OPEN CAMP OF THE MASTER WOODSMEN

Timeless passages and lessons from the forefathers of rustic classic camping.

BY STEVE WATTS AND DAVID WESCOTT

Perhaps no other camping style brings us as close to Kephart's ideal of "a free life in the open air" as does the woodcraft camp. It is a style that best connects us to our pioneer forbearers, those American woods runners of the 18th-century frontier, the wandering linen- and leather-clad backwoods scouts—the master woodsmen.

Horace Kephart may have put it best in his *Camping and Woodcraft* masterpiece:

"Woodcraft may be defined as the art of finding one's way in the wilderness and getting along well by utilizing Nature's storehouse. When we say that Daniel Boone, for example, was a master woodsman, we mean that he could confidently enter an unmapped wilderness, with no outfit but what was carried by his horse, his canoe, or on his own back, and with the intention of a protracted stay; that he could find his way through the dense forest without man-made marks to guide him; that he knew the habits and properties of trees and plants, and the ways of fish and game; that he was a good trailer and a good shot; that he could dress games and cure peltry, cook wholesome meals over an open fire, build adequate shelter against wind and rain, and keep himself warm through the bitter nights of winter—in short, that he knew how to utilize the gifts of Nature, and could hide comfortably in the wilderness without help from the outside."

Shelter Style

The woodcraft camp style is defined not so much by a collection of hard and fast rules, but rather by a set of woodsy principles and preferences that lead us naturally to make certain choices in our gear and practices. The woodcraft camper tends to prefer an open-face shelter over the closed-in environment of a wall tent, a wedge tent or pyramid.

> "Perhaps no other camping style brings us as close to Kephart's ideal of 'a free life in the open air' as does the woodcraft camp."

As Nessmuk wrote in *Woodcraft*:

"It admits of a bright fire in front, without which a forest camp is just no camp at all to me. I have suffered enough in close, dark, cheerless, damp tents…This is why I discard all close, canvas tents."

The masters of classic camping in the "golden age" were comfortable and experienced with a variety of tents used in a variety of camping styles, from tramping to campaigning. Yet, when camping in the woodcraft style, they all had their favorite open-faced shelters: Nessmuk and his shanty tent, Warren Miller and his forester, Townsend Whelen and his hunter's lean-to, Dan Beard and his campfire tent and Horace Kephart with his George/tarp tent. Even Henry David Thoreau, the sage of Walden Pond, preferred "a shed-shaped tent…like a Yankee-baker" designed to "catch and reflect the heat" allowing "you to be drying while you are sleeping."

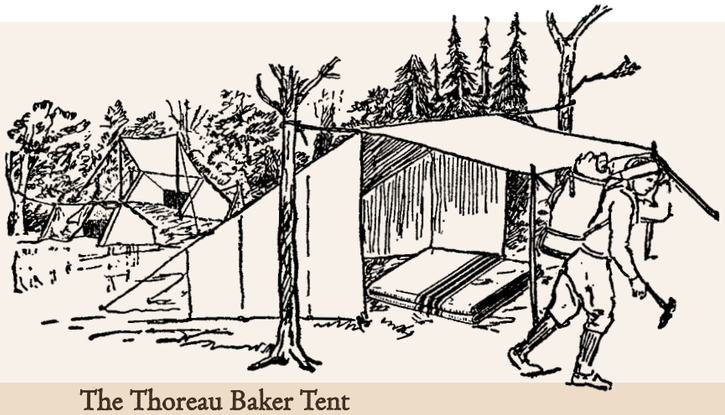
Warmth And Kit

The woodcraft camper looks to the open fire not only to warm his shelter, but prefers it to the camp stove for cooking.

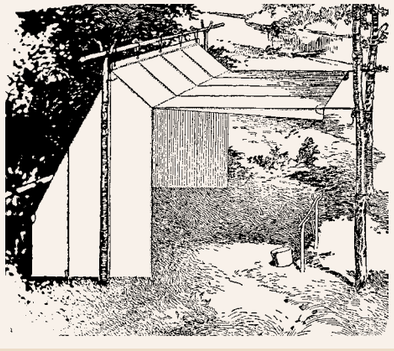
Dan Beard, founder of the Sons of Daniel Boone, which later merged with the Boy Scouts of America, was quoted as saying:

"No matter where the old camper may be, no matter how long a time may have elapsed

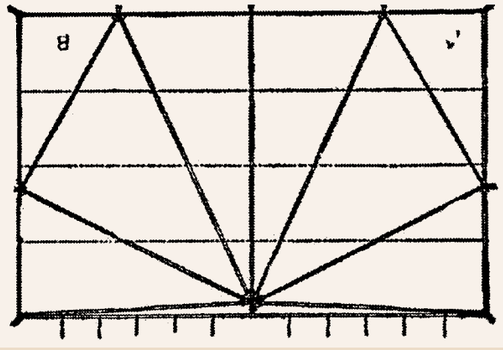
(Top) The Plow-Point tarp is set with the opening away from the wind. The trapper fire setup is open to the wind, and the back-log setup blocks wind from pots suspended on the crane. (Above, left) Note lean-to tarp and stretcher bed are set parallel to breeze to eliminate smoke eddies from entering the shelter. (Above, right) Rise, shine and eat! The morning breeze created a great little hot spot for frying bacon and baking a bannock.



