

# The Economics of Camping\*

## Camping Yesterday and Today

By David Wescott, 2019

### Why Call It *The Golden Age of Camping*?

*During the late 1880s to about 1930, people began to camp for the first time for recreation; not because they had to camp.... because they were soldiers, explorers, miners or railroad workers. They went to camp for enjoyment, for recreation, for re-creation. It was a pretty exciting time, because there were still plenty of skills left among outdoorsmen, combined with a few modern gadgets that came along at the time. Camping was for the masses. In terms of percentage of the population, it seems that around 1923-24 it was the largest percentage ever.*

**Steve Watts, 2012**

### Here's What We Know

I have yet to verify this quote with an historical source, so let's compare the math. Information from the past is not complete, and current figures can be creatively aligned to make some comparisons fuzzy at best.

Most of what we know about early campers comes from statistics related to the "autocamper" and leaves out the sportsman - the "hook and bullet" crowd as they are called today - as well as the sporting goods industry. If we add these groups back into both *overall use* as well as *dollars spent*, the above quote about the Golden Age of Camping is indeed fact.

1905 - less than 100,000 registered cars

1908 - Model T was \$825 - (\$22,500 in 2018) "The People's Car"

1915 - Nostalgia is delisted as a disease - door is open to pursue romantic notions

1916 - price was lowered to \$345 - (\$8,000 in 2018)

The Model T dominated the market from 1913-1923

1920 - Abercrombie and Fitch advertised the Complete Camping Outfit for 4 people at \$275.64 - (\$3600 in 2018) - *Slips into 7 bags and weighs 173 pounds* - Camping was still a pastime of the upper class.

1923 - 10 million campers and 2 million cars (112 mil pop. - 9%) - Elon Jessup

1924 - 15 million campers and 5 million cars - Saturday Evening Post

1924 - US per capita income was \$624 (\$8900 in 2018 dollars) or approx. \$1.76 per day (\$22.23 in 2018) - by 1929 it was \$7 per day.

1926 - The average outfit of thousands of campers [in 1926] cost \$198 complete\*\* [\$2700 in 2018]; replacement for outfits that had been in use averaged \$58 a year [\$800]. Camping becomes affordable for the new middle class.

*In the United States a new and increasing way of satisfying this desire for recreation and adventure has swept the country. Motor camping has become a leading national*

- *Dollars seem to be the single driving factor when tracking hegemony.*

*pastime. Thousands play golf every year, tens of thousands play tennis, hundreds of thousands play baseball, but in the past few years, millions have gone in for motor camping.*

**John Long, Motor Camping, 1923**



**\*\* Here is the average outfit for the ordinary party of four people:**

*Auto tent size 9 x11, Coleman Camp Stove on high stand, one double spring bed, two single folding cots, three wool blankets for each person, camp bed mattress or air mattress, Coleman Camp Lantern, four-party cooking and eating utensil set, folding table and chairs, luggage carrier, ice basket or chest, thermal jug or bottle, accessories for the automobile, miscellaneous equipment such as fishing tackle, camera, outboard motor, camp axe and hunting knife in sheath, flashlight, first-aid kit, field glasses, water bag, auxiliary tank, radio, phonograph. **Frank E. Brimmer, Autocamping, 1926***

• Following is a very complete list, with weights, of camping accessories that may be stowed neatly on the running boards of two cars for a short or long cruise of eight people:



| <b>Article</b>  | <b>Weight</b> |
|---|---------------|
| 2 automobile tents  | 18 ½ lb.      |
| 2 doz. 12-in. steel tent pins   | 4 ½ lbs.      |
| 2 tubular steel telescopic tent poles   | 3 ½ lbs.      |
| 8 sleeping bags   | 21 lbs.       |
| 8 No. 1 air beds  | 9 lbs.        |
| 2 three-quarter axes and sheaths  | 3 ½ lbs.      |
| 1 aluminum cooking outfit for eight people,<br>in leatheroid case, with all accessories | 15 lbs.       |
| 1 large aluminum folding baker, with<br>pan, bread board, canvas case and two handles   | 8 lbs.        |
| 1 folding grate with canvas bag   | 2 ½ lbs.      |
| 4 No. 3 chairs  | 4 ½ lbs.      |
| 4 steel folding stools  | 2 ½ lbs.      |
| 2 folding aluminum lanterns   | 7 oz.         |
| 4 folding wash basins   | 7 oz.         |
| 2 folding pails   | 8 oz.         |
| 2 folding tables  | 16 lbs.       |
| 2 shotguns and two rifles in each car   | Discretionary |
| 2 fishing rods with reels, lines, hooks, flies, etc.                                    | Discretionary |
| 1 toilet tent   | 6 lbs.        |
| 2 wall pockets  | 1 ½ lbs       |
| 1 refrigerator basket   | 9 lbs.        |
| 1 folding safety saw  | 4 oz.         |
| 2 military night marching compasses, one for each car                                   | 7 oz.         |
| 1 medicine case   | 21 oz.        |

*Equipped with such an outfit. or at least its essential items, the motorist is prepared either to emulate his French brethren- who are past-masters in taking little jaunts along their good roads, lunching luxuriously on the way - or to cross an entire continent, as the famous French sportsman, Baron de Crawhez, is now doing in Africa.*

Robert Sloss, Camping In An Automobile, *Outing Magazine*, 1910

*Autocamping became the vacation alternative for the comfortable middle class – they were seeking the values of pre-industrial times – a more leisurely pace, personal independence, simplicity, and family solidarity – from Americans On The Road, 1979.*



## POST WAR –

1945 - 27 million cars registered - camping one of America's favorite pastimes

1946 - Post WWII - one billion dollars in surplus materials were available...  
more equipment, better technology and easier access... Youth on The Loose....

