

Great new website for campers

By Joan Vasey

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In 1994, Suzanne and Fred Dow wanted to go camping on a National Forest, and searched the Internet for possible destinations. They could not find one good source of consolidated campground information anywhere on the web.

So, they decided to do something about it for the benefit of camping devotees who use the Internet to plan travel adventures.

The Dows set a goal of visiting every campground on each National Forest in the United States, including Alaska, then offering the consolidated information to the public over the Internet. And, they would do this wholly at their own expense as a public service.

"So many people don't know about their national forests," said Suzanne Dow, an avid hiker and lover of National Forests since she was 16.

"People don't know the difference between the significance of the USDA Forest Service and the

National Park Service," added Fred, who has discovered most people confuse the two agencies.

After examining a number of information sites for the variety and quality of information provided, the Dows approached a Manhattan-based private enterprise, Great Outdoor Recreation Pages, or GORP, to see if the company would provide a website.

"No other site met our needs," Fred explained.

Additionally, the Dows entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Forest Service. They wanted to enlist agency cooperation and support to add credibility to the website. And so, <www.gorp.com/dow> was born.

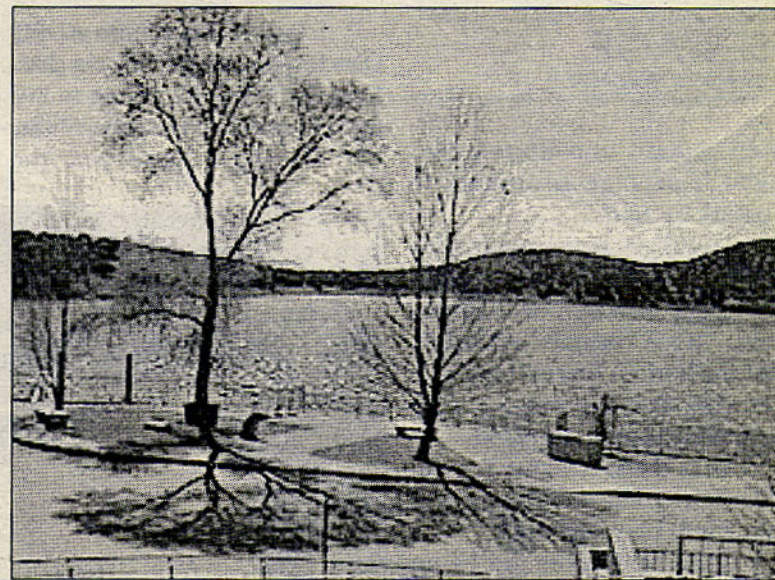
And the, Dows sold their house, prepared their motor home, and set out. With continuous travel, they expected the project to take three years. They planned to evaluate 10 campgrounds per day. However, due to distance between campgrounds or ranger districts on some National Forests, they quickly revised the timeline. To date, their record has been eight

campgrounds in one day. They now expect to wholly finish the project in 2004.

The Internet, Fred's hobby, melds nicely with Suzanne's love of camping for this major undertaking. Of the 155 individual National Forests, they have completely evaluated campgrounds on 94. (The Dows break down combined National Forests into pre-combination units for consistency.) They evaluate only those campgrounds with family sedan access and 10 or more designated sites to avoid confusion and to make the website more user friendly. However, there are two exceptions. One is the single, nine-unit campground in the Finger Lakes National Forest. The other may be the ferry-accessible campgrounds they'll evaluate when they go to Alaska. At night, on his laptop with generator thrumming, Fred inputs the results of the day's research.

"GORP is simply a vehicle for data storage," Fred emphasized. The Dows are not paid for the information and GORP does not charge them. The Forest Service does not contribute to their expenses in any way. There is absolutely no outside funding of any kind, to prevent compromise of position.

A spin-off project is simultaneously occurring. The Dows are writing campground guides, region by region. They have finished a National Forest Campground Guide for the Northern



This photo of Parker Canyon Lake can be found on the Dow's website.

Region, and expect to complete guides for the Southwestern and Southern Regions in April. Eventually, there will be a series of eight guides, with the Alaskan and Pacific Northwest region included in one publication.

The Dows can almost be considered National Forest and campground experts. They try to visit each ranger district and meet with the district ranger, where possible. Fred and Suzanne talk with Forest Service employees, campground hosts, local people, and other campers. They plan to travel to Washington in December to meet with Forest Service Recreation Director Peggy Hernandez and others to share their findings and experiences. The nationwide campground evaluation project has drawn Forest Service and other agency interest at all levels. Additionally, public interest is high. The website is now averaging up to 200,000 visits per month.

According to Suzanne, finding spectacular locations without the time to visit is the major frustration. However, this will change when their project ends in 2004. Currently, the couple live in Bisbee, a decision they made following a visit to the Coronado National Forest last year. Drawn to the area by its biological diversity, they bought a house and now nest in Arizona for six months. Then, they spend six months on the road. In 2005, they'll start traveling for pleasure six months a year. Then, they'll get to leisurely explore the many areas and attractions they were unable to investigate while the project was underway.

To keep quality high and information up-to-date, the Dows invite the public to contact them with questions, comments, suggestions, or changes. E-mail sent to <72000.3571@compuserve.com> will reach them year round.