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# In Search of the Perfect Pot

## Part 1 – The Billy Can



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*Rabbitstick*

This is Part 1 of a 5-part series - an evolution - in trying to find out what actually makes the perfect cooking/ration pot. Today's "Bushcraft market" is overrun with ads and video reviews touting the best of this or that without ever asking" is 'this' or 'that' a requisite to life outdoors?" Is a manufactured gadget better than an improvised "wrinkle, kink or dodge" that may service you just as well, and come from your own ingenuity and not a catalog? Much of the historic research for this article comes from early camping literature that Steve Watts and I used as source materials for much of our approach to woods-loafing. The fascinating thing is that "why these old ways worked" is supported by very modern research and testing summarized by Don Kevilus in his masterworks on "Potology" and the "Tin Can Bushcooker Stove." All of this concludes with a step back in time to when statements like "I made this" were more important than "Hey Guys, I just got this in the mail." Join us on a journey of re-discovery. DW



The Swag Man with his bedroll and billy.

" Once a jolly swagman camped  
by a Billabong

Under the shade of a Coolabah tree

And he sang as he watched and  
waited 'till his billy boiled

"Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda  
with me?"

A.B. (Banjo) Paterson, Australia, 1895



My woolen blanket Jet Pack. This billy is a #5 juice can and the 2 Barlow's (tucked into the 550 cord) show what one looks like new and the other - with it's scales long missing and the blade worn down from a thousand flint and steel fires - a personal heirloom.

#### A Little History: Bedrolls, Barlows and Billys

I can clearly remember the first time I made it into camp after a 3-day march with no gear to support us - no bedding, no canteens, no knives....nothing. This was my first experience going out with Larry Dean Olsen. But, OH, how wonderful it was when we got to camp, because waiting for us, in a pile on the ground, were the blanket packs we had tied so carefully and loaded on the truck as we hit the trail. Along with the packs, we each got our own knife - not an ordinary knife, but a simple 2-blade folding Barlow knife, and a 30oz can of sliced peaches. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Only after a few weeks on the trail, did I come to understand how important this bit of theater was to the entire course.

In our modern world we have a tendency to be seduced by the convenience of technology while not even stopping to consider what we give up in the process - usually that's skill and knowledge. By going 3 days with nothing, that blanket pack and its contents were an amazing gift. During that first three days, all we could do at night, while we were freezing, was pile up pine needle nests and "wish" for a warm sleeping bag. Now, we were happy for the blanket because we could compare it to our experience with no bedding at all.

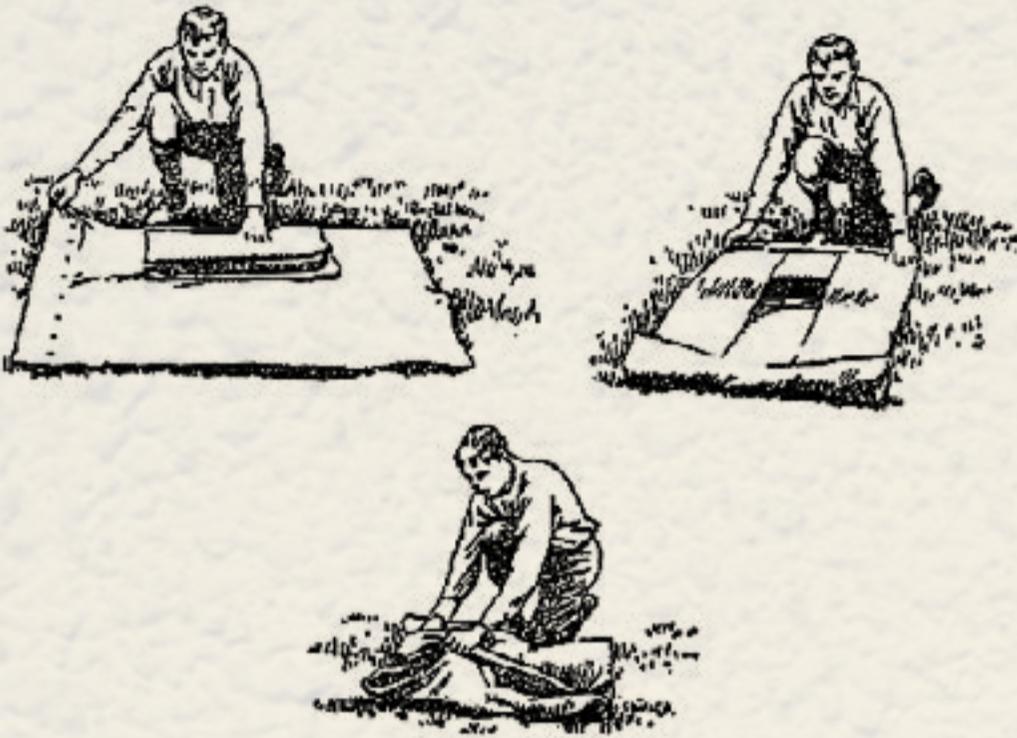
That bedroll - or what we call a Jet Pack - is still a tradition found at the school that evolved from Larry's first programs - Boulder Outdoor Survival School. I owned BOSS for 12 years and worked in

the field for over a decade prior to that. I have spent many nights getting to know the simple pleasure of a wool blanket.