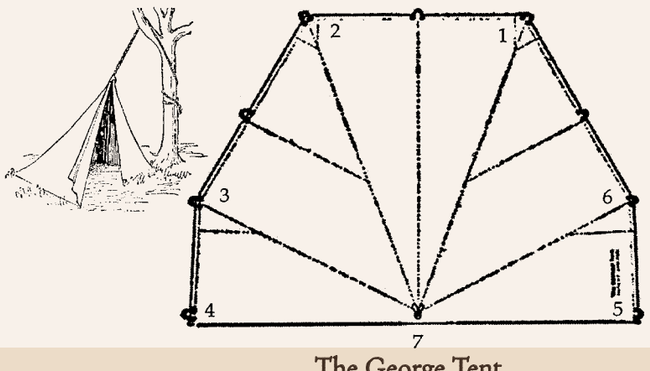
The Thoreau Baker Tent



The Dan Beard Campfire Tent



The Tarp Tent



The George Tent

The Forester in use. Dan Beard (left), Stewart Edward White (center) and David Abercrombie (far right).

since last he slept in the open, no matter how high or low a social or official position he may now occupy, it takes but one whiff of the smoke of an open fire, or one whiff of the aroma of frying bacon, to send him back again to the lone trail…There is no use talking about it, there is no use arguing about it, there is witchcraft in the smell of the open fire, and all the mysteries and magic of the Arabian Nights dwell in the odor of frying bacon."

A true woodsman is the master of fire lays—the trapper's fire, the reflector, the teepee and the council fire. He can build a fire in the rain, the snow or the wind. He can start it with one match or, to draw himself more closely to the fires of the pioneer past, he might choose to light it with flint and steel.

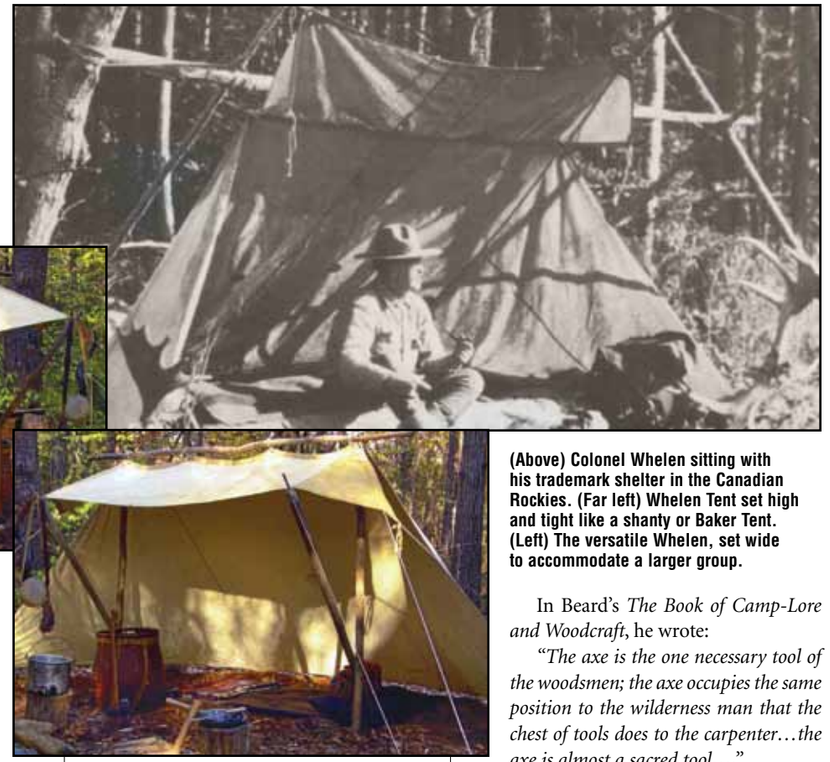
The woodcraft camper's kit might be lightweight if tramping, or middleweight if travelling by other means, but never cumbersome or overbearing. There is a "just enough" and a "just right" quality about his gear—making for an efficient and comfortable, if somewhat Spartan, camp.

