf Coast in 2004, a disproportionate number of non-RVing transient workers were long-terming in the park.

At Beach RV Park, in contrast “most . . . snowbirds stay a minimum of three months [to] six months.” Seven of nine interviewees were spending the winter in Beach RV Park; eight of nine were married. Snowbird interviewees ranged in age from 49 to 67. The average age, at 60, was in line with that of workampers. Incomes, though, were more varied. At least one interviewee reported an income within each of five income categories, beginning with less than \$20,000 and ending with \$80,000 to \$100,000 annually. The majority, though, fell in the \$40,000 to \$80,000 ranges.

Education levels followed a different pattern. The four interviewees with the lowest levels completed 12 years of education. Of these, one individual reported a working income of less than \$20,000 a year. This compares with a husband and wife who both report education levels of 20 years and a retirement income of \$80,000 to

\$100,000. This wide range of income and education levels tends to indicate distinct class differences among the snowbirding population – differences with deep boundary-building potential.

Excepting the one full-timer, all interviewees share at least one thing in common. They “have homes.” That is, they are long-termers who spend varying amounts of time in the RV subculture and the mainstream culture. It also indicates that all are able to maintain both a home and an expensive recreational vehicle, in spite of a wide range of incomes. From a different perspective, continuing home ownership and amount of time spent in the RVing subculture indicates a level of commitment that is below that of full-timers but noticeably above that of weekend/vacationers. Most leisure long-termers are retired and have decided against full-timing. Nevertheless, their commitment to the RVing subculture is evident in long RVing histories.

One interviewee, for instance, has RV’d for twenty years and tent camped for about eighteen years before that. Janice, a snowbird who was not an interviewee, has RV’d and camped “for forty years.” She “really missed” RVing after her husband’s recent surgery. Long-termers, like full-timers and workampers, often self-identify as “true” RVers. Theirs is not a traditional identity that is “relatively fixed and stable” in the mainstream culture (Wheaton 2000:255). Rather, like Wheaton’s (2000) subcultural windsurfers, they use both the RVing subculture and the mainstream culture as sources of self-identity.

Several snowbird interviewees indicated that they were drawn to Beach RV Park by the full activity calendar. There, they joined with others to form communities of

interest similar to those Patrick Jobses described in 1984. In terms of boundary work, these snowbirds bond with others who share their interest in games, dinners, and similar social events. Unsurprisingly, then, snowbirds return to Beach RV Park, at least in part, to rejoin a “big circle of friends” – friends who keep in contact throughout the year, usually through e-mail. “About 75 percent,” shares manager Dave, “renew every year.” They get to “be like a family” – a family that, in George’s experience, includes workampers. In fact, he notes, there are “social gatherings almost every night of the week for everybody.”

In spite of their close friendships, these snowbirds, like Counts and Counts’s (1997) “serious” RVers, tend to be community builders who reach out to newcomers. In so doing, they attempt to “build bridges, as opposed to draw[ing] boundaries” (Lamont 2000:249). Returning snowbirds like Frances, for example, “always talks to them,” about upcoming events. Nevertheless, she shares, transient workers and utilitarian non-RVers seldom attend either day or evening activities. Most snowbirds, though, do attend at least some activities. During the day, these might include shuffleboard, crafts, pool aerobics, breakfasts in the park community center, lunch trips outside the park, Sunday church services, and increasingly popular Tea Parties. Daytime activities also include informal activities such as communal walks, leisurely conversations, and friendly visits back and forth.

Most evenings, interested RVers gather in the large community center to participate in activities that range from weekly game nights and “Texas Hold Em” poker nights to dinners and special events. During our winter field trip, special events

included an “Ice Cream Social and Blue Grass Gospel Concert” on Saturday evening and a “Super Bowl Party” on Sunday. The former event drew a large crowd of about sixty people. Most, it seemed, were snowbirds, overwhelming young seniors.

Workamper attendees, I found, were indistinguishable from other RVers enjoying ice cream sundaes and applauding loudly during the blue grass concert.

Fewer people, perhaps thirty, attended the Super Bowl party. Many brought their own chairs and staked out spots close to friends and the big-screen television. Others sat at the long tables that had been used the previous night for the Ice Cream Social. I recognized more workampers at this event. There were also several younger fellows, perhaps transient workers, who arrived after the game began. The party was a noisy affair of cheering, booing, and exchanged comments. The excitement heightened at the end of each quarter when names of Super Bowl “pool” winners were drawn and announced. Most attendees, perhaps all, had purchased numbers in the pool from the several workampers who had scoured the park several times for that purpose.

At events such as these and during their daily doings, snowbirds, workampers, and other full-timers and long-termers in Beach and Highway RV Parks dress and act similarly. Moreover, this research shows that these snowbirds and, by extension, certain other long-termers, practice RVing in ways that resemble full-time RVers. Snowbirds, like full-timers and in contrast to most vacationers, tend to RV year round. “Twelve months out of the year,” shares snowbird Dennis, “we’re using this trailer to do something.” When settled in one place, both snowbirds and full-timers adopt a long-term pattern of living that includes keeping in touch with family and friends, paying

bills, cleaning, shopping, reading, and so forth – a pattern relatively normal based on mainstream standards. A disproportionate segment of both populations appear to share military roots. At least two interviewee snowbirds, for instance, mentioned a military background. In addition, I noticed a striking amount of military insignia, such as flags and emblems displayed on snowbird rigs – to say nothing of caps, tee shirts, and such.

Only subtle, porous boundaries seemed to exist between these full-timing and long-terming RVers, perhaps because they recognize each other as “true” or, to use Counts and Counts’s (1997, 1992) terminology, “serious” RVers. Especially at Beach RV Park, shared interests and shared experiences tended to bridge boundaries, as did leisurely hours to become acquainted. Even at Highway RV Park, though, workampers Barb and Lem enjoyed a winter friendship with a long-terming couple who, like them, “are educators.” Both couples enjoy “playing games . . . [and] dancing.”

