

# Defining Classic Camping

*Compiled by Steve Watts and David Wescott, © 2015*

*When the frontier skills of Daniel Boone  
meet the industrial age of Henry Ford.  
Steven M. Watts, 2013*

**Classic Camping is the use of tools, techniques and traditions  
in the style of the Golden Age of Camping (1880-1930).**

**(A snapshot in time)**

**Classic Camping is:**

- directly connected to its historic context.
- an understanding and appreciation for handmade craft.
- the use of classic style, timeless utility and aesthetic efficiency.
- a comfortable confessed relationship with romance and nostalgia.

**Classic Camping**

**Rustic • Romantic • Real**

**The goal of camping is camping itself...  
The practice and the payoff are one and the same.  
*Steve Watts***

**Camp as if the act of camping mattered.  
Camping is what you do when you get to camp,  
not how you get there.  
*David Wescott***

## To Camp or Not To Camp ? That's a Stupid Question.

### Classic Camping "In The Old Style"

The Golden Age of Camping in America (1880's-1930's) was a time when camping meant sleeping under canvas and cooking over an open fire.

Here in the wood smoke, surrounded by the outdoor gear of a by-gone day, the traditional skills of camp and trail are practiced in their proper setting.

## Classic Camping Applied David Wescott, 2013

During a surprise meeting at Kamp Kephart on April 4, 2009 Steve Watts and David Wescott firmed up plans to throw in together and partner up for a new exciting project – “*what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is yours*”. We are currently working on a series of 6 titles that address the topic of traditional/classic camping and it’s place in today’s world. They will be self-published under the collective title of ***Watts and Wescott Guides to Classic Camping***. This comes after a few years of discussions and plans to do something that would have some interest to those engaged in this timely subject. So, we are announcing our plans to get this project underway, and hope you will join us on the trail.

***What is Camp and Trail X ?*** This is an attempt to formalize thought, test ideas, share recent finds, make corrections, and create sample layouts that might be used in the book series. This is communication between the two chapter huts – Yellowstone Trails and Kamp Haven– that have shown the most interest in getting things moving. We invite anyone who might be interested to join us as “***Field Research Team***” members and assist in researching the topic. The field is so wide, and so much has been written with so many specialized niches, that research could go on for a long time without ever seeing everything available. Mike Powell, longtime friend and fellow traveler, worked with me here in Idaho (until his passing). He assisted on the Seton Project. John Latham (It’s so hard to find a good Swedish stove repairman!) has shown his interest in the Primus and it’s many faces, and we hope he will consider joining us as well. The invitation is open. The only criteria is that your participation will help this research move forward.

Since it is planned to use the *Camp & Trail* title to hopefully start a magazine or webzine in the future, and the information we include here will be published in the book series, we want to limit the dissemination of this publication to Field Research Team members only. You can request a PDF of the masthead and create your own submissions. We have specific topics that

need addressing, so if you see one of interest, or you have an idea, or you would like an assignment, just get a hold of me and I'm sure we can hook you up.

So far, I have created a series called *Treasures From The Attic*. It has photos from The Harriman Park collection, the Family Camping Museum, The National Fly Fishing Museum. There was also one entitled *A Study of the Trapper Nelson Pack Board*. Note: None of these are finished items. They are put out for two reasons: 1. They force me to compile my thoughts and resources on a subject in one place; 2. They may stimulate someone else to add on to what I submitted. The end product will be the book series.

I thought about doing this as a blog, but don't know how to do it without getting the info too widely distributed prior to publication. One idea is to create a website that will address the topic and create interest, so that when we release the series – one book every other month – the series can be pre-ordered at a discount – we will have already created an interested following of possible subscribers.

## Re-encampment: The Classic Camping Revival

*Steve Watts and David Wescott*

*Published in American Frontiersman #4, © 2015*

*Daniel Boone . . . a master of woodcraft, [was] 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 speed 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, "Daniel Boone, Wilderness Scout,"  
Boys' Life, January 1922***

The U.S. census of 1890 officially confirmed that the American frontier no longer existed. 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-distant 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 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.

