

# The Self-Guided Hunter...

## GEARING DOWN FOR THE BACKCOUNTRY

### Fourth in a series...

**George A. Bettas**  
1st VP of Administration  
Boone and Crockett Club

On a crisp, clear November morning a few weeks ago Larry Lathen, Dr. Jere Dick, and I were on our way to hunt elk in a remote area of Idaho. As we left the parking area for the trailhead we rode through the camp of the only other hunters in the area. These hunters occupied a large "road camp" near the trailhead, complete with wall tents, horses, ATVs, and 4x4 pickups. They were "day hunting" from a camp that appeared to have all of the luxuries of home. As we passed by their camp on our horses the con-

trast between our hunting camp and theirs was apparent. We had everything we needed for a week-long elk hunt many miles from the trailhead packed on three horses, carrying 150 pounds of gear each, including 100 pounds of horse feed. These hunters chose to hunt out of a deluxe camp, which was located miles in any direction from the elk. This had been a very dry fall and the elk were still high on their summer ranges for there had been no snow to move them to lower elevations. We had made the choice to hunt light with the ability to go to wherever we would find elk. Our camp, although lightweight, contained all of the essentials for a comfortable camp no matter what the weather happened to dish out at whatever elevation we anticipated finding elk.

The hunters at the road camp had been hunting for a week and had not seen a legal bull,

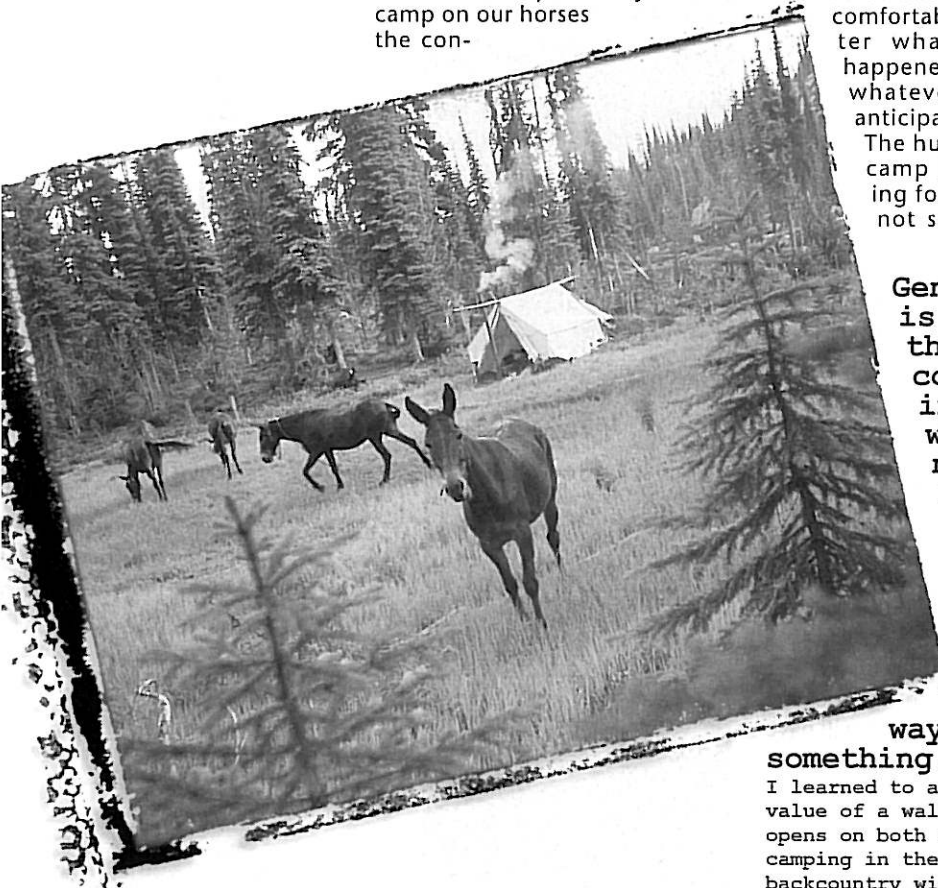
in spite of the fact that they had ridden their horses considerable distances into the mountains, had driven their pickup trucks to distant areas, and had scoured the non-wilderness areas with their ATVs. Although it was late in the year, it was not cold enough to keep the elk feeding much during daylight hours. A hunter had to be in position to be where the elk were at the crack of dawn. In spite of the reports of "no elk" from these hunters, we were full of anticipation for a great hunt. We had done our research, assembled the right gear, had a plan, and were ready. We had the right stuff to execute the plan and were on our way.

