

The lure of a campfire



There is something magical, even spiritual, about a campfire, especially when you share it with family or friends. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

BY TIPS FROM THE POSSE
BY MARK RACKAY

In the background of just about all of my fondest outdoor memories, is a campfire. Staring vacantly into the last glowing embers surrounded by the gray- ing ash, with the sparks rising to the heavens, your nostrils full of the sweet smell of the burn- ing logs and the sounds of the trapped steam as it bursts open from the wood.

On most of my North- wood fishing trips across Canada, lunch is always on the shore with a roar- ing fire to cook on. Fish that were swimming an hour ago, fried in a skillet, alongside pota- toes and onions. Cer- tainly not cardiologist approved, but the finest eating outdoors anyone can ever experience.

Off to South Ameri- ca, where at days end a large fire is built with a local wood similar to mesquite. When moun- tains of orange coals are ready, steaks as thick as a dictionary are tossed on, with beef ribs as a side dish. When the supper is finished, all sit around the fire for warmth and a glass or two of man's best friend.

There is something mysterious about a

campfire. A camp, made up of 15 campers and a handful of tents can be scattered about the land- scape, with each camper busily involved in their own separate activity, until someone starts the evening campfire.

Once the others get a whiff of the smoke or hear the first couple of pops as the flames take hold of the logs, the tru- ly magnetic effect of the fires takes place. Peo- ple begin leaving their activity and congregate around that fire, as if in a trance or some type of magical spell.

The magic of the fire continues into the evening, as the sun disappears in the west, dragging all the orange colors with it, leaving complete blackness behind. Everyone stays close to the fire for warmth and all eyes stare vacantly into the dancing flames that have a life of their own.

Conversation will cover everything from the day's activities, fishing in the creek, elk running the ridge above camp, to politics, religion and the general state of the union. Magical- ly, the crowd will turn melancholy, and begin reminiscing about past campfires and simpler times. Sometimes multi-



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ple conversations carry on amongst the group.

And then it happens. All conversation sud- denly stops. Everyone stares vacantly into the dying embers, and silence takes over. Not just a normal silence but more of a pregnant silence that comes easily, with little expectation of what may or may not happen next. Perhaps it is the point of true relax- ation. Isn't that what you were looking for on this trip anyway?

Fire has been an im- portant part of evolu- tion. In 2012, archaeol- ogists discovered traces of ash, burnt twigs and animal bones while ex- cavating a cave in South Africa. What they un- covered was the remains of a million-year-old campfire, made by homo erectus, a species that predates homo sapiens, or you and me.

The existence of this campfire site suggests that our distant ances-

tors invented campfire before they invented anything else, perhaps with the exception of stone tools. It represents evidence of early man learning to work togeth- er. Early man learned that the fire would warm him and cook his food.

The problem our ancestors had was an inability to start a fire. They obviously did not have stick matches or a Bic lighter. They would have to find a lightning struck tree to get a blaze going. Early man could only maintain a fire, which is where the working together start- ed, as all would have to pitch in to keep it going.

Imagine the difficulty of having to relocate an early village and moving the fire with you. Some poor soul would be charged with carrying the fire with them, which might have entailed dragging along a burning tree. If the keeper of the fire screwed up, and let the fire go out, the sentence could have been severe or possibly a capital offense.

When you stare into those flames, you are witnessing a complex chemical reaction called pyrolysis. The wood is turned into a gas, gas that is ignited by heat,

and light generated from the excitement of the electrons. The entire process is simply tearing a log into as many pieces as possible. The tearing releases chemical bonds, expending energy as heat and light.

Many people believe that the fire is alive, containing a beast with- in. When you watch a fire, it appears alive and moves with a mind of its own. Fire can spread across a landscape, mov- ing from one combusti- ble object to the next. It can consume materials, like wood, and convert it into ash. Like most life, a fire requires oxygen; in the same way we require breath, plants being the exception as they feed on carbon dioxide.

Anyone who has experienced a large wildfire can attest to fire having a life of its own. Driven by wind and humidity levels, a large fire can actually create its own weather. Often times, the result is a fire tornado. I prefer to see my fires contained in a small ring of rocks, leaving the big fires to the professionals.

Fire has been an important part of man for as long as he has walked on this earth and still is for my money. I have reached the point

that I can build a fire just about anytime I am outdoors, should the need arise. All I need to get a roaring blaze is a pit, some kindling, a few dry logs and half a box of kitchen matches.

I enjoy sitting by a fire at days end, with a glass of man's best friend, and a few friends. Falling asleep by the fire, as the embers retire for the night, is probably the best sleep I have ever had. Waking up as the sunrise hemorrhages in the east, all I have to do is stir the coals a bit, add a new log and bring the coffee to a boil. The start of a day does not get any better than that.

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