



William B. Mershon

Chapter of Trout Unlimited

Conservation, preservation, and restoration of Michigan's cold-water resources.

Fishing letters

Back Packing

by Art Neumann

If you're the kind of person who's always pushing ahead, wondering what's around the next bend - if you relish a challenge and revel in the satisfaction of accomplishment - if rivers and trees, mountains and wildlife mean more than power and lumber, minerals and food - if you cherish the companionship of good friends - if roaring streams and whispering pines, a chattering squirrel and a crackling fire untie the knots and sooth your soul - if sand and smoke, flies and ants are seasoning in your food - if one wild trout out-values a whole season of tame ones - if your heavy load makes a lighter heart, then, almost surely, you are a back packer.

But notice, no mention is made of age, physique or financial status. These are not necessary qualifications. The smallest, the oldest and the poorest man can still be a back packer. But a love for the outdoors, an urge to explore and a dogged determination to succeed are valuable talents. Almost all of us qualify and most of us like the idea but few of us have given it a try. I got started more or less by accident. Through chief Dan Pine of the Garden River Indian Reservation we learned of a way into the wonderful Garden River. It meant a six mile hike over the mountain with a pack on our back to get there but we'd been down the river by canoe, knew firsthand of its breathtaking beauty and longed for more of its excellent trout fishing. So it naturally followed that in September of that year we made our first assault on the Garden. I hope this article will save you a measure of the time, the toil and the tears that was wasted that first trip. We knew little about the area, less about equipment and nothing about carrying the load. The result was a disappointing, relatively unsuccessful trip. But it did serve one useful purpose. It made up my mind to search out and test every- thing necessary for efficient, enjoyable back packing. It took several years but I succeeded and herewith is a report of my findings. Let's start from the beginning.

Successful back packing is a combination of three things—the correct equipment, a knowledge of how to use it and, finally, where to go. The first, proper equipment, is the critical link in the chain for without it, not only is back packing unpleasant, it is practically impossible. Good equipment costs no more than cheap equipment for, almost without exception, it is design rather than price that makes one item perfect and another worthless. All good back packing equipment has three things in common—lightness, durability and utility. In some items, like food, weight is of utmost importance. In others, durability and utility mean more. Regardless, no piece of equipment should be selected that will not perfectly do the job expected of it. This is especially true of a pack rack, the most important piece of equipment in the entire outfit. A poor rack can exhaust you in an hour. A good one actually makes back packing a pleasure. We started with a converted surplus army ammunition bag but soon discarded it. Then followed a trial and error period that ended with our discovery of the Himalayan Mt. Everest assault pack, the absolute ultimate in fine pack racks. It was designed for and used in the historic conquest of Mt. Everest. It is made of aluminum and heavy canvas and weighs only two pounds. Its design features a base platform for pack building that provides complete flexibility of center of gravity loading, a wide base back support that pushes the load up from the hips, conveniently placed tie-down loops for universal lashing of the load with a minimum of cord and knots, adjustable and flexible shoulder harness, and the deluxe model can even be converted into a chair for camp use. I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of the pack rack. You may cut corners elsewhere but go the limit on a pack rack. Buy the finest made. Buy a Himalayan.

Next on the list comes the pack sack into which one stows his gear and which, in turn, is secured to the pack rack. While any durable canvas sack or duffle bag will do, one especially designed to fit your rack is best. In the case of Himalayan pack sacks, they are constructed with an extra piece of webbing on the back side that permits the sack to be hung from the top of the rack and is easily removed when the rack is made into a chair. They are large and roomy and one model has a zipper closed pouch on the outside for items like camera, first aid kit and parka that might be needed in a hurry. In assembly they make a comfortable, efficient unit that leaves absolutely nothing to be desired.

