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# From Silver Moons to the Silver Screen *Alma's Travel Trailers*

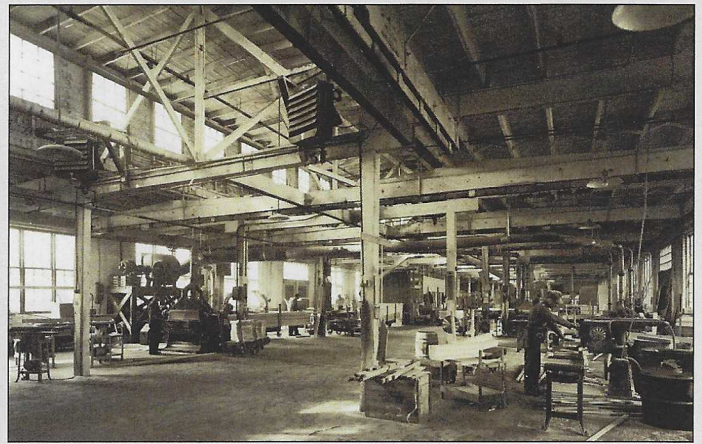
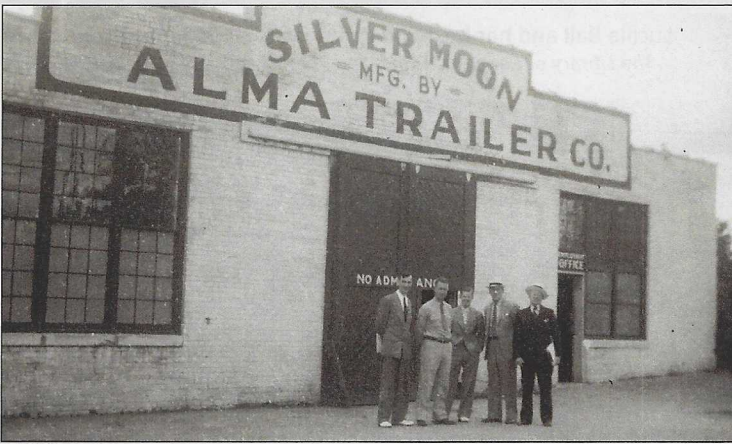
By Dianna Stampfler

*In February 1954, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) studios released a 96-minute movie called "The Long, Long Trailer" with the beloved husband-and-wife duo Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. While the film became the highest-grossing comedy at the time—earning just under five million dollars across the United States and Canada—the real star of the show was the luxurious 1953 36-foot New Moon camper made by the Redman Trailer Company in Alma, Michigan.*



A trailer produced by Alma Trailer Company in 1938. (All photos courtesy of the Alma Public Library, unless otherwise noted.)





Top left: A group of men outside of the Alma Trailer Company in Alma, Michigan, c. 1938. Top right: The interior of a factory in Alma where trailers were produced, c. 1938. Below: The Alma Trailer Company in Alma, Michigan, c. 1938.

Growing up in rural mid-Michigan at the turn of the twentieth century, William H. “Bill” and Harold F. “Harry” were the oldest of James and Lucy Redman’s five children, born in 1887 and 1889, respectively. During their early years, the family moved between Gratiot and Isabella counties where James worked as a farmer.

By 1914, James had ventured into the wholesale grocery market, constructing a 60-by-70-foot warehouse near East Superior Street and Gratiot Avenue in Alma, Michigan. Bill and Harry Redman joined the family business, which became known as Redman Brothers Wholesale Grocers. When World War I broke out, both Redman brothers completed their draft cards. While Bill Redman was not enlisted, Harold Redman became the first man in Gratiot County

accepted by the Army after passing his examination “with flying colors.”

The Redman family wholesale grocery business thrived and expanded over the years, with James working alongside his sons until his death in 1930 at the age of 70. Six years later, operations moved to a larger location near the Michigan Central Railroad. Around this time, the ambitious brothers stumbled into a new venture that would take the country by storm and put Alma, Michigan, on the map.

## A Recreational Pastime

The two oldest Redman brothers were avid hunters. In the early 1930s, they envisioned a trailer that could be used for their hunting and camping expeditions, turning to engineering friend Allen Hathaway to bring the concept to

life. However, before the brothers could take their trailer for a test drive, they had an offer to buy it. They decided to build more trailers, knowing that purchasing bulk materials would help keep costs down and profits up as the need for their new trailer concept showed no signs of stopping. After constructing 30 trailers for others throughout the area, they were finally able to build trailers for themselves.

