

# Camping

Back in Nebraska, when I was a kid living on our farm, we really didn't understand the word "camping." After all, our country was just recuperating from the Great Depression where many millions had been living outdoors, not for recreation, but for survival. Sleeping outdoors under the stars was not something that most folks yearned to do.

As for us little kids, we did enjoy the occasional outdoor sleeping experience but mostly that happened within the confines of our big screened-in porch. The screening was there to keep the bugs at bay. Without it you'd spend most of the night slapping away the mosquitoes and other flying menaces.



However, after we moved off the farm and became town dwellers, I joined the Boy Scouts. This was my first exposure to "formal" camping including such appliances as tents and sleeping bags. It was also my first experience at cooking over a campfire and learning how to eat a steak that

had been mistakenly dropped in the coals a few times. We were assured that steak tastes a lot better after being dredged through the campfire.

Our scout troop was in Laurel, a very small town in northeastern Nebraska. As in many small towns, the scout troop was supervised by churches, in our case the local Lutheran and Catholic churches. The Lutheran pastor and the Catholic priest were the co-scoutmasters. As with many scout troops, we did a major campout every summer, and my first outing was a week at the Niobrara river.

Prior to leaving for camp, I noted that one of our youngest members, a quiet kid named Joey who lived just down the street from our house, was not going to go with us as his parents didn't think he was old enough. I had a number of conversations with him and even spoke with his parents. I don't remember what I told them, but I sincerely wish that he hadn't come with us.

The park where we camped at the Niobrara River was a wonderful place with lots of swimming holes and places to explore or just hang out. One evening after dark, a bunch of us "older" kids decided to sneak out of our tents and meet under a nearby lighted pavilion to enjoy a late evening game of poker. We also had some cigars that someone had smuggled in, so we felt very grown up, puffing away on our stogies and betting pennies on our poker hands. At one point in the evening, Joey came around and, after

watching us for awhile, announced that he was going swimming. There were no other kids his age in the troop, so he was probably lonely. So many times I have wished I could go back to that moment and change history. It was at least thirty minutes later when someone in our group inquired where Joey had gone. Within a few minutes, the camp was alive with adults swarming over the lake, feeling the bottom for a body. The local gym coach found our lad and brought him to the beach. It was too late.

But most of our camping experiences over the years have been very joyful. I camped a great deal with my dad when I was in my teens. He was a desert rat, always telling himself that he was a “prospector” and not just someone who like to hike and camp in the desert. We camped in places where you couldn’t see any sign of civilization save for the tire tracks made by our auto. At night, we’d lie on our backs and enjoy the incredible display of stars and shooting meteors that only seems to be visible deep in the desert, far away from city lights.

My dad was a true minimalist. His idea of an appropriate boon-docking vehicle was an old AMC station wagon with reduced air pressure in its tires. With that rig he fearlessly drove everywhere in the trackless desert. Sometimes he came to the aid of people out there with big 4X4’s who had managed to get stuck. It must have been embarrassing for them. Dad’s tent was the interior of his old station wagon. His only source of heat for cooking and illumination was a campfire made with whatever materials he could find. His campsite was wherever he had stopped at the end of the day. I often chafed at the inconvenience of his camping style, but looking back I have to admit it was the best of times for me.



When I got married my wife Carolyn and I didn’t immediately take up camping. That’s probably because both of us had experienced living in a small travel trailer in our youth and didn’t relish the idea of going back to that. However, good friends of ours, John and Nancy Citso, talked us into accompanying them on a two-week camping trip from where we lived in Southern California all the way up the coast to Vancouver Island in British Columbia. John had a half-ton Chevy pickup and to make the trip he rented a cab-over, slide-in camper.



It was a wonderful trip. We stayed at state and federal campgrounds every day and found the experience to be restful and often rather exciting. It also had its humorous moments. At a very small private campground near Vancouver, B.C., we were assigned to a spot conveniently adjacent to the bathroom /laundry facility and were delighted to find a water spigot next to our camper. We quickly rigged a hose from the

spigot to our water tank inlet, thus providing us with an unlimited supply of water. About an hour later we were inside the camper playing cards when there was a knock at the door. We opened the door and saw a line of people standing behind our camper with buckets in hand. The person at the head of the line inquired, “are you done with the water?” We had connected our camper to the only water supply in the campground. I guess that made us “ugly Americans.”

Not long after that experience we decided to purchase a vehicle that was designed for camping, but being young and not wanting anything that smacked of our bad old days in travel trailers, we opted for a VW van that been converted into a camper. It had lots of cabinets and a cooking station that required you to open the side doors and unfold the working surfaces. It was all very elementary but we thought it was luxurious. What we really loved doing in those days of little money and even less time with work and school was driving into a supermarket parking lot, buying some sandwich-making materials, and then dining inside our camper.

