



A Campfire Handbook
for Parks



A campfire handbook for parks



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Campfires

The light and warmth and smell of a campfire gather people in. A fire reminds people of when they were younger, perhaps of singing together and making music, or of telling campfire stories. A campfire is also one of the oldest ways to cook food. Almost everyone, no matter what country they were born in, seems to have a recollection of eating something delicious cooked over fire. People feel strongly about campfires. When we began to make campfires at Dufferin Grove Park, everything changed.

Why should park staff encourage campfires?

A campfire is such an old sign of human gathering that even today its power to signal community is undiminished. Wherever there is a campfire, one knows there are some people nearby. There also seems to be an ancient etiquette common to all cultures, that allows strangers to approach a fire. One can't come right into the circle but one can draw near. At the Dufferin Grove Park campfires there is sometimes a whole second tier, an outer circle of passersby standing back a little way, just watching the fire for a while.



A campfire is less private than a picnic barbecue. For that reason, a campfire in a park is very suggestive of *what is possible* among strangers. It maybe that most people living in cities treasure their privacy and their distance from one another, but for almost everyone that same privacy sometimes feels like loneliness. For some people, the occasion of a campfire may make the awareness of bonds that have been lost more acute, for instance if the fire evokes memories of village life in a different country. But at the same time, many people, when they draw near a campfire, seem to feel that they can talk a little to the strangers near them, perhaps about some overlapping memories of other campfires. Even when there is no talk, but rather, a reflective silence -- people staring into the flames -- the campfire seems to make a connection between those around it, although they may never have met before.

Because a campfire in an ordinary city park is so unusual, when people come across such a fire they are surprised, amazed. They may feel that *tonight*, in the dark, they've seen something worth thinking about. It reminds them that their park, and perhaps their city, is beautiful. It may even make them boast, the way the young guys who use the basketball court beside Dufferin Grove Park's fire circle boast: "nobody else has a park like this one, man, *nobody*."

Campfire Safety



Although much fire safety is common sense, there are a few specifics. Sand is a safer way to put out a fire quickly than water, for instance (no steam). Water finishes the job and cools it down, so there should be two buckets of sand and two of water right beside the fire, and a shovel to move things around if necessary. In our experience it's best to build the fire on level ground, not dig a pit. That way there's no slope for anyone to stumble down toward the flames. For additional safety, some might wish to erect a tripod over the fire.

In fifteen years of frequent cooking fires at Dufferin Grove Park, with between 5 and 25 people around each campfire, with school classes and day camps and people who don't speak each other's language, the park campfires have never had an accident. That's partly good fortune — unexpected things can happen — but it's also from paying good attention to safety details.

The main thing is to locate the fire on level ground, with ample room for people to keep a distance on all sides of the fire. There should be no nearby obstruction — a bush, a wall, a picnic table, a path — that requires people to walk too near the fire to get somewhere else.

Because of its heat, fire carries its own natural incentives for people to stay back and have respect. Once in a long while you encounter a person who seems not to notice their position relative to the fire and gets dangerously close without appearing to be aware of it. It's important to point this out to them if they persist. If the person doesn't respond with greater awareness, or actually clowns around or enlarges the fire or takes out pieces of flaming wood, they need to leave the fire-site at once.

Children's curiosity about fire: In our experience, children are very careful around fire, and also very curious. Some people feel strongly that children must not be allowed near the fire. For those people, it's probably best to have the campfire without children present, or not to have the campfire at all. Otherwise it's too frustrating for the children. We've noticed that when we allowed very curious children to have long sticks which they could poke into the fire, they could experiment safely with us right there watching. They quickly learned what they wanted to know about combustion. Fire safety for children means allowing them to learn under the watchful attention of adults, not barring them from the fire site.

Campfire stories from the park

Isabel Perez, the first Dufferin Grove Park “cooking-fire lady.”



Isabel Perez grew up cooking over a fire in Guatemala, and she used to miss that kind of cooking, living in Toronto. She once said that when the first people in her neighbourhood back home got gas stoves, most of their families refused to eat the food cooked on them, saying the gas made the food taste bad. Everyone wanted to keep on eating food cooked over fire.

