

Fireside Talk: Jellystone Park

J. William T. Youngs



Jellystone Park at Lake Monroe, near Bloomington, Indiana, is neither a national nor a regional park. But it shares some of the characteristics of other parks we are studying, and by exploring it we gain a useful perspective on public parks – particularly in the area of entertainments and nature.

I stayed in Jellystone for an entire week, August 3 to August 10, 2012. I find that when travelling by RV that I gravitate towards three different kinds of “camping experience” depending on my current needs. (1) If I’m trying to make distance, and I don’t need “shore power” (electricity) or water, then a Walmart Parking lot works out just fine. It’s free and, well, there is a store nearby! (2) If I want a good dose of nature, I seek a park where I can immerse myself in the landscape. It should have a fire pit and a lot of privacy with trails leading into the forest, mountains, or desert. (3) Then there are those other campgrounds, built to accommodate RVs, a tad more natural than Walmart’s, with varying approaches to providing or not providing access to nature.

Sometimes these are little better than parking lots with water and electricity for an RV, but with no more attention to nature than most motels. But sometimes, in contrast, the sites are carefully sculpted into the woods and you “can have your cake and eat it” with utilities for the RV and natural beauty for you.

We should be aware of this dichotomy as we study parks. One of the fundamental questions in our class is why, historically, have we Americans taken to the woods, and how do we most like to shape our experience there? In particular, in this case, what activities and entertainments are most appropriate in a park?

In the early days of Yosemite there was talk of building a golf course on the valley floor. Why not? There was plenty of room, and what a glorious experience it would be to play golf while glancing now and then at the valley walls. Well, luckily, that idea did not fly. But what about rock concerts in the valley? Also rejected. The national parks focus on nature or history to provide entertainment for their guests. For man-made entertainment, let folks go to Disneyland and other entertainment parks. But that said there are plenty of exceptions to the idea of focusing on natural entertainments. Take snowmobiles in Yellowstone. There are plenty of them every winter these days; and there is also plenty of controversy about their presence.

Jellystone Campgrounds – full name is “Yogi Bear’s Jellystone Park Camp-Resorts” – began with the idea of entertainment. A brief but useful article in Wikipedia provides this information: “The idea to start a campground came to Doug Haag during a drive down the local highway. As he passed cars and campers on the highway, he got the idea to give families a destination where they could camp and vacation for the summer. Haag and his business partner purchased 30 acres of land in Wisconsin which would be the site of the first Jellystone Park Camp-Resort. The inspiration for the name ‘Jellystone Park’ came as Haag overheard his children watch Yogi Bear cartoons.” He founded his first park in Wisconsin in 1969. At this writing in 2012 there are 78 of these parks throughout the United States. The mission statement declares that the parks are “dedicated to providing each guest with a quality camping experience in a clean and entertaining environment.”

The parks have adopted Yogi Bear as their mascot, along with several other characters from a cartoon series about “Jellystone Park.” (See separate lecture on the Yogi Bear cartoon.) Each park has the standard RV parking area with picnic tables and fire pits, water and electricity. Then comes the entertainment. At Jellystone outside of Bloomington I learned first hand about entertainment in Yogi Bear’s parks. As evidence that I was in Indiana here is a picture of me taking Yogi for a ride on my Can-Am Spyder:



Don’t tell the kids, by the way, but inside this particular Yogi Bear costume is Tim, a park staffer who is a social studies major at nearby Indiana University. The temperature was 95 degrees that day, and I suspect Tim was as hot in his bear costume as I was in my riding gear.

The entertainment program at Jellystone is impressive. The camp has a wading pool and indoor and outdoor swimming pools. There is a big slide, a huge sandbox, and a humongous “jumping pillow.” The so-called pillow looked like a slice of a huge balloon, some 40 feet across, 5 feet high in the middle, and filled with air. As many as a dozen children would be bouncing on the pillow at any given time, jumping high into the air and turning somersaults. A game room featured modern electronic games; park staffers

organized bingo parties and painting parties. Children could decorate their bikes for a “Bead parade.” At 5:00 every day Yogi Bear or his friend Boo Boo would walk through the park and greet their fans. The staff members were wonderfully friendly and helpful. The children love the park, which means their parents must enjoy it as well. I heard lots of children’s laughter at the park, but heard no whining.



All well and good: the park certainly included plenty of entertainment, but what of the camping side of the park? We usually associate camping with nature, right? But the nature side of the story was elusive, if not completely absent. You just had to look for it. In an effort to create a traditional camping experience the office store sold firewood, and some of the visitors built fires in the evenings – although the temperature was still 80 degrees! And the camp showed some regard for the environment: at arrival I was provided with a blue plastic bag to use for recycling aluminum and tin cans: just leave them in the bag at your campsite when you depart. And there were cabins and tent sites off the paved roads designed for recreational vehicles. These were deeper in the nearby forest. I also noticed on the camp map the indication of a trail to a waterfall. As I followed signs into the forest I expected no more than a ripple in a stream – possibly even a man-made artificial falls. But the forest turned out to be the genuine article: thick trees, the persistent sound of crickets and birds, and a river bed (now summer-dry) giving way to a 30 foot plunge to a deeply shaded canyon. This felt like the forests once known to pioneers and Indians, and it was only a few hundred yards from the mini-golf and the wading pool.



(See below for more photos of the Jellystone forest.)

I quite liked the forest and several times took a walk from my RV site to a mile or so of forest paths. But here's the thing: during an hour or so of hiking, which it turns out was owned by the "camp-resort" I never saw another "camper" back there.

Food for Thought

1. Why do many Americans prefer man-made entertainments to ones provided by Mother Nature?
2. Would the entertainments provided at Jellystone, as described in this lecture, be appropriate in a national park such as Yellowstone or Yosemite? Why or why not?
3. What are some examples, past and present, of providing "entertainments" in the national parks? What have been some of the important examples of arguments for and against those activities in particular parks at particular times?
4. Does the fact that Jellystone is a private campground justify its emphasis on entertainment rather than nature?
5. Despite the entertainment focus of Jellystone, we can see here some examples of nature appreciation: what are these examples? How do you explain them? Why would anyone light a campfire and roast marshmallows on a hot, muggy evening?!

More Photos from the Jellystone Nature Trail



The forest near the falls.



The “falls” in the summer, when I was there. Beautiful, but no water. For another view, see below.



This is what the waterfall looks like in the winter. Thanks to Darcie Lowe, Assistant General Manager at Jellystone for providing this image.



Another view of the forest: I can imagine pioneers and Indians on a trail like this.



And last but not least, Yogi himself. Hello and Goodbye.