

ESSAY

Camping: It's not what it used to be

BY KAY MACDONALD
Special to the Record-Eagle

We camped a couple of weeks ago in a spot that I had camped in 52 years ago. Believe me, neither the site nor I have become more charming with age.

I was disappointed. But I don't know what I had expected. After all, progress had been at work.

There wasn't any nice soft, squishy dust left on the park roads to walk through happily barefooted. The avenues were all carefully labeled with one-way arrows and signs and they were clean, neat, well-cared-for asphalt. What a treat! Just like downtown Detroit. I've been dying to camp there.

We were well supplied with electricity. I'm not really complaining about that. I'm up for some of the comforts.

But I remember the hot, distinctively camping smell of our old gasoline lanterns and my dad pumping them up periodically as they dimmed. When we climbed into our blankets, they still made a reassuring glow out where the grown-ups sat around the picnic table playing cards as we fell asleep. This time we went to sleep by the glow of TV screens through camper windows and we were serenaded by electronic music, not all of it my own choice. Rap and hard rock seem discordant in the trees.

I always enjoyed the aroma of early morning breakfasts cooking in a campground, bacon and pancakes, grease and coffee. The air is sterile now. Everyone (those who don't go to McDonald's for Egg

McMuffins) cooks and eats inside and I didn't have a clue as to what my neighbors were enjoying. Well, hey, we cooked inside as well with the furnace going. No more need for those ratty old red and black checked wool flannel jackets. I sort of liked those scratchy old things that carried a history of fish juice and marshmallow goo.

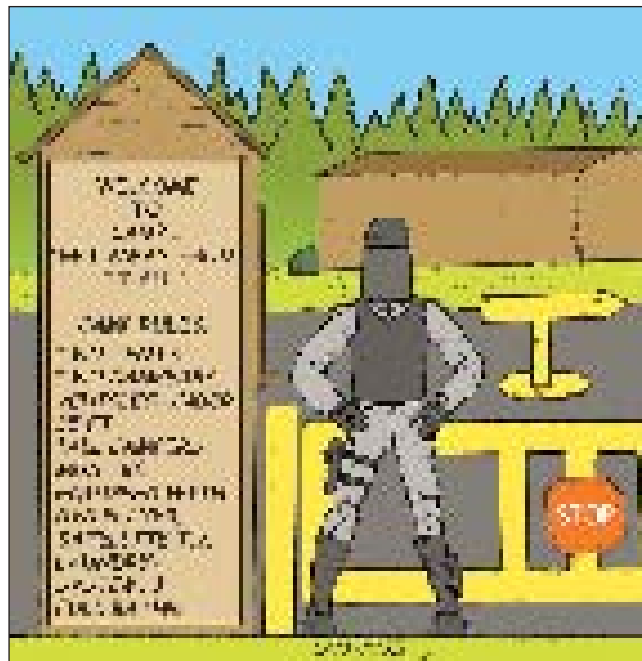
An amazing thing! Some parks don't allow tents. We have a trailer now ourselves, but I have fond memories of our old family tent. It was big and unwieldy and weighed as much, I think, as our trailer does now.

The tent floor was always sandy and the sand worked its way into our blankets, which were spread out on the floor sans cots or air mattresses. In a rain, a kid could put his finger against the canvas and magically make a rivulet run down inside. On a sunny day, the tent had a warm, musty, old dog aroma that was comforting when we were cold from swimming and curled up there to get warm.

These days on a rainy day the whole family goes to Wal-Mart or the movies. Back then we sat cross-legged on our blankets and played cards or colored or read and when the sun finally came out, we burst to freedom and raced back

to swimming while our mother hung everything out to dry.

Maybe the day will come when entry to the parks is granted by guards in full riot gear who assess your rig and refuse entrance to anything under 32 feet without a generator, full bath, laundry system, DVD player and satellite dish.



Speaking of those generators; is there anything less musical than the steady beat of a generator running all night in the camping site next door? It's much like taking your vacation in among the semis in the truck section of a freeway rest area.

The park we were in had plenty of welcome elbow room. That is unlike last year when we visited our daughter and her husband in a campground where the nose of their vehicle was snubbed up to the trailer in the next lot. Our campfire that night warmed the blankets of

the tent camper on the other side. Across the road a tent was pitched not three feet from the traffic. This is communing with nature? All I heard of the lovely night was the sounds of snoring and an ongoing argument two lots away over who was going to be on dog duty the next morning.

Campfires are safe now. Every campsite has its own industrial strength fire ring engineered of concrete, metal and flame retardant U237589.

Concessionaires sell neat bundles of firewood for the price of gold, as parks have no broken tree limbs or debris lying around to burn. I miss the big bonfires we built from pine stumps and driftwood that cooked your

front while your backsides froze. If you were lucky, you had a place in the tent where you could lie to watch the dying flames make fantasy images to dream on.

I loved especially the fires I was allowed to have on the beach by myself or with another buddy when we felt adventurous in the dark. We made a big deal out of baking potatoes in the coals and eating them charred and smoking as if they were actually good. And it was so grown up and bad to search out some fairly dry seaweed to smoke as we hunkered

down, pretending we were out on the ole round-up. Now no responsible parent would allow a child to play with fire even if camp rules allow beach fires.

On the other hand, bathroom facilities have taken a real turn for the better. The old outhouses, if there were any, were dark and scary with huge spiders lurking in all the corners and rats waiting to bite our posteriors (I thought).

There was some very interesting reading on the walls and I learned what girl loved which boy in every county in Michigan. I could never imagine who dared to spend enough time in there to write an entire poem. And where did they get their pencil?

The new johns have hot water (well, sort of). Modern campers are free to indulge the American obsession with one or two daily showers. We used to take our baths cheerfully in the lake and if we didn't, no one cared if we went to bed with dirty feet. On one cold camping trip, one of my cousins didn't throw any dirty clothes in the laundry bag for nearly two weeks and my aunt found that he had simply been putting one clean outfit on top of the dirty ones every day. No one even noticed that he was grubby and misshapen.

We're home now to our quiet little river and there are no rules here about fires and no paved roads and sometimes our water is lukewarm too. I think I'll just camp out in the yard and save the gas money.

Kay MacDonald is a freelance writer who lives near Irons.