Walt Disney Studios released its popular and wildly successful family comedy *The Parent Trap* in 1961 at a moment when the baby-boom era had arguably reached its zenith. This was right at the end of the so-called consensus fifties and not long before the turmoil of the sixties began to atomize America. *The Parent Trap* might serve as a synecdoche for the period in terms of popular familial and gender concerns and how camping and outdoor recreation related to the two. Although superficially innocent (it was a movie for youngsters after all), the film took as its subject some very serious issues confronting post-World War II America: juvenile misbehavior, separation and divorce, spousal abuse, and even sexual uncertainty. It also depicts how the disrupted family, the endangered male-female monogamous relationship, and the values guiding the nation’s youth might be returned to balance and normalcy thanks to the effects of the American outdoors, specifically through camping and the summer camp experience.

The film opens in an all-girl summer camp where thirteen-year-old identical twins Susan Evers and Sharon McKendrick meet. They have been unknown to each other since being separated as babies by their parents’ divorce in about 1947. Upon their arrival at the camp, its doddering proprietress, Miss Inch, introduces them and other summer sojourners to the rules and value system governing the camp and, if followed properly, their expected outcome: the transformation of them all into “one big happy family.” Regardless, Susan’s and Sharon’s identical looks lead them into instant rivalry. The discord shatters the one-big-happy-family picture when an all-out brawl between the two leaves a camp soiree, to which boys from a neighboring camp have been invited, in shambles. To teach them a lesson, Miss Inch sequesters Susan and Sharon in isolation. Inch’s tonic soon proves a cure as here the look-alikes figure out they are indeed sisters and make a pledge to reunite their mother Margaret and father Mitch, who have both remained single since their divorce.

The biggest obstacle confronting the girls soon presents itself in the figure of their father’s new, fashionable, young, and beautiful fiancée, Vicki Robinson. She only desires Mitch’s wealth and is anything but outdoorsy. It is therefore through family camping that the girls succeed in vanquishing their rival. First, and really it is Margaret’s doing, Vicki is tricked into a backpacking trip into the Sierras with Mitch and the twins. Margaret avoids going herself; she even quips earlier in the film, upon hearing that Mitch might be involved with another woman, “Well, I certainly hope she likes to sleep in the great outdoors and scale fish.” Sure enough, Vicki likes neither. When in the outdoors her stereotypical feminine frailties emerge, exacerbated by the twins’ conniving: they terrorize her with a tree lizard, make a fool of her as a result of her lack of knowledge about mountain lions and wood lore, furnish her with an ersatz insect repellant that attracts every mosquito within fifty miles, cause her to plunge into an icy mountain lake, and, the coup de grace, “gopher-trap” her in her tent with bear cubs. At that point Vicki becomes hysterical. While angrily smashing up the camp she screams, “I hate this place. I hate this filthy, stinking, dirty place...This may be someone’s idea of fun. But it’s not mine. I hate the fish. I hate the lake. I hate the trees. I hate the filthy bugs...Get me out of this stinking fresh air.” The out-of-doors has effectively become a metaphor for the baby-boom family, something which Vicki cannot brook and from which she is expeditiously driven. Later that evening we learn of Vicki’s likely fate: after Mitch declares, “That’s the last time I’m going to take a woman to the mountains,” he speculates that Vicki is “probably at Park Avenue and 57th Street by now”—the antithesis of the family-centric outdoors of the American West to be sure.

With Vicki out of the way, Mitch and Margaret reunite. Mitch confesses all the reasons he has secretly pined for Margaret over the years, including that while camping now he misses her hairpins that used to get mixed up with his fish hooks in his tackle box. Although Margaret and Mitch make their final conciliation in a kitchen where, significantly, she is barefoot and cooking, the out-of-doors really serves as the place for the entire family’s reunion. It is here where the twins first meet. It is here where the dangerous Vicki is sabotaged. It is here where both Mitch’s and Margaret’s recollection and memory take them. It is also here in the beautiful California outdoors where the two remarry in the final scene. The Reverend Moseby who performs the ceremony refers to this location as “God’s natural setting, under the trees.” More than just Mitch and Margaret reunite, however, as the twins, their grandparents, and the family servants are all there - one big happy family indeed!
In popular memory the 1950s has remained a golden era of simplicity and innocence where traditional family values prevailed, where American economic and military power and influence went unquestioned, and where the social complexities of our contemporary life seem nonexistent. At the scholarly level, historians have effectively debunked that myth: they have made central to our understanding of the period the very issues that rent the Evers and McKendricks—family discord and divorce, youthful defiance, and the sexual threat posed by the single woman. These issues—not to mention others such as race and civil rights, McCarthyism, controversial New Deal policies, juvenile delinquency, suburban isolation and boredom, consumer society’s hollowness, and the emerging gay rights movement—reveal the deep fissures and discontents that actually ran straight through the heart of baby-boom society. Those issues made the fifties and early sixties anything but the idyllic place and time of popular memory.

During this postwar/baby-boom era of social strain, Americans, like The Parent Trap’s Evers and McKendricks, took to the outdoors. They picnicked, hiked, backpacked, saw sights, boated and water skied, and camped at unprecedented and ever-increasing rates. Generally ignored in the scholarship, evidence shows that Americans looked to the outdoors and camping at this time much as Disney cameras and projectors captured it in The Parent Trap, as a palliative; in the fifties and sixties white middle-class families and their individual members scoured the outdoors for that which escaped them in the routine of their daily lives—family togetherness and cohesion, self-fulfilment and contentment, and even broader societal unity. In searching for Miss Inch’s “one big happy family” in the out-of-doors, some Americans were offering a critique of their social world, another indication of the limits of actual consensus of the times. Moreover, in searching the outdoors for what they felt they lacked in the every day, Americans ended up creating opportunities that had the potential to further undermine the ideals of consensus in America, for example in developing new activities or simply in providing new settings in which old activities might be performed and wherein gender behaviors, expectations, and traditions might be dramatically altered.

