

# H-Net Reviews

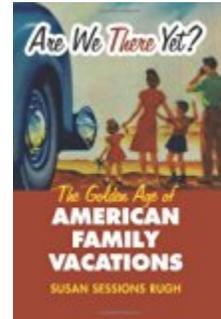
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Sessions Rugh. *Are We There Yet?: The Golden Age of American Family Vacations*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008. xii + 240 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1588-9.

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## On The Road Again

Few rituals of American middle-class life have been as familiar, and enduring, as the family vacation road trip. In *Are We There Yet?* Susan Sessions Rugh offers the first sustained effort to situate the evolution of the family road trip within the broader social and economic contexts of post-World War II America. In so doing, Rugh seeks to provide, “a cultural history of the American middle-class family in its golden age” (p. 2).

This golden age, according to Rugh, extended from the close of the war in 1945 until the recessionary downturn of the early 1970s. It was grounded in the advent of postwar middle-class prosperity and the concomitant rise in automobile ownership, which along with generous paid leave times from work and improvements in highway infrastructure, allowed for unprecedented levels of mobility. Thus, given the economic means, time off, and the increased accessibility of travel, the family vacation was allowed to flourish as never before.

The book explores a number of useful themes, the first of which involves what Rugh terms “civic pilgrimage” to such “sacred sites” as national monuments in Washington DC, presidential birthplaces, and Civil War battlefields. Such pilgrimages allowed families to “partake of the national legacy, praise its heroes, and internalize its democratic values,” inculcating in children “patriotic values ... encouraging in them a loyalty to the nation for which many of their father’s fought in World War II” (p. 54). Civic pilgrimages were facilitated by the prolifer-

ation of free road maps offered by oil companies and state governments. These maps served not only as navigational aids but, with their idealized images of particular regions and sites, “shaped travelers’ perceptions of the American landscape” (p. 43). As well, road maps were a key strategy of marketing and public relations, encouraging brand loyalty toward oil company products, and promoting states as tourist destinations at a time when this was just beginning to be recognized as a potentially lucrative source of revenue.

Rugh provides an especially illuminating account of the degree to which African American vacationers had to contend with prevailing norms of racial apartheid in the 1950s and 1960s. As she points out, “In a nation where schools, housing and society were segregated, vacationing was also segregated by race.... Discrimination against black travelers meant that vacationing was a fundamentally different experience for them than it was for white families.... It was an uncertain, even fear-filled, experience because blacks never could be sure that they would find places to sleep and eat on the road” (p. 69). African Americans dealt with this by developing a parallel travel infrastructure: just as white travelers consulted American Automobile Association and oil company guidebooks listing recommended establishments, so too black-owned travel businesses circulated guides like the *Green Book* and *Travelguide* that catered to the needs of black families seeking accommodations, mostly black-owned, that welcomed their patronage. Rugh also

details the extent to which the African American community challenged racial segregation in public accommodations during the Jim Crow era, with civil rights organizations the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) initiating successful campaigns to end discriminatory practices at national chains like Howard Johnson and Hilton Hotels. Furthermore, testimony before the Senate Committee on Commerce in 1963 by NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins regarding the degrading treatment black travelers faced had a tangible impact on the passage of the Civil Rights Act the following year.

*Are We There Yet?* covers an admirable amount of ground, but there are areas Rugh could have taken her analysis further. In a book encompassing the childhood experiences of the baby-boom generation, for example, one would hope for an in-depth examination of how elements of the youth counterculture and generational conflict figured into the changing zeitgeist of the family vacation in the Vietnam War era. Unfortunately, this is an opportunity that Rugh allows to go largely unrealized. In a chapter on national park travel, she makes brief reference to a 1970 incident where “a counterculture group of long-haired hippies rioted in Stoneman meadow in Yosemite National Park,” in which “a confrontation between generations ensued” (p. 152), yet no further details are pursued. Along similar lines, at the book’s conclusion Rugh notes, “When the children of the greatest generation became adolescents, they began to chafe at the constraints of parental authority and took their own path forward,” yet precisely how and under what circumstances this may have occurred is only glossed in fleeting anecdotal references to Woodstock and “antiwar marches near the steps of the Lincoln Memorial” (p. 179). The reader is left wanting more, and it’s a shame this potentially exciting vein of inquiry, certainly well within the

scope of the book, is not more fully exploited.

In addition, one can’t help but think the chronological framework might have been more fruitfully extended through the end of the twentieth century. Rugh’s contention that the golden age of family vacations ended with the economic malaise of the 1970s, and “shift[s] in cultural authority as baby boomers came of age” (p. 11), is well taken. However, as Rugh herself argues, “to meet the needs of today’s families, the family vacation is being reinvented, but on the foundation of vacations of the past” (p. 181). Again, specifically how and under what circumstances such reinvention may have occurred more recently would have made a fascinating addition to the book. To be fair, Rugh does touch upon some pertinent issues here, particularly with reference to changing demographic patterns. Nevertheless, such matters might have been better integrated into the larger arc of analysis with a full chapter-length treatment, rather than consigned to an afterthought in the epilogue.

Notwithstanding these concerns, this is an insightful and commendably researched work. Rugh makes fine use of an array of primary sources, including oral histories, legal documents, and administrative communications drawn from the NAACP Papers at the Library of Congress, National Park Service Records, and other archival collections. The book is amply illustrated with a number of well-chosen photographs that richly underscore the narrative. What is more, Rugh’s writing is precise, evenhanded, and engaging. The book is sure to be a welcome resource in a variety of teaching venues, from general surveys in cultural history to more specialized courses in family, childhood, and leisure studies. Overall, Rugh lays a solid foundation for future scholarship concerning the family vacation experience, and *Are We There Yet?* is likely to become a standard point of reference.

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