

# A Fine and Pleasant Misery

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More witty cautionary tales of outdoor life, by everybody's favorite expert on the subject, Patrick F. McManus.

Patrick F. McManus has published novels, plays, and more than a dozen collections of his humor columns from *Outdoor Life* and other magazines. There are nearly two million copies of his book in print, including his bestselling *The Shoot Canoes, Don't They?: The Night the Bear Ate Goombaw*; and *A Fine and Pleasant Misery*. He divides his time between Spokane, Washington and Idaho. *Fine And Pleasant Misery, A*

*A Fine and Pleasant Misery* MODERN TECHNOLOGY has taken most of the misery out of the outdoors. Camping is now aluminum-covered, propane-heated, foam-padded, air-conditioned, bug-proofed, flip-topped, disposable, and transistorized. Hardship on a modern camping trip is blowing a fuse on your electric underwear, or having the battery peter out on your Porta-Shaver. A major catastrophe is spending your last coin on a recorded Nature Talk and then discovering the camp Comfort & Sanitation Center (featuring forest green tile floors and hot showers) has pay toilets. There are many people around nowadays who seem to appreciate the fact that a family can go on an outing without being out. But I am not one of them. Personally, I miss the old-fashioned misery of old-fashioned camping. Young people just now starting out in camping probably have no idea that it wasn't but a couple of decades ago that people went camping expecting to be miserable. Half the fun of camping in those days was looking forward to getting back home. When you did get back home you prolonged the enjoyment of your trip by telling all your friends how miserable you had been. The more you talked about the miseries of life in the woods, the more you wanted to get back out there and start suffering again. Camping was a fine and pleasant misery. A source of much misery in old-fashioned camping was the campfire, a primitive contrivance since replaced by gas stoves and propane heaters. It is a well-known fact that your run-of-the-mill imbecile can casually flick a soggy cigar butt out of a car window and burn down half a national forest. The campfire, on the other hand, was a perverse thing that you could never get started when you needed it most. If you had just fallen in an icy stream or were hopping around barefooted on frosted ground (uncommon now but routine then), you could not ignite the average campfire with a bushel of dry tinder and a blowtorch. The campfire was of two basic kinds: the Smudge and the Inferno. The Smudge was what you used when you were desperately in need of heat. By hovering over the Smudge the camper could usually manage to thaw the ice from his hands before being kippered to death. Even if the Smudge did burst into a decent blaze, there was no such thing as warming up gradually. One moment the ice on your pants would show slight signs of melting and the next the hair on your legs was going up in smoke. Many's the time I've seen a blue and shivering man hunched over a crackling blaze suddenly eject from his boots and pants with a loud yell and go bounding about in the snow, the front half of him the color of boiled lobster, the back half still blue. The Inferno was what you always used for cooking. Experts on camp cooking claimed you were supposed to cook over something called "a bed of glowing coals." But what everyone cooked over was the Inferno. The "bed of glowing coals" was a fiction concocted by experts on camp cooking. Nevertheless the camp cook was frequently pictured, by artists who should have known better, as a tranquil man hunkered down by a bed of glowing coals, turning plump trout in the frying pan with the blade of his hunting knife. In reality the camp cook was a wildly distraught individual who charged through waves of heat and speared savagely with a long sharp stick at a burning hunk of meat he had tossed on the

grill from a distance of twenty feet. The rollicking old fireside songs originated in the efforts of other campers to drown out the language of the cook and prevent it from reaching the ears of little children. Meat roasted over a campfire was either raw or extra well done, but the cook usually came out medium rare. The smoke from the campfire always blew directly in the eyes of the campers, regardless of wind direction. No one minded much, since it prevented you from seeing what you were eating. If a bite of food showed no signs of struggle, you considered this a reasonable indication that it came from the cook pot and was not something just passing through. Aluminum foil was not used much in those days, and potatoes were simply thrown naked into the glowing coals, which were assumed to lie somewhere at the base of the Inferno. After about an hour the spuds were raked out with a long stick. Most of the potatoes would be black and hard as rocks, and some of them would be rocks, but it didn't make much difference either way. Successive layers of charcoal would be cracked off until a white core of potato was uncovered, usually the size of a walnut or maybe a pea. This would be raw. Sometimes there would be no white core at all, and these potatoes were said to be "cooked through." Either that or they were rocks. There were other fine sources of camping misery besides campfires. One of the finest was the old-fashioned bedroll. No matter how well you tucked in the edges of the bedroll it always managed to spring a leak in the middle of the night. A wide assortment of crawly creatures, driven by a blast of cold air, would stream in through the leak. Efforts to close the gap merely opened new leaks, and finally you just gave up and lay there, passing the time until sunrise--approximately thirty-seven hours--by counting off insects one by one as they froze to death on your quivering flesh. My bedroll, made from one of my grandmother's patchwork quilts, was an oven compared to the first "sleeping bag" I ever spent a night in. My inconstant boyhood companion, "Stupe" Jones, told me one September day that I would not need my bedroll on our outing that night because he had discovered an honest-to-goodness sleeping bag in the attic of his house and it was big enough for both of us to sleep in. Now when I saw what a compact little package a real sleeping bag could be folded up into, I became immediately ashamed of my own cumbersome bedroll, which rolled up into a bundle the size of a bale of hay. I was glad that I had not marred the esthetics of our little camping trip by toting the gross thing along. That night we spread the sleeping bag out on a sandy beach alongside Sand Creek, stripped to our shorts (we had both been taught never to sleep with our clothes on), and hopped into the bag. The effect was much like plunging through thin ice into a lake. Not wishing to insult my friend or his sleeping bag, I stifled a shrill outcry with a long, deep gasp disguised in turn as a yawn. Stupe said through chattering teeth that the sleeping bag was bound to warm up, since it was, after all, a sleeping bag, wasn't it? No two lovers ever clung to each other with such tenacity as did those two eight-year-old boys through that interminable night. Later we discovered that some sleeping bags come in two parts, one a nice padded liner and the other a thin canvas cover. What we had was the latter. One of the finest misery-producing camping trips I've ever been on occurred when I was about fourteen. Three friends and I were hiking to a lake high up in the Idaho Rockies. What had been a poor, struggling drizzle when we left home worked its way up and became a highly successful blizzard in the mountains. Before long our climbing boots (called "tennis shoes" in more prosperous parts of the world) were caked with ice. The trail was slowly being erased before our very eyes, and I was beginning to write news stories in my head: "The futile search for four young campers lost in a snowstorm has been called off ... ." As we clawed