The process for creating this style of 3-fold pack was part of the program before I ever knew Larry. I asked him many times what the source was for this method of folding a blanket. He wasn't able to remember where it came from, so we went on a search. It wasn't long before fellow bushcraft enthusiast Russell Fisher sent me two early sources; one comes from a WW-I U.S. Army training manual and the other was found in Elon Jessup's book *The Boy's Guide To Camplife*, 1928.



This WWI photo clearly shows the blanket roll being tucked into itself. U.S. Army



THREE STAGES OF ROLLING A PACK IN ARMY STYLE  
FINAL STAGE SHOWS THE ENVELOPE LOCK.

The 3-steps for folding a blanket to create the envelope tuck. From Elon Jessup's book *The Boy's Guide To Camplife*, 1928.

BOSS has maintained the tradition of making this style of pack for over 50 years. Two short videos demonstrating how this style of pack is still made at the school, can be found on YouTube at:

**YouTube** Making a Primitive Survival Blanket Pack Tutorial

**YouTube** Wool Blanket Survival Pack by BOSS

The most fascinating thing about that pack is not only the method for creating it, but how all of the parts that make it functional also have a function of their own; the straps, the 550 cord, a military-style poncho all added to our resource list. Maybe this will be part of the bigger "Blanket Tech" article that might appear in the future.

The Barlow knife was another throwback to earlier times – George Washington had a Barlow knife. But the principle we learned was still to compare how great this little tool was to no tool at all. It also required us to improvise other tools from what was at hand when bigger jobs made it necessary. It was made from carbon steel, so it threw a hot spark when struck against a flint chip. It was our secondary source of fire, after we used it to create the kit we needed to build our daily bow-drill fire..... tools making tools. That little knife did every chore that required a cutting edge for 30 days.



Larry Olsen cooking in a #10 billycan. Ca 1968. Lastly, the billycan. I have yet to find a reference to the term "billy" in any of the old American sources of camping literature. We obviously borrowed it from elsewhere (see Part 2). On the trail we had access to 3 different sized cans. The #3 peach can – 4 cup capacity - was our individual cooking/ration pot. We also sometimes had a #5 juice can – 6+ cups capacity



After the peaches are gone – a 32oz/4 cup cooking or ration pot.

– which 2 people would share when an open fire ban restricted us to using simple tin can stoves for cooking. When we traveled in "cook groups" of 4 or 5, we carried a #10 can – what used to be called a coffee can - (15 cups capacity) and used it as a common cooking pot for our main meal and served it into our individual ration pots or "burned bowls" (Note: The importance of these particular sizes and capacities will be addressed in-depth in Part 2). We also used the smaller cups - what some call a pannikin, or in Kephart's case it was a porcelain tea cup - for heating water for tea that we could sip while we enjoyed whatever we had baked on the coals after the flames used for boiling the stew had died down.

Also inside that pack was a ration of simple dried foods that provided about 1500 calories per day. It was simple fare – lentils, rice, oats, whole wheat, etc. – so it required long cooking times and the development of some pretty creative cooking techniques. Rather than being limited by our cooking gear, we were challenged to produce more than we thought possible by simply experimenting with new ideas and testing limits that weren't really there.

I have watched with interest as the "bushcraft field" has matured and how many have slowly moved from "make it from the land" to "buy it at the store" without missing a beat. The loss of the skills needed to improvise and source materials from what you find around you is the sacrifice to the siren's song of technology – what you gain in convenience, you lose in skill and knowledge.

Normally my choices of camping style are informed by what can be learned from the past and seamlessly blended with the present. In this article it seems that the past is being explained by what we know now, and what we have learned about topics like efficient use of fuel, the physics of what Don Kevilus calls “Potology”, and what the human body requires for health and performance under strenuous conditions. This entire story can be told through the humble billycan and the search for the perfect pot.

