

EAST COAST
PLAYGROUND

VAGABONDS IN THE ADIRONDACKS

Retracing the early Model T camping trips of Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone and John Burroughs in northeastern New York

— by Lisa Ballard

I imagine Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffet and Tom Clancy RVing together on a regular basis, just to get away, talk around a campfire and enjoy the outdoors. President Trump joins them for a few days. Sometimes their wives and families come. Other times, it's just the guys. That's the modern-day equivalent of the camping trips that Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone and John Burroughs put together between 1914 and 1924.

Edison, Ford and Firestone were among the most influential businessmen of their day,

and Burroughs was a popular author and conservationist whose books sold millions of copies in an era when books were mass media. (Radios were not broadly available to consumers yet.) Instead of Donald Trump, Calvin Coolidge and Warren Harding sometimes joined their caravan for a few days.

They called themselves the Vagabonds, in the nomadic-traveler sense of the word. According to Burroughs, the reasons for their excursions were to "cheerfully endure wet, cold, smoke, mosquitoes, black flies and sleepless nights, just to touch naked reality once more."



ON THE ROAD AGAIN

The Vagabonds' 1916 Adirondack Itinerary

August 29: From Edison's home in Orange, New Jersey, to Burroughs' home in the Catskill Mountains, just south of Albany, New York (82 miles).

August 31: From Albany north through Cohoes and Saratoga Springs, to Corinth (55 miles).

September 1: From Corinth, north into the Adirondack Park to Lake George and then northeast to Indian Lake (74 miles).

September 2: From Indian Lake through Blue Mountain Lake and Long Lake, east to the Schroon River, then north to Elizabethtown (93 miles).

September 3: From Elizabethtown through Westport to Essex on Lake Champlain, then to Keeseville, Ausable Chasm and Au Sable Forks (64 miles).

September 4: From Au Sable Forks west through Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Paul Smiths, then north to Malone (73 miles).

September 5: Leaving the Adirondack Park through Malone, then to Mooers and Plattsburgh on Lake Champlain (82 miles).

September 6 to 9: Taking the ferry at Chazy Landing to Vermont. Heading across Vermont to New Hampshire, then south to Massachusetts and back to Orange, New Jersey (about 70 miles per day).



Above, from left: Million Dollar Beach on New York's Lake George is a sandy 1,700-foot strand that welcomes families every summer. A kayaker heads down a section of 14-mile Long Lake, a scenic water-sports playground centrally located in the Adirondack Park.

PAVING THE WAY

The Vagabonds were among the first to go camping by motor vehicle, traveling by Model T, which Ford had introduced six years earlier. Their small convoy of Tin Lizzies, including one trucklike vehicle containing their food, furniture and other supplies, covered about 70 miles per day, an impressive distance in those days as only a few roads were paved in larger towns. Most were gravel or dirt. Sometimes there were no roads at all.

And there were no campgrounds. When they were ready to stop for the night, the Vagabonds parked in a pleasant meadow, usually by a lake or river. They slept in their clothes, which were wool three-piece suits. (Nylon would not be available for another 25 years.) They looked more prepared for Wall Street than the wilderness, except for Edison, who refused to shave for the duration of a trip.

They roughed it, sort of. Their campsites had many creature comforts, including a mobile kitchen with an icebox (it really did contain a block of ice back then), a stove fueled by one of the Model T's gas tanks, and a dining tent with electric lights — after all, Edison was along!

Like RVers today, they sought solace from their busy lives among natural settings. Ford was a bird watcher. Firestone wrote poetry. Edison was chief navigator who shunned

population centers, and Burroughs was the group's resident naturalist.

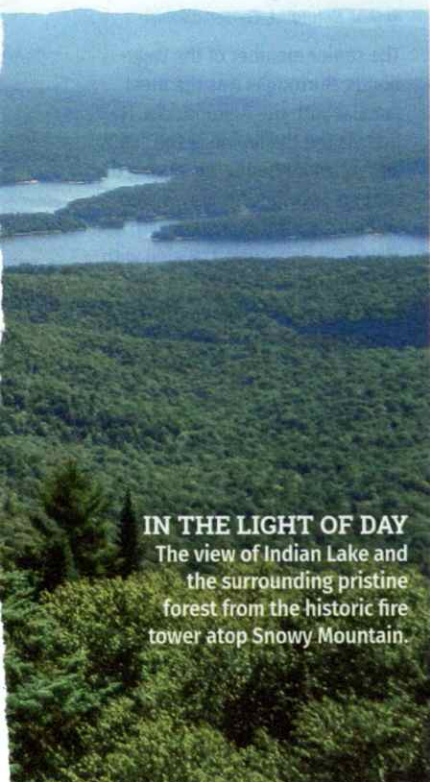
After a memorable first camping trip in the Florida Everglades, instigated by Ford in 1914, the Vagabonds picked the Adirondacks in upstate New York for their next vehicular journey two years later. Ford missed that trip in the wake of the negative publicity surrounding the Peace Ship he organized to Europe to protest World War I, but he participated by invention, creating custom "camping cars" for the outing.

