



Your Family Campsite

The Life-Changing Nature Connection

**A Six-Step Guide to:
An Easy-to-Create, Affordable
Family Retreat**

By Darby Checketts

Introduction

The Ultimate Retreat from a World of Turmoil to Nature's Wonderland

There are many devices we humans use to escape from problems or unpleasantness. You can lose yourself in various mood remedies or you can lose yourself in service to others. I just read an article regarding how to deal with the gloominess of the 2020-21 pandemic. It suggests, "Just be a helper." Help those who are struggling more than you are and your own troubles will shrink as you do.

There are many philosophic approaches to increasing your happiness. Cultivate those that brighten your frame of mind, increase your zest for life, and strengthen your faith.

There is solace in the natural world. There is such beauty in the natural world. There are those who go to *bathe their souls in the forest*. You may think that "bathe in the forest" is just a figure of speech but walking among the ferns and wildflowers and among the trees in particular *is* to cleanse one's soul of the turmoil that our modern world too often represents whether it is about work pressures, freeway traffic, information overload, financial worries, relationship struggles, health concerns, or the societal issues that tend to overwhelm us.

My first exposure to *cleansing in nature* came as a youth as I would go camping with my family. As the years went by, our family eventually bought a 20-acre ranch in South Phoenix, Arizona. We raised dates (as in date palms) and watermelons. We kept a flock of sheep, a small herd of cattle, and a stable of quarter horses and Shetland ponies. I loved caring for the crops and being around the animals, especially the horses.

Over a half-century ago, I married Sharon. For several decades, we were primarily and happily occupied with rearing our seven children and providing for them. My career led to my life's work as an author. Then, Sharon and I "semi-retired." I had been blessed to have a career coach who taught me the secrets to "re-inventing" myself at the various stages of life. For four years, I served our community as a substitute schoolteacher. I worked for a couple of years in the "outdoor outfitter" retail industry. Sharon and I served our community as education advisors to assist college students with serious financial challenges. We eventually established a scholarship fund to further extend our service to them. I became *re-focused* rather than *re-tired*.

Along the way, we returned to nature. We bought a compact motorhome. We traveled the Intermountain West region of the USA. As our national parks became more congested, campgrounds became more crowded, and RV resorts more expensive, we decided we needed our own family campsite. We created what we affectionately call the "Owl's Nest" (ON). The remainder of this document is the step-by-step process we followed to do so. No project before had so engaged my creativity and brought me such deep satisfaction. It is a more feasible and affordable enterprise than you may think. Here are the steps...

Step 1 - Where?

Step 2 - Infrastructure, Storage, and Securing Your Property

Step 3 - An Initial, Portable Cabin (an RV or a Good Tent)

Step 4 - Special Features / The Facilities and Gear for Outdoor Activities

Step 5 - An OHV and a Barn of Your Own

Step 6 - The Crowning Glory... a Cozy Cabinette

Step 1 - Where?

My principal geographic frame of reference is Utah where there are many wide-open spaces and numerous rural communities where land is affordable. I am confident that this is the case in every one of the United States. Here is our story. One day when driving home in our small *Pleasure Way* motorhome along what I call the *heartland corridor of central Utah*, U.S. Highway 89, we passed through many rural towns. I love them all. As we wound our way northward through the rolling hills and valleys of Sanpete County, we passed through lovely Manti, Utah, with its beautiful hilltop temple. As we passed through tidy Mt. Pleasant and further north, Loafer Mountain was soon on the horizon. It was wearing its fall coat of many colors. I turned to Sharon and said, "This would be a good spot--south and east of the busy Wasatch Front--to create our own campsite. I wonder what property would cost here?" When we got home, I Googled "property in Indianola/Milburn/Fairview/Mt. Pleasant, Utah." I discovered a realtor who specialized in the area. Soon we met him in the mountain foothills of Sanpete County.