The trip to the area where we planned to camp took most of the day, in spite of our early morning start. As we approached the ridge above the campsite, having seen no sign for hours, the fresh elk tracks were a welcomed sight. We were here, with the elk. It was time to set up camp.

We quietly unloaded the horses and began setting up the wall tent. No loud talking and no chopping, pounding, etc. We had done this many times before so everyone knew just what to do. The sound of the hand saw was the only noise as we fashioned tent poles from the abundant blown-down lodgepole pine. The wall tent was up in short order. Jere sawed up more dead lodgepoles for firewood as Larry and I put together the wood stove and set up the kitchen. Finally, we tied a pole between two trees and hung our tack on the pole to keep it clean, dry, and off the ground where mice or other critters might enjoy chewing on the salty leather. We watered the horses in the spring near camp and fed them from the feed we had packed for them.

**Gene Alford is one of those quiet, competent individuals who does not say a lot... It is best to be listening because, if you do, you will always learn something.**

I learned to appreciate the value of a wall tent which opens on both ends while camping in the Idaho backcountry with Gene Alford.



WE HAD MADE THE CHOICE TO HUNT LIGHT  
with the ability to go to whatever elevation  
we would find elk.



Larry Lathen packing in a 2-person camp.  
Everything you need for a 10-day hunt in the backcountry.

# The Self-Guided Hunter...

There would be no fire tonight as we were in the middle of the elk. A Coleman lantern took the chill off the tent and the lightweight propane stove made dinner preparation simple. Warm sleeping bags and thermarest pads made for a comfortable night in spite of the freezing temperatures. We quickly dozed off in anticipation of the morning after a rewarding day of packing in and setting up our camp.

We were up early, had breakfast and were out of camp just before daylight, Jere hunting in one direction and Larry and I the other. Larry had already taken a nice 6x6 bull earlier in the season so he was just along for the ride, testing some new gear he was developing for Rocky Mountain Pack Systems, LLC.

The night had been clear and cold with no moon. We encountered elk on the ridge by camp. All cows and calves. Soon after that we jumped a nice bull in the lodgepoles. We tracked him for a short distance but with no snow he soon gave us the slip. Although we had never hunted in this area we had studied our topographic maps carefully. As we hunted we noted our progress on the maps, and I marked the location of the campsite and a few other key topographic features with

my GPS as we hunted throughout the morning.

Larry and I were in the lodgepoles and were into elk all morning but I had no opportunities for a clear shot at a bull. As noon approached we located a clearing which we had been working toward using the topographic map. Within moments we spotted a bedded bull elk across the face of the mountain in front of us. Although we did not know exactly where Jere was, I knew he would be somewhere on this face about this time of day. For Jere and me, this was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of hunting together, and we had a sixth sense developed over years of hunting together which enabled us to anticipate what each other would be doing.

From where he sat high on the ridge above us Jere watched Larry and me emerge from the timber on the edge of the clearing. He had been watching a herd of elk bedded on the ridge across from him for nearly two hours, waiting for the six-point bull to stand up and present him with a clear shot. Since I suspected Jere was above us, Larry and I concentrated on the bull, which was low on the face of the mountain. We decided to make a stalk on this bull.