Feeling ill, Burroughs, age 79, almost opted out, too. However, the others eventually persuaded him to come. Afterward, he joked that the trip was so bouncy, thanks to Edison's creative route-finding skills, it shook his ailments out of him.

"The doctors think that as we grow old there is great remedial power in mechanical vibrations," wrote Burroughs after the trip.

IN THE LIGHT OF DAY

The view of Indian Lake and the surrounding pristine forest from the historic fire tower atop Snowy Mountain.





The author casts a line in the fabled Ausable River, between Lake Placid and Wilmington.

"I do not know which I owe the most to, the campfires or the car. I am only sure I took a most delightful shaking up such that I had not had for 40 years."

An Adirondack native, I was curious to experience the Vagabonds' route for myself to see what had changed since 1916. The roads were better, of course. I also found wonderful lakeside campgrounds and an infinite number of things to do and see throughout the park. Here are some of the things the Vagabonds would have experienced if they traveled to the Adirondacks today.

LAKE GEORGE

Their first stop within the Adirondack Park was Lake George, a lake and a village located in the southeastern corner of the park. Lake George is a bustling tourist destination. It has every amenity, including Million Dollar Beach, a 1,700-foot strand from one end to the other that cost \$1 million to build in 1951. Since then, the beach has received another \$10 million in improvements, a sum that would have impressed even the Vagabonds, and the group could now camp next to the



ADIRONDACK PLAYGROUND

The Adirondack Park is a 6-million-acre state park located in northeastern New York. It is a mecca for outdoor recreation with 3,000 lakes and ponds, 30,000 miles of rivers and streams, 2,000 miles of trails, and hundreds of hills and mountains of which 46 are more than 4,000 feet high. The heart of the Adirondack Park is the "forever wild" Forest Preserve, which the state legislature created in 1885 to protect the area as a water source for the Erie Canal. In fact, the park is a patchwork of public and private land of which about 43 percent is controlled by the state. The park has about 130,000 year-round residents dispersed throughout 101 towns and villages. It's also home to a plethora of wildlife and flora, and a number of historic sites, some predating the American Revolution.

www.visitadirondacks.com/about/adirondack-park

WHO WERE THE VAGABONDS?

Henry Ford (1863 to 1947)

Founder, Ford Motor Company

Ford invented the Model T, the first automobile affordable to the general population (\$360), which profoundly changed the way people traveled. He introduced the concepts of the 40-hour work week, believing more leisure time was good for the economy (workers would have more time to buy more goods), and he introduced high wages and profit sharing as a way to attract and keep productive employees. He was the chief organizer of the Vagabonds' camping trips.

Harvey Firestone (1868 to 1938)

Founder, Firestone Tire and Rubber Company

Firestone patented a mechanism that applied rubber tires to carriage wheels, which led to his idea of mass-producing automobile tires in 1900. By 1906 he had developed a pneumatic tire that Henry Ford used on his Model T's. Firestone also supported the early use of trucks for hauling freight and the building of road systems. Firestone used the Vagabonds' expeditions as a way to test tire designs and treads. He also looked for plants that might be an alternative to rubber, which came exclusively from Southeast Asia and was monopolized by the British. He eventually started his own rubber plantations in Liberia.

Thomas Edison (1847 to 1931)

Inventor, Businessman

Edison is best known as the inventor of the electric lightbulb, though he also invented the phonograph, motion pictures, an early X-ray machine and a number of other household and industrial items. He founded the first electric utility company, a battery company and a mining company at various points in his life. Edison visited the Adirondacks on a number of occasions prior to the Vagabonds' camping trips, which is why he became the self-appointed navigator for the group. In 1892, he installed a generator and lights in the Prospect House on the shore of Blue Mountain Lake, the first hotel in the country with electric lights.

