

Winter Camping Up North

We went camping after Christmas in the winter of 1964.

I do not recall whose idea it was or if there was any compelling reason. We just did things like that.

We loaded Pa's 57 Ford station wagon and drove to wooded country we knew in central Minnesota. Gear in those days included axes, shovels, guns and ammunition, blankets (nobody owned a sleeping bag), a roll of tar paper and a canvas tarp, (nobody owned a tent) food and cooking pans.

There were five of us. Nick and Steve Thies, Bob Miller and Jim Von Bank. Nick and I were long-time hunting and school buddies. We were on Christmas break from the U of M. Steve and Jim were both a couple years younger. Bob was a year older. In time, Bob and Jim became my brothers-in-law. Bob married my younger sister and I married Jim's older sister.

We were up there most of a week. I don't believe the temperature ever reached zero, day or night. In Minnesota, in December, the days are short and the nights are long. That makes for an awful long time where the chief occupation is just keeping warm.

The woods we picked to camp in were a large rough area north of Little Falls. Nick and Steve had lived in that country for a few years. The three of us had hunted there many times. Farmhouses were far apart. The woods was typical for the rough lands of central Minnesota. In the 1800s, it had all been part of the Great Pinery of Minnesota. Most of the pines had been logged off by 1900. The land had been homesteaded but the settlers found it to be poor land. The topsoil was thin as is typical of forests. Many of the homesteads were abandoned in the depression of the 1930s. The few farmers that remained made a living through a combination of grazing, haying, mixed crops and off-farm work.

The farmstead for the land we built our shack on was a mile away. We drove off the gravel road about ¼ mile on a woods trail and parked in a poplar thicket. There was a stream ¼ mile to the north, passing more or less from northwest to southeast. A stand of straggly white pines stood 100 yards to the north. There was six inches of snow with little drifting. Generally, it was good mixed country for hunting. We had based our fall hunting camps on this same trail.

The poplars were easy to fell and cut into lengths for any purpose. We selected four trees that defined a rectangle suitable for the corners of a shack and cut them off at about four five feet from the ground. We were good with axes. I doubt that any of us had ever used a chain saw. Axes were better for warming up a body anyway.

We wrapped tarpaper around the four trees, leaving an opening over which we hung an old blanket.

We cut pines boughs to build a thick mat on the frozen ground inside and banked snow around the outside.

We used our hand tools to make a few other conveniences like gun racks and a food shelter.

We were all set.

Each day we scattered after breakfast to hunt. Most of us preferred to hunt solo. Got a few rabbits and squirrels, but mostly it was too cold for wildlife