An hour later as I approached the spot from which I

planned to shoot, I heard Jere shoot on the ridge above us. His patience paid off and he took his bull when it got up for a mid-day stretch. The shot spooked the original bull I was stalking, but a short time later, I jumped elk in the lodgepoles and took my bull. That evening we had a warm fire in the wood stove and celebrated the day with a homemade dinner of Italian peppers, bracciale, marinara sauce and pasta, thanks to my friend Duane Sidler who had pre-made all of the dinners but was unable to make the trip.

The next morning after a hearty breakfast of hotcakes and sausage, we packed our bulls to camp and boned out the meat in preparation for packing out to the trailhead. Early the following morning we "bunched" the camp, made up our packs, and headed down, just as the winter snows hit the high country.

When I began packing into the backcountry for elk more than 20 years ago, my idea of a camp was influenced by the fact that we seldom had more than five or six days to pack into the backcountry, set up camp, hunt elk, pack meat to camp, bunch the camp and pack the camp and our meat to the trailhead. This forced us to think carefully about how to reduce our camp weight so we would have sufficient room on our horses to pack out four elk plus our camp and our personal gear. We accomplished this by

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RESOURCES**
- Salem Tent & Awning  
(800) 892-8659
- Beckel Canvas  
Products  
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- Kozy Kamp  
(541) 568-4347
- Montana Canvas  
(800) 235-6518
- Rocky Mountain Pack  
Systems, LLC  
(208) 234-4584  
[www.rockymountainpacks.com](http://www.rockymountainpacks.com)
- Barney's Sports  
Chalet  
(907) 561-5242
- Outfitter's Pack  
Station  
(208) 522-3446



packing all of our horses and walking out at the end of the hunt. We almost always encountered rain or snow so a wall tent and wood stove were necessities. We were fortunate in that the area we hunted had lots of elk and our camp was remote enough that we had almost no competition from other hunters. We affectionately called this place "Bull Creek Camp." It was backcountry elk hunting at its best.

I thought I knew a great deal about packing until I had the good fortune to make two 100+ mile wilderness trips with Gene Alford, the recipient of the 1989 Sagamore Hill Award. Gene and I made the first trip alone. My two daughters accompanied us on the second trip. Gene had spent most of his life in the mountains packing and guiding elk hunters. He annually spent a month in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness hunting cougar, alone with his two dogs. As we set up and moved our camp almost daily I had a unique opportunity to observe Gene and learn the fine points of packing. Gene is one of those quiet, competent individuals who does not say a lot. When he does have something to say he is always sincere, thoughtful, and well spoken. It

is best to be listening because, if you do, you will always learn something.

