

# Auto campers at Memorial Park

While it would be many years before the forests returned (and then not to their former grandeur), the wild north country of Wisconsin became popular for a new form of outdoor recreation—automobile camping—that promised to bring modest benefits to Washburn. Camping by auto surged in popularity across the nation after World War I, made possible by inexpensive automobiles, good roads, and the availability of auto campgrounds, and fueled by the post-war enthusiasm for tourism. Washburn did not have resorts or fancy hotels, so it could not take advantage of much of the tourism trade, but just by coincidence it had the ideal automobile campground, Memorial Park. The idea of opening the park to campers seems to have been inspired in 1921 by a telegram asking if the city wanted to be shown on a map as providing camping grounds. An affirmative reply was immediately sent, and Washburn was subsequently shown on a state map as “one of fifty cities in the state offering free camping to tourists,” according to the Times.

The camping project was enthusiastically taken up by the Commercial Club in cooperation with the city council, and a strip of land on the west

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side of Memorial Park was set aside as a free tourist campground. Over the years the park facilities were continually improved, with covered picnic tables, a well for water, electric lights, a bath house, swings, a telephone, a refreshment stand, caretaker's house, and a large park kitchen. A welcome arch was erected over the entrance to the park, while in 1927 the park was enlarged with additional land from the city and county. No doubt because of advertising provided by the Wisconsin Highway Commission, city newspapers, outdoor clubs, and even occasionally by Washburn, campers did indeed come to camp among the stately pine trees in Memorial Park. People came from Ashland, Bayfield and throughout Wisconsin, from Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan, and more distant states, and even from Hawaii. The Times reported regularly on activities at the park, listing the names of campers and

referring to out-of-state automobiles as “foreign cars.” Letters from campers praising the park were occasionally published in the Times, one writer stating “We are camping at your beautiful Memorial Park and we all agree that it is by far the prettiest and most convenient of any campground we have been to and we have been all the way to Winnipeg, Canada, and back by Duluth.” Since there were no contrived attractions or other ways to occupy the campers' time and attention, the camping experience itself and the natural beauty of the surrounding area must have been the major motivations for coming to the park. Camping—except for a few hardy souls—was a summer activity, so this small source of income for the city and its businesses disappeared during the winter.

In 1926 a summer resident suggested that a golf course be built to serve “cottagers” like himself and the tourists at Memorial Park. The idea was enthusiastically supported by the few golfers in Washburn, who had to go elsewhere to play. The Washburn Golf Club was soon organized and a parcel of land, extending eastward from First Avenue East to the road to the pump house, or Fourth Avenue East, and southward from the

Omaha Railroad right-of-way to the bay shore, was leased from the Omaha Railroad Company. The plan was “to open a nine hole course with an estimated yardage of about 3000 yards, with a 37 par, the entire course being in sight of the lake.” The course, constructed during the fall of 1926 and early summer of 1927 was actually a six hole course with holes one, four, and five replayed to make nine holes. A footbridge was also constructed across an adjacent ravine to Memorial Park for the benefit of golf devotees among the tourists. The formal opening of the course was held on July 3 1927, beginning with a picnic dinner at Memorial Park, after which “the assemblage repaired to the grounds,” where there were the usual speeches, and S. A. Oscar “drove off the first ball which officially opened the course, making a pretty drive and landing on the edge of the first green.” Despite the opening hoopla the course was apparently not used much until it was improved in 1928. For several years thereafter it served the recreational needs of tourists, “cottagers,” and the few Washburn residents who had the leisure, money, and interest to play the game.