

The IBF Man

In the days I lived at home there were still a few who rode the rails. Not as many as in my father's day when hobos were a familiar sight. In the summer after sixth grade my best friend and I trekked all Saturday across rails and trestles until we found the perfect place, right next to a creek and with the trees standing back from the water's edge by a good 20 feet.. We pitched our tarpaulin tent and set ourselves to starting a fire. But Friday had been an all-day rain and we could not find even one dry stick. No dry leaves for kindling, no dried twigs to make the jump from leaf to limb.

Dark was coming on when we saw, wobbling toward us from down the track, an old man in dirty worn clothes. As he reached the rail closest to our camp, he acted surprised and pleased to see us there - although we were clearly visible when he was yet a mile off. With a big smile, he climbed down off the tracks and bent over our pitiful attempt at a fire.

"You boys planning to cook some supper are you? Might need a fire for that."

We allowed that yes, we had some raw bacon and white bread that we had planned to cook and eat as sandwiches, but it was too wet to build a fire.

"Don't you worry about the fire, boys. You pull out that bacon and we'll be eating proper here in no time." With that he began to walk in tight little circles staring at the ground among the trees behind our clear spot. After a few seconds, he picked up a limb and waved it at us like a flag. "Here we go. Now we can do something!"

My friend and eye covertly looked at each other. That limb was half rotted and soaked with water. You couldn't light it with a blowtorch. But that's not what our hobo did. Now he was walking in little circles again, but this time looking up, not down.

"Ah, just what we want!" he said, as chipper as a Sunday School teacher. He took the fork of the branch he was holding and snapped off one side branch at about one foot long. Then, using that short stub like a hook, he raised the branch up into a snarl of grape vines and dragged the whole mess down to where we could reach it.

"Look in there for some kindling, and I'll get some wood." Sure enough, the stuff he had pulled down was a tangle of fallen twigs and leaves and dead vines, and in minutes we had enough to get a small fire up, but nothing big enough to make it last. We built the sticks and twigs into a teepee shape like they told us in the scouts and waited to see what he came back with.

"Oh, no, boys, that won't do a'tall. Here's something to help us get underway." He had several fairly large dry limbs. "Always look for the ones standing straight up. They don't take on nearly as much rain. I found some good dry pieces." He then carefully disassembled our teepee and started afresh. He laid his two biggest pieces crossways from each other, with only a little of the longest one crossing the other. Then he pointed to me, "You're the stoutest of us lot. Jump on this limb right here with both feet like you mean to kill it." After two tries I got the hang of it, and under his direction broke his dried limbs into manageable lengths.

Next he laid two of them with heads together at about a 30 degree angle. He put another on top of each of the first two, and piled our dry leaves tight into the corner this made. He laid out the twigs and vines on top of the leaves, and then all the scraps of dry wood we had made breaking up the limbs.

Finally, he laid another limb piece across the top, forming a sort of roof over the kindling.

"You were watching, but I don't suppose you knew to pay attention to this. But you see I laid the fire so the open mouth faces into the breeze. If the wind was a lot higher, we'd build it a whole other way." He patted his pockets and came up with a small box of strike-anywhere wooden matches. "You boys got some matches, I reckon?"

We admitted that we did, and he opened our box and looked at them.

"We'll use yours if they work, but you don't want these. If the box gets damp -just with sweat even - you're out of luck." He tried a couple, and the second blazed up. He carefully extended the match deep

into the leaves and held it there until we were sure he would get burned. "Nice if we had some paper. Leaves are awful for this. Makes you wonder why they have so many forest fires."

Soon we had our skillet hot and our bacon sizzling. We made our sandwiches, and shared them out evenly. From time to time he would add some of the dead wood into the cleft where the kindling had been.

After we ate, he said, "Now we have to get ready for the rest of the evening." He pulled some of the large but wet chunks of wood out of the edge of the woods and up to the fire. "Won't be breaking these by jumping, even with that belly of yours!" Then he laid two of these long wet logs across the wedge of the fire, where over the next few hours they dried and burned through. Each time one was close enough, we would break it, fold the pieces together and feed those back into the fire. I say "we" because by now, well after dark, our hobo had retired from the field, back up against a tree, telling us the most obviously untrue and even unbelievable lies.

After all these many years, we both remember his pulling a NATO round out of his coat, saying he was showing it to us so we would know he was an IBF man. When we retold this tale later, we rolled with laughter. That night, though, we were twelve, he was grown, and a stranger, and having a grown crazy stranger invite himself to your camp was pretty scary. Eventually we drifted to sleep, us on our Army surplus blankets, him leaning on his tree. At least once during the night, I thought I saw him tending our fire, which we had banked so it would burn until we woke.

And wake we did, when the sun fell full on our faces over the top of the trees. We were achy from sleeping on the ground. We were cold because the fire had eventually gone out. We were hungry but had finished all the bacon with supper. The hobo was gone.

So was our canteen, our one extra blanket, and our pilfered Playboy magazine.

In their place was a small stack of dry kindling ready for the match and a piece of our fishing line that was tied to a bush by the fire and lead down to the creek through the gills of two catfish to a stick to hold it all together.