Shared interests and long winter months together at Beach RV Park led to formation of caring friendships among a wide circle of snowbirds. In spite of diverse educational and income levels, these friendships lasted from year to year. Theirs became a close-knit community of RVers who looked after each other. A mini-group of snowbirds, for instance, provided companionship, meals, assistance, and emotional support to a grieving widow. This same group came to the aid of another couple suddenly called away on a family emergency. Despite the closeness among some long-term snowbirds, theirs was an inclusive community that made newcomers such as this researcher feel welcome. Notably, transient workampers, though usually in the park for only one season, were accepted as an integral part of the winter community. Deep,

year-round friendships, though, seemed to occur only among snowbirds. Symbolic boundaries, it appears, existed at the margins of winter transiency.

Commitment, Identity, and Difference among Weekend/Vacationers

Early in my research I witnessed a stark manifestation of difference between what I came to perceive as two distinct RVing populations – weekend/vacationers and non-vacationing full-timers and long-termers. Saturday evening during my spring field trip, I saw that the transient area was a hustling, bustling place. People were sitting out; there was a lot of cooking and eating and visiting and swinging. The entire environment changed on leaving that area. I saw no outside activity in the long-termer and workamper areas. Rather, I caught occasional glimpses of TV screens through uncurtained windows.

Throughout that spring weekend and the entire summer field visit, Beach RV Park seemed like “two parks in one.” Vacationers pursued the business of having fun, while non-vacationing full-timers and long-termers most often went about the day-to-day business of living. The non-vacationing end of the park felt more like a neighborhood than a vacation destination. A different pattern could be seen at Highway RV Park. There, large numbers of non-vacationers muted the vacationing environment, especially during the work week. Unsurprising, then, is worker spouse, Betty’s observation that only “some” people RV “just for the recreation.”

Beach RV Park swells with large numbers of vacationers throughout the summer; their numbers increase noticeably on weekends at Highway RV Park. Summer vacationers at both parks include a number of multi-generational families as

well as young families with children and a liberal scattering of young people. Eight weekend/vacationers volunteered for interviews, two individuals, two married couples, and two single sisters. They ranged in age from 41 to 68 and included one weekender at Highway RV Park and seven vacationers at Beach RV Park. Six were full-time workers earning incomes over \$60,000 in professional occupations. Two reported a retirement income of \$30,000 to \$40,000. Five had sixteen or more years of college and a sixth had fourteen years. These middle-class RVers seemed financially able to maintain both a high-priced recreational vehicle and a mainstream home, perhaps better able than some long-term interviewees.

Yet, several weekend/vacationers towed recreational vehicles commonly thought to be choices of low-income RVers. Three, for example, RV in travel trailers and one RVs in a pop-up trailer. These RV choices dispel the myth that travel trailers equal low-income RVers. Rather, weekend/vacationers might select less-expensive towable recreational vehicles because they seldom use them. Abe, to provide another explanation, continues to use his pop-up trailer because, unlike larger motorhomes, it provides ample sleeping room for his grandchildren. These RV choices also dispel the myth that mainly “new” or uncommitted RVers are travel trailer people. The two interviewees with the shortest RVing histories travel in motorhomes, while the two with the longest histories travel with a pop-up trailer and a travel trailer.

RVing, realizes manager Tami “has evolved into a classier vacation than it used to be” – a fact that goes hand-in-hand with increasing numbers of middle-class RVers. In addition to mature, middle-class RVers like these case study interviewees, Tami sees

more young families who can also “afford a *nice* rig and a *nice* house.” She described one recent arrival, for instance, as a young family in a 40’ motorhome with “maybe three or four slides, pulling a hummer, and . . . three kids about three, five, and eight.” Nevertheless, Tami continues to “see older rigs, smaller Class C’s with families in them.”

This disparity suggests the probability of class- and culture-based cleavages among the weekend/vacationing population and even between weekend/vacationers and full-time and long-term subgroups. Vacationing sisters Terri and Shelia provide an example. As travel trailer RVers, they consider themselves “normal people.” When compared, for instance, to affluent RVers in high-dollar motorhomes and, at the other end of the continuum, college students who simply “throw a tent in the back of their car,” they judge themselves the “normal” ones.

Vacationing interviewees of all classes RV sporadically, perhaps four to six trips a year, usually in the summer. Unlike full-time and long-term RVers who roam leisurely, most have compressed vacation schedules that cause them to cram as much as possible into trips lasting from several days to several weeks. For many, RVing means opportunities to “get away” from mainstream routines and obligations. It also means opportunities to travel and to see new places and meet new people. Like full-timers, most weekend/vacationers value self-contained travel, freedom, relaxation, and sociality, only for shorter periods of time. Like full-timers, too, they obey park rules and are non-boisterous. Some even consider full-timing at retirement.

Vacationers display subcultural commitment through their expensive, well-maintained recreational vehicles or, perhaps, through long RVing histories. One interviewee, for instance, RV'd for eight years and tent camped for twenty-one years before that. Others have ten- and eight-year RVing histories. Weekend/vacationers, though, spend most of their time in the "real" mainstream world. They are, by this measure, less subcultural than full-timers and long-termers. Moreover, in terms of continuing home ownership and amount of time spent in the RVing subculture, their level of commitment is lower than that of full-timers and long-termers. Nevertheless, weekend/vacationers in this case study identified as RVers. Like long-termers, it seems, they draw from the RVing subculture as well as the mainstream culture to form self-identities.

