

## Winter Camping with Nevada and Two Good Buddies

December of 1960 was a cold month in a cold winter.

Cold weather has never bothered me.

I kind of like it in fact.

Bobby, Jim and I lived on neighboring farms.

We had gone to grade school together.

We were around 14 in 1960 and freshmen in high school.

Bobby was a little guy.

He was a wiry farm kid but not real rugged.

Jim was a big, tall, strong fellow.

He lived in town until he was 11.

He wanted to be tough.

I was in between in size, but I was tough.

I suppose the camping trip was my idea.

We got two weeks out of school around Christmas.

We must have been caught up on winter chores.

The plan was to hitch my big paint horse Nevada to my buckboard, load it with necessary gear and ride from our farm to a woods west of St. Michael.

We would build a camp when we got there.

The woods, which I had hunted and scouted in the fall, belonged to Harvey's folks.

Harvey was a high school classmate.

Harvey and I spent a lot of time together years later as upperclassmen in High School and at the U of M.

He joined the marines to fight in Vietnam.

He thought he should.

One day his pack of phosphorus grenades ignited spontaneously.

He was carrying them on his back.

He survived but it bothered him for a long time.

We did not have tents, sleeping bags, or really any of the things people now recognize as camping gear.

We had a canvas sheet, blankets, an axe, ropes, a shovel and other basic items that you would find on a farm. I do not think we even knew much about camping equipment.

Those were different times; it was a different world.

We started out about midmorning.

We were traveling west.

It was too cold to ride in the buckboard.

We walked to keep warm.

No one had paid any attention to the weather forecast.

Weather forecasting was not all that precise back then anyway.

The temperature stayed well below zero.

The west wind was strong in our faces.

It was fifteen miles to Harvey's woods.

We walked steadily without break.



It was almost dark when we got there.

We ate as we walked.

Mom sent along a roasted turkey, and I recall chewing on a huge frozen drumstick.

I had to hold it in my teeth for a few minutes before I could gnaw off a chunk of meat.

It was a cold day.

The woods were about ¼ mile off a gravel road.

There was quite a lot of snow for December.

It took some fighting to get the buckboard to the woods.

The wagon had large diameter steel wheels and Nevada was always a willing worker.

It was tough going though; the snow was two feet deep.

There was to be a full moon that night.

Unfortunately, the wind had blown in a heavy cloud cover.

Sundown occurs shortly after 4 p.m. on December days in Minnesota.

It was twilight as we got into the protection of the trees.

We picked a thick pile of windfalls as a campsite.

The windfalls would provide a ready source of firewood.

They would also help to break the wind.

We spread the tarp across the pile to improve the wind break.

Forming the tarp into a tent would not have helped under those conditions.

We had a windbreak, but definitely not a tent.

It was obvious that we were going to need to stay close to a fire for the night.

Even with the protection of the trees, the wind was strong and bitter from the northwest.

We built a fire and prepared for the night.

We were hungry.

Food preparation was more a matter of melting or thawing food.

We had some cans of beans.

We pushed the cans right into the fire to thaw.

As the contents on the fire side boiled, the contents on the outer side would refreeze.

The thing that is most challenging about winter camping in Minnesota is not the cold; it is the length of the darkness.

It was going to be dark for the next 16 hours.

We piled firewood.

It was too windy, cold, and dark, to read, or even talk.

The whole ordeal was a matter of just keeping warm.

Besides, we were exhausted from walking into that stiff wind.

Jim and Bob wrapped up in as many blankets as they could, and got as close as possible to the fire.

If you are wondering about my horse, he was just fine.

There was a bale of fine hay for him on the buckboard.

He could eat snow for water.

He was always an outside horse, so he had a thick winter coat.

For him this was not much different from any other winter night.

I felt responsible for getting us into this fix.

I kept the fire going and watched that the blankets did not start on fire.

I woke the guys up every couple of hours to make sure they were alive.



