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NATURALIZING YOUR FAMILY

The Camping Way to See America

By Charlton Ogburn, Jr.

Most Americans, if they set out to explore their country, would find four-fifths of its landscape as exotic as Africa's. They would also find themselves wonderfully rewarded. At least that was my belief on returning home from a 9,600-mile transcontinental driving trip which a writing assignment required me to take two and a half years ago.

The United States is a lot to encompass—how much, only one who has

toured it can hope to comprehend. Yet that may be all the more reason for getting to know as much of it as time permits. Only one who has traveled it can begin to grasp what its settlement must have cost, or appreciate what a miracle it is that one popularly-elected government can administer a land of such immense congregations of humanity, of such pulsing energies, of such limitless stretches of farmland, forest and desert. Only one who has seen for himself can have a true (if still inadequate) idea of its physical diversity, the grandeur of its mountains and sweep of its plains, the beauty that remains despite all we have done to disfigure it.

For the family with children, the reasons for getting out and seeing are all the more impelling, it seems to me. If it is true for adults, it is at least as true for youngsters that excursions abroad in the land, planned with the capacities of their age-levels in mind, can give them an awareness of their homeland and arouse in them an excitement about it that no amount of reading or instruction will.

But granting these things, there remains the question of practicalities.

Let us note to begin with that a member of a national firm like Haskins & Sells with 60-odd offices starts out

with advantages in the form of professional acquaintances all around the country. They can tell him about local attractions that can multiply the rewards of a trip. They can also inform him on local conditions. (Are roads to Crater Lake snow-free by mid-June? Is southern Arizona tolerable in August?) He has someone who can put him on to a doctor, dentist, or reliable garage if need arises.

A trip by car may be planned to take full advantage of motels and restaurants. Being waited on is agreeable. So is air-conditioning in the summer lowlands and a dip in the motel pool. But these amenities come high—as

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much as \$50 or even \$70 a day over and above motoring costs for a couple with two or three adolescent children. And there are other drawbacks, which I shall come to. The alternative is camping.

Those to whom that word has connotations of charred frankfurters and punishing nights on the ground will dismiss the possibility out of hand. That could be a mistake. I think everyone owes it to himself at least to consider whether camping might not be for him. Last summer, on the precedent of my coast-to-coast, Texas-to-Canada tour of the year before, my wife and I—neither of us masochists—went on a 7,300-mile motor trip around the country with two daughters of eleven and fifteen. We spent twenty nights in camp-grounds, three on a ranch in Wyoming, three with my wife's mother in Colorado and four in motels when decent camp-grounds were unavailable and we needed a bit of luxury anyway. It was the biggest and most enjoyable adventure we have ever shared. Of course, taking a month off is not the only way to see the country. It can be done equally well in annual instalments, one region at a time.

Awaiting the camper is a king's domain—over 292,000 square miles of national forests and over 40,000 in the 214 units of the national park system comprising the most stirring scenery in the country and some of the world's finest. (National forests, national parks, national wildlife refuges, Indian reservations, state parks, and the parks and preserves of southern Canada are shown, and much further useful information given, on a map entitled *Vacationlands* obtainable for \$1.00 on paper, \$2.00 on fabric, from The National Geographic Society, Dept. 87, Washington, D.C. 20036.) As for camping itself, the question today is not whether you can put up with its inconveniences but how far you wish to go in equipping yourself to overcome them. And with all it has to offer, the equipment that will enable you to get the most out of it can prove a very worthwhile investment.