In 2015, we purchased three acres. The lot was in a secluded area and covered with 80-plus Juniper trees and some Pine and Gambel Oak trees. We could imagine our grandchildren scampering through the trees. A shady picnic site was apparent near the Oak trees. As you read on, you will discover that various individual trees or groups of trees became the basis for especially atmospheric enhancements to our new family campsite. By the way, the photo on this guide's cover page was taken at the Owl's Nest by our son, Ken.

Most of Central Utah is not commercially developed. It is farming country. It is rural and therefore quiet and peaceful. This is not the high-priced land along the more northern *Wasatch Back* as it is called--property in the areas of Heber City, Midway, Park City, Kamas, and others that would be more prestigious, but therefore much more pricey. These are bedroom communities to the Salt Lake City urban and Provo/Orem suburban communities. If you want prestige, you can pay tens of thousands of dollars for just an acre in these areas. As for me and my household, we prefer the lower cost of a quieter back-country environment with rural neighbors who count their sheep and cattle rather than their cabin's square footage and how many OHV's (Off Highway Vehicles) are parked in the driveway. There is a side benefit to discovering the more rural environs of central and southern Utah. This accomplishes a needed re-distribution of prosperity across Utah beyond the bustling, highly prosperous Wasatch Front. These same factors hold true in rural Nebraska, Oregon, Missouri, Alabama, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and across the USA. Go buy three acres in a tranquil, rural area. Then discover what you can do to make it a delightful family retreat. Here we are, Darby & Sharon with our RV parked on the driveway of our beloved "Owl's Nest" and at Zion National Park in the winter.



Step 2 - Infrastructure, Storage, and Securing Your Property

Our rural property had some scraggly trees in need of serious pruning and some rutted pathways along which water travels from the hills in the springtime and where certain ATV riders had previously taken short cuts through our property. We went to work on the vital infrastructure that a good driveway represents. We became acquainted with one longtime resident of the development of which our property is a part. He is a rugged and savvy individualist who proved to be a source of much down-to-earth wisdom. He had a small excavator and knew the local sources of sand and gravel. He recommended no pea-sized gravel that tends to disappear into the soil, but rather “2-minus” rocks that stay atop the dirt and eventually form a nearly pavement-like surface. We planned for a wide driveway with space at the end to park a couple of camping trailers and a car or two. BTW: When you are in the “rural” world, you’ll meet lots of practical people who know how to get things done without spending a lot of money. And they are often the ones with the very skills and tools that are needed to do the tough stuff us city folk are not always prepared to do.

Next, we posted some no trespassing signs at strategic points around the property just to let the ATV riders know that someone “for real” now owned the property and planned to improve it. We have had no further intruders over the five years we have owned our special three acres. We have discovered the reality of a “rural rule of respect” for each other’s property. It is about, “You don’t bother my stuff and I won’t bother yours.” There is enough space between us and our neighbors that we feel as though we are fifty miles deep into the Juniper Forest. It is so quiet with only two or three cars passing by each day on the dirt road at the edge of our property.

We knew we would have tools, picnic/cooking equipment, and toys to store, so we contracted for the construction of a quality 8x10 storage shed. We made sure it had a skylight and air vent in the roof. In addition to the door lock that was included, I added a door lock hasp with padlock.

We put some signs at the entrances to our property and on the storage shed. I found high-quality cedarwood signs online at reasonable prices. We put a chain and no trespassing sign across our driveway entrance. The sign currently on the storage shed is a psychological deterrent. It now reads: “Grandkids’ Barn & Tool Shed.” We had sand hauled in to spread around the shed for two purposes--to be our picnic area and to accommodate those who wanted to come visit and pitch their tents without having to deal with any mud. We put in an inexpensive fire pit that consists of the top half of a 50-gallon drum planted in the sand with a lid that assures the quick termination of any fire. Behind the storage shed is a nice wood pile.



Step 3 - An Initial, Portable Cabin (an RV or a Good Tent)

We already had a nice little motorhome that was our cabin on wheels and that served as our lodging at the Owl's Nest. A nice travel trailer will do. And we initially invited our kids to bring their tents. Our quality rock driveway made an excellent place to park the motorhome. For the first few years, we just enjoyed having our own campground (or RV resort) without having to make reservations six months in advance, deal with traffic and crowds, pay overnight camping fees, and worry about the "quiet hours" for running our RV generator. Our campground was all ours and so private and so quiet.

