

Backpacking Leads many to Idyllic hours of Summer Solitude



Breaking away

by Kim St. Clair

In this world of automation and rapid transport, it comes as somewhat of a relief to discover that man's age-old use-it-in-a-pinch mode of travel — walking — is back in vogue.

At least, it is to the ever increasing numbers of people taking to the trails. Urbanized Albertans are rediscovering the world pioneer photographer Walter Wilcox visited 100 years ago: fabulous Mount Assiniboine, Lake O'Hara, Skoki Valley . . . these areas are preserved in virtually the same pristine wilderness condition that Wilcox found them in.

Wilcox and his party travelled through the Rockies by

pack train, lived in heavy canvas tents, and ate out of smoke-blackened cast-iron pots. Today, many hikers will relate rather smugly how they can carry all their worldly needs on their backs, eat like kings, go for weeks and never have to replenish stock, shiver at night or set eye on a newspaper. They should have tried it a century ago — before the advent of freeze-dried foods.

Technology has not left the wilderness industry untouched: ultra-lightweight nylon tents, specially-packed eiderdown sleeping bags and freeze-dried foods (sometimes mundane but certainly a far step removed from the earlier simulation-cardboard products) have truly made wilderness "any man's" land. No longer is it necessary to pass the Jeremiah Johnson mountain endurance test before daring to make MacDonald's Restaurants nothing more than memory.

The fact is that whole families are taking to the bush, for better or for worse. This, of course, is nothing new to Swiss and Austrian hikers, but let's remember that Canada doesn't have hostels stationed every few miles in the mountains as these countries do. In Canada, there are trails suited to any kind of mountain hiker, though, ranging from the high-altitude rock scrambles to valley-hugging river routes where friendly hikers with a bottle of wine to share can occasionally be found.

A few things beginners should think of before setting out: check with the parks people about registration and fire-lighting regulations.

The Youth Hostel is still the best place to go for in's on technical aspects. The NARTS (a Youth-Hostel affiliate) are a group of mountain-lovers devoted to walking who operate out of Edmonton and can be contacted at the Hostel Shop; and the Blue Lake Centre in Hinton offers courses in wilderness survival and nature appreciation.

Retail stores throughout the city supply equipment ranging from cheap to top-of-the-line quality. And, of course, ye olde hostel store (Mountain Shop) peddles merchandise as well.

There are so many new lines of equipment on the market nowadays it's impossible to keep tabs on all of them. The best thing to do is shop around; it's good for the legs anyway.

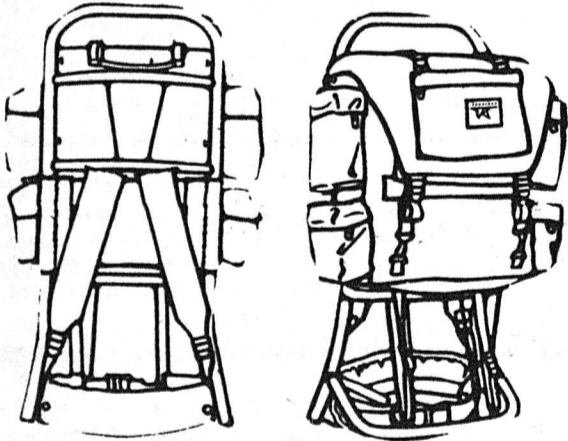
A complete set of only-the-best can be purchased for much less the price of a car, for instance, or a television. Neither of these will do anything to get you off your butt. In short, there is very little apart from personal inclination left to discourage anyone from discovering the utopia of Alberta backpacking.

BOOTS

- * Kastinger
- * Raichle
- * Vasque

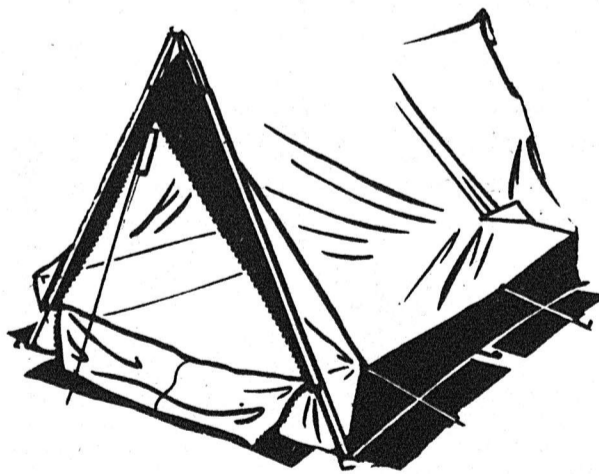


PACKS



- * Jan Sport
- * Kelty
- * Alpenlite
- * Trailwise
- * Caribou Mountaineering

TENTS



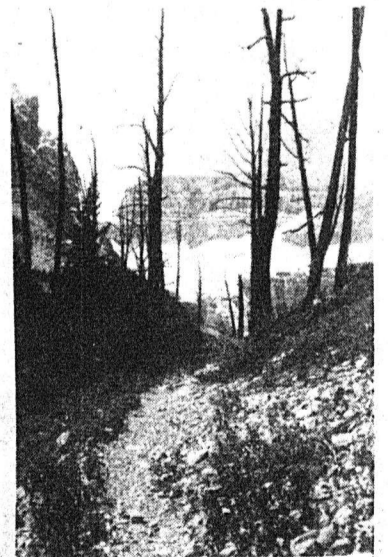
- * Jan Sport
- * Eureka

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Trail above Marvel Lake, Mt. Assiniboine area. Photo Kim St. Clair