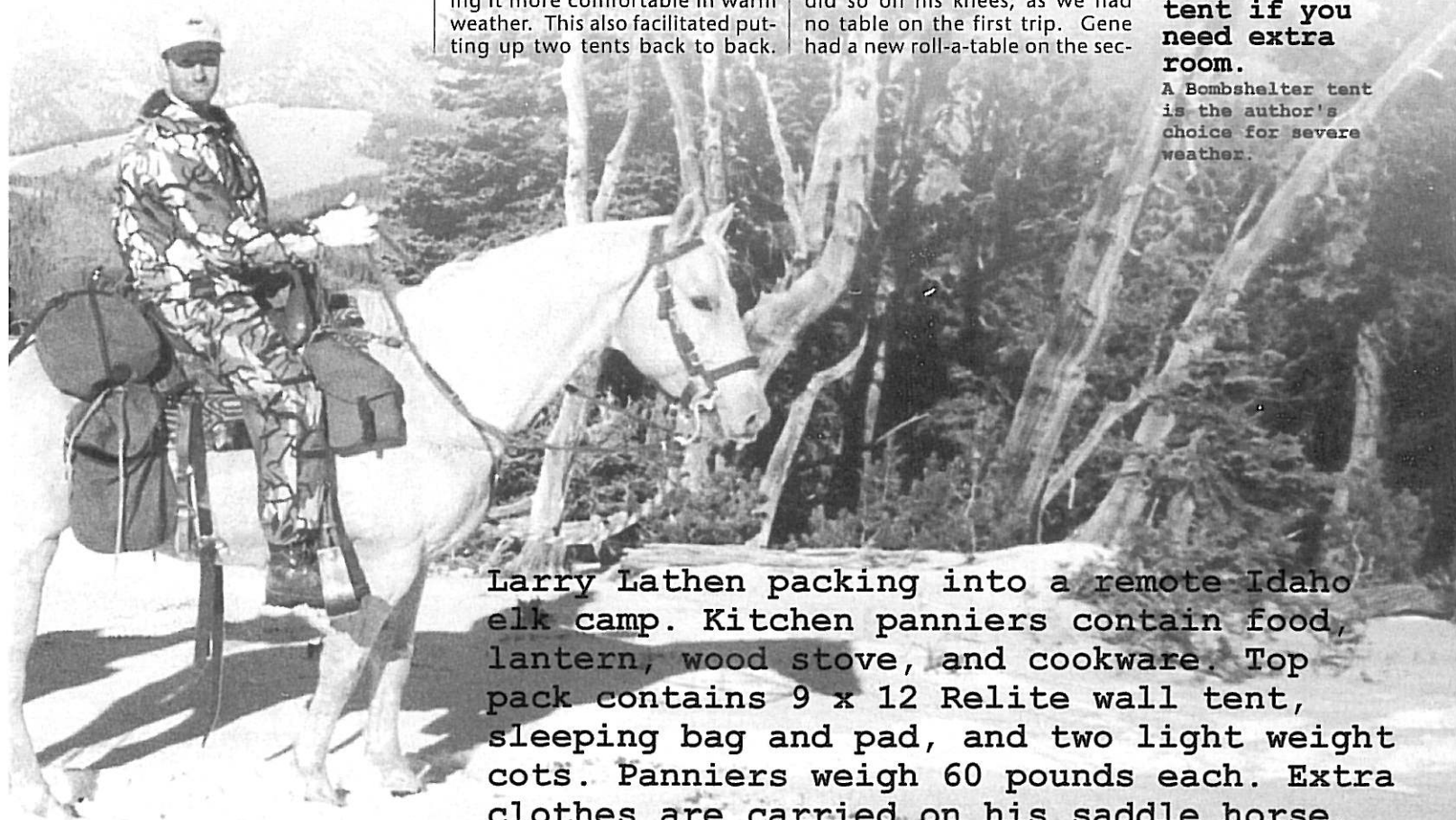
Each move Gene made while setting up or taking down camp or "carguing" his loads was calculated and followed the same pattern as the previous day. The most important single concept that I learned from Gene was that every item we had with us had a purpose. Everything also had its place in our packs. Efficiency characterized Gene's camp gear and perfection characterized his packing and camping techniques. I particularly noted his "grub boxes," two wooden panniers which he packed on the bell mare. These boxes held all of the food and cooking gear for the entire nine-day trip. I could not detect much difference between the trip where we had to provide food for two people or the second trip when we cooked for five. Gene's wall tent was different than most as it opened on both ends, making it more comfortable in warm weather. This also facilitated putting up two tents back to back.

Everything we cooked was prepared on Gene's army surplus wood stove. The stovepipes "nested" inside each other and were stowed inside the stove for packing. When Gene cooked he did so on his knees, as we had no table on the first trip. Gene had a new roll-a-table on the sec-



