



## JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF AMERICA

**M**any RVers dream of the day they can chuck the house and job to embrace full-time RVing. It's just that not everyone actually gets around to it.

Meet Bill Brown and Susan Dona, a couple living the dream.

Two years ago, Brown and Dona were playing it safe. Both were in their 50s, had established careers, and were working hard toward retirement.

But Bill did some hard thinking about what he wanted in life. While on a month-long RV vacation, he raised the idea of quitting their jobs and hitting the road in search of America.

The goal was to "explore this great country for three years and then settle down again."

To Susan, the idea of selling home and possessions to embrace a nomadic existence took some getting used to. By the end of their vacation, they had decided to go for it.

So it began, a journey both physical and emotional, with the internal struggles and second-guessing so many full-timers go through — all documented on their website ([www.cooljourney.net](http://www.cooljourney.net)).

Today, they're halfway there, zig-zagging across America, setting their own loose itinerary and enjoying every moment. That three-year idea? It already looks as if they're pushing it back to four or five.

We caught up with them in Lebanon, Ohio, to visit about the experience and note the favorite travel destinations of a couple who've chosen life on the road.

**What made you two say, "What the heck, let's do it?"**

**Bill:** I think that I probably was the catalyst for it. I'd been working for the State of California for quite a few years, one of those people who started working with retirement in mind. I was in a management position working with a staff of about 120 people. It was rewarding in many ways. But the thing I was working toward was the ability not to work.

I kept looking at the stresses and it began to take a toll on me. Then my former boss died while on the job. He was 49 at the time. I was very close to him personally and professionally. After he passed away in 1995, I began to take my own mortality very seriously. We wanted to send our lives in a radically new direction.

**Susan:** On my part, I had just retired (about nine months earlier) and I had a whole idea of what I wanted to do in my retirement: go back to school, learn new things, get into photography. I guess I sat

back and said, 'That's what everybody does.' I didn't want to be in a rut, and I saw that possibility. Although I was perfectly comfortable, it was time to shake myself up. What gave me courage? I'm still wondering.

**You began to hash out your future and were on the road within six months?**

**Bill:** While on vacation, I was beginning to feel the pressures lift, beginning to think: 'I think I'm there. I can retire with a comfortable income. I want to do more of this.' We began the discussion, going through the stages of 'Could we even consider this' to 'Let's get started planning.' We came out of that month-long trip with a goal in mind, and I started doing serious research into full-timing.

**Susan:** At first, I was very skeptical, and frankly, somewhat frightened at the prospect. A sense of security has always been fairly high on my priority list.



**It sounds as if your goal is to see as much of America as possible, and to scout potential locations to eventually settle down again. What's your approach?**

**Bill:** We started out West our first year following a loop that took us as far east as Minnesota, with a northern side trip into Canada — a wonderful jaunt. Then we came back down into California. At first, we felt like we had points



### the story:

**WHO:** Bill Brown and Susan Dona, formerly of Sacramento, Calif.

**WHERE:** Quit their jobs to embark upon a three-year journey to see America

**WHAT:** A 32-foot Thor Mirage fifth-wheel pulled by a F250 Super Duty longbed diesel truck

**WHEN:** November 2004 through 2007

Hiking path at Karchner Caverns State Park, Benson, AZ

"We have two cameras. I take most of the pictures and use a Pentax Optio WP 5.0 megapixel camera. It is small and fits comfortably in a shirt pocket. Susan's camera is a Canon EOS Digital Rebel at 6.3 megapixels." (left to right) Spring at Bryce Canyon National Park. Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park, Southern Utah. Stonelick Covered Bridge, built in 1878 in Clermont County, Ohio. Spirit Island in Maligne Lake, Jasper National Park, Canada. Sunset view in Springdale, Utah, the west gateway to Zion National Park. "Spoonbridge with Cherry" at Sculpture Garden in Minneapolis, Minn.. Autumn scene near Melrose, Mont. The Old Mill, used in the opening scenes in "Gone With The Wind", Little Rock, Ark.



