

The Autocamping Experience

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Technology and Pop Culture

By 1920 the automobile was integrated into the American lifestyle and families turned to their convenient new form of transport as a mode of vacationing. Autocamping became a popular American pastime; it was unconventional, adventurous, and opened up new markets for the visionary entrepreneur. Because it was new to the vacationing genre there was much room for development, especially in the market for camping equipment. "Autocamping thus relied on personal experimentation and inspection, trial and error [and] word of mouth."¹ The first campers saw themselves as the daring elite; they set the precedent for the new wave of campers that came after autocamping publicity grew. They experienced firsthand the trials and errors of the camping excursion. Autocamping was innovative in its early years, so campers relied on themselves and others on the road in order to refine its process.

Autocamping was first standardized in the early 1920s when people began to stay in public campgrounds and municipal parks. Autocampers were centralized into these grounds due to the ever growing number of motorists that were taking to the side of the road, disrupting nature and causing sanitation and health issues. The public recognized a need for these parks and campgrounds as a means to organize the masses. Autocampers found out about parks and campgrounds by word of mouth from other campers. Though journals and articles, such as those in *Motor Camper*, were published, hearing firsthand experiences from fellow campers was more reassuring, informative, and convenient. Also, the publications of the times did not offer a substantial listing of campgrounds. Not only was this verbal communication helpful to the campers, but it also served as a form of advertisement for the campgrounds. "Most important was 'verbal advertising' about other camps: what conveniences they had, recent experiences, and what to avoid."² Fellow autocampers aided each other in avoiding disappointing vacations by sharing their own bad experiences or the opposite by recommending the best places they had been. Not

¹ Warren James Belasco, *Americans on the Road From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1979), 101.

² Belasco, 102.

only were the new camping journals inadequate sources of information, but maps were also lacking, if they were even available. Because roadways were not yet officially established, maps were virtually nonexistent for some areas and distances were not easily calculated. "Road talk supplemented the incomplete information of Blue Books and maps..."³

Autocampers did not rely on each other and their own experiences solely concerning routes and habitation. Campers probably found more pleasure in discussing and comparing their equipment than anything else. The market for camping equipment was experimental; newer, more practical gear was being invented persistently, more often than not by the campers themselves. Campers purchased their gear and made their own modifications to suit their individual needs. "Store bought equipment could still be modified, and manufacturers themselves could not agree on what constituted standard equipment."⁴ As they became more experienced campers also learned how and what to pack in order to maximize their comfort but not their car load. The demand for more compact equipment prompted campers to adapt on their own because the market for camping gear was still lagging behind.

Autocamping was still relatively new in the 1920s, so its market was not yet as advanced as many of its seasoned veterans. Autocampers relied on their own kind, if you will, and their own resources to improve their individual camping experiences. The utilitarian mindset that many autocampers possessed enhanced their ability to fend for themselves in the new frontier of autocamping. Comfort was self provided or unnecessary; self-reliance was still prominent in the autocamper's reasoning for resorting to this form of vacationing, so the fact that the field was not yet standardized was only injurious to the newcomer. The inexperienced autocamper sought convenience on a silver platter, but the old timers knew better. They were on the forefront of autocamping before it was yet an industry, and it was by their experience that the field evolved.

³ Belasco, 102.

⁴ Belasco, 101.