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How do parents of 14-year-old twins and 10-year-old triplets keep their sanity in summer and give the children a meaningful experience?

Cook children (from left) Danny, Tony, Alyssa, LeAnne and Frank and parents Beth and Dan. Photos by Sam Arendt and Dan CookPack everyone into a 1994 Chevrolet station wagon filled with tents, sleeping bags and camping gear and head west.

That's what Dan and Beth Cook of Saukville and their children — twins Danny and Frank and triplets Tony, Alyssa and LeAnne — did the last two summers.

They traveled 6,500 miles in four weeks in 2009 and added 7,500 miles during six weeks in 2010, exploring dozens of state and national parks and monuments in the Wild West.

The station wagon is still going strong at 170,000 miles, Dan said.

Actually Dan, a stay-at-home dad, drove with the kids and camped more than Beth, a labor and delivery nurse at St. Mary's Columbia Hospital in Milwaukee. She joined them for two weeks of camping, but avoided the long drive, flying into Las Vegas and departing from Denver.

The family also visited her sister, who lives in the desert near Pueblo, Colo., and a cousin near the Mojave Desert.

The Cooks have been in all but four states west of the Mississippi River in the last two years. They explored the Grand Canyon, Zion National Park, Arches National Park, Yellowstone, the Great Tetons, Devil's Tower, Yosemite, Sequoia National Forest, Bryce Canyon, Death Valley, the Badlands, Mount Rushmore, Rocky Mountain National Park, Estes Park, Pike's Peak, Death Valley, the Great Sand Dunes and other places that sounded interesting.

"The first year, I had places I wanted to go — the Grand Canyon, Zion, Bryce Canyon — but found a lot of other places," Dan said. "We went without any reservations. If we saw something we liked, we stopped and enjoyed it. I didn't want to say, 'We don't have the time.'

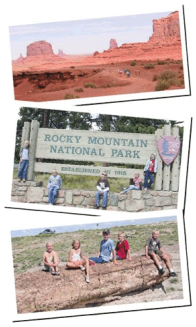
"The kids learned a lot of history and geography. It's a lot better than reading about it."

The family encountered an abundance of wildlife — including a black bear that attacked their

bear-proof container within 10 feet of their tent at Yosemite National Park.

Campers are told to put everything that is food or has a strong scent, including soap and detergents, in the bear containers rather than vehicles, since bears have been know to tear off doors to get to food.

“At 6 a.m. we heard all this banging on pots and pans (which is what campers are advised to do to alert others when a bear is sighted in the campground). I looked outside and he’s right there,” Dan said.



“You’d think something that big would make a noise. But they have those soft padded feet and they’re stealthy. You don’t hear a thing.”

They saw another bear while walking to the restroom and decided not to do that again at night.

They also saw big horn sheep, elk, moose, prairie dogs, buffalo, desert tortoise, mule deer, wild mustangs and a scorpion on their travels.

The children participated in Junior Ranger programs at each national park, answering questions, drawing pictures or completing puzzles in a booklet. If they answered enough questions correctly, they earned a Junior Ranger badge. The Cooks have a large collection of the badges.

The family took free or inexpensive guided tours and participated in as many park programs as possible.

The temperature reached 115 to 120 degrees in the Mojave Desert.

When they aren’t exploring other states, the Cooks like to set up their tents at Mauthe, Long Lake or Harrington Beach state parks, staying the maximum allowable two weeks before moving on to the next state park.

“There is so much winter, it’s nice to be outdoors when you can,” Dan said.

“It keeps them away from video games,” Beth added.

Dan allowed them to play video games while riding through miles and miles of boring cornfields

and flat land.

“As soon as the landscape became more interested, I didn’t have to remind them to turn them off,” he said. “They did that on their own. They don’t want to miss a thing.”

Frank’s favorite place was the Great Sand Dunes in Colorado, where he and Alyssa climbed to the top of the highest sand dunes in North America — 750 feet. The others got to within 100 feet of the top.

“I don’t have a favorite place. I like all of them,” said Tony until his dad asked about fishing in the Colorado River. His eyes lit up.

“I caught the biggest fish,” he said, stretching his hands wide, then adding, “until Danny caught a bigger one.”

The boys caught 5-pound and 2-1/2-pound large mouth bass that they ate that night along with the rest of the day’s catch.

That was also Danny’s highlight. The girls couldn’t decide what they liked best.

“I like meeting new friends and roasting marshmallows,” LeAnne said. “But I don’t like mosquitoes.”

Dan and Beth have been camping since they were 18 so it was natural to share their love for the outdoors with their children.

“I think the twins were a month old when we took them camping and the triplets were about six weeks,” Beth said.

Dan, the chief cook in the family, cooks over an open fire or use a camp stove when camping.

Stew is a favorite. “It’s so easy. You put the meat, vegetables and water in a Dutch oven, put it on the fire and it’s ready when you get back,” Dan said.

If they’re in a hurry, he adds extra vegetables to Dinty Moore stew.

They also make a lot of foil-pack meals, sealing meat and vegetables with cream of mushroom soup in heavy foil, then placing them in the fire to cook.

Another favorite is a chicken leg quarter, uncooked rice and mushroom soup sealed in a foil pouch.

“We eat a lot of fresh fruit and vegetables,” Beth said.

Of course, they roast hot dogs and marshmallows and make s’mores with marshmallows, graham crackers and chocolate.

The boys are also in Boy Scouts. Dan, a former Cub Scout leader, goes on camping trips as a chaperone. Danny and Frank plan to start projects for their Eagle Scout Award next year.

The family waits until August to camp because the children play baseball or softball through July. Dan coaches the boys' baseball team — with Danny and Frank a formidable duo as pitcher and catcher respectively — and is an assistant coach for the girls' softball team.

Dan, who had been a stay-at-home dad since the twins were born, earned a degree in mechanical engineering from Milwaukee Area Technical College in 2005 and worked at Sauk Technology in Saukville for two years.

"It was getting crazy. We both were working 12-hour days, and I realized it didn't pay for me to work to pay a baby sitter," he said.

"It made sense for him to stay home. I think he missed the kids," Beth said. "If we need extra money, I can always pick up more hours. It works for us."

Dan said he realizes monthlong camping adventures may be coming to an end soon with the twins starting high school in September. The triplets are in sixth grade at Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Port Washington.

"You have to do this while you can," Dan said. "When I go back to work, finding time for vacations will be more difficult."