

## Camping

It had been an exciting day. It started very early in the morning, when Bill's dad gently shook him awake. He wasn't exactly certain how early it was. It was still dark out as he stumbled out of the motel room and into the passenger seat of the Plymouth, where he promptly fell asleep again. When he woke up the sun was shining brightly and they were waiting in line at Customs. After a brief conversation with the Customs official they crossed into Canada!

It took them a little longer than expected to make it through Sault Ste. Marie because his dad missed a turn while winding through side streets near the locks, but soon they were on the main highway headed North. Houses, stores, and all other signs of civilization dwindled away. The road wound around rocky hills, or occasionally cut straight through them, while dense pine forests flanked them on either side. Periodically Lake Superior appeared on their left, its steel gray water raked by whitecaps which broke against the rocky shore. An occasional billboard, tourist stop, or gas station reminded them that they hadn't totally escaped the human race, but it was clear to Bill that life here was a lot more rugged than it was back home in Indianapolis.

They stopped for lunch at a restaurant/gas station/gift shop with a cluster of tourist cabins out back. The hamburgers tasted like the real hamburgers Bill's mother made at home, and he and his father shared a plate of a local delicacy - French fries covered with cheese curds and gravy. Then they headed north again.

It was mid-afternoon when Bill's dad stopped at a provincial park office to let the officer know they were headed "into the bush." He described the route they intended to take, where they would camp, and when they would come back out. That was when it really dawned on Bill how different this trip was going to be from the family camping they'd done in Indiana state parks. His mother and his little sister were staying home this time, although his sister complained about it, as this trip was just for Bill and his father.

A little farther north his father turned off the main highway onto a gravel road. The gravel road soon deteriorated into a dirt logging trail. Even though his father was driving slowly, the Plymouth pitched and bounced through the potholes. Eventually his father pulled into a little clearing beside a stream. Bill helped his father take the canoe off the roof of the Plymouth and set it in the stream. Then they unloaded what seemed like a mountain of camping and fishing gear out of the car and carefully packed it into the canoe.

There was just barely enough water in the stream to float their canoe with the two of them in it, but within a very short distance the stream opened into a lake. Bill was fascinated by the water. It was stained brown, like strong tea. Bill could clearly see the bottom of the lake until they got into deep water so it wasn't murky, it was just brown. His father said tannin from pine needles turned it brown. It wasn't hard to see where the pine needles came from. The lake was in the middle of a pine forest. There were no grass fields or open meadows to be seen. Just acres and acres of pine trees, with a birch tree showing here and there. In most places there was no beach. The forest came down to the water's edge and trees hung out over the lake. In other places huge boulders and

rock outcroppings fringed in gray-green lichen edged the lake. Occasionally there would be a thin strip of sand for a beach, a very few of which actually had a small clear area between the beach and the forest. These were few and far between, however. For as far as you could see in any direction, the forest covered everything. There was no horizon, or at least, not a horizon like Bill was used to seeing in Indiana. In Indiana a horizon was far away. Here, there was a ridgeline around the lake. Sometimes it was right next to the lake, edging a granite cliff that plunged into the brown water, and sometimes it was a half-mile or more back from the water's edge, but the lake was surrounded by an unbroken wall of trees. Here and there a dead tree stood a little higher than its neighbors, its bleached white branches giving a forlorn look to the forest.

Bill was disappointed when he saw a tent clinging to one of the narrow clearings behind a sand beach. He had imagined that they were the only human beings who had ever seen this lake. Then he saw another tent, and then a cabin. They rounded a point and he saw a cabin that looked like a year-round house at the back of the bay. It actually had a cleared yard, although there didn't appear to be any grass, and a pier with a speedboat. Bill joked about the lake being crowded. "Just wait 'til we make the first portage," his dad replied.

In a little while his dad pointed to a dip in the ridgeline ahead. "See that low spot in the ridgeline?" he asked. "That's the first portage."

Bill could see the dip in the ridgeline, but as he looked around the lake he could see lots of dips. Did every dip indicate a portage? When he looked back he was surprised to realize that he could no longer see where they had started. There were so many twists, turns, and islands in the lake that it was impossible to see the entire lake. You could only see a portion of the lake at any one time. Bill asked his dad how he could be certain that was the portage.

