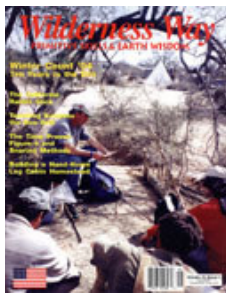


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## Winter Count '04 Ten Years in the Dirt

by Dude McLean and Alan Halcon  
Photos by Dude McLean



"Winter Count" of old was when various Indian tribes gathered each winter to see who had been born, who died, who got married, to socialize, to work on tools for survival, and to await the Spring.

So, in that tradition, Backtracks' "Winter Count" is the only primitive event held during that time of the year. Backtracks is the same group of folks who host the

annual Rabbit Stick event in Idaho, and who publishes the *Bulletin of Primitive Technology*. Winter Count is held each February in Maricopa, Arizona, and the focus is primitive technology. Dozens of workshops are featured where you can learn myriad primitive skills from some of the country's top instructors. Winter Count is not a so-called "period" event where everyone wears a costume. (Oh yes, you will see buckskins and other outfits worn by many, but just as many do not, and cellular phones are a common accessory.)

When we arrived at the February's 10th Annual Winter Count with our *Wilderness Way* cameras, color, sound, smell, and the general overall look of things assaulted us. The encampment was loaded with tents of all kinds, camper trucks, cars, RVs, tipis, and leantos. We could smell food cooking. There were close to 250 attendees rushing about, getting ready for the after-noon events. From bush hippies to business owners, doctors, plumbers and professional trappers, it was a cross section of Americans with a common interest in primitive skills. Some brought their children, who were also kept busy by their participation in classes.

Backtracks' David and Paula Wescot greeted us and rolled out the red carpet, or we should say, the red dirt. We were introduced to the whole gathering at a general meeting that afternoon.

The instructors and artisans are invited by Backtracks to attend the Winter Count gathering and lead the workshops. Anywhere from twenty to thirty classes are held from about 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. ("Abo" time) every day during this weeklong event. These classes include many hands on workshops, lectures, and discussion sessions that last from one hour to all day (and in some cases, more than a day). Although there were classes that overlapped or "competed" in the same time slot, there was often the opportunity to catch a "repeat" of a class on another day.

Running down the list of some of the events that were posted on the bulletin board in the center of the camp, we saw classes on maintaining, felting, basketry, earth pigment paints, shelters, and card weaving. The list continues with enough to fill each of the seven days. Since we were representing *Wilderness Way*, we tried to cover each and every class, which was an impossible task. All of this activity goes on in an extremely friendly atmosphere—not only very family like, but tribal.

Everyone we spoke with was more than generous with their time and expertise. We interviewed many of the top instructors in the field. We also spoke with attendees, first timers, and some that have been to all ten Winter Counts. Once the group understood that we were not just rookie reporters, but had more than considerable dirttime and skills under our belts, we were welcomed as part of the "family."



One of the skills that we were able to observe included the making of a quickie survival bow. The instructor employed three sticks of river cane, but he could have as easily used willow or any similar wood. The bow takes about two hours to make. The sticks are lashed together at about ten tie points. This is an amazingly fast-made bow that works easily for all skill levels.

Dick Baugh demonstrated the Egyptian fire bow method for us. One of the secrets is how the cord wraps around the fire drill. This method allows for a weaker cordage to be used, and gives a positive spin without the slippage and pressure that is prevalent in the one-wrap method. This permits you to use a smaller set to carry in your kit. Even dental floss will work as a cord. Even more impressive—Dick got a coal in about 15 to 20 seconds.

We thought we knew a lot of traps, but we were not even close to matching the number that was fashioned at Winter Count. The primitive trapping class was a standout, with great attention to detail, and we learned to make some very easy and ingenious trap triggers. Tom Cartwright's presentation reemphasized his expertise in his field.

Paul H. Campbell, well-known author, lecturer, and researcher in the primitive skills and arts, conducted a hands-on, hands-in class of earth pigment paints. Paul handcrafted many of the bowls himself.



We watched as Cody Lundin inspected gourds for his upcoming canteen classes. Water containers are important and have to be made the right way. Cody is the author of *98.6 Degrees: The Art of Keeping Your Ass Alive*. We picked up a copy of his book at Winter Count and highly recommend it as a "must-have."



Throwing the atlatl is very enjoyable and the instructors were first rate. There were atlatls made from PVC pipe as well as from traditional woods. Atlatls were being made from scratch in the classes and thrown at hay bale targets. People learned within minutes to hit the target. We could not stay away. Alan was shown how to hold and release the dart and in about 5 throws, he was hitting the target with consistency.

Dr. John H. Standing Bear Hoopingarner, a native American Delaware Indian, survival teacher, U.S. Marine scout, Arizona game ranger, Tewa bear clan member and psychologist (whew!), is a font of knowledge and a most fascinating man to learn from. His class covered desert plants and wildlife, healing, herbal medicines, food, signaling, basic survival skills, tracking, and animal lore.

Winter Count provides two full meals a day pre-pared by the staff—breakfast and dinner. If you are hungry for anything else or if you want something "different," you are on your own. The food is all organic, simple fare. It is utilitarian, but Winter Count is not about the food.

For the duration, very colorful display tables were set up everywhere through-out the camp, selling decorative gourd craft, leather goods, buckskin clothing, jewelry, books, musical instruments, knives, primitive tools, herbs, woven crafts and anything that is hand-crafted and/or related to the primitive skills lifestyle of the well-heeled Abo.

If you are lucky enough to attend next year's Winter Count, you will be busy. At the end of the day and after dinner, a large campfire is lit and folks gather around to talk, sing, play drums, banjos, didgeridoos, and dance until late into the evening. Meanwhile, way over by George Michaud's tipi, where he teaches brain tanning, there was another boisterous group, all bunched around a fastmoving "trade blanket" full of wares ranging from decorated gourd bowls, self bows, knives, brain tan skins, felted hats, books, pouches, clothing, and even "frog skins" (real currency). Folks bring items for trade, and it is a lively time with applause when a successful trade is made (we wanted every-thing!).

So much is going on from sunup to the full moon at midnight that a week at Winter Count is like a full season at summer camp. Do not be like us and wait years before you go. Put Winter Count on your calendar for this time next year.

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**Please Note:** The Winter Count flier emphasizes that this a wholesome event for the whole family with no drugs or alcohol allowed. *"This is not a naked bush hippie event,"* is stated in the flier.



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