

CAMP & TRAIL

X *Classic Camping Notes*



A STUDY ON THE TRAPPER NELSON PACK BOARD

It's interesting to note that the Trapper Nelson is virtually absent in the literature of the day, but so well seated as an icon of the "old days" in the memories of those of us who started camping at the setting of the Golden Age and the rise of the Modern Age. Trapper Nelson was a pack board not a backpack. In fact, the compound word didn't even exist until well into the late 50s and 60s.

The classic style of tramping was with a canvas rucksack or canvas duffels lashed with a leather strap system or tumpline. Manufactured frames and rigid boards were still a ways off, although traditional woodcraft inventions had been used by woodsmen for years. Then in 1929, Lloyd Nelson created his design from one of these woodcraft models, and it remained in popular use for decades. Trapper Nelson is truly a holdover from the classic times. It remained on the market until it was finally replaced by the aluminum Kelty in 1955.

Even though it isn't seen in the classic catalogs or the writings of the day, its arrival in the last days of the golden age make it an item that we can still touch, and feel its connection to the roots of classic style.

Trapper Nelson's are offered regularly on e-bay, but look out for sizing and condition. Also check to see who the manufacturer is – Jones Tent and Awning, Edward Lipsett, Trager. I have also seen similar frames made by companies in Maine. I just saw (9/14/09) a Trager large in mint condition sell to someone in Malasia for \$222



Photo captures of Daniel Day Lewis in There Will Be Blood - wearing a Trapper Nelson that might be a bit small for him.

Notes On The Trapper Nelson

During my youth, the "Trapper Nelson" pack board was essential for trappers and other outdoorsmen carrying heavy loads. This board was constructed of wood with a canvas covering and fitted snugly against the back. It was strong and durable, but heavy and rigid.

Paul Petzoldt
The New Wilderness Handbook

Another type of pack board that has been found eminently satisfactory is the Alaskan variety. The nucleus of this is a rectangular frame of wood or some other rigid material about 15 inches wide and 30 inches long, over which a canvas is doubled and tautly laced. There is about a 2 ½ inch space between the two expanses of canvas which, because only one surface of canvas rests against the back, ensures a free circulation of air. The effect is exactly as though you were lying on your back on a canvas cot.

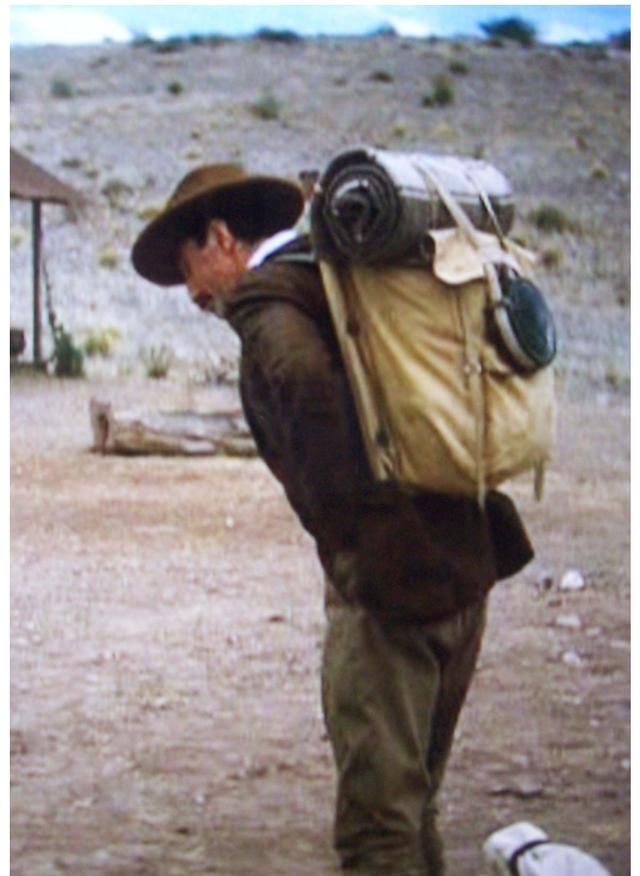
There are two cross members to this frame, the top being about 6 inches below the bottom of the form. To it are















