

Classic Camping The Frontier Connection

By Steven M. Watts *

"Daniel Boone...a master of woodcraft, able to find his way hundreds of miles through unbroken forests, able to maintain himself alone not merely for a day or a week but for a year or more without other resources than his rifle, his tomahawk and his knife; and this in the face of the most wily of foes. He was muscular and strong and enduring; victor in many a hand-to-hand combat, conqueror of farms cut from the forest; performer of long journeys afoot at speeds that would seem incredible to a college athlete. He was a dead shot with the rifle, an expert hunter of game. Other men, long since forgotten, were all these things."

Stewart Edward White, 1922

At the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner delivered a paper to the American Historical Association entitled, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". In what became known as the "Frontier Thesis", Turner argued that the lure of the unsettled lands to the west had shaped the American character in a unique and powerful way—creating a culture defined by egalitarianism, aggressiveness and innovation. But, the U.S. census of 1890 had already declared that this frontier no longer existed—leaving Americans with much to ponder in regard to the nature of our national identity.

At this same time, the *Golden Age of Camping* in America was on the rise. As the frontier was vanishing, campers looked back with nostalgia to the skills of their not-so-dis-

tant pioneer ancestors. Their camps became their own personal journeys into their own personal frontiers. To be a master camper was to be in some sense a frontiersman, a wilderness scout, a backwoodsman, a woodsrunner, a shirt-tailed man, or a forest rover of old—self-reliant and skilled in a sylvan world that was quickly slipping away.

Thus, an American camping and woodcraft style emerged with a smoky frontier flavor all its own.

It is no accident that Dan Beard named his pre-Boy Scout youth programs the "Sons of Daniel Boone" and the "Boy Pioneers"—organizing them in to "forts" and "stockades". Old Uncle Dan came by it honestly. Born in 1850 in Ohio (the old northwest frontier), he spent his formative years in Kentucky—the storied land of Daniel Boone himself. He was only one generation removed from his backwoods heroes. His father knew the famous frontiersman (and Boone companion) Simon Kenton. He also knew Jim Bowie, Sam Houston and a certain Mr. David Crockett! Beard urged his boys to perfect their camping and woodcraft skills and become - like these men— "*American Knights in Buckskin.*" Although today we may sometimes flinch as Beard's enthusiasm slips over into muscular jingoism, we can only ad-



Doug Meyer Photo



admire his energetic and good natured drive to recapture the frontier spirit and inspire his young charges:

"...for my inspiration...I did not summon to my aid King Arthur and his Round Table, the glistening armor of the tourney, Richard the Lionhearted, the Black Prince or Saladin of the Saracens. No, not even Robin Hood, though he was more my type of man. In place of the lance and the buckler was the American long rifle and buckskin clothes, in place of the shining plumed helmet was the American coon-skin cap, the tail of the 'coon its plume. I tried to put into the organization the joyousness of the blue sky with its fleeting clouds, the reliability and stability of the earth beneath our feet, and the natural democracy of Daniel Boone himself."

Daniel Carter Beard, 1939

Many an old time camper would acknowledge that their own campcraft training began as a boy under the woody romantic spell of Beard and his idealized frontier scouts of lore.

Coming out of the same tradition was George Washington Sears ("Nessmuk") - born in 1821 (only one year after Daniel Boone's death.) Nessmuk travelled by foot and canoe in a style that would have been familiar to any frontier scout.

His lightweight kit would not have been out of place in any backcountry settlement, fort or deep-woods hunting station: rifle, hatchet, belt knife, clasp knife, knapsack, haversack, blanket and oilcloth. At night, he preferred the open-front "shanty tent" - in the style of the frontier "half-faced shelter" - and, he was a master of the campfire and minimalist cooking techniques.

Ellsworth Jaeger opens his classic volume *Wildwood Wisdom* with "The Woodsmen of Yesterday" - his homage to "our ancestral buckskin men" and acknowledges the direct link between skills of the frontier and the campcraft that he so tirelessly taught and promoted throughout his life:

"With their meager equipment and perhaps some jerked meat and parched corn in their pouches and a tightly rolled blanket, our buckskin men traversed the American wilderness from end to end....from generations of wilderness men and women came the outdoor lore and wildwood wisdom of today, a truly great American folklore that is becoming increasingly important in the lives of all modern Americans".

Ellsworth Jaeger, 1945

Horace Kephart, "*The Dean of American Campers*" (and considered by many to be the Grand Master of outdoor practitioners in his day) was himself seeking the spirit of the frontier. In his encyclopedic and iconic work, *Camping and Woodcraft*, he



Jim "Three Mailed Jack" Green Photo

Frontier Fire

By Steven M. Watts

“...powder horn, shot pouch, gun, hatchet, skipatogan (pouch for carrying fireworks) hanging at his belt...”