Additionally, the family camping craze of the fifties and sixties had the effect of helping to make Americans (or at least a fairly significant segment of that population) into people more environmentally aware, leading by the end of the period to the emergence of an environmental ethic that critiqued consensus society and culture. Historians have argued different causes for the rise of postwar environmentalism, from growing concerns about threats to or overuse of wilderness, to the advocacy role of ecologists, to an ambiguously defined revolt against urbanism and industrialization, and to consumer demands that producers behave more responsibly. In 2001, historian Adam Rome put forth what constitutes possibly the broadest socially based argument to date for that which gave rise to modern environmentalism in the United States. He maintained that it grew out of the postwar spread of the suburbs and, more precisely, the response from within those places to all the problems associated with them: demand for electricity that outran supply, over-flowing septic tanks and tainted drinking water, increased run-off and soil erosion, the continual loss of open space and wildlife, and serious questions about where to build and not to build. Rome argues rightly that broad-based modern environmentalism grew particularly out of American suburbs. But I would add that as denizens of such places increasingly took to the great outdoors in order to find what eluded them in their suburbs and which the general atmosphere of the times had led them to believe indeed resided there, what many often found was an increased appreciation for nature and thus a willingness to protect and advocate for it—The Parent Trap’s Vicki Robinson excepted.

After arriving in Denver, where the author’s uncle, aunt, and three cousins lived, both families went into the Rockies for more camping. The author and one of his sisters are shown here on that part of the trip holding their grandmother’s hands. In the background is the family’s International Travellall that transported three adults and four kids throughout their extended trip.
Camping was hardly new to the postwar period. Depending on how one defines it, camping arguably existed throughout American history. As a truly leisure activity, though, it likely began in New England in the mid-nineteenth century. Particularly popular by the turn of the century was the summer camp for children. Again, the Northeast led the way in this aspect of the broader camping movement; there the earliest were founded already in the 1870s. By the 1920s that region of the country claimed some 90 percent of the nation's camps with New York hosting more than any other state. Individual and family-style camping also increased in popularity through the early years of the twentieth century, encouraged by such phenomena as the See America First Movement which began when World War I prevented vacationing Americans from traveling overseas. Although railroads initially promoted See America First, ready access to the Model T served as the movement's driving force. For example, one historian discovered that whereas in 1916 about an equal number of people entered Yosemite National Park by railroad (14,251) as they did by automobile (14,527), in 1925 autos transported nearly 27,000 visitors to the park, the railroad only about 4,000. Among this era's so-called "tin-can tourists," camping was central to the experience.

While camping declined precipitously during World War II, it quickly recovered at the end of the war and the number of people camping increased markedly. United States Forest Service (USFS) statistics reveal that in 1943 about 1.1 million people overnighted in its campgrounds nationwide. This figure almost quadrupled by 1950 to 3.9 million. By 1960 it nearly tripled again to 10.9 million and in the year 1964 some 14.2 million people camped in USFS campgrounds. The popularity of national parks also skyrocketed after World War II. Graph 1 depicts the annual decline and then growth in visitation to National Park Service (NPS) properties between 1940 and 1950, while Graph 2 shows the continually growing numbers between 1945 and 1970. The figures in both graphs include all NPS lands, meaning not just numbers of visitors to parks, but to recreation areas and monuments as well. Many of these places, such as the monuments in Washington, D.C., had no camping facilities associated with them and so the figures can only hint at the true magnitude of American camping.

A look at visitor numbers to national parks and monuments in the Rocky Mountain region, an area somewhat isolated from urban centers and therefore more likely to require overnight stays, many of which
But camping truly was a national phenomenon. State governments, universities, local recreation departments, and family camping associations and clubs promoted camping in different ways, from hosting workshops that taught the basic how-tos of camping to sponsoring equipment expositions. At the federal level, President Eisenhower created the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission in 1958. It collected data on outdoor activities and use and produced a twenty-seven volume report in 1962. Not surprisingly, outdoor recreation became big business. In 1958 Americans spent 1 billion dollars on camping while fourteen years later they shelled out some 105 billion on leisure generally, with picnicking, swimming, fishing, boating, and camping being their five most favorite outdoor activities.

Some years ago historian Roderick Nash offered the now standard interpretation for what led to this incredible rush to the outdoors, attributing it to four revolutions: a revolution in transportation that made the outdoors more accessible, a revolution in camping equipment thanks to technological advancements made during World War II, an information revolution that made available sophisticated maps and stunningly accurate guides, and an intellectual revolution that provided a popular philosophy of the outdoors. Since Nash formulated this list, other scholars have refined and added to it, though none have essentially revised it. Historian Susan Schreper offered a somewhat fresh perspective in 2005 with an argument that tied 1950s-era American interest in wilderness and camping to postwar social and particularly defense concerns. Schreper shows in Nature’s Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism that early Cold War worries about national security popularized wilderness as a place that would contribute to American traits and values supportive and defensive of democracy; wilderness also provided an environment conducive to physical and mental health as well as to discipline and patriotism. In this section of her study, Schreper looks especially at family as central to how wilderness and the outdoors more generally became associated with national defense. But in doing so, she focuses on rhetorical more than on real reasons American families went camping.

