





A frame

an excerpt from the new book **by chad randl**
architectural historian, heritage preservation services,
national park service

THE A-FRAME'S ASCENT TO POPULARITY coincided with an economic expansion that brought vacation homes within reach of a rapidly expanding middle class. As Americans began to enjoy longer weekends and extended vacations, they yearned to get away from their everyday life, to obtain what was once available only to the rich: a second home in the country. There was a new emphasis on recreation, both for self-improvement and for the sheer joy of it. With the evolution of a leisure industry predicated on conspicuous consumption, Americans packed up the station wagon and headed out to stake their claim on a small lakeshore or hillside lot.

Architecture during this time was also undergoing change. Blending elements of modernism, local building traditions, and recent technological advances, architects,

Left: Communing with nature, 1950s-style.

“A NASCENT LEISURE INDUSTRY, ENCOMPASSING THE BUILDING TRADES, REAL ESTATE AGENTS, MAGAZINE EDITORS, AND SPORTING GOOD AND MOTOR VEHICLE MANUFACTURERS, PROMOTED VACATION HOMES AS A NECESSARY POSSESSION. THE SECOND HOME BECAME A RIGHTFUL INHERITANCE.”

especially those on the West Coast, developed entirely new expressions: origami-like roof forms, space-age motifs, and creative glazing schemes. Bearing the influence of work by Frank Lloyd Wright, Eliel Saarinen, William Wurster, and others, these designs offered a more human contemporary architecture and appealed to broad segments of the American population. Some of the most creative designs were for vacation homes.

Second-home design offered architects a cheap, informal opportunity to garner attention with something new. Image-conscious clients saw the contemporary vacation home as a way to distance themselves from everyday life, to reflect their true unbuttoned personality. Owning a stunning retreat marked the achievement of a revised American dream. It was from this mix of economic, architectural, and cultural trends that the A-frame came to the fore.

The A-frame’s popularity lasted from around 1950 through the first half of the 1970s, when many Americans saw an upswell in their financial fortunes. During the 1950s, as industry shifted from wartime production to the manufacture of consumer goods, the economy ballooned. An increasing number of families had more money and time.¹ The middle class expanded rapidly. Between 1955 and 1965, the average income of an American worker rose 50 percent, while disposable income increased 57 percent.² Returned veterans, helped along by the GI Bill, filled a variety of new (largely white-collar) jobs in corporations, government bureaucracies, service industries, the media, and the military-industrial complex. As the percentage of middle-class families rose, their influence as culture creators grew proportionally.³

As the middle class came to dominate leisure spending, a new breed of vacation homes evolved to fit their budgets and lifestyles. A nascent leisure industry, encompassing the building trades, real estate agents, magazine editors, and sporting good and motor vehicle manufacturers, promoted vacation homes as a necessary possession. The second home became a rightful inheritance.

Extravagant claims about the investment potential of vacation homes were part of the pitch. Payments were manageable, appreciation was assumed. In the short term, renting out the home when not in use could cover much of the monthly mortgage. Long term, vacation homes could eventually serve as retirement homes before being passed on to one’s children. According to some boosters, middle-class families could hardly afford not to own a second

home. “As a rule . . . annual family vacations at resort hotels are a heavy drain on the budget, entail tiresome preparation and too often result in little more than fast-fading tans and fleeting memories. When such credits and debits are balanced, a vacation home may well be an economy.”⁴

Even with rising incomes, many families still came up short. Increasingly available credit and financing helped close the gap.⁵ Initially, banks were not willing to mortgage modest, individually constructed vacation homes, especially those built only for seasonal use.⁶ Bankers saw contemporary vacation houses as a trend that would eventually lose favor and be difficult to resell in a foreclosure. So home developers and producers offered financing directly, including credit applications in brochures and plan books. Ads for precut A-frame kits encouraged buyers to “build now and pay later.”⁷

With more money to spend on nonessentials, Americans now secured more free time in which to spend it. The 40-hour work week was nearly universal, the culmination of a trend dating back to the beginning of the century. In 1940 the average American worker was entitled to a week of paid vacation and two holidays. By 1969, the average paid vacation had doubled; holidays had grown fivefold.⁸ Saturdays were ensconced as part of the weekend, rather than the last (half) day of the work week.