our way up the side of the mountain, one of the frailer souls--never ask me who--suggested that the better part of valor or even of stark madness might be to turn back. But he was shouted down with such cries as, "When I come this far to fish, I am going to fish!" and "Who knows which way is back?"

Eventually we came to the tiny cabin of a trapper, who had either been a midget or had crawled around on his knees all day, for the structure was only four feet from dirt floor to log ceiling. We tidied the place up by evicting a dead porcupine, split up enough wood to last a month, and started a fire in a little makeshift stove. The stovepipe was a foot short of the roof and this resulted in the minor inconvenience of having the roof catch fire every once in a while, but nobody really minded. On the second day Kenny and I fought our way up to the lake, where he carried out his vow to fish, and then we stumbled back to the cabin. We stripped off our sopping clothes and sat down side by side on the woodpile next to the stove, whose glowing pipe was sending out soothing waves of heat from the flames howling up through it. Now as was our practice in those days, we had carried enough grub with us to feed a regiment of lumberjacks for a week of full-time eating, and Norm, a rather plump kid, decided to take the edge off his boredom by shooting "baskets" with an excess of hardboiled eggs he had discovered. The opening at the top of the stovepipe served as the "basket." Kenny and I watched in fascinated horror, as they say, as one of the rim shots lodged on the edge of the glowing pipe and the whole contraption began to topple toward our naked laps. Now both of us worked up a sizable amount of activity, but because of the cramped quarters, it was insufficient to move us clear of the descending pipe. In order to avoid incurrance of potentially worse damage to our anatomies we caught the stove pipe in our hands. For two or three hundredths of a second we passed the glowing cylinder back and forth between us, all the while calmly contemplating the best course of action, since neither one of us could manage to accumulate enough free time or leverage to get up from the woodpile. At last it occurred to us to simply drop the pipe on the floor, both of us wondering why we hadn't thought of such an obvious solution sooner. At the time it seemed that we had juggled the stovepipe for approximately two hours, but in retrospect, I doubt that the total time was more than half a second. Smoke, true to its nature, had in the meantime filled the cabin to overflowing and the four of us rolled out through the tiny door hole as a single choking ball of adolescent humanity. The storm outside, particularly to those not wearing any clothes, was refreshing and seemed to call for some strenuous exercise. What followed, as Vern remarked later, was something you don't see every day: two naked and enraged people chasing an hysterical fat kid up the side of a mountain in the middle of a blizzard. In terms of misery, that camping trip was very fine. I once launched my family on a program designed to toughen them up, on the assumption that the more misery they could endure the more they would enjoy hunting, fishing, and camping. Whenever anyone skinned a knee or thumped his "crazy bone," he was to reply in answer to inquiries about the extent of his pain: "A mere detail." Thus my children were expected to ignore the minor miseries encountered in the acquisition of outdoor knowledge and experience, and to make little of mosquito bites, burned fingers, and that vast assortment of natural projectiles known as "stickers." As it turned out, though, I had to abandon the program. One day on a family camping trip, I picked up a large branch for firewood and discovered an outlaw band of yellow jackets waiting in ambush. A running battle ensued. I finally outdistanced the little devils, as I called them, but not before several of them had

inflicted some terrible wounds on various parts of my person. My family watched as I flitted like a nymph through the woods, careening off of boulders and leaping mammoth moss-covered logs. Fortunately, as my wife said later, most of my shouts were inaudible and the children were saved from traumas that might have wrought psychological havoc. When I finally lunged back into camp, still sweating and snarling, my littlest girl consoled me with the words, "Details, Daddy, mere details." Well I decided right then and there if a kid can't distinguish between real pain and a little old skinned knee, then I had better call off the whole program, and that is what I did. I mean you don't want your children to grow up to be totally insensitive.

But camping misery is a thing of the past. Like most of my fellow outdoorsmen, having gathered unto the camper the fruits of technology, I am protected from cold by propane, from hardness by foam rubber, and from the insect world by a bug bomb. Still, sometimes I have a nostalgic yearning for some of that old-fashioned misery, and it came to me that what we need nowadays is a misery kit. I think it would find a market, especially among older campers, who might enjoy a bit of instant misery on a camping trip so they would have something to tell the folks back home about. There could be an aerosol can for spraying a blast of cold air down your back every once in a while, another for spraying smoke in your eyes. There might even be a pair of refrigerated boots that you could stick your feet into for a few minutes each morning. A rock or a pine cone could be included for slipping under the fitted sheet of a camper bunk. Everyone, of course, would want a pre-charred spud. There might even be a box of mixed insects--yellow jackets, mosquitoes, ticks, jiggers, and deer flies--but maybe that would be carrying misery a bit far. Copyright © 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978 by Patrick F. McManus All rights reserved.

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