**A sleeping tent is a nice addition to a wall tent if you need extra room.**

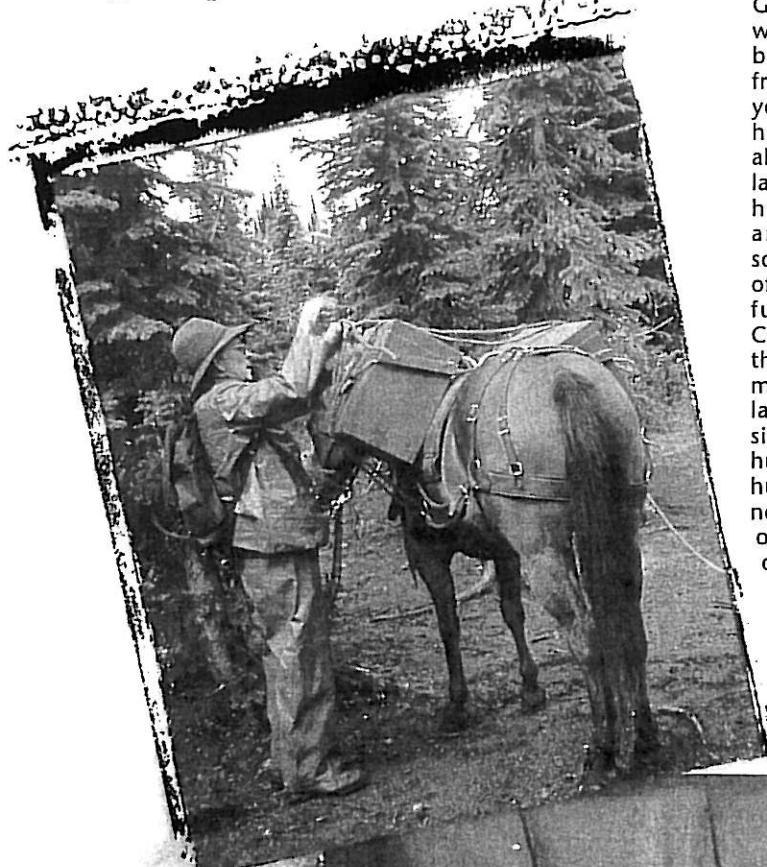
**A Bombshelter tent is the author's choice for severe weather.**



Larry Lathen packing into a remote Idaho elk camp. Kitchen panniers contain food, lantern, wood stove, and cookware. Top pack contains 9 x 12 Relite wall tent, sleeping bag and pad, and two light weight cots. Panniers weigh 60 pounds each. Extra clothes are carried on his saddle horse.

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Gene's cook boxes held sufficient food for five people on a seven-day trip.