But none of these explanations really tells us why Americans actually chose to go camping. A search of the growing popular literature on camping of the postwar era turns up one very practical reason that explains the camping craze: camping’s relative inexpensiveness as compared to other activities, particularly vacations, in which the large middle-class baby-boom family could participate. Donald Shedd wrote a popular article on the “Purposes and Goals of Family Camping” in 1966 wherein he responded to the question “why do people camp?” with the answer, “We are continually encountering the suggestion that it is the only way a family can afford a vacation, particularly the present day family averaging 4.3 persons.” Studies from the era indeed show that camping proved most popular among America’s middle-income groups and particularly with families composed of three, four, and especially five or more members. This economy proved imperative, as in Edwin Brock’s family of six who, in the forties, only “dreamed of making a trip to other sections of the country to view some of the splendor and beauty of America. But, like other middle[-]class families,” Brock explained, “we have hesitated because of the cost.” Through camping, though, the Brocks discovered the economy of such a trip, and so in the summer of 1949 they undertook their first outdoor expedition, one that ranged from Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico to the Grand Canyon in Arizona and to Yosemite in California. Similarly, A Ladies’ Home Journal piece in 1954 connected the modest financial circumstances of the Dick and Geegee Williams family of Venice, California, to their love for camping. Dick worked as a fireman, earning $4,740 a year. In addition to paying for the mortgage on the house that he had built and for “a baby-blue convertible” that Geegee “had to have,” the Williams were saving for their children’s college education. Because, as the Ladies’ Home Journal put it, “vacations, in his budget, just don’t exist, unless they’re inexpensive,” the Williams decided to try camping. They spent two lovely weeks in the Sierra—two weeks that transformed them into an avid outdoor family.

Experiences such as the Williams’ as related in popular magazines no doubt encouraged other families to give camping a go, as did Field & Stream’s declaration in 1962 that camping cost “little (if anything) more than the everyday expenses of living at home.” Maybe even more compelling were the stories related from families like the Brocks, noted above, who took mega-camping trips and did so on what seemed to be a dime. There were many families like the Brocks. For example, Robert Charles, his wife, three children, and mother-in-law took their first camping vacation in the summer of 1964. They drove 1,230 miles on their two-week trip and spent less than $250. In the summer of 1955, Robert Orr boasted, his family journeyed from California to Colorado, drove
Robert Orr claimed in 1956 that “camping is a mental rest unparalleled, particularly for people who spend most of their normal waking hours in a fast-paced business world.” A few years later, an article in The Living Wilderness magazine echoed Orr’s claims, touting the Adirondack and Catskill “forest environment with its stately conifers, massive hardwoods, cascading brooks, and still lakes” as “ideal for the camping tasks assigned to individual members in her family, noted that she, as mother, was “chief cook.”

Baby-boom families also had other less tangible but still very real reasons for taking to the outdoors in the fifties and sixties. For example, family camper Robert Orr claimed in 1956 that “camping is a mental rest unparalleled, particularly for people who spend most of their normal waking hours in a fast-paced business world.” A few years later, an article in The Living Wilderness magazine echoed Orr’s claims, touting the Adirondack and Catskill “forest environment with its stately conifers, massive hardwoods, cascading brooks, and still lakes” as “ideal for the family that wishes to escape momentarily from the rigorous demands of the working world.” In 1963, Phyllis McNally revealed in the lack of a “schedule to maintain in the woods” while camping in lower Michigan, remarking that her “whole family enjoyed a kind of freedom we have too little of at home.” A little later in the 1960s Natasha Boyd found that, as her family “wound down the trail” at the end of a backpacking trip in Idaho’s Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, “our hearts [were] happier, and our spirits renewed for the various jobs ahead.”

Historian Elaine Tyler May argued that the 1950s suburban family “was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members’ personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life.” The ideal proved elusive, however, as “postwar domesticity never fully delivered on its promises.” May found, for example, that stay-at-home moms often felt trapped and isolated in the suburbs, adolescents lacked privacy in the popular ranch-style home, the consumerism that so roundly touted itself as alleviating burdens often did not do so and certainly could not fulfill emotional needs, and men found that the provider role they were usually cast in was monotonous and dissatisfying. In light of May’s findings, it should come as little surprise that through camping people could “get away from it all,” which is precisely what 22% of them surveyed in California in 1964 claimed as the reason they most liked camping.

It would seem that Americans’ escape from the suburban, domestic, consensus ideal through camping was a revolt against the expectations that straight-jacketed them in their daily routine. In fact, just the opposite was true. They strove in the out-of-doors for what had eluded them back home: the domestic ideal of the postwar American family and satisfaction in its prescribed gender roles. One 1965 study found that while camping truly disrupted the routine of daily life and offered the potential for its participants to accept or reject distinctive gender roles, in fact those who went camping instead tended to stick to tradition. For example, women’s role in camping typically centered around domestic duties. A 1962 article in Consumer Reports that offered advice to beginning campers characteristically assumed that food preparation would fall to the wife when it promoted a two-over a three-burner cook-stove model. The latter, it explained, would “certainly permit cooking more elaborate meals—perhaps too elaborate to suit your wife....” A man obviously wrote this article for other men, but even women who wrote about camping during the era made similar assumptions about women campers and cooking. For example, Elizabeth Durbin, who authored “A Wife in the Wilderness” in 1969, encouraged women to give into their husbands’ desire for camping “even though,” Durbin presumptively explained, “the mere thought of cooking over an open fire has all the appeal of a lungful [sic] of wood smoke....”