When we asked Isabel whether she would try cooking over a fire at the park, she said she'd love to. But she wasn't used to it anymore, and some familiar arrangements were missing. Back home in Guatemala her father had built a clay fireplace in their courtyard, with support for a grill. But in our park we had no fireplace. Isabel wanted to cook tortillas with the kids at the park, and for that she needed a level grill. In the park we first tried to balance the grill on some rocks stacked around the campfire, but the rocks were unsteady, and then we tried a semi-circle of firebricks but the bricks were very heavy to set up each time. One day we happened to come across a window display of cast-iron four-legged pot stands, built for cooking-fires, at a hardware store in an Italian part of town. We bought a big stand, one foot high and two feet in diameter, for \$39.95.

A week later we went back and bought a smaller stand, 8 inches by 16 inches, as well. That was the end of our troubles. Pots sat on the cast iron stands as steady as can be, or if we wanted, we laid a grill across the stand. Isabel made donuts with the camp kids in the summer, and tortillas, and dobladas, and pasta with sauce, in a big iron pot.

Sometimes when Isabel was cooking at the fire, the smoke would curl slowly upwards through the trees and people going by would just stop in their tracks and stare. Cooking over a fire is a time warp. The cook moves more slowly and the food smells different. The sight of such a thing is surprising and disorienting for people walking through the park, and after they have stopped to take a look, they often walk away shaking their heads and smiling.

A school visit

The second year after we got the campfire permit we began to let the nearby schools know they could book a park day with us and we would set them up

with a fire and some food. Soon after we started this, Margie Rutledge, who was in charge of the playground then, had booked two classes at the same time, on a Monday. It threatened rain all morning until just before the classes arrived. Then, as the kids made their way from the bus stop across the park, it began to pour. We thought we should send them away. But when the classes – a little United Nations - got to the campfire area, the kids were excited, squealing and hugging each other as they took shelter under the half-in-leaf maples. We said to the teachers – you should probably just go back to the school. But they said, no, it's really warm today and there's no wind, and we'll have a good time anyway. Can we maybe put up your tarp?

So we unfolded the giant blue tarp and ten or more kids helped stretch it out and tie it to the tree branches. They pulled the picnic tables underneath and set themselves up in their "kitchen," with the cooking fire steaming and sputtering nearby. The teachers lined up the kids with paper plates and one of them held a big black umbrella over Isabel while she dished up warm macaroni and sauce from the pot.

There was a grand banquet under the tarp, with the kids shouting loud, outrageous jokes back and forth while they ate. The rain fell in sheets. Every few minutes one of the kids would poke a big branch upwards to raise the centre of the sagging tarp and a great fall of water would slide off the edge, with excited screams from everywhere.

After half an hour the rain slowed down to a light drizzle. A few groups began to break off into their own little umbrella-houses, six or seven umbrellas with a tipi-cloth stretched overtop. Soon the big central banquet was split up into a village of smaller "huts," with some of the braver kids leaving shelter altogether, to try out the stilts or dig a river-channel in the sand pit.

By the time the rain stopped, fort-building was in progress in the sand pit, with a bridge over the river channel and a stone-reinforced embankment for a castle that only girls were allowed to go into. Margie and the teachers built the fire back up, so that it would be warm for the kids who were wet. The fire was the centre of this scene, with kids going out to build and to play and then coming back again to get warm.

By the end of the afternoon, when the two classes left, Margie and I thought we should present medals to those teachers, real gold medals with shovels and fire engraved on them, for being so kind and adventuresome with their students.

The rink campfire

When we first started to try making the rink a bit more civilized, I used to come down on Sundays and make a campfire, beside the rink. Sometimes Fabio and Jennifer, aged 11 and 13, and I made chicken soup, cutting up the chicken and the vegetables at a picnic table beside the fire. We'd sell 50-cent styrofoam cups of soup right from the fire, and we'd have a pot of hot chocolate simmering there too. Skaters would come over and sit on the benches and warm their hands on their soup cup or their hot chocolate cup.

