

## Desert Fires



The sky was clear as the sun set beyond the mountains. It would be a cold night, crisp enough already. My son and I were camping at Raven Rock, his favorite campsite. We had come to listen to the desert and this was the perfect spot. Coyotes liked our campsite and they would come much later to serenade us with their haunting calls. Perhaps, if we were lucky, we would hear the cry of a fox or even a mountain lion. For sure, sunrise would bring the ravens; their raucous calls would be our alarm clock.

But as the sun set there were no sounds, not even the wind. Everything, including my son, was still as we watched the evening light fade over one set of mountain peaks and reflect off another. It was the reflected light that held our attention. Beautiful. First pink, then orange glowed in the distance. Finally, purple accented the rugged mountains, casting a calming light around us. Ah, desert evenings. Soon it would be totally dark with no moon to brighten our way. Normally, when we camp, my son and I are content to lie under the stars, talking and making up stories about the stars and their constellations until we fall

asleep. But winter days are short and it was still early, too early to lay out the bedrolls and lie down. "We could build a fire", my son suggested as the light began to fade from the mountains.

I looked around. Yes, there were enough small pieces of dead wood to support a small, intimate fire. It would have to be small, but in the desert, with its paucity of wood, that is the only type of fire to build. Since the night air was cold enough already, I did not have to worry about snakes as I sent my son off with a flashlight to find more wood.

Over the years we have been building fewer and fewer fires, so that now it has become a rare occasion for us. I have found that a fire tends to isolate a person from their surroundings. Sitting close to the fire you see nothing but those things reflected in its light. When camping I like to feel I am part of the desert, not apart from it.

But there are those times when a small fire provides a spiritual haven and, perhaps, a primitive connection to the past. For thousands of years we depended on campfires for survival and, even today, I occasionally find a sense of that past within the glow of burning wood. Besides, it is not easy to build a good campfire, it requires patience and a certain amount of skill, both things my son needs to learn and practice.

For me, building a fire is almost a religious rite, requiring dedication, knowledge, and concentration. Only certain sizes of wood can be used at particular stages of the fire's life and only dead wood. It is sacrilege to burn living material; nothing is to be taken from a standing plant. Enough twigs and branches can be found on the ground, there is no need to deface or harm living things. Besides, in burning downed wood, its return to the soil as minerals and nutrients is hastened.

My son knows the basics of fire building. His first armload of wood is mostly twigs and small branches that will be the tinder, easily catching fire but burning too quickly for an evening's warmth. I form a loose mound with two handfuls of broken twigs. With the longer, but still slender branches, I build a small tepee above the mound. These provide the kindling for the night's fire. It will carry the flame to the fuel of the fire, the larger wood that I set around the tepee, wood that will hold the flame. Beside us my son has set more of the larger wood, more fuel for the fire. It is the fuel that will provide the warmth, and most of the light, for this evening's fire. When enough wood has been gathered and placed close by, I light the match and set it on the tinder. Within a few moments the tepee of kindling has caught fire and is carrying the flames toward the fuel. We sit back to enjoy our work.

Not that all the work is done. Wood must be added slowly to produce the size of fire wanted. Because we only need a small fire we must tend it carefully. There is a critical point in building such fires: if too much fuel is added too soon,

the flames will grow quickly but the fuel will not burn evenly. If fuel is added too slowly the fire becomes a smoky mess.

There are three phases in the life of a campfire. In a young fire, wood must be added at the appropriate time. If not constantly maintained, the young fire will not grow into a mature campfire but will rapidly die. At this stage the fire it must be tended constantly, its needs met quickly. With proper care it will grow into the mature fire. The mature fire needs little maintenance, just the addition of an occasional log or two. Only when this stage is reached does the fire builder lean back and tell or listen to the tall tales and adventure stories of the evening. It is good to be with friends and family around a mature fire, you are all locked into a special warmth that comes from more than just the flames. Under such conditions the only world that exists is comprised of the fire and the faces reflecting its light.

But it is the last phase, the senescent fire, that I enjoy most. As the fire dies down to a soft white ash and red coals blink into darkness we become one with the universe again. Stars hidden by the earlier glare, become visible, blinking as if in reply to the dying fire. My son, tired from telling me tales of why the buzzard has a red head and listening to why the coyote howls at the moon, has fallen asleep. We have shared some intimate moments, close moments in the faint warmth of a bright campfire.

In the morning I will show him the proper way to remove signs of our fire. No one will know of our pausing here, and no one can desecrate our special place. And no one can remove the memory of a special night spent together.

*I wrote this story many years ago, when my son was 5.  
He is 38 now but he knows how to build a fire and is teaching the skill to his  
kids.*

**Posted by Patt Sims - January 5, 2014**