

THE ADVENTURES OF THE "FOUR VAGABONDS"

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1921 - Camping with the President

The third in a series of articles about the legendary excursions and summer tours of the "Four Vagabonds".

Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, and John Burroughs, who called themselves the "Four Vagabonds", embarked on a series of summer camping trips into some of the most rural areas of the United States between 1914 and 1924. This third article in the series describes the summer camping trip of July 21 - August 3, 1921, into the mountains and wilds of western Maryland and West Virginia. This expedition differed from many of the previous adventures in several ways.

First, John Burroughs - great naturalist, nature writer, and one of the four Vagabonds - passed away in March of 1921. For the remaining three Vagabonds, this was the first trip without their friend and traveling companion.

Second, after much debate, and to the initial objection of Edison, the threesome decided to take their wives along on this excursion. Edison was concerned that the wives would not "appreciate the primitiveness of camp conditions or take pleasure in roaming over the unbeaten track."

Third, unlike some of the previous "gypsy trips" in which they traveled many miles each day and only camped one night at each stopping point, on this trip they spent several days at two of their campsites in Western Maryland before continuing into West Virginia. From July 22 to July 27 they camped on Licking Creek near Pecktonville, Maryland, and from July 27 to July 31 they set up camp at Muddy Creek Falls in what is now Swallow Falls State Park near Oakland, Maryland.



Three of the "Vagabonds" with President Harding at the campsite on Licking Creek near Pecktonville, Maryland in July 1921. Left to right: Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, President Warren G. Harding, and Harvey Firestone, Sr. The fourth Vagabond, John Burroughs, had passed away in March of 1921.

Fourth, during their stay at Licking Creek they were joined by President Warren G. Harding, who spent the night camping with them on July 23. Today this area is named Camp Harding County Park and a plaque there commemorates the location of the campsite.

Planning the Trip

In the spring of 1921, Harvey Firestone and his friend, Bishop William F. Anderson of Ohio, called on President Harding at the White House and invited him to join the camping trip scheduled for late July. Harding and Firestone were longtime friends. The President gladly accepted but insisted that the camping trip be within reasonable driving distance of Washington, DC.

Firestone and Bishop Anderson returned to the White House in June of 1921 to confirm that the President would join them. Firestone returned again on July 16 to plan details of the trip with the Secret Service. Unfortunately, during the week of July 17, Mrs. Harding became ill and the President had to delay his rendezvous with the campers for several days, until he was certain his wife was in no danger.

Vagabond caravan of cars traveling between campsites in Western Maryland in July of 1921.

Rendezvous in Hagerstown, Maryland

Henry Ford and his wife, Clara, sailed on July 21 from Detroit, Michigan, to Cleveland, Ohio, via Lake Erie on their yacht. They met Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Firestone, Sr. in Akron and traveled to the Firestone homestead in Columbiana, Ohio, to meet up with Harvey, Jr., his new bride, and Firestone's other son, Russel. This was Harvey Firestone's homeplace and he and Ford had visited here en route to their 1918 Vagabond summer vacation trip (see second article of this series in the March/April 2018 *Model T Times*). They were joined here by Mr. and Mrs. Edsel Ford (Henry and Clara's son) and served dinner by the Women's Missionary Society of the Grace Reformed Church. The entire group then drove to Bedford Springs, Pennsylvania, and spent the night. The next day, July 22, the Fords and Firestones traveled to Hagerstown, Maryland, and met up with Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Edison, who had traveled from West Orange, New Jersey, and Bishop and Mrs. William Anderson, who had arrived from Washington, DC.

Shortly after lunch the caravan made its way to their campsite near Pecktonville, Maryland, about six miles east of Hancock, Maryland. They made camp along Licking Creek on a 200 acre farm. The camp was quite elaborate with numerous tents and nearly fifty cots for sleeping. A special electric lighting system was erected and even a large truckload of food from the Firestone farm arrived, which contained two refrigerators with several hundred pounds of meat, butter, eggs, milk, melons, and one hundred dressed chickens. All the meals were prepared by Chefs Fisher and Herman. There was also a special padded truck which brought six of Firestone's finest riding horses all the way from Akron.