Vacationers, as discussed above, differ from full-timers both in the ways they practice RVing and in their level of commitment to the RVing lifestyle – differences that cause full-timers and some long-termers to practice exclusionary boundary work. In the eyes of at least one workamper, summertime RVers are "mostly kids, they have their own agenda." Long-term workamper Grace draws a stronger boundary. People who come in the spring and summer, she told me, "are not real RVers. They leave cigarette butts and don't clean up dog poop." Managers Dave at Beach and Mark at Highway RV Park describe other infractions. Some summer vacationers, bemoan these managers, "let their children and pets run, just free, and they vegetate. All they want to do is just let the park . . . be their babysitter." Holiday weekends, grumbles Dave, bring

in yet “a different group of people . . . roughneck campers [who] just kind of overindulge.”

In contrast to “true” RVers’ clean, well-maintained rigs, explains Dave, “those of holiday campers” tend to be “dirty” and even “abused.” Implicit in Dave’s comment is the realization that most weekend/vacationers have clean, well maintained rigs. Nevertheless, at least some full-timers and long-termers such as Grace use the infractions of a few to label all weekend/vacationers as rule-breakers. Most vacationing interviewees busy with their own affairs, though, seemed to take little notice of full-timers or full-timing boundaries. Weekenders and vacationing interviewees neither mentioned nor implied any sense of exclusion in Beach and Highway RV Parks.

Most summer vacationers are rule observers who, like non-vacationers, distance themselves from rule-breaking “others.” A few, like Don and Kathryn, also draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and non-vacationing RVers. Don, for instance, fumed about workcampers who “got their kicks off showing their authority [as] security guards” at another RV park. Their actions, he complained “ruined our stay there.” Kathryn, in her turn, draws a boundary between vacationing people like herself for whom “kids come first” and full-timers who “don’t talk about their kids like we talk about our kids.” Some weekend/vacationers like Abe, resent the growing numbers of non-vacationers. “RV parks,” he protests, are “more set up now for the full-time RVer and less for the occasional weekender.” More and more, he continues, they are “filled up with the full-timer, the snowbird that’s there for three to six months.” Notably, neither these nor other vacationing interviewees seemed to recognize full-timers as

higher status or “core” members of the RVing subculture. For most, as vacationer Terri concluded, full-timing is simply a “different” way of RVing .

“Outsiders” in RV Parks

Yet another sub-group can be found in Beach, but primarily in Highway RV Park - utilitarian non-RVers. Rather than being committed to the RVing lifestyle of self-contained travel, freedom, and adventure, these non-RVers use recreational vehicles as stationary, usually temporary, housing. Some like elderly interviewee Marie, to provide one example, settled in an RV park as an affordable and convenient way to be close to family. Marie enjoys sociality with passing RVers and fleeting friendships with some long-termers. She appreciates the convenience of making one payment for rent, electric, cable, and garbage. Self-identity among this group, it seems, remains firmly rooted in the mainstream culture. In spite of the deep differences between “true” RVers and these utilitarian “others,” their presence seemed almost a non-issue with most interviewees. Excepting a few who acted snobby, made demands, or broke park rules, interviewees seldom mentioned these non-RVers in their midst.

Demographic Boundaries

Demographically based boundary work in Beach and Highway RV Parks causes cleavages that cut across other boundaries. Marital status, class, and age, stand out as dividing factors across the research population, while at least on the surface, gender, race/ethnicity, and disabilities seem less significant. Often RVers practice boundary work based on several demographic factors. Marital status, for instance, may intertwine

with both age and gender norms, while younger RVers are often better educated and wealthier. Here, though, I address each individually.

Race/Ethnicity

White RVers were the dominate race at the national FMCA Rally as well as at Beach and Highway RV Parks. A scattering of minorities, though, seemed to blend into the RVing population at all three locations. Neither white interviewees nor two minority interviewees hinted at racial tensions. A sizable proportion of RVing minorities appeared affluent and/or drove large motorhomes. Wayne, a single African American male, provides an example. Wayne retired in December, bought a big rig, and was following his traveling dream – a dream going so well that he was already busy planning next year’s trip. Wayne, himself, practiced seasonal rather than demographic boundary work. Unlike most snowbirds who travel year around, he was eager to be on the road to home “before the summer hordes arrive.”

Disabilities

I saw only a few people with disabilities during my fieldwork. Perhaps, in part, this was due to the challenge of driving and setting up large recreational vehicles. Then, too, boundary work on the part of RV designers and manufacturers seems central. Entrance stairs in most units, for instance, are both deep and steep. Yet, I noticed handrails in only a few of the hundred or so rigs I toured at the FMCA rally. Handicapped accessible recreational vehicles, according to one manufacturer’s representative, must be special ordered.

Gender

Interestingly, several interviewees mentioned women traveling by themselves as exceptional, but no one commented on similarly situated men. Yet, the RVing populations at both case study RV parks included a noticeable sprinkling of RVers who appeared to be single men and women. Among single interviewees, gender seemed an issue for vacationing sisters Terri and Shelia, but not for single males. “For two women traveling,” Terri told me, “we’ve been very fortunate.” Throughout their ten year RVing history, these professional women have “never run into any problems; anybody getting stupid.”

Marital Status

Full-timer Hank senses symbolic boundaries between himself as a single person and the mainly married RVing population. “You can’t associate on the same social level with a married couple as you can another single person,” he told me. Single workcamper George, like sisters Terri and Shelia, enjoys sociality with the many married and few single RVers in the park. George, as a single person, confronts an exclusionary boundary of a different sort. RV parks advertising for workcampers, he told me, “all ask for couples . . . in the *Workamper*” help-wanted ads. In that regard, Beach RV Park with its sprinkling of single workcampers is atypical. Overall, George seems to join snowbird Kate as “an independent person” undaunted by his single status. In Kate’s words, “I can do things alone just as well as I can do things with somebody.”

