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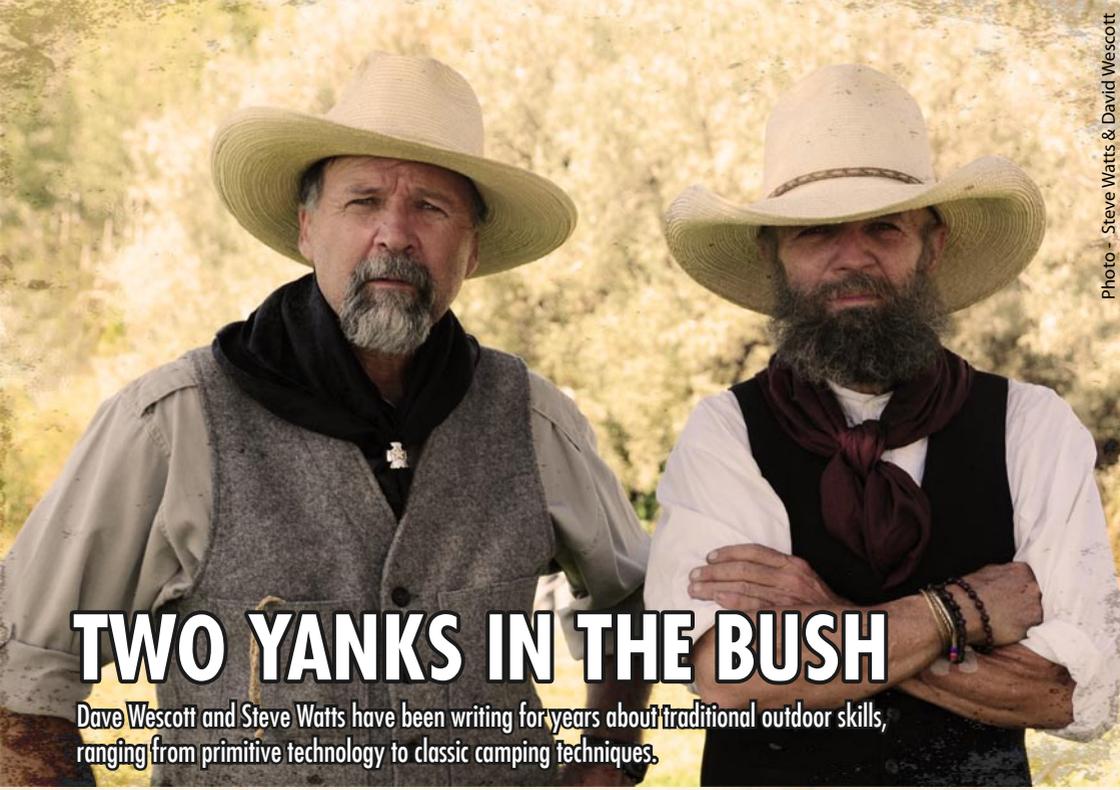
Camping in the Old Style

By David Wescott & Steve Watts
Woodsmoke USA



Photo - Steve Watts & David Wescott

THE WHELEN TENT



TWO YANKS IN THE BUSH

Dave Wescott and Steve Watts have been writing for years about traditional outdoor skills, ranging from primitive technology to classic camping techniques.

Why have two guys with big hats and silk scarves been invited to contribute to *The Bushcraft Journal*? In the early days, American wild lands were known as the “frontier”, and today they may be called “forest”, “wilderness” or “public lands”. There is no traditional use of the term “bush” in American outdoor culture. Woodcraft was the way skills for living in the wild were defined.

Woodcraft - the art of finding one's way in the wilderness and getting along well by utilizing Nature's storehouse.

Horace Kephart, *Woodcraft and Camping* - 1917

Being admitted sentimentalists, we hold to the traditions of the masters of the Golden Age of camping in America (1890-1930) and pursue the classic style of roaming in the woods and loafing by the open hearth. Camping in the old style has a charm and attraction that many of us who were trained in classic woodcraft still hold dear. In an attempt to preserve these skills, we are cultivating a sort of renaissance of Classic Camping style. The interesting thing is that the skill set of the classic camper dovetails nicely with many of the ideals of

Bushcraft. It's because of this common ground that we feel comfortable pulling up a log and warming ourselves at the bushcrafter's fire.

