

Our Christmas in the Wilderness

A city family takes a camper into the isolated North Woods for a yuletide with the deer and porcupines—and nature at its best and worst

By BILL THOMAS

To us, Christmas has always meant a warm, comfortable home with a tree, decorations, and the children running around in their pajamas and slippers.

But last year changed that age-old image for us. My wife and our two sons, Billy, 9, and Alan, 2, decided to camp out on Christmas in the North Woods section of Michigan in the Ottawa National Forests. Alone with the elements, our holiday was exhilarating and memorable—contrasting sharply to past ones.

We struck out from home in Cincinnati, Ohio, in an El Dorado camper outfitted with a butane-gas forced-air furnace, gas refrigerator, four-burner range, double sink, bathroom and shower, and beds for six. It was to be our holiday home.

After almost six months of considering sites, we choose (with the help of the U.S. Forest Service) Sylvania on the west end of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. We drove the 1,400 mile journey leisurely, stopping for overnight rests. We reached the ranger station in Watersmeet and parked overnight. The next morning we picked up a snowmobile and drove five miles to Sylvania, where we found a snow-laden paradise—and more snow falling.

Once at the site, we spied a pine tree close by, its branches heavy with snow. It was small enough to be decorated and would be our own special Christmas tree—not one for bright electric lights but one on which we hung edible decorations for the wildlife which abounds there. Strings of popcorn and cranberries, apples, suet, and ears of corn made up the tree décor. We carpeted the snow beneath the tree with bird seed, and we knew that this would be the best Christmas tree we had ever had.

Christmas Eve the snow stopped, leaving a 42-inch blanket of white on the ground. It was powdery and difficult to travel on by snowmobile.

But we did explore several miles in Sylvania that day, and on several occasions we spotted fresh deer tracks. The bellies of the animals nearly erased their tracks, the snow was so deep. We also spotted the cuttings of porcupines and knew the forest was alive with animals.

Mark Leffer, U.S. Forest Ranger, came by to warn us that night of an impending cold wave—temperatures would drop to -30F. We decided to prepare for it. We'd had some problems with the regulator on the bottled gas tank which had frozen on the underside of the camper, so we insulated it after we heated the pipes.

We had some heaters—a butane-gas radiant heater and one Coleman heater, which had an output of 5,000 BTUs for just such an emergency. We lit it that night; it would burn for 36 hours on one filling so it would last the night.

If the journey itself lacked an atmosphere of adventure before, it certainly did not now. We now felt like frontiersmen.

On our breakfast table, we decorated a small tree which we had obtained in Watersmeet. Around this would be our gifts to one another, but Santa was not going to come until Christmas morning—not during the night and leave without being



We decorated our Christmas tree with tidbits for the wildlife there.



Santa arrived by snowmobile.

seen. He would come through the woodland on a snowmobile, racing along the modern way instead of with his usual flying reindeer.

We thought we'd explore Lac Vieux desert some 15 miles south of Sylvania to see if any ice fishermen were there. Besides, it was a nice day for a drive along a snowy back road, and this particular one leading to the lake would pass an old Indian village, deserted in winter but occupied in summer by members of the Winnebago tribe from Wisconsin.

We stopped and took pictures, wading about in the snow to the flimsy framework of their one-pow-wow tent. The hides which formed the walls were missing but the wood-bent framework was still there, and we marveled at the architecture of it.

The snow was too deep to walk around much without snowshoes, so we soon went on. There were no fishermen out that day. It might have been because it was Christmas Day, or it might have been because it was so cold—the thermometer never did get up to zero all day.

That night we had Christmas dinner. We planned to spend another day at Sylvania, but after dinner, the ranger came by to warn us again—this time a storm was on its way.

We talked about it and decided not to make any firm decision on leaving until morning. But when we awoke, it was snowing heavily again. We quickly broke camp, returned our snowmobile to Watersmeet, and headed home. We didn't want to be snowed in by a blizzard if we could avoid it.

It was with great reluctance that we left Sylvania and the North Woods. The giant hemlocks, spruce, and fir all pointing skyward from their blankets of snow, large snowflakes falling from the skies, made the scene—whatever its hazards—like a Christmas card.

Our Christmas ended earlier than we had planned—but even so, it was the most cherished of all.

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