

Camp food for kids

When we were kids, camping trips were a spur of the moment type of thing, meaning it suddenly popped into one of our little sunburned heads, as in, “I know, let’s go camping.”

Before any trip, the necessary preparations had to be made. First, we had to browbeat a parent to haul us all up to some spot in the mountains and promise to come back and pick us up. There was always the fear that your parents would get used to you not being around, and kind of like the idea. In my case, I was sure my grandfather would rent out my room.

The second thing we had to do was forage for food. Foraging for us was a means of living off the land. Foraging was everything you could grab from your family’s kitchen, icebox and pantry, without getting caught.

This method of foraging meant you must not only be stealthy and quick, but also could not be too picky about what food you would bring to camp. Heaven help the kid that brought vegetables.

My earliest camp food was probably the good old hot dog. Hot dogs are still one of the best foods for a campfire. You only need a sharp stick to cook them. A kid does not have to be too picky about how well the hot dog is cooked, since most of them are precooked when you buy them. Clean-up is a breeze, just toss the hot dog stick in the fire.

Another very popular camp food is the s’more. As kids, we did not get these very often. Most of our families did not have money for chocolate bars or marshmallows. Desserts in our house might have been



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

a pie or cake on Sunday, but store-bought candy was a real treat. When someone did luck into the ingredients, graham crackers, marshmallows and chocolate bars, it was an extra treat.

Marshmallows are the secret ingredient of a s’more, and like all my favorite camp foods, they can be cooked on a stick, with the same clean up routine. People will buy some 45 million pounds of marshmallows a year to cook on sticks over a campfire. The hot toasted marshmallows are wedged between two graham crackers and a hunk of a chocolate bar known, to all, as the s’more.

Marshmallows have been around for hundreds of years, coming from a plant known as the marsh mallow, or Althea officinalis in case you were wondering, native to Northern Africa and parts of Asia. The sap from the root was boiled down, strained, and sweetened as a cure for sore throats or eaten as a treat.

The ancient marshmallow looked very similar to the ones we eat today but they were much more labor intensive to make back then. Each marshmallow had to be individually

poured and molded, making them a very expensive treat that only the rich people could afford. The marshmallow of today contains no marshmallow sap at all. They are made up of corn syrup, cornstarch and gelatin. So much for tradition.

Credit for the creation of the s’more probably goes to the Girl Scouts. In the 1927 edition of the Girl Scout Manual, Tramping and Trailing with the Girl Scouts the addictive treat is mentioned, dubbing it “some More.” Other people believe the s’more is a homemade version of the famous Mallomar or Moon Pie, which were both introduced in the early 1900s.

Today you can buy a s’more flavored Pop Tart. I would think that Pop Tarts would have been a decent camping food for us kids, but they weren’t around yet. You can also find premade s’more treats in the store, but I would think it is more fun to make your own on a camping trip.

Warning: while s’mores are a delicious treat for kids, they can be toxic to adults. A kid can consume a half dozen of them in a single sitting, but I highly recommend that an adult limit their intake to one.

Canned foods were a popular food for camp food. We always opted for the foods in a tin can rather than a glass canning jar. Very few glass jars can survive the rigors of a camping trip intact, besides, you were expected to bring any canning jars back home.

The most famous canned camp food has to be the pork and beans, which were created by Gilbert Van Camp sometime during the Civil War.



When you take kids camping, like Faith and Chance Watkins, shown here, you had better have something they are going to eat. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

Canned pork and beans became a staple for the soldiers of the Union Army.

In 1894 Gilbert’s son, Frank, added a tomato sauce to the mix and the rest was history. Within four years, Van Camp’s Pork and Beans were selling 4 million cans a year. Canned foods were around in glass jars and tin cans, since the very early 1800s. The bad news was the can opener was not around until Ezra Warner invented one in 1858. That meant most cans had to be opened with a hammer and chisel.

As kids, we ate lots of canned pork and beans. We never dared take a can opener from the family kitchen. My grandmother

had a can opener that was given to her by her mother. If I took that on a camping trip, it would have been considered a capital offense. We could not take a hammer and tools either, so we used rocks and a nail, or we hammered a hole in the can with a hunting knife. Either method usually ended up with beans all over the kid and wounds that needed attention.

Nowadays, we have coolers, cook stoves, campers, refrigerators and dehydrated foods. Making a meal outdoors has become very sophisticated and I find the whole process rather tedious.

How much simpler it was to forage food in

the family kitchen when nobody was looking and have everyone throw their collected foods in the communal pile for all us kids to share.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

Box elder: An Arbor Day connection

Talk to a staff member at one of the area greenhouses about box elder trees and they may try to talk you out of buying one. There was a time when residents around the country planted many of these trees around their homes. They grow quickly casting a broad canopy of shade.

But the list of reasons to dislike them is long, starting with the brittle limbs that easily break, and rot-susceptible trunks. Plus legions of box elder bugs that will conquer your home in late summer because they adore the



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

warmth of your furnace.

Box elder trees (Acer negundo), natives of North America, can tolerate drought and, particularly, heat through long hot

summers. They primarily grow along streams and rivers in the West. They are not remarkably tall, don’t add fragrance to the forest, and aren’t anyone’s state tree among the 50 states. But I thought that there must be more to this tree that is tied into the web of life across our continent.

Some box elders grow to immense size, perhaps 90 feet tall, with trunks three feet in diameter. One such specimen grew on a wild slope near our neighborhood. Children had pounded boards in the trunk, making steps up to

plywood boards that once formed a fort. I sometimes wonder what secrets the tree heard which were made and kept. What snacks helped fire their imaginations for adventures and explorations?

Spotting a box elder can be challenging. It is a species of maple, but unlike the multi-lobed leaf of other maples (see a picture of the Canadian flag), the box elder has a compound leaf separated into five or seven lobes.

An important difference in this species is that box elder trees are dioecious (die-EE-shuss). It’s hard

to say – I had to practice several times. It means that individual trees have either male or female flowers; not both. They devote energy to producing seeds, but breeding between different trees adds diversity to the gene pool of the species.

A crucial outcome is that box elders are more adaptable to sudden changes in their world. A study some 30 years ago also found that box elder trees, particularly female, can control moisture loss from their leaves through various adaptations of their stomates; microscopic pores in leaves

through which water vapor and gases (think oxygen and carbon dioxide) are exchanged.

That adaptation is helpful during summers in the arid West. A trait that these trees don’t share with other maples is one of sweet sap that can be made into syrup. Various tribes in the West tap into box elders for the fluid, but the trees are not known for juice that yields the rich taste and dark amber color of the sugar maple of New England or the upper Midwest.

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