Step 4 - Special Features / The Facilities and Gear for Outdoor Activities

Next, I began to "imagineer" (as the folks at Disney do). I dreamed up things I thought the grandkids and I would like to do. I installed a tetherball pole and a horseshoe pit. I created a safe place for BB gun target practice. We put a briquette barbecue grill in the storage shed along with a *Lifetime* picnic table. As we have no running water, we keep water storage containers in various places. Without permanent toilet facilities, we acquired a *Reliance* porta-potty with its ingenious *Double-Doodie* bags. The storage shed serves a secondary purpose as our "privacy barn" for making use of the porta-potty. We also have toilet facilities in our motorhome. Here are other fun features of the Owl's Nest that Sharon and I created for the grandkids to enjoy.

Owl's Perch: The Owl's Nest was intended to give the Owl (RV) a place to rest. We figured that the grandkids would love an *owl's perch* up in a tree somewhere. I had set my eyes upon one Juniper tree that had its central trunk removed, probably by an early farmer looking for a long, straight post to use for some construction project. From around the center trunk, four branches reached out ready to suspend a special platform among the tree's foliage. I have two metal chairs attached to the north end of the perch to accommodate those who would choose to sit for a while. There is a ship's helm at the other end to give children the effect of steering a great ship through the sky. The view of our valley is outstanding and there is always a breeze blowing through the branches to make the perch a comfortable place to hang out. Online, I discovered special "movable mounts" for suspending a tree house that do not damage or restrict the tree. I did a "MacGyver" by going to Home Depot and purchasing various pieces of deck hardware to make my own version of these mounts to save a lot of money versus buying those that are ready-made. There are many websites that provide ingenious ideas for constructing tree houses and for making these appealing and safe for youngsters.



Grandsons' Bear Cave: Five of the most enthusiastic visitors to the Owl's Nest are the five sons of our youngest son and his wife. The boys are currently all under the age of thirteen. The oldest brother was inspired to build what kids usually call a "fort" made from whatever odds and ends may be available. Big brother seized upon a pile of cuttings from my various tree pruning projects. The boys designated their creation as "The Bear Cave." Note: The bear statue is optional - available at www.blackforestdecor.com.



Picnic Area with Table and Campfire Pit: What is family camping without cookouts and campfires? Not enough. There is no competition for an outdoor breakfast consisting of sausage/bacon, crispy hash browns, fluffy pancakes, scrambled eggs, and lots of orange juice. Okay, French cuisine is delightful. Do crepes instead of pancakes as you wish, but I cannot imagine serving Eggs Benedict and crepes to John Wayne or Clint Eastwood on a cattle drive. A vegan diet can be supremely healthy, but I cannot imagine serving a quinoa and kale salad with tofu yogurt to a bunch of hungry ranch hands as Ben Cartwright's guests at their Ponderosa lodge in Nevada (Google "Bonanza" TV Series). Smile.

Sharon and I knew we needed a special new picnic site apart from our tent camping area. We identified a circular grove of large juniper trees that we carefully pruned to become our "sacred site" for special family connections. We built our "Millennial Picnic Table" from the legal logs of a fallen White Fir tree and added an 11-foot umbrella from Wayfair. Then, we heard grandchild after grandchild ask, "When we come to the Owl's Nest, will we have a campfire?" Oops, our one fire pit was at the sanded tent site and the drought conditions in our high desert forest had increasingly raised the unthinkable prospect of forest wildfires. So, we went to Cal Ranch and bought one of Camp Chef's marvelous propane fire pits. At first our children asked, is it a real fire? The answer is that there are actual multi-colored dancing flames that are hot with lava rocks that glow. An added benefit is that there is no smoke to blow in your face and make your clothes all smokey. Below is the result...picnic grove, natural picnic table, and a marvelously modern and safe fire pit. Cookout + Campfire = A Family Connection Miracle.