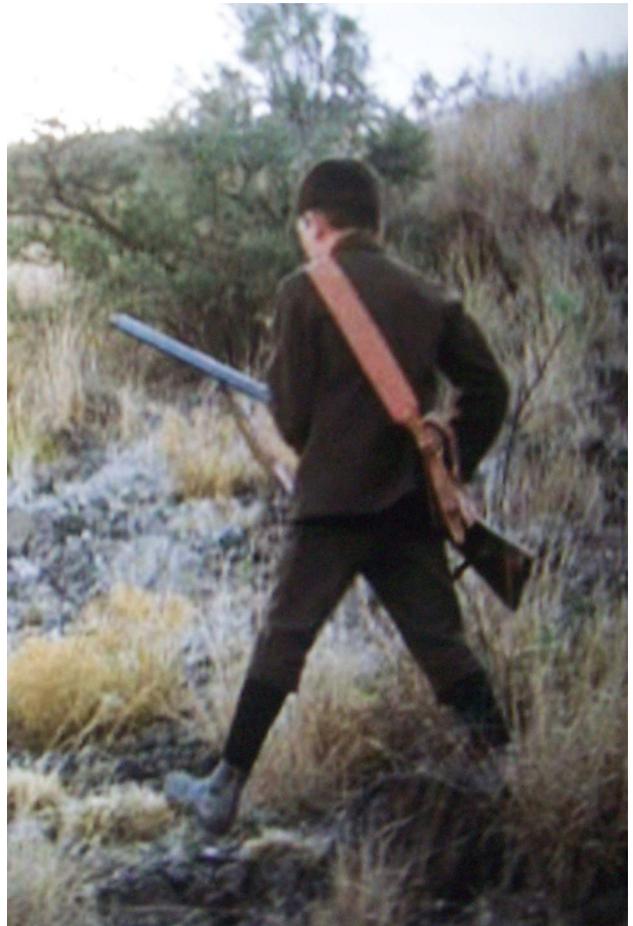
attached, closely together, the board shoulder straps. These pass through a slit in the canvas on the side toward the back. Their lower ends are fastened to the lower outside corners of the frame.

Your outfit and food are tightly wrapped in a tarpaulin or other covering so a compact bundle is formed, depending on what you have, some 15 inches wide and 30 inches long. This is lashed to the outside of the pack board. Because the load does not touch the back at all, being held away by the space between the two coverings of canvas, you can pack anything from a sack of fossils to an outboard motor without chafing or bruising.

The pack board should have its shoulder straps so adjusted that it sags just enough to rest some of the weight on the hips. The shoulder straps will then bear straight down on top of the shoulders instead of pulling them uncomfortably backwards.

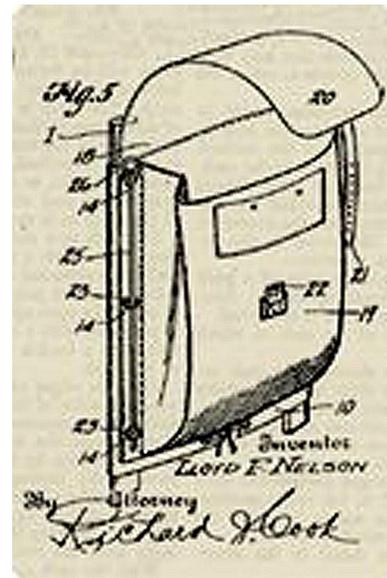
The commercial model of this type of pack, known as the Trapper Nelson Pack Board, can be obtained from almost all dealers in camp equipment. Three sizes are now made. The medium size, with a 26 inches by 14 ½ inches frame, is right for the average hiker. The small, 24 inches by 13 inches, is excellent for women and youths. There is also a large for heavy work, 30 inches by 14 ½ inches.

It can be had with a large canvas dunnage bag that laces to the frame. For lightweight packing with this type of pack, though, it is only extra weight. If you are going to





Patent Drawing



L.F. Nelson Pack

get this sort of pack, it is generally best to obtain it without the bag and tie your outfit on in a cover that has some other use, such as shelter, and so pays for its weight and bulk.

Bradford Angiers

Basic Wilderness Survival Skills

Angiers' works have been rehashed and republished so many times, it's hard to tell when this section was actually written (probably in the 40s). This excerpt is followed by a section entitled, *Making Your Own Pack Board*, page 31. It can be read on-line at books.google.com.

