The Municipal Campgrounds of Kansas

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CAMPING out while traveling by automobile has again become popular. With some encouragement on the part of automobile manufacturers, the vacation tourist is fast renewing an old American tradition. It might be interesting then, to take a look at the camping accommodations available to early motorists, especially in view of the fact that some of the early campgrounds are again in use. Because the early municipal campgrounds were highly popular for only a short period of time, several questions immediately come to mind: What was the need for campgrounds? Why were Middle Western communities not only willing but eager to offer camping facilities? Why was the popularity of these accommodations so short-lived?

For the early motor traveler, procurement of suitable lodging for the night presented obstacles which, while not altogether unassailable, could cause some real inconveniences. West of the Mississippi river, the condition of the roads, the scarcity of choice accommodations and the distance between stopover points did not lend themselves readily to the making of hotel reservations in advance. Efforts to reach previously selected destinations before nightfall often swallowed up the enjoyment of the trip. Hence, the development of municipal campgrounds where all tourists were free to stop for the night offered a welcome alternative. Thus it was, that during the early 1920’s, the municipal camp area reached an apex of popularity in the Middle West where major cities are few in number and often hundreds of miles apart. It was estimated in 1921 on one Western highway that every second car carried camping equipment. Since the percentage of campers was high throughout the Middle West, it is not surprising to discover that the state of Kansas, with its central location, was one of the earliest to encourage campgrounds and remained a leader throughout their years of popular use. Accordingly, knowledge of conditions as they developed in the campgrounds of Kansas seems especially pertinent.

As early as 1902, St. Marys is reported to have opened to travelers

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a municipal park which was capable of handling 100 parties in its 23 acres of ground.\textsuperscript{2} In the next few years other municipal camp areas developed, until by 1920 there were 300 cities in the nation offering this overnight lodging privilege.\textsuperscript{3} By 1922 the number had risen to 1,000.\textsuperscript{4} As campgrounds proliferated rapidly, Kansas continued to assert its leadership in the offering of camping facilities. John G. Stutz, writing in *Kansas Municipalities*, stated: "Kansas has the distinction of having more tourist camps per 100 cities than any other state in the Union."\textsuperscript{5} At that time there were 156 Kansas municipalities that proudly boasted some kind of municipal camp area.\textsuperscript{6}

The deliberate encouragement of the municipal camp area was based on the premise that it was necessary to control the otherwise accidental locations which the tourist might select for his overnight lodging. The automobile tourist could be expected to locate not only near the highway but also within easy reach of the community, both because of the need to obtain food, automobile supplies, and good water, and also because of a certain degree of fear of being alone and completely isolated. However, these self-chosen locations were not always the most auspicious for the health interests of the community concerned. There was then, need for some regulation of the activities of the casual camper. The municipal campground seemed at the time to be an effective way of meeting this need.

These municipal camps usually were located in a park near the downtown commercial zone, where the automobile traveler could conveniently acquire the services he needed. Foremost among these was the need for such enterprises as gasoline filling stations, garages, and tire shops, but travelers also patronized grocery markets, restaurants, dry goods and drug stores, as well as telegraph and post offices.

Many municipal parks displayed a sign stating that a camper was welcome to stop. Moreover, stimulated by the efforts of their civic organizations, many communities offered municipal campgrounds that became elaborate places with kitchens, tables, fire-

\textsuperscript{2} John G. Stutz, *Tourist Camps in Kansas Cities* (Municipal Reference Bulletin No. 35, University of Kansas, Lawrence, March 1, 1923), p. 28. The date given in the report is 1902. However, this seems a bit early for the need for a large campground to have been felt. A check of a St. Marys newspaper for 1902 revealed that land was purchased and a city park established, but there is no indication that it was open to tourists for camping at that time.


\textsuperscript{5} "Kansas Has Many Tourist Camps," *Kansas Municipalities* (published by the League of Kansas Municipalities), Lawrence, February, 1923, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
places, showers, baths, and rest rooms, and they even offered police protection. At the opening of a campground at Manhattan, it was claimed that the city had taken "...the lead among all the states in providing the most convenient as well as beautiful 'free' camp park maintained for the traveling public." In this particular camping area the tourist was offered, in addition to the usual facilities, a community building containing a lounge room with a rock fireplace. This was situated in an artistic park planted with every shrub and ornamental tree known to thrive in the Middle West, and with flower beds containing hundreds of blooming flowers.

The costs were high for the construction of elaborate facilities such as those at Manhattan. Up to $35,000 was spent by Kansas City, Kan., alone. In order to justify a financial outlay of this magnitude for a municipal campground, local merchants calculated the increased returns anticipated by the businesses of the community from trade with overnight guests. For most tourists, the average length of stay in a given camp area was approximately two days, and it was typical for the spending of each tourist group to net the merchants of the community about $5.00 per day. One unnamed community which kept records on the campers realized an estimated $100,000 increase in cash trade resulting from the stay of visitors sheltered in its municipal campground.