Campers’ stories about their trips provide first-hand evidence of what Consumer Reports and Elizabeth Durbin accepted without question: that wives and mothers usually did the cooking in camp. For example, in 1957 Rosemary Depler, in enumerating the camping tasks assigned to individual members in her family, noted that she, as mother, was “chief cook.” Willis Dryer boasted in 1961, after having upgraded his equipment to a fifteen foot camper trailer, that “[m]y wife is in the trailer getting our meal ready almost before I have it parked” while Bill Conaway bragged two years later that his wife, “[w]ith four burners and portable Coleman oven at her disposal...had practically the same cooking facilities she had at home.... We had full-course dinners and plenty of baked products.” Luckily Geegee Williams, who went camping for the first time with her husband and children in 1954, was “interested in outdoor cooking...."
She broiled steak and chops on a grill over the open flame; rubbed potatoes with butter, enclosed them in aluminum foil, baked them in the coals of the fire; and as her boldest experiment, wrapped individual portions of lamb stew in aluminum foil and cooked these in the coals.\textsuperscript{137} Even the girls in camping families performed kitchen duties. For example, Robert Orr proudly commented in 1956 that while camping he was pleased to become aware that his "five-year-old daughter...on her own initiative, wash[ed] the dishes with unexpected skill."\textsuperscript{138} Similarly, Hal Burton, two years earlier when visiting Moose Brook State Park in New Hampshire, found the eleven-year-old daughter of one family washing the breakfast dishes. Noting that it is "a task most little girls don't fancy... she actually seemed to be having fun."\textsuperscript{139}

At first glance it might appear that camping hardly provided escape from the domestic duties that other historians found so tiresome and unrewarding to suburban women of the fifties and sixties. But period literature suggests that domestic duties in the great outdoors proved qualitatively and quantitatively different than when at home. Geegee Williams, who produced remarkably complex meals over a fire, also reportedly "discovered to her delight how really simple” camp cooking was. Additionally, Williams found housekeeping, or rather the lack thereof, the "one big thing" that really appealed to her. "Just wash the dishes, fold the pajamas in the sleeping bags, and close the flap on the tent. Even when you are working, it seems more like playing house."\textsuperscript{140} And though Harriet Pennington otherwise found in 1958 that "[c]amping does involve more chores than staying at tourist courts," for her, "that's part of the fun..... Even dishwashing can be an event when you have a mountain to look at and chipmunks for company." She also explained that "because food cooked outdoors tastes better, I find camp-cooking a joy, not a chore."\textsuperscript{141}

Sociologists Margaret Cerullo and Phyllis Ewen studied camping families in New England during the late 1970s. They found that camping women performed the same household duties prescribed to their gender back at home. But when camping, these duties became less tiresome often because the women had help from other family members, because they were not preoccupied by the many other things they might be doing around the house, and because such work while camping was more public and visible, giving them a certain level of confirmation for their contributions to the family.\textsuperscript{42} In varying ways, the same held true for the earlier postwar period. For example, when the June 1954 Ladies’ Home Journal reported Geegee Williams’s interest in outdoor cooking, it also noted that her husband, “Dick—who does not cook at home—had pancakes, bacon and coffee going” for her and the rest of the family for breakfast.\textsuperscript{43} A few years later, Jeanne Olsen described her “principal job, as for most mothers of camping families, is that of advance strategist in charge of menu planning and assembling equipment and supplies,” but in her family her husband was the “chief camp chef (self-made pancake flipper extraordinary).”\textsuperscript{44} Harriet Pennington found that housekeeping associated with camping proved “lighter than at home because my husband had more time to help. What needed to be done we did together and as the children grew, they lent willing hands, too.”\textsuperscript{45} In 1954, Dot Critchley explained during her first camping trip in New Hampshire that she “loved it,” particularly because her children “even ask to do the dishes.... I’m not put in the position of enforcing household discipline all the time.”\textsuperscript{46} And Gloria Wortman explained in 1957 that, “Camp housekeeping is so much simpler that there isn’t any comparison. And it’s never lonely work either.”\textsuperscript{147}

Relief from the relative drudgery of household work back home became a motivating factor for at least some women to go camping. Bill Conaway claimed that his wife, Jackie, “relieved of the tedium of housekeeping, had a wonderful time just relaxing, bathing, lying on the sand, and visiting around. (In fact, when we returned from our vacation she immediately started planning on weekend trips we might take during the rest of the season.)”\textsuperscript{48} One might treat with suspicion this man’s assessment of his wife’s experiences. But Bill did state that he and his three sons “cleaned up after the meals.”\textsuperscript{49} Moreover, women themselves sometimes verified Conaway’s contention that camping might serve as a holiday for them, as Harriet Pennington did when noting that because her daughters eventually took over some of the domestic duties, it gave her “a real vacation from pots and pans.”\textsuperscript{150}

As previously noted, husbands and other male family members might cross gender boundaries while camping, something that opened up the possibility for significant re-gerrymandering of all gender roles in society. The potential did exist, as William R. Burch, Jr. explained in his 1965 study of different types of campgrounds in Oregon. Although he discovered that campgrounds dedicated to fishing tended toward the traditional in male and female roles, work-a-day gender roles could and did mix there at different times. Waterskiing campgrounds went entirely
against tradition. The sport’s relative newness with no long history of prescribed gender roles, Burch believed, led it and its attendant campground to be devoid of gender roles along traditional lines. As he explained, “the operative and performing roles can be equally filled by anyone capable of a minimum level of dexterity and acuity.” His observations at Oregon’s various camps led him to speculate that if the trend in family campground use that he witnessed continued, gender roles would become re-organized.51