One hundred years ago, the backpack – or rucksack, as it's sometimes called – consisted of a heavy bag, often made

of a coarse fabric such as burlap or canvas, and two straps. For serious trips into the wilderness, or in warfare, the bag allowed people to carry more supplies than with the arms alone, but often at the price of serious physical discomfort.

Then in 1920, Lloyd "Trapper" Nelson was sent by the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard to Kodiak, Alaska. After completing his work for the Navy, Nelson took a short leave to hike into the Alaskan wilderness. A member of the local Native American tribe lent him the backpack his tribe had used for generations – a sealskin bag stretched over willow sticks. Though the bag improved on the earlier rucksack – and supported more weight by distributing the load to the willow frame – Nelson lay awake at night, with sore and bloodied shoulders, determined to come up with a better solution.

When Nelson returned to Seattle, he purchased an in-



dustrial sewing machine and after more than eight years of trial and error, developed a design that incorporated the wooden frame with the rucksack. He was the first to commercialize the frame backpack in the U.S. (1929).

The canvas rested the weight of the pack load on the user's back, keeping the wooden frame from gouging the user's back. He filed for a U.S. patent - Patent 1,505,661, and began marketing the product by visiting every sporting goods store between San Diego and Seattle, and within a few years sales began to pick up. He sold his patent rights to Trager, the company making his canvas pack bags.

From http://tragerusa.com/born_main.html

When Lloyd "Trapper" Nelson went on his first foray into the back-country of Alaska back in 1920, he couldn't have known then the eventual impact he was going to have on the way people, the world over, carried their belongings. What he did know however was that one day he would go back home to Bremerton Washington and employ some folks who lived and worked in that town to help him manufacture what would become known as the first Trager "backpack."

From http://patentpending.blogs.com/patent_pending_blog/2005/01/the_trapper_nel.html

My father-in-law carried a Trapper Nelson pack on a hike from the Hell's Canyon of the Snake River, to the town of Riggins, over the Seven Devils mountains. This was in the early forties, before WWII, and they carried canned food, an axe, a handgun, and other gear that made their pack weight extreme. I inherited his Trapper Nelson, which belongs in a museum now. ...

Nice to see there are still some folks who appreciate the old Trapper Nelson Indian Packboard... Charles Trager was my great-grandfather, and George Trager was my grandfather, both of whom owned Trager Mfg. respectively.

A few points about the bag... it is the 1st example of an external frame pack to be massed produced for the market, and gave birth to the outdoor camping gear industry. Trager, and manufacturer of leather gloves and aprons for Klondike miners, was involved with the bag from the early stages; Trapper had come to Charles to help refine the manufacturing process and for a time it was a joint venture, but sales were slow and Trapper had a family to feed.

As the above story says, a very short time after the rights were transferred, major forest fires broke out in the west and orders came in from the US Forest Service, and later as far away as Abyssinian Water Development Comission. The Boy Scouts of America were also regular customers.

Largely unsung, George Trager bought the business from his father and proceeded to expand the whole industry. Most REI sleeping bags, packs and tents were Trager made until the 70's, as were products from Eddie Bauer, Roffe and the first Jansport pack was designed and stitched by George

Trager. Trager was also a primary sponsor and supplier of equipment for Jim Whittaker's successful ascent of Mt. Everest in the early '60's.

I own the last official Trager-made Trapper Nelson that my grandfather and I assembled shortly before his death in 1986. I still use it with pride...

From http://tragerusa.com/look_body.html

A Brief History of How Backpacking Got It's Name

From an article penned by Charlotte D. Widrig

If you are a mountaineer, Boy Scout, forest ranger, prospector--if you occasionally hike into off-the-road areas on hunting, fishing or adventure trips--chances are that you are familiar with the words "Trapper Nelson."

Yet, few persons are aware that this copyrighted name of a pack board whose fame has encircled the world is a product of the Pacific Northwest.

Before the 1920's the usual pack was a limp canvas sack equipped with shoulder straps. Only careful packing prevented the contents from digging into the hiker's back. The weight of the pack sagged down on the hips. The heavier the load, the more the carrier bent forward.

Lloyd F. Nelson is the man who developed and patented the rigid type of pack board which carries his surname. To him belongs the credit of eliminating discomfort, and adding pleasure, to backpacking.

