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# The End of Camping

Coming home to the city

When twenty-nine-year-old John Muir first disembarked at San Francisco in March 1868, he was a man with a mission. On the road for nearly a year, Muir had walked 1,000 miles from Indianapolis to the Gulf Coast, sailed south to Cuba and Panama, where he crossed the Isthmus, and then sailed north to California. Legend has it that once off the ship, Muir asked a passing stranger which

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Making tea on the summit of Liberty Cap on a Sierra Club outing to Mt. Ritter in 1909. Photograph by Edward Taylor Parsons. COURTESY OF THE BANCROFT LIBRARY.

was the shortest route to any place wild. Without hesitation, the man directed Muir east to the Sierra Nevada where for the next twelve years he more or less made Yosemite and the nearby mountains his home.

A Romantic in the mold of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Muir questioned the value of an urban-industrial life and praised the state's wilder areas as God's handiwork, the antidote for those who had to toil in California's cities. "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings," wrote Muir in 1901. "Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of Autumn."<sup>1</sup>

Many Californians heard Muir, and took him at his word when they headed out of San Francisco, Sacramento, Los Angeles, and other cities to pitch their tents in Yosemite, Sequoia, and other wild settings. Over the next century the annual number of recreational campers swelled into the millions as more and more Californians, as well as other Americans, escaped their everyday lives to enjoy the pre-modern conditions of camping that they were told by Muir and others would restore and refresh them before returning

to their permanent residences. These campers, just as Muir had recommended, became pilgrims to California's natural "cathedrals."

Pilgrimage is never straightforward nor simply a matter of traveling somewhere. Regardless of whether the ultimate destination is Lourdes, Gettysburg, Disneyland, or wilderness, a pilgrim does not begin to journey unless he is dissatisfied with life's customary places, people, and social relations. Something in his or her life must "push" the pilgrim away from the profane, everyday world before the journey can begin. At the same time, the pilgrim must desire some exceptional outcome in order to be "pulled" toward and into a sacred, transformative place during pilgrimage and then, hopefully, return to the everyday world satisfied.<sup>2</sup>

Pilgrimage is generally arduous, forcing pilgrims to endure challenges as a part of their journeys. One of the world's foremost religious pilgrimages, the *hajj* to Mecca, has traditionally been seen as so difficult that devout Muslims are expected to perform it only once in a lifetime. In Spain each year, thousands of pilgrims, the majority of whom are not Roman Catholics, hike hundreds of miles to kiss the statue of Saint James in his cathedral in Santiago

“No American wilderness that I know of is so dangerous as a city home ‘with all the modern improvements.’ One should go to the woods for safety, if for nothing else.” —John Muir,  
*Our National Parks*

de Compostela. Of course, one could simply fly into Santiago or drive there from St. Jean Pied de Port, a traditional starting point on the French border, but people who do so are dismissed as “tourists” by those who, like innumerable pilgrims before them, walk the traditional path.<sup>3</sup>

Camping is not a religious practice, nor is it usually as arduous as the great pilgrimages, especially these days, but it does share this pilgrimage pattern.<sup>4</sup> Campers perceive great power at a place—“nature”—which when tapped can counteract the “evils” of urban life and “restore” them mentally and physically. This restoration will occur only if the camper travels to where nature’s power is readily accessible and there resides temporarily. Not just any location will do—and then there’s the pilgrimage itself, from the preparations that must be made before setting off to the journey itself. At the same time, what qualifies as “natural” and how one engages it turns out to be highly flexible among campers as a whole. Parking a large motorhome along the Pacific Coast Highway on the Ventura County shoreline can satisfy some. Others have long preferred to car camp in Yosemite. While for still others, only a backpacking trip along a remote stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail will suffice. Wherever it is, it must be a place where the pilgrim-in-the-wild will cede some element of control and let nature take over.