On September 15, 1923, the Chamber of Commerce in McPherson reported on the volume of business from a municipal campground which had been built there in 1921 for $7,000. By that time the income, including that realized from the 5,886 tourists from 43 states, Canada, and Mexico who stayed in the camp during the summer of 1923, amounted to several times the original cost of the camp. Similar economic gains were experienced by many other communities, not only in Kansas but also along other major highways of the Middle West.

In spite of their decided economic advantage to the community, these municipal campgrounds faced strong local opposition for

8. Ibid.
9. Dr. L. B. Gloyne, "The Grading of Tourist Camps," Kansas Municipalities, September, 1925, p. 28. Dr. Gloyne makes the interesting remark that the community had received more favorable comment on its tourist camp and "has got more good advertising out of it than from any one thing that it has done in a number of years."
several reasons, even at the peak of their popularity. The chief antagonists represented two specific factions. Most vocal were those who were deprived of the opportunity of serving these tourist groups. Especially bitter were the members of hotel associations and the owners of commercial tourist lodgings. A second contingent consisted of those who felt that community campgrounds were not a legitimate area of municipal governmental activity. The opposition elements had spokesmen who were vitally concerned with and influential in the affairs of their communities. The most convincing charge against the municipal campgrounds centered around health.

It was charged by those opposed to the municipal campground that adequate sanitary standards could not be maintained. Conditions in some of these tourist camps were such, that on February 15, 1923, the Kansas State Board of Health, under the authority of Section 10122 of the General Statutes of Kansas, 1915, unanimously recommended a set of sanitary regulations specifically designed to improve campgrounds. Kansas was the first state to take such action. Unfortunately, there have always been persons who mistreat or misuse any kind of public facility, so that even with these regulations, the conditions of the campgrounds in Kansas remained variable. Some were of good quality, others deteriorated.

In order to publicize the satisfactory municipal camp areas and at the same time to encourage indirectly the improvement of others, a Tourist Camp Bureau was organized on April 18, 1924. Cities which belonged to this Tourist Camp Bureau were to have standard facilities and to charge the tourist camper 50 cents per day for the use of the camp area. In addition the Tourist Camp Bureau issued uniform registration blanks, and each automobile was given a recognizable type of serially numbered tag. These tags were a receipt for registry and at the same time were to serve as identification for the motorist during his stay in a given city.

It was felt by the leaders of this movement that the 50-cent fee would assist in improving the conditions in each of the camps and at the same time keep out the "gypsy" or "hobo," who polluted streams, left heaps of rubbish behind and accidentally set forest fires.

15. Harger, loc. cit.
In spite of the efforts of the Kansas State Board of Health and the Tourist Camp Bureau to control conditions in camp areas, the Kansas Public Health Association at its meeting in Wichita on September 19, 1922, specifically ordered tourist camps throughout the state to improve their sanitary conditions.17

The failure on the part of city officers to administer sanitary and police regulations effectively had, by the mid-1920's, forced the desirable types of campers to seek other lodgings. Official notice of this trend was taken at the second conference of city officials of Kansas held in Topeka in April, 1924. At this time, it was stated that: "While a majority of the tourists are appreciative of the services offered by the cities, not a few are unappreciative, destructive, and in many cases criminal in their treatment of tourist camp facilities..." As this thoughtless type of person came to be dominant among those using the facilities, additional members of the community began to question the wisdom of allotting city taxes for the maintenance of municipal camp areas. The city manager of Wichita, Earl C. Elliott, forcefully summarized this position when he called the Wichita municipal camp, "...a 'haven of roost' for the automobile tramp and for the 'boomer' who travels through the country living off the community. Our experience is that many of the folks who light in our camp are tramps...who become a charge upon the community." 19

As unsatisfactory conditions in the municipal campgrounds became increasingly prevalent, discerning campers ceased using them entirely, and with the rapid degeneration of most of the camps, even the "gypsy" or "hobo" camper began to avoid them. Robert D. McGiffert of the Topeka City commission stated that during the early part of the summer of 1928 the Topeka campground had not averaged eight persons per week. He commented that the 50-cent fee charged each of these groups was not enough to pay for the watchmen and caretakers necessary to maintain the grounds.20

Thus it appears that by 1928, not only did the commercially desirable class of tourist avoid the municipal campgrounds, but even those less considerate in their treatment of the sites had turned

17. McChen, op. cit., p. 528. At this same time other states were experiencing similar difficulties. An Indiana State Board of Health survey of 116 municipal tourist camps in Indiana reported in May, 1924, that 27 per cent of the water supplies were undesirable or unsafe, only 22 per cent of outside toilets were approved, and only 47 per cent had approved garbage disposal facilities—"Unsanitary Tourist Camps," Literary Digest, New York, October 11, 1924, p. 61.


to other sources of lodging. It ceased to be common to see informally dressed men, women, and children alighting from heavily loaded cars to spend the night in these municipal camps. This loss of popularity marked the end of an era in the wanderlust of the American tourist.