



IR photo by George Lane

## Couple explores campgrounds

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IR Staff Writer

For Fred and Suzi Dow, it's a heck of a drive to the office — 60,000 miles and two years after leaving their Virginia home, they are still only halfway there.

The retired couple is on a cross-country quest to visit every national forest in the United States and compile information on their campgrounds.

"This all started because we wanted to go camping in West Virginia," Fred said. "But we couldn't find any consolidated information about campgrounds in the national forests, and if there was information, there wasn't any infor-

*Fred and Suzi Dow have traveled nearly 60,000 miles on their quest to document the thousands of campgrounds in national forests across the country.*

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mation on recreational pursuits."

As a result, on May 30, 1996, Fred and Suzi hooked their 23-foot travel trailer to their truck and "headed for the wilds of the United States."

Early on, the pair realized that it was an unrealistic goal to visit all of the more than 5,000 campgrounds in the country's 155 national forests. So they decided to survey campgrounds with 10 or more campsites that can be reached in the family sedan, a move that nar-

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rowed their tour to about 3,000 destinations.

"We want to try to give the campers an image of what they are going to find wherever they decide to go," Suzi said.

"And that way they can decide if that's the experience they want," finished Fred.

The couple documents such factors as how many water spigots a campground has, whether it is wheelchair accessible, if it has pull-through sites and more. All that information is posted on the Dows' website, along with photos taken at the campgrounds.

Fred and Suzi don't try to rate the campgrounds on their website.

"Something I might like, you might not," Suzi said.

One place Suzi said she liked

was a campground in the Sylvania wilderness in the Ottawa National Forest in Wisconsin.

"You're camping in trees that you could hide a Volkswagen bus behind," she said. "You're sitting at the campfire expecting to see a group of braves walk by."

Of course, Suzi and Fred say they have come upon very few campgrounds they haven't enjoyed — they are all beautiful in their own way, the couple said.

Even if it was somewhat difficult to find the beauty in some campgrounds, often the people Suzi and Fred met in them made up for it.

They met a 76-year-old healer in the Tonto National Forest in Arizona who had retired from the rodeo circuit only the year before.

Then there was the campground host in Vermont who firm-

ly believed that unless she was at the campground to feed the migrating hummingbirds, they would surely die.

"Sometimes I feel like Charles Kuralt," said Suzi. "You just meet so many interesting people."

Of course, it isn't all fun and games. Suzi says the tensions sometimes get high and disagreements run deeper than whether the smell of a ponderosa pine forest most resembles vanilla or butterscotch — Suzi says it's butterscotch while Fred swears it's vanilla.

"That's when we know it's time to take a long walk alone," Fred said.

Fred and Suzi — who sold their home in Virginia after they started their trip — say they also miss their children, who range in age from 26 to 36 years. However, they try to keep in touch and visit

as much as possible.

On a less personal note, the couple says it also is difficult to cope with strange doctors, dentists and even hair stylists.

"I'd do anything for a good haircut," Suzi said.

By the couple's best estimate, they will be on the road until at least 2004 completing their task. They want to finish Montana this summer and hit Wyoming before winter comes.

Once the Dows complete their research, they intend to publish a set of guide books, one for each national forest region.

For now, Fred and Suzi will continue to look expectantly down the road for what will come next.

"The excitement of leaving one place for another, of seeing what's over the next hill is what keeps us going," Fred said.