Recognizing the opportunity before them, Hathaway and the Redman brothers formed the Alma Trailer Company in 1934 and began mass production of their two-wheeled travel trailers. Hathaway filed a patent on December 28, 1935, for a “new, original, and ornamental Design for Trailers” called the Silvermoon House Trailer. A 1936 newspaper stated that the price started at \$350, with deluxe models at \$450-\$500.



Lucille Ball and her husband Desi Arnaz in 1956. (Photo courtesy of The Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, 2021682664.)



Demand for trailers swiftly rolled along and operations moved into the shuttered 86,000-square-foot Republic Motor Truck Company plant No. 1 building at 903 Michigan Street. Outfitted with two conveyor assembly lines to speed up production, the factory's business boomed, and central Michigan became a hub for recreational vehicle manufacturing. James E. Ryan, a member of the Detroit Stock Exchange, stepped in as fiscal agent for the Alma Trailer Company in mid-1936, helping manage the orders, production schedule, and dealer relationships. Ryan eventually acquired 51% of the company, forcing out the founders.

Undeterred, the Redmans and Hathaway opened another shop in the vacant Libby, McNeill and Libby pickle canning factory building at the intersection of Bridge and East Superior. By November 1937, the Redman Trailer Company (RTC) was incorporated and introduced its first 16-foot New Moon trailer. With two different trailer companies in town, Alma was on its way to becoming the "World's Trailer Capital."

Headlines in January 1940 touted "Trailer Firm Makes Gains" and "Redman Trailers Expect Big Year" with more than 400 New Moon units sold the previous year, resulting in more than \$220,000 in gross sales. With about 60 men on the payroll, RTC was producing

16-, 19-, and 23-foot models—including the first insulated trailers with made-up beds and double floors. The RTC's projections for 1940 were favorable, with goals of doubling the output. Marketing also amped up, with participation in the East Michigan Trailer Show at Port Austin County Park on Saginaw Bay, where RTC was one of twelve companies exhibited. The company also attended other consumer shows, traveling as far as Chicago, Illinois, to reach potential customers. Around this time, RTC donated a specially equipped trailer to the Lansing Junior Chamber of Commerce to get the chamber delegation to the national convention in Washington, D.C., in



style. Along the way, the Michigan representatives stopped in several cities to show off the trailer and displays from other Alma-area industries.

## The War Effort

As America entered World War II, the Redman family banded together with other regional trailer manufacturers to fulfill other needs for the war effort. In August 1942, the Redmans parked a 45-foot trailer—the world's largest at the time—outside the Alma City Hall for two days to raise money selling war savings stamps. Bill Redman bought \$1,000 of stamps himself. The New Moon trailer was then off to the Gratiot Free Fair and then Flint, Michigan, before heading to Massachusetts to further promote the cause.

Four trailer plants in central Michigan—including the Redman Trailer Company—rallied together to build trailers for 500,000 war workers. The RTC also received government contracts to construct hospital units, ammunition trailers, and military equipment until a shortage of raw materials like rubber, copper, and steel halted production. After the war ended, RTC and the other trailer manufacturers found their units could help curb the housing shortage caused by the influx of soldiers returning home. An expanded mobile home industry began to take shape.

In September 1949, Harry Redman's son, James, assumed the role of general manager. The RTC was soon developing larger, fancier models for the growing middle class. With the war in the review mirror, people were anxious to hit the open road. This desire for adventure led former radio personality and author Clinton "Buddy" Twiss and his wife, Merle,

to embark on a two year, 41-state excursion in the late 1940s. The trip centered around their 28-by-8-foot deluxe travel trailer, affectionately named "The Monster," and led to the publication of his book *The Long, Long Trailer* in 1951.

## Destination Hollywood

From the onset, there was talk of turning Twiss's book into a motion picture and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) acquired the rights with two of its key actors in mind for the lead roles: Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, stars of the popular *I Love Lucy Show* which had premiered in October 1951.

MGM had sent queries to trailer manufacturers around the country searching for the perfect unit to star in their big-screen comedy. The *Alma Record* later reported that 200 trailers were screened before MGM selected RTC's yellow-and-white, 36-foot New Moon trailer. The article

went on to say that Ball "found that the New Moon Mobile Home's all-steel kitchen with its modern stove, electric refrigerator and hot water tank, its roomy cupboards and well-planned work surfaces made cooking for Desi a very easy and delightful task."