Class

The RVing population, observes long-time RVer Abe, is “much more educated, much wealthier” than in the old days when there were mainly “‘good ol’ boys’ out there.” Now, “it is not uncommon to park next to a doctor or retired lawyer . . . that is out there full-time” – or, this research shows, as a weekend/vacationer. Along similar lines, “good ol’ boys” no longer fit in at RV parks like Beach and Highway. The truly wealthy, in their turn, are more likely to be found in exclusive RV resorts rather than middle-class parks such as Beach or Highway RV Parks.

Some RVers in big RV buses, declares workcamper Sam, “are kind of snobby and think they are better than you.” Such RVers, as noted earlier, fail to meet boundary-building standards of equality expected among “true” RVers. Most educated, affluent RVers such as snowbirds Rita and Dennis, though, are “true” RVers. In spite of sometimes troubling class differences, Rita developed friendships with “people with the same interests as mine.” In addition to the educators and professionals from earlier times, this couple now counts a butcher, a pizza shop owner, and a Walmart employee among their good friends. At least for some RVers, then, common interests can bridge across class and lifestyle boundaries.

Age

RVers are “all getting younger and younger” remarked Grace. Manager Dave agreed. He “think[s] they’re starting to retire quicker in life.” Most snowbirds at Beach and Highway RV Parks, I observed, are young seniors ranging in age, it seemed, from about sixty to their mid-seventies. Nevertheless, fifty-six year old full-timer Jack

describes a wide gulf between himself and these young retirees. “Most of the RVing crowd is older than I am,” he observes, “and a lot of the folks come in here to rest and relax. That’s just not my reason for being in an RV.”

Rather, he asserts, baby boomers like himself have a different “outlook on life. . . . I think most of us are planning to be very active, pursue our hobbies and our sports.” Jack wants to “travel in an RV and see America,” but he also wants to explore the nation on foot and by bicycle. Fifty-five year old Tami provides a markedly different view. Baby boomers, she argues, will not want to explore “some God-forsaken place. We want the adventures of camping but I want air conditioning and I want a bed to sleep in and I want a stove to cook on.” Fifty-four year old Dave concurs. “Baby boomers like me,” he asserts, “want a little more comfort.” Baby boomers, then, tend to create age-based symbolic boundaries between themselves and senior “others” in RV parks, but also lifestyle boundaries among themselves – trends that promises to intensify as more boomers join the RVing population.

Summary

In spite of sharing a collective, subcultural lifestyle, RVers in Highway and Beach RV Parks differ along multiple axes. Boundaries such as those described by theorists Epstein (1992) and Lamont (1992) divide RVers into three broad groups (full-timers, long-termers, and vacationers) and into multiple subgroups within those categories. The meanings and practice of RVing, this research shows, vary from group to group, as does levels of commitment to the RVing lifestyle. The deepest cleavage separates deeply committed full-timing “people like us” from less committed “others,”

such as transient workers and weekend/vacationers. Though boundaries come in many forms, most are based on levels of commitment to the RVing subculture, divergent RVing practices, and violations of park rules and RVing norms. Those norms, in comparison to Counts and Counts's (1997; 1992) findings, include equality but not reciprocity. Rather, interviewees in this case study value freedom, equality, relaxation, and sociality, along with the adventures of self-contained travel and exploration.

For the most part, boundary work in Highway RV and Beach RV Parks is subtle, often invisible. At least on the surface, these RV parks are welcoming spaces where individualistic and even divergent RVing travelers join in loose communities to enjoy a common subcultural lifestyle, fleeting acquaintanceships, and occasional friendships. A closer look reveals that surface as a veneer masking "real and significant differences at a deeper level" (Cohen 1985:44). Weekend/vacationers may remain unaware of those differences, in part at least, because they come and go quickly.

Perhaps, too, bridging by full-timers and long-termers conceal such differences. Full-timer, Hank, is but one of many full-timers and long-termers who enjoy "meeting different people" in RV parks. Vacationing transients, he shares,

are always nice people because they are on their downtime. . . . They come here to have a good time. So you're going to meet them at their best, not their worst. They leave their problems behind, their stress behind. . . . This is why I choose this life.

Full-time and long-term RVers, then, erect bridges as well as boundaries between committed RVers like themselves and the diversity of RVers who come and go in Highway, Beach, and other RV parks.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

RVers, this research shows, begin practicing boundary work when they choose an RV park. Diverse arrays of RVers select Highway and Beach RV Parks, in part, because they are what one interviewee called middle-class parks. That is, in choosing these parks RVers exclude RVing resorts catering to the affluent and economy parks that attract the poor and thrifty. RVers, as Counts and Counts (1992) recognized, “define themselves and are defined by others by where they park” (Counts and Counts 1992:169). RVers in this case study, it would seem, identify and wish to be identified by others, as middle-class RVers – or, perhaps, as RVers with middle-class standards. In terms of this research, park selections, like other symbolic boundaries, spring from and work to maintain RVers’ subcultural identity – at least for most. Some traveling RVers pull into Highway RV Park only to find that this middle-class park is “too expensive” for RVers like themselves.

Many RVers, especially overnights, select Highway RV Park for its convenient location. RVers with personal business, transient workers, and weekenders also tend to choose Highway RV Park. Summer vacationers select Beach RV Park for its proximity to beaches and tourist attractions, while winter snowbirds are drawn to a

full activity calendar. In terms of research design, my choice of Beach and Highway RV Parks for this case study allowed me to observe and interview a broad diversity of RVers in two distinctly different natural settings. A field trip to a FMCA rally provided a comparative glimpse of RVers from across the nation.