One Sunday a man came over with his three children and sat by the campfire, and I noticed his right hand had no fingers. The stump looked swollen, dark red. He saw me looking. He said, "next week it will be one year since I lost my fingers." He said he worked in a tool and die factory and he'd been trying to fix his stamping machine. It was stuck. Suddenly it came unstuck and came down on his hand. As he told me this I could see he was back there again and the machine was coming down again. He told me that he now has terrible phantom pain. They had told him at the clinic that the pain would get better after six months. But it had got even worse.

His wife came over. She wore a sari under her winter jacket. I had never met her (or anyone in this family) before, but she, like her husband, seemed to have no desire to hide their situation. She watched him as he poked at the campfire with his other hand, and said, "he suffers all the time." And, indeed, he sat there suffering, getting his children some soup, talking to them, and suffering in the intervals, his shoulders hunched.

The campfire was his rightful forum, where he could find witnesses for his suffering, and for his bravery. This is another ancient reason for campfires.

The beating

A group of five families were having a campfire on the Sunday of Labour Day Weekend. At about 9.30 p.m. a fight broke out near the basketball court, and it turned into a group attack by 6-10 guys who kicked one person repeatedly about the head and chest. When the families at the fire circle realized what was happening, they yelled at these guys to stop. Some of the guys left the park then, but three of the attackers continued with the kicking. Because there were so many people in the campfire group, some of them got up the nerve to run over. That finally made everyone else leave. But the fellow who was being kicked wasn't moving – he was unconscious. They called 911 and gave him first aid. Then the ambulance came, and he was just coming around when they took him away.

The families put out the campfire and left too. They told us the next day that seeing this terrible beating was revolting, and also they were really worried about the effect on their kids. But I said they shouldn't underestimate the positive effect on their children. How many children get to see for themselves that their parents are brave and help out people in danger, instead of turning away?

They said they guessed that was true. Thank God all those families were in the park with the campfire. Who knows how that fellow would have ended up otherwise?

And there was never such an attack in the park again.

Hallowe'en

Children from the Hawthorne-on-Essex Daycare Centre, and their parents, held a Hallowe'en Fundraiser. I went over to check on them after dark. They had made a big campfire in the fire circle, and there were sheet ghosts flapping in the trees. The park is usually pretty empty at this point in the year, but not that night. There were children everywhere, playing games in the dark and rolling down the hills and jumping out at each other from behind the trees. A lot of the parents had dressed up. I asked the kids what they were eating, and they told me: *haunted hot dogs* and *terrible treats* (popcorn stuffed into see-through latex gloves with jellybean fingernails), and drinking *eerie drinks* (mulled cider).



There was a storyteller off to one side of the fire, telling a ghost story to a group of big-eyed kids, all of them very quiet.

Charlotte, who organized this campfire, told me that the kids had such a wonderful time that everyone wants to make this event a yearly happening. And she said they raised \$380 for new toys for their daycare.

Chestnuts

A woman named Anna told me this: "Our campfire in the park last Saturday was on a very cold day. When I came into the rink house with my little boy a few days later, the staff asked me if we all froze. But we didn't. We made a good fire and kept warm.

"We roasted my parents' homemade Italian sausages and a kind of hard homemade cheese that doesn't really have a name. We also roasted chestnuts, by making a slit in each nut and shaking them over the fire in an old frying pan. It worked okay, although my parents said it would have been better if we'd had a pan with holes in it, like people use back home for roasting chestnuts.

“Some kids we didn’t know came over from the playground and we gave them some nuts. There was so much food, it was no problem sharing it.

“My parents had told me beforehand that a campfire at this time of year was silly. But at the park (there were twelve of us there), my parents started telling us about when they were young and still lived in Sicily. They used to go out to other farms to pick olives and if the weather turned bad, they’d make a fire and roast some food, and then go home without picking any olives, but with a full stomach. Now here they were again so many years later, cooking food over a campfire on a cold day in Canada, with their children and grandchildren. We had a really good time.”