Artificial lakes and reservoirs, created by developers and public agencies like the Bureau of Reclamation, opened tens of thousands of miles of shoreline to recreational use.⁹ Between 1946 and 1966, the mileage of surface road doubled.¹⁰ Highway construction, especially the interstate system, brought large undeveloped recreation areas within a Friday night’s drive of city and suburb. Roads like Interstate 70, through the Rockies, and California’s Route 40, through the Sierra Nevada Mountains between San Francisco and Reno, created weekend wonderlands accessible year-round.¹¹



Above: Antecedents of the modern A-frame. Hungarian farmhouse, circa. 1947; pole-and-thatch house in New Guinea.

Right: A winter vacation home in California’s Squaw Valley, 1958.

LEFT: NATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHIVES, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION; RIGHT: © ERNIE BRAUNVEICHER NETWORK ARCHIVES







Above: Plywood manufacturers' product enticements. Left: San Francisco Arts Festival's Leisure House exhibit, 1951.

The automobile spurred the dispersal of recreational activities. In the 1920s and 1930s, cabin camps and cottage courts sprouted up, offering a private and flexible leisure experience.¹² Vacation homes, especially those individually built on scattered lots, took that seclusion a step further, requiring interaction only with family members and invited guests.¹³ New roads permitted vacation home owners to seek out their own piece of unspoiled and uncrowded paradise.

A-frames were suited to the new economic atmosphere. Designers kept costs down to attract people of modest means. Though grand versions were built, the A-frame was often seen as "entry level." Plan books and popular magazines like *Better Homes and Gardens* featured a variety of small, 600- to 1,000-square-foot A-frames, the dramatic shape compensating for the diminutive size. Construction costs were often kept around \$10 per square foot; construction time was measured in weekends. Articles boasted of how easy, fast, and inexpensive the A-frame was to build, one stating that "with a few long poles and not much dough, you can build your own Shangri-la."¹⁴ Now, thanks to the beneficence of American capitalism, everyone had access to the good life.

LEISURE TIME AND VACATION HOMES

The leisure culture was an amalgam of several, at times conflicting, attitudes. There was a stubbornly persistent belief that free time was best spent on self-improvement, like taking courses or attending the ballet. Alternately, there was a sense that Americans had earned the right to relax, to lounge in hammocks and share cocktails on the patio. Somewhere between these two poles was an increasing interest in spending free time engaged in physical, usually outdoor, recreation.

The wealthy no longer dictated perceptions of what constituted the leisure life. Instead, the rules were being rewritten by new tastemakers. *Fortune* summed up the trend, saying that "the yacht splurge of the late 1920s is replaced by the outboard boom of today."¹⁵ Unlike the yacht, the outboard motorboat represented widespread access to waterskiing, fishing, and a lakeside vacation home.

Broadly considered, leisure is a state of mind, a freedom from the necessities of life. Since the 19th century, when industrialization first delineated work time from free time, there was a growing concern among social scientists, politicians, and religious leaders that American civilization was imperiled by leisure.¹⁶ This fear reached a peak in the postwar era. Robert Hutchins, a former president of the University of Chicago, observed that "if we survive the leisure which the atomic age will bring, it may make peace more horrible than war. We face the dreadful prospect of hour after hour, even day after day, with nothing to do. After we read all the comic books, traveled all the miles, seen all the movies, what shall we do then?"¹⁷

Many worried not so much about a nation of bored sybarites but one made weak from lazy living. In the Cold War era of missile gaps and domino theories, this was especially dangerous. The rhetoric of the time posed the Soviet Union, tempered by war and adversity, against an America becoming too comfortable to bother defending itself. If Americans chose to squander time on amusements, the moral and physical vitality of the entire country would be jeopardized. Abundance would be its downfall.

The solution was spending free time on activities considered fulfilling and enriching. Wholesome leisure, from learning to paint or play an instrument to woodworking or building a vacation home, refreshed one for new work and new trials psychologically, physically, and spiritually. Wholesome leisure emphasized the centrality of the family, creating a cultured population.¹⁸ It was an antidote to such un-American developments as urbanization, overcrowding, and automation. It was often hard work and, therefore, an extension of the Protestant ethic that spurned indolence.

Spending money was a central component of the postwar leisure life, whether for a pair of skis, a dirt bike, a rec room, or a vacation home. Like a Ford Mustang bought in addition to the family car, vacation homes signaled that one had arrived. One recreation area developer told a conference of builders that when it comes to vacation homes, status "is the sizzle you are selling."¹⁹

The best leisure activities encouraged consumption and furthered economic growth. Unlike passive entertainment—frequenting bars and other uses of free time derided by the experts—outdoor recreation activities and do-it-yourself projects required the purchase of specialized equipment and tools. The beneficent effects of building vacation homes spread beyond the real estate and construction industries, since second sets of sheets, silverware, and furniture were required.

