

gallery

GRAPHICS EDITOR'S NOTE

While the pages of *Environmental History* have included numerous essays on recreating in the great outdoors, the journal has never run a single article that analyzes the mind-boggling array of gear that campers lug into the nation's parks and forests. In this issue's gallery essay, Terence Young corrects this omission by examining four wonderfully rich images of camping equipment spanning nearly one hundred years. The evolution of this equipment—from household kitchen utensils used by late-nineteenth century campers, to specially designed “nesting” pots and pans at the turn of the century, to the post-World War II cornucopia of pop-up trailers, gas lanterns, synthetic sleeping bags, and even inflatable swimming pools—dramatically altered our relationship with nature. As Young persuasively illustrates through these images, what began as a desire to “rough it” far removed from the urban environment developed, partly through our use of increasingly sophisticated camping equipment, into a competing desire for comfort that ironically replicated the very city living that campers were trying to escape.

NEIL M. MAHER

TERENCE YOUNG ON CAMPING AND ITS EQUIPMENT

THE FOUR IMAGES PRESENTED HERE help to foreground a key component of camping: the shifting relationship between roughing it and comfort. All are from camping's prescriptive literature rather than from advertisements or campers themselves. Furthermore, while camping can be practiced in a

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Figure 1. “A Lodge in the Wilderness.”



E. R. Wallace, illustration in *Descriptive Guide to the Adirondacks and Handbook of Travel* (New York: The American News Company, 1875), opposite title page.

variety of modes, such as backpacking or with a car and trailer, these images focus on dominant modes rather than less common ones. Nevertheless, these four examples tell us much about campers' evolving attitudes toward the natural world. In particular, they raise questions about what it meant to deride urban life and its components as false and inauthentic and to embrace nature's guises as true and real.

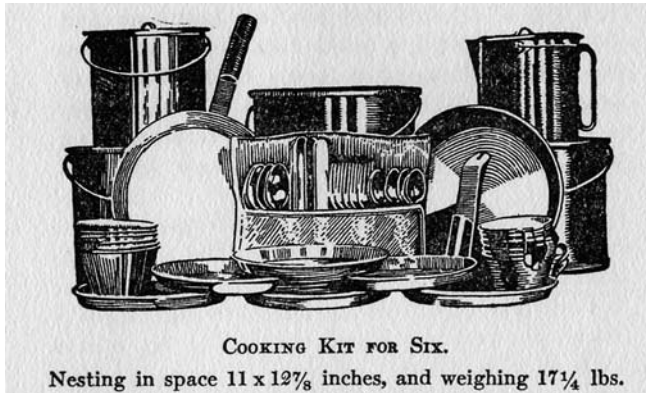
Figure 1 comes from E. R. Wallace's *Descriptive Guide to the Adirondacks and Handbook of Travel* (1875), among the first publications to explain where and how to camp. Set at a "wilderness" campsite on an Adirondack summer's evening, the emphasis in this image is not on equipment but place. The close trees and rustic lodge on the left act as a frame, pushing the eye to the right and across the open lake to a mysterious, beckoning forest on the far shore. The campers in the center are all male, which was typical for the era, and relatively small in scale. The image, which is in a romantic style, suggests a pleasant experience in the sort of benevolent environment that authors encouraged campers to visit. The campers' gear, of which there is little in the scene, seems trivial when compared to the setting. Most of it sits or hangs away from the central figures and many of the identifiable items—a hat, coat, pots, pans, jugs, and an ax—are not specialized for camping, but similar in size and design to the tools and clothes for urban homes. Many of the other objects, including the "lodge," seats, and table, appear to have been made from materials at the campsite rather than being carried in by the campers. Along with the hunting and fishing

equipment, these last items remind us that early camping included a large component of production, albeit for pleasure, as well as the consumption of wildlife, scenery, and settings.

Camping was not new when E. R. Wallace published his *Descriptive Guide to the Adirondacks* in 1875. American hunters and fishers had long employed it as a means for engaging in their sports, but it emerged as a leisure activity itself in the decades following the Civil War. As the country's cities swelled rapidly with a booming economy, many middle-class urban Americans became anxious and distressed. Open to suggestions about how they might restore spirit, health, and a sense of belonging, they embraced camping, which allowed them to step out of their urban lives, to travel to natural places to rough it for a while, and to return home renewed. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, it is clear that these first campers, like the millions who followed them, were pilgrims to the wild. Wherever they traveled, campers, like other pilgrims, departed from their everyday worlds on a journey to a sacred place or through sacred space as an act of devotion and in pursuit of personal goals, and then returned to their starting point changed.