The pack board designed by Nelson has a sturdy wood frame which distributes the weight and supports the bulk of the load on the shoulders. A canvas jacket cushions and ventilates the back. A "tailor-made" canvas bag, which can be attached or removed in a jiffy, further facilitates the art of packing.

While the simplicity and comfort of the design are apparent today, the basic idea might never have come to realization if Nelson had not made a trip to Alaska in the spring of 1920.

Details of Nelson's enterprise fall into three categories--inspiration, development and marketing.

"I was working for the Puget Sound Navel Shipyard in Bremerton and was sent to Wood Island, near Kodiak, Alaska, to check shortages on a construction job," Nelson said. "When my work was finished, I asked for and received, a short leave without pay, and joined the throngs of miners, fishermen and other foot-loose Alaskans who were staking claims on newly opened oil-reserve land."

"While assembling an outfit to enable me to cross a mountain range on foot," Nelson said, "an Indian agreed to lend me his crude Indian pack board made of sealskins stretched over willow sticks, a style used by generations of his ancestors."

"I made the trip and staked my claim, but afterwards lay awake nights recalling the back-breaking ordeal and wondering if it would be possible to evolve a really comfort-





able backpacking device.”

“While waiting on Wood Island for the ship that came once a month, I put together my prototype of a scientific pack-board frame, and thus began a project which kept me ‘burning midnight oil’ for the next nine years!”

Back at his home in Bremerton, Washington, Nelson set aside a part of his basement for a workshop. His idea of a frame and a carrying sack was fairly well defined.

“I made a trip to Seattle and purchased a power sewing machine and a bolt of canvas, thread, grommet, dies, cord, buckles and a side of leather and a cutter,” he related. “Next, I asked a young man, J.D. (Dorm) Braman, then working at the Braman Mill in Bremerton to turn out material enough to make a dozen pack-board frames according to my instructions.”

“The next step was learning how to operate my sewing machine,” Nelson said. “My initial attempts were crude as I



worked out a pattern for the bags and experimented with mounting them on the frames. Frank Aubrey, a friend, became interested in my idea, and we tested the packs on long walks and mountain trips, while I tried to achieve free body movement and ideal weight distribution. We carried blankets and canned food, and sometimes even added rocks for weight!"

"Meanwhile, I changed and improved my design," Nelson said. "I added an outside pocket to the bag for handy access to small objects and I increased the size of the flap to cover a bedding roll laid across the top of the pack."

"When the first dozen were assembled, I looked over the array--and cut them up and burned them in the furnace," Nelson said. "Then I went back to Dorm and ordered another dozen frames."

Nelson's design and workmanship pleased him better on the second dozen. When they were completed, he set forth as a salesman and aroused curiosity by walking into sporting-goods shops and hardware stores in Bremerton and Seattle with his loaded pack on his back.

"Everyone was interested, but no one would buy one," Nelson recalled. "The consensus was that my product was too good-looking for the type of person who carries food, clothes and blankets from place to place. The best I could do was leave my samples on consignment."

Before long, a few of the consignments sold, and Nelson decided to advertise his product. He put one of his packs on his back and went to the Izzard Advertising Co. in the old Times Building. There he talked with Bill Horsley and arranged for printed folders.

As he was leaving, Horsley asked what he wanted to name his new idea. "Anything you like!" Nelson said. "Your business is advertising."

When he returned a week later, Horsley had coined the name "Trapper Nelson's Indian Pack Boards." In time, this was shortened to the catchy trade name still in use.

After applying for a patent, Nelson continued his advertising campaign by mailing his folders to sporting-goods shops and outdoor organizations. He placed a few advertisements in magazines, and he sent free sample pack boards to likely prospects, including the Forest Service, Boy Scout leaders and well-known sportsmen. Nelson's faith in his enterprise was unbounded. He even loaded his car with samples and took his wife and small daughter on a trip from Seattle to San Diego and return. They spent 35 days traveling and camping out. Nelson called on every sporting-goods store he could find in every town they passed.

To speed up production, he arranged with Charles Trager, a Seattle manufacturer of lumberjack gloves, aprons and bags, to take over the making of the canvas parts.

