

INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN RUGH

Question: You suggest in your book, *Are We There Yet*, that the family summer vacation, at least how we perceive it today, originated in Post WWII America. Did people not go on vacations before this time? Is the idea of vacations in general and specifically the summer vacation something relatively new?

Answer: People have gone on vacations since the beginning of the 20th century, but not until after World War II was it a mass phenomenon, cheap enough for most Americans. It became a middle-class social ritual, something that people expected they could afford.

Question: Is our idea of the summer family vacation different from the phenomenon of the 1940's through 1970's?

Answer: The idea is much the same, but the family vacation is different. We still go on family vacations because we believe it will strengthen the family and will educate children. We want them to see the country we live in, and we take them to historic sites. But today vacations are shorter in length, and if we go long distances we travel in an airplane, not the car. Technology has changed in the vacation, too. We wear seatbelts, and children sit in car seats. No wonder we rely on electronics, like a DVD player, to keep the children happy!

Question: What changes in American society led to greater numbers of Americans venturing out on family vacations?

Answer: By that time workers had earned the right to two weeks paid vacation as a benefit, and in the recovery auto manufacturers boosted production to meet the demand by middle-class families for the 'family car.' The government was building

new interstates that were promised to be safer and faster. The 'baby boom' fueled the growth of suburbia and an appetite for consumer goods for the household. Going on vacation was an experience that families could 'buy' and could brag about to their neighbors.

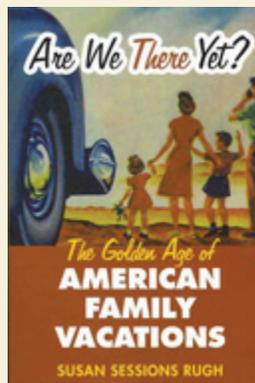
Question: How else did the American auto industry affect the family vacation?

Answer: Auto advertisements featured vacation scenes in their ads, so vacations provided a way to promote sales of cars, especially the roomy station wagon.

Question: Was the American summer vacation influenced by European or other cultural notions of summer vacation?

Answer: The family vacation is distinctively American. In Europe, August is the vacation month, but American industries wanted to stay in production year-round, so 2-week vacations were staggered all summer long. Americans were driven by the Puritan work ethic and had to see the value in vacationing as more than a leisure activity.

Question: Is the stereotypical summer vacation more common within a certain demographic of American society? In other words, is the family vacation a



“white” phenomenon? Upper class, lower class?

Answer: The American family vacation is a middle-class habit, but in America that takes in a wide swath of society. Even those at the lower reaches of the middle-class took vacations, and would take along their own food or stay with relatives to afford it. The vacation was not limited to whites, although black travelers faced terrible discrimination along the road, especially in the south. That they were willing to travel demonstrates their determination to claim their due rights of citizenship.



Dr. Susan Rugh is the author of *Are We There Yet?*: The Golden Age of American Family Vacations (973.92 R848), as well as *Our Common Country: Family Farming, Culture, and Community in the Nineteenth Century Midwest* (307.72 R848). Dr. Rugh teaches in the history department at Brigham Young University where she specializes in the history of travel and tourism as well as the history of rural America.