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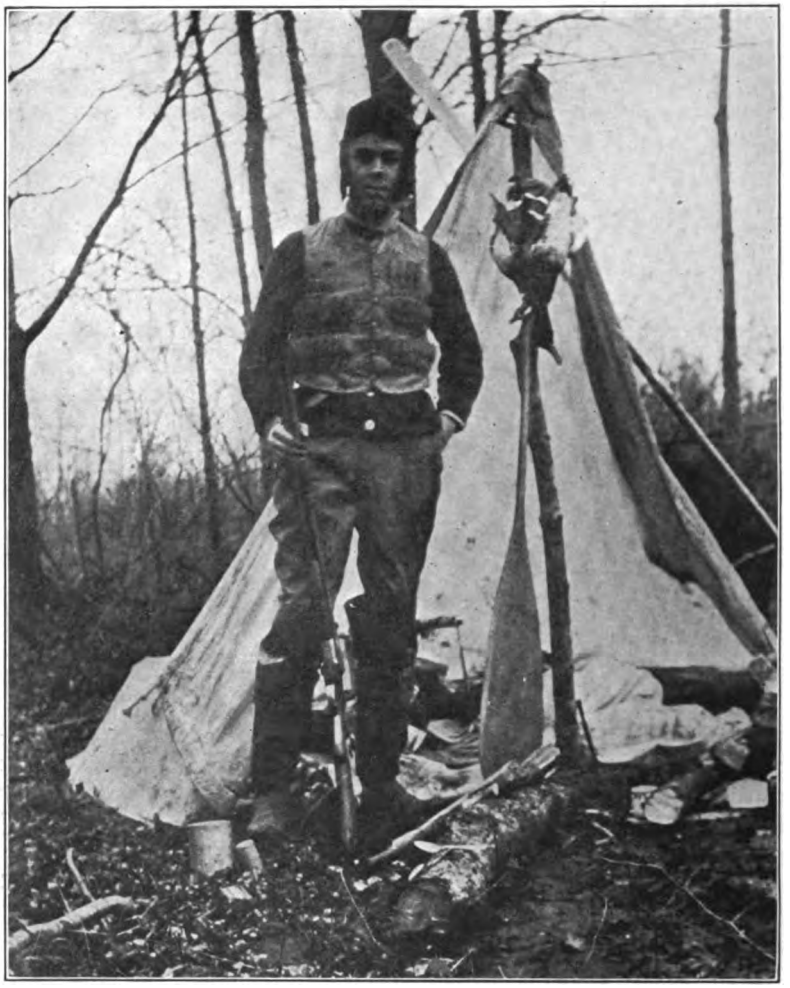

THE TENT IS JUST LARGE ENOUGH TO SHELTER TWO, THOROUGHLY WATERPROOF, CAN BE SWUNG FROM AN OVERHANGING LIMB WITHOUT THE USE OF POLES—WEIGHS FIVE POUNDS

rail, for neither Charles nor I possessed an automobile.

"I should say," I remarked, some of my early skepticism creeping back upon me, "that we need a cross between a plank, a wash-boiler, and a suit-case!"

Well, we got it!

Our craft is a folding canvas boat. It is twelve feet long, and thirty-eight inches wide amidships. Its shell is made of a double thickness of heavy canvas, covered with a water-proofing of some sort and painted green. It is given what I can define in no better way than to call it an elastic rigidity by an ingenious contrivance of lateral and transverse ribs of metal, and a combination floor and keel of wood, which shuts up like a jack-knife. The whole affair takes down and folds up into a package four feet or more long, two feet wide and eighteen inches thick, laced into a canvas cover and weighing a trifle over seventy pounds.

It is not beautiful, it has no graceful lines. It is not a swift affair; a cedar canoe passes us easily. But it is easy to portage, it draws so little water that it will go anywhere a plank will float, that

elastic rigidity enables it to actually bounce off snags and sharp rocks which would infallibly puncture a wooden canoe, and a few minutes' work with needle and coarse thread (which always form part of our traveling kit) will patch a hole resulting from any ordinary mishap.

Best of all, every railroad running out of Middleville will carry the packed and folded boat as baggage, it will slip under the seat of a capacious livery rig, or carry easily on our shoulders to those bits of our wilderness which lie within reach of the ends of the city car-lines.

Next came the tent. It has little more beauty than the boat, and is just as useful. It is rather shapeless, just large enough to shelter the two of us (and an occasional dog), thoroughly waterproof, can be swung from an overhanging limb without the use of poles—and weighs five pounds.

That is really all of our wilderness equipment. The rest depends on the nature of the trip, and consists merely of those things which you would take on any close-to-home fishing or hunting trip on which you expected to cook your own meals.

And Charles was right about the wilderness! It is there—right in the middle of that county map which seemed to

TO UNPACK THE BOAT AND SET IT UP IS ONLY A FIFTEEN-MINUTE JOB ONCE YOU GET THE HANG OF IT

contain nothing but farm-land and villages!