Regardless of the lightness of the load or the ease of carry, a day spent hiking in the wilderness will leave even the most durable weary and ready for bed. If one hopes to continue on the morrow or even enjoy the fruits of the previous day's labors, a good night's rest is an absolute necessity. So when choosing a sleeping unit, give serious consideration to sleeping comfort, weight and warmth. While a deep layer of cedar boughs makes a passable substitute, nothing can equal a good air mattress. I wouldn't attempt a trip without one. Properly inflated, (not too hard) they are more comfortable than your bed at home. Most plastic models are lighter but a good rubber-surfaced air mattress will outwear a dozen plastic ones. And it isn't necessary to have a full length mattress. One that will support the body from the hips up, or about 44" long, is all that is required. This has the desirable advantage of reducing both bulk and weight, the back packer's two worst enemies. When choosing a sleeping robe, lightness, warmth and cost are the controlling factors. The ultimate is a Woods Featherweight down filled bag that weighs only

4 1/2 lbs. Such a bag will keep you toasty warm in temperatures down to freezing yet can be compressed into a roll scarcely larger than a loaf of bread. Other bags, while not as compact, are equally comfortable and almost as light in weight. One, filled with Dacron, weighs just 5 lbs. Another, filled with Cellacloud, weighs 5 1/2 lbs. Both are suited to back packing and cost about half the price of down.

Now let's consider shelter. Two shelter halves or a pair of light tarps joined together make into a unit offering some protection from the elements but in rainy, windy weather they can be quite miserable. Much more desirable, and scarcely any heavier, is a small tent similar to the well known army mountain tent. It is light and waterproof and will sleep two nicely. Even the common pup tent does a better job than a tarp. Mine weighs just 5 lbs, floor, mosquito netting and all and, while it's a little small, (5' X 7') it will sleep two. The ideal tent would be one built like a wall tent but low like a pup tent, about 5' X 7' in size and made of lightweight, waterproof balloon cloth. We hope to have such a tent, specially made, in stock before too long. But even if you do use a tent to sleep in, don't fail to take a light tarp along too. You'll need something to cover the gear that won't go into the tent while you're in it and, if it rains, you'll welcome the protection it offers while cooking, eating or washing dishes.

Next comes cooking and eating equipment. All cooking will be done over the open fire so a good axe is a must. A full size one is too heavy and a hatchet is too small but a 3/4 camp axe, single bit, is just right. Keep it good and sharp. Hanging pots and pans from limbs stuck over the fire may make a nice picture but a simple wire rack like you'll find in the oven of any old kitchen stove, when placed between a couple of rocks, does a much better job. It weighs nothing, can be tied to the back of the pack in transit and will save many spilled pans and much burnt food. And then, of course, you'll need a set of cooking and eating dishes. If you're smart you'll invest in an aluminum nested camp cook kit. These kits consist of three kettles, 2 frying pans, a coffee pot, six plates and six cups, all nested into the largest kettle, which we use as a dish pan, and the whole unit weighs less than four pounds.

That brings us around to the most pleasant item—food. I'll never forget how Bill Mang and I tried to talk the rest of the gang out of taking canned food on that first pack trip. Suffice it to say, not a trace of it has ever appeared in any of our pack sacks since. The principal reason is the discovery of Bernard's Camp Pack dehydrated food. Most of us are inclined to think of dehydrated food in terms of the tasteless fare the services dished out during the war. And I realize it will be difficult for you to believe that Camp Pack food is the absolute opposite. But, I assure you, not only will you find it the tastiest camp food you have ever eaten but you'll readily agree that it actually puts many of milady's recipes to shame. Some items are better than others but none of us has ever found a pack that we actually disliked. And it's inexpensive too. You couldn't possibly provide the menu Camp Pack permits at anywhere near the same cost. There is a wonderful variety, it's extremely simple to prepare and, most important of all, it has no bulk and no weight. The only additional food required would be those items which can't be had dehydrated like butter, shortening, bacon, cheese etc. We rarely even take bread along anymore. Camp Pack hot biscuits are so much better. If there's still any doubt in your mind, take a pack home and try it. It will sell itself.