This frontier connection was acknowledged by the masters of traditional camping and woodcraft. Coming out of this tradition was George Washington Sears, better known as "Nessmuk" (*Woodcraft*, 1884), born in 1821—only one year after Daniel Boone's death. Nessmuk traveled 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. Horace Kephart (*The Book of Camping and Woodcraft*, 1906), known as the "Dean of American Campers" (and considered by many to be the grand master of outdoor

practitioners in his day), was seeking the spirit of the frontier in the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. It is no accident that Dan Beard (*The Book of Camp-Lore and Woodcraft*, 1920) named his pre-Boy Scout youth programs the “Sons of Daniel Boone” and the “Boy Pioneers of America.” Ellsworth Jaeger opens his classic volume *Wildwood Wisdom* (1945) with a chapter entitled “The Woodsman 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.

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. The love and practice of these traditions is being carried on today by a group known as the Acorn Patrol, who are dedicated to planting the seeds of the classic camping revival in America.

### **Meet the Acorn Patrol—Ambassadors of Classic Camping**

The idea of the Acorn Patrol grew out of Kamp Kephart—a series of traditional camping skills workshops conducted at the Schiele Museum of Natural History in Gastonia, North Carolina. These courses were inspired by the works of the classic camping authors and practitioners of old, and the publication of the first edition of this book (2000). From this foundation, the Kamp Kephart field courses were initiated and the classic camping revival in America was born.

The eight original members of the Acorn Patrol hailed from places such as New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Idaho. Today the patrol numbers sixteen, with newer recruits from Georgia and the Carolinas, and is rapidly catching fire across the country. They continually practice, participate in workshops, conduct research by referring to literature from the masters of woodcraft, and apply their skills in demonstration camps, contributing their time and treasure to the preservation of the craft. Unlike some other living history events, life in an Acorn Patrol camp celebrates life in the outdoors through leisure and re-creation. The Acorn way includes finding teachers, honoring those teachers, reading historic texts, and applying new skills in the field. You can never know too much and you can never be too skilled. The first Acorn Patrol outing was held at the Pisgah National Forest’s Cradle of Forestry in America Historic Site, which tells the story of the Biltmore School of Forestry (the first forestry school established in America) and pioneering forester Carl Schenck, chief forester for George Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate. The Acorn Patrol was initially invited to the site in 2007 by Cindy Carpenter, the Cradle of Forestry’s education/interpretation program manager, to conduct a demonstration camp exhibiting camping in the classic style. The Acorns have gathered on this same site for their annual fall encampment ever since.

### **Patrolling Onward**

In 2010, the Acorn Patrol was invited to set up a camp as a part of the Horace Kephart Days Celebration in Bryson City, North Carolina (Kephart’s adopted home). They have been involved with this unique annual gathering ever since. As Libby Kephart Hargrave (event organizer and great-granddaughter of the old master) said, “They dress Kephart, they cook Kephart, and they camp Kephart.” Many Kephart family members and scholars from across the country attend this event, including George Ellison, author of the insightful introduction to the newest edition of Kephart’s *Camping and Woodcraft* (available exclusively from the Great Smoky Mountains Association). This direct link to Horace Kephart and the Kephart family is a treasured gift shared by all members of the patrol.

The patrol has been invited to such notable events as the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Blue Ridge Parkway at Appalachian State University, and the one hundredth anniversary of

John Muir's camp in Idaho's Harriman State Park. Members have also conducted research resulting in projects such as In Seton's Tracks: Grace and Ernest Thompson Seton in Idaho, as well as Tom Ray's work on Kephart's knife and his recent reproduction of the folding Kephart camp desk. A national conclave took place in the summer of 2013 at the Woodsmoke Symposium held in Idaho, where an international contingent of participants gathered to celebrate classic camping.

*In the school of the woods there is no graduation day.*

Horace Kephart, *Camping and Woodcraft*, 1917

### **What's with the Dressing Up?**

Let's face it, clothing is gear—it's your first line of protection against the elements. When you dress in the traditional style, you learn to think and move in ways that are efficient and effortless, and it puts you in rhythm with life outdoors. You have to work *with*, rather than in spite of, nature, and the outcomes are based a bit on your technology, but more importantly upon your skill, knowledge, and experience. Living in clothing made from fibers that are safe near fire, and keep you warm even when damp, is far more practical than our contemporary fashion. The pioneers knew their clothing and how to dress—they survived for hundreds of years with fur, hide, and natural fibers. We wouldn't be here now if it didn't work. But wouldn't they have used Gore-Tex if it had been available? These people knew how to live outdoors and how to dress with what they had available at the time. The answer to the question is simply that they didn't have it, so there was no choice, and they learned how to live comfortably without it, and became better outdoorsmen because of it.