Woodcraft properly relates only to the forest wilderness. The literature of outdoor sports is getting us used to such correlative terms as plainscraft, mountaincraft, and even icecraft and snowcraft. This sort of thing can be overdone; but we need a generic term to express the art, in general, of getting on well in wild regions of any and all kinds, whether in forests, deserts, mountains, plains, tropics or arctics...

Horace Kephart, *Camping and Woodcraft* - 1917

Old Kep may have been ahead of his time by realizing that an overarching term was needed to include all aspects of woodcraft. Our Dean of American Camping was a strong supporter of the efforts of T.H. Holding, Father of Camping in the U.K. and they communicated regularly. Maybe it's time for a conversation among contemporary practitioners to start sharing skills and techniques that will help woodcrafters and bushcrafters alike improve their relationship to the outdoors in a variety of settings.



THE WHELEN LEAN-TO

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, is one of those principles.

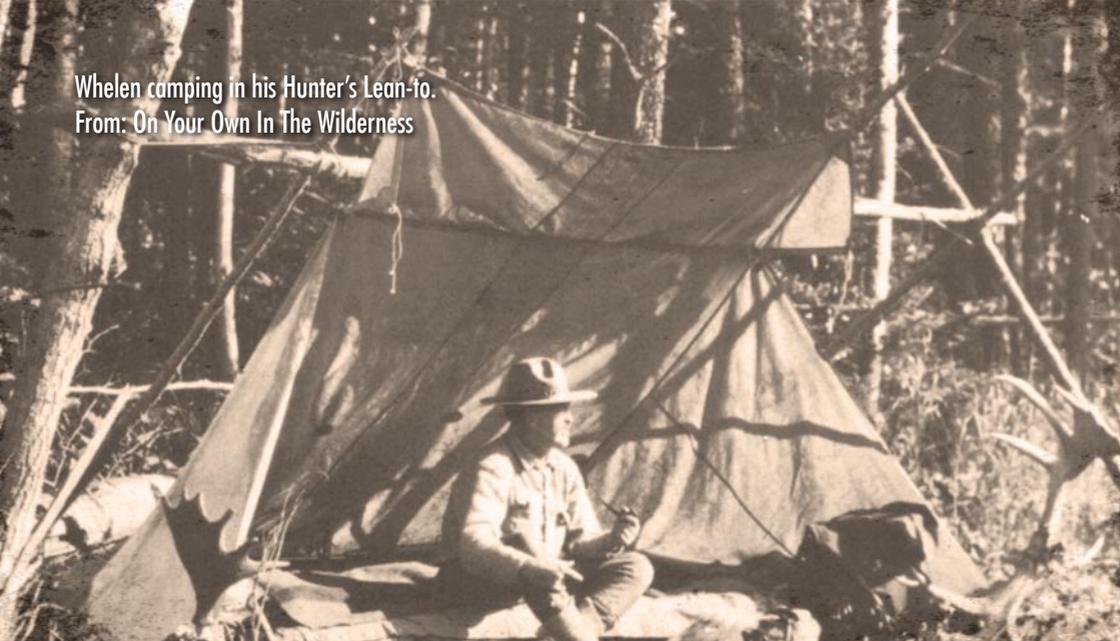
"It admits of a bright fire in front, without which a forest camp is just no camp at all to me. I have suffered enough in close, dark, cheerless, damp tents...This is why I discard all close, canvas tents." Nessmuk, Woodcraft

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 Forrester, 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".

Over the past few years our favorite open tent has come to be the versatile Whelen lean-to tent

designed by master camper Colonel Townsend Whelen in 1926. He thought out the design from descriptions provided by naturalist Charles Sheldon, who had worked out the original design as early as 1906. Years later while pondering the design he wanted for his signature shelter, Whelen used the benefits of the Sheldon shelter and created his popular Hunter's Lean-to tent design. It can be set high and wide for maximum access to the radiated heat from a front fire, or closed low and tight to shed wind and rain driven by a passing storm. The design allows the use of shears, ridgepoles, guy ropes, or upright poles to pitch the structure. It's perfect as a solo shelter or can be expanded for two, or even four in a real pinch.