"That's why you need a good map" his father replied, pointing to a map he had secured to a backpack in front of him. "I've been watching the shoreline ever since we put in, keeping track of where we are. I know the portage is somewhere just ahead, and the dip in the ridgeline is the most likely spot. Nobody wants to carry a canoe over a mountain. They look for the lowest hill, and the shortest path between two lakes."

In a little while they came to the portage. Someone had tied a piece of orange ribbon to a tree to mark it, but it was right where Bill's dad said it would be. They pulled up on the shore and began the laborious process of carrying all of their gear and their canoe along a narrow path that took them over a hill and down to another lake. It took them three trips apiece to carry everything. Bill's father carried the canoe, but before they had even begun to seriously plan this trip Bill had to prove to his father that he could carry a canoe by himself. His father said they couldn't take the trip unless Bill was able to get out of the bush by himself, just in case something happened to his father. That meant he had to be able to read a map, carry a canoe, and drive. He only had his learner's permit for driving it was true, but in an emergency he could drive for help.

The next lake was huge, and even the light wind that was blowing that day created whitecaps out deep. Fortunately they only had to go a short distance on this lake, and they could keep close to shore where they were sheltered from the wind. As they paddled

away from the portage Bill's father told him to turn around and memorize the shoreline near the portage. "Remember," he said. "To get back home we'll have to find the portage from this lake. Things look different when you're going the other direction."

The portage out of this lake wasn't as long as the first portage, but they still had to take everything out of the canoe and carry it to the next lake. That lake was relatively small, with one big island in the middle. Bill looked around and realized what his father had meant by "after we make the first portage." He hadn't seen a soul since they left that first lake. No tents, no cabins, no sign that any other human being had ever been to this lake. Bill was anxious to start fishing, but his father pointed out that it was already late afternoon and they had to make one more portage and set up camp before it got dark.

The sun was setting as they finished their last portage but Bill's father had been to this lake before with his fishing buddies so they paddled straight to a thin strip of sand next to a small clearing where they could pitch their tent. The twilight seemed to last forever - Bill's father said it was because they were so far north - so they had enough light to set up their tent, gather firewood, and heat up a pot of beans and hot dogs. They watched the light slowly fade from the sky as they ate. For the first time Bill heard the haunting, lonely cry of a loon. The air smelled incredibly fresh. His hands smelled of pine sap from gathering wood, and the smoke from the campfire gave a warm, spicy scent to the night air. Bill knew he would never forget this day.

And now he was lying in his sleeping bag, with his father snoring softly beside him. Tomorrow they would spend the whole day fishing and exploring this wilderness lake. The air had turned cool. It felt almost nippy on his nose, but he was warm inside his sleeping bag. Everything was just about perfect. Except he had to pee.

One of the cruel facts of life that experienced campers have learned is that when you wake up in the middle of the night, you'll have to climb out of your warm sleeping bag and venture into the cold night air to pee. You might as well do it right away and get it over with, because there's no getting around it. It doesn't matter that you never have to do this at home. Your bladder doesn't know the meaning of the word "consistency." You can try to ignore it and go back to sleep. It won't work. You can try to think about something else. You won't succeed. You can remind yourself that you peed just before you went to bed so there's no logical reason why you should have to pee now. Your bladder won't listen to reason.

Bill tried all these time honored stratagems plus a few new ones he invented on the spot, but with no luck. Eventually he gave in and slipped out of his sleeping bag. His bare skin instantly convulsed into goose bumps. He pulled on his jeans as quickly as he could, an act which was made more difficult because there wasn't enough room to stand up in the tent and he didn't want to wake his father. He pulled on his boots but things were getting urgent so he didn't take the time to lace them up and tie them. Grabbing his sweat shirt and his flashlight, he stepped out of the tent.