Such views helped justify the enormous efforts expended by all levels of government. From establishing the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation to opening up Forest Service tracts to "vacation homesteading," agencies worked to instill the ideal of productive leisure.²⁰ Vacation homes were a bulwark against creeping Communism and a soft citizenry, an assertion of private property and the primacy of the family.

The idea of fun for fun's sake contrasted with the view that leisure must provide moral uplift. Many felt a joy of living after the privations of the Depression and self-

denial of the war years, or at least after a hard week at the office. In the words of one historian, this was the leisure lifestyle of “a new middle class of college-bred administrators, professionals and managers,” who took “endless delight in pursuing a light-hearted existence of interpersonal repartee and pleasure based on a moral code that bore no relationship to babbity and its Protestant morality.”²¹ It was youth-oriented, individualistic, and unapologetic in its focus on gratification.

Vacation homes appealed to both button-down conformists and hedonistic pleasure seekers, straddling the line between the safety of the family and the swinging bachelor, between wholesome recreation and the shameless quest for fun. The A-frame could be

regular maintenance and repair, vacation homes offered the mix of leisure, labor, and self-affirmation that many Americans seemed to crave. (In fact, many articles pointed out that amateur vacation home builders got more work than they expected, as construction and upkeep left them more exhausted on Sunday night than they had been on Friday.)²⁵

The aggressive marketing of electric tools, latex paints, linoleum, paneling, and prepackaged kits made

“HIGHWAY CONSTRUCTION, ESPECIALLY THE NEW INTERSTATE SYSTEM, BROUGHT LARGE UNDEVELOPED RECREATION AREAS WITHIN A FRIDAY NIGHT’S DRIVE OF CITY AND SUBURB. ROADS LIKE INTERSTATE 70, THROUGH THE ROCKIES, AND CALIFORNIA’S ROUTE 40, THROUGH THE SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS BETWEEN SAN FRANCISCO AND RENO, CREATED WEEKEND WONDERLANDS ACCESSIBLE YEAR-ROUND.”

a sanctum where the nuclear family immersed itself in the regenerative powers of nature, or a totem of nonconformity, a singles’ love nest where unchaperoned romance could blossom on the bearskin rug before a prefab fireplace.²²

DO-IT-YOURSELF

Families that built their own A-frames fulfilled the hopes that Cold War Americans would make productive use of their free time. Amateur builders were part of a do-it-yourself phenomenon that included a plethora of activities from arts and crafts to building barrel chairs. As Americans became more adroit with the adding machine than the saw, hands-on projects provided a sense of fulfillment. With the cost of skilled tradespeople rising rapidly, doing it yourself was an economic imperative for those who wanted more than their salaries could cover.²³ Whether it was finishing an attic space or building a vacation home, couples, particularly young couples, saw do-it-yourself activities as a way to acquire comforts increasingly considered necessities.²⁴

For those still a little squeamish about leisure for leisure’s sake, do-it-yourself projects were both productive and morally defensible. Whether through construction or

home renovation and construction seem within the capability of the hands-on hobbyist. To promote the sale of construction materials, companies developed booklets of second home plans featuring easy-to-build A-frames. Some offered kits with all the materials for a basic A-frame shell. With sweat equity, do-it-yourselfers bought the necessities that they could not otherwise afford.²⁶

POSTWAR ARCHITECTURE

In *Waiting for the Weekend*, Witold Rybczynski observed that “country retreats have always been an opportunity to break loose from the architectural constraints of the city.”²⁷ Unconventional designs furthered the fantasy of escape. Rustic “camps,” with bark exteriors and knotty furniture, had long allowed



© WALLY REEMELIN

Above: An A-frame goes up in the hills above Berkeley, California, in 1948. Far right: The San Francisco architecture firm of Campbell and Wong designed this model that came to be known as the Leisure House.

wealthy owners to play pioneer in the Adirondacks. In the past those who could afford modest summer homes usually selected designs traditional to rural or mountainous settings: variations on the English cottage, Cape, or bungalow. Except for the occasional cabin, there was little difference between summer homes and permanent homes.²⁸



