

FEATURE

Cowgirls, fly-fishing and vintage trailers_on western roads — it doesn't get much_better than this!

TEXT & PHOTOS BY LINDA HAGEN MILLER

"NO BOYS ALLOWED," SAYS BECKY Clarke. "The whole dynamic changes when the husbands are around." Feme Krumm, Mary Carter, Jessica Records, Vickie Stoppello and Arlene Tribble— all trailered up in Becky's McCall, Idaho, pasture chime in: "They're too bossy... And competitive ... They want to take over... When they drive, all the stuff in the trailers ends up on the floor... No, no — we're not about male-bashing. It's a sisterhood thing, sisters who get along ... Heck, we don't even talk about our husbands."

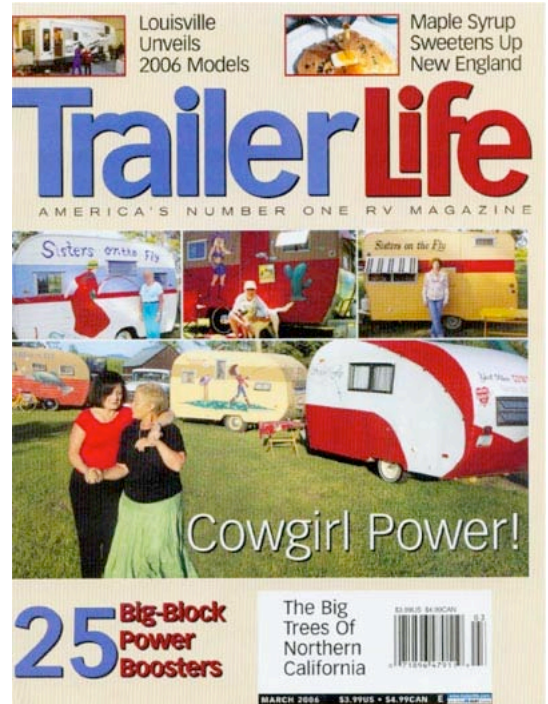
Welcome to Sisters on the Fly, outspoken adventurers and owners of vintage trailers who give a unique twist to the phrase "a room of her own." In order to get a real charge out of life, they believe a room of one's own is just fine, but a real woman needs a vintage trailer she can haul around the country and decorate to her heart's content.

The sisters don't fancy just any old trailer — they prefer the 13- to 17-foot 1950s and 1960s-vintage Shastas, Scotsmans, Alohas and more because they're well-balanced, don't sway much and are easy to tow. They say they're drawn to the original pastel-painted ovens, the trailer's rounded edges, the funky look and the fact that every one of them is teeming with history.

The sisters are not content to simply hitch their trailers to SUVs and head for the nearest fly-fishing stream. They paint the exteriors with lavish scenes of cowgirls, fly-fishers, trout in mid-air, lake scenes and, in one case, a distressed cow mistakenly hooked by a wayward fishing line. These very personal traveling bedrooms are decorated in cowgirl (or fisher girl) chic and kitsch with calico, vintage dishes. Western knickknacks, fish plaques, flannel and placards that proudly proclaim a sister sleeps here.

Sisters on the Fly was born eight years ago, while real-life siblings Becky Clarke and Maurrie Sussman were fly-fishing in Montana. They decided they were having too much fun not to share the experience. Over a bottle of wine and a freshly caught Brown trout, they hatched the idea of gathering girlfriends and traipsing around the West in search of good fly-fishing and great adventures. Becky lives in Idaho, while Maurrie lives in Arizona, and neither knew where their new sisters might come from, so they needed a way to caravan in comfort. And style. Affordable style.

No problem. Maurrie had a 1958 Holiday trailer that she used as her base when working as a camp cook at the Arizona Cowboy College, the original setting of the television program *Cowboy U*. She had restored and outfitted the trailer herself, and named it *Lucy*.



It was mighty cute, and Becky wanted one, too.

What began as a sisterly fly-fishing duo has grown into an all-girl club of more than 250 nationwide dues-paying members ranging in age from 87 to 29 (their preferred way of stating the years). Most own refurbished vintage trailers, and they get together several times a year to caravan with their vintage trailers, fly-fish, attend "cowgirl college" and generally rack up some good times. And they're seriously elitist — no kids, and no men. "My husband loves that I do this," says Jessica Records, who's driven up from Hillsboro, Oregon. Jessica painted a tranquil lake fishing scene on the side of *Vema's Rose*, her 1962 Shasta, and for this afternoon's get together, she's amassed ajar full of lilacs to decorate the folding table and chair sit_ting under the tarp.

When Becky and Maurrie were looking for guides for their first trip in 1999, Feme Krumm was the natural choice. She was one of the first female fly-fishing guides in Montana, and a 10-year veteran of Montana and Idaho expeditions.