- Advertisements sold nylon products alongside traditional canvas and wool products, touting their "lightweight" and "waterproof" qualities in order to justify charging up to 30% more than in the past (1950s and 60s shift to the backpack paradigm)

1962 – described the backpacker as a "different breed of outdoor camper"

WK Merrill - *All About Camping*

1970 - 20 million people involved in some form of backpacking

1971- The Backpacking Backlash – increased impact

1981 - According to the NPS, camping peaked in 1981 – developed, primitive, backpacking – all 3 types have peaked and are currently in slow decline. Determined by tent sales.

2014 – 14% or 40 million engaged in car camping, backpacking or RV camping – 4<sup>th</sup> behind running, biking, and fishing.

2016 – The outdoor industry accounts for **\$373 billion** – 2% of gross GDP –  
BEA Report - Outside Feb 2018

2017 - The BEA's report differs from the OIA's own 2017 report, which said that outdoor recreation was **\$887 billion** in size - The BEA report did not measure the revenue generated from apparel, equipment or travel spending.

2017 - the number of participants (aged six years and older) in camping amounted to approximately 41.77 million.

*The BEA report broke down the outdoor economy into three sections: "conventional core activities" (things like bicycling, hiking, hunting), "other core activities" (like agritourism, outdoor festivals, and even amusement parks), and "supporting activities" (travel, government, construction).*

*The core activities we typically think about when we think of the outdoor economy make up nearly 40 percent of the industry total. **By far the largest sector was the motorized vehicle industry, which was valued at roughly \$60 billion.** That was followed by the boating and fishing industry, hunting and shooting, the equestrian industry, and, finally, what the report called "**other conventional outdoor recreation activities**"—backpacking, climbing, and other outdoor gear-related sports—were valued at \$10 billion, well behind the hook-and-bullet industries.*

## Conclusions: Let's Play With Numbers

**1924 – 15 million campers - 112 mil pop. = 14% of the population camping**

These 15 million campers were mainly automobile owners who were adults [2017 statistics add in 26% of the population who were children]. If the average outfit for the autocamper in 1920 cost \$275 [\$3600 in 2018], that would put the camping gear industry at over \$1 billion dollars [over \$13 billion in 2017] just for car campers [1 outfit per 4 campers= \$3600 divided by 4 campers = \$800 x 15 mil. = \$1.2 billion – that's over \$17 billion in 2018 dollars]. When you

add in hunting and fishing gear, along with canoe, horse and tramping campers, the numbers skyrocket. One could surmise that the percent of campers would be closer to 20% of the population – 1 in 5 people camped.

**2014 – 40 million or 14% of the population** were car camping, backpacking and RV camping. 14% of \$800 billion+- is \$12 billion in expenditures. This is a closer comparison of just campers to 1924 users.

**2017 – 42 million campers – 327 mil pop. = 13% of the population camping**  
This includes people camping with cars and tents, as well as recreational vehicles and backyard camping. Approximately 26 percent of campers counted [10.66 million participants] were children [Once you subtract them, the total adults are 31 million or 9% of the population – 1 in 10 people are camping]. Camping equipment wholesale sales had a total value of about \$2.56 billion in 2017. All of these numbers have been in decline over the past 10 years.

#### **Other Interesting Notes:**

- Two-thirds of all outdoor recreation happens within 50 miles of home.
- 83% of all manufactured camping goods are used for car camping.
- The Shift of the Hegemony – Camping - romance and nostalgia – to a retreat for the masses – to public institutional appeal – to corporate control.
- If you look at what made up historical recreational pursuits, the big 3 were hiking, horseback camping and wheeled recreation – and eventually canoeing. The last 3 were primarily uniquely American - as opposed to say hill walking, skiing, and mountaineering that have European roots.



**Do you see a problem?**  
**Was “woodcraft “ the problem?**  
**How can it be resolved?**  
**Is the answer based on technology?**

### **Historic Sources –**

*Americans On The Road: From Autocamp to Motel – 1910-1945*, Warren James Belasco, 1979

*Heading Out: A History of American Camping*, Terence Young, 2017

*A Short History of the Campsite* – Martin Hogue, 2011

*Working At Play*, Cindy Aron, 1999

*The Motor Campers Manual*, Frank E. Brimmer, 1926

*Roughing It Smoothly*, Elon Jessup, 1920

### **Contemporary Sources –**

- *Outdoor Recreation Economy* – Outdoor Industry Association Report, 2017

- *The KOA North American Camping Report*, 2018

<http://koa.uberflip.com/i/960378-2018-koa-north-american-camping-report>

- *The Coleman American Camper Report* - 2017

[https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/2017-Camping-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/2017-Camping-Report_FINAL.pdf)

- Bureau of Economic Analysis – *Outdoor Recreation Report* – 2016

<https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>

The U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) show that the outdoor recreation economy accounted for 2.2 percent (\$412 billion) of current-dollar GDP in 2016. In data produced for the first time, using inflation-adjusted (real) GDP, the outdoor recreation economy grew 1.7 percent in 2016, faster than the 1.6 percent growth for the overall U.S. economy. In addition, real gross output, compensation, and employment all grew faster in outdoor recreation than in the overall economy in 2016.

Camping is not even listed in the 2017 BEA database of *Real Outdoor Recreation Gross Output by Activity*.