Fire cooking

The ideal cooking fire is about an hour or more old, and has a good amount of embers that give off heat and are capable of igniting new wood quickly. A newer fire will not be stable and hot enough to cook with. Hardwood is better than softwood, but make sure whatever wood you use is dry and of a suitable size for your needs. There is no pleasure to be found in spending all of your time trying to burn one giant smoldering log, or conversely in feeding the fire frantically with tiny sticks of kindling that are swallowed up in flames immediately. Luckily, with some attention and time, any fire can become a good cooking fire.

Campfire recipes

A lot of people use a campfire to cook hot dogs or toast marshmallows. If you want to go beyond that, you could try:

Bread on a stick

Corn roasted in the coals

Bread baked in the coals

Potatoes in the coals

Donuts

Apple fritters



Roasted Chestnuts

William Rubel's *The Magic of Fire* gives instructions for roasting chestnuts in embers, a Dutch oven, or in a frying pan. Here is the simplest:

"Preparing the chestnuts: Use a very sharp knife to make a deep cross on the rounded side of each chestnut. The shell can be slippery, so pay attention.

To roast in the embers: Use the shovel to create a bed of hot ash beside the fire by mixing 1 part embers into 1 part ash...Let the heat soak into the ashes for a few minutes and stir the prepared chestnuts into the ash. Stir every few minutes to promote even roasting. Check in 10 minutes. The nuts are done when the shells peel back at the cut and the meat is soft and tastes sweet, usually 10 to 20 minutes. Test a nut before removing them all from the ashes. When done, serve immediately."



Basic Bannock Recipe

Adapted from the B.C. website: *The Southern Interior Forest Region*

1 cup flour
1 tsp baking powder
1/4 tsp salt
2 tbsp butter/oil



Sift together the dry ingredients. Cut in the butter until the mixture resembles a coarse meal. Grease and heat a frying pan. Incorporate enough cold water to the dry mix to make a firm dough. Knead the dough until it is uniform, then form the dough into cakes about 1/2 inch thick. This can be done by pressing a ball of dough between the palms, or by rolling it out and cutting circles. Dust the cakes with flour to make them easier to handle, and place them in the warm frying pan. Once a bottom crust has formed and the dough has hardened enough to hold together, flip the cakes. Cooking takes 12-15 minutes. If you are in the field and you don't have a frying pan, make a thicker dough by adding less water and roll the dough into a long ribbon (no wider than 1 inch). Wind this around a preheated green, hardwood stick and cook about 8 inches over a fire, turning occasionally, until the bannock is cooked.

Bannock dough can take a great deal of experimentation, since most of its delicious taste comes from the fire, the fun of cooking it (especially wrapped around a stick) and a good spoonful of butter and jam or honey slipped inside or on top. For sweeter dough, try adding honey, syrup or sugar and blueberries, raisins or other dried fruits.

Corn-cob in the husk, Wades'konduk o'nis'ta:

From *Iroquois Uses of Maize and other Food Plants*, by A.C.Parker (1910):

The embers from the camp or hearth fire were brushed aside and a row of unhusked ears laid in the hot stones or ground. These were then covered with cold ashes from the ash pit. Embers were now heaped over and a hot fire built and continued until the corn beneath was thought sufficiently baked. "Corn baked in this manner has a fine flavor and never becomes scorched." (p.68)



Baked scraped corn, Ogo n sa' ohon'sta':

From *Iroquois Uses of Maize and other Food Plants*, by A.C.Parker (1910):

The corn is scraped from the cob, pounded in a mortar or mashed in a wooden bowl with a stone, patted into cakes, sprinkled with dry meal.....For baking in the ashes the cakes are wrapped in husk and covered with ashes. Embers are heaped over and a brisk fire built, this being kept going until the cakes were considered baked.....a British traveler.....says of this dish "better flavoured bread I never ate in this country." (Sometimes cooked cranberry beans or berries were mixed with corn before it was baked.)