In Protestant America, one traditionally struck out from home to find one's material fortune. This pursuit formed a powerful motif in American culture, but it also generated its counterpart—a pilgrimage system of returning "home" in order to restore body and mind by escaping what anthropologist Gwen Kennedy Neville called "the individuation and depersonalization experienced as a member of a scattered, mobile and often anonymous urban industrial society." As a consequence, American pilgrims tended to head out of the cities where they pursued riches to find themselves in rural and wild land areas. Within this system, American pilgrims attended family reunions, gathered at rural churches, participated in religious camp meetings, visited the birthplaces or homes of presidents, heroes, and artists, and camped in national parks and other "natural" settings. In these protected areas, campers recapitulated the pioneer experience and felt that they were escaping the confines, limits and alienation of modern, urban life even as they came into contact with their "true home" or the "real America" that they sensed in wild areas.¹

Figure 2 pulls us into the twentieth century by highlighting an early focus of camping equipment manufacturers—food preparation. The "Cooking Kit for Six" was Horace Kephart's 1910 solution to a common problem—household cookware that would not "nest." One of America's best-known camping authorities, Kephart declared in *Camp Cookery* that domestic pots, pans, and lids were "all spouts and handles, bail ears and cover knobs."² Their conflicting and uncoordinated designs meant that they would not fit together into a small space. If a camper took along only everyday cooking equipment, he or she would need an unreasonably large and expensive transport to carry it. Instead, Kephart prescribed, the wise camper would use the "Kit." Like many depictions of equipment in this era's prescriptive literature, the items sat alone with the emphasis placed on an innovative design or new material that allowed one to

Figure 2. “Cooking Kit for Six.”

Horace Kephart, illustration in *Camp Cookery* (New York: MacMillan 1910), 22.

“smooth” a previously rough bit of camping. In this case, every item was designed to nest within others, to weigh little and, since everything was made of the same sturdy material—steel—to not break during transport. By the second decade of the twentieth century, manufacturers were developing and producing a wide variety of similarly light, compact, and durable tents, cots, sleeping bags, and other specialized gear, which the prescriptive literature readily promoted.

Kephart’s cooking kit and the swelling array of gear that came with and after it provided campers with increased efficiency, calculability, predictability, and environmental control, which are the hallmarks of a process that sociologist George Ritzer termed “McDonaldization.” Basing his analysis in the writings of Max Weber, Ritzer described McDonaldization as “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world.” In particular, McDonaldization works by substituting nonhuman technology for direct human-environment interactions, which in turn shapes behavior. In camping, McDonaldization has expressed itself through the growing proliferation of distinctive, specialized gear. Beginning late in the nineteenth century, manufacturers began to develop camping gear that was advertised or promoted by authors like Kephart under the banners of environmental control, predictable experience, and relief from “unnecessary” roughness. For more than a century, purveyors have promised that one could camp “the smooth way” with one of their motor homes, sleeping bags, ice chests, aluminum cookware, or backpacks.³

As the variety of camping gear continued to multiply, illustrations spent less time foregrounding a specific piece of equipment and instead began presenting items as parts of an integrated approach to a specific mode of camping. In *Popular Mechanics Auto Tourist’s Handbook No. 1* (1924), the target technique

Figure 3. "No One Gets More Joy Out of Life than the Automobile Tourist."