Kephart wrote of simplicity in *Camping and Woodcraft*:

"An old campaigner is known by the simplicity and fitness of his equipment. He carries few 'fixings', but every article has been well tested and it is the best that his purse can afford. He has learned by hard experience how steep are the mountain trails and how tangled the undergrowth and downwood in the primitive forest. He has learned too how to fashion on the spot many substitutes for 'boughten' things that we consider necessary at home…Ideal outfitting is to have what we want, when we want it, and not to be bothered with anything else."

A woodsman might carry a pot chain or a wire hook or two, but more often prefers to suspend his few simple tin or aluminum pots over the fire with handcrafted cranes, wooden hooks and dingle sticks. Leaving his cast iron at home, he prefers his bannock cooked in a frying pan and his biscuits baked in a folding reflector oven. Packs, pack baskets and a few wooden boxes carry his gear. Camp furniture may include a folding piece or two, or may be just a handy log or stump. Camp light is by candle or kerosene, and the bed is most often at ground level—a browse bed, a stretcher bed or a couple of sheepskins.

The woodcraft camper's tool kit harkens back to pioneer days. The tomahawk, belt knife and clasp knife of the frontier scout are present in the hatchets, sheath knives and pocket folders commonly used by the masters of classic camping. To this kit the woodcraft camper might add a folding saw, a camp spade and a handful of tacks, nails and copper wire.



(Above) Colonel Whelen sitting with his trademark shelter in the Canadian Rockies. (Far left) Whelen Tent set high and tight like a shanty or Baker Tent. (Left) The versatile Whelen, set wide to accommodate a larger group.

In Beard's *The Book of Camp-Lore and Woodcraft*, he wrote:

"The axe is the one necessary tool of the woodsmen; the axe occupies the same position to the wilderness man that the chest of tools does to the carpenter…the axe is almost a sacred tool…."

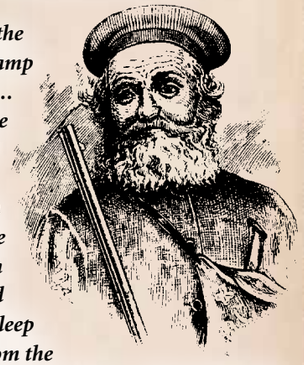
With these simple tools, the woodcraft camper can build and furnish a camp, cook his food and warm both body and soul. Demonstration of the proper use and maintenance of these tools is required for full initiation into the fraternity of the woodcraft camp.

And Ellsworth Jaeger, in his classic *Wildwood Wisdom,* summed up what to bring along in the backcountry as follows:

"So from generations of wilderness men and women came the outdoor lore and wildwood wisdom of today…The jingle-jangle gadgets of some of our modern outdoorsmen would make our ancestral buckskin men turn in their graves. Their packs were light and their equipment meager, for these adventurous and picturesque wilderness men depended upon their skill and ingenuity in woodcraft rather than upon a lot of 'things'…. Let us then conjure up these wilderness men of the past…Let us ask them to sit with us in council around the campfire. And in the shifting ghostlike wreaths of the smoke we may catch glimpses of them in fringed buckskins with tomahawk and long rifle." ☆

Other Woodsworthy QUOTABLES

"The open air, the preparation of food, the tending of fires—these are the great soothers." **—Harry Roberts, *The Tramps Handbook*, 1903**



"On the whole, for all kinds of weather, the shanty-tent is perhaps the best style of camp to be had at equal expense and trouble…. it is the best form of close-side tent I have found. It admits of a bright fire in front, without which a forest camp is just no camp at all to me. I have suffered enough in close, dark, cheerless, damp tents…The worst ones are the A and wall tents, with all closed camps in which one is required to seclude himself through the hours of sleep in damp and darkness, utterly cut off from the cheerful, healthful light and warmth of the campfire." **—Nessmuk, 1920**

"For such is the open-camp tent. Not a bivouac, but a forest home. Not a cold, chill canvas box into which you retire, to creep into an icy mountain of blankets, which you will be hours warming up, but rather—far rather—a bright, cosey retreat, with the warmth of the camp-fire penetrating to its farthest recesses; a place of jollity and good fellowship; a place where you can dream over the fire flames in comfort. To me the open tent with the backlog fire is the acme of forest life." **—Warren Miller, 1915**

Three forester tents shown here are set up around a traditional backlog fire. This setup allows one fire to heat all three tents.

Warren Miller was the editor of *Field & Stream*. He published great "how to" books as well as popular fiction, including *The Lone Woodsman*.

Dan Beard—author, illustrator, master woodsman. His influence was felt around the world through his efforts to teach outdoorsmen.