



The Monthly Column

Note: In February, we'll be putting out a book on tents and tentmaking that has much of the contents of these articles, plus some additional stuff. At that time, we'll be removing the articles from the web site. Until then, feel free to download what you find interesting.

December's Column:

Situating the Campsite

How to make the best of the situation.

You can have the best tent in the world and still have a terrible time camping. The tent is only a small part of the total environment of the campsite. Outside, there are several factors that you may not have much control over. The secret to success in camping, as in life itself, is to attend to the things that you can control and do what you can to minimize the effect of the things you can't control.

The Campsite

This is one of those areas where you may not have much control. If you've been assigned an area, you'll have to camp there. But at least you can situate yourself in the best possible part of your assigned spot.

If rain is expected (or even if it's not), try to locate yourself on terrain that won't be flooded. In other words, don't be the lowest thing around. Make sure that there is adequate drainage, too. Somehow, all those jokes about "running water in your camp" get to be real old, real quick. A pocket-sized level, perched atop a tent pole laid on the ground, can give you accurate data about which way the ground slopes places which deceive the eye.

In areas of wind, try to situate yourself so that your back is to the prevailing wind. How can you tell which way the wind usually blows? Look for the way some of the trees are leaning. Or ask the locals. In most parts of the country, the strongest winds are usually from the west, but there are too many variables --- local storm patterns, local topography, and so on -- to take any particular direction for granted. For example, if you're camping in a canyon, the wind is probably going to follow the canyon's length, rather than blow across it. If you're at the base of a mountain, expect fairly strong breezes in the evening coming from air coming down the mountain. If you have any doubts about your tent's ability to weather the winds, arrange to have wind lines stabilize the tent when you set up.

You'll also want to know which way the wind likes to blow when you orient yourself with respect to the toilets. I'm sure the authenticity freaks will want to put themselves directly downwind of the toilets to heighten the medieval redolence of their campsites. I'm equally sure that everybody else will want to do the opposite.

Another factor to consider is sun. If you have a partial-wall sunshade, it's worth considering how you want to orient to maximize the shade at those times of the day that you most need it. Savvy campers already know that setting up in the trees will keep you cooler than tents set up elsewhere. But examine the ground carefully to be sure those trees won't be dripping sap or dropping branches on you.

It should also go without saying that you want the campsite to be level. If that's impossible, at least arrange the beds inside so that your head is at the high point. I usually bring pieces of wood in various sizes so I can shim up tables (especially the kitchen tables) to be level.

If the stay is to be a long one, you will find that small stones under the rugs and ground cloth will appear to grow over time, until they seem to be large rocks. So take a rake and a broom with you and groom the area as much as you can before you lay down the ground cloth.

Noise control

If noise doesn't bother you, consider yourself blessed, and read no further. But if you're like me, you'll select your campsite so as to maximize your isolation from:

1. Roads. Particularly on the day of set up, you can count on cars using the roads well into the wee hours of the morning. Roads mean cars. Cars mean car doors. Doors mean slamming. If the area is very dry, it also doesn't take much traffic to create a lot of dust, so those with sensitivities to dust (or those who like to keep their tents clean) usually like to keep themselves some distance from the road.

2. Privies. Port-a-potty doors have amazing acoustical carry when slammed. And be sure that port-a-potties will be used all night long. Remember that if you camp twice as far from the port-a-potties, you will get only a quarter of the noise.

Speaking of privies, you'll find that another drawback of being close to privies (in addition to their aroma) is that there will be a lot of traffic going to and from them. It may be nice to live by the side of the road and be a friend to man, but you'll be a lot friendlier if you take that traffic into account and leave the pathways clear for them. It's easy to say "I was here first!" but even cogent arguments fall before the pressure of a full bladder or queasy stomach.

It also helps sometimes to identify where the noisy parts of camp are. If quiet is important to you, try to contact the group or individual that will be running the show and make a point of asking about it. It's always too late to try to establish the policy on the night you arrive. Groups and sites vary greatly in their ability to accommodate noise. If, despite your best efforts, the noise level is still too high, there are always ear-plugs. The best ones I've found are little bits of foam called "Ears." My biggest objection to them is that I can't hear the heralds in the morning, or the very soft beep my alarm makes.

Other Considerations

If you're camping with children, you need to be aware of any special hazards nearby -- ponds, rivers, steep areas, poisonous vegetation, and critters like wasps. In fact, any of these could ruin anybody's event, but the consequences for children are usually much more severe.

If really inclement weather happens, it's not unusual for site owners to severely restrict the vehicle traffic on the site. That means that you may not be allowed to drive on to the site to load your stuff. In that case, the road you were trying not to camp near suddenly becomes your salvation, if it's the closest they'll let the cars get to the camping area. For these situations, a push-cart or wagon really comes in handy. I made one out of a shipping crate and two old bicycle wheels. It doesn't look very period, but folds up flat and lives behind the tent and covered up when not in use ... and when it's needed, no one can be found to complain about its looks. I'll eventually replace it with a more authentic pushcart.

If you're camping in areas that are overgrown and you'd like to have a fire, there are a few more tools you need to carry with you. The first is a scythe or "weed whip" to cut back tall grass. (I'm not talking about those powered tools, but the tool with a flat, bent blade that you swing kind of like a golf club). You'll also appreciate a lawn rake to clear away the grass you've just chopped down. A shovel also comes in handy. In a pinch, I've used one of those folding shovels called an "entrenching tool" by the folks in the military) as both a shovel and a weed whip. It got the job done, but it made me wish I'd brought the proper tools for the task. The entrenching tool doesn't take up much room, and it gets used at least two or three times a year.

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Other articles of interest, mostly about tents and tentmaking

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