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A Look At The

PRIVATE

CAMPGROUND

USER

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Raymond M. Mischon was a Research Forester working on the Central States Forest Experiment Station's small woodlands recreation project when this paper was written. Since then he joined the staff of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service as a specialist in economic recreation. Mischon received his B.S. degree from the University of Missouri in 1962 and his M.S. in 1963. He served 4 years with the Air Force as a jet fighter pilot before attending college.

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A Look At The

PRIVATE

CAMPGROUND

USER

Contented campers are the key to success in the private campground business. They keep coming back themselves, and they tell their friends. But to satisfy camping customers you must know something about them. Who are they? Why do they camp? What facilities do they use? Why do they choose a particular campground?

To find the answers to these questions we canvassed users of the 12 private forest campgrounds in the Ohio Valley during the summer of 1964. For our purposes we con- on either side of the Ohio River from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Evansville, Indiana. The area includes 98 counties in five states — Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia — and has a population of over 6 million.

PROCEDURE

Questionnaires were distributed only to heads of households in family groups and to single persons over 21 in other groups. Of the more than 2,500 questionnaires passed out in 1964 between May and October, 666 were returned — a 27 percent response. The response where owners made a special effort to explain the importance of the study to campers was 40 percent.

The results presented are a summary of the responses. Only findings significant at the 99 percent level of probability are reported.

It is possible that the campers who did not respond have different characteristics and preferences than those who did, but it was not possible to find out. So, in the strictest sense, the results can only be said to refer to the people who returned questionnaires. We assume these people were similar to the rest.

To make information about campers' education, occupation, income, and place of residence more meaningful, the data were compared with averages computed by the Bureau of the Census for all Ohio residents. Ohio was chosen because three-fourths of the campers lived in that State.

THE CAMPSITE GROUP

Private forest campground users generally camp as a family (fig. 1). Fifty-five percent of the camping groups consisted of a single family; 23 percent, two or more families; and 14 percent, a single family with friends or relatives. Those not camping in family groups were hunters, Boy Scouts, single individuals, and members of camping clubs.

Most camping families consist of parents 25 to 44 years old with at least one child under 12. Only 5 percent of the groups contained a person over 65 years old.

FIGURE 1. — *Private forest campground users generally camp as a family.*



The camping father is better educated than the average man in Ohio. Nearly all camping fathers complete high school, and one-third complete college, while less than half the adult males in Ohio have completed high school and only 9 percent, college.

Because camping fathers are better educated, they have better jobs. Three-fourths of the camping families earned more than \$6,000 a year compared with half of all Ohio families.

We also found that nearly nine-tenths of the camping families live in urban areas, compared with three-fourths of all Ohio families. And more than half of the people using private campgrounds have been camping less than 2 years.

These figures can help the private campground owner plan what facilities and services to provide. Obviously, a successful campground must satisfy an urban family with young children and a higher-than-average standard of living. With the changing conception of "roughing it," many families are likely to regard showers and flush toilets as necessities rather than conveniences.

Sociologists tell us that interest in nature generally increases with a person's affluence. Nature trails and other interpretive programs are likely to be popular with these people. At least, where they have been tried they have been successful. If such programs are planned, they should be of interest to the entire family. Many times this will require separate programs for children and adults.

The large percentage of new campers each year presents both an opportunity and a challenge to the private campground owner. He has the opportunity to attract these people to his campground and thereby rapidly expand his business. And he has the challenge of making their stay so enjoyable that they continue to camp, both at his and other campgrounds.

THE CAMPING TRIP

Families that spend a day or more at a private campground generally seek a variety of outdoor activities; whereas, families that just stop overnight are more concerned about conveniences such as showers and laundry facilities.

Three-fourths of the campers were on weekend trips. Half of the remainder were transients on major annual vacations, and half on shorter vacations. Groups on a weekend trip generally arrived at the campground Friday evening and stayed until some time Sunday. Groups on a major annual vacation arrived throughout the week and generally stayed overnight.

Campers at their main destination desire a variety of outdoor facilities. They like to do more than just camp. Two-thirds of them took part in three or more outdoor activities. Swimming was most popular followed by hiking and fishing (fig. 2). People were willing to travel as far as 10 miles from the campground to swim or fish but they were not willing to leave the campground for other activities such as hiking. When available at the campground, canoeing and horseback riding were also favorites of campers.

FIGURE 2. — Swimming is almost a must at private campgrounds catering to weekend guests.