John Burroughs (1837 to 1921)

Author, Naturalist, Conservationist

The senior member of the Vagabonds, Burroughs was the most familiar with the Adirondacks. He first visited the region in the 1860s and returned frequently during the next six decades. He also visited Yellowstone National Park with Theodore Roosevelt, traveled with railroad tycoon E. H. Harriman to Alaska and counted John Muir among his closest friends. In addition to a number of best-selling literary nature books, he contributed essays to *The Atlantic Monthly* about the natural world. Because his writings were based on his personal observations and philosophies rather than science, his work faded from the public eye shortly after he died.

Traveling in custom Model T "camping cars" on their 1916 excursion through New York's Adirondacks, the self-described Vagabonds spent a night "roughing it" in suits and ties on the Ausable River.



Right: Meecham Lake, between Paul Smiths and Malone, is a lesser known but wonderful place for lakeside camping, with hiking trails, paddling and fishing outside your door. Far right: The Olympic bobsled run in Lake Placid is open year-round. The public can take a ride on the 1932 track.



beach at Lake George Battleground State Campground.

Prior to car travel, visitors to the Adirondacks came by horse, train and boat. One of those old-time paddle wheelers, the *Minne Ha Ha*, departs from the Lake George Steamship Company's pier near Million Dollar Beach. After an afternoon in the sun, I could imagine the Vagabonds taking a dinner cruise aboard the *Minne Ha Ha* to relax and see more of the lake.

INDIAN LAKE

From Lake George Village, they headed northwest to Indian Lake. One of my favorite hikes in the Adirondacks, Snowy Mountain, lies on the west side of this 12-mile-long lake. It's a substantial hike, 7.2 miles round trip with a gain of 2,000 vertical feet, but it's uncrowded and goes through a wildflower garden and along a brook.

The 50-foot historic fire tower on the summit offers sweeping views of the lake, the Siamese Ponds Wilderness (southeast), West Canada Lake Wilderness (southwest) and Blue Ridge

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KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

July and August are prime time for visiting the Adirondack Park, but it can be crowded. Mid-May through the end of June can have long stretches of pleasant weather, though it can be buggy. September is bug-free and crowd-free. Leaf peepers should go from late-September through mid-October.

In the alpine zone of the High Peaks Region, it can snow anytime throughout the year. At lower elevations, expect summer days to vary from the mid-60s to the high 80s. Most lakes warm into the 70s by mid-July. Rivers run high until mid-May for fishing. Lakes are fishable anytime, except when the ice is melting out. Wait until after Memorial Day to hike to allow the trails to dry out from the melting snow.



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Wilderness (northwest). Surrounded by acres of pristine forest, hikers get an idea of just how primitive the region was when the Vagabonds drove through it a century ago.

BLUE MOUNTAIN LAKE

A hike up Snowy Mountain was probably too ambitious for the Vagabonds. More likely, they continued west past Lake Durant and through the village of Blue

Mountain Lake, then turned north. If they went for a hike, it was probably up Blue Mountain along this stretch of road (now State Route 30).

It's an easy mile to the top of Blue Mountain to another historic fire tower. The first time I did this hike, I also stopped at the Adirondack Experience, the Museum on Blue Mountain Lake, across the road from the trailhead. To my delight, I discovered one of

the Vagabonds' camping vehicles on display!

