

Self Reliance in the Outdoors

Tom Watson

Legacy of the 'Traveler'

"The idea of the work occurred to me when exploring Southwestern Africa in 1850-51... by collecting the scattered experiences of many such persons in various circumstances... and deducing from them what might fairly be called an 'Art of Travel'."

So begins Sir Francis Galton in the intro to his 19th century guide to outdoor tips and skills entitled *The Art of Rough Travel/From the Peculiar to the Practical/Advice from a 19th Century Explorer*. The guide book was born in an era of exploration of those regions of major continents on maps that showed great expanses of "Terra Incognita" or "unknown land"—blank areas throughout Asia, the Americas and perhaps the most popular global region, Africa.

Sir Galton's book is addressed to the "traveler," an expeditionary explorer who employed a variety of what we'd call backcountry skills today—sometimes crude but innovative ways of dealing with life in the bush where self-sufficiency and reliance were all the "traveler" had to work with. And, in some regards, the extent to which these travelers furnished their camps amounted to an 1800s style of "glamping."

Dozens of fellow travelers are referenced in the book hinting at the myriad explorers poking around the globe a couple of centuries ago—many of whom elevated their egos by publishing books of their adventures:

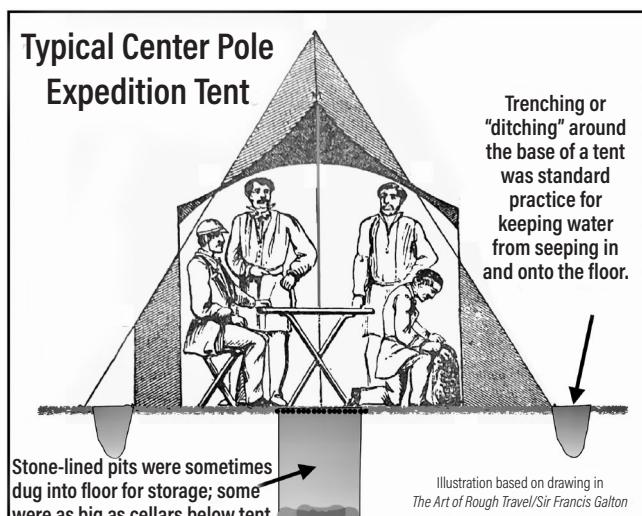
- Heinrich Barth: *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa* (5 volumes).
- MacGregor Laird: *Narrative of an Expedition into the Interior of Africa by the River Niger in 1832-34.*
- William Wentworth Fitzwilliam (aka Viscount William): *The North-West Passage by Land: Being the Narrative of an Expedition from the Atlantic to the Pacific, Undertaken with the View of Exploring a Route Across the Continent to British Columbia Through British Territory by One of the Northern Passes in the Rocky Mountains.* In the book, 23-year-old Fitzwilliam describes his year-long expedition from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.

Others concentrated on exploring the geology of vast areas, recording scientific observations from unknown regions and basically engaging in expeditions that took on the essence of military campaigns.

Besides the insights into what it meant to be a "traveler" (that is "explorer", outdoorsman, etc.), Sir Galton describes dozens of practical skills created and employed by these adventurers, many of which were of common practice over two hundred years ago, yet very similar to backwoods skills today—at least an "ancestor" to a common practice we may now take for granted. Here are some of the many skills, methods and gear used by these outdoorsmen of yore as cited in Galton's writings.

Shelters

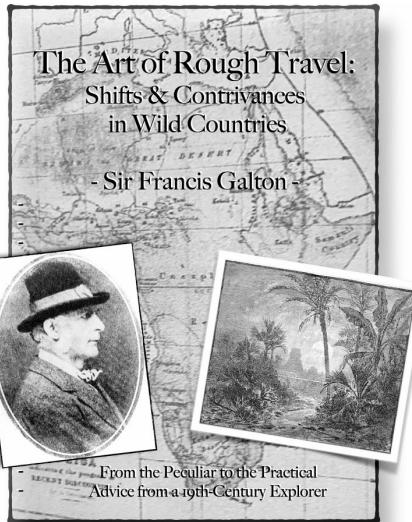
Many travelers by boat used the sails and overturned hulls as shelters while on expeditions. Those that set up more permanent base camps used a center pole, tipi-style tent. Ditching or trenching around the base of the tent was standard procedure to prevent water from seeping onto the floor. Sometimes, tents were pitched over storage pits dug beneath the floor (covered in boards/branches) that served as food caches and even sleeping areas.



Open Terrain Hunting Blinds



Since ancient times, hunters have hunted game from behind screens that kept them out of view of their game. A) Animal outlines painted on canvas, frame-supported and staked in place were sighted and shot through a hole in the canvas. B) Sub-Arctic hunters erected a white sheet to simulate snow/ice as their winter 'camo' blind.



Practical tips

In the years before synthetic fabrics and other modern materials were available, the best insulations of the day were wools, and the best waterproofing was often some sort of wax or animal fat worked into the fabrics at hand. Even clothing had to be creatively fashioned for relief of pains and ailments caused by exposure to the elements.

Any outdoorsman knows that there's nothing like a fresh pair of socks to sooth the foot during even a weekend encampment. In lieu of such a luxury, "travelers" were advised to use a large square of linen around the feet to serve as an adequate preventer of blisters, chafing and cold feet. Clayton's book illustrates a simple, but effective means of securing a "sock" around one's foot to serve as a liner inside a boot.

A handy tip useful in today's campsite keeps water from sloshing around in a bucket being carried from your water source to camp. Simply making a wreath/ring of fresh grass that will cover the surface of the water in the bucket will minimize the splashing of the water as it sways back and forth during the carry.