It snowed a few more inches during the night and just got colder and colder. Eventually I could not wake Bobby to get him to move. I figured he needed to move around a little bit to keep from freezing. By morning, I honestly figured he had frozen. In my mind, I rehearsed how I was going to explain that to his mother. She was a tall, thin woman. A nice woman. She had 13 kids. Eleven of them were girls. I did not think she would be happy to lose her oldest son. I was wearing surplus army boots which I had purchased from the Salvation Army store for \$1. They were high lacers, and I thought they looked pretty sporty. Good walking boots but not warm enough for this night in the woods. When I was not chopping firewood, I put my feet as close as I dared to the fire. When it got light, Jim woke up in good shape. To my great joy, Bobby was alive. He was cold and stiff. He could not seem to gain enough heat to work off the shakes. We built the fire up high and made a simple breakfast. Our plans for this trip had never been particularly firm. If the weather had been kinder, we intended to stay in the woods for several days and do some winter hunting. We had guns and ammo. That was not the situation, however. Without discussion, we packed up our gear and hitched Nevada to the buckboard. Getting out to the road was a lot harder than getting in. During the night, the blizzard had more than doubled the depth of the snow drifts. Nevada was always willing to pull but we soon stalled him out. The horse was in snow up to his chest. The buckboard which had a good two feet of clearance was pushing snow. Nevada could only make progress in the deep snow by struggling one jump at a time. That takes a lot of strength, and it is of itself a violent enterprise. You cannot be close to a horse trying to work its way through deep snow. Front hooves strike high in the air and there is a lot of kicking going on. There is no way for a horse to do that while hitched into a buckboard. The poles, hardware and leather were all in danger of busting. I unhitched the horse and instead tied him to the buckboard with about 20 feet of rope. Jim pushed on the buckboard, and I worked with the horse. Bobby was too weak and stayed in the wagon.



Nevada's lunges were of necessity quite violent and every few pulls the rope would break. We dug, pushed, pulled and fought our way out. I suppose it took an hour or so. My Salvation Army boots fell apart. Well, not exactly apart but the soles crumbled into chunks and fell off. By the time we got to the road, I was walking in my stocking feet. At least on the bottoms. Apparently, I had kept my feet too close to the fire during the night. I do not know just what material those soles consisted of, but they were not good winter camping boots. I was out a dollar. When we reached the road, Jim, the horse and I were exhausted and soaking wet. We did not stay warm and wet for long. A few minutes of catching our breath on that open gravel road and the sweat froze on all three of us. I wrapped my feed, made repairs to the harness, hitched the horse and started toward home. Bobby was on the wagon, wrapped in all our blankets. He seemed ok. Jim, Nevada and I needed to keep walking to stay mobile and warm. We were about five miles west of St. Michael and needed to pass through town to get home. We decided that we would stop at the café in St. Michael to thaw out. I knew the family that owned the place. We had reached the tar road that runs between St. Michael and Buffalo and traveled a couple of miles when a passing car stopped. In those days, especially on very cold days, there was little traffic on the roads. Cars did not start all that well. Besides, people did not have as many reasons to leave home. This driver was a salesman from Dakota traveling to Chicago. He asked if we were doing ok and offered to give Bobby a ride to town. When we reached St. Michael, I tied Nevada in a convenient place that he and I had used before. I had ridden him or driven him to this town many times. Jim and I went into the café and there was Bobby, warm as toast and talking his head off. He was telling folks about his great camping adventure in the blizzard. The salesman was so impressed with Bobby's story that he had given him five dollars. That was a lot of money then. A big breakfast cost a dollar. Bobby had eaten his fill and still had nearly four dollars left for us. We all got warm and full. The rest of the journey home was pretty much uneventful. The wind was at our backs. We got home before dark. In time to do chores and milk the cows. Mom remarked that it had gotten awful cold last night but not much more was said. Those were different times; it was a different world.

Tom