Whelen camping in his Hunter's Lean-to.
From: *On Your Own In The Wilderness*



A LITTLE HISTORY

In 1901 a young Spanish American War veteran walked out of the Canadian bush. He was 24 years old, over six feet tall, with a 44 inch chest and a 29 inch waist. Dressed in a fringed buckskin shirt, jodhpurs, high-top moccasins and a campaign hat, Townsend Whelen was well on his way to establishing his place in the pantheon of great outdoorsmen. He carried a typically light outfit - an 8x11 ft. tarp, a pair of blankets, a poncho and a set of cooking pots. He was also packing a .40/72 Winchester rifle and a .30/30 Winchester Model 94 to supply his food larder.

By 1915 he was back in the U.S. Army as a captain with the 29th Infantry Regiment defending the Panama Canal in unmapped country. Whelen set out to explore the Panamanian jungle whenever time away from his duties allowed - always with a rucksack and a light-weight kit.

Whelen remained in the military until retirement in 1936. He is perhaps best known today among readers of hunting and military small arms literature. He wrote at least a half a dozen books and was a regular contributor to *Field and Stream*, *Sports Afield*, *The American Rifleman* and *Outdoor Life*. Col. Townsend Whelen died in 1961, much loved, it seems, by all who knew him.

Through it all, Whelen camped. And even though he had experience with about every kind of shelter available to the sport at the time - his choice, again and again was - the tarp.

So it was, that in 1926 he developed what he would call the "Hunter's Lean-to". The original was made of Abercrombie green waterproof Egyptian cotton. Soon, it would be made available commercially, marketed as the "Whelen Lean-to". By 1955, Whelen had spent more than 400 nights in the little tarp - a testimony to its practicality and his fondness for it.



ORIGINS OF THE WHELEN DESIGN

For a thorough history of the development of the Whelen Lean-to, visit Masterwoodsman.com and read Thomas Ray's original research on the tent - *Origins of the Whelen Lean-to* - March 14, 2015. Tom has compiled a most complete picture of how the design came to be so popular, that has been referenced by many in recent months.

The Whelen Lean-to

This tent in principle is somewhat like the Baker tent. It, too, has a steeply sloping shed roof. The side walls, instead of being perpendicular, splay outward and forward at the bottom. Their angle is such that the front end of each of those walls stakes down about two feet outward and two feet forward of where a perpendicular would reach the ground if dropped from the ends of the six-foot tape ridge. Thus the walls slope at such an angle that they will reflect heat and light into the tent. Thus the walls slope at such an angle that they will reflect heat and light into the tent.

Made of Aberlite or Green Waterproof Egyptian cotton running approximately six ounces per square yard, the Whelen Lean-to Tent weighs about seven pounds. It is not adapted to temperatures of twenty degrees below zero and colder, for it would take too many hours of ax work to get in the fire wood necessary for heat and cooking. When such frigidty endures for any considerable time, you need a closed tent with a stove.

Colonel Townsend Whelen and Bradford Angier,
On Your Own in the Wilderness -1958

Tom Ray standing in front of his Whelen Lean-to.



Photo - Steve Watts & David Westcott

At first glance, the Whelen Lean-to is reminiscent of a small Baker tent, a Dan Beard tent, or Nessmuk's shanty. But Whelen has made important modifications.

Across the front is a small awning, which can be extended at a variety of angles or thrown back completely as a needed.

The tarp can be pitched with a few poles, as many as six poles, suspended from a ridge pole lashed between trees, or simply strung up by ropes to standing trees.

All of these features combine to make the Whelen Lean-to an ideal cool-to-cold weather shelter.

A fire built across the front opening warms the interior yet allows the camper to enjoy contact with the outdoor world into which he has ventured.



Pitched on a suspension pole.



Pitched on a rope tied between trees.



