

At Big Meadow Family Campground, Hospitality and a Wealth of Local Attractions Keep Campers Coming Back



Why not branch out? That thought led Big Meadow Family Campground to open an accompanying RV storage facility, allowing Big Meadow to provide extra service to their guests and even guests of nearby parks.

Nestled among the Great Smoky Mountains, this award-winning RV park also operates its own storage facility — which helps bottom-line performance

Nestled in the Great Smoky Mountains in the sleepy one-traffic-light town of Townsend, Tenn., lies a quiet, tidy 14-acre property owned and operated by **Malcolm and Barbara Johnson** and their son, **Greg**. Small wonder that the area's laid-back, country-comfortable atmosphere trickles through to **Big Meadow Family Campground**, the newest winner of the Small Park of the Year award from the **National Association of RV Parks & Campgrounds (ARVC)**.

To be entirely accurate, Big Meadow is part campground and part RV storage facility. According to Barbara Johnson, they realized soon after its opening in 1995 that folks needed a place to keep their RVs. With ancillary income always a welcome boon for a new park, they started their storage area with three units — and kept adding more. That, she said, was one of the most important decisions that led to their long-term success and “keeps us operating in the black year ‘round.” Today, 200 units are regularly stored on site.

“The fact that we store campers has always made us unique and different. That’s a separate business by itself,” Johnson explained. With a little notice, the Big Meadow staff (60% of which is the Johnson family itself) can have a customer’s RV leveled and hooked up in a campsite when they arrive — even washed and visited by a mechanic for a tune-up or repairs, if so desired.

“We do a lot of the work ourselves,” she said. After all, “we’re a small park.”

Nor does Big Meadow limit its pre-arrival RV prep to its own guests. “Some of our customers also camp in the national park, or they actually camp in other campgrounds here in Townsend, so we also offer a service where we will transport the camper for the customer into another park and set it up there for them,” reported Johnson.

larger and older than Big Meadow, that suits the Johnsons just fine.

“The other parks have always been so great in giving us their overflow. There are times that we cannot take care of all the campers that are here in our little town,” she said. “We each have different personalities. We’ve been very fortunate to find a niche here where we’re located.”



Malcolm and Barbara Johnson and their son, Greg (right) run their family business in the shadows of Tennessee’s Great Smoky Mountains.

If that sounds extreme, consider the necessity for Big Meadow to be distinctive and competitive: It’s located within two miles of six other commercial RV parks. Rather than being intimidated, Johnson thinks her competitor neighbors are “all very nice,” and while she said they are all

That location is in a unique geographical area in that it’s only about 1,200 feet above sea level and surrounded by mountains, giving it an unusual pocket of protection from harsh weather — the coldest winter temperature is typically about 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

It’s also surrounded by attractions that continually bring campers of all demographics to Big Meadow. They’re two miles from the entrance to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 15 miles from Pigeon Forge and just 17 miles from Gatlinburg.

“We say to people that come to our area, we have the best of everything,” Johnson related, including the famous “Tail of the Dragon.”

While some local draws are indeed of the homey country type typically associated with the region — visitors can catch wood-carver shows and even a local festival’s “Old Timers Day” — Johnson said an element of danger and excitement brings motorcyclists and sports-car enthusiasts to Townsend in droves: They all want to ride the “Tail of the Dragon,” a stretch of uninterrupted two-lane highway on U.S. 129 at Crossing Deals Gap near the Tennessee-North Carolina state line.

“People come to ride their motorcycles there because it has 318 curves in 11 miles,” she said. “We are simply located in a fantastic area here.”

The area’s status as a heavy tourist destination is the impetus behind two Big Meadow policies: They don’t take seasonal campers and they don’t do seasonal activities. The latter is a case of learning from trial-and-error what did not work for their property.

“We have tried just a ton of things to do. We’ve had gospel or bluegrass music, chili cook-off contests, ice cream socials, and nothing really worked for us. We found ourselves having to beg customers to attend,” Johnson recalled. “We finally real-



Big Meadow’s visitors like to take advantage of the park’s “deluxe super sites,” which grew as the Johnson family decided to reduce — and upgrade — the number of sites.



Owners Malcolm and Barbara Johnson (left) and Greg Johnson (right) with staff members Janet Cooper and Kristina Price in the campground’s camp store.

ized we were competing against the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the professional entertainment and giant shopping outlets in Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg.” The campground activities schedule was pulled down, and lists of local attractions and festivities were put up around the property and on the website. “Lesson learned — you have to pay close attention to your customer base,” she said.