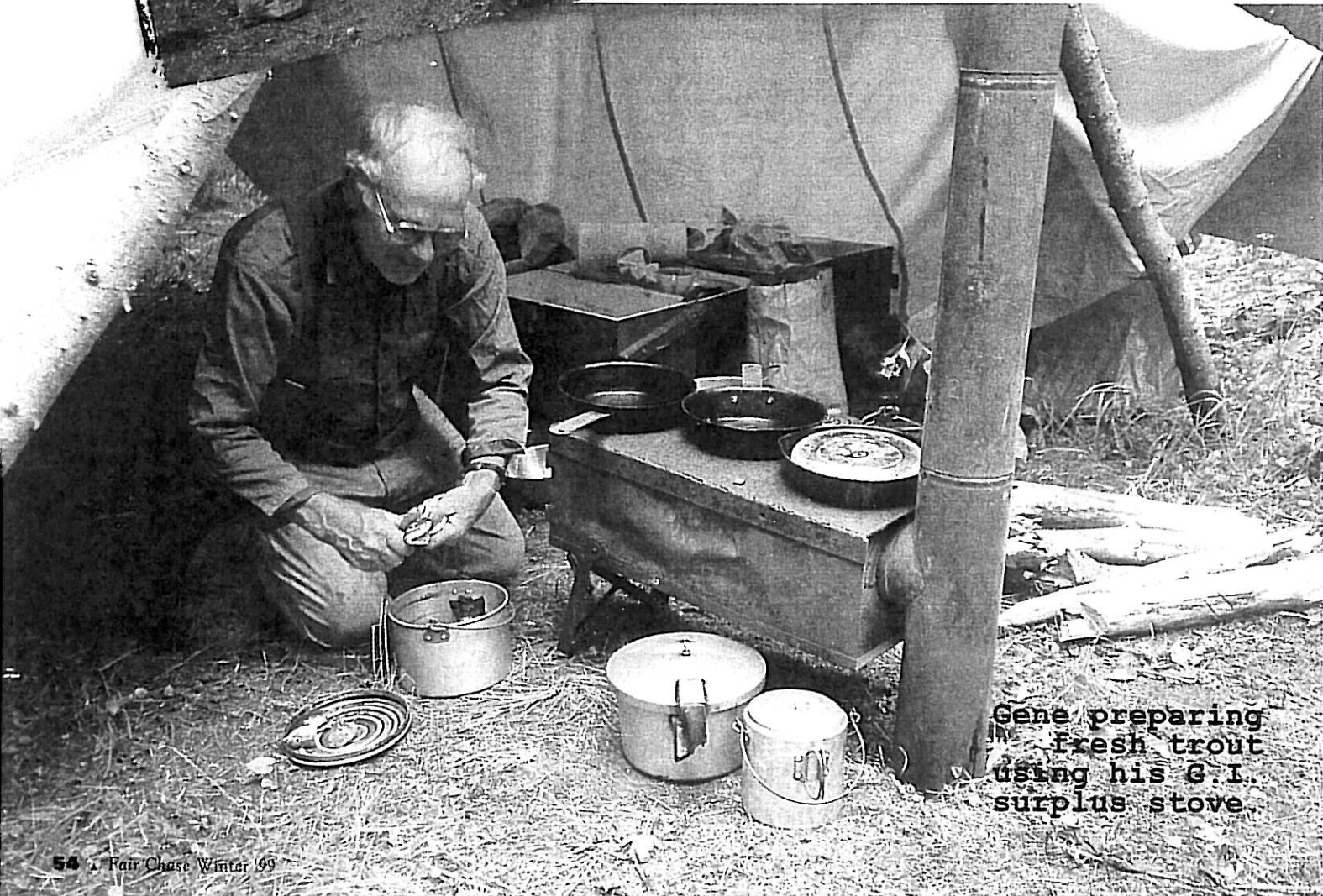


ond trip but he still cooked on his knees in front of the stove. We used the table for food preparation.

After making these trips with Gene, I too became more efficient with my packing for the backcountry. After we had hunted from Bull Creek Camp for twelve years it seemed as if we had been hunting there forever. But as with all things in this world, nothing lasts forever, especially good elk hunting spots. It's hard to kill elk anywhere without drawing someone's attention. Our group of four hunters had been wonderfully successful at Bull Creek Camp with each of us taking bulls the first ten years, most of them mature 6-point bulls. The popularity of elk hunting increased significantly since the time we hunted there. New "self guided" hunters came into the area and new, aggressive outfitters bought out the old-timers who had owned their areas for years. One of the new outfitters registered a "spike camp" in "our spot" and we had to take our case all the way to Washington, D.C., to get to use Bull Creek Camp again. The area

became "crowded" and the quality of the hunt changed. The last straw occurred when some California hunters "jumped" our camp and were all set up in "our spot" when we arrived. We still got our elk that year, but it just was not the same. The specialness of Bull Creek Camp was gone and it was time to move on down the trail. At this point I began searching for lighter gear and perfecting my outfit to go wherever we found elk.

This fall's hunt was the result of a conscious effort to "gear down" and go light. The tent which we used was a 10' x 12' with 5' side walls and weighed 35 pounds, wet or dry. It was made from a waterproof material called "relite" by the manufacturer, Montana Canvas, Belgrade, Montana. My "old" 10' x 12' canvas tent weighs 50 pounds dry and closer to 75 pounds wet. The relite tent sweats a bit since it is waterproof, but you do not need a fly. If you want the tent to be warmer during cold weather you simply add a lightweight fly. The relite tent, unlike a canvas tent that will swell when wet and "seal" the needle holes at the seams, needs to be seam sealed. If you want an even



Gene preparing fresh trout using his G.I. surplus stove.

lighter tent, Bob Beckel of Beckel Canvas, Portland, Oregon, makes an excellent tent from a material called poly-tex which is water repellant, mildew resistant and fire retardant. A 10' x 15' poly-tex tent with 5' side walls weighs 20 pounds. A 10' x 10' weighs 15 pounds.