In the summer of 1929, Nelson sold the business to Trager. "Fate is peculiar," Nelson remarked. "Two weeks later, I received a rush order from the Forest Service at Missoula. They wanted 500 pack boards to equip forest rangers and forest-fighters."

"Within a fortnight, another rush order came for 500 more from the Forest Service at Salem, Ore.! A pall of

smoke hung over the Pacific Northwest, and the ill wind that fanned the fires proved to be a boon to my pack boards. Movie newsreels showed scores of men equipped with 'Trapper Nelson' pack boards. At last they had reached the public eye!"

George Trager, who inherited the business from his father, continued production of Nelson's pack boards and found many customers including the Coast and Geodetic Survey, the Army Mapping Service and, of course, the Boy Scouts of America. "Many orders had been received from foreign countries, and one surprise request for 50 'Trapper Nelson' pack boards came from the Abyssinian Water Development Commission!" Trager said.

Nelson finally retired in 1959. He was proud to have contibuted with his pack-board episode, to the welfare and pleasure of those who travel on foot in the great outdoors.

In 1958 John Hartsfield joined the company and quickly became George Trager's right hand man. While still outfitting the US Forest Service and the Boy Scouts with good old Trapper Nelson pack boards, Trager's product line began to expand to include items used for everything from weekend hiking to expedition-level mountain climbing. In fact, Trager supplied the pack-sacks, gaiters, and mukluks for the 1963 Everest Expedition! During the 1960s and 1970s, Trager made most of REI's (Recreational Equipment Co-op Incorporated) brand tents, packs, gaiters, and other items and has since gone on to produce daypacks for companies like Eddie Bauer and L.L. Bean under their own labels. And even during this time of product-design advancement among outdoor gear, one could still procure an original Trapper Nelson pack board from none other than Abercrombe and Fitch!

In the late sixties, George hired a salesman to call on university bookstores around the country. The salesman lived and worked out of his van and traveled from college town to college town, selling Trager daypacks and returning to Seattle every so often to stock up on the popular packs. Trager brand daypacks were the first daypacks ever offered in a college bookstore, and Trager continues to supply these locations today nationwide.

George Trager retired in 1980 and John Hartsfield took over the company. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Hartsfield continued to build up the private-label portion of the business while concentrating on the bookstores for the Trager label items. John retired in 1995 and John Tanner (who joined the company in 1979) took over the business.

In the past five years, Trager has focused exclusively on the design and production of its own line of quality products. Trager's dedication to function shows in the way each of its new bags, packs and briefs fit the needs and lifestyles of today's customer. Trager's distribution base has broadened to include luggage and outdoor stores, on-line retailers and, of course, college bookstores all over the United States.

And that, in short, is the way backpacking got its name. From a simple idea a Northwest Indian had--a hundred years ago--to what we now see almost every college kid and citywide worker hauling their stuff around in. And even



though you might not see too many folks with Trapper Nelson pack boards on the trails today, Trager is still extremely proud of its heritage and contribution to a worldwide industry, hobby and loved obsession.

out when we needed it most. Not surprisingly, that is exactly the kind of business leader I strive to be. Maybe George was a hippie at heart after all.

The Hippies Guide to Climbing The Corporate Ladder
Skip Yowell, Co-Founder of JanSport

If you were to trace the history of the rigid frame pack back to its roots, you'd bump into the broad shoulders of Lloyd F. Nelson. In the Spring of 1920, Lloyd was working at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in the Pacific Northwest. During a brief leave from work, he decided to cross an Alaskan mountain range on foot. Back then, hikers only had a basic canvas sack with shoulder straps to lug gear.

As Lloyd prepared for the trek, an Indian friend lent him a traditional Indian pack board. This somewhat crude design featured sealskin stretched around several willow sticks. While an improvement over the limp canvas sack, his back ached for weeks. Over the next nine years, Lloyd worked nights in his basement to perfect a rigid frame pack using wood slats and canvas. He ultimately developed a pack known as the "Trapper Nelson" that did a good job of distributing the weight. It was certainly a real improvement over anything on the market.

