

# Tennessee State Parks Campground Hosts Chip in to Enhance Your Stay

By Tennessee Conservationist Editor Louise Zepp

Have you ever gone camping and wished you could stay on longer than you are able to? Tennessee State Parks campground host volunteers have figured out how to extend their camping experience, and to make yours better, by volunteering.

Campground hosts may stay a season, part of a season, or they may return year after year. Campground hosts in Tennessee State Parks offer the first line of help when campers have questions about the park, area attractions, or rules. Campground hosts are there to provide the information.

Some of the campground hosts will even teach you how to back up your trailer if you don't already know how!



Photo by Nancy Schelin.

According to Tennessee State Parks Volunteer and Community Services Coordinator Nancy Schelin, the concept for the campground host program began in the late 1980s when reductions in staff made it difficult to maintain a presence in the state park campgrounds. "Allowing volunteers to live on site at no charge in their recreational vehicles enabled parks to offer a variety of assistance to our camping visitors," says Schelin.

Schelin says the program began in just a few parks and has steadily spread in popularity and strength to 21 of the 53 Tennessee State Parks. "In 2008, 80 campground hosts donated more than 384,000 hours of service to Tennessee State Parks. The campground host program is by far the most popular way to volunteer at a Tennessee State Park," she says.

Take a look at some campground hosts and hear how they got interested in volunteering for Tennessee State Parks.

## **Bledsoe Creek State Park Gallatin**

In their fourth year as campground hosts at Bledsoe Creek State Park in Gallatin, Wallace and Sharon Armistead of Lebanon arrived the second week of March to start their campground host duties that they anticipate running through the beginning of November. "We came in to work while it's fairly quiet," says Sharon Armistead.

Their experiences as campers led the Armisteads to become campground hosts. "We camped here for 20 years and then decided to become hosts," she says. Sharon Armistead works as a nurse on weekends. Her husband, Wallace, is retired from TRW, a company that makes steering gear for semi trucks. "Our grandkids grew up in the park and remember all the trails. They are 18, 14 and 11 years of age and live in Hartsville and Lebanon."

Most campers want to know more about the history of the area, she says. Campground hosts are there to provide just such information. "Quite a few are from out of state. One lady from Colorado came here. She was part of a history group and she was looking for a certain cemetery to find someone's grave. I was able to help her find the cemetery on the Trousdale/Sumner County line and she went there, found the grave and the information she was looking for, and was very happy about it," says Armistead.

Bledsoe Creek gets a double volunteer "whammy" from the Armisteads as Sharon serves as the president of the Friends of Bledsoe Creek State Park and is now in her second term. She has been able to recruit members from the campground and from the hikers that visit the park and says the Friends now have 50 members. "The members are about half campers and half hikers," she says.

## **Edgar Evins State Park**

## **Silver Point**

Mike and Karen Everhart, full time “RVers” for a little over a year, plan to return to Edgar Evins State Park in Silver Point as campground hosts for a season running from May through mid-November.

Last year, the Everharts spent half the season as campground hosts at Edgar Evins. This year, they plan to stay the whole season there.

Mike Everhart is a retired editor from ABC News in New York. He and his wife, Karen, lived in New Jersey for 25 years. Karen is a “retired homemaker and lunch lady at an elementary school in New Jersey,” says Everhart.

Everhart found the campground host opening at Edgar Evins while he was searching online to pick up volunteer jobs along the way as they traveled to Florida. “We are campground hosts in Florida at Myakka River State Park outside of Sarasota and we’ve hosted at state parks in Georgia and Pennsylvania. So far, Edgar Evins is our favorite. It’s unique, with the decks on the side of a hill. We saw them and we were ‘ga-ga’ over them. The staff is super nice and it’s a well-run place. We really fell in love with Edgar Evins.”

Mike Everhart has family members who live in Greeneville. “I lived there briefly as a child. It’s a part of Tennessee I am familiar with,” he said.

## **Fall Creek Falls State Park Pikeville**

Escaping the suit and tie world of being a college president and a teacher in their respective retirements, this year, T. Clark and Shirley Bryan entered their eighth year of volunteering as campground hosts at Fall Creek Falls State Park in Pikeville.

“This is what I wanted to do when I retired,” says T. Clark Bryan. “This is different from 40 years of sitting behind a desk and from my wife’s years as a schoolteacher.” The Bryans plan an eight-month season of campground hosting from March through October.

Bryan says he likes volunteering and he likes the t-shirt and shorts world of the work they do at Fall Creek Falls.

“We enjoy it. We do what needs to be done. We help with general park information, or delivering messages. I’ve painted 24 buildings since we’ve been here. We help out in the inn, we bus tables, or help with planting flowers, or help out if rangers need help.”

When not acting as campground hosts, the Bryans live in Douglasville, Ga. They camped at Fall Creek Falls for 38 years before becoming campground hosts.

## **T.O. Fuller State Park Memphis**

If campers at T.O. Fuller State Park in Memphis want to know how far Graceland is from the park, they would likely ask John and Polly Hesse, campground hosts at T.O. Fuller for over 10 years.

The Hesses are full time “RVers” who might travel to Florida or Texas when they aren’t in the campground. Their season at T.O. Fuller generally runs from March through early December.