The night sky astounded him. He thought it had been dark when he went to bed, but apparently there was just enough twilight left so the sky didn't look any different than the night sky in Indiana. Now the sky was as black as India ink, and the stars were brilliantly white. For the first time he truly understood how immense the universe was, and the

concept of an uncountable number of stars was driven home. The Milky Way was a distinct white band, not the vague blur he saw at home, and it split into two bands as it stretched across the sky. For a few minutes he forgot about his bladder and stared at the sky in awe.

The cold air on his bare arms eventually brought him back to reality. He realized he was still holding his sweat shirt so he quickly pulled it on. He didn't turn on his flashlight because he didn't want to destroy his night vision. He wanted to look at the stars some more after he finished his business. There was enough light from the stars that he could see the ground and find the animal trail that led back into the woods from their campsite. It wasn't very bright, especially once he stepped into the trees, but he didn't have to go far.

There is a peculiar, unreasonable phenomenon that makes men feel vulnerable when they unzip their fly in the woods. The sensation is heightened if their boots are unlaced. It's at its worst if they're squatting with their pants around their ankles, but even when standing this is the time when thoughts of predators began to torment their imagination. Coyotes, wolves, mountain lions, and especially bears seem to be lurking everywhere in the darkness. The feeling is unreasonable because if any of these creatures did decide to attack you, it really wouldn't matter where your trousers were. You're pretty much toast. It also doesn't matter whether or not your boots are laced up. You're not going to outrun any of these animals. You're on their turf and you're playing by their rules. Your superior intellect isn't going to help you much unless you happened to use it to arm yourself *before* you stepped into the woods to pee.

These thoughts raced through Bills mind as he quickly concluded his business. He was just zipping up when he heard a twig snap behind him. He froze and was absolutely silent. The woods were silent, too. Maybe it had been his imagination. Then he heard another snap, and a muffled noise that sounded like a very heavy paw stepping on a lichen covered rock. A bear! And it was between him and the tent! Chances are it was going to come down the trail Bill was on.

As noiselessly as possible Bill edged off the trail, nestling his head between some pine branches that he hoped would hide him. He frantically looked around for a weapon. He could dimly see a streak of white by his feet that turned out to be a stick from a birch tree. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

Something was definitely walking in his direction. He held his breath and gripped the stick tighter. He could hear the creature pushing through the pine boughs. Then he could see something dark against the faint starlight on the trees. It was walking upright like a bear, but it was smaller than he'd expected. Maybe, just maybe, it was a small bear and he had a chance. He silently raised the stick. The bear was beside him and he was poised to strike when he caught a glimpse of bare skin on its face.

"Dad!?" he gasped.

The figure leaped aside in surprise at this unexpected sound. Two flashlights clicked on simultaneously, each instinctively shining in the other's face with the result that neither one of them could see anything.

“Bill?” his father said, squinting at the glare. “I thought you were still in the tent.” They both lowered their flashlights. As their sight returned, Bill’s father asked “What’s the stick for?”

“Oh” Bill said, looking at the stick in his hand. In the light from his father’s flashlight he could see that the stick was less than a foot long, and it was rotten. “I thought this looked like a good piece of firewood, but I see now that it’s rotten.” He tossed the stick into the woods.

“You got up in the middle of the night to look for firewood?” his father asked.

“No” Bill quickly replied. “I got up because I had to pee. When I saw how bright the stars are I decided not to turn on my flashlight because I wanted to look at the stars again afterward.”

“I did the same thing,” his father answered. He looked at Bill expectantly. It took Bill a moment to realize what his father was waiting for.

“Well, I guess I’ll go back and look at the stars” he said, walking back toward the tent.

“By the way,” his father called over his shoulder. “If you ever happen to come across a bear, don’t try to attack it with a stick. “You’re not going to win that fight. Just stand still and tell it to go away in a normal voice. If you feel like you’re too close you can back away slowly, but don’t turn and run or it will chase you. You can’t outrun a bear. Bears are afraid of humans, especially bears in the wilderness. Unless it thinks you’re attacking it, chances are it will try to get away from you.”

Bill’s father walked a little deeper into the woods looking for a bush that needed watering. He chuckled as he remembered the Cub Scout pocket knife he had carried for bear protection the first time his dad took him camping.