This first VW camper was a 1966 model that came with a trusty 1,500cc air-cooled engine and a front suspension that positively guaranteed that you couldn't keep it on the road in a strong cross wind. Going up hills was not exactly its strong point either. There were times we'd be in low gear going up grades where everyone else was flying along at 70. And, of course, at that vintage it totally lacked creature comforts such as air conditioning.



We took the old VW camper to just about every state and federal park of note in the Southwest. We also did a great deal of weekend camping, especially after our son Robert was born. His portacrib fit perfectly in the back of the camper so we could just chuck it

on the ground when we arrived at a campground and use it to confine him while we rigged the camper. We had friends with similar gear so we'd all head for a campground right after work on Friday, hoping to beat the crowd and get a nice campsite in those days well before the existence of park reservation systems..

Rigging for an evening's stay in the VW camper didn't require a whole lot of effort. All formal campsites have picnic tables and that's where all our gear would be located, after installing an oilcloth covering to serve as a tablecloth and to protect us from whatever grunge might have been left on the table by previous campers. We always had a Coleman stove and a Coleman lantern, and both required frequent maintenance. Both appliances used a fuel similar to kerosene and both were somewhat cranky in their operation. However, that was part and parcel of the true camping experience, and the older looking your Coleman gear was, the more caché you had among other campers.



Not all of our camping memories involve family outings. Sometime around 1968 when I was working for Beckman Instruments in Fullerton, California, our company "rod and gun" club decided to have a great adventure by driving from Ensenada cross-country to the Gulf of California town of San Felipe. There is a formal road that goes that way nowadays, but back then it was mostly just trails.

Once during this trek, after driving across a very large dry lake, we couldn't figure out which trail on the other side led to San Felipe, so we just selected one and started driving. After an hour or so, our caravan pulled into a farm yard, creating a huge dust cloud that covered the poor farmer trying to milk a cow. Our interpreter, the one guy in our group who spoke Spanish, went over to the farmer to apologize for our intrusion. The farmer looked up from his milk bucket and said, "I know, you are lost." Nobody ever went to his forsaken farm unless they were lost. Later we were driving along the beach below San Felipe when one of our vehicles got stuck in the sand. As we were standing around trying to figure out how to get it out, an old gentleman came out of nowhere with a piece of steel tread and a shovel. He waved us out of the way so that he could place the tread and very quickly and expertly got the rig free of the sand. As we were reaching for our wallets, thinking he helped us only to earn a fee, the old man just waved and walked away. He was just a good samaritan. We had many good experiences on that trip that changed forever my thinking about "Mexicans."

When VW campers became closely associated with the hippie culture, we decided to abandon ours and buy a nice, respectable Volvo sedan. However, we also decided to purchase a huge Coleman tent which we carried in a bag on a roof rack. The tent was very spacious but a lot of work to erect. As a result, we didn't go hopping from one campground to the next like we did in the VW camper. Once the tent had been erected it was time to settle in for a few days.



It took a while for us to learn the ins and outs of tent camping. We swiftly learned that there is no such thing as a secure tent. No matter how flaps and zippers you close, the little critters will get still get inside if you leave some tempting morsels such as a box of crackers. Also, we had to learn all about bears and their nocturnal habits of raiding



campgrounds. Our first night of tent camping in Sequoia we learned the hard way to (a) always put your ice chest in the trunk of your car and (b) always eat the good steaks on the first night rather than the hamburger. The bear got the steaks.

I'll have to say that none of the camping styles we tried later on ever provided the sleeping room of the big 9 X 12 Oasis Coleman tent. Unfortunately there was

always a problem with the air mattresses. We had the very finest air mattresses that money could buy. They were built so ruggedly that you could also use them for surfing, however, they always ran out of air at about two in the morning. As you descended into the acorns, rocks and pine cones that materialized under your tent, serious thought had to be given as to whether or not you wished to crawl out of your sleeping bag, find the air pump and refill your mattress. Usually the answer was to endure the pain and postpone the blowing up until the morning.

After a few years of tenting, we decided to get back into van camping and this time we wanted something bigger. We sold the Volvo and bought a brand new, short-wheelbase Ford Econoline van that, except for a driver and passenger seat, had no interior accouterments. I spent the better part of a month working weekends paneling the interior

and putting in some cabinets. Sleeping was done by curling up in a sleeping bag on the floor.

The Ford van started out as a camping vehicle but eventually ended up hauling a motorcycle and then a fiberglass boat. It did its duty but never did anything really well. Like many of the Fords of that era, it had totally inadequate cooling for freeway traffic and very small brakes. We eventually sold it.



During a period of apparent sanity where we drove big, comfortable Oldsmobiles, including a station wagon, we went back to occasional tent outings using our old 9 X 12 Oasis Coleman tent. You needed to make sure that you had found a good campsite as you only wanted to erect this thing once. Also, finding a campsite that would be good for at least a couple days was a good thing. However, the tent served us well by providing lots of space and good protection from the weather including rain storms.