My findings in these two RV parks support Counts and Counts's (1997; 1992) identification of the RV lifestyle as subcultural. RVers at Beach and Highway RV Parks describe a lifestyle that differs distinctly from the cultural norm. Unlike mainstream travelers who typically seek accommodations in impersonal motels and condominiums, RVers take home and belongings with them. They value the freedom to travel extensively and spontaneously. Some value their self-contained ability to overnight in certain public places without utilities, a markedly subcultural practice known as boondocking. Many RVers proudly describe themselves as gypsies, nomads, and wanderers. RVers, like Jasper's (2000) individualists, tend to be roamers who follow American traditions of explorers, adventurers, and travelers. Yet, they also participate in the mainstream culture, especially as consumers of increasingly larger and more luxurious recreational vehicles.

RVers form a highly diversified, individualistic subculture. To provide a broader perspective, the RVing subculture forms a segment, or microcosm, of our diversified, individualistic American culture. As such, this research has much to tell us about American society as a whole. The RVers in this case study, for example, join other individualistic Americans who seek control over their lives. Yet, like Americans everywhere, RVers also want community and sociality.

The majority of case study interviewees mentioned meeting people as one of their greatest RVing enjoyments. Like full-timer Jack, most RVers in this case study value the instant community they find in RV parks and the opportunity it provides to “meet a lot more people” than would have been possible in mainstream accommodations. Yet, most interviewees seek only fleeting acquaintanceships among a diversity of RVers over deep friendships. Jack sums it up. He most enjoys “short-term friends . . . [who] come and go.”

Such RVers seek fleeting acquaintanceships in the loose-knit, undemanding communities found in RV parks and among gatherings of RVers. There is a community of transients – an upscale, modern-day version, perhaps, of the fluid jungles formed by those earlier transients, the hobos and tramps. Traveling RVers, for instance, often stay in one park only one night, while the largest RVing group, weekend/vacationers, stay only a matter of days or weeks. RVers, with some notable exceptions, tend to meet as strangers, engage in conversations ranging from the casual to the intense, and go their separate ways.

Even cliquish workampers join other RVers who seek adventurous travel over roots and day-to-day friendships. Rather than a community of place, the RV community, as a whole, tends to be an “imagined community” of like others who travel America’s roads in recreational vehicles. Yet, many interviewees mentioned one or two RVing friendships that persist over the years. Full-timers, Raymond and his wife, for example, “still keep up with some of the ones, I guess you might say, that we like.”

Only among winter snowbirds in this case study did I find multiple deep, lasting friendships along with evidence of social obligations and community building similar what that Counts and Counts (1997; 1992) describe. Perhaps this goes hand in hand with the fact that Counts and Counts's (1997; 1992) research population prized reciprocity, while case study interviewees made no mention of reciprocity as an RVing norm. Perhaps, too, this change reflects a societal decrease in reciprocity. Robert Putman (2000), for instance, documents the dwindling presence of "networks of community [that] foster sturdy norms of reciprocity" in America (Putman 2000:20). As generalized reciprocity diminishes, argued Putman (2000), Americans increasingly rely on formal institutions such as the law (Putman 2000:147).

Similarly, RVers in this case study relied on park rules to maintain the RVing environment they seek at Highway, Beach, and other RV parks. Unlike Jasper's (2000) restless individualists and Counts and Counts's (1997; 1992) boondockers, the RVers in this case study valued rules. Both full-timers and long-termers expressed boundary-building disapproval toward individuals, often weekend/vacationers, who violated park rules and RVing norms of equality and respect. These rule-breakers, at least one contended, are not "true" RVers. That interviewee categorized all weekend/vacationers as rule-breakers. For some interviewees, at least implicitly, the label "true" RVer is reserved for deeply committed, mainly full-timing, RVers. The contentiousness of the label "true" RVer points to a fragmented subculture with hierarchies and divisions.

"True" RVers, full-time and long-term workampers told me, share a variety of characteristics. They are more than travelers in recreational vehicles. First and

foremost, they are *dedicated* to the RVing lifestyle – a dedication visible in their commitment to this lifestyle that combines fun, freedom, relaxation, and the spirit of adventurous travel with community, sociality, and equality. Overall, then, “true” RVers, like communitarians in the broader culture, attempt to combine what they consider the “most desirable attributes” of both individualism and community (see Triandis 1995:39; Etzioni 1996).

Difference is, RVers, especially full-time and long-term RVers, tend to be more mobile and more individualistic than mainstream Americans. Some full-timers will stay on the road indefinitely; a few may even RV in order to escape mainstream obligations. Most full-timers, though, seem to be enjoying that period of transiency which, according to Caplow (1940), has become a normal phase in the lives of many Americans. “True” RVers seek the common good of the RVing community as well as freedom through mobility. To that end, “true” RVers are rule-abiding, respectful, and non-boisterous. The successes and failures of their effort to combine community and individualism within the microcosmic RVing subculture will provide valuable lessons for the individualistic American society as a whole. So will lessons learned from the practice of boundary work in these small spaces.

RVers, I found, erect and maintain symbolic boundaries to separate RVers like themselves from RVing others. Marked differences in commitment and the practice of RVing, this research shows, separate RVers into three broad groups (full-timers, long-termers, and vacationers) and into multiple subgroups within those categories. Like RVers themselves, RVing boundaries come in many forms. The most dominant, this

research shows, are levels of commitment, divergent RVing practices, and to a lesser degree, violations of park rules and RVing norms. Demographic factors, especially age and class, cut across these boundaries.

Full-timers, as a group, are the subcultural “core” among RVers. Like Wheaton’s (2000) “core” windsurfers, most are fully committed to the RVing subculture and wholly self-identify as RVers. Leaving the “real” world behind, they make the RVing world their only world and their RV their only home – acts that separate them from all other RVers as well as from the cultural mainstream. They erect and maintain symbolic boundaries that separate “committed” RVers like themselves from less committed “others.” During interviews, full-timers used words and situations to portray commitment and dedication – words that bring to mind Counts and Counts’s (1997; 1992) description of their research population of full-timers and some long-termers as “serious” RVers.