Tour of Trees: We love trees. We created a *Tour of Trees* represented by the following special placard. This gives our grandchildren the opportunity to appreciate the phenomenally valuable role of trees in our earth's ecology and to understand their importance in adding so much personality to our three-acre property.



A Tribute to Trees: Thank you faithful trees for the green and colorful character you add to our property...the stability your roots provide the soil beneath you...the canopy of shade you offer us...the firewood your dead branches represent under carefully prescribed conditions...fallen leafy needles that provide a soft and water-proof carpet beneath our feet...oxygen you breath forth each night. And, special thanks to *The Mother Tree* for holding our "Owl's Perch" aloft among your four perfectly placed branches so our children can play as they survey our beautiful valley and the nearby mountains.

Step 5 - An "OHV" and a Barn of Your Own

Okay, our friends had them. We wanted some local mobility along the 300 miles of back-country trails and dirt roads that surrounded our property. We knew our grandkids would enjoy rides in one of those OHV (Off-Highway Vehicles) known as Side-x-Sides, so we bought a small 2016 Honda Pioneer 500. It became affectionately known as the "Owlet," the Owl's baby. What fun it has added. We bought a trailer and towed the owlet back and forth from the Salt Lake City area. The trailer-towing thing became tedious and it was dangerous on the freeway, we thought. We needed a home for the owlet, so we had *Cumberland Buildings* create a 10x16 custom gambrel-roof barn to further enhance our property. We added the horse artwork to the exterior wall. We could not afford a horse, so rather than have a horse *in* the barn, we chose to have a horse *on* the barn. We call the owlet's home, the *Horse Barn*. It has a separate rear driveway with a garage-like, metal roll-up door. It is a secure place for our Honda Side-x-Side and for other equipment such as our small electric generator, chain saw, portable Bissel rug vac, etc.



Step 6 - The Crowning Glory... a Cozy Cabinette

We enjoyed parking our motorhome at the Owl's Nest, but eventually realized that there really was no place for visitors to call "home base." We had a storage shed, picnic area, fun toys, and a barn. Sharon said, "We need a cozy little cabin to hang out in and as a place for children to roll-out their bedding to do easy sleepovers that are much more comfortable than tent camping. Once again, we called upon *Cumberland Buildings* to create a 10x18 overnight cabin with a four-foot-deep front porch. Inside we have a large wool-woven rug, a small maple dining table, a couple of chairs, and nine throw pillows for lounging. We eventually added a removable "on-porch" facility for using a second *Reliance* porta-potty.



Add a canvas enclosure and...*voila*, there's "en-porch" privacy!



Our cozy, little cabin was almost cozy. It initially had only rough timber showing on the inside until we decided to insulate the walls and redecorate with wood paneling as shown below...



This interior design was accomplished by D&S (smile) Interior Decorators. Key features include the rustic-beam recessed ceiling, a colorful wool-woven rug, a distinctive throw pillow rack, throw pillows from *at-home*, with an original mural by *Vincente de las Montañas* (a.k.a. me).



A 2022 Addendum – The Pirates Roost

Ever since building the Owl's Perch (see page 5), I have wished that it were more of a treehouse—with a roof and some features that would represent more intrigue for our grandchildren. I conceived the idea of transforming the *Owl's Perch* into a *Pirates Roost*. Now, let it be known that the pirates who will roost in this new structure are “friendly pirates” whose intent is to do good in the fashion of Robin Hood and his merry band of followers. They will seize treasure from mega-rich, greedy pirates and then share the newfound riches with friendly, generous children.

In the fall of 2021, Sharon and I set about to add more interest and more fun to our *Owl's Perch* through the captivating enhancements described below. The result is the rebranded *Pirates Roost*.