We camped mostly in the company of friends who also had huge Coleman tents. We all had kids who were about the same age so the arrangement worked out really well. We were like the miniature “village” that Hillary Clinton spoke of in her book. We shared the duty of watching over the kids so as to permit some time for adult activities, which was mostly drinking and card playing.

Eventually we got tired of hauling the big tent around and gave up camping almost entirely. We traded camping for boating, but that’s another story. But there were some times where we had minor relapses.

Sometime around 1980 we again developed a sense of nostalgia for the “good old days” in the VW camper, and decided to buy a used 1970 VW Vanagon, Westphalia, pop-top camper. It had been owned by a geology professor from some school in Hawaii and had been used to transport him and his family to locations all over the southwest where he explored rock formations. We used it much like our previous VW camper except this one was much more sophisticated. In addition to the full head room provided by the pop-top, it also had an upper bunk that made sleeping the three of us much more appealing. It also had an interior galley that featured a propane gas stove and refer. Now when necessary, I could cook standing up, indoors, out of the weather.



The upper bunk in this camper was where I slept. Getting into it was rather tricky and getting out of it in the middle of the night for a call of nature was not advisable, so I kept one of those medical urinal bottles up there for those needs.

The Vanagon was a vast improvement over the old VW in terms of its road handling performance. It was no longer terrifying to be hit with a blast of wind from the side. Driving the old VW was more akin to sailing than driving while the new rig handled like an ordinary car.

In 1982 we decided to really put the Vanagon to the test and took a one-month driving trip all the way to the east coast and then up to Quebec. On the way home we stopped for several days in Yellowstone National Park. We had planned to camp at Yellowstone but quickly discovered that only a few of the park’s campgrounds were open to “soft sided” vehicles like ours. (Apparently the bears were not the least bit shy about ripping open canvas to get at the goodies inside.) However, after finding no available camp sites, we discovered a brand new housing facility that had opened so recently that it was not yet part of the park’s reservation system. So we enjoyed a very nice condo-like place during our several days in Yellowstone.

We really enjoyed Yellowstone, mainly because—unlike so many national parks—it encompassed many square miles for people to spread out on. This eliminated the super crowds that you often encounter in places like Yosemite. Also, it had many places where

you could sit and watch the mud pots bubble away. Very relaxing, at least until the evening when the swarms of mosquitoes would descend on the park.

It was a wonderful trip but apparently too taxing for the VW. Not long after returning home the VW dealer informed me that it needed major engine work. My reaction was to trade it in on a new Mitsubishi pickup, something wife Carolyn truly despised.



The pickup truck was mainly used to haul a boat around, a 15' aluminum job, but it also served as a one-man camper for me. Wife Carolyn hated the truck, would not ride in it and refused to ever sleep in it, but I loved it. I put an old Army mattress in the back for sleeping and carried along all our old camping gear. It gave me all the outdoor experience of tenting without any of the grief involved in erecting a tent.

When we gave the pickup to our son, that ended a long period of camping adventures. In the meantime we had a number of boating adventures.

A fair number of years passed before we felt any need to answer the call of the wilderness. As always, however, I eventually get the bug to do a little camping but not in a state of total discomfort as before. Also, we weren't sure what sort of "rig" we might want to buy so we decided to start out very slowly by renting a tent trailer. This was a very small trailer that could easily be towed with our relatively new Lexus RX300. The Lexus already had a good trailer hitch so all we had to do was go to the rental place in Lompoc and hitch up.



Our last fling with camping, if you can call it that, ended just a few years ago when we sold our 36', diesel pusher motor home. We bought the motorhome after we retired, thinking that it would encourage us to get back out and do some travelling. After owning it for about three years, we came to the conclusion that it was an impediment to travel

rather than an incentive. Driving around in a 36' motorhome and towing a 15' long Chevy Malibu does not provide a whole lot of flexibility with respect to where you can go. Every day on the road had to be carefully planned so that by late afternoon we would arrive at another luxury RV campground where there were "full hookups." As you can see, we were not the camp in the Walmart parking lot types.



During the three years, however, we did do a fair amount of travel with the motorhome. On 9/11 we were camped in an RV park in a Seattle suburb. Our plan for that day was to drive around to the local sites in our Chevy Malibu tow car and to start the day we drove to the local tourist info center. We were camped close to the Boeing plant and were surprised to note that traffic seemed to be awfully heavy even though it was about ten in the morning, way later than most folks would be going to work. When we got to the info center we were the only customers. After perusing the literature for a few moments a proprietor came out and greeted us with a somewhat apprehensive attitude. He was obviously wondering why we were in such a good mood and why we were planning a day of tourist activities. He knew about the attack on the twin towers; we didn't. It was not our habit to watch TV in the morning so we had no knowledge of the attack. Needless to say, after learning of the attack, we spent the day back in our motorhome, glued to the TV.

I'm sure that for many people there is still magic left in the camping experience, but not much for us. We love our memories of all those days spent camping, but we also remember the hardships associated with it. So nowadays our idea of "camping" is a nice king-sized bed in an upscale hotel—preferably one with free broadband.