Unlike fully-committed full-timers who make their RVs their only home, long-termers continue to maintain homes in the mainstream culture. Nevertheless, they tend to RV year around and they spend months at a time in the RVing subculture. Most are retirees who have made the decision not to full-time. Compared to full-timers, theirs is a lower level of commitment. Nevertheless, the long-termers I interviewed self-identified, either explicitly or implicitly, as “true” RVers. Rather than having traditional “relatively fixed and stable” identities formed within the mainstream culture (Wheaton 2000:255), long-termers draw their identities from both the mainstream and RVing cultures. Most long-termers, I suggest, as did Counts and Counts (1997; 1992),

are “serious” RVers who practice RVing in a manner similar to full-timers. Unlike that of Counts and Counts (1997; 1992), this research indicates that snowbirds such as those wintering in Beach RV Park are also “serious” RVers.

Like full-timers, snowbirds travel year around. Like full-timers, too, they often live in one RV park for extended periods and, during those times, settle into recurring patterns of day-to-day living. These and other long-termers, then, share a notable number of commonalities with full-timers. In the case of snowbirds at Beach RV Park, those commonalties tend to deepen into camaraderie during long winters of shared activities and leisurely conversations – a camaraderie that cuts across symbolic boundaries to include workampers. As noted above, these winter populations are community builders. Symbolic boundaries between snowbirds and workampers, this research shows, were fluid and highly permeable during the winter season, with some exceptions. Symbolic boundaries for one workamper, for instance, were firm. “They’re not full-timers, they’re just snowbirds,” she maintained.

Symbolic boundaries tend to be equally firm between serious RVers and weekend/vacationers – a population omitted from earlier social scientific research among RVers. Weekend/vacationers are primarily members of the mainstream culture who enter the RVing subculture only sporadically, usually during the summer and usually for short periods of time. Some, like Dan, might arrive with a mini-community of friends and family who “just kinda stick to ourselves.” About four RV outings a year proved the norm among the vacationers who volunteered for interviews. When they do RV, weekenders and vacationers practice RVing in ways that diverge sharply from full-

timing and long-terming norms, often in visible ways. Especially at Beach RV Park, they enjoy busy, fun-filled days and evenings while non-vacationing RVers go about the business of day-to-day living and leisure pursuits. The transient section of the park is a hustling, bustling place of outdoor fun; the full-timer/long-termer area resembles a neighborhood. The same holds true during weekends at Highway RV Park, though to a lesser degree.

Vacationers, claim some full-timers and long-termers, break park rules. Some, they claim, join a scattering of snobbish long-termers who violate the unwritten rules of sociality and equality among RVers. At first glance it would seem that full-timers and long-termers erect moral boundaries based on the actions of a few to separate “true” RVers like themselves from vacationing “others.” More likely, I suggest, they experience these moral infractions as a lack of commitment to the RVing lifestyle. I further suggest that full-timers and long-termers use levels of commitment as their primary basis for boundary work. For full-timers and long-termers, divergent RVing practices among weekend/vacationers add to the cleavage they experience between deeply committed RVers like themselves and less committed “others.” Perhaps, in part, because of their larger numbers during the summer, busy vacationers show little awareness of full-timers’ boundary work and sometimes even their presence in these RV parks.

The weekend/vacationers I interviewed self-identity as RVers. They are dedicated to the RVing lifestyle of self-contained travel, freedom, relaxation, and sociality. They obey park rules and they are not rowdy. They immerse themselves in

the RVing subculture during intermittent RVing trips and anticipate the next trip when at home. The majority maximize their time in the RVing environment through weekend outings between longer travel adventures. Many show commitment through a long RVing history; some consider full-timing when that becomes possible. Most weekend/vacationers at Highway and Beach RV Parks put their money where their commitment is. They RV in high priced, well maintained recreational vehicles. Unlike the windsurfing subculture where skill rather than displays of high-priced equipment are signs of commitment (Wheaton 2000), RVers view recreational vehicles themselves as symbols of commitment.

Other RVing subgroups, this research shows, diverge more markedly from full-timers in terms of commitment and ways of RVing – differences, again, that trigger boundary work on the part of committed full-timers and long-termers. Transient construction workers provide a stark example. These RVers tend to RV for utilitarian reasons. For them, the recreational vehicle provides economical mobile housing that allows them to take their families with them as they travel from job to job. Moreover, they are inclined to be “clannish” and sometimes loud and rowdy. Unlike weekend/vacationers, volunteer construction workers implied a sense of “otherness,” in their dealings with other RVers in Highway RV Park.

Members of another subgroup, utilitarian non-RVers, are also “others” or “outsiders.” Found mainly in Highway RV Park, these non-RVers use recreational vehicles as temporary, stationary housing. This sub-group displays minimal commitment to the RVing lifestyle. Yet, excepting a few perceived as snobby,

demanding, or rule-breakers, neither committed full-timers nor other interviewees mentioned these non-RVers in their midst.

Incoming baby boomers are causing changes in the RVing subculture, as they have been doing in the broader culture. Their presence is already creating age- and class-based boundaries that cut across other boundaries. Divergent lifestyles, for instance, are creating cleavages between younger and older RVers and even among baby-boomers themselves. Some boomers, for instance, seek active lives filled with hobbies and sports. Others want RVing adventures, but in greater comfort than that of their parents and grandparents. The affluence of many baby-boomers may also intensify cleavages between middle-class RVers like themselves and working-class “others.” Demographic boundary work promises to intensify as more boomers and affluent RVers of all ages join the RVing population.