1. **A Roof.** We have been watching the world's premier treehouse builder, Pete Nelson, on *Discovery-Plus*. Several of the more rustic treehouses his team built appeared to be beehive-like or bird's-nest-like with exteriors interwoven with the bark and branches in the surrounding outgrowth of their host trees. So, we added a rustic, woody roof with cabin-like mini-logs.
2. **A Trap Door.** We wanted the good pirates to be able to sneak into the roost undetected and to exit stealthily when needed. It is amazing how much young children like to climb up through and into, and then back down and out through the secret door-in-the-floor. **Note:** There are trap door safety and security features.
3. **A Cannon/Tennon.** At the window slot on the west side of the roof, we created a turret for a pretend cannon that shoots “tennonballs” (a.k.a. tennis balls) rather than cannonballs to defend the Pirates Roost. Greedy pirates will try to invade the roost from the sea to the west. We devised a game where half of the children defend the pirates' fortress and operate the cannon while the others (the greedy pirates) are in an imaginary boat just below attempting to approach, climb, and invade the roost. These pirates must avoid the *tennonballs* or fall from the boat and be out of the game.
4. **A Treasure Hunt Opportunity.** We hide a treasure chest somewhere on our forest property and let the pirates follow elaborate clues to retrieve it. This is what they store in the roost that they intend to share with other children and that must be protected from the greedy pirates.

Here is the result—the new Pirates Roost where the Owl's Perch once was...



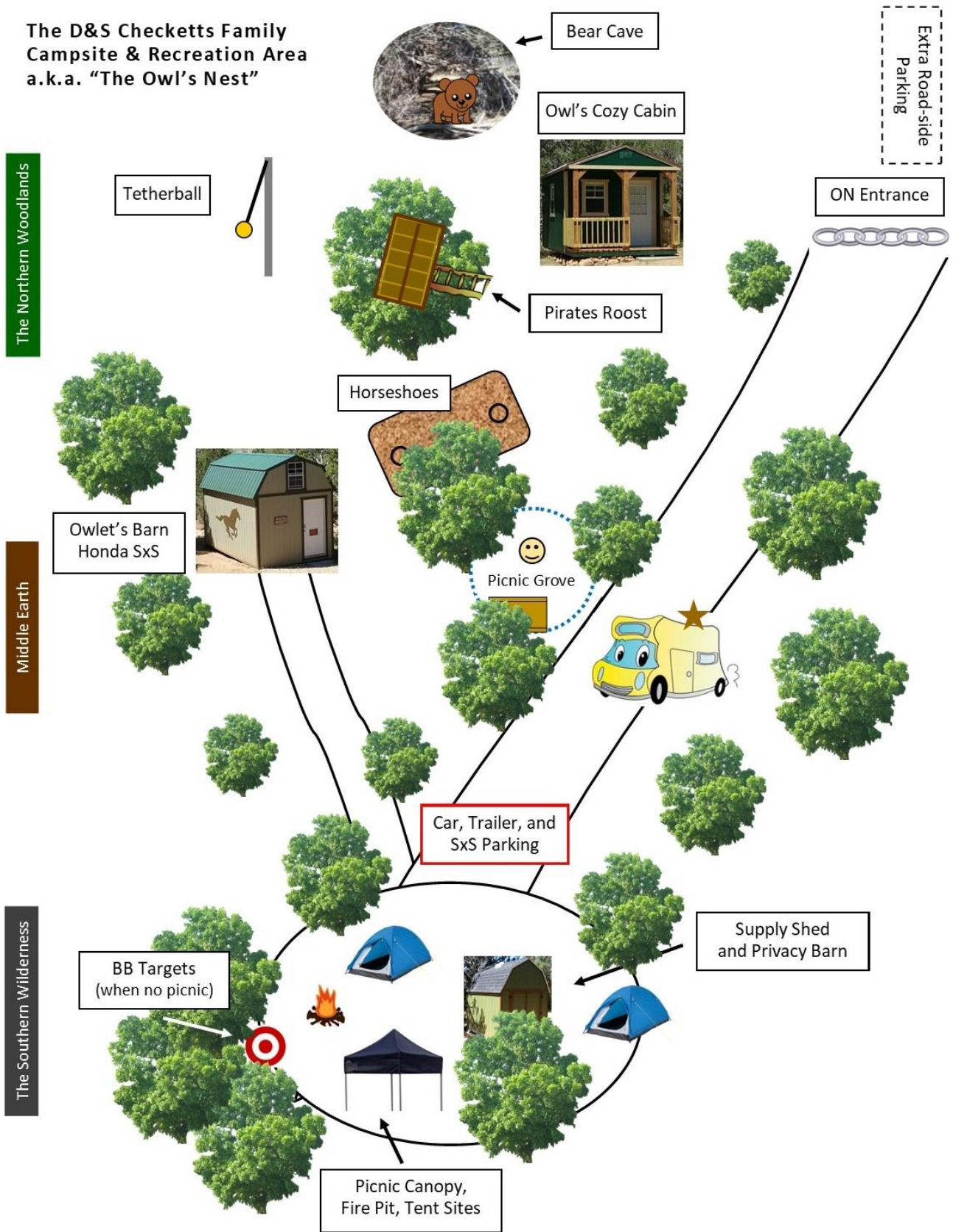
Work Like a Captain.
Play Like a Pirate!