Campfire apple fritters:

The batter is adapted from *The Joy of Cooking*.

To make the batter:

2 eggs, beaten

2/3 cup milk

1 tablespoon melted butter or sunflower seed oil

1 cup all-purpose flour

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon sugar.

Mix it well. *The Joy of Cooking* says, let the batter stand for 2 hours at least. Then beat the mixture again.

While your batter is resting, make a medium-size campfire, and tend it until you have a solid bed of glowing coals as a base. While you're tending the fire, peel and core twenty ripe but firm apples, cut into ½ inch thick cross sections. Have a bowl of sugar on hand for dipping the fritters.

When the campfire is well established and the batter is two hours old, set up a small table or cooking platform by the fire. Put on this table: your bowl of sugar, your apple sections, a colander lined with paper towel for draining the apple fritters, your batter, a slotted spoon, a pair of tongs, and a pile of paper napkins weighed down with a stone, so they don't fly off in the wind. You can use the paper napkins for wiping your fingers from time to time. Have a trash basket nearby, for the used napkins

Position a fire stand in the fire and put a heavy pot on it, with about three inches of vegetable oil. When the oil is hot, test it with a small piece of apple-in-batter. If the apple



rises quickly to the surface and foams, the oil is hot enough. Dip each apple slice into batter and drop it gently in the hot oil, being careful not to overcrowd the pot and thereby take the oil temperature down too much. Turn each slice once with the tongs and deep fry until it's golden on both sides. Remove with the slotted spoon and roll the slice in sugar, then wrap it in a napkin and pass it to the eager eaters who may be waiting.

Make sure you keep feeding the fire with small pieces of wood so the flames are hot enough to keep the oil hot. If the apple fritters begin to sink to the bottom, put more wood on the fire and cover the pot briefly with a lid (leave a slit open) until the oil gets hot enough again. (When the oil isn't hot enough, the apple fritters will cook, but they'll be very greasy.)

Apple fritters are most delicious in mid-winter. If you make them when there's snow on the ground, pick your fire location carefully. It should be on a slight hump, because any hollow will quickly fill up with melted snow from the fire, and if you're standing there making the fritters, you'll be standing in an icy puddle.

Deep-frying outdoors in winter is a very challenging way to learn to manage a fire. You begin to learn the meaning of "variables" -- all the different factors, all inter-related, that affect the transformation of food through cooking: the outdoor temperature, the type of wood you're using, the kind of apples you have, what happens when it starts to snow. It's a very interesting activity, and so many people will tell you how delicious your food is that your head will spin (but your feet will be cold).