No matter how it is practiced, the patterns of modern camping are closely tied to the long-standing divisions of urban and wild California. According to one powerful strand of our national myth, a free and democratic America was forged on the wild frontier, not in the country’s “over-civilized” cities, which have long been perceived as unhealthy and hazardous environments. Frederick Law Olmsted, the famous landscape architect involved in the origins of Yosemite as a park and the creation of Central Park in New York, subscribed to this view as he justified his

1866 plan for San Francisco’s “Public Pleasure Grounds.” The city’s population, he warned, was “wearing itself out with constant labor, study and business anxieties . . . Cases of death, or of unwilling withdrawal from active business . . . cause losses of capital in the general business of the city, as much as fires or shipwrecks.” What the city needed, offered Olmsted, was a woodland park with “beautiful sylvan scenes” where exhausted San Franciscans could escape the city and relax in nature.<sup>5</sup>

Americans may earn their fortunes in cities, but they don’t really belong there. Instead, their true home is wilderness, which Muir declared, is safer than any urban residence. The expressions of this tradition of urban skepticism have been pervasive and monumental, spawning America’s great urban parks, its sprawling suburbs, and camping.

Unsurprisingly, most campers have been from urban areas. For more than 100 years, those who preach the benefits of camping have sounded like Olmsted—bemoaning everyday urban places as burdensome, polluted, and irritating. “We want to emphasize here and now,” began the Sierra Club’s David Brower in *Going Light with Backpack or Burro*, “even to the point of being evangelical in our emphasis, that one gains a great deal by getting just as far from exhaust fumes and ringing telephones as his feet will let him . . . and that so long as one can walk . . . it is possible to use the wilderness as a sanctuary.”<sup>6</sup> Again and again, for more than a century, camping has been offered as a positive escape from stress, overwork, in-laws, and other everyday irritations.

Camping, however, also has a darker side. Paraphrasing historian William Cronon, to the degree that campers have seen themselves as somehow displaced from their “true” homes in nature and have turned to nature to find solace, they have missed opportunities to amend their cities environmentally and to place them on more sustainable paths.<sup>7</sup>



Camping is not just a pleasant form of leisure. It can also be interpreted as an escape from campers' responsibilities for their cities. Is city life too noisy? Backpack through the quiet of the Sierra Nevada high country. Is the air polluted? RV camp in fresh air along the Pacific shoreline. City streets too harsh? Car camp out in a lush redwood forest. By escaping cities to find nature, campers have been evading the environmental challenges of a truly supportive and humane urban life.

But camping is in trouble. After more than a century of increasing popularity, the number of campers is declining. Although camping remains among the top-five outdoor recreations in the United States, the rate of participation by Americans sixteen and older is down from its peak in the late 1990s. Automobile, trailer, and motorhome camping at "developed" locations (with drinking water, tables, restrooms, etc.) and at "primitive" locations (without such amenities) has decreased approximately 7 percent overall. Only backpacking's popularity has held steady, although at much lower numbers than other forms of camping.<sup>8</sup>

Predictably, perhaps, given how much significance has been invested in camping, some observers interpret this diminution in camping as a menace to our civilization. Oliver Pergams and Patricia Zaradic argue that the decrease in camping and other forms of outdoor recreation indicates that Americans are shifting away from an appreciation of nature and toward "videophilia," which they define as a "tendency to focus on sedentary activities involving electronic media." Such a shift, they conclude, "does not bode well for the future of biodiversity conservation." In an even gloomier piece, author Richard Louv argues in *Last Child in the Woods* that American children increasingly suffer from "nature-deficit disorder" because fewer of them are camping, playing in streams, and generally enjoying themselves outdoors. This deficit must be reduced, Louv warns, because "our mental, physical, and spiritual health depends upon it."<sup>9</sup>

But instead of immediately taking such a sentimental and alarmist view, let's recall the history and cultural significance of camping, which present at least two potential explanations for its decline:

First, most forms of camping are losing their ability to function as a pilgrimage. As campers embrace the latest in modern, high-tech gear, they transmute "roughing it"—a distinctly antimodern activity—into something comfortable and too much like everyday life. Car campers, for example, no



John Muir, circa 1902.

longer have to experience many of camping's customary hardships. Campers may still sleep on the ground, but it is no longer so uncomfortable when using a microfiber sleeping bag rated to 35 degrees and a self-inflating mattress pad. The culinary limitations of camping have likewise moderated with the use of coolers, propane stoves, and an explosion of gourmet freeze-dried meal options. The physical challenge of hiking vanished when a paved road allowed campers to drive to scenic overlooks. When camping with a trailer, motorhome, or other recreational vehicle, adversity recedes even further. Without its physical and psychological challenges, the transition from daily life to camping can become so "smooth" it's barely a transition at all. With no bright line between the wild and the urban, how can camping be the refreshing and restorative break it's meant to be? Like those who fly to Santiago de Compostela to visit Saint James's cathedral, comfortable campers slide from being pilgrims to "tourists." By contrast, backpacking's appeal continues because no matter how much backpackers may adopt the latest in gear, they still have to walk and carry their load. In a fundamental way, it remains "rough."