RTC provided MGM with ten custom-built New Moon trailers which were used for interior and exterior film shots, "finished off to the specifications of the movie production." Another newspaper noted that "Desi and Lucy each got his or her own custom-made trailer, as did the movie producer. The remaining trailers were cut in sections for filming the movie." Although the unit price settled upon as part of the deal was not revealed, the standard cost for consumers for this model was \$5,300 (\$62,500 today).

The units were sent to the studio in Culver City, California, where filming began on June 6, 1953. Ball had given birth to her second



Above: New Moon Trailers on display alongside posters highlighting its role in the movie starring Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, c. 1954. (Photo courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University.)





Above left: Men working on trailers at the Alma Trailer Company, c. 1938. Above right: A photo showing the cargo capacity of a trailer produced by Alma Trailer Company in 1938.

child just months prior and was also the mother of a two-year-old. However, she tackled an aggressive production schedule. Filming was completed by August 9, 1953.

*The Long, Long Trailer* centers around newlyweds and new camper owners Tacy and Nicholas “Nikky” Collini as they set out on their honeymoon trip through the Sierra Nevada mountains en route to Colorado. Along the way, they encounter one challenge after another as they try to acclimate themselves to their home on wheels and keep their marriage intact. In true Lucy and Desi fashion, the film is full of laughter at every turn.

A private screening of the movie was held for employees of New Moon Homes—the newly rebranded name for the Redman Trailer Company—in February 1954 at Alma’s Strand Theater. Two days later, the whole town celebrated with a parade led by the high school band. Actresses Perry Sheehan and Kathryn Reed—who played Lucy’s maid of honor and bridesmaid, respectively, in the movie—rode in an open convertible alongside Governor G. Mennen Williams and were presented with keys to the city from Mayor Everett Thompson.

Later that day, the actresses toured the New Moon Homes plant and visited the Michigan Masonic Home.

Upon entering the Strand on February 26, the public found the ticket office had been converted into a miniature trailer front. In the lobby were a series of displays from local companies involved in manufacturing the trailer, including interior décor by Doris Christensen of Alma Furniture, plumbing by Central Michigan Plumbing, and a Crosley refrigerator from Phillips’ Appliances.

MGM reported that *The Long, Long Trailer* earned just under five million dollars throughout the United States and Canada, making it the highest-grossing comedy at the time. As for New Moon Homes, executives liked the Hollywood design so much they launched an “I Love Lucy” model to the public. The *Alma Record* even reported that “Desi presented Lucy with a replica of the trailer used in the film for their own home on wheels. It boasts roomy dining, sleeping and living quarters with a modern tiled complete bath.”

## Closing Credits

In 1955, New Moon Homes surpassed 18,000 trailers produced with annual sales of about \$10 million and dealers in 46 of 48 states. The company employed 300 individuals in a variety of capacities, with an annual payroll of about \$1.5 million. By the time the 1960s rolled around, big changes arose in the industry. In late 1961, news broke that the original Alma Trailer Company had been acquired by Detroit Mobile Homes, Inc., of St. Louis, Missouri, with Ryan resigning as president. The next July, a painted fire severely damaged one of the Alma factory buildings. By that fall, operations for the company had been liquidated.

Expansion for New Moon Homes continued with the addition of factories in South Dakota, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Nebraska, and California. In the early 1960s, James Redman relocated the company’s headquarters to Dallas, Texas, around the time New Moon Homes reincorporated as Redman Industries. By 1965, there was no reference to Redman Trailer, Alma Trailer, or New Moon Homes in the Polk City Directory for Alma. Some of the Alma buildings have