Roast Vegetables

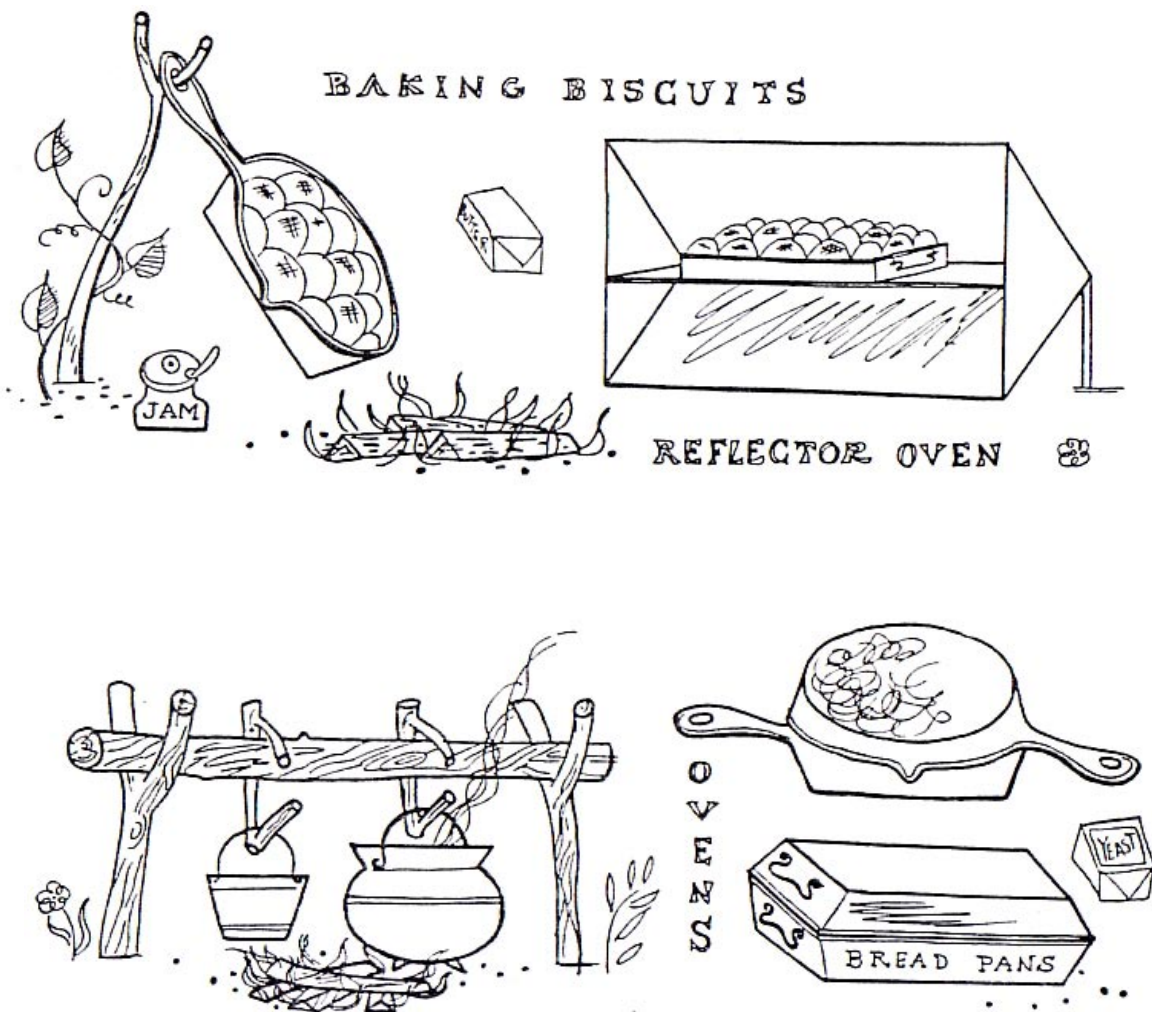
Potatoes, onions, carrots, parsnips, leeks, peppers and whole heads of garlic become soft, sweet and full-flavoured when cooked on the embers. To protect them from too much direct heat, place them on a layer of ash and turn them every once in a while.

They can also be loosely wrapped in foil. When they're done, toss them in some olive oil, salt and pepper, and herbs like sage, thyme or oregano. William Rubel writes about a special medieval spice mix of pepper, cinammon, ginger, saffron and clove that can be used to enhance the rich flavour of roasted onions.

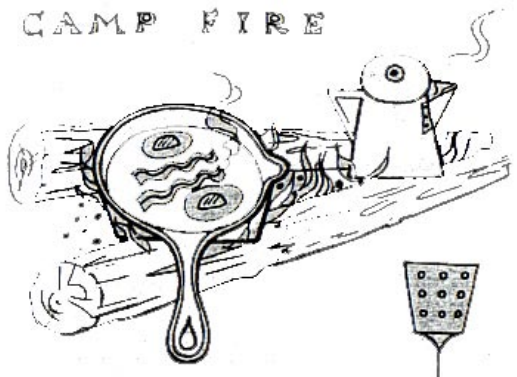


Cooking methods:

