

“Vanishing Americana”

In 1870, a group of Methodist congregations decided to hold camp meetings on a deserted stretch of beach on the Delaware coast. There was a grove of trees back from the ocean and it made a great place to set up tents and hold their religious retreats. In 1881 the place became an official town and eventually became known as Rehoboth. A thriving little resort community had sprung up and a lot more than religious meetings went on there. Around 1925 a paved road from the county seat in Georgetown was constructed and this promoted even more traffic. People would drive their model “A’s” and “T’s” into the new easily accessible beach town from all over. When they arrived there was a usually shortage of rooms, so they brought tents in their cars. The now abandon camp meeting area was as good a place as it ever was to spent the night and that is where the town sent anyone who was interested in a campsite. It wasn’t long before someone at the town office figured out that they could rent these campsites and the town discovered an additional source of income. The tents got bigger and some even had “semi-structures” attached to them to make them a little more durable in the wind.

When travel trailers came along this location was a natural place to put one of the new types of “Mobile Homes”. The town of Rehoboth liked the idea because these vehicles stayed longer and there was less bookkeeping to do. Some people would show up in May and never leave ‘till October. Eventually nearly all the homes in Grove Park were early travel trailers and mobile homes. People would come down with their families and enjoy the beach, just like lots of other families had been doing in Grove Park for over 100 years.

In 1987 this little collection of early mobile homes, some over 70 years old, were evicted by the town. Some in the Historical Society and a few of the town fathers decided that this “trailer park” was an “eye sore” and it and the people in these “huts” had to go! There were 44 rent paying sites in Grove Park with most of the lots occupied. There was a vote by the people of the town and by a very narrow margin, Grove Park lost out. It is no more.

Fortunately, an internationally known local artist, Howard Schroeder, painted the park just before it was bulldozed. He thought the shapes and colors were pleasing, especially in the fall when the leaves on the grove of trees started to change. It wasn’t all that unsightly to his trained eye.

Interestingly, the homes in the painting actually are historic homes, but not in the eyes of some of the Historical Society. They were some of the first to be classified by the US Census Bureau as “homes” not “travel trailers”. These homes were of an age when mobile homes were distinctive, like cars. You could tell what kind of home it was by looking at the shape and exterior metal treatment.

Grove Park started a town and then the town destroyed it. There are many other “Grove Parks” around this nation and they are disappearing rapidly at the hands of probably well meaning people who unfortunately have no sense of history for what is now the

Manufactured Housing Industry. Rehoboth has preserved some old tent meeting houses, barns, lifesaving stations, lighthouses, fire engines and even some trees, but some folks just could not abide a trailer in the town, historic or not. The homes are gone, but sadly so are all the families in those homes. They used to have their own affordable place at the beach but no more, and they are gone too. “Vanishing Americana” also include families.