Sunset at Heartland RV Park in Hermosa, S.D.

**BILL AND SUSAN'S DON'T MISS LIST RECOMMENDED RV DESTINATIONS:**

- Banff National Park/Lake Louise/Jasper National Park in Western Alberta, Canada
- Yellowstone National Park
- The Grand Tetons
- Utah's Zion National Park/Bryce Canyon National Park
- The Black Hills of South Dakota
- Texas Hill Country
- Northern Arkansas
- The Great State of Iowa!
- Keewawee, Wisconsin, overlooking Lake Michigan
- Two Harbors, Minn., on the shores of Lake Superior
- Mackinac Island/Sault Ste. Marie Locks, Michigan's Upper Peninsula

we had to be at certain times. But after that first loop, we looked ahead and said 'We have no plans,' and just started picking places. That was a turning point.

Now we tend to stay in southern areas during the winter and head north as the temperatures begin to rise. This year we've been as far north as the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Our next target is Florida. We zigzag north to south, trying to travel in this band of 70- to 80-degree weather. Wherever that happens to be flowing in the U.S., that's where we are.

**Have there been any surprises with the destinations you've hit along the way?**

**Bill:** We'd been a number of places in the West, but everything east of that has been new and, in many cases, exciting to see. We've seen areas of the country we were stunned with. A wonderful discovery was up at Two Harbors, a town

north of Duluth, Minn. — a beautiful little area, a real jewel.

Then there was the Texas Hill Country area this last spring — rolling green hills, beautiful country. We were delighted. Texas was supposed to be desert. It's not. Our jaws dropped whenever we went around the corner and saw a beautiful stream. Even the Iowa farmlands were impressive. We enjoyed the heck out of Hot Springs, Ark., in fact, the whole northern segment of Arkansas — the hills, the trees, the beauty . . .

**It seems that there are dual journeys going on here — a physical journey and the emotional journey of turning full-timer. What has this trip taught you about yourselves?**

**Care To Share?**

We invite readers to send us recollections of their own fantastic voyages. To submit your experiences for possible publication in "Travel Memories," send an account in your own words or provide contact information to: Editor, *Scenic Route*, 1233 Janesville Ave., Fort Atkinson, WI 53538. You may also contact us by e-mailing: scenicroute@cygnusb2b.com.

**Susan:** That I had a lot of preconceived notions. You have an idea of places, you know? It's like, 'Oh, I have no desire to go there,' when in fact it's beautiful, the people are friendly and welcoming. Take Iowa. You think, 'Who would want to go there?' We wound up spending time there while we had some repair work done. And do you know what? It was fabulous! We spent the Fourth of July there and it was a delight.

**Bill:** When we first began the trip, divested ourselves of all of our worldly belongings, I felt just a huge release of burden. What a wonderfully liberating feeling that was, just traveling with what you had!

At the same time, I had a healthy respect regarding safety. Knowing your house was on your back, what happens if you get into an accident? That's it, that's our house. I think I had more fear or respect for that possibility at the beginning, and less now. Overall, there's just a much more comfortable feeling with some of the curves that life can throw you.

**After reading your website, it sounds as if you had the harder transition, Susan.**

**Susan:** The loss of a home base and community is still an adjustment. We were in Lebanon, Ohio, yesterday and they had their big apple festival. I'm looking at all the crafts, the pumpkins, the cornstalks — everything you decorate your home with in the fall. And

you feel a void. When it's planting time in the spring, I want to be putting in tomatoes.

**So what do you love about this journey, about this lifestyle?**

**Susan:** I'm a history buff. Going to other parts of the country, delving into the early history of European settlement in North America, going to the presidential libraries, that's all been wonderful to me. Bill isn't that into history, but he's really been into it, too. Next, we're going into the Civil War area.

**It sounds as if you've already looked at extending this journey.**

**Bill:** We really embarked on this as a three-year journey. As we finish our second year, all of a sudden three years is beginning to look like four or five. We've missed so much in this whirlwind tour. So we're staying somewhat flexible, and I think that's the beauty of the lifestyle. ✂

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