Despite these signs for the future, it appears that during the era whatever novelty happened in the outdoors generally stayed there. And even in the outdoors some men resolutely refused to take on female work. For instance, when George Wells wrote in 1962 that “[t]he modern camp cook really has it made,” he made clear that, “She (sometime it’s a he, but not in our family) is enjoying the benefit of a great many improvements in her kitchen gear.”52 Men typically stuck to fairly traditional male duties while camping, such as assembling and maintaining equipment, setting up camp, building fires, and gathering and cutting wood.53 They also at times resisted some of the other inroads women made into camping. The August 16, 1958 edition of The Saturday Evening Post carried a humorous article entitled “The Ladies Go Camping” by George Wells, an avid outdoorsman of the period who also wrote books on family camping. In this article, Wells explained how the camping industry found that big profits awaited them should they cater more to the fashion and practical sense of “the little woman” in hopes of luring her “away from her ranch house and backyard barbecue.” For example, when one camping equipment executive heard his wife explain, “I don’t mind so much camping out...but why does everything around a campground have to be so dull?” he introduced a pink tent. But such finery proved too much for some male stalwarts of camping. “One day last summer,” Wells related, “a plaid-shirted gentleman of the roughing-it-with-the-boys set came puffing up to his campsite in one of California’s seaside parks. He threw down his fishing rod in disgust and snorted, ‘I’m getting out of here!’ ‘What’s eating you?’ chorused his companions. ‘They’ve gone too far,’ he shouted, ‘I won’t stay in the same campground with a pink tent!’”54

Likely more fictional than real, the anecdote nevertheless revealed two truisms. One, tents in pink and other less traditional colors did appear in America’s campgrounds, probably due to female influence, whether direct or indirect. Two, women’s influence might only go so far in remaking fundamental arrangements in the family while camping. Notably, women often found themselves caring for the children in camp while their husbands engaged in other pursuits. William R Burch, Jr.’s 1965 Oregon study found this typical of the fishing camp, explaining that it resembled a “suburban development from 8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., as it is largely peopled by women and children while the men are fishing.”55 And so it was specifically in the case of Tom McNally when he took his family fishing in the summer of 1959 on Michigan’s Au Sable River; he left his wife “Phyllis in camp with our boys; Bobby was then nine and Marc three” while he went fishing.56 Similarly, Natasha Boyd revealed in 1966 of her family’s backpacking trip into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness that one afternoon, while her husband and son “went fishing in the babbling waters of Boulder Creek,” her daughter “Charlene and I dug and built a fireplace. The men came in with their limit by the time we had chocolate pudding made and the water boiling, and we dined royally that night on trout and corn bread.”57

In light of these stories related directly to fishing camp trips, it is interesting that Field & Stream magazine attributed the postwar increase in camping to fishermen, claiming that it was they more than any
others "who wanted to introduce their families to the joys of living under the sun and stars." Period studies also show that adult males more often than adult females took the lead in introducing their families to camping in the postwar era, having gone camping themselves as children and youths and wanting to continue the activity after marriage. And so it was with Jim Wortman who reported in 1957 that he had camped as a boy in Missouri with his family. "So, I was bitten early, and the responsibility for encouraging camping in my family must rest with me" as his wife gave him "absolutely no encouragement." Similarly, when Dick and Geegee Williams made their inaugural camping trip together with their children to the California mountains in 1954, "Setting up camp was Dick's show. He was a veteran camper after many fishing trips to the Sierras as a boy. Geegee was a complete novice...." Donald Shedd also reported in 1966 that it was "[s]ome years after marriage and children I found I could return to my old outdoor pursuits." His "pursuits" eventually led his wife, Enid, "to adopt the philosophy 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.'"

A cynical view might suggest that these men, pressured by societal expectations that they focus on the family, only reluctantly took them along on camping trips, perhaps to have women keep the campfires burning. Evidence actually suggests that men took their families camping because it provided them certain rewards not necessarily readily available back home. George Wells commented on some of the attendant benefits that family camping provided the head of household. The camper has, Wells contends in 1962, the "opportunity to use his ingenuity, to devise from the forest some of his own comforts and to exercise his own judgment in choosing camp sites. A man is a man again when he lives outdoors." Another male camper, Richard Charles, explained in 1957 that winning against "the elements, with bare essentials...[provides] the same satisfaction a man derives from successfully steering a ship through a storm when there are others aboard. Maybe there is no explanation, but the feeling is there."

George Wells and Richard Charles bespoke a gender phenomenon that sociologist K. Peter Etzkorn actually speculated on in his study of campers in early 1960s California. He believed that middle-class men received "limited satisfaction from their jobs and limited rewards through occupational advancement" and so instead sought personal fulfillment and gratification by focusing "their attention on their family and domestic affairs" where they could have an effect. This led many to camping, Etzkorn argued, because through camping men who might be in less satisfying occupations as lower-level bureaucrats or foreman back home could attend to "the physical comfort of the family" in the outdoors and gain recognition for it.

Collectively, Wells and Charles, who did indeed camp and promoted it for families, and Etzkorn, a scholar who studied it at the time, suggested that satisfaction in work and in supporting a family that males ideally were to achieve in daily life in accordance with the postwar consensus had eluded them. But in turning to camping and outdoor recreation with their families, they could and did achieve, with a measure of gratification, this gendered expectation. Similarly, when women of the era went camping, even though they still faced many of the same domestic duties they had back home, they found their gendered tasks to be far less onerous and more satisfying than at home. In camping, then, it is clear that postwar middle-class men and women did not necessarily revolt against the gendered roles and duties that constituted their often burdensome and thankless lot in the work-a-day world. Rather, they found stimulation, satisfaction, and confirmation in them. While not revolting against the postwar consensus, these people nevertheless critiqued its limitations and expectations.