The first to break with convention were International Style beach houses from the late 1920s and 1930s. Primarily on the coasts, these modern structures, with featureless white walls, ribbon windows, flat roofs, and open interiors, derived from a European industrial and socialist aesthetic that had nothing to do with leisure. Rudolph Schindler's concrete and glass Lovell Beach House, in Newport, California (1926), was one of the earliest in the new form. It was followed by others on the California shore, as well as homes on Long Island by Warren Matthews, William Muschenheim, and the firm Peabody, Wilson and Brown.²⁹

Five such homes, offering affordable avant-garde living, appear in a 1938 *Sunset* cabin plan book.³⁰ Where the log cabin was a bulwark against the wilderness, these homes, with jutting terraces and copious glass, suggested a more engaged and salutary relationship with the outdoors. Nature was an accoutrement, not a threat.

In the early 1950s, the A-frame vacation home marked a new category of contemporary leisure architecture. The emphasis was on playful informality, dynamic structural concoctions, unconventional roof shapes, open plans, and unusual glazing configurations. Designers sought to produce dramatic structures with limited resources, goals that often proved complementary as tight budgets impelled innovation and modest size encouraged experimentation.

The result was an accessible modernism, more at home in the pages of *Popular Mechanics* than in the "official" architectural press.

For those unexcited by strict modernism, the A-frame and its whimsical offspring had great appeal, in tune with the era of outdoor living, of sun decks, breezeways, and the all-important patio. They were uniquely suited for their function: the stylish, informal enjoyment of free time in natural surroundings. The magazine *Living for Young Homemakers* observed in 1961, "Vacation retreats are providing the ideal chance for designer and owner to unshackle all inhibitions. Fanciful expressions are popping up like bright impertinences against the conventional landscape. Houses and shelters are becoming more and more adventurous in themselves, inspired by shapes and forms that stir the imagination and invite the spirit to get away from it all."³¹

Playful roof forms set contemporary vacation homes apart, a trend paralleled in banks, car dealerships, and restaurants, replete with folded plates, hyperbolic paraboloids, cylindrical and spherical shells, bat wings, and saddles, often built in concrete or steel. Coming up with something new seemed a rite of passage for aspiring architects. California's modern coffee shops introduced a flamboyant vocabulary of cantilevered roofs, exposed trusses, and tilted glass walls that was part Frank Lloyd Wright organic, part Jetsons space age.³²

Vacation home purveyors sought designs that were bold yet accept-

able to middle-class Americans. Like the parties, getaways, and activities that took place in and around them, contemporary vacation homes were relaxed, refreshing, and above all fun. To many, the A-frame matched this description.

This article was excerpted from *A-Frame* by Chad Randl, published by Princeton Architectural Press, www.papress.com. Copyright 2004. Used with permission.

Chad Randl is an architectural historian with the National Park Service. Contact him at National Park Service, Heritage Preservation Services, 1849 C Street NW (2255), Washington, DC 20240, (202) 354-2042, email chad_randl@nps.gov.

Notes

1. Nationwide, spending on leisure increased from approximately \$8 million in 1946 to almost \$24 million in less than 20 years. "Vacation Homes: An Exploding Market Takes On a New Shape," *House & Home* (February 1964): 107.
2. From a paper read at the Home Manufacturers' Association's 22nd Annual Convention, quoted in Richard Lee Ragatz, "The Vacation Home Market: An Analysis of the Spatial Distribution of Population on a Seasonal Basis, Volume I" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1969), 60.
3. Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (New York: Berg, 2001), 81.
4. William J. Hennessey, *Vacation Houses* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), vii.
5. In 1945 consumer credit was at \$5.7 billion, and by 1970 it had climbed to more than \$143 billion. During the early 1960s an expanding universal credit card industry was mass-mailing unsolicited charge cards, creating 26 million cardholders by the end of the decade, who charged refrigerators, hi-fis, rugs, and other furnishings to stock second homes. See Lloyd Klein, *It's in the Cards: Consumer Credit and the American Experience* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 27 and Lewis Mandell, *The Credit Card Industry: A History* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), 35.
6. "A Vacation House Can Pay for Itself," *American Home* (July 1961): 72.
7. *Free-Time Homes*, 2d ed. (Portland, OR: Potlatch Forests, Inc., 1962), 21. Customers could buy a kit with no money down, using a payment plan to cover the cost.
8. Ragatz, "The Vacation Home Market," 46.
9. By 1968, the Bureau of Land Management had created more than 200 reservoirs and more than 9,500 miles of shoreline. Between its creation in 1933 and 1968, the Tennessee Valley Authority created more than 10,000 miles of new shoreline, which accommodated at least 12,000 vacation homes. See Clayne R. Jensen, *Outdoor Recreation in America* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1970), 80, 88.
10. Ragatz, "The Vacation Home Market," 79.
11. Real estate and building trade magazines routinely discussed the distance an average family was willing to travel to reach its vacation home. As highways proliferated, that distance grew.
12. See John Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
13. In the early 1970s, with increasing costs and scarcity of prime vacation property, second home ownership shifted to the vacation community and condominium.
14. "A-frames: New Cabin Fever," *True: The Man's Magazine* (October 1959): 60.
15. *The Changing American Market*, by the editors of *Fortune* magazine (New York: Time, Inc., 1955); reprint-