Pitched wide and low on two poles.



Pitched high and tight on two poles.



Pitched on a ridge with two lashed shears.



Pitched on a ridge with two lashed tripods.



Photo - Steve Watts & David Westcott

The dropped sides modification.

Being fans of open tents in general, the Whelen Lean-to seems to see more use than any other shelter. It has its limitations of course. In the hot buggy season, you can choose to add a simple fly with a mosquito gauze bar. In the coldest of weather a closed tent with a wood stove can't be beat. (Whelen's use of his lean-to down to "twenty below" just proves that the old soldier was tough.) But, for the majority of the year, and the majority of situations, the Whelen is almost ideal.

The ease and speed with which it can be pitched are unmatched. If through bad judgment or a change in the weather, you find the need to change its orientation to the wind - few shelters can be taken down, turned around and set up again as quickly as the Whelen. You'll remain snug and dry through rains, snows, high winds and even hail storms.

The open front company of the campfire's warmth and light radiate into your little lean-to home. The mid-night or early morning pleasure of leaning out of your bedroll to throw another piece of wood or two on the fire satisfies the definition of sylvan luxury and romance.

Perhaps one of the most pleasant traditional camp set ups for two outers is two Whelen's pitched with

their open fronts facing each other. Between the two shelters a trench fire is built. In this way both tents share the heat and, in effect, create a warmed open living/cooking space between them. With this face-to-face set up, the wind direction should ideally be parallel to the length of the lean-tos.

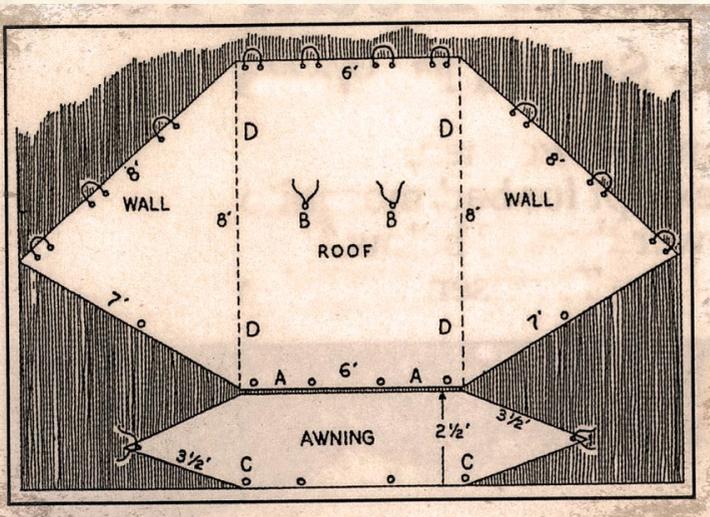
"Most men are needlessly poor all of their lives because they think they must have such a house as their neighbors have" an old woodsman said more than a century ago. "Consider how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary." Townsend Whelen.

The Whelen Lean-to is compact and lightweight enough for backpacking, packing down to a bundle 8x16 inches, and weighing about 8 pounds (including ropes, storage bag and accumulated grime).

The side wings can be pulled in, reconfiguring the tent into more of a standard lean-to. While the splayed out sides are part of the genius of Whelen's design, the straight-sides-modification is useful in conditions where blowing sand or rain are invading your sleeping space from the open ends. In bug season/territory it also allows you to hang insect netting straight down from the ridge - filling in the now square-shaped opening.

THE MODERN LIGHT-WEIGHT WHELEN

Models of the Whelen are available from a number of purveyors of quality canvas gear - Frost River, Tentsmiths, or David Ellis Canvas, to name a few. They range in weight from 7 to 16 pounds, varying in size and material. To make an ultra-light version of this classic design, take a look at **Americangrouch.com's** remake of the canvas original in coated nylon material, (Bringing the Whelen into the 21st Century- January 15, 2012).



◀ Whelen's original plans on how to build a lean-to.

So, here's thanks to Col. Townsend Whelen. His example, his legacy and his shelter live on. His simple approach to camping and "woods loafing" challenge us yet today.

Steve Watts & David Wescott

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