

The History of Camping

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The first visiting human that wandered what we now call North America around 15,000 years ago did not call it camping; he called it home. Soon, enough visiting humans were gathered together in the same place that they began to live in caves. Other humans, whose caves were not as nice, began fighting with the first bunch about whose cave was whose. They called that war. This led to more camping. Each group tried to outdo the other by having the best camping gear money could buy and picking the best camping spots. This part is still going on today.

The American Civil War produced the best camping gear so far on this continent. After that war was over, a few of the boys that had come of age in those camps decided to do it for fun, and they were very good at it. The Adirondack Mountains of New York State were a handy choice to practice this new pastime for the young men that had returned to city life. The forest was glorious. The lakes and streams held fish to catch, and the woods sustained game to hunt.

William Murray wrote in the *Meridian Literary Recorder* of an 1867 trip he made to the Adirondacks. "Indeed, it is marvelous what benefit physically is often derived from a trip of a few weeks to these woods. The air which you there inhale is such as can be found only in high mountain regions, pure rarified, and bracing." Murray was not the only wealthy east coast city dweller that had pleasing memories of the place and the Adirondack Park was officially dedicated in 1892.

Horace Kephart was not a wealthy east coast city dweller; he was a burnt out librarian from the mid-west. He wrote, "I owe my life to these mountains, and I want them preserved." Kephart wrote those words in his office located one block down the street from where I am writing these. He and others championed the Great Smoky Mountains. Kephart first published *Camping and Woodcraft: A Handbook for Vacation Campers and for Travelers in the Wilderness* in 1906. It ranks sixth among the ten best-selling sporting books of all time. But Kephart is perhaps best known for his decade-long crusade to help protect the Smokies as a national park. His philosophy on camping was, "The man with the knapsack is never lost. No matter whither he may stray, his food and shelter are right with him, and home is wherever he may choose to stop." Reminds me of the first visiting human.

Those wealthy east coast city dwellers grew fond of their forays to the bracing forest and wanted more. And those wealthy railroad barons were happy to oblige them. The new national parks in the western states offered fresh and new camping destinations which were only a luxurious train ride away. Geologically speaking, they also offered more dramatic, jagged, and taller mountains than their worn-down cousins in the Adirondacks. And speaking of camping gear, the sky was the limit.

Then Henry Ford made the automobile affordable for almost everyone. This meant that the city dwellers no longer needed to be wealthy to enjoy the bracing forest. This also meant that mountains were not the only playground. Creeks, rivers, lakes, and even the ocean joined the game. Camper numbers swelled. Naturally, automobiles and camping gear got married and needed a place to park. Cities like Denver, Colorado joined the joy. According to *Denver*

Municipal Facts, 79,433 people in 23,658 cars visited the 160 acre Overland Park Campground alongside the Platte River as it ran through town in 1925. Walmart began allowing free overnight RV parking at many of their stores in 2006. One store manager said of the decision, "They are just shoppers that take a long time to make up their mind."

Meanwhile, back in the Appalachian Mountains, most everyone lived near a creek or river and the bracing forest was out the back door. Enter mountain balds. Even though they were worn down like the Adirondacks, the southern Appalachians were much taller, and some had no trees on top so you could see forever. Wagons loaded with all the gear the horses could pull up the drover trails and a few hardy automobiles would make it to the top for extended stays every summer.

Benton MacKay also thought the mountain balds were special and that Kephart's idea about the knapsack was sound. He dreamed up the Appalachian Trail to run along the ridge tops from Georgia to Maine. Most folks thought he was nuts; "No one is going to walk that far for fun," they said. MacKay's idea turned out to be a good one as well.

This all went along slowly for years while the humans from all over the world had a couple of big wars. Camping became necessary again. After the second one, Americans especially, needed a break. Some of them started hearing the call of the bracing forest and the gurgle of the mountain stream. Automobiles and camping gear had kids which grew up to be recreational vehicles. Now the parking places needed water, sewer, and electric hookups just like home in the city which brings us back again to the first visiting human.

Fringe groups evolved, mostly spurred on by folks trying to outdo the fancy, hooked-up parking place owners. They came up with ideas like camping cabins, treehouses, and glamping. Some campsites left the bracing forest and landed in orchards, alongside wineries and breweries, and on farms like the Homeplace.

Nowadays, all types of people are still doing all the herein described stuff somewhere, which is swell. Visit the Homeplace Campground and Gardens and try a little yourself.