In camping, postwar Americans did not limit their critique of society to its failure to provide them with satisfaction in their daily routines. They also made claims that only through camping could they achieve the familial togetherness otherwise culturally associated with suburban living specifically and the baby-boom more generally. Several studies completed between 1968 and 1970 similarly found, in the words of one of these, that camping indeed did contribute to "stronger family cohesiveness." Family camping expert George Wells, in 1962, already recognized such outdoor effects. "[E]xternal factors" experienced in camping, he declared, "cause a family to work in unison. And after the battle is over, there is a sense of triumph shared by all. This kind of thing welds a family together more effectively than any other force in our modern society. Campers...have the togetherness of the frontier society, the kind of interdependence and solidarity which threatened for a time to disappear after we had pushed the edge of the wilderness right into the Pacific Ocean."

People’s real experiences during the era support the conclusions of George Wells and 1960s sociological studies. "What is so enjoyable about camping?" Richard Charles asked in 1965. "For my family,
it was the sum of many varied shared experiences; sometimes, just fleeting moments of laughter; strange predicaments, new acquaintances, new scenery; time to sit and talk around a campfire, time to think and listen. You may think you know each member of your family well, but when you return from a camping trip you will feel you know them much better.”

Willma Simpson in 1959 from the California mountains that, “No experience can compare with the sense of unity and strength a family can find alone in the silence of the wilderness.” Two years earlier Marie Wood discovered from her boat-camping trip to islands in the Bahamas that her family took “with us a return cargo not only of collected shells but of vibrant health and peace and reemphasized love for each other.” Harriet Pennington reported in 1958 that, “What have we gotten as a family out of these camping trips of ours? A number of priceless things, my husband and I feel....Not only the experience of pitching in together as family and sharing work, but the experiences of sharing equipment, discovery and adventure together. Not only broader, richer interests developed together, but stronger, warmer family ties.” The Critchley family put it very succinctly in 1954 from their New Hampshire campground, “Camping out has taught us all a big lesson in family co-operation.”

When Richard Charles learned so much about his family while camping; when Willma Simpson claimed that “no experience” can compare with camping for the familial unity it provided; when Marie Wood discovered a “reemphasized love for each other” as a result of camping; when Harriet Pennington’s family discovered “stronger, warmer family ties” while camping; when the Critcheys learned about family cooperation while camping; and when George Wells claimed that camping “welds a family together more effectively than any other force in our modern society,” they all suggested that a family who knew each other, a family with strong and warm ties, a family that loved each other, and a family that cooperated, was not necessarily part of the daily scene and routine back home. Perhaps Robert Orr captured the essence of this critique of the baby-boom family in his 1956 article “Pack up the kids and Go Camping” wherein he carefully compared camping to life in the suburbs. “As for bringing the family together, we think there’s nothing like it,” Orr claimed. “A family that’s camping is on its own—as a family. You’re together most of the day and all night....The normal bickering and tugging that go on in any household of children seem suddenly absent. There are squalls, sure, but nothing like the routine at home....We camp because it makes our family a family in the truest sense of the word.”

Those who went camping in the fifties and sixties sought more than simply to improve ties within their families; they also hoped to create broader connections with others. Because his early 1960s research revealed so many campers who claimed that meeting other people was what they liked most about camping, sociologist K. Peter Etzkorn could only conclude that the “leisure values of these campers do not so much depend on the natural resources available in the camp area as one might assume, but depend at least as much on various ‘social resources.’” Another study completed later in the sixties similarly discovered that “for many, the appeal of camping lies not in the opportunity to escape people, but rather in the chance to meet them in a setting that affords an ease of social intercourse often unknown in the urban situation.” This was an attempt, in so many words, to create one big happy family.

And, it is exactly how camper James Jackson described his family’s experience camping at an otherwise barren and unwelcome site along an irrigation reservoir in eastern Wyoming in 1966. “[T]he place was windy, dusty, and offered scant shade from a merciless sun” for the few families camped there, Jackson began.

But when the wind died and a golden sunset painted rippling reflections on the lake, it became a cool and peaceful place. Then, as it darkened, a college lad at a nearby campsite began to strum a guitar and to sing in a soft, soothing voice. Like a magnet he drew the four families together and proved to be a charming songleader for the entire group. The hootenany lasted until slumber took its toll of the children; the talking continued well past midnight. All the while, a heap of brightly glowing embers held us together as one big happy family. And the families had been total strangers only a few hours before!

An important unintended consequence of camping was that it helped to make a broad sector of the American public more environmentally aware—by the mid-sixties millions upon millions of Americans were visiting America’s campgrounds, forests, lakes, mountains, deserts, and other scenic wonders, which they came to deeply love. “[T]he lure of camping,” Edwin Brock opined in 1950, “is not simply in its economy,” but in rare experiences one might not otherwise have, such as the night in Yosemite when, while camped along a lake, eating...
supper around a campfire, “a deer came down right to the edge of our encampment.” Similar events left indelible marks on Bill Thomas’s family who camped many parts of the country in the 1960s. On Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, for example, they “lay down on the grass by the edge of a lake, listening to the calls of the loons, and watching a porcupine clumsily climb a hemlock.” As they rode horses through Indiana’s Hoosier National Forest one fall, they “heard the gobble of a wild turkey in the distance. When we rounded a sharp turn in the trail, we flushed a couple of grouse, and still further along glimpsed a timid doe scurrying off into the woodland.” When they retreated to Alaska’s isolated Tongass, they “explored the woods and fished,” saw moose and black bear, but never another soul. Of her family’s first night in Idaho’s Selway-Bitterroot country, Natasha Boyd related that the “beauty of the place soaked into our souls, as we went to sleep contentedly.”

