

Back in the day

When travel trailers were put to a test.

Kathryn A. Kahler

It started in the early 1930s, an unlikely time for a boom in a pastime considered by some to be a luxury. At a time when the country was just starting down the road to recovery from the Great Depression and its unprecedented levels of unemployment and homelessness, "motor-camping" took root and became a national craze attracting millions of enthusiasts.

Americans were feeling a new optimism and federal works programs were paving highways across the landscape, providing new access to public forests and parks. Companies began introducing travel trailers equipped with refrigerators, stoves, beds and bathrooms. Trailers with names like Air-float, Airstream, Roadmaster, Silver Streak, Covered Wagon and Vagabond carried families to national and state parks and forests for a couple of weeks of rest and relaxation each summer.

But travel trailers were not without their critics. In April 1935, E.P. Meinecke, a forest pathologist with the U.S. Forest Service, wrote a scathing memo to headquarters in Washington, D.C., about "The Trailer Menace," and the threat he felt they posed to the



A trailer camper at the Northern Highland American Legion State Forest in September 1943.



A camping area at Potawatomi State Park in June 1940.

EUGENE SANBORN

natural resources of national parks and forests. He warned of how the "modern dwelling on wheels, a moving bungalow provided with beds, cooking stoves, sanitary equipment, running water, ice boxes and electric lights" would soon dominate campgrounds, crowding out "legitimate campers" and depleting park budgets that were forced to accommodate them.

Meinecke made a case that a "sharp line may be drawn between genuine campers and those who prefer city comforts," and proposed that parks and forests be maintained for the former because the latter could find "ample provision in hotels, resorts and privately owned auto camps." He went so far as to propose that it wasn't too late to ban them outright.

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, one would think that summer vacations would have seen drastic cutbacks. Almost overnight, the country was plunged into war-time production and things like tires, cars, gasoline and fuel oil saw tight rationing. But in fact, leaders in Washington took the advice of Brits and Canadians who had already been immersed in the war for two years and promoted the value of recreation to the collective psyche and morale of the people.

In Wisconsin, C.L. Coon reported on the "Vacation Industry During the War," in the February 1942 issue of the *Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin* (the predecessor to *Wisconsin Natural Resources* magazine). Coon was head of the Recreational Publicity Division of the Wisconsin Conservation Department, which a half century later would become

the Department of Tourism.

"It seems now only a few Sundays ago that the United States was so suddenly jarred by the news from Pearl Harbor," Coon wrote. "However, in the few intervening weeks, the nation has settled down with unflinching resolution to the stern business of winning the war.

"This country, now strongly united and determined, is steeled to the firm conviction that a victory program should be 'this above all,' [but] that the tourist business is one industry which can continue, and perhaps even expand without impairing our war efforts...

"Leaders in Washington advise that the war workers who have to back up the boys on the fighting fronts should keep fit for their war duty, and it seems sensible to believe that the workers can do a better job, work longer hours, and keep their morale at a higher level by combining their work with outdoor sports....

"Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes has recommended that civilian travel for purposes of relaxation should be continued, [providing] the essential ingredients for restoring health, rekindling enthusiasm and improving efficiency."

So this summer as you confirm campground reservations, air out your tents and sleeping bags, and head out to Wisconsin's state parks and forests, be thankful that planners over the years heeded the advice of Mr. Coon. And those pulling a pop-up camper or fifth-wheel behind your pickup? Thank your lucky stars that Mr. Meinecke's advice went unheeded.



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