RVers, in conclusion, form a mobile, heterogeneous subculture. Most RVers, this research shows, are committed to a subcultural lifestyle of fun, relaxation, travel, and adventure in their homes on wheels. Most, too, are individualists who prize freedom and enjoy short-term acquaintanceships and occasional friendships within loose-knit, undemanding RV communities. Yet, like most mainstream Americans, they value their communities and expect sociality and equality within them. Full-timers, based on their deep level of commitment, are core members of the subculture. They form identities in opposition to less committed RVers as well as to the mainstream culture. Moreover, they erect symbolic boundaries to separate “true” RVers like themselves from those they consider less committed “others.” Some used the moral

infractions of a few to justify boundaries between themselves and entire RVing groups. This research points to levels of commitment and divergent practices of RVing, rather than the transgressions of a few, as the underlying and more convincing basis for such group-level boundary work.

Contributions

This case study makes a significant step toward filling the gap in empirical studies on RVers. Unlike earlier social scientific studies that focused on retirees, this study includes volunteer participants from all groups and subgroups occupying Beach and Highway RV Parks during seasonal field trips. It adds data about new RVing subgroups and modern ways of RVing. Of less importance, this research adds data on RVing in the southeastern United States to that now available on RVing in the American southwest.

This research points to the need for additional research on RVers and RVing, with a focus on minimally studied RVing populations. Research centering on commitment, boundary work practices, and subcultural identity among weekend/vacationers, for example, would provide insightful data on the largest and least studied group of RVers. Of special interest might be the effect, or lack thereof, of full-timers' hierarchal boundary work on more mainstream groups such as weekend/vacationers. Research among transient workers, like that among hobos and tramps in earlier times, will supply valuable insights into the American labor market and American transiency. Exploratory research among the poor who live in often

dilapidated RVs because they “cannot afford to do any better” promises to provide rich and needed data on homelessness and alternative housing.

This exploratory case study also adds to its theoretical foundation – subcultural identity and boundary work theories. It especially builds on Wheaton’s (2000) finding that commitment plays a central role in both self-identity and status in leisure subcultures such as windsurfing. Commitment, this research shows, is also central in the formation of subcultural self-identities among full-time and long-term RVers in this case study. Moreover, commitment is a prime source of boundary work among and between RVing groups and subgroups. Additional research will provide important data on the roles of commitment, boundary work, and community in the formation of self-identities in both leisure and semi-leisure subcultures.

Lastly, the data generated during this case study has implications for the broader American individualist culture. In spite of occupying small spaces in recreational vehicles and in RV parks, RVers perform boundary work in ways that are indistinguishable from boundary work performed in the mainstream culture. Boundary work here, as in the broader culture, creates groups, communities, and collective identities. This study, then, provides valuable lessons on how we, as Americans, define ourselves, build boundaries, and form communities. Further research within this microcosmic subculture will add empirical data and theoretical insights of value to both academicians and policy-makers.

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APPENDIX A
RINGING GROUPS AND SUB-GROUPS

RVING GROUPS AND SUB-GROUPS

FULL-TIMERS – RVers who make RVs their only home.

Leisure RVers

- Traveling RVers who stay in one place for varying lengths of time.
- Snowbirds winter in the south, often staying in one park.
- Semi-settled RVers who stay in one park for long periods.
- RVers who “hang up their keys” and settle in one park.

Worker RVers

- Transient workers travel with their jobs.
- Workampers work in private and public RV parks.

LONG-TERMERS – RVers who live in their RVs for months at a time.

Leisure RVers

- Traveling RVers who stay in one place for varying lengths of time.
- Snowbirds winter in the south, often staying in one park.

Worker RVers

- Transient workers travel with their jobs.
- Workampers work in private and public RV parks.

WEEKENDER/VACATIONERS use their RVs for leisure outings and vacations.

APPENDIX B-1
QUESTIONNAIRE FOR RVERS

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR RVERS

Practice and Meaning of RVing (General):

1. To begin with, please tell me why and how you began RVing?
2. What do you find most and least enjoyable about RVing?
[Freedom/ Independence/ Home away from home / Cost]
3. What are your primary RVing chores and responsibility? If you RV with someone, how do you decide who does what?
[Probe for gender implications: planning and financing as well as indoor vs outdoor chores?]

Community/Individualism/Boundaries/Subculture

4. What are the main things you look for in an RV destination? Why are these important to you?
[probe for solitude, friendliness, cost, structured activities, recreation (park/area), security]
6. How, if at all, does the number and types of rules at a park affect your decision to stay there?
[alcohol, pets, restrictions on RVs, length of stay]
7. How has RVing changed your lifestyle? Circle of friends?
[Probe for RVing centrality in life; new friends, if any, among RVers]
8. What are your time frames and destinations for this trip?
9. How does this trip compare with your last several RVing trips?
[Probe by Boondocker, Full-timer, Part-timer, Worker, W/V possibilities]
10. How do you think RVing has changed over time?
[Probe “Are RVers/campers different today than they used to be?”]

APPENDIX B-2

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARK MANAGER/STAFF

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARK MANAGER/STAFF

1. First, please tell me about your position here in the park. How did you come to be in this position?
2. Please tell me about the park's history, especially changes and improvements through the years. What features, facilities, or activities have been successful and what have not? Why?
[probe for how and why changes were initiated and results of those changes.]
3. What do you think are the most important features, facilities, and activities your park now offers RVers?
[probe for recreational activities, but also cable TV and telephone/modem hookups]
4. Do some RVers participate more than others? Why do you think that is? What other differences have you observed among different groups of RVers?
[probe for friendliness, outdoor living, cliques, aloofness]
5. Overall, how would describe your clientele? Your "best" clientele? What is an average length of stay?
[probe for groups; long-term vs overnighters; leisure vs workers; RVers vs cabin renters; types of RVs]
6. What types of advertising or publicity have you used? What has proved most effective?
7. What do you think is the best aspect of running an RV park? The worst?
8. What types of problems or "incidents" involving RVers have you had to deal with? Have you found that any one type of RVer more involved in such problems?
9. In your experience, how has RVing changed over the years?
[probe "Are RVers/campers different today than they used to be?"]
10. If you could change anything about the park, or how you do business in the park, what would that be?

