

# Primitive Camping - NCOWS Style

by Mike Tatham

The term “Primitive Camping” is really a bit of misnomer. It is usually used to describe the “Period Correct” camping area of an event. This area is separate from the “Modern Camping” area. The modern camping area is for RVs and nylon tents.



The “primitive” area, when done correctly, will resemble a 1880s boom-town. These tent cities popped up at the end of the tracks as the railroads pushed west (or south, north or even east from the Pacific coast). They also sprang up at every new mining discovery.

I was asked to coordinate the primitive camp for the 2008 NCOWS National Shoot. I accepted the challenge/responsibility. I and my partners from the Kansas Vigilance Committee (KVC) arrived on site at the West Side Sportsman’s Club Monday evening. [The KVC contingent to the ’08 Nationals has over 150 years combined experience primitive camping. This covers the mountain man/fur trade 1820-1840, military encampments 1812-1850, as well as the boom towns of the post civil war era.] Like most boom towns, the personal residence tents went up first; followed closely by a saloon. [At its peak the 2008 Nationals boom town reached nearly twenty structures.]



The personal tents reflect the occupation (persona) of the owners. The Doctor has a wall tent with a partition separating his sleeping area from his office-examining room-parlor. Being a man of means his tent is well furnished with a bed, tables, chairs, even a well stocked field bar with the floor covered with a Persian rug. [Now you understand what I mean when I say The term “Primitive Camping” is really a bit of misnomer.]



The mule packer and the horse trader opted for pyramid or “miners” tents. These tents are easy to set up and are nearly storm proof. The pyramids come in various sizes and all but the smallest have room for 2 or more people and their gear.

A German explorer/sportsman resided in a 6’ X 9’ X 6’2” common tent. (This tent is also referred to as a wedge or A tent.) In this small structure he managed to fit a cot, his personal gear and a small arsenal.

My quarters consisted of a 9' X 9' wall tent, a "Marcy bed" (1859), a "Galton table" (1856), a "Directors chair" (1863), a "Marcy table" (1859), a field bar (circa 1830), a couple of trunks, a couple of brass oil lamps and a cooler cleverly hidden in a rough hewn wood crate.

The cooler box brings me to the most important aspect of primitive camping. If you have an item that is not appropriate for the time period; Keep It Out of Sight. This is extremely easy to do: Cover it with a blanket or tarp or stash it in your tent.

Most primitive campers use modern camp cots &/or sleeping bags. This is perfectly acceptable: Just keep your tent flaps closed.

Probably the most important piece of gear, after acquiring a tent, is a bed/cot. Besides providing a comfortable and restorative sleep, a cot gives the camper more room by allowing gear to be stashed underneath. This is the best place to hide modern gear. By throwing a blanket over the bed and allowing it to hang over, nylon luggage and hard rifle cases become invisible. This technique can even hide a nylon and aluminum cot and a sleeping bag.

After the cot/bed, put together a cowboy bedroll. This is just a couple blankets, with an optional sheet, wrapped in a piece of canvas. [For the truly authentic and adventurous you only need a cowboy bedroll. In moderate temperatures and dry weather, this is a great way to go.]



Two additional items that really set off a primitive camp are authentic chairs and lighting. By the time a man reaches his thirties, sitting on the ground has lost its charm and a chair becomes an important piece of camp furniture. For the NCOWS era, it is hard to beat a "director's chair." They were patented in 1863 and show up in many Civil War photographs. Bow backed Windsors and "ladder-backs" are certainly boom town appropriate, though they are a challenge to pack.

After sundown, period lighting really makes a dramatic impression. [See *The Shootist* cover, Nov.-Dec. 2007.] Old style

kerosene lanterns are readily available at your neighborhood big box discount store. These run about \$ 5.00 and old ones are still around for a modest price. A lantern does more than just add to the camps atmosphere. It helps you find your way home after dark; either as a PC flashlight or as a porch light for your tent.

So if you want to maximize your old west / NCOWS experience; get yourself a tent, cot, chair, lantern and a cowboy bedroll and join us "die-hards." A complete kit will cost less than a weeks stay at a decent hotel. That means your second stay at the Nationals Primitive Camp will save you more than your kit cost. [A good tent will last you a lifetime. I have one that I've been using for twenty years.] We hope to make the "Primitive Camp" at next years National Shoot even bigger and better.

### Ten Commandments of Primitive Camping

- 1) **Thou shall not:**  
Have loaded firearms in camp.
- 2) **Thou shall not:**  
Leave any non-period correct item out and observable  
[Especially vehicles.]
- 3) **Thou shall not:**  
Wear non-period correct clothing in camp.
- 4) **Thou shall not:**  
Leave the lid up/open on any pit-toilet, out house  
or Porta- Potty [They are designed and built  
with a vent pipe to allow the fumes (smell) to go up  
and out. This will only work with the lid closed.]
- 5) **Thou shall not:**  
Drink beverages from a modern container.
- 6) **Thou shall not:**  
Sit in someone else's chair (unless invited to do so).
- 7) **Thou shall not:**  
Mooch. [Self reliance is the Cowboy Way. If  
you are in need, someone will offer assistance.]
- 8) **Thou shall not:**  
Over stay your welcome.  
[When your host turns in, do like wise or move the  
party.]
- 9) **Thou shall not:**  
Leave your trash in someone else's camp.
- 10) **Thou shall not:**  
Leave the camp area in any condition except better  
than you found it.