Andre Graham, 1740

Fire making from medieval times through most of the 19th century was mainly by flint and steel. This was certainly true on the American frontier. Other methods included the use of burning lenses, gun locks and possibly friction fire techniques.

“Tinder” in the 18th century refers to the material used to catch and hold the spark creating an ember—not the bundle of fibers used to kindle that ember into a flame.

Frontier tinders: charred cloth (linen, hemp and cotton), flax tow, hemp tow, raw cotton, punk wood, gun powder, gun powder impregnated paper and various fungi. Other possible but poorly documented tinders include the piths of various weeds stems, seed downs and ovum.

Other words for tinder: “punk”, “sponge”, “touchwood”, “wildfire” and “match”.

“This induced me to resolve not to travel more by land without my gun, powder and shot, steel sponge (punk wood) and flint for striking a fire...”

Patrick Campbell, 1792

“Fire making is a simple process with the mountaineers. Their bullet pouches always contain a flint and steel, and sundry pieces of punk—a pithy substance found in dead pine trees—or tinder; and pulling a handful of dry grass, which they screw into a nest, they place the lighted punk in this and closing the grass over it, wave it in the air, when it soon ignites, and readily kindles the dry sticks forming the foundation of a fire.”

Ruxton, 1848

“Mr. MacKay lighted a bit of touch-wood with a burning glass, in the cover of his tobacco box.”

Alexander Mackenzie, 1793

“I made two fire steels out of an old file...”

Anthony Henday, 1754

“With the flint of my gun, I made a fire...”

Alexander Henry, 1763

“...how to make a fire, we had neither steel, nor flint. I pointed to the gun from which we took the flint, I then produced my pocket knife with its steel blade...”

David Thompson, 1790

“...he was left to amuse himself all night alongside his fire which he made with his gun.”

A. McKenzie, 1804

“They employ tree mushrooms very frequently instead of tinder. Those which are taken from the sugar maple are reckoned the best; those of the red maple are next in goodness, and next them, those of the sugar

birch, for want of these, they likewise make use of those which grow on the aspen tree.”

Peter Kalm, 1749

“I said to them...you Fools go to the Birch Trees and get some touchwood.”

David Thompson, 1790

“Cabuketay’s son died, he was immediately tied up in a new Blanket, full dressed and painted, with a pipe, a smoking bag, Tobacco, fire steel, spunkwood, Wampum Beads, a small kettle...”

John McKay, 1797

“Here we borrowed a smoking bag containing a steel, flint and tinder.”

John McLean, 1822

“...fungus that grows on the outside of the birch tree...takes fire readily from the spark of a steel: but is much improved by being kept dry in a bag that has contained gunpowder.”

Samuel Hearne, 1772



The authors flint and steel kit. The “tinder” is top-center in the tin cannister.

discovers that spirit (still alive) deep in the woods of the Southern Appalachians:

“From the autumn of 1904 to the winter of 1906 I lived, most of the time, alone in a little cabin on the Carolina side of the Great Smoky Mountains, surrounded by one of the finest primeval forests in the world. My few neighbors were born backwoodsmen. Most of them dwelt in log cabins of one or two rooms, roofed with clapboards riven with a froe, and heated by hardwood logs in wide stone fireplaces. Many had no cooking-stoves, but baked on the hearth and fried their meat over the embers.

Nearly every man in the settlement was a skilled axeman and a crack shot. Some of them still used home-made muzzle-loading rifles with barrels over four feet long. Some of the women still worked at home-made spinning-wheels and looms. Coonskins and ginseng passed as currency at the wayside stores. Our manner of life was not essentially changed from that of the old colonial frontier.

To one coming from the cities, it was a strange environment, almost as though he had been carried back, asleep, upon the wings of time, and had awakened in the eighteenth century to meet Daniel Boone in flesh and blood” **Horace Kephart, 1916**