“Since we are less than 10 miles from Graceland, we get a lot of foreign visitors. We had two girls from Germany and a couple from Switzerland lately.” The park also gets lots of regular campers including local people. “In the early spring there were lots of campers from Indiana, Michigan and Canada on their way back home,” Hesse says.

If you were a visitor wanting to know more about area history, the Hesses might point you toward historic sites nearby. John Hesse retired after 32 years as assistant director at Chucalissa Museum and Archaeological site, Memphis, operated by the University of Memphis. The site, near T.O. Fuller State Park,

is home to the C.H. Nash Museum. It focuses on the science of archaeology and interpretation of Native American history. Hesse still works at Chucalissa as a part-time maintenance man. His wife is a retired teacher in Memphis city schools.

Visitors to the Memphis area also want to know where to find the best barbecue. John Hesse says he has several places he recommends.

### **Montgomery Bell State Park Burns**

Now in their third year as campground hosts at Montgomery Bell State Park in Burns, Linda and Don Cooper arrived in the park on March 1 to start their camping season.

"We have 40 new sewer sites this year and we are excited because now people can shower in their own campers," says Linda Cooper.

They got their first taste of Montgomery Bell camping when they were traveling through after visiting Tucson and stayed in the campground. Their daughter and son live in Nashville, along with two grandchildren and ".....another on the way," says Linda Cooper. The Coopers had previous park experience from working at a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers day use park at Defeated Creek in Carthage where they worked on boats. "We had a lot of fun there," she says.

Don Cooper worked as a trucker for 32 years before retiring and Linda Cooper was a cafeteria manager at Jackson County High School in Gainesboro. They hit the road as "full-time Rvers" in 2005, visiting relatives in South Carolina, Kentucky and traveling around.

They like the campground host experience and have made lots of friends in the park.

"We really enjoy this. It's like being on vacation. You have the regulars that come and stay with you. They bring us country eggs and tomatoes out of their garden. People come through in the spring and we are happy to see them and to hear how their winter has been," she says.

"My husband, Coop, is an old trucker who can help them into their spot. He helps people who are new to camping with campers and some don't know how to back in. He shows them how to work the tanks, electrical and awnings," she says.

Linda Cooper says her door is always open. "We are there and aware," she says.

### **Paris Landing State Park Buchanan**

Full-time "Rvers" since 2002, Jeannie and Howard Collins are marking their second year as campground hosts at Paris Landing State Park in Buchanan.

The Collins provide campers with information on the area and what is available in the park, says Jeannie Collins. She says there are lots of local people from the region camping there on the weekends. "There are also lots of people passing through who are overnights. We get them into a site, collect the money, and make sure they have what they need. We've met nice people and enjoy being there," she says.

Highlights among last season's visitors to Paris Landing included two tent campers who were bicycling from Pennsylvania to New Mexico and stayed a couple of days. "They carried everything on their bikes with them," she says.

Don and Linda Cooper, campground hosts at Montgomery Bell State Park in Burns, introduced the Collins to the idea of becoming campground hosts after they met. "They told us about being campground hosts and then we applied. We enjoy it. We play golf and there is golf right there," she says. The Collins' children live in Dickson and Franklin so their grandchildren get to come and tent camp with them at the park in the summer. Prior to becoming full-time "Rvers," Howard Collins was an electrician and Jeannie Collins sold real estate outside of Franklin.

## **What Do Campground Hosts Do?**

### **What are the typical duties of a campground host in Tennessee State Parks?**

Their tasks may vary but could include the following: camper check-in; light maintenance and housekeeping of campground facilities; providing information to campers about park activities and programs as well as park rules and regulations; providing directions to local attractions and services. With permission of park management, some hosts with special skills or talents might assist with programming or events.

Hosts serve a minimum of one month and a maximum of nine consecutive months in a 12-month period. The hosts commit to working a schedule of a minimum of three days a week. Exact times are determined by park management, but most likely include weekends and holidays. Volunteers are asked to serve a minimum of 20 hours a week and maintain 24-hour availability for the days they are scheduled.

### **The Benefits of Being a Campground Host**

Campground hosts receive a campsite in a high visibility area at no charge. They also receive electric and water hook-ups.

### **How to Apply to Become a Campground Host**

Each Tennessee State Park that participates in the campground host program is responsible for interviewing and hiring their own hosts. Park staff recommends that you call the park you are interested in prior to sending in an application to make sure they are in need of a host for the upcoming season.

The next step is filling out an application (available on the Tennessee State Parks Web site) and sending it to the park where you are interested in being a campground host. For more information, visit the Tennessee State Parks Web site [www.tnstateparks.com](http://www.tnstateparks.com) or call 888-867-2757.

To contact the Tennessee State Parks Volunteer Coordinator, call 615-532-5249 or contact her via e-mail at [tnstateparks.volunteer@tn.gov](mailto:tnstateparks.volunteer@tn.gov). The mailing address for the Tennessee State Parks Volunteer Coordinator is: Volunteer Coordinator, Tennessee State Parks, 401 Church St., 7th Floor, Nashville, TN 37243.