Even those initially loathe to partake in the camping craze soon found their feelings about camping, and therefore the out-of-doors more generally, markedly changed. Many women at first responded to the outdoors as did Vicki Robinson in The Parent Trap. For example, when Jim Wortman first attempted to get his wife Gloria to camp, he met with disaster. “About three months after our June wedding,” Jim explained, “I persuaded her to give it a try one weekend, but our first night out she wandered alone in the dark (‘feeling all shivery anyway’, she says) and bumped into a cow. The experience jarred her so that we didn’t try camping again until two years later.”

Elizabeth Durbin likely spoke for many women in 1966 when she remarked about them and wilderness that, “You accept your mate’s affinity for old clothes and burnt beans beside a campfire—so long as you don’t have to share it. And when he marches off to pit his strength against the elements, you wave goodbye with a smile, thankful that you can stay home in comfort.” And recall that Enid Shedd, in light of her husband’s desires for the outdoors, only reluctantly adopted the philosophy, “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.”

But unlike Vicki Robinson, once these and millions of other women like them went camping, they became outdoor aficionados. On her second try camping two years after her first frightening experience, Gloria Wortman “discovered that our system of parks can provide a beautiful setting in the open air, at a low cost, with a minimum of ‘roughing’ it.”

Elizabeth Durbin encouraged women to give wilderness camping a try as it would provide them an opportunity “to unravel” what she strongly felt was “the fascination of nature’s siren call.” And Enid Shedd did not just “join ‘em,” she became an avid outdoor writer, the editor of the Family Camping Federation’s leader, a trainer of Girl Scout leaders, and a day-camp director.

Observers and promoters of camping, as well as campers themselves, realized that camping kindled conservationist and environmental concerns in those who participated in it. Reynold Carlson, in his 1961 review of the surge in postwar family camping, explained that the camp “is an ideal setting for conservation education—for practicing good land use and for helping young people develop understanding and sound attitudes toward our natural resources.” While William Vinal claimed that through camping one gained kinship with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s values and sentiments, Bill Thomas advertised that a “wonderful way to begin to appreciate nature is to go family camping.”

Truth resided in these rhetorical flourishes. Period studies found that people effectively acquired environmental values early in life through camping and the earlier in life one was introduced to camping, particularly through family and friends, the more “inventive or committed” they would become to wilderness and the outdoors. In the 1960s, those who took to the more primitive forms of camping that wilderness afforded demonstrated a significant level of commitment to environmentalism. One survey found that about 30 percent of wilderness users surveyed belonged to at least one conservation organization.

Indeed, camping during the postwar years served as a transformative experience in the lives of many modern environmentalists and outdoor supporters. After naturalist Natasha Boyd took her first trip with her husband and two children to Idaho’s Selway-Bitterroot area, she became a long-time advocate of wilderness protection for the area. Arizona environmental writer and activist Mary Sojourner recalled the event that first connected her to the land and nature when, as a child in the early postwar years, her parents took her to the Adirondacks and put her in a canoe by herself. While drifting offshore she smelled the scent of pines, watched dragonflies alight on her legs, and “waited for the first star, and when it pierced the east, I felt myself connected....” Canadian environmentalist Ric Careless, who spent his childhood in 1950s Toronto, went to summer camp at Algonquin Park for the first time at age fourteen.
It was there that he connected with the land: “As I canoed down Opeongo and Happy Isle Lakes, surrounded by the low, mapled ridges of the Canadian Shield, I felt my soul shiver.” Scott Gediman, Yosemite National Park Service Ranger at the time of this writing, recalled that his parents began taking him camping in the Yosemite in the 1960s. “Our family would come to Yosemite for a week every summer,” Gediman explained. “As a teenager, I’d come up for weeklong backpacking trips. I wanted to be a Yosemite ranger for as long as I can remember.”

Somewhat later than the period of this study, Charles Pezeshki, advocate for protection of Northern Idaho’s Clearwater Country, first fell in love with the area when, at age fourteen in 1976, his father brought him out from Ohio to raft Idaho’s Salmon River. Even more recently, Adam Werbach, elected the youngest president of the Sierra Club in 1996 at age 23, recalled the importance in his childhood and youth of school vacations in the 1970s and 1980s when his parents “would pack my brother Kevin and me into the car for trips to the national parks. They wanted us to see that the world was more than L.A.’s smoggy canyons, nose jobs, and leased Mercedes.... From the Grand Canyon to Zion to Yellowstone to Death Valley, from Acadia in Maine to the East Mojave in California, our vacations gave us reprieve from San Fernando Valley culture.”

These are just a few of those whose camping experiences, either as adults or as youngsters, would deeply shape, even kindle in them, environmentalism. I would propose that on a broader level camping in the fifties and sixties—maybe not in every case to the degree that it shaped the subsequent lives of people noted above—had a positive effect on the environmental ethics of an entire generation. In 1958, camping advocate and stalwart Harriet Pennington captured the essence of this argument in a sentence when she related the priceless gifts camping afforded her family. Two of these were, “Not only a view of our country we wouldn’t have had otherwise, but a feeling of it that’s made us all ardent conservationists.”

Baby-boom families camped because of its relative inexpensiveness compared to other activities that they might have participated in together. While it provided them escape, it also afforded members of the family, notably husbands and wives and fathers and mothers, affirmation of and reinforcement for their gender roles and expectations. Camping also strengthened family bonds and provided improved social ties with others. In all these ways camping in the 1950s and 1960s served to reinforce—maybe even create—the mythical consensus so long believed to be the signature of the era. And so it was that Susan and Sharon and Miss Inch in The Parent Trap saw the outdoors as the place, probably the only place, where One Big Happy Family might be and indeed was created.