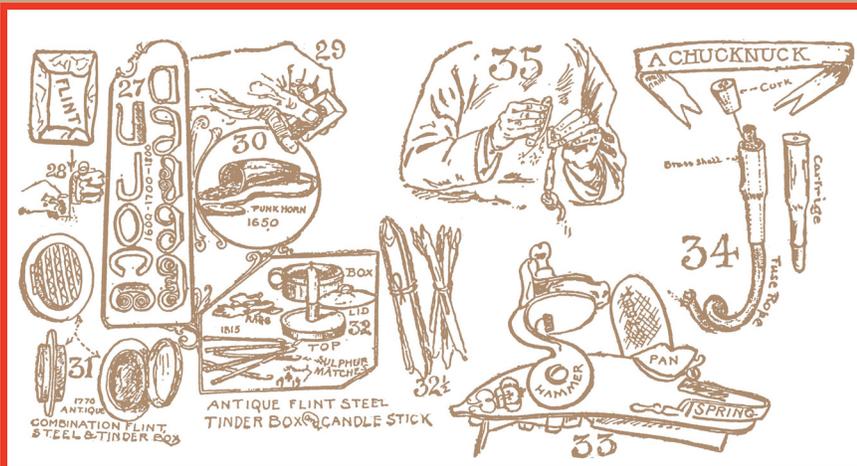
History will correctly note that the opening of the frontier by the intrepid backwoodsmen of old, ultimately led to the destruction and disappearance of that frontier. Ill-informed critics of traditional woodcraft have oft cited this observation in condemnation of classic camping practices. But, the old masters of the Golden Age were not so short-sighted. They viewed the frontier-way as an inspirational skills-model that could be successfully applied to best practices in a post-frontier world. Dan



“Uncle Dan” - Daniel Carter Beard

Frontier Fire - Acknowledgements

- Karl Koster—“The fire in flint shows not till it be struck...”: A look into fire-starting for the Nor’wester, *On The Trail: A Journal for Historical Trekkers, Re-enactors and Students of Living History, 1600-1840, Vol. 11, No. 2, May/June, 2004.*
- Warren Boughton—Fire Making, *The Book of Buckskinning II*, William Scurlock, editor, 1983
- Mark Baker—Another Chance, *A Pilgrims Journey, Vol. 1*, 1986-1985, 2004
- Jesse Mains—*What I Carry to Survive in the Woods*, DVD, That’s Just Muggs Productions, 2008
- Ken Burgess—*Primitive Fire Lighting: Flint and Steel and the Fire Bow*, 2007.



Flint and Steel Fire - Plates 28-34.

From *The Book of Camplore and Woodcraft* by Dan Beard, 1920.

Background screens on text pages are Plates 293-308 also from Beard, 1920.

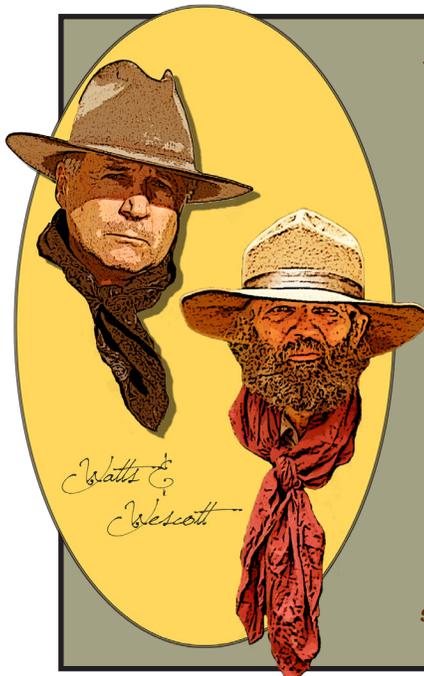
Beard (as enamored with the romantic frontier image as anyone could be) was clear-eyed in this respect:

“Because we were so close to pioneer days, outdoor life seemed to mean destruction of wild life. We killed the game recklessly. We caught the fish from the streams, pulled up the wild flowers by the roots. We even destroyed the songbirds to get feathers for ladies’ hats.”

Dan Beard, 1939

As an antidote, Beard preached “love of the outdoors in terms of conservation...the thousand and one laws of woodcraft...the backbone of the sentiment for the preservation of wild life”. He challenged us to be mature woodsmen - living a “life in the open” - our actions guided by environmental responsibility, and our souls fed by the skills and spirit of our shared frontier heritage.

And so, we return to the trail...to the camp...to the fire. We are not alone. We are connected to the old masters—and thanks to them—to the frontiersmen of legend. We are the inheritors of a uniquely American outdoor legacy. We walk in their shadows—as they walked in the shadows of the great trees. We drink from the well of their knowledge—as they drank from the clear mountain streams. And, ultimately we sit by the fire - together.



*** Join Steve Watts
and David Wescott**
(authors of *Practicing Primitive and Camping In The Old Style*) as they team up to bring back skills from the Golden Age of Camping in their new book series - *The Watts and Wescott Classic Camping Field Guides* - and the upcoming *Woodsmoke* classic skills and bushcraft re-encampment. Keep up with developments at: <http://campandtrailblog.blogspot.com>.