Why would modern reenactors choose to go without it? Because we have the choice to learn skills and techniques informed by the land and gain a richer experience because of that interaction. Not to mention the fact that in classic clothing you just look classy. The trade-off with using modern rather than traditional gear is that when new gear is introduced it's usually for convenience, and when you adopt that gear, the price you pay is usually the loss of knowledge.

### **How Do You Carry All That Stuff?**

Backpacking killed camping. Camping is what you do when you get to camp, and hiking is only one of many ways you may choose to get there. The word *backpacking* didn't even arrive in the outdoor literature until the early 1960s. Historically it was known as woodsrunning, and in later years man packing, hiking, or more popularly tramping; gear was manufactured, modified, or homemade to accommodate concerns for weight and bulk. Now that backpacking is *the* model for how we camp, gear is thought of in that context and is engineered backwards to fit the model—hence we get gear that is totally inefficient and undependable in the camping market because it was designed from a backpacking paradigm. Weight is only one small factor when considering the camping outfit.

When you think of camping from a classic camper's perspective, a whole world of possibilities is rediscovered. Campers got to camp in cars and wagons, or on trains or horses, or were self-propelled in canoes or on skis; all of which make weight a secondary concern. The sturdiness and dependability of canvas tents with wooden poles, cast iron and steel cooking gear, the beauty of brass and leather fixtures, and the warm glow of oil lamps in the evening—now that's camping. No more crawling into nylon cocoons to spend the evening; sit upright in a chair and read a book, or loaf with friends and bask in the woodsmoke for a while. Camping was meant to be pleasurable, so get comfortable and re-create yourself.

*“Two hundred years of American technology has unwittingly created a massive cement playground of unlimited potential. But it was the minds of 11 year olds that could see that potential.”*

Craig Stecyk, 1975

*“Skaters by their very nature are urban guerillas: they make everyday use of the useless artifacts of the technological burden, and employ the handiwork of the government/corporate structure in a thousand ways that the original architects could never dream of.”*

Craig Stecyk, 1976

From ***Dogtown and Z Boys***

## **Camping In The Classic Style**

***David Wescott, 2016***

The Classic Camping style is embraced by men and women who remember what it was like to be 11 years old and can still feel the magic that was created by making fire from nothing or building an entire camp kit from tin cans, scraps of canvas, leather and wood. Classic Camping legitimizes and validates the traditions and heritage that comes from over 100 years of living in the outdoors for recreation. Woodcraft encourages the mastery of craft and handiwork – creating technology rather than purchasing it – making what you needed with a knowledge of the materials born from the wild outdoors. To date, the Classic Camping movement can be labeled ***guerilla*** – venture into a grocery store on your way to camp with your traditional gear on and see what kind of response you get. The general public is drawn to it – they know the feeling – but they no longer know what to do about it or how to access it ...”You made that?! What do you mean you made it?” This is taking place in the face of a corporate/government campaign to make “touch” off limits. Leave No Trace is the philosophical antithesis to Classic Camping... although the practices are encouraged, the underlying foundations of the movement are suspect. Classic Camping is also something that youth recognize as valuable. Even Scouting has decided that woodcraft is an anachronism and has abandoned much of what was known as “scoutcraft” citing that youth no longer relate to it. They could never be more wrong. Every demonstration I have ever done for youth or adults is swarmed with a “Teach me how to do that” attitude. ***Classic Camping is back.***

The publication of David Wescott's Camping In The Old Style in 2000 marks the beginning of the Classic Camping Revival in the US. Watts and Wescott then began to offer a series of classic camping skills courses, both east and west. The “Kamp Kephart” workshop series began in 2005 at the Schiele Museum of Natural History in Gastonia, North Carolina. Participants trained in those workshops have formed the core of a classic camping demonstration team – a group responsible for pioneering experiential history re-encampment events on the east coast. SW

**The Watts & Wescott Field Guide To  
Classic Camping In the Old Style  
Volume I: Campcraft (Life Under Canvas)**

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## **Life Under Canvas**

**What is the lure of classic camping in the old style?**

**Beyond the down-to-earth, practical, nuts and bolts of the skills and the gear lies something more ethereal...something less tangible...but without question just as real.**