But at the same time, when heading to the outdoors to find what they thought should and were told in fact did exist in their suburban households and in their domestic and white-collar jobs of the era, white middle-class Americans of the postwar era were offering a profound critique of how their work-a-day lives did not provide that which they had come to expect. Likewise, separation and divorce, spousal abuse and acrimony, youthful defiance, and the threat of the single woman in reality or just in popular belief lurked beneath the placid surface of the suburban homefront. Those were the very things Sharon and Susan in The Parent Trap felt camping could overcome.

The Parent Trap, a synecdoche for the period, perhaps. But it did not, could not capture all the relevance of the out-of-doors to Americans in the baby-boom era, relevance whose true meaning emerged only some years later and has become the province of historians, though they have as yet to fully recognize it: camping in the fifties and sixties opened up the possibility for undermining the consensus of that era. Gender roles had the potential to be reconfigured and in some cases they were. Additionally, camping helped to give rise to a new environmental ethic in the country that would remain one of the most significant, long-lived, and successful criticisms of American society and culture that emerged during the rebellion of the later 60s and early 70s.

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Notes:
2. A general text along these lines is journalist David Halberstam’s The Fifties (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993).

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23. Joseph N. Bell, “Four Weeks of Camping on a Family Budget,” *Popular Mechanics,* May 1958, 97-103. Campers such as the Brooks, the Charless, the Orrs, and the Bells were known, in the parlance of the times, as travel campers—those who took very long vacations during which they covered many miles and visited America’s great scenic wonders. Amazingly, some families traveled even greater distances than these. During the summer of 1954, for example, the T.G. Lupton family from Virginia traveled 8611 miles in five weeks on their way to the Pacific Coast and back. They camped in Rocky Mountain, Grand Teton, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, and what later became Redwood National Parks, and later the family roamed 10,000 miles from their home in New York to California and back, along the way visiting thirteen national parks and monuments, twenty-three national forests, and a dozen state parks and forests over a two month period. Another type of camper was the destination camper, one who took a trip and stayed in one location for a period of time. Most campers, however, were of the “weekend” variety, the kind, as one period observer described, who “can get away on Friday night and head for his favorite campsite and escape his regular camping friends or to keep working at landing the big one in the deep...of his favorite stream.” See Maralyn Orbison, “Family Vacationland Big as All Outdoors,” *Better Farming and the Country Gentleman,* April 1955, 94; Shedd, “Purposes and Goals,” 6.


28. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the*

May, Homeward Bound, 187.

May, Homeward Bound, 186-203.


Weyl, “How Young America Lives,” 120.

 Orr, “Pack up the Kids,” 88.


Pennington, “Wood Smoke and Tent Pegs,” 52.

Burton, “Pitch a Tent for Family Fun,” 95.


Conaway, “Big-family Camping,” 51.


Pennington, “Wood Smoke and Tent Pegs,” 52.

Burch, Jr., “Play World of Camping,” 604-12, 606 quoted.


Examples of these are contained in “Case History: Family Back-Packing on Mount Rainier,” Sunset, August 1961, 30; Conaway, “Big-family Camping,” 48; Weyl, “How Young America Lives,” 119; Orr, “Pack up the Kids,” 88.


Burch, Jr., “Play World of Camping.” 608.

McNally, “Family and Fishing?" 49.


Wortman, “California, Here We Come!” 189.


Wortman, “California, Here We Come!” 119; Orr, “Pack up the Kids,” 88.

Charles, “Let’s Take a Family Camping Vacation!” 120-21.

Satisfaction in Camping: A Conceptualization and Guide to Social Research, Journal of Leisure Research 1, no. 4 (Autumn 1969): 350, found that the appeal of camping to many was “experiencing family togetherness.” William R. Cattanach, Jr. and John C. Hendee, “Wilderness Users...What Do They Think?” American Forests, September 1968, 31, determined that, “Wilderness recreation often represents a quest for strengthened bonds among families and among close friends. More than half of the wilderness visits of our 1,350 respondents were by small family groups, and most of the remainder by small clusters of friends.”

Charles, “Let’s Take a Family Camping Vacation!” 119-120.


Mable L. Wood, “We Found Our Family Haven,” Travel, November 1957, 42.

Pennington, “Wood Smoke and Tent Pegs,” 68.

Burton, “Pitch a Tent for Family Fun,” 35.

Orr, “Pack up the Kids,” 88.

Etkorn, “Leisure and Camping,” 76, 78, 81 (Table II), and 86 (quoted).


James P. Jackson, “Growing up with Family Camping,” American Forests, May 1966, 71 (emphasis is mine). Cerullo and Ewen, “Having a Good Time!”, 22, found that families in the late 1970s also had difficulty creating larger community back home, but camping provided them this opportunity.

Brock, “Whole Family Can Go Camping,” 86.

Bill Thomas, “Why Not Take to the Wood this Summer,” Parents’ Magazine & Better Family Living, April 1969, 62, 93


Wortman, “California, Here We Come!” 189.


Wortman, “California, Here We Come!” 189.


See Cattanach, Jr. and Hendee, “Wilderness Users...What Do They Think?” 31; University of California Wildland Research Center, Wilderness and Recreation, 135, 136.


Peter Fish, “Old Faithful versus the Xbox,” Sunset, July 2007, 104.


Pennington, “Wood Smoke and Tent Pegs,” 68.