We elected to use a set of "kitchen panniers" which we obtained from Outfitter's Pack Station in Idaho Falls, Idaho. These panniers are made of high-tech plastic and are contoured on the inside to fit the horse. They have detachable legs, which screw into the bottom corners of the panniers. The tops are placed between the two panniers forming a table top for cooking, making sandwiches, food preparation, etc. A stainless steel cook kit, coffee pot and utensils rounded out our kitchen gear.

Our stove was a take down stove made by Kozy Kamp of Cove, Oregon. The top, sides, bottom, and ends come apart and pack into an efficient, lightweight, flat package. The stove pipes nest inside each other making them efficient to pack as well.

The older I get the more I like a comfortable bed at night. A cot with a thermarest pad is hard to beat but cots weigh up there to the point where they are a hassle to pack. Last year I found a high quality, lightweight cot made by Recreational Equipment Incorporated (REI). These cots are half the weight of the aluminum military cots... which are the best cots available. Two cots fit nicely in a 10' x 12' wall tent along with the Kozy Kamp stove and kitchen panniers.

Top packs are always a challenge and if not balanced properly are trouble in steep country because they are prone to cause a load to become unbalanced on a pack animal. After experimenting with a variety ways to top pack, I settled on the rectangular top pack made by Salem Tent and Awning, Salem, Oregon. These top packs are just the right size to hold two lightweight cots with a relite tent packed between them with the total weight of the top pack being about 50 pounds. Other optional lightweight gear includes a roll-a-table or a collapsible chair if you like. The collapsible chair (or a roll-a-stool) is a worthwhile item to pack if you have room, especially if you do not take cots which serve the dual purpose of a bed and a place to sit.

Now that we have taken care of the camp we need to think about food. I concentrate on hearty dinner meals and light breakfasts and

lunches. There are many lightweight meals available including, pasta, instant mashed potatoes, rice, beans, and the like. We like to prepare meals ahead of time and freeze them. My friend Duane Sidler likes to cook so he prepares and freezes the dinner meals. *The key is to plan what you will eat each day and stick to the menu.* Pack only what you need. We take a few extra MREs in the event that we need to spend an extra day or so afield. If you like them, MREs make a good hot lunch. Drinks are heavy, so we limit our liquid drinks to a minimum. Coffee, hot chocolate, tea, and powdered drinks such as Tang or Gator Aide don't weigh much and are well worth their weight. The high-energy bars such as Balance bars and Power Bars are tasty, and are better nutritionally than candy bars.