For our first family camping trip, in 1956, we had a station wagon, a little gasoline stove, a small ice chest, air mattresses and a heavy canvas tent designed to be erected by Atlas. That was standard among the few campers at the time. Tents are now vastly lighter and handier, which no doubt accounts for last year's sales of a million units. But for extended trips most campers now rely on "recreational vehicles," of

which 390,000 were sold last year and 490,000 are expected to be sold this year, according to the marketing-consultant firm of Elrick and Lavidge, Inc. These offer built-in bunks, stove, ice-box or refrigerator, counter, storage compartments, electrical systems and, in the more elaborate versions, toilets. Two-thirds of those now in use, the Recreational Vehicle Institute states in *Facts and Trends*, are trailers. Of these, almost three-quarters are "travel trailers"—rooms on wheels—which begin with 8-foot models sleeping two at about \$800 and go up through 15-foot family-sized models at close to \$2,000. The compact "camping trailers" comprise those that open up into tents sleeping four or six and cost upwards of \$400, and "hard-tops" which resemble travel trailers when erected and, like tent-trailers, fold down to a level below the rear-view mirror; these start at about \$1,000.

Of the all-on-four-wheels camping vehicles, by far the most popular are the "truck campers," designed for owners of pickup trucks and addicts of the rough

back-country. The full-sized, fully-equipped "coach" that slides over the truck costs up to \$2,500, or more, bringing the price of the whole rig to about \$6,000. (It was of a trip around the country in one of the first of these that John Steinbeck wrote in *Travels With Charlie*.) The camping-equipped "step vans" put out by General Motors, beginning at about \$5,000, have the great advantage of full communication between front seat and household section. At the top of the category, and the ultimate in equipment, are "motor homes"—in effect, travel trailers mounted on a truck chassis; they run up to 27 feet in length and \$15,000 in price. My own preference is for the familiar minibus equipped for camping, with elevating roof. We have had one of the early models since 1962. (I drove it and ate and slept in it on my 9,600-mile tour.) Today, with improvements, one costs about \$5,000, or more, though a smaller, lower-powered version may be had for about \$3,200.

The minibus will sleep four or five, utilizing three canvas hammocks, but for elbow room we put up a tent for the girls. Spartan compared with most recreational vehicles, but a practical second car, shorter than the usual station wagon, ours has proved a delight

on trips of a day or a month. One reason is that while on the road the girls can sit at a table in it, move around, or stretch out. The great drawback of trailers is that while under way the children are confined to a car seat. Riding in a trailer is illegal in most states, risky in any. So it pays to forego long daily mileages in favor of frequent stops to let the children roam free for a spell. If they are interested in, or can be interested in, bird watching, flowers and trees or rock collecting, so much the better—by far. Reading, if they have acquired the habit, will greatly speed the duller miles.

With equipment, the rule is this: the further you go to avoid the drawbacks of camping, the more you sacrifice its rewards. One that suffers is economy—though equipment of all kinds may be rented, from a tent to a motor home. Another is the very real satisfaction of making shift. Housekeeping on a camping trip takes more time and effort with minimal facilities. Putting up and taking down a tent in a drizzle and stowing gear on a car roof can be tire-

some. But pleasures earned are sweeter, physical exertion adds savor to life, and there is nothing like a sense of accomplishment. More than one urbanite, buying a trailer with misgivings, has shortly found himself *really* camping—backpacking where cars cannot go.

In the matter of utensils and supplies, there are two things to remember. First, the more you take, the more trouble you will have getting at what you really need. Secondly, the United States is well equipped with stores in which the camper can buy what he lacks at the moment. By visualizing step by step the routine of the camping day you can pretty well anticipate your needs. But your local bookshop should be able to provide you with one of the how-to booklets on camping, if you wish to be forewarned.

Don't be intimidated by the thought of meals. You can save space and labor by using disposable items ranging from plates to frying pans. Most camping is in warm weather, so prepared cold foods will go a long way in meeting the family's needs. On the numerous solo trips I have had to take I have found that for hot meals there are plenty of good things that come in cans and require no other treatment than heating in a saucepan. Cooking over an open fire can add to the atmos-

phere and make possible distributing the work—and charred franks fresh from the flame are better than you might think.