**Yes, we confess to a healthy dose of both nostalgia ("a yearning for home" as defined by the Greeks) and romanticism ("an emotional attraction to an especially heroic era, adventure or activity" as defined by the French). Unabashedly, we acknowledge the siren's call.**

**The Golden Age of Camping is about a special time...a time when the most innovative urges of the Industrial Revolution were featured front-and-center against the backdrop of a vanishing frontier. It's about a world in which both Henry Ford and Daniel Boone had something to contribute to the outdoorsman's pursuits.**

**It's about the senses...the smell of wood smoke and paraffin lamps...the taste of honest grub cooked over an open fire...the feel of sharp-edged tools, snug knots and the crisp air of morning...the sound of birdsong at sunrise or wood splitting at dusk. And, let's admit it, it's about style...khaki riding breeches, broad-brimmed hats, soft wool shirts and well greased boots.**

**It's about life....a very special kind of life...a life under canvas.**

## Classic Camping – What Is It And Why Should You Care? By Ross Gilmore, 2013

Classic Camping is a term that has gained popularity recently. A main driving force behind it has been two men, Steve Watts and Dave Wescott. Both men are very accomplished in the field of primitive technology, and have been teaching on the subject for many years. Their expertise in the field covers everything from Neolithic technology, to early 20th century technology and skills.

So, what is Classic Camping? Since the definition of the term comes largely from Watts and Wescott, we have to look to their writings for the definition. According to an interview given by Steve Watts, Classic Camping, encompasses the camping methods and style of the late 1800s through the 1920s. It involves the use of iron tools, canvas tents, and wool clothing. As Mr. Watts explains, it is the time period when the woodsmanship skills of the past intersected with the technology of the early 20th century. In particular, it is the act of leisure camping. It is the point in our history where woodsmanship skills and camping stopped being necessary tools for explorers, hunters, soldiers, and loggers, but rather become a recreational activity for city folk with free time and money to buy a Ford to take them to the camp site.

**He's right so far, but his thesis quickly falls apart after this introduction.**

From *Classic Camping and its Relationship to the Concepts of Wilderness and Wilderness Skills*  
By Tom Ray

Classic Camping is skills-based in nature. By that I mean that we rely more on skills than gear to accomplish tasks such as pitching a tent or cooking a fine meal. This does not make Classic Camping better or worse than modern camping, just different. The skills I practice when camping (depending on how I am camping) could be called Woodcraft, Woodsmanship, Bushcraft or a combination thereof, depending on which skill I am practicing at the time. I am not going to get into definitions here because each term means different things to different people and because of the simple fact that these definitions overlap in some areas. This leads us to an important point. **The skills are what is at the heart of these three terms, not the context in which the skills are practiced.** We should not confuse Classic Camping with the skills we use when we practice Classic Camping, because these skills can be used with almost any kind of camping. Furthermore, **many skills can be practiced in a variety of places, not just in the wilderness.** If learned properly, skills practiced in the country or in your backyard will serve you just fine in the wilderness if you keep your wits about you.

Another very important point that I think is often missed is that no matter what one calls these wilderness skills, be it Bushcraft, Woodcraft, Woodsmanship or what have you, **they are not the sole property of any one group. These skills belong to anyone who puts in the blood, sweat, blisters and dirt time it takes to learn them.** It doesn't matter if they are a Classic Camper, backpacker or (gasp!) a car

camper. **Woodcraft, Woodsmanship and Bushcraft are *not* styles of camping, they *are* sets of skills. Car camping, backpacking, canoe camping and Classic Camping and its variations *are* types of camping, *not* sets of skills.** These sets of skills represent specific knowledge or information. **Both Mears and Kochanski allude to this fact in the beginning of their books. They represent sets of information, not particular types of camping.** For example, from what I have seen, those who use the set of skills most would call Bushcraft are practicing a type of camping I would call backpacking or canoe camping. A day trip is simply a hike. **I think this is the main place where people are getting hung up and unnecessarily coming into conflict. No matter what you call it, the skill set is not the kind of camping that you do. The kind of camping you do determines the skills you need. Some of these skills overlap and are used in many styles of camping.** An example is sharpening. It doesn't matter what kind of camper you are. Sharpening is a skill you need. It fits into the skillsets of Bushcraft, Woodcraft, Woodsmanship or whatever you want to call it. It's the same with laying a fire.