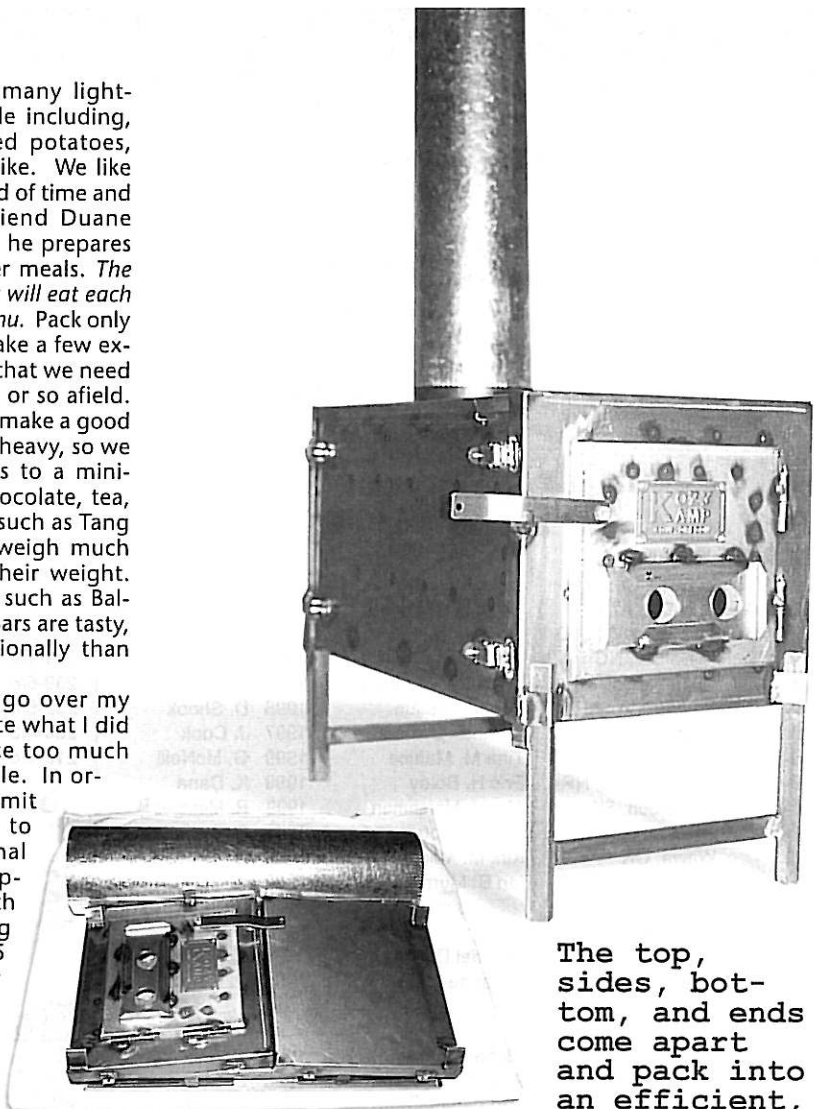
After each trip I go over my personal gear and note what I did not use. I always take too much and so do most people. In order to be tactful I limit my hunting partners to 25 pounds of personal gear, including sleeping bag and pad. With the high tech clothing available today the 25 pound limit is easily sufficient. This is especially true if you have a wall tent and wood stove capable of drying wet clothing. Extra ammo, lunch, water, and rain gear go in my saddle bags or are tied on behind the cantle.

During an early season hunt, depending upon where you are camping and what kind of weather is expected, you can lighten your camp even more by eliminating the wood stove and wall tent. In such cases we cook on a lightweight gas or propane stove and use a simple tarp over the cooking area if it rains. Sleeping tents consist of a high quality tent which will withstand a significant snow load like the Bombshelter or Hurricane Hut made by Barney's Sport Chalet, Anchorage, Alaska. If you really want to go light you can use backpack gear and freeze-dried food. Personally, I hate to give up the wall tent. Wall tents, wood stoves, horses, and mules all go together to make an elk hunt special . . . different from an antelope hunt, or a caribou hunt, or whatever.

We had ridden for several hours coming out of our camp this November when we stopped for a short lunch break. As I tied up my horse I noticed Jere was

grinning like always at the end of a successful hunt. As he walked up to where I was sitting with my MRE warming in my cap he said, "Just like Bull Creek Camp, wasn't it?" I agreed and we spent the next twenty minutes remembering the good old days at Bull Creek.

Since we left Bull Creek we have hunted a number of great new areas, but none of them have had the charm of Bull Creek Camp. This year once again, our research, gear, planning, and preparation had paid off in a great hunt with two nice bulls as a bonus. Was this luck? I have always thought that if I had the choice of being "lucky" or being "good" I would always choose "lucky." In this case it was a combination of luck and being good. After more than 20 years of hunting elk in the backcountry we have perfected the light gear luxury hunt, thanks to technology and the new clothing and gear which is currently available to the hunter. If you haven't tried it, you should. It is a lot better than eating peanut butter sandwiches and freezing at night. ▲▲▲



The top, sides, bottom, and ends come apart and pack into an efficient, lightweight flat package. The Kozy Kamp take-down stove and nesting stove pipe fully assembled.