

Outdoors

Campfire magic

The campfire is the heart of any hunting camp ... and a camp isn't a camp without one. Folks who hunt out of luxurious air-conditioned lodges or, worse yet, motels, are only to be pitied.

The fire is common ground where all gather to share and comment on the day's observations and adventures.

The ritual dates back ten thousand years to Cro-Magnon caves in Europe, tired hunters assembling at the fire to share warmth and light and fellowship.

Now, as then, campfire sitters exist as peers in a special, private world isolated and bound together by a ring of darkness. Events and things beyond the light from the flames are largely peripheral. People of every age and shape, background, experience and station are equal beside the campfire.

Many of my richest and most durable friendships commenced a long time ago around some campfire.

There is, by the way, no such thing as an in-town campfire – a bonfire, maybe, but not a campfire. Real campfires are outdoors, in wild places, on the ground, under the stars.

Attendees relax together and enjoy the company, but they also hear the night sounds of the wild — the deep bass queries of the barred owls' "Who-who-who cooks for YOU-awlllll!?", the yipping and squealing of coyotes, or perhaps the hypnotic repetitions of a whippoorwill – rarely audible inside city limits.

Overhead on December nights, the constellations wheel glittering like diamonds across the limitless skies, led by Orion, the mighty hunter. A shooting star streaks down the Milky Way, reminding all that our universe remains a work in

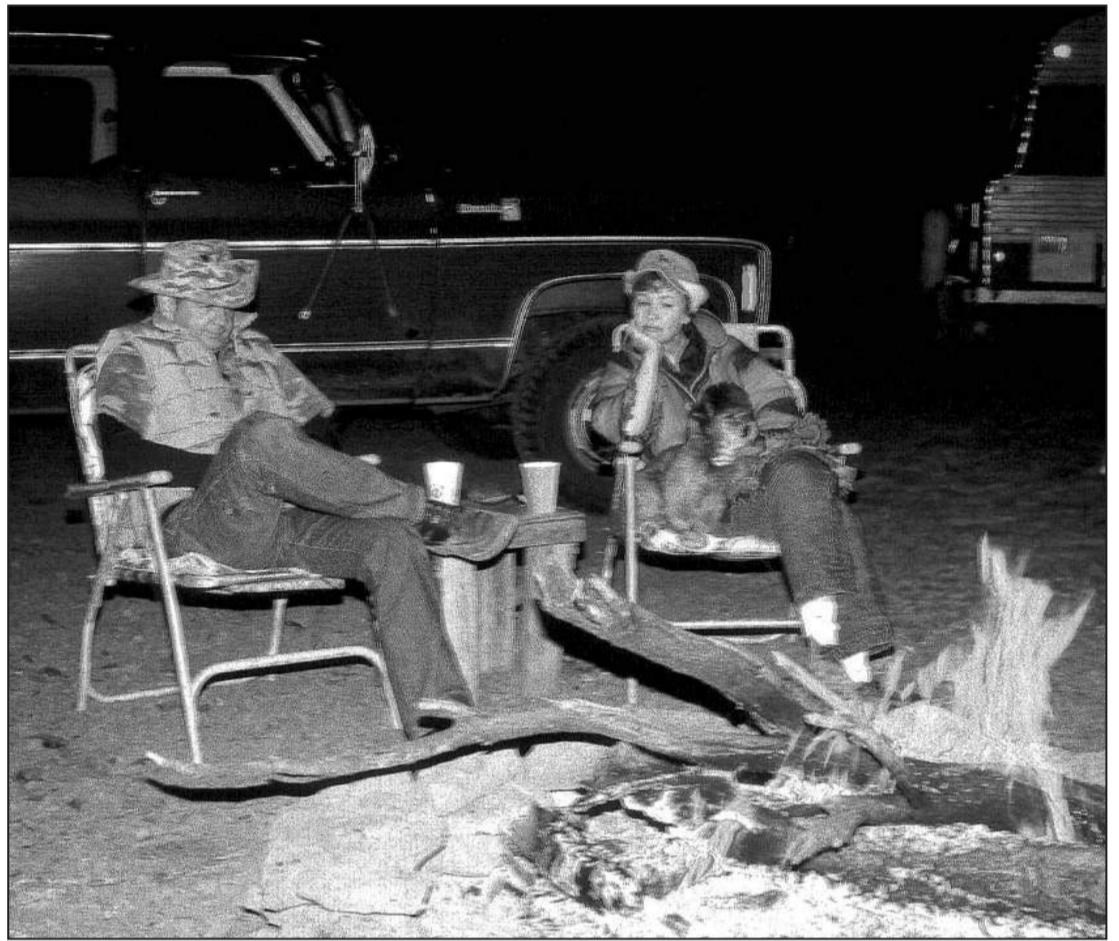


Photo by John Wootters

The author and his wife succumb to campfire hypnosis many years ago at their deer lease in Uvalde County.

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progress ... as do we.

The toe of somebody's hunting boot nudges a burned-through stick back into the flames, sending a cloud of sparks swirling upward to fade into the span-gled heavens.

Custom holds that all are welcome to participate in tending the communal blaze; it's a badge of belonging. No campfire is personal property; any who sit beside it become

stockholders in the magic of the flames.

Campfire smoke permeates hunting clothes. Perhaps it will help conceal the hunter's scent tomorrow; certainly it will stir a sudden sharp stab of nostalgic fragrance in the closet next summer. Woodsmoke is a universal entitlement of the campfire democracy: every person is entitled to an equal share.

Profound matters arise in campfire conversation, including some subjects taboo at other times and places — religion, politics and morals, for example — as well as such esoterica as feelings about wildlife management, government and other momentous affairs. Also, the most amazing hunting yarns pass across campfires — totally believable in that setting.

Kids get impatient with some adult conversation, of course, but still they listen and learn. At the fire they absorb opinions and attitudes of respected adults and figure out for themselves what is and isn't important. The campfire circle is the best of all theaters in which to impart abstract concepts like sportsmanlike behavior, fair chase and respect for wildlife and its habitats. Participation at

the fire is a rite of passage for youngsters, and offers an unparalleled opportunity for teaching without preaching and parent-child bonding.

Discourse at the fire tends toward the philosophical; discussions are rarely adversarial, almost never disagreeable. Might world leaders accomplish more around a campfire than in formal and protocol-ridden summit meetings? The plains Indians understood this much about their powwows: it isn't easy to be devious across a campfire.

Later, the dying fire whispers to itself as it draws a coverlet of white ash over the embers, conversation dwindles, and one by one the hunters yawn, rise and head for the sleeping bag, their souls refreshed by the camaraderie of the evening campfire.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.