Of special interest to those planning to build a new campground or to expand and improve an old one are the figures we found on the number of travel trailers used. Sites for these vehicles, as compared with tent sites, not only require more space but also electrical outlets, water, and sewage hookups. Thirty-nine percent of those surveyed used a travel trailer; 35 percent, a tent; and 16 percent, a tent trailer. The remainder used a camper truck, a bus, or a station wagon. Most of those that used trailers are experienced campers that started out with a tent or station wagon.

Weekend campers generally did not travel more than 100 miles to camp, while vacation campers seldom traveled less than 100 miles (table 1). Groups on shorter vacations generally traveled more than 50 miles but less than 200 miles. These distances should be helpful to an owner who is planning an advertising campaign.

TABLE 1.—Relation between type of camping trip and distance traveled

(In percent of campers)

Distance traveled to campground (miles)	Type of camping trip		
	Major annual vacation	One of two or more shorter vacations	Weekend trip
0 - 50	6	27	44
51 - 100	15	37	48
101 - 200	22	26	6
201 +	<u>57</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>2</u>
	100	100	100

ADVERTISING

The most effective advertisement medium for private campgrounds is the satisfied camper. Half the groups learned about the campground they were visiting from a friend.

Road signs and campground brochures were very effective. Advertising in camping guides, notifying local public park officials, and distributing brochures to local businessmen (especially camping equipment outlet stores) were also effective. Another method used by a few owners was to invite a newspaper or magazine outdoor editor to visit their campground. Articles written by these editors attracted new campers almost immediately. Radio and television advertising were not successful.

We expected many of the campers to be members of a camping club and/or an outdoor club. Had this been so, owners could have reached a large proportion of the camping population by sending brochures to these organizations. However, nearly three-fourths of the campers were not members of either type of club. Fifteen percent of the campers were members of one or the other, but only 3 percent belonged to both.

USER CHARACTERISTICS BY TYPE OF CAMPGROUND VISITED

The characteristics of campers vary with the type of campground. To learn more about this variation, campgrounds in the Ohio Valley were classified as:

Weekend campgrounds — large and small; overflow campgrounds; and transient campgrounds.

Weekend campgrounds - large.—Camping is the major activity but facilities for at least five other activities such as swimming, fishing, and boating are also provided. In addition, an attempt is made to fill all the campers' needs

by providing more than 10 complementary services and facilities such as a camp store, showers, and electricity. Large weekend campgrounds have more than 100 developed campsites and are generally open all year.

Weekend campgrounds - small. — Fewer outdoor recreation facilities are provided than in large weekend campgrounds and less than 100 campsites are developed. Small weekend campgrounds operate seasonally.

The weekend campground user.—Weekend campground users are at their main destination, so a variety of outdoor facilities are needed to keep them happy. Most of the campers take part in at least three activities such as swimming, fishing, and hiking (fig. 3). The major reason campers chose a particular large weekend campground was the variety of outdoor facilities and complementary services offered. On the other hand, the reason given most often by campers for choosing a small weekend campground was its nearness to their home. Other important reasons for choosing weekend campgrounds are the natural environment of the campground as well as its cleanliness and neatness.

FIGURE 3.—*Hiking is a popular outdoor activity among campers of all ages.*



Half the groups at weekend campgrounds consisted of either two or more families camping together, or a family plus friends or relatives. This suggests that at least half of the campsites at weekend campgrounds should be large enough for more than one tent or trailer. Owners often found their single-family sites occupied by two or more families, even though there were other singles available. Since groups such as clubs and churches usually have their outings at weekend campgrounds, provisions should be made for them too.

Half the groups used a travel trailer for their overhead shelter, one-fourth a tent, two-tenths a tent trailer, and the remainder a camper trailer or bus. Therefore, emphasis should be given to trailers when laying out the roads and campsites for weekend campgrounds.

People will travel farther to get to a large than a small weekend campground because of the greater facilities and services offered. Nearly all of the visitors to small weekend campgrounds came from within 50 miles; whereas, most of the visitors to large weekend campgrounds traveled more than 50 miles but less than 100 miles. Thus it appears that weekend campground owners would receive the greatest returns from their advertising expenditures within these radii.

Most of the campers learned about the weekend campgrounds from friends. However, camping guides or brochures and road signs were also effective. Many of the groups also lived nearby and knew of the campground.