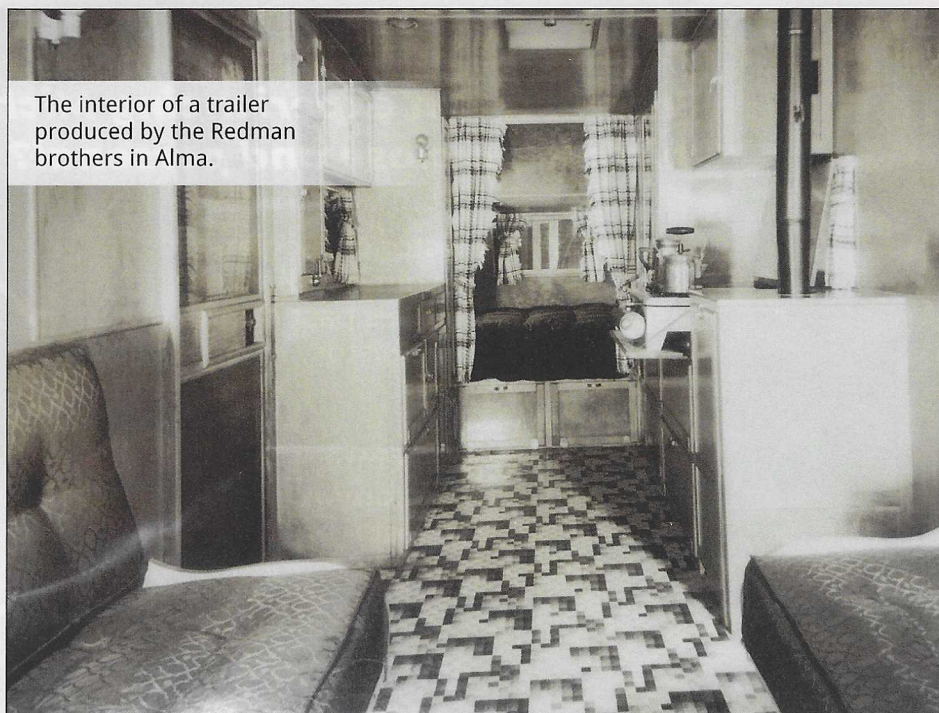


razed over the years, but the story at 903 Michigan—which produced Republic Trucks and later Alma Trailers—now manufactures Avalon and Tahoe motorboats. Redman Industries, which had become the third-largest producer of manufactured housing in the United States, was acquired in 1966 by Michigan-based Champion Enterprises—known today as Champion Homes, headquartered in Troy, Michigan.

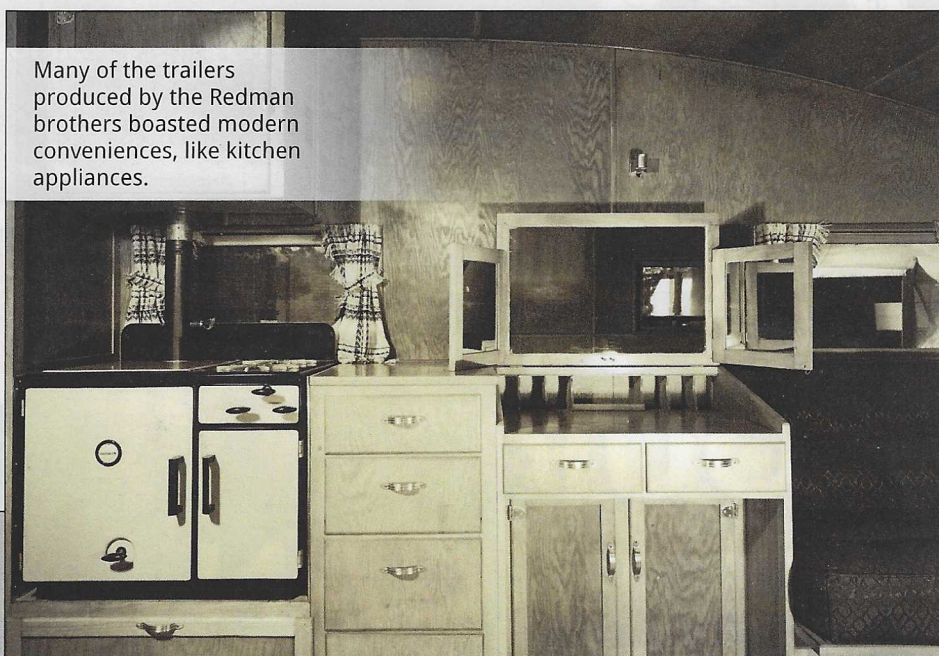
Outside of the factory, the Redman brothers supported their local community wholeheartedly.

Redman served as Alma's mayor from 1930 to 1934. He was a member of the Alma Masonic Lodge and the Order of Odd Fellows before passing away in December 1977. Harry Redman was a Mason, a member of the Rotary, and an active member of the United Methodist Church. He passed away in 1969. 🇺🇸

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The interior of a trailer produced by the Redman brothers in Alma.



Many of the trailers produced by the Redman brothers boasted modern conveniences, like kitchen appliances.

People pose with New Moon trailers in 1942. During the postwar years, trailers became larger.