That idea was a mistake the Johnsons learned from — but another idea turned

crete pad and patio, and they can easily accommodate large luxury motorhomes. We’ve had them 45 feet long pulling a 26-foot trailer with cars and motorcycles in it,” Johnson said, adding that all 77 campsites also received upgrades for more value to the customer.

“Every single site has water, electric, sewer, 72 channels of cable TV and 30/50-amp service, and we offer wireless Internet throughout the park. All of these items are included in the prices we have



The Tennessee fall colors add to the natural beauty at Big Meadow’s 14-acre site.

out to be their most significant and successful. In the same minimalist vein, they upgraded their campsites by reducing them.

“We reduced our number of sites so we could expand our ‘deluxe super sites.’ They’re all pull-through with a level con-

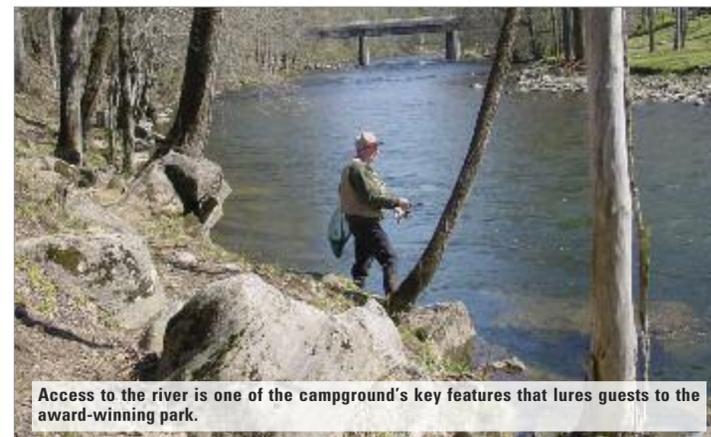
on the website.”

This property-wide revision to put more into each campsite, she said, is what has brought the most positive feedback from Big Meadow’s customers.

Some ideas work and some don’t, so it’s always critical to keep creating and apply-



The playground area is a popular feature for young visitors to Big Meadow’s 77 sites in Tennessee.



Access to the river is one of the campground’s key features that lures guests to the award-winning park.

ing more ideas, Johnson said, describing the annual “research and development” exploration trips she and her husband Malcolm take. “We normally take the month of February off and take our camper and just wander around. We stay at other parks and look to see things they do that we like and don’t like, and we always come back and implement something new in our park from that.”

Campground owners also have to be willing to continually back up those ideas with the funding to make it work. “We try our best to put every dime of revenue that we can get back into our park to improve it,” she stated. “We’ve done this for 18 years now.”

In those 18 years, Big Meadow Family Campground has gotten more things right than wrong, as evidenced by its recent award from ARVC — and all the others they’ve garnered over time from other entities such as the **Tennessee Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds (TNARVC)** and being named among the old **Woodall’s Campground Directory** “Top 100 Favorite Parks in North America.”

Some of their best practices might have been specific to their size and location — such as smart strategies to stand out in a competition-dense location among much larger facilities — but the Johnsons’ tips for success go beyond small-park application.

“The best advice I can give to anyone out there is to treat people the way you want to be treated,” Barbara Johnson said.

“We’ve always said, ever since we opened up, ‘We have to try hard to make a better place to camp, try to be friendlier

when people walk in our door.’ It’s always just us doing what we thought other campers would want, as campers ourselves.

“We’re just extremely humbled and happy and grateful that we got this (ARVC) award, I tell you what; we’re just tickled to death,” she said. “We’re so fortunate to be in a business that we love. We have great customers that have supported us throughout the 18 years we’ve been in business. How much better can it get?” — **Barb Riley WCM**

Campground Overview

Name: Big Meadow Family Campground

Owners: Malcolm, Barbara and Greg Johnson

Address: 18215 Cedar Creek Rd., Townsend, TN 37882

Number of sites: 77

Physical description: 14 acres at 1,200 feet elevation in the Smoky Mountains

Season: Year ‘round

Rates: Pull-through RV sites \$45; River overlook sites \$50; premium super sites \$55

Professional Affiliations: Tennessee Association of RV Parks & Campgrounds, National Association of RV Parks & Campgrounds

Website: www.BigMeadowCampground.com

Contact information: (888) 497-0625