Ye Who Trespass
Shall Walk the Plank!

Tennon Barrel with Ramrod

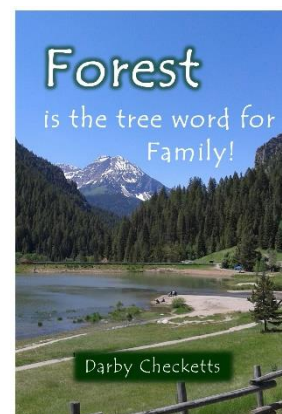
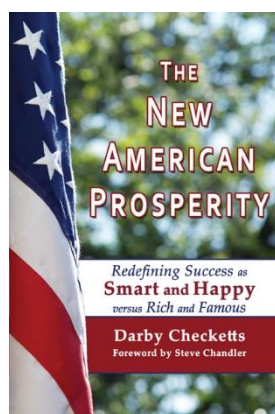
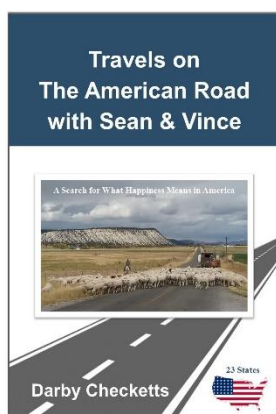
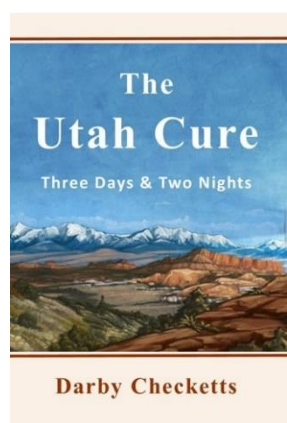


**The D&S Checketts Family
Campsite & Recreation Area
a.k.a. "The Owl's Nest"**



Darby & Sharon Checketts

Darby & Sharon Checketts live in Salt Lake County, Utah. They own a small family retreat in Sanpete County, Utah. Darby is a retired business consultant. After 17 years in the corporate world, he and Sharon established a family-owned business, which they managed for 27 years. Theirs is a large and active posterity, which is the center of their attention these days. Darby is the author of 18 books including his best-selling business book, *Customer Astonishment: 10 Secrets to World-Class Customer Care*. Other books highly relevant to your *nature connection* are: *The Utah Cure: Three Days & Two Nights*, *Travels on the American Road with Sean & Vince*, and *The New American Prosperity*, which is a collection of 39 essays to help you deal with life's perplexities and to seize life's amazing possibilities. Darby's latest book, *Forest Is the Tree Word for Family*, was just published.



Books are available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

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Please Contact Us

Darby Checketts
Cornerstone Professional Development
South Jordan, Utah 84095

Inquire at: darby@customerchampion.com

Our Tree Partnership Website: www.thetreeroost.com

Thank you!