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEWEE DATA

INTERVIEWEE DATA

LEISURE FULL-TIMERS (n=3 individual interviewees)

| | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Ages | 56 – 69 |
| Gender | Male (n=3) |
| ..... | Female (n=0) |
| Race | White (n=3) |
| Marital Status..... | Married (n=1) |
| ..... | Single (n=2) |
| Education..... | 16 – 20 years |
| Income | >\$100,000 (n=1) |
| ..... | \$60,000-\$80,000 (n=1) |
| ..... | Extensive resources (n=1) |
| Occupation..... | Retired (n=3) |
| Type RV | Motorhome (n=3) |
| Time RV'd..... | 1.2 years to 4.5 years as full-timers |
| ..... | 1.2 years to 29 years total as RVers |

WORKAMPING FULL-TIMERS (n=6: 2 individual interviewees; 2 couples)

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Ages | 53 – 70 |
| Gender | Male (n=3) |
| ..... | Female (n=3) |
| Race | White (n=6) |
| Marital Status..... | Married (n=5) |
| ..... | Single (n=1) |
| Education..... | 9-18 years |
| Income | \$30,000 to \$40,000 (n=1) |
| ..... | \$20,000 to \$30,000 (n=5) |
| Occupation..... | Retired (n=4) |
| ..... | Semi-retired (n=2) |
| Type RV | Motorhome (n=2) |
| ..... | Fifth-wheel (n=2) |
| ..... | Travel trailer (n=2) |
| Time RV'd..... | 4 months to 3 years as workampers or full-timers |
| ..... | 10 months to 27 years total as RVers |

INTERVIEWEE DATA CONTINUED

PARK MANAGERS (n=3 individual interviewees)

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Ages | 54 - 59 |
| Gender | Male (n=1) |
| ..... | Female (n=2) |
| Race | White (n=3) |
| Marital Status..... | Married (n=3) |
| ..... | Single (n=0) |
| Education..... | 12 - 16 years |
| Income | \$40,000-\$50,000 (n=1) |
| ..... | \$30,000-\$40,000 (n=1) |
| ..... | \$20,000-\$30,000 (n=1) |
| Occupation..... | RV Park Manager (n=3) |
| Type RV | Fifth-wheel (n=2) |
| ..... | Travel trailer (n=1) |
| Time RV'd..... | 3.5 years to 16 years as full-timers |
| ..... | 20 years to 45 years total as RVers |

FULL-TIME TRANSIENT WORKERS (n=2 individual interviewees)

| | |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| Ages | 42 - 56 |
| Gender | Male (n=1) |
| ..... | Female (n=1) |
| Race | White (n=1) |
| ..... | White Hispanic (n=1) |
| Marital Status..... | Married (n=2) |
| ..... | Single (n=0) |
| Education..... | 12 years (n=2) |
| Income | \$50,000-\$60,000 (n=1) |
| ..... | \$20,000-\$30,000 (n=1) |
| Occupation..... | Construction worker (n=1) |
| ..... | Homemaker (n=1) |
| Type RV | Travel trailer (n=2) |
| Time RV'd..... | <1 year as transient workers (n=2) |
| ..... | <1 year to 3 years as RVers |
| ..... | 0 to 18 years as tent campers |

INTERVIEWEE DATA CONTINUED

WORKAMPING LONG-TERMERS (n=1 individual interviewee)

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Ages | 68 |
| Gender | Male (n=0) |
| ..... | Female (n=1) |
| Race | White (n=0) |
| ..... | Native American (n=1) |
| Marital Status..... | Married (n=1) |
| ..... | Single (n=0) |
| Education..... | 12 years |
| Income | <\$20,000 (n=1) |
| Occupation..... | Retired (n=1) |
| Type RV | Fifth-wheel (n=1) |
| Time RV'd..... | 2.5 years as a long-terming workamper |
| ..... | 7 years as an RVer; about 8 years as a tent camper |

LONG-TERM SNOWBIRDS (n=9: 1 individual interviewee; 4 couples)

| | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Ages | 49 – 67 |
| Gender | Male (n=4) |
| ..... | Female (n=5) |
| Race | White (n=9) |
| Marital Status..... | Married (n=8) |
| ..... | Single (n=1) |
| Education..... | 12 – 20 years |
| Income | \$80,000-\$100,000 (n=2) |
| ..... | \$60,000-\$80,000 (n=2) |
| ..... | \$40,000-\$50,000 (n=4) |
| ..... | <\$20,000 (n=1) |
| Occupation..... | Retired (n=6) |
| ..... | Semi-retired (n=2) |
| ..... | Service worker (n=1) |
| Type RV | Motorhome (n=4) |
| ..... | Fifth-wheel (n=5) |
| Time RV'd..... | 2 – 20 years as RVers |
| ..... | 0-18 years as tent campers |

INTERVIEWEE DATA CONTINUED

WEEKEND/VACATIONERS (n=8: 2 individual interviewees; 3 couples)

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| Ages | 41 - 68 |
| Gender | Male (n=4) |
| ..... | Female (n=4) |
| Race | White (n=8) |
| Marital Status..... | Married (n=6) |
| ..... | Single (n=2) |
| Education..... | 12 - 18 years |
| Income | >\$100,000 (n=2) |
| ..... | \$80,000-\$100,000 (n=1) |
| ..... | \$60,000-\$80,000 (n=3) |
| ..... | \$30,000-\$40,000 (n=2) |
| Occupation..... | Retired (n=2) |
| ..... | Professional workers (n=6) |
| Type RV | Motorhome (n=4) |
| ..... | Travel trailer (n=4) |
| ..... | Pop-up (n=1) |
| Time RV'd..... | 2 to 10 years as RVers |
| ..... | 0 to 21 years as tent campers |