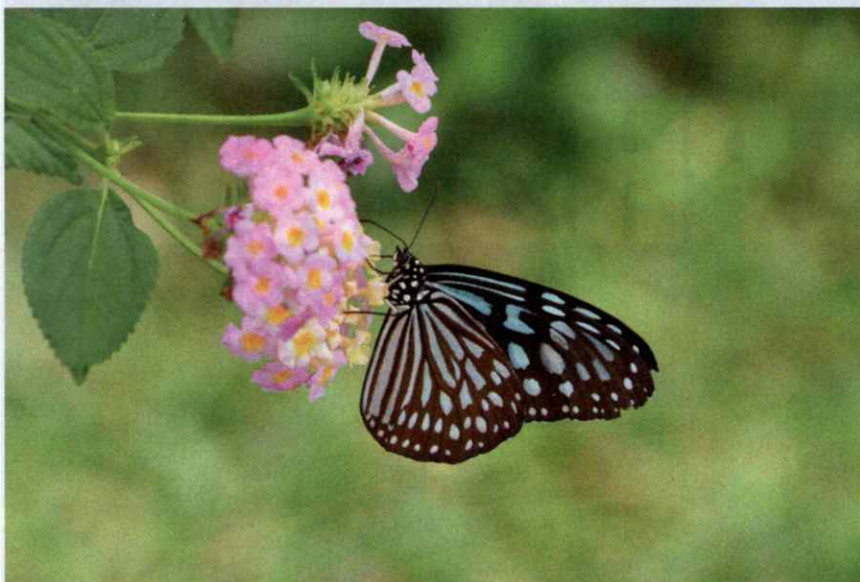
While they merely passed through Blue Mountain Lake, I spent the night at the state campground on Lake Durant. The Vagabonds were likely friends with William West Durant, the architect for whom the lake is named. His father, Thomas, was a well-known New York-based financier and railroad tycoon. William was credited with designing many of the famous Great Camps, grandiose compounds of cabins built in the latter half of the 19th century and scattered throughout the Adirondack Park.

The lake looked peaceful with regal blue herons wading in the shallows, but it was action-packed for anglers. Each year, the state of New York stocks the lake with 1,300 tiger muskies. I arrived too late in the evening to fish but eagerly accepted a taste of grilled musky from the folks in the RV next to mine.

LONG LAKE

Next, the Vagabonds would have certainly paused in Long Lake, probably to pick berries or go bird watching. It remains a worthy stop for those same reasons, and to go swimming (there's a lovely public beach) or paddle a canoe. Long Lake is well known as a launching point for paddle trips down the Raquette River

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WHERE TO STAY

If you plan to stay in or around New York's Adirondack Park, make reservations early. Campgrounds are busy during most of the summer as well as the fall foliage season, but there's availability in the spring and late summer after schools are back in session.

To find commercial RV parks along the Vagabonds' 1916 travel route, including a number of Good Sam Parks, use the Find a Campground search tool on the Good Sam website.

www.goodsam.com/campgrounds-rv-parks

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation maintains 41 campgrounds within the Adirondack Park boundaries.

newyorkstateparks.reserveamerica.com

to Tupper Lake.

Had Edison, Firestone and Burroughs been canoe campers, their route from Long Lake would have been clear, but how they ended up in Elizabethtown the next night is not. Apparently, they followed the Schroon River, a tributary of the Hudson River, north. To get there from Long Lake, they would have turned east where State Route 28N is today, at least for part of the way. Route 28N bends south, whereas the Vagabonds continued farther east and then north, following the valley where Interstate 87 was later constructed.

Upon arriving in Elizabethtown, the sheriff organized inmates in the county jail to chop firewood for the famous travelers. They also camped in his field.

AUSABLE RIVER

From Elizabethtown, the Vagabonds drove along Lake Champlain, passing through Westport and Essex, and then through Keeseville, Ausable Chasm and Au Sable Forks. Their next campsite was beside the Ausable River.

Burroughs, who wrote several books about fishing, described the Ausable River as "plausible and sauciful." Knowing his penchant for casting a line, he probably tried to catch a trout, as the river already had a reputation as one of the best trout streams on the East Coast. I bet he chose the campsite that night, too.

LAKE PLACID

From there, the Vagabonds veered west again, back into the heart of the Adirondack Park. They passed through Lake Placid 16 years before it hosted its first of two Olympic winter games, then continued through Saranac Lake and Paul Smiths.

In Paul Smiths, they turned north once more, eventually exiting the Adirondack Park near Malone. Between Paul Smiths and Malone, they passed Meacham Lake, where yet another state campground now exists, another of my favorite lakeside spots for paddling and fishing. The trailhead for Debar Mountain is also at the campground.

RETURN TO THE ADIRONDACKS

The Vagabonds enjoyed their first camping trip in the Adirondacks so much, they went again in 1919. By then, the paparazzi had started following them on their outings. An entire town would greet them as they passed through.

The publicity they generated on these vacations certainly spawned RVing as we know it, and the places

they visited remain among the most popular camping destinations in the Adirondack Park.

Despite these intrusions from the press and the public, the Vagabonds still found respite from the pressures of their lives while camping. Burroughs aptly summed it up, "The thought of it, and the joy of it and the good of it stays with one for many a day." **TR**

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