ed as "\$30 Billion for Fun," in *Mass Leisure*, ed. Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyersohn (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 168. The piece noted that families earning more than \$4,000 increased from 20 percent just before the Depression to more than 45 percent by 1953. Many economists believed that when a family reached the \$4,000 level, they began to spend more on leisure. *Fortune* called them "the rulers of the leisure market."

16. Predictions that by 2000 the average work week would be 30 hours, with most Americans enjoying four weeks of vacation, pointed to a coming "crisis of leisure." See Paul F. Douglass and Robert W. Crawford, "Implementation of a Comprehensive Plan for the Wise Use of Leisure," in *Leisure in America: Blessing or Curse?* ed. James C. Charlesworth (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1964), 55.
17. Quoted in Jensen, *Outdoor Recreation in America*, 5.
18. Historian Elaine Tyler May borrowed the rhetoric of the Communist threat when she wrote that female sexuality and leisure were "contained" during this period, the former within the traditional family and the latter through constructive use of leisure. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). Imagery from the period is conflicting. Illustrations of women carrying trays of drinks to seated husbands are often adjacent to those showing tool-belted women taking part in construction. Contemporary vacation homes were touted as low maintenance, for the sake of both husband and wife.
19. "NAHB Spring Builder's Conference Report," *National Association of Home Builders Journal of Homebuilding* (May 1963): 14.
20. As one government report observed, "Even in this era of electronic warfare, men are still the key to vigilant defense. In many situations a fit man with a rifle in his hands is the only effective defense, and in those where machines are the combatants, fit men must direct them." See *Outdoor Recreation for America: A Report to the President and to Congress by the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1962), 23. The Department of the Interior administered a "small tracts" program in which recreational lot sales went from 103 in 1951 to almost 10,000 in 1960. In that 10-year period more than 43,000 recreation lots were sold. "Vacation Cabins," *NAHB Journal* (August 1962): 61.
21. Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise*, 81.
22. A 1961 exposé about cabins voiced concerns over such activities: "Winter 'athletes' set aside snowshoes and skis [sic] while male-chasing females turn on the heat in pursuit of more intimate indoor sports—romance and wild parties." Gene Channing, "Sin in Snowland: The Shame of Ski Lodge Shack-ups," *Man's Life* (January 1961): 33.
23. "Modern Living: Do It Yourself," *Time* (30 June 1952).
24. Albert Roland, "Do-it-Yourself: A Walden for the Millions," *American Quarterly* (Summer 1958): 162.
25. Steven M. Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 276.
26. Roland, "Do-it-Yourself," 162.
27. Witold Rybczynski, *Waiting for the Weekend* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 173.
28. See *Redwood Vacation Homes* (San Francisco: California Redwood Association, 1930); *Log Cabins and Summer Cottages* (Newark: Sears Roebuck & Co., 1940); Conrad Meinecke, *Your Cabin in the Woods* (Buffalo, NY: Foster & Stewart, 1945). Log cabins, long associated with grit and self-reliance, were increasingly made from log-veneer kits mass produced in a factory.
29. See chapter two in Alastair Gordon, *Weekend Utopia: Modern Living in the Hamptons* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001).
30. *Sunset's Cabin Plan Book* (San Francisco: Lane Publishing, 1938).
31. "Secrets of a Self-Indulgent Summer: Vacation Shapes," *Living for Young Homemakers* (July 1961): 41.
32. See Alan Hess, *Google: Fifties Coffee Shop Architecture* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1985).



Above and right: A-frame interiors, late '50s.