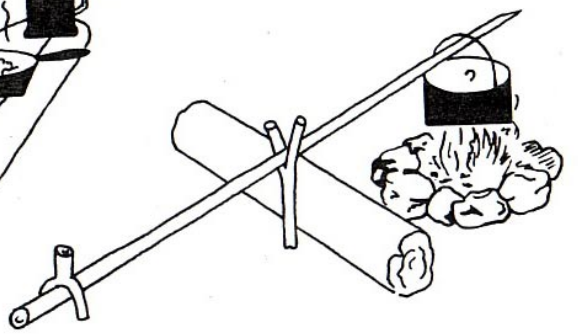
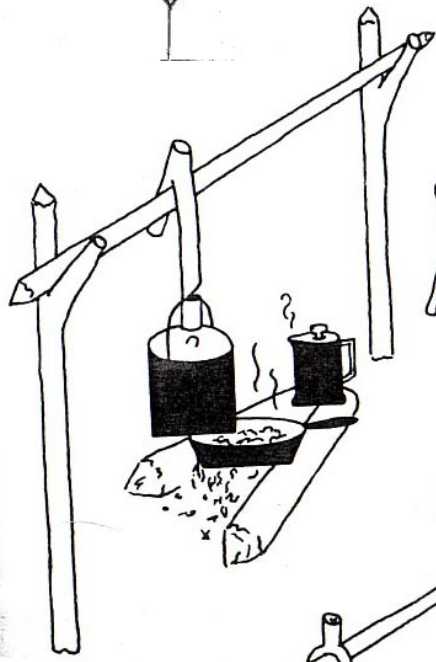
The recipes included here only cover a few of the possible ways to cook using a campfire. These and many other methods are to be found in older editions of cookbooks and specialized books on cooking outdoors or with a hearth. A book called *The Complete Book of Outdoor Cookery* includes wonderfully detailed instructions and comments on outdoor cooking methods. The authors are Helen Evans Brown and James A. Beard, and the publisher is Doubleday (1955).



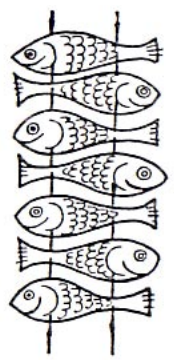
CAMP FIRE



BREAD ON A STICK

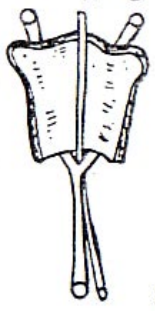


SPYTTED SMALL



FISH

TWIG
FOASTERS



Three small campfire stories we found in books:

Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, p.233. Penguin Books. (First published 1909).

"Dickon made the stimulating discover that in the wood in the park outside the garden, where Mary had first found him piping to the wild creatures, there was a deep little hollow where you could build a sort of tiny oven with stones and roast potatoes and eggs in it. Roasted eggs were a previously unknown luxury and very hot potatoes with salt and fresh butter in them were fit for a woodland king -- besides being deliciously satisfying."

Grace Firth, *A Natural Year*, p.15. Simon and Schuster, 1972.

"Our boat sank...our overburdened, untrustworthy craft simply settled to the bottom of Mary's Cove, an isolated bite of the North Pacific east of Cain's Head, Alaska...From early childhood I was my grandfather's partner on foraging trips. So while the two men stalked shrimp with a shirt stretched between two poles, I cruised the bushes. Actually I hadn't left the high-water drift before I found breakfast: sorrel, goosetongue, sea-rockets and a battered bucket. With our waterproof matches I started a beach fire and soon had water boiling for greens and shrimp: our first foraged meal.

Our encounter with nature lasted eleven days: eleven adventurous days of misshapen fry bread cooked on hot rocks, seafowl eggs, clams, roots, greens and sand-shark steaks. Then a Scandinavian freighter, alerted by a Coast Guard "overdue" dispatch, maneuvered into Mar's Cove, lowered a boat, and eight bearded, turtlenecked seamen rowed ashore to rescue us. My companions tried to drag me into the bushes to hide; they didn't want to be saved. We had fared well on the bounty of the northland."

Berndt Berglund and Clare E.Bolsby, *The Edible Wild*, p.35. Pagurian Press, 1974.