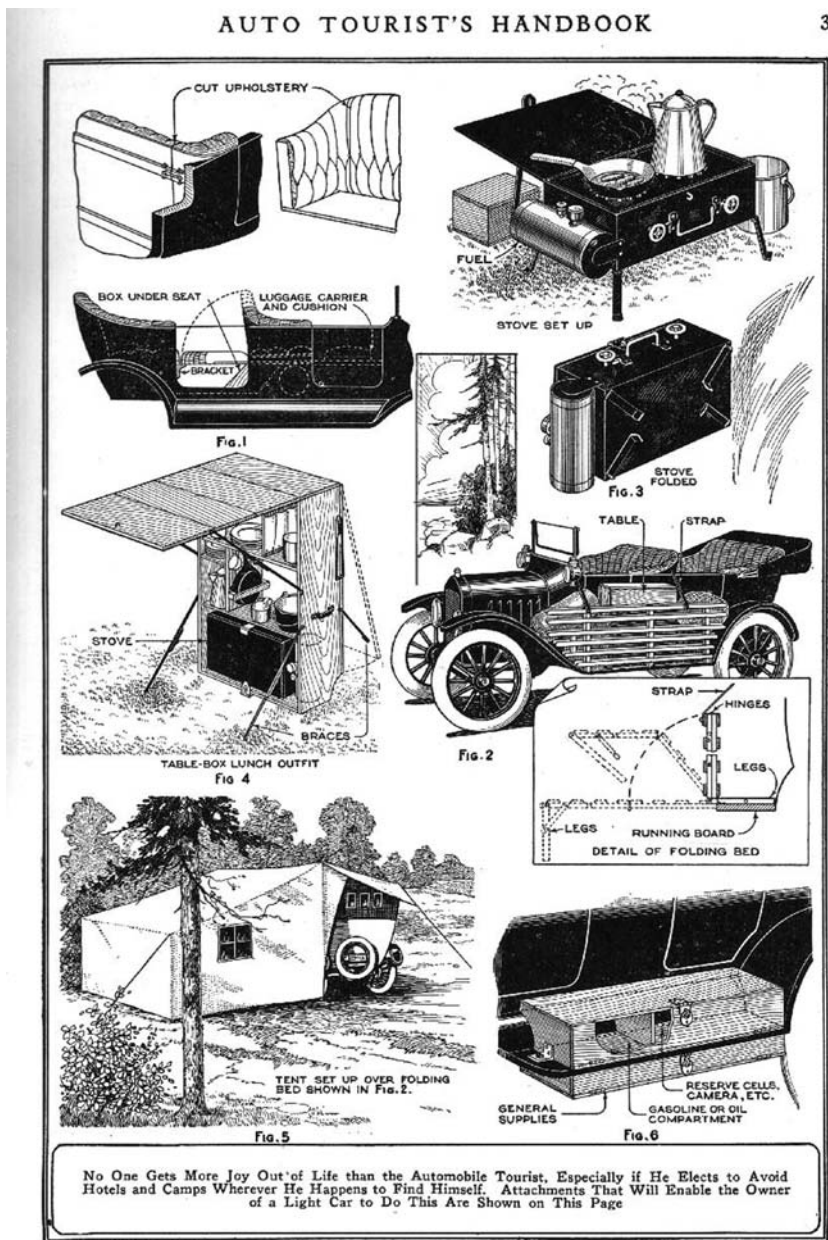


Illustration in Popular Mechanics Auto Tourist's Handbook No. 1 (Chicago: Popular Mechanics Press, 1924), 3.

was auto camping. With an automobile, campers could tow a trailer and carry more equipment, which was proliferating swiftly and becoming less expensive. Figure 3, which foregrounds equipment but only hints at natural scenes, illustrated how recent innovations could be fused with an automobile to make camping more convenient. The image's "Fig. 2," for instance, disclosed how a hinged wooden latticework could be cut to attach to a car's running board so that gear could be stored behind it when in motion and used as a bed frame when at rest. A camper did not need to sleep on rocky or damp ground when her car had such a device. Moreover, the latticework made it possible to pack gear on the outside of the vehicle, which had no trunk, and so freed up seats for the working and middle-class families who were taking to camping. Equipment innovation picked up speed at this time because campers were likely to want a gasoline-pressure stove to do their own cooking or a tent with an integrated canvas floor rather than having to carry and spread the heavy carpets once used. The upshot, however, as Kathleen Franz aptly quipped, was "no vacation for the motor wife," who often became auto camping's principal laborer.⁴ Nevertheless, cheap cars and gear so reduced auto camping's roughness that its fame climbed in comparison to backpacking and the other modes of camping, and it became the most socially and ethnically diverse mode of camping.⁵

Camping's popularity, especially when using an automobile, rose through most of the first half of the twentieth century, and after World War II it boomed as affluence and the explosion of consumer culture had its greatest impact. According to the *Ford Treasury of Station Wagon Living*, a 1957 publication of the Ford Motor Company, "the designers of recreational gear have come forth with more new and original ideas during the past few years than they did in the generation before."⁶ To illustrate these recent developments for the expanding host of campers, the *Ford Treasury* presented camping equipment as spectacle. In Figure 4, the products of fifty equipment manufacturers hint at the abundance of auto-camping gear and its importance vis-à-vis the environment. Nature, which was no longer romanticized or able to push and pull the eye, had become the proscenium and backdrop that signaled the general purpose of the equipment. At the same time, no particular piece of equipment acted as the focus of the scene, while the function and purpose of most pieces were simply ignored. As if dropped from a disgorging cornucopia, the incongruity of boats on grass or enough tents for dozens of campers required no explanation. A camper was expected to understand that plenty had arrived. Furthermore, the items' arrangement provided no sense of system or integration with each other, but was simply a bounty of available items offered as a smorgasbord to hungry campers.