Ferne proved to be the perfect guide, and was easily integrated into the sisterhood. By 2002, she had purchased a 1963 Aloha, named it *Syringa* (after the Idaho state flower), and had her daughter paint a skirted fly-fisher on one side and a trout on the other. She installed a recliner in the dining nook, hitched *Syringa* to her Toyota Tundra, and joined up.

In the past six years, the Sisters on the Fly have caravanned, camped, fished and learned "cowgirling" at working ranches throughout the West and British Columbia. This year their most ambitious trail drive took them on a three-week cavalcade to Colorado, Kansas, Arkansas, Tennessee and Maryland. Along the way the founding sisters camped with the Midwest and Eastern contingents, and capped off the trip with a hoedown in Arkansas.

Throughout the year, get-togethers are as casual as the annual Pendleton Round-Up in Oregon, where the ladies circle the campfire then head off for serious rodeo-watching, or as organized as the Ultimate Fly Fishing Adventure and Cowgirl College. Guided flyfishing trips are pre-planned, pre-paid excursions to pristine locales such as the Gallatin River in Montana for three days of fishing lessons, lodging, gourmet food, wine and martinis for \$1,200 per person.

Cowgirl College is modeled after the original Arizona Cowboy College, minus the hairy-chested edge. This year, participants will meet at Willow Creek Ranch in Wyoming, where they can learn to rope, brand, herd cattle and ride horses. Or, as Maurrie says, they can do "as little as they want." Trip dates are June 10-14, 2006, and the cost is \$1,040 per person. You can bring your trailer or stay in ranch accommodations.

However, it's hard to imagine doing anything with the sisters without your very own trailer. The talent, individuality, humor and outlandish style that go into these little mobile homes give the women an uncommon opportunity to toss off the decorating rules and bring on the personality. On one side of the *Rhinestone Cowgirl*, Vicde Stoppello's 1956 Fireball, a look-alike cowgirl complete with bejeweled hat, boots and shirt, casts a fly-fishing line. Follow the line to the back and you'll see the cowgirl has wrapped the line around a squawking chicken. On the opposite side of the Fireball, she's finally hooked a startled cow. Vickie's daughter, Rachael, a professional San Francisco artist, created the scene with a sizable brush stroke of humor and obvious admiration for her mother.

Becky Clarke's 1956 Aljo is named *Sister Sioux #2*, and was also painted by Rachael Stoppello. But before *Sister Sioux #2* was eligible for a professional paint job and skilled decorating inside, it needed a major clean up.

"Shorty [her husband] found my trailer in Twin Falls, Idaho. It was a mess," she says. "A disgusting mattress and toilet, the door wouldn't stay closed, screens and windows were broken. There was a hole in the floor, the tin skin had to be removed and the frame rebuilt. I had to wear gloves and a mask to clean it out, and ended up making two trips to the dump."

Today, *Sister Sioux #2* is a far cry from its original state of neglect. Artist Rachel Stoppello painted an oversized trout about to bite an elaborate fly on the left side of the tan-and-red trailer. But as beautiful as the trout is, the traffic stopper is the shapely, halter- and short-shirt-clad cowgirl on the other side.

"They have old trailers and they fish? I gotta join," said Arlene Tribble when she heard about Sisters on the Fly. She bought a 1954 Empire, stripped and replaced the trailers aluminum skin and painted the exterior red and white. Vinyl stencils say GOD_BLESS COWGIRLS on the front and rear of the trailer. Inside, the tiny kitchen is decorated with vintage linens and red dishes, pots and pans. When Arlene pulls *Cowgirl Whiskey Rose* to a stop, she sets up the chintz-covered table and chairs, hauls out the CAMP RUNNAMUCK sign, and hangs a cowboy boot full of flowers beside the door.

Mary Carter speculates that the previous owner of her 1964 Aloha was "an old logger who saved just about every six-pack case he ever emptied. They were stuffed everywhere." Once she cleaned out the "memorabilia," she painted the exterior gold and red, made removable striped awnings and added SISTERS ON THE FLY in two-foot-tall letters. By sister's standards, the exterior of Mary's trailer is fairly conservative, but what *Ruby* lacks in external decor she more than makes up for with interior touches. Straw hats, calico, horse shoes, metal fish on a string and Western-themed linens pull together a lot of living in 13 feet.

The Sisters on the Fly's formal mission statement, "Offering empowerment and sisterhood through exceptional adventures," sets the scene by encouraging women to get creative (and pretty dirty) restoring and decorating their own vintage trailers. Then the sisters challenge them to learn how to haul the thing, back it up and troubleshoot problems (as always, duct tape is a favorite). Last, but never least, the sisters introduce the new gals to road trips, fishing, horseback riding and martinis around the campfire, plant them in the middle of the wilderness with a bunch of like-minded women and expect them to have a rollicking good time. The formula has success written all over it.