We know the country now, know it, I think, as nobody else in Middleville. The map is no longer a mere collection of colors, lines, and names. We can put our fingers on this or that pond or lakelet and recall every detail of its appearance. The black lines of the creeks have become the tracings of our wanderings. We know that just where the creek winds up into Farmer Biddle's pasture-lot, there is a small patch of wild rice where the mallards (which Mr. Biddle has no time to bother with!) like to wait, and where, a mile beyond, a path leads from the stream to Farmer Gernert's yard and the best well water in the state!

There is one trip which has become an institution. We make it every Decoration Day without fail, but never more frequently. There are plenty of others, and to overwork any part of our wilderness is to spoil it!

At precisely nine-twenty-seven in the morning of every 30th of May, boat and tent are passed up to the grinning baggageman of the P. L. & M. local, while Charles and I, in flannel shirts, knickerbockers, and puttees, laden with paddles and packs, climb into the smoking-car.

A thirty-minute ride takes us to the village of Hicksburgh, where a big paper mill with a tall stack stands by the side of a broad mill-pond. We exchange salutes with the station-agent, shoulder boat, tent, paddles, and kit, and make the short portage to the pond. Here the boat is unpacked and set up—a fifteen-minute job once you have caught the hang of it—then we light our pipes, grin at each other with anticipation, and settle to paddling.

The mill-pond itself does not count. That is civilization. The wilderness begins beyond the railroad bridge—even though the first creek we follow goes within a dozen paces of the back fences of Hicksburghers, and is lined for some hundreds of yards by unlovely dump-heaps.

For three hours, the creek—nowhere boasting a breadth of more than twenty feet or a depth of more than four—dodges this way and that in an effort to shake itself free of the town, twists suddenly around a shoulder of hill, and plunges into a marsh, noisy with the splashing of turtles and the notes of rail and blackbirds. The neat fields and the telegraph poles stand back; the marsh engulfs us.

All that morning we thread the marsh. Man and his noises are not more than half a mile away in either direction, but we are alone. After the moment we round the blunt hill, we rarely see a human being until the stop at noon.

From the outset we are forced to call upon the excellent qualities of our queer-looking craft. At the very edge of the marsh, where the creek is not a dozen feet wide, a foot-bridge, consisting of a single plank, has been flung across. Heavy traffic has bent the plank until it is just below the surface of the water. On the first passage, we started to get out and lift the boat across.

"Let's make the boat jump!" I proposed.

We did. By dint of shifting our weight, poling manfully with the paddles and some scraping, we passed over that plank without getting out of the boat. On the spot, we laid down the rule that thereafter we could cross anything which did not actually show above the water!

The lonely marsh lasts until close to noon, then out we shoot into a lake where the stragglers of the northward flight of ducks provide amusement, poles are put together, and a few blue-gills and perch laid in for the night meal. Then across the lake and into a wider creek that will carry us till night.

Half a mile down this second stream is a little string of tumble-down houses. We salute them as though emerging from a three-months' cruise. Here is the spot for the noon meal, established by inviolable custom. This meal never varies; plain rolls, baked kidney-beans, and coffee for the first course, more coffee and rolls spread with orange-marmalade for the second!

The inhabitants of the tumble-down houses come down to watch. (We do not pry into the affairs of natives. Their lives remain closed mysteries. That is

a rule of the game.) The boat arouses their curiosity.

"You don't tell me you take a chance in that thing! I'd as soon trust myself afloat in a towel!"

We explain the trustworthiness of the craft, but they shake their heads, unconvinced. Even our successful launching does not break down their incredulity, and they remain on the bank waiting for us to ingloriously sink, and, like enough, turn away disappointed when we disappear around the bend with a wave of our paddles.

Another stretch of marsh-bound river, then Marmalade Lake! It may have another name, but the map does not show it, and we never make inquiries. We christened it on the first trip, having reached it hungry, wasted an hour trying to find the outlet, which was hidden away in the most unlikely place, and taken a flying lunch of rolls and marmalade in the very middle of it.

After this, we get a change of scene for some miles. Marsh gives place to sandy shores, bits of timber and thickets. Farmers are plowing within a stone's throw of the boat, yet our narrow strip of wilderness remains uninvaded. Once, a mile below Marmalade, we found a woman fishing on the bank! We were uneasy at first, but on closer view, she proved to fit! Description is needless; she was a wilderness woman!

Marsh again by the middle of the afternoon, and this time no mere ribbon of it, but a broad stretch, so wide that the low hills and the surrounding timber vanish. Here, instinctively, speech ceases, the paddle-strokes are noiseless that our approach to prowling muskrat, stalking heron, and gabbling mallards may be easy.

OUT AT THE FIRST STREAK OF DAWN, A BIT OF FISHING, A QUICK PADDLE DOWN TO THE OUTLET, AND BREAKFAST BY A PILE OF TIES AGAINST A BACKGROUND OF AN IRON BRIDGE

In the very center of the marsh, we assume the offensive and invade the haunts of men. A portage over an old dam—Charles carrying the boat while I shoulder the rest of the stuff—then we follow a faint path from the bank to the road, and down that to the house of "Soak 'Em." I don't know who owns the farm. There is a name on the mailbox, but I always turn away my eyes. It