

Winter Camping with Nevada and Two Buddies 2/21/2009

December of 1960 was a cold month, but I have always been good about ignoring cold weather. Bobby Pouliot, Jim Luger and I lived on neighboring farms and had gone to grade school together. We were around 14 at the time and freshmen in high school. Booby was a little guy, a wiry farm, kid but not too tough. Jim was a big tall strong fellow but had grown-up in town. 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 and I must have had been caught up on winter chores.

We had some time.

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 wooded area 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 Zachman's folks. Harvey was a high school classmate.

Nick Thies, Harvey and I spent a lot of time together years later when we got to be upperclassmen and when we attended the U of M. Harvey was great guy. He joined the marines to fight in Vietnam because he thought he should. One day his backpack of phosphorus grenades ignited spontaneously. He survived but it bothered him for a long time.

We didn't have tents or 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. We didn't even know about camping equipment which I suppose existing in some form. Those were different times and it was a different world.

We started out about midmorning. It turned out to be too cold to ride. We had to walk to keep warm. No one had paid any attention to the weather forecast, although forecasts weren't all that precise back then anyway.

It never warmed up to zero and the west wind was strong in our faces. It was fifteen miles to Harvey's woods. I don't recall that we took any breaks or rests stops along the way but it was almost dark when we got to the woods. In fact, now as I think about it, I remember eating as we walked. Mom sent along a roasted turkey and I remember chewing on a frozen leg. I had to hold it in my teeth for a few minutes before I could gnaw off a taste 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 and it took some fighting to get the buckboard in. The buckboard had large diameter steel wheels and Nevada as always was a willing worker but at times 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 and it was nearly dark as we get into the protection of the woods.

We picked a thick pile of windfalls as a campsite. The windfalls would provide a ready source of fuel for a fire and also help to break the wind. We spread the tarp across the pile to improve the wind break. Making the tarp into a tent would not have worked because 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 north west.

We built a fire and made preparations for the night. We were all hungry so we heated food. I suppose we were good eaters anyway but we had not taken much time to eat during the day and our long walk in the cold only increased our appetites. Food preparation was more a matter of melting or thawing food. Cans of food needed to be pushed right into the fire to thaw but then 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 isn't the cold, it's the darkness. December is a cloudy month. It gets dark by 4:30 and it stays dark until well after 8 in the morning. I piled up a lot of firewood.

When it's windy, cold and dark you can't play checkers or read books or even tell stories for long. The whole ordeal is a matter of just keeping warm. The guys 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 hay for him on the buckboard and he could get water by eating snow. He was always an outside horse, so he had a great winter coat. For him this was not much different than any other winter night.

It was apparent already that this was going to be a tough night. I suppose I felt responsible for getting us into this fix. I kept the fire going, watched that the blankets didn't start on fire and woke the guys up every couple of hours to make sure they were awake.

It snowed a few more inches during the night and then just got colder and colder. Eventually I could not wake Bobby enough to get him to move. I figured he need to move around a little bit to keep alive. By morning I honestly figured he had frozen. I rehearsed how I was going to explain that to his mother.

I was wearing surplus army boots which I had purchased from the Salvation Army store for \$1. They were high lacers. Good walking boots but not warm enough for this night in the woods. When I wasn't 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 however, awfully cold and stiff. We built the fire up high made a simple breakfast. Our plans for this trip had never been particularly firm, I suppose if the weather had been kinder, we may have stayed in the woods several days and done some winter hunting. That was not the situation however, so without much discussion at all we packed up our gear and hitched Nevada to the buckboard.

Getting out to the road was going to be a lot harder than getting in. During the night, the blizzard had more than doubled the depth of the snow banks. Nevada was always game and willing to pull but we soon stalled him out. The horse was in deeper than his chest and the buckboard which had a good two feet of clearance was buried deep in the snow. A horse with a lot of heart like Nevada can still make progress by jumping one jump at a time but that takes a lot of strength and it is of itself a violent action. You can't be too close to a horse trying to work its way through snow that is four feet deep. Hooves are coming 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 will all be busted on the first lunge.

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 had to stay 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. By the time we reached the road, Jim, I and the horse were all exhausted and soaking wet from sweat. We didn't stay warm and wet long. A few minutes of catching our breath on that open road and our sweat froze solid.

I made some 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, I and the horse needed to keep walking to stay mobile and warm.

We were about five miles west of St. Michael and needed to pass through or around that town to get home. We decided that we would stop at the café in St. Michael when we got that far. We had reached the tar road that runs between St. Michael and Buffalo and traveled a couple of miles when a car came along and stopped. In those days, especially on very cold days, there was little traffic on the roads. The driver was apparently a salesman from Dakota traveling to Chicago. He asked if we were ok and offered to give Bobby a ride to the café in town. When we got to town, 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 on the way into town that he gave Bobby five dollars to buy us all breakfast. That was a lot of money in those days. A big breakfast could be had for 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 and we got home before dark. My Mom remarked that it had gotten awful cold last night but not much more was said.

Those were different times in a lot of ways.