

THE DAY THE BEANS EXPLODED

With none of today's fly-weight materials, camping gear in the late 1950s shared one quality: heavy. Thus the drive to lighten loads spawned many a freewheeling innovation--until the beans exploded.

From rain gear to foot gear, the character of camping was stamped in the military mold. Army surplus pup tents of stout canvas, reeking with the lingering odor of World War II waterproofing, had neither floors nor windows. Although youthful bones and muscles tended to forgive ill-placed stones and stobs, we still tried to scoop together leaves and pine needles for makeshift mattresses.

Sleeping bags, packs, cooking sets and canteens--all followed the heavy-duty design for full-grown fighting men, not Boy Scouts.

Once assembled, the necessities for a camping trip tipped the scales prodigiously for young fellows, causing us to ever be on the lookout for ways to shed pounds.

Some of my more adventurous companions thus opted for jungle hammocks, leaving heavier tents at home. But like flies drawn to honey, pranksters seemed compelled to cut down hammocks in the dead of night just to hear screams of terror.

On the other hand, food choices bristled with opportunity for eliminating weight and effort. Adding scrambled eggs to the menu, for example, meant carrying both a frying pan and grease. Then the pan required scouring with an S.O.S. pad to remove residual scorched eggs and soot. Nix the eggs; too much trouble.

The consequence of this line of reasoning was obvious: wherever possible, pick "low impact" foods.

Canned items--ravioli in particular--quickly rose in popularity. With a few holes punched in the lid for pressure relief, a can of ravioli could be carefully placed upright in a bed of coals near the edge of the cooking fire and left unattended. Then in 15 minutes or so... voila! Steaming, savory ravioli eaten straight from the can left only a single fork to clean. Once stomped flat by a boot heel, the can itself could be handily packed off with the garbage. No extraneous pots or plates or pans.

Some brave souls dared eliminate even the fork through judicious manipulation of a Scout knife, which afterwards could efficiently be wiped on a pant leg and stowed until the next meal.

But the flame of efficiency was suddenly quenched the day Jimmy Collins failed to ventilate a can of pork and beans.

Nobody noticed the slowly bulging ends of the can until the differing thermal expansions of beans and metal permanently resolved their conflict. Like the fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, the resultant explosion rained beans, coals and ash throughout the camp. Collateral damage was amazingly light, despite fiery missiles that burned through tents and sleeping bags clear to the ground.

I would later conclude--repeatedly, and in varied circumstances--that shortcut paths may lead to hidden and unexpected dangers.

Efficiency and effectiveness are vastly different beasts, the former having the more vicious bite if not handled with utmost care.