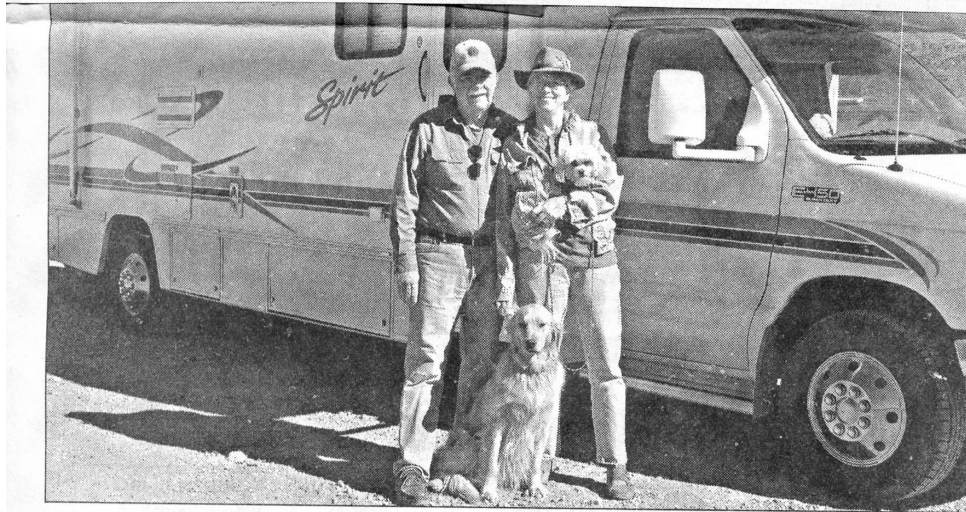


ravel



Family photo

After 14 years, two national forests to go: Suzi and Fred Dow of Bisbee, Ariz., with Dani, front, and Ralf.

Couple's RV pilgrimage never misses the forests for the trees

Tuesday, Suzi and Fred Dow of Bisbee, Ariz., climbed into their 31-foot RV with their two dogs. The retirees — he's 73, she's 59 — are completing a 14-year mission: to visit every mainland U.S. national forest with a developed campground. By August, the authors of a website, guidebooks and blog plan to accomplish their goal in Alaska. USA TODAY's **Kitty Bean Yancey** spoke with the couple as they loaded up for the trek.

Q: What started this project that's taken you more than 255,000 miles so far?

Suzi: We wanted to go to a Scottish folk festival in Abingdon (Va.) and could not find a hotel. A colleague of Fred's recommended a campground in the Jefferson National Forest. Driving back, we started talking about how everyone knew about national parks, but not national forests.

Fred: I said, "I'm getting ready to retire (from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development). Why don't we look into researching national forest campgrounds as a website and guide?" That started another career in camping.

Q: That's funny. I read that you weren't always an avid camper.

Fred: I'd camped all over Europe in a pup tent (in the Army), so when we were dating, I told Suzi there were two things I didn't do: wash windows or camp.

Suzi: He knows I love it, and so we went camping for two weeks in

Canada and had the best time. Camping is wonderful ... the rocks ... the trees. It's magical. And oh, the people we've met! I remember one guy in the Ozarks. He could identify any tree from 100 yards. And the "RV people" are great.

Q: So how many forests have you visited?

Fred: It will be 153 by August. We'll end with Alaska's Chugach National Forest and the Tongass National Forest. The Tongass is the largest (U.S.) national forest, about 400 miles long. We'll put the RV on a ferry and get on and off. Three forests we won't have visited: two without developed campgrounds and one in Puerto Rico. (When the Dows' quest began, the number of national forests was 156. Two were combined, and it's now 155, the U.S. Forest Service says).

Q: Can we follow your trip?

Suzi: On our forestcamping.com website. I'll blog as much as I can.

Q: So far, which forests are favorites?

Suzi: For scenery, the (lesser visited) north rim of the Grand Canyon is fabulous. We stayed at the Kaibab National Forest. And the Spring Mountains Recreation Area in the Toiyabe National Forest in Nevada is amazing. You're up above the desert and you can see the stars and the glow of Las Vegas.

Fred: I would say the Jefferson and George Washington national forests in Virginia. There's so much history (in the area).

Q: On your website, you allude to scary moments during trips but don't elaborate. So?

Suzi: We were hiking and the trail gave way, and Fred fell at least 20 feet onto cement. He ended up with bruised and contused ribs. It could have been worse.

Fred: I had a (Washington) Redskins hat, and we were up on a mountain in Colorado. My hat blew off and went down a cliff. I said, "I'm not going to lose that hat!" I climbed down to get it and couldn't get back up. Suzi, being as smart as she is, got a hose and tied it to the bumper and threw it down to me. I climbed up with my teeth gritted. Luckily, the hose held.

Suzi: You know what's also scary? Gas prices (at 7-8 miles per gallon). And going to a strange dentist and getting a haircut (on the road). You have no idea how frightening that can be!