Edison always enjoyed the more rugged adventures and liked to get "close to nature", so as he looked over the large expansive camp, he complained about how elaborate and comfortable it was. Ford and Firestone quickly reminded him that he had contributed to the setup with his special electrical lighting equipment and a portable radio, which was a rare item in those days.

After the evening campfire conversations, the entire group retired early to get a good night's sleep in preparation for the arrival of President Harding the next day.

July 23 - President Harding Arrives

Leaving camp about 10:00 a.m., the Vagabonds traveled through Hagerstown, Maryland, to Funkstown, Maryland, where they met President Harding. The President had departed the White House around 9:30 a.m. and averaged around 50 mph for the trip. Quite a fast pace for the day. The Secret Service and the many journalists and photographers had difficulty keeping up with the President's car as it journeyed toward Funkstown. He arrived shortly after Ford, Firestone, Edison, and company arrived. Ford and Edison had never met the President. They shook hands and Harding joined them in their car, riding in the back seat with Edison. Ford and Firestone rode on the jump seats while a Secret Service agent occupied the front passenger seat.

As the caravan passed through Hagerstown, a large crowd greeted them. About 1:00 p.m. the cavalcade arrived at the camp on Licking Creek. The President was very pleased with the location of the campsite and, after a brief tour of the camp, the party ate lunch in the dining tent around the table with the nine-foot Lazy Susan (photo in first article of this series in the January/February 2018 *Model T Times*). After lunch, the President took a nap and Ford chopped wood for the campfire. Edison lay down with a pillow on the ground under an elm tree and took a nap as well. While Harding and Edison were sleeping, Firestone and Ford competed with each other in a



President Harding (left) and Harvey Firestone, Sr. (front, right) leading a horseback ride near Camp Harding, Licking Creek, on July 23, 1921. In the rear, left to right: George Christian, Jr. (partially hidden), Harvey Firestone, Jr., Colonel Edmund Starling of the Secret Service, and Henry Ford.

wood chopping contest in front of the numerous cameramen and journalists. Ford was then asked by the assembled group to crank one of his own cars. He noted that all of the cars in camp had "self-starters", but stepped up to one of the Model T's and cranked started it. He drove around the camp to a roaring applause by the spectators.

President Harding arose from his nap and went for a horseback ride with Ford and Firestone. They were accompanied by Harding's personal secretary, George Christian, and Secret Service agent, Colonel Edmund Starling. The President then visited a local general store and made a phone call back to the White House to check on the health of his wife. While there, he bought candy for several local children gathered at the store.

After dinner, dance tunes were played on a player piano powered by a portable electric generator. The piano had been brought to the campsite by a music dealer from Hagerstown. Ford, Edison, and Harding stayed up until around 2:00 a.m., chatting and telling stories around the campfire.



Edsel Ford uses the player piano for his father, Henry, during the festivities at Camp Harding, Maryland, on July 23, 1921. The player piano was brought to the camp by a music dealer in Hagerstown, Maryland, and powered by a portable electric generator.

July 24 - Memorial Service for John Burroughs and the President Departs

After a hearty breakfast and a short horseback ride across Licking Creek, Bishop Anderson conducted an outdoor Sunday morning worship and memorial service in memory of John





Washing and shaving before breakfast at Camp Harding on July 24, 1921. Left to right: Henry Ford, Bishop Anderson, Harvey Firestone, Sr., Thomas Edison, and President Warren G. Harding.

Burroughs. Mrs. Firestone played the piano and the congregation sang hymns. There were several hundred in attendance, as many local farmers and visitors joined the service. The service concluded with the audience joining President Harding in singing “Rock of Ages” and “Nearer My God to Thee”.

Sunday afternoon dinner was served at the campsite, which was the last meal with President Harding. He and his entourage departed for Washington around 4:00 p.m. The Vagabonds and their party then enjoyed a quiet evening and retired early.

July 25 – Where to Next?

