Escape to the lake and the advent of tourism

By Chris Corpus and Hannah Combs
Reader Contributors

Laying her luggage on the bed (a real innerspring mattress, just like back home), she steps out the door and across the lawn to scope out a place for the children to swim. Satisfied that the water is shallow and calm, she slips off her shoes and lets her toes sink into the sand. In a minute, the children will find her, begging for brown cows, and vacation will stop feeling like vacation, but for this one moment she feels perfectly relaxed. A far cry from “going up to the lake” when she was a child. At the time, the full day of clattering up the goat trail in her papa’s Model T. The road from Coeur d’Alene to Canada earned the sobriquet “goat trail,” lacking a hard surface, prone to potholes and too narrow around curves for comfortable car travel. Even Canadians entering at Eastport noted the degradation of the road once they crossed the border. Changing the name of the road from US 10 Alternate to US 95 attracted federal and state funding to improve the road, starting with a hard surface in the 1930s. Widespread use of the automobile changed tourism and recreation permanently. Crowds came en masse from the metropolis of Spokane, but the east to west Hwy. 200 brought crosscountry travelers through Sandpoint. Gas stations, car mechanics, motels, and cottage camps blossomed, along with a new business, auto camps.

Car travel magazines heralded Sandpoint and its lake as a destination for families, featuring fishing, boating, camping, hiking, and swimming. Not to be missed was a “remarkable two mile long wooden bridge that links to the little gloaming town of Sandpoint.” Besides summer fun, they recommended traveling during the fall when the colors were worth the challenging drive. From the beginning, civic and state leaders emphasized the natural beauty and clean water of the North Idaho lakes. The fabled fishing of Lake Pend d’Oreille reached all the way to southern California. The Chamber of Commerce worked with local legendary writer and photographer, Jim Parsons and Ross Hall, to attract even more tourists. World record catches of the Dolly Varden trout, Kamloops, and the abundance of Kokanee became big stories in newspapers and sport magazines. Auto camps popped up on downtown lots and in yards on the edges of town, but visitors began looking for an experience, not just a place to sleep on the ground. By the late 1940’s, 27 resorts and motels appeared along the shores of Lake Pend d’Oreille, and among the most popular was the Lakeshore Tourist Park, which flourished next to the Sandpoint city beach. Their neon sign directed travelers to go east on First Avenue for two blocks.