There is unforgettable charm in ending and beginning the day in scenes where nature accounts for more than man. Having chipmunks run beneath the picnic table for crumbs or magpies and brilliant blue Steller's jays come down for contributions, watching the sun set behind a cathedral of volcanic rock, looking up at the stars beyond the black silhouettes of spruce, palmetto or western juniper, knowing silence at night, and clean air, waking to the singing of wood thrush or cactus wren—this is the camper's enviable lot. And the compensations are not all of wilderness origin. Even if you scarcely exchange a word with your fellows, there is a pleasant sense of human community in simple, shared circumstances recalling our rural past, and this is something fast being lost in American life. There is the tang of wood smoke at evening and the aroma of frying bacon on the crisp air of early morn-

Some of these things and others besides have a special appeal for children. We went on our first camping trip when one daughter was three and the other on the way, and though it rained part of each day of seven out of eight—this was the southern Appalachians—we still enjoyed it. Perhaps because I have never done it, I should hesitate to drive from coast to coast with children under eleven, but only because continued days of driving are hard on them. With young children, that is the crucial question: how much driving can they take? Camping is generally a lark for them: the novelty; life in the relatively open; independent explorations of the campground; other children to play with; parents without grown-up responsibilities doing the same kind of things they are.

The popularity of camping has been soaring. This both testifies to its attractions and creates the chief impediment to its enjoyment. There are more than 29,000 campsites in the national parks, 80,000 in the national forests and a great many in state parks. Yet at the height of the season you may well find every site filled in the more popular parks by two o'clock and for the whole weekend by Friday afternoon.

I point this out not to be discouraging but to bring out the need to be forehanded. For camping, the choice times of year are before July or after August—if you can manage to take off just after school lets out or delay until as long as possible before it begins. A day on the road should begin and end early. Spending no less than half of each week at one park (and most national parks are worth far more) makes for a much more relaxed and enjoyable vacation. Where feasible, avoid the beaten path. Recognize that a "primitive" park is far more pleasant than one with overcrowded facilities.

Here I should add also: support the National Parks Association in the plan of regional dispersion it is urging, under which provision would be made to spread overnight visitation from the national parks to other public lands adjacent to most of them—the much larger national forests and even vaster holdings of the Bureau of Land Management—and onto the privately owned lands adjacent to the public lands. As a devotee of the parks I have selfish motives in presenting its cause to a body of men and women whose experience as accountants gives them a special understanding of the part efficient management has played in our nation's success and far more knowledge than most

conservationists of the way America conducts its business.

If the needs of campers are to be met in the future, private enterprise will have to play a growing role—as, fortunately, it is doing. Private campgrounds, charging between \$1.50 and \$5.00 a site per day, are at present too sparse and too many of them pack the campers too closely. Some are quite attractive, however, and in addition to wooded sites and hot showers may offer swimming, boating and fishing. The number has been rapidly increasing, and with more sophisticated entrepreneurship entering the field and campers becoming used to paying adequately, the quality is undoubtedly improving.

Meanwhile, it pays the camper to know what is available. Road maps now conventionally give the location of most public campgrounds with a checklist of their facilities. Private campgrounds as well are located in guidebooks like the *Rand McNally Guidebook to Campgrounds*, which

sells for \$3.95 and lists more than 12,000 grounds in the U.S. and Canada with the number of sites, the facilities and the fee at each.

If the idea of a stay on a working farm or ranch appeals to you, \$2.00 sent to Farm Vacations and Holidays, Inc., at 36 East 57th Street, New York, N.Y., 10022, will bring a guidebook with details on over 500 in the U.S. and Canada that take paying guests, many having campsites; it was from this source that we learned of Klondike Ranch in Wyoming that was one of the high spots of our trip last summer.

Lastly there is your address book. Surely you and your passengers will be able to count on your fellow professionals for a turn at their showers and washing machines when you have been some days apart from either—and show it!

A nationally-advertised all-inclusive back-pack, with two-man tent, sleeping bag, foam pad and allowance for cooking gear and food for a week, weighing only 15 pounds, may be had for \$159.00. You may wish to bear that in mind against the time when the urge to head off down the crest of the Great Smokies or to see what lies on the other side of the Grand Tetons becomes irresistible. □