Overflow campgrounds. — Located near public parks these campgrounds rely to a great extent on the overflow from the public campground for their business. Since there are recreation facilities at the nearby public park, few, if any, such facilities are developed. Instead, complementary services, such as showers and so forth are generally emphasized. Overflow campgrounds generally have 50 to 100 campsites and are operated on a seasonal basis.

The overflow campground user. — Overflow campgrounds, like weekend campgrounds, receive mostly weekend use. The users consider the campground and nearby public recreation area to be their main destination. A few groups on a vacation, however, do use overflow campgrounds as one of two or more destinations or an overnight stopping place.

The groups using overflow campgrounds were similar to those using weekend campgrounds. About half were single families and the remainder were either two or more families camping together or a family plus friends or relatives.

Since the nearby public recreation area generally provides sufficient recreation facilities, overflow campground owners probably receive the greatest return on money invested in conveniences such as showers and flush toilets.

The major reason campers stayed at overflow campgrounds was that adjacent public campgrounds were full. Other reasons often mentioned were (1) outdoor facilities offered at nearby recreation area, (2) nearness to residence, and (3) aesthetics of campground. The large proportion of business coming from the overflow of public campgrounds points up the need for the campground owner to become acquainted with the park attendants. Attendants may be able to pass out brochures or direct overflow campers to private campgrounds. Owners who followed this practice found it to be very effective. Road signs near the public campground are also effective.

Campers using overflow campgrounds are willing to travel up to 100 miles, as are large weekend campground users, because of the outdoor recreation facilities provided at the public area.

The overhead shelter used most often at overflow campgrounds is the tent. Nearly half the groups used a tent; one-fourth, a travel trailer; one-sixth, a tent-trailer; and the remainder, a camper truck, bus, or station wagon. Tents are more popular than trailers because overflow campgrounds are usually located near a large public lake or reservoir and

many of the campers bring a boat and trailer and hence cannot haul a travel trailer. Campers, especially those with boats, prefer campsites that are located near the water's edge.

Transient campgrounds. — Found along major highways, transient campgrounds emphasize conveniences rather than recreation facilities. Showers, flush toilets, sewage hookups for trailers, laundry facilities, and a camp store are often provided. This type of campground generally has more than 100 tent and trailer sites, is advertised nationally, and operates seasonally.

The transient campground user. — Transient campground users usually are on vacation. Nearly all the groups are not at their main destination. These campers remain no more than two nights and generally one night. They do not arrive on one or two particular days as do users of the other campgrounds who are on a weekend trip. Transient campers are more interested in conveniences and services such as showers and laundry facilities rather than a variety of outdoor activities.

Because families usually vacation alone, nearly all transient camping groups were single families. The dominance of single-family groups indicates a need for individually marked campsites that are landscaped for privacy.

Nearly all the transient campers traveled farther than 100 miles from home, whereas very few users of the other campgrounds traveled this far.

The major reason campers selected the transient campground was its nearness to an area of interest or route of travel. Neatness and cleanliness were also given as reasons for selecting a campground.

Campers traveling long distances use camping guides and directories. Road signs and brochures are also effective. Since transient campers are usually visiting a distant area, few locate campgrounds through their friends.

Half the transient campers used a tent for overhead shelter. One-fourth used a travel trailer; one-sixth, a tent trailer; and the remainder, a camper truck, bus, or station wagon.

Transient campground owners might also receive a greater return from capital invested in conveniences, such as showers and flush toilets, rather than a variety of outdoor recreation facilities. Transients generally are tired and would like to relax and freshen up after the long day's drive.

SUMMARY

Private forest campground users usually camp as a family. For nearly half this is their first year to camp. Most of the campers come from the city and have a higher-than-average standard of living.

When on a weekend trip, they usually camp with another family, participate in a variety of outdoor activities, travel less than 100 miles, have a travel or tent trailer, and stay at a weekend or overflow campground. When on a major vacation, families generally camp alone. Enroute to their main destination, they prefer conveniences such as showers and flush toilets rather than recreation facilities.

The major reason for choosing a large weekend campground is the variety of outdoor facilities and services offered; for a small weekend campground, it is nearness to home; for an overflow campground, it is closeness to a full public campground; and for a transient campground, it is nearness to other areas of interest or routes of travel.

The most effective media for advertising transient campgrounds are camping guides, directories, road signs, and brochures; other types of campgrounds must depend mainly on word-of-mouth advertising.

The private forest campground owner should decide what type of user his campground is best suited for and strive to satisfy that type of user. By doing this, he will produce the satisfied customers needed for success.



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