
“CAMPING HAS TWO PURPOSES:
TO MAKE US ACQUAINTED WITH OUR
OWN SOULS, AND TO RENEW OUR
ACQUAINTANCE WITH EACH OTHER.”

FRANK H. CHELEY

FROM

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CAMPING *in the* OLD STYLE



DAVID
WESCOTT



GIBBS
SMITH

CAMPING

in the

OLD STYLE



DAVID WESCOTT



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[SECTION TWO]

The
**TRADITIONAL
CANVAS
SHELTER**



“The principal function of a tent is to make a real “woodser” of you. A shack or a log cabin, located in the heart of the woods, will shelter you from the elements and put you in reasonable touch with the sights and sounds and smells of the wilderness, but you are not of it, not in the real heart of the wild life, nor will a year in a cabin be as beneficial to your health as thirty days in a tent. The reason is that, day and night, there is a constant seepage of the fresh ozone of the forest through the texture of the tent wall, neither draft nor stagnation, but a constant change of air. The fresh, fine woods aroma is not barred out by log or clapboard, nor yet does it blow over you in chilling drafts as in an open-air bivouac or under a single sheet of shelter cloth. I never regarded the latter as anything but an unnecessary outdoor hardship, and the cabin I have always considered as anything but a luxury when there was a possible choice of a tent to sleep in.” (Warren H. Miller, *Camp Craft*, 1915)



The triangle is the most stable structural form, and most tent designs are based on the triangle. The wedge, or “A,” tent is the most obvious use of the triangle.

THE CANVAS TENT

The first thing we think of when remembering camping in a cotton tent is the old surplus rag that our dad or scoutmaster had. It was dark, smelled of chemicals, was like an oven when the sun hit it, and took an army to move or set up. Then when we got it up, every seam leaked like a sieve. It was a hot, smelly, heavy, and unwieldy behemoth. Compared to today’s tents that are light, compact down to nothing, have flexible poles, and are easy to find, why would anyone go back to the old style?

This line of reasoning comes from the fact that we were never exposed to well-made canvas tents or high-quality canvas fabrics. Fabrics such as Egyptian cotton, which is difficult to obtain in today’s market, rivaled even the best space-age fabrics for weight and weatherproof capabilities.

“There is a large variety [of tents], each of which is suited for special needs and conditions. You should be familiar with all the standard shapes, advantages and disadvantages, and then select the one you think best suited for your particular purpose. But if at all possible, be sure to camp in a tent. Cabins, shacks, and shanties have their attractions and place, no doubt, and should not be belittled, but for a real camping out in the summertime, a tent.”

—Frank H. Cheley, *Camping Out: A Handbook for Boys*, 1933

It was common to see an eight-by-ten-foot wall tent with four-foot side walls that weighed a mere twelve pounds listed in a catalog. These tents were light, very roomy, and let the light penetrate into the tent. The other thing is that when these tents were well maintained, they would last for generations.

The open tent, properly set with a well-laid fire, harkens back to the earliest days of our woodcraft traditions. Although actually late in the development of tent designs, the open woodcraft style really lets us live in the outdoors on its terms while still maintaining a level of comfort and protection that let’s us rough it smoothly.

Living in a closed tent heated by a woodstove has no match for comfort, aesthetics, or style. When viewed from the outside, the simple lines of the tent, with smoke gently rising from the chimney and the whole structure lit to a warm glow

with candles or lanterns, speaks of the true wildwood home. This icon of traditional camping has earned its place as our choice for how to camp. It hasn’t outlived its usefulness, as we think of much “old-fashioned” gear. Once you come to understand its value and beauty, and make an educated decision on the style of camping you would like to do, traditional wood and canvas has no rivals.

Types of Tents

The size of the tent and what it’s made out of determine just how portable it will be. Some fabric-covered tents require premade poles or frames of wood or metal. Others can be rigged on a rope or pole ridgeline that can be created in the field. In the case of traditional camping, the fabric is some form of cotton—ten-ounce canvas and Egyptian cotton being the most common for mobile camps.

The variety of designs is limitless (the *World Book Encyclopedia* sets the number at half a million). For one of the best books on the evolution of tent design, locate a copy of Godfrey Rhodes’s *Tents and Tent-Life, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Time* (1858). It’s been said that all of the old outdoor writers left their legacy on the sport by designing a tent and hanging their name on it. Why a tent? Why not a pack or stove, or knot? Most tents are a variation on simple geometry, and most modifications weren’t always an improvement.

Size is also a factor when considering mobility. Tents can be had in all sizes, but how many people will help move it and stay in it determine what size is required. There is, however, a point of diminishing returns. A two-person tent is optimal for size, weight, and material. If you have more people, size and weight can be divided amongst the campers. For winter, ten feet by twelve feet is probably as large as you want to go. If you need more room, get another tent.

A tent is merely a windbreak. It provides no insulative value, but temporarily holds a bubble of warm air or captures radiated heat from an open fire. A stove keeps generating heat to offset the loss of warmth through the tent fabric.

“And now I wish to devote some space to one of the most important adjuncts of woodcraft, i.e., camps; . . . There are camps, and camps. There are camps in the North Woods that are really fine villas, costing thousands of dollars, and there are log-houses and shanties and bark camps and A tents and walled tents, shelter-tents and shanty-tents. But, I assume that the camp best fitted to the wants of the average outer is the one that combines the essentials of dryness, lightness, portability, cheapness and is easily and quickly put up. Another essential is, that it must admit of a bright fire in front by night or day.”

—Nessmuk, *Woodcraft*, 1884



Living in a tent adds chairs, beds, and other furnishings that require additional height.