The development of the equipment illustrated in these four figures supported the growth of American camping after it began as a retreat from urban life. Over the last 125 years, the role of camping gear shifted in the prescriptive literature from one of supporting actor to that of star. Nevertheless, a

Figure 4. “Count the Items in the Picture.”

Franklin M. Reck and William Moss, comp., illustration in *Ford Treasury of Station Wagon Living* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), inside covers.

limit to this change apparently was reached in 1987, when the overall number of U.S. campers began a two-decade decline of approximately 1 percent to 1.3 percent per year. “Videophilia” and an increase in other at-home recreations have been offered as explanations for the decrease of most forms of camping, but the shifting relationship between camping and its gear must also be recognized as a cause of this slide.⁷ Ironically, camping began as an antiurban recreation, but its most popular modes became increasingly similar to urban life as campers embraced equipment that provided greater comfort. As “roughing it” became more comfortably urban, in other words, camping as pilgrimage receded in American culture.

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NOTES

1. Gwen Kennedy Neville, *Kinship and Pilgrimage: Rituals of Reunion in American Protestant Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 20. The literature on pilgrimage is extensive, with most authors focusing on religious sites and practices. Recently, however, scholars have built upon these analyses to explain a variety of

historic and contemporary nonreligious activities. See David Chidester, "'A Big Wind Blew Up During the Night': America as Sacred Space in South Africa," in *American Sacred Space*, ed. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 262-312, on international politics; Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976); Nelson H. H. Graburn, "Tourism: The Sacred Journey" in *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, ed. Valene Smith, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 21-36; John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen, eds., *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008) on tourism and vacations; J. W. Davidson, A. Hecht and H. A. Whitney, "The Pilgrimage to Graceland" in *Pilgrimage in the United States*, ed. G. Rinschede and S. M. Bhardwaj (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1990), 229-52, on a secular hero—Elvis; Wilbur Zelinsky, "Nationalistic Pilgrimages in the United States" in *Pilgrimage in the United States*, ed. G. Rinschede and S. M. Bhardwaj (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1990), 253-67, on war memorials; Neville, *Kinship*, on family reunions; Patrick McGreevy, "Niagara as Jerusalem" *Landscape* 28 (1985): 26-32; and Dennis Tobin, *Mountain Climbing as American Transcendental Pilgrimage: Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Colorado 14ers Peakbaggers* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003) on sublime landscape features; and Thomas R. Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004) on U.S. wilderness. See William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 80, who similarly argued that Americans value wilderness over cities because they imagine the former to be uncorrupted, true, and authentic. "Wilderness," he wrote, "offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us.... we live in an urban-industrial civilization, but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our *real* home is in the wilderness." Cronon does not identify which Americans have been most attracted by the "illusion" of wilderness, but campers have been more strongly drawn to it than most Americans.

2. Horace Kephart, *Camp Cookery* (New York: Outing Publishing Co., 1910), 21.
3. George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 5 (Los Angeles: Pine Forge, 2008), 1-2. Ritzer gave the process this title because the McDonalds restaurant company has been its apotheosis in the modern world. See 50-52 on Mt. Everest ascents and 113-14 for a brief discussion of camping.
4. Kathleen Franz, *Tinkering: Consumers Reinvent the Early Automobile* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 58.
5. Auto camping also became socially contentious before the other modes of camping. See Terence Young, "'A Contradiction in Democratic Government': W. J. Trent, Jr. and the Struggle to Desegregate National Park Campgrounds" *Environmental History* 14 (October 2009): 651-82.
6. Franklin M. Reck and William Moss, comp., *Ford Treasury of Station Wagon Living* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 10.
7. Only the popularity of backpacking increased after this date. See Oliver R. W. Pergams and Patricia A. Zaradic, "Evidence for a Fundamental and Pervasive Shift Away from Nature-based Recreation," *Proceedings of the National Academy*

of Sciences 105 (February 19, 2008): 2295-2300, about the percentage decline; and Oliver R. W. Pergams and Patricia A. Zaradic, "Is Love of Nature in the US Becoming Love of Electronic Media? 16-year Downtrend in National Park Visits Explained by Watching Movies, Playing Video Games, Internet Use, and Oil Prices" *Journal of Environmental Management* 80 (2006): 387-93 for the discussion of "videophilia."