**Borrowed Customs, Common Culture**

**The Innovators - The Mothers of Invention**

*Wescott - ©2019*

**On The Land**

- Indigenous People
- 3<sup>rd</sup> World Inhabitants
- Sailors/Whalers
- Counter Culture / Bush Hippies

**On The Road**

**Heroes, Hobos and Scribes**

- Hobos
- Gypsies
- Soldiers
- Cowboys
- Correspondents
- Swagmen

**Far From Home**

**Living in a foreign space**

- Frontiersmen
- Refugees
- Homeless
- POWs/Convicts
- Loggers/Prospectors
- Sourdoughs
- Campaigners/Colonists

Over the years, I have found that most innovations in the contemporary market are created by some implied need – the Mother of Invention. However, I think that rather than following the lead of manufacturers or purveyors of high-tech gadgets, we are more likely to learn from the technologies developed by those who live close to the earth on a daily basis – those who live “on the land,” “on the road,” and those who by choice or by fiat are “far from home.” Theirs are the skills that are needed to survive or continue the life they choose. We can learn a lot from what their skills can teach us.

**Boil Up “The Billy”**

Cooking in cans has worldwide roots; once the metal container was available, it became the cooking vessel of choice everywhere. But we clearly borrowed – just as all cultures do - it’s colorful name from the land down under.

Some say the name was derived from the large

cans used to transport “bouilli” or “bully beef” to the outback. Others say it has to do with boiling water from a billabong – from the Aboriginal word “billa,” meaning water.

Whatever the source, the name has stuck and has been borrowed for use by cultures around the world.

**Biscuits , Sinkers and Tea**

*Charcoal tarts, AKA johnnycakes or Bannock were simply small, flat dampers cooked in a pan, billy lid or directly on the coals of the fire. They could be plain flour and water or they could have dried fruit, golden syrup or sugar added.*

*Sinkers were dumplings, that is balls of flour dough which were cooked by boiling. Since in many cases a swaggie boiled his salt beef or pork, he would often throw in a few of these “sinkers” for the last half hour of the boil and they would make a nice accompaniment for the boiled meat.*

*With such primitive equipment in the form of a billy, a billy lid, a wire grill and, if he was lucky a steel skillet, the swagman often got highly creative with his meals.*

*Craig Brown, Vintage Bushwalking & Camping - Australia*

**Mulligan Stew**

*A Mulligan is traditional stew allegedly first concocted by a gandydancer named Mulligan*

*on the Union Pacific Railroad while building the first transcontinental line in the 1860s. It was usually made from the combined contributions of everyone who wanted some. A group of hoboes gathered around the “jungle fire” can keep a pot of stew – the billy pot - perpetually refreshed by each contributing one thing- a scrap of bacon, a half-biscuit, a withered carrot stolen from someone’s garden. No matter how small or mean the contributions are, as long as they are freely given the stew will be rich, warming, and nutritious, and the pot will stay full until everyone who contributes has had his fill.*

*Adapted from “Hobo Terminology” the Original Hobo Nickel Society - USA*



Local cowboy billy found in a line shack on Long Neck Mesa – Boulder, Utah



Cookin’ with cans. Depression Era photo

## Coffee On The Boil

*Out of all the equipment I carry in the bush, the most important to me is the billycan. I've gone for several weeks with the most minimal of tools and gear, but I always make sure a billycan is available... A billycan will boil water, cook food, store items in the pack, and act as a makeshift shovel. It can be put to use as a durable gathering basket. It can melt snow by the fire, and be used as a washbasin.*

*I grew up with old coffee cans being put to similar use, at our moose hunting camps up north of Lake Superior. They – along with large aluminum pots – would boil our water for the week, and be charged with the ever-pressing need for coffee.*

*I'd also like to mention that over the years, I have had the pleasure of using hand-made clay pots over an open fire, as well as boiling stews in pumpkins, a hollowed out log, folded birchbark, and in a pit lined with fresh deerskin. These are all marvelous pieces of traditional land skills (bushcraft), but for living on the land, there's a reason I carry a billycan.*

*Caleb Musgrave, First Nations Bushcrafter,  
from "The Billycan," Canadian Bushcraft, 2015*

Issues regarding the safe use of tin cans as cooking and eating implements, and the preparation and care need to keep them in working order will be addressed in Part 3 of this series. Stay tuned.

Part 2 - The Cooking and Ration Pot

Part 3 - The Tinkers' Art: Create Your Own Bushcraft Pot

Part 4 - Efficiency: A 3-Legged Stool

Part 5 - Wrinkles, Kinks and Dodges: Bushcraft Uses for the Humble Tin Can

All photos are the authors except –

1-(Unknown source)

3- U.S. Army

8-From a blog on depression era dining - <https://paulineconolly.com/2018/depression-era-dining/> - caption states "Depression era swaggie cooking dinner."



The author at the end of a 30-day survival experience. Note the #10 billycan. Boulder, Utah 1971