"Evening primrose...The way I like them best is in a stew, using the root. If I have a rabbit, I usually take the saddle (the thick back of the rump of the rabbit), cut it up in small pieces and place the meat on aluminum foil. Then I clean and scrape the roots and split them four ways as I would a carrot. I place the roots on the meat and if I have a piece of bacon or porcupine fat, I add that to the mixture. After closing up the aluminum foil tightly, I place the whole thing in the coals of my fire and let it cook for a couple of hours."

The bureaucracy of campfires in city parks

Why have campfires in neighbourhood parks? Campfires put more life into the park in the evenings (increasing park safety). Campfires draw families, friends, neighbours together. Food tastes more delicious. And campfires are a story magnet – people often get more sociable, and the park therefore gets nicer. Some people call this “community development,” although we just call it a good thing to do.

Over the years, various park users who lived near other parks often asked for help in getting campfires into their neighbourhood parks. In the fall of 2006, our group of park friends worked together with the park’s part-time recreation staff to write a funding proposal to the Ontario Trillium Foundation. It had the working title: “Taking the show on the road.” We asked for funding to pay Dufferin Grove’s part-time City recreation staff to work with other park users, when they were not doing City shifts. They would help other neighbourhoods add a bit more liveliness to their parks, with campfires as one tool for that. The local City councillor wrote a letter of support, and so did the Parks and Recreation “community engagement” manager. But it seemed that the proposal didn’t please everyone. Soon after the funding application was submitted to the Trillium Foundation, with a copy to the City, we began to hear rumours that campfires were in trouble. And on January 26, 2007, the long-standing campfire permission in Dufferin Grove Park was cancelled by a new Parks supervisor. Thirteen years of campfires at the park with no injury, and suddenly they were stopped!

The Parks supervisor said he was concerned about the safety of all those campfires. In his view, there was no adequate protocol.

When the order came to cancel the campfires, Dufferin Rink staff had to call all the people planning winter birthday parties or family get-togethers around campfires, telling them their gathering was off. (The staff said it was not a happy job, making those calls.) One woman wrote a protest e-mail to the Parks supervisor personally, so he let her have her campfire after all, even though everyone else was banned. (He wrote to her: “This permission is for your event and your event alone. I hope this will allow you to have a happy birthday.”) A new, uniform protocol, now meant to apply across the whole city, was devised, rewritten, and rewritten again. The first meeting to discuss the new fire protocol didn’t include any Dufferin Grove Recreation staff or park friends. The next two meetings allowed two recreation staff to come, but still no community people.

All was confusion. One day it was said that all campfires would revert to the jurisdiction of the central permitting office, costing \$53.50 each time, with no recreation staff supervision. Then we heard that no campfire could be closer than 30 meters to any structure including a fence. Then it sounded like recreation staff would have to be present every minute to oversee the campfire groups – a staffing expense for which there is no budget (and no need). It was impossible for park friends to get a place at the table, to be part of the discussion.

An e-mail to ‘campfire friends’ brought many letters to the Councillor and the mayor’s office (excerpts below). A few days later, and still before any new rink protocol was offered for public presentation, the Park Supervisor called Dufferin Rink to tell the Recreation staff that the campfires had been temporarily restored. This restoration would be in effect for a weekend, or maybe even for a month. The rules would be the old fire safety rules that had been in place for fourteen years already, but now renamed the “Pilot Project” rules.

Meantime, meetings continued. As time went on, e-mails back and forth began to accumulate – over 200 all together. The “f” word reared its head: *failing* to meet conditions, *failure* to comply; and “p” words peppered the e-mails – Permits, Pilots, Policies, Protocol, Procedure, Process.

Fourteen years of campfires at Dufferin Grove Park began to sound like an illicit activity. Although the park campfires were established and maintained for all those years with the explicit blessing of both the Fire Department and Parks and Recreation management, the new wave of Parks management seemed to find that history of collaboration hard to believe. So their first step was drastic: to halt all the campfires. Only then did they begin talking, still in a very