The final major item for consideration is fishing tackle. Actually, you'll find the standard tackle you regularly use back home completely satisfactory for pack trip fishing with perhaps two exceptions. One is rods, the other wading gear. In the case of rods, short two piece models or regular three and four piece numbers are more desirable since they permit attachment directly to the pack without protruding above or below. This eliminates snagging on bushes and trees. You can get around this, however, by taping a handle to your longer rod case and carrying it in your hand, making it double, as required, for a walking stick. In the case of waders, most regular models are too heavy for back packing, especially when you realize that a pair of felt soled slippers must be included if you hope to negotiate the slippery, rock bottomed back country streams. Stocking foot waders with felt soled wading shoes are perfect and Hodgman Zephyrweight waders are ideal. While we do have some special flies, like the Spitfire, tied especially for Canadian fishing, most standard patterns like the Grasshopper, the Hairwing

Coachman and the Black Gnat dry and the Wooly Worm, the Mickey Finn and the Royal Coachman bucktail wet, will produce real well on wilderness lakes and streams. The same holds true for spinning lures although the One-O-Six is by far the best of all.

That takes care of the big items. Now let's touch on a few minor tips that I'm sure will help. If black flies are prevalent where you plan to go, don't forget OFF. Some still like 6-12 and others speak highly of 7-11 but OFF is the best we've found. A few small spikes will permit the assembly of a table so that cooking and dish washing can be done in an upright position instead of squatting. If you carry your sleeping robe in a waterproof bag, it not only will remain perfectly dry but the bag can double as a food sack and when hung from a high limb will assure you that no bear will get to your food before you do. Don't venture into back country without a parka. Forgetting his cost my son Gary two days fishing our last trip up. Nothing beats a reflector oven for baking biscuits but you can do a presentable job directly over the fire using a covered frying pan—if you turn them once. If you take dehydrated food, be sure you include a measuring cup. Much of your culinary success will depend on how accurately you measure the water you add to the mixture. Make sure every member of your party has a map of the area and a good compass. Remember, you're not on the open road—you're in the track-less wilderness. A pictorial record of your travels will make your trip last forever. Your word might be questioned but pictures prove your honesty.

Now, where to go? We in Michigan have a decided geographical advantage over other sections of the country. We not only have an upper peninsula full of wild country, we also have Canada with its roaring rivers, rolling hills and fabulous fishing right at our northern doorstep. But let's be a little specific. Let's start with the Upper. In the eastern half there's the remote headwaters of the Two Hearted, the browns of the Driggs and the brooks of the Fox. Moving west, how about the upper Yellow Dog and the tremendous Huron Mts. directly north of it? And don't forget Isle Royale. It has no roads at all. Even Copper Country offers some rugged challenges, the valley of the Montreal to mention only one. But the ultimate is reached near the western end of the Upper—in the beautiful Porcupine Mts. Here one can travel for a week without setting foot on the same trail twice. But if you long for trackless wilderness where trails are few and challenges many, go north of the border into Ontario's Algoma district. Here back packing opportunities are unlimited. You have the White River trail to the northeast, the Chateau road to Rocky Island, Peshu and the far north, the Ranger Lake road to the Goulais, the Aubinadong and the Garden, the Algoma Central Railway that welcomes, actually caters to, parties who love to rough it, stretching straight north from the Soo for over 200 miles and, finally, King's Highway 17 north along the Lake Superior shore breeching the wildest section of all—the Lake Superior Provincial Park with the Agawa, the Sand, the Baldhead, the Gargantua, the Red Rock, the Old Woman and all their headwaters, a virtually untouched paradise with virgin fishing just waiting for the adventurous back packer. We're familiar with most of it so if you're planning a trip and want some help, stop out. We have excellent aerial survey maps of all areas mentioned and even have colored movies and slides of some. It's our invitation to you to try packing in and enjoy with us the incomparable thrill of hiking and fishing where few have gone before you. ♦