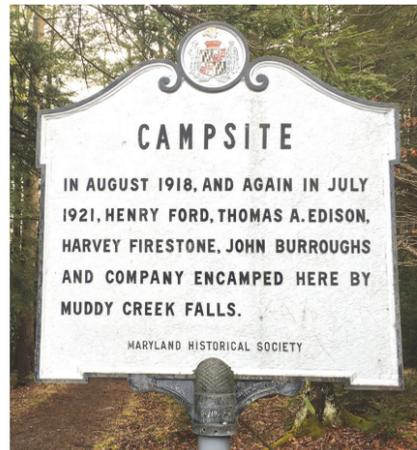
The next day, July 25, Ford, Firestone, and Edison discussed and planned when they would leave Licking Creek and where they would go next. They agreed to remain at this site at least one more day. Henry took one of his walking trips into the surrounding country, while Harvey took his daily horseback ride with his sons and Edison took his usual nap! Mr. and Mrs. Edsel Ford left and drove back to Detroit.

On July 26, Firestone decided to ship his horses back to Akron and the horse truck departed the next morning. The group made the decision to relocate their camp about ninety miles east to Swallow Falls near Oakland, Maryland. On July 27, they broke camp and the long caravan traversed the National Road toward Oakland. This was a familiar route for them since they



Chefs Fisher and Herman preparing a meal on the 1921 Vagabond camping trip.

had traveled this same road on their 1918 vacation trip. They stopped for lunch in a roadside field near Deer Park, Maryland, and then proceeded toward the Swallow Falls area to establish the camp. As they approached the campsite in a heavily wooded section of virgin hemlock and fir trees, the path crossed a small wooden bridge. The first cars made it across, but the bridge collapsed under the weight of the heavy camp kitchen truck and blocked the path of the remaining vehicles carrying the supplies. The campers helped carry supplies into an open clearing near the high falls of Muddy Creek, a perfect campsite! However, to their initial dismay, the site was already occupied by a group of young boys from nearby Oakland. One of the boys, Joseph Hinebaugh, tells the story of how a few ten dollar bills from Ford easily persuaded the boys to move to a different site nearer to the smaller Swallow Falls. The boys visited the famous campers several times and eagerly accepted candy and other treats. This area is now Swallow Falls State Park and the campsite used by the Vagabonds is marked by a commemorative sign. Muddy Creek Falls is the highest natural waterfall in the state of Maryland. The tired campers retired early that night and slept late the next morning.



Historic marker at the location of the Muddy Creek Falls campsite. Although the “Four Vagabonds” visited the site in 1918, they did not camp there until the three remaining Vagabonds returned in 1921.

Vagabond Stories Told by the Locals

July 28 was a restful day. Due to the broken and blocked bridge, this camping spot turned out to be one of the most secluded they had ever encountered. No cars or visitors could get to them, except the young boys camped nearby. This suited Edison well and he greatly enjoyed sitting by the falls, relaxing and chatting with his friends about many different subjects.

The distinguished campers bathed and swam in the pools around the falls and hiked the trails between the two falls. Ford enjoyed hiking the back roads looking for anything old or mechanical. He discovered an old steam engine at a nearby sawmill and wanted to purchase it. The owner, Newton Reams, came to visit Ford the next day at the camp. According to Reams, Ford reached into his pocket and paid for the engine with two crisp fifty dollar bills. Upon further inspection of the engine, Ford noted a missing part, and he asked Reams if he could find a replacement. Reams went to a neighbor who had a similar engine and asked to buy the part. The neighbor would not sell the individual part to Reams, only the entire engine for \$75. Reams returned and told Ford he would need to buy an entire second engine to get the missing part. Ford asked, “How much?” Reams doubled the price to \$150. Ford again reached into his pocket and, this time, pulled out three fifty dollar bills. Reams took both engines to Oakland and shipped them by train to Dearborn, Michigan.

Another story told by locals in the area involved Ford’s Lincoln automobile getting stuck in the mud; a local resident hooked his horses to the car to pull it out. A young boy, not knowing who Ford was, allegedly said, “Mister, you have the wrong kind of car. My father drives a Ford and it never gets stuck on this road.” Ford, liking the remark, wrote down the name and address of the boy’s father and, after returning to Dearborn, sent the man a brand new Model T.