A second explanation for the decrease in camping's popularity brings us back to California's rapid and destructive form of urbanization, where for more than a century cities, farms, resource extraction sites, and pristine areas grew increasingly discrete and isolated from one another. Now, however, the distinctions between these landscapes are beginning to fade as they slowly blend back into one another. "Urban agriculture" is no longer an oxymoron; a billion dollar plan to restore the Los Angeles River has



“D. A. Stivers and Thor arrive in camp, Camp Kitmear, 1915,” from Panama Pacific International Exposition and Yosemite Camping Views.

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been embraced by the US Army Corps of Engineers; and “rewilding” California’s cities with native flowers has thousands of supporters. Distributed, renewable energy, onsite rainwater retention, xerophytic gardening, the greening of alleys, protecting urban mountain lions, and much, much more are increasing the sustainability of California’s cities and decreasing the differences between them, agricultural tracts, protected wildlands, and natural resource areas. Californians are beginning to bring their cities and nature back together.<sup>10</sup> As these landscapes become less sharply separate and as California’s cities become more “natural,” campers are decreasingly feeling a need to heed Muir’s call to climb the mountains in order to get the “good tidings.” Instead, they are finding and making it around themselves in everyday life. And, to the degree that camping is decreasing because Californians feel less distressed by their urban homes, these are all signs that we are embracing where we really live, which are good tidings in their own way. **B**

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> John Muir, *Our National Parks* (NY: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), 56.
- <sup>2</sup> The anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff once characterized pilgrimage as simply “in-out-in with a difference.” The pilgrim begins in everyday society, steps out of that society and then returns to her/his society transformed. See Barbara Myerhoff, “Pilgrimage to Meron: Inner and Outer Peregrinations” in S. Lavie, K. Narayan, and R. Rosaldo, *Creativity/Anthropology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 218.
- <sup>3</sup> See Nancy Louise Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 26–27.
- <sup>4</sup> Gwen Kennedy Neville, *Kinship and Pilgrimage: Rituals of Reunion in American Protestant Culture* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987) has identified a variety of anti-urban pilgrimage patterns in American life.
- <sup>5</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, “Preliminary Report in Regard to a Plan of Public Pleasure Grounds for the City of San Francisco” in Victoria Post Ranney, Gerard J. Rauluk, and Carolyn





Glenola and Robert E. Rose, 1938. COURTESY OF THE BANCROFT LIBRARY.

F. Hoffman, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Volume V: The California Frontier* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 522.

<sup>6</sup> David Brower, *Going Light with Backpack or Burro* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1951), 6.

<sup>7</sup> William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (NY: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995), 81.

<sup>8</sup> The current popularity of camping is ranked in Outdoor Foundation, "Outdoor Recreation Participation Report 2012" (Boulder: The Outdoor Foundation, 2012), 14. The decreasing participation rates for "developed" and "primitive" camping and the steady appeal of backpacking were revealed by the 1999–2001 and the 2005–2009 National Surveys on Recreation and the Environment. See H. Ken Cordell, "Outdoor Recreation Trends and Futures: A Technical Document Supporting the Forest Service 2010 RPA Assessment" (Asheville: US Forest Service, Southern Research Station Gen.Tech.Rep. SRS-150, 2012), 33, 35, 37–38.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver R.W. Pergams and Patricia A. Zaradic, "Is Love of Nature in the US Becoming Love of Electronic Media? 16-year downturn in National Park Visits Explained by Watching Movies, Playing Video Games, Internet Use and Oil Prices," *Journal of Environmental Management* 80 (2006), 387, 392. See also Oliver R.W. Pergams and Patricia A. Zaradic, "Evidence for a Fundamental and Pervasive Shift Away from Nature-Based Recreation," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105 (2008), 2295–2300. Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Updated and Expanded E-Book Edition (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2008), paragraph 13–13.

<sup>10</sup> The idea that cities need not be sites of degeneration, but can be places for the mutual regeneration of nature and society is increasingly explored by scholars and students. See, for instance, the John T. Lyle Center for Regenerative Studies at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. Their website is located at <http://www.csupomona.edu/~crs/>.