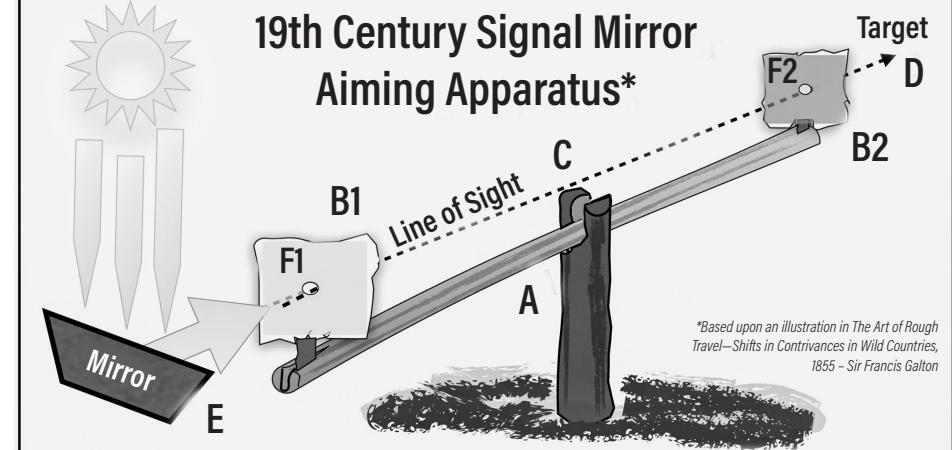
A candle lantern can be made from inserting a candle into the neck of a bottle whose bottom has been cracked off (not easy to accomplish and results in a sharp, jagged edge). The book also relates that a dried-out swan's foot had also been used as a candle holder stand.

Makeshift Candle Lanterns & Holders



Typical candle holders were made by breaking the bottom out of a bottle and inserting a candle into the narrow neck area. Various animal parts were dried and used for holders as well.

19th Century Signal Mirror Aiming Apparatus*



*Based upon an illustration in *The Art of Rough Travel—Shifts & Contrivances in Wild Countries, 1855 – Sir Francis Galton*

(A) Adjustable aiming device; (B1 & B2) Aiming card with sight hold in center; (C) Sender's line of sight from aiming card to target; (D) Target or signal projection point; (E) Signal mirror reflecting sunlight onto aiming card/hole; (F1) Center—Reflected sunlight over aiming hold and cast shadow of B1 onto center of B2; align shadow of B1 so image of aiming hole F1 projects onto shadow of F2.

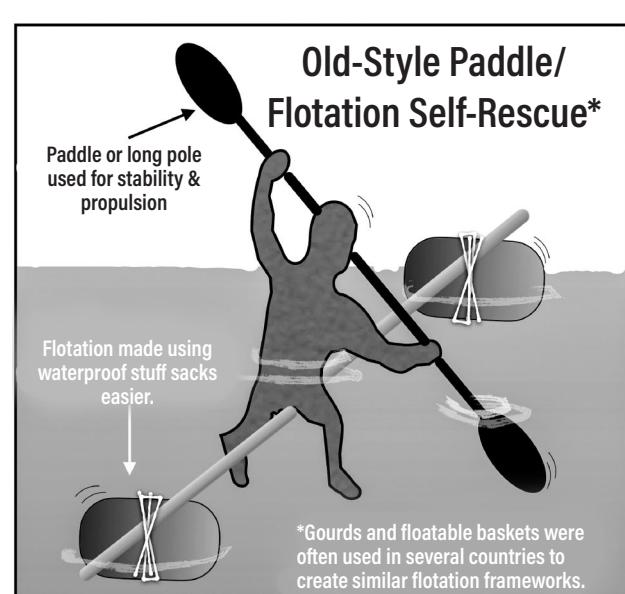
Other contraptions

Signal mirror—The common method of aiming a signal mirror is to direct the sun's reflective rays off a mirror held close to one's "aiming eye," to a "V" created by one's outstretched fingers and pointed at the distant target; a finger sight if you will. A mirror signaling apparatus illustrated in the book and based on those same components was suggested as a way to flash a signal to distant targets.

Make-shift water

conveyance—Travel by water has been creatively developed to utilize pretty much anything that floats. Sir Galton once observed a Mideastern worker crossing a stream using two large, gourd-like globes attached to ends of a long pole which the "paddler" straddled and was able to cross the body of water. Such an emergency vessel could easily be considered today: Replacing the gourds with flotation from waterproof stuff sacks or other similar buoyancy gear and perhaps a long paddle for the "seat?"

Old-Style Paddle/Flotation Self-Rescue*



*Gourds and floatable baskets were often used in several countries to create similar flotation frameworks.

From *Robinson Crusoe* to *Dr. Livingstone, I Presume?*

tales of castaways and expedition leaders have embellished their exploits with references to myriad skills they developed to aid in their survival. Some seem totally ridiculous by today's standards while others are the forbearers of processes still commonly practiced with very little alteration in their process or materials.

Being self-reliant carries with it a legacy of those who developed their own levels of self-reliance as part of their everyday routine, in environments where they had no choice. Fortunately, the somewhat dramatic narratives these explorers, these "travelers," shared in their voluminous publications reflect that today's backcountry outdoorsman/adventurer is part of a continuum that goes back to the cave dwellers in our past. **MWO**

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Hunting

Hunting blinds have probably been in use since the Stone Age and remain little changed in utility and materials since. Polar region hunters use an ice-camo white sheet to conceal themselves from their prey, both on land and from kayaks. In some regions of the explorer's world, they observed hunters hiding behind sheets of canvas onto which a common animal (horse, cow) was painted and erected on a frame to look like a beast grazing in a field. A small hole in the sheet enabled the hunter to view game and stick his rifle through the opening for shooting.