He got the patent for his rigid frame pack design, and in 1929 sold the business to Charles Trager, a Seattle-based manufacturer of equipment for the lumberjack and mining industries. It wouldn't be long before Trager's company experienced remarkable sales of the "Trapper Nelson" pack, the industry standard for several decades. From the Boy Scouts of America and the U.S. Forest Service to the U.S. Army Mapping Service, Trager supplied Trapper Nelson pack boards to an ever-growing market that would ultimately include REI and Eddie Bauer.

Charles Trager passed the business on to his son George. While I never met Charles, George and I developed a friendship over the years. You see, during the very early days of JanSport, we would often run out of raw material to make our flexible frame pack. Since Trager's outfit was across town, we introduced ourselves to George Trager. George took a liking to us young guys with long hair—so much so that when we ran out of materials he'd say, "Skip, just borrow what you need and be sure to pay me back as soon as you can."

For the next several years, Murray and I borrowed holts of fabric and grommets as needed and repaid George as quickly as we could from our profits. Keep in mind we were technically competitors. Why should George have helped a couple of hippies? What was in it for him? In his own way, George played an important part in the JanSport story. His kindness was one of the stepping stones which enabled JanSport to become the global leader that it is today.

His unconventional generosity which led to the success of our fledging company is an example of what happens when a business man or woman decides to nurture others, speak well of others, and assist others. I carry with me a fond memory of how George believed in us and helped us

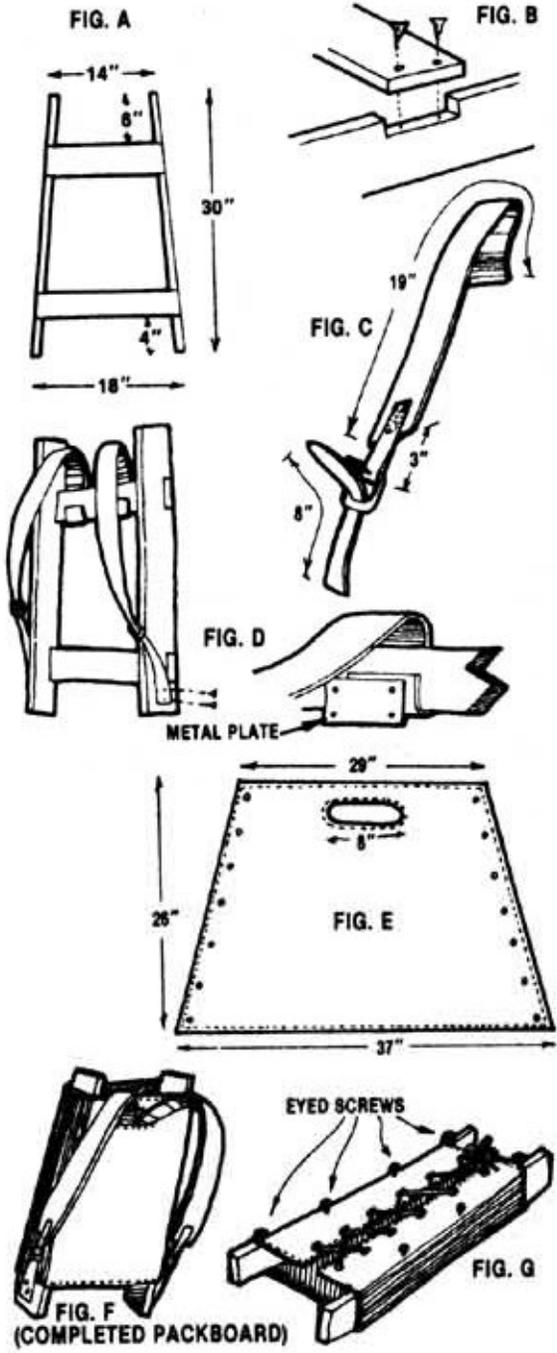




25 LBS.
7/8 x 8
DUPONT DYNAMITE
RED CROSS
REGISTERED
EXTRA 40% STRENGTH
U.S. PAT. OFF.
MAR 15 1923

THE
"TONEBRIDGE"
AUTOMATIC
FUELING LANTERN
PAT. 1,100,000
MADE IN U.S.A.

**ALASKAN PACKBOARD
CONSTRUCTION DETAIL**



From *Mother Earth News*



Three Match's Frame







A frame very similar to this frame is shown in *Handbook of Trail Camcraft* by John Ledlie, 1954. Available for free download at books.google.com.