Two local mountaineers who spent time with the Vagabonds were Henry Sines and his brother, Abraham Lincoln “Link” Sines. Henry Sines was seventy-five years old at the time and he and Link would share stories about the natural and cultural history of the area. Link was a well-known Garrett County forest warden and master woodsman. He had met the Vagabonds, including John Burroughs, in 1918 when they passed through Garrett County. On this 1921 trip, with Burroughs absent, Link served as a guide and naturalist for Ford, Edison, and Firestone. He later noted, “Ford loved anything mechanical. He was constantly looking for items to add to his collection in Detroit. Firestone liked to fish. Edison was either reading a book or tinkering with his Packard. Burroughs knew more about trees and plants than anyone I ever met.”

A local boy named R. Emerson Cross and his friends rented horses in Oakland and were riding in the Muddy Creek area when they rode into the clearing where the Vagabonds were camped. Since Firestone’s horses had already been trucked back to Akron, Russel Firestone and several of the campers asked Cross if he would loan them their horses to ride. Cross agreed and when the campers returned from their ride, they gave Cross and his friends crisp ten and twenty dollar bills. This proved to be quite a good deal for Cross since he and his pals had only paid \$1.25 each to rent the horses! They spread the word in Oakland, which resulted in more visitors coming to the camp.

July 29 – Rain Delays Departure from Muddy Creek

On July 29, the Vagabonds conferenced to select the next campsite. Edison suggested they visit the Cheat River area of West Virginia. The collapsed bridge had been repaired and they began preparation to break camp. However, the next day, July 30 and Henry’s 58th birthday, a severe rainstorm occurred which lasted for many hours. The road leading out of the campsite became impassable due to the mud and the group had to remain another day. On July 31, the road dried enough to allow them to break camp and navigate the narrow lane out of the Muddy Creek Falls campsite. The big White truck, which carried the camping equipment, had to be pulled out by a tractor.

The caravan headed to Elkins, West Virginia, over some of the same routes they had taken in 1918. They arrived in Elkins late in the evening and, since the camping equipment had not arrived, they spent the night in a hotel.

The next morning, August 1, the support crew advised the Vagabonds that a campsite had been selected near the Cheat River. Harvey Firestone, Jr., his wife, and Russel Firestone left the group and returned to Washington, DC.

Duty Calls at Home

The company offices of Ford and Firestone had been inquiring with some urgency when the two would return. With pressing business at home, the decision was made to spend only one night at Camp Cheat. The party left on the morning of August 2 to begin the return trip. After traveling through Fairmont, West Virginia, they stopped for a roadside lunch. Due to rain in Wheeling, West Virginia, the expedition modified their route and proceeded through Morgantown to the Summit Inn



The view today of Muddy Creek Falls where the Vagabonds spent several days camping during their 1921 expedition.

near Uniontown, Pennsylvania, the same hotel where they spent the night on August 19, 1918, during that Vagabond summer camping trip. That evening at the Summit Hotel, Edison showed off his agility by kicking a cigar off the mantle in the hotel lobby three times in a row. He and Ford competed in a “stair jumping” contest on the lobby stairs. Ford jumped up ten steps in two hops; Edison needed three hops to jump the same ten stairs.

On August 3, after having a late breakfast at the hotel, the campers made a brief stop in Uniontown and continued to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Edisons motored back to West Orange, New Jersey. The Fords, Firestones, and their entourage headed north and returned to their homes. Thus ended the Vagabonds’ 1921 camping adventure.

100th Anniversary Vagabond Commemorative Tour

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Vagabonds’ August 1918 excursion, a special tour will occur August 19-23, 2018. This progressive tour will begin at the historic Summit Inn near Uniontown, Pennsylvania. Participants will spend the night in the same hotel, on the exact date, the Vagabonds stayed there 100 years before. The tour will retrace the actual route from the Summit Inn, along the National Road to Maryland, through Oakland, and continue to Elkins, West Virginia. Along the route, stops will be made at several of the historic locations visited by the Vagabonds. Watch for the article highlighting this historic commemorative tour in the November/December 2018 issue of the *Model T Times*.



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