
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”
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Camping

Because this is the month of June and because the thoughts of more people in our nation than ever before, are turning to the out of doors, I want to say a few words tonight about camping and some of the reasons why many more people should try out this wonderful way of spending a part of the summer. As a matter of fact living in the outdoors is an historical attribute of the American people. From the earliest days of the settlements along the Atlantic Seaboard in every generation for two hundred and fifty years up to the completion of the pioneer settling of the great West, a very large proportion of our population was at all times engaged in camping out in one form or another. George Washington spent the greater part of his early years before the outbreak of the Revolution in camps. First with the troops of Braddock and then as a surveyor of a very wide stretch of territory. Lincoln himself spent many of his earlier years in camping when his family was moving on from place to place in search of new land and in the creation of new homesteads.

It was only during the past eighty years or so that so many American families got out of the habit of living more or less out of doors. The tendency to concentrate in cities, the growth of industry and the greater comforts that came into modern homes led many families to forget the opportunities for health and enjoyment that lay in country life or in returning to more simple ways of life even for short periods during the year. It is only within the past few years that we have remembered our heritage and rediscovered the old joys of getting closer to nature. With this has come a better understanding of health conditions and a realization that the stress and strain of modern civilization requires a complete change from city conditions if the race is to maintain itself.

A few years ago a great French doctor made some interesting and intensive studies in various large cities of Europe and he came to the conclusion that the average family will die out in the course of three or four generations if they live continuously in the city and have no addition of country bred stock through intermarriage with people of country ancestry. I do not know whether modern medical science supports this theory that the race will die out if it is confined to cities over a long period of time but I do know that every doctor encourages outdoor life and fresh air in as large quantities as possible to every city dweller.

Much has certainly been accomplished to spread the gospel of fresh air during the past few years. I remember as a boy going into New York City by train and passing along the elevated structure that passes through the

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northern part of the city. In those days when one came into the city on a train late at night every one of the windows in the tenement houses on both sides was firmly and tightly shut. It was the almost universal rule for people to sleep in hermetically sealed rooms. Today if you enter New York late at night on the same railroad and look out you will see practically every window in those same tenement houses wide open to let the fresh air in. That health lesson has been pretty thoroughly learned.

We have been helped in the opportunities for outdoor life more than anything else by the advent of the automobile and especially the cheap automobile. They have made it possible for whole families to get out into the real country districts at less cost and greater speed than formerly. When the automobile first came into fairly general use large numbers of families wanted to take up camping but they could go for miles along country roads or through woods and find only private property which no trasspass signs kept them out of. But the demand for camping places was soon met. Hundreds and thousands of farmers and other property owners found that they could earn an honest penny by providing camping places and even more important, the Federal Government and most of the State Governments were prompt to recognize their own obligation by opening up State and Federal owned land for camping purposes. For instance, today the nation has a hundred and sixty-seven million acres of National Forest Preserve to visit and camp in and the States and Counties have another eleven million acres which are open to the public. Those of you who know what the State of New York has done will appreciate the marvelous opportunities for campers in the Adirondacks, in the Catskills and in the splendid park areas that have been developed by the Regional Commission on Long Island, in the Palisades of the Hudson, in the Taconic area, in the Central New York Region, among the Finger Lakes and in the great Allegany State Park in the southwest corner of the State. The State itself has put up the cost of paying for and developing these splendid areas for campers and the State expects no reimbursement for the sums which have been thus expended. All they ask is that the campers and other visitors will keep fires from starting and remember that orderly conduct and the preventing of litter is a really public duty on the part of each group of campers towards those who follow them. The State furnishes the camp sites, the water supply and the sanitary facilities and only in some areas does the State receive a very small fee in return in order to pay a part of the upkeep.

Every year that passes sees some new group organize for the encouragement of camping. We all know of the hundreds of thousands of boys and girls who have been taught to understand and love camping through the effort of the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, the Camp Fire Girls, the Young Men's and Young Women's Associations and the thousands of school and health and religious and educational associations which are maintaining camps. That the whole movement is growing is shown by the simple fact that since the State of New York started its camp facilities in the Adirondack Preserve a number of years ago the actual attendance at these camp sites has practically doubled with each year that has gone by. That includes 1930, when in spite of the economic depression twice as many people used the Adirondack camps as had done so the year before.

That reminds me that people are beginning to realize that camping out is just as much meant for the poor family as for the rich family. It is easy to figure out that provided a family can afford the initial cost of some kind of transportation and some kind of camping outfit of the simplest sort, the actual cost of living in camp is lower than it is in almost any hotel, and it is actually lower, under the conditions that most people live, in the city itself.

I am told that the national agencies alone, such as the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts, the Health Camps of various kinds probably have two million people in camp during the summer. And the campers in commercial and family and tourist and park camps probably run to many times that figure.

I do not need to enlarge on the health values of camping out for old and young but I do want to say a few words about the social and educational values. We Americans need to get to know all of the phases of American

life. To stay within our own little, narrow circle in our own communities, whether it be a big one or a little one, narrows our perspective and keeps us from a better understanding of the problems and needs of the country as a whole. We need a fresh point of view, a mental stimulus that will fit us better for the coming winter's task, whether they be the tasks of business or the tasks of home life.

Furthermore, in camping out I think that we learn to adjust ourselves to other personalities, to meet and rub elbows with lots of other people whom otherwise we should never see. Camping is not only a leveling influence in that it brings in all sorts of new influences but it is also leveling in that we get a new insight into the characteristics of other people. Furthermore, we get new chances to develop leadership, to meet and solve new problems, to devise new and interesting experiments and to show what we can do in all kinds of delightful emergencies that we will talk about for months to come after we get home.

Finally, I like to think of the camper as one who is standing off at a little distance and looking at his normal and usual life. He is free to have the time for a little thinking, free to survey the conditions in which crowded humanity lives, free to ask himself questions as to whether improvement along various lines cannot be made in our much vaunted civilization. It is a time for stock-taking, a time for a calm survey, not only of one's own personal problems, but also of community problems and even national problems. I am convinced that in this way we can build up a saner, more intelligent citizenship which will do much to provide sane yet new solutions for the many difficulties that confront us at the present time.

My one regret is that there are still millions of individuals and even millions of families throughout the land whose circumstances are such that they cannot possibly even consider taking a camping trip of some kind. That is one of the problems which has not yet been solved. Nevertheless, to every man and woman and every boy and girl who can in some way manage to get off into camp for even a few days, let me say that it is well worthwhile. I hope if you have not done it before that you will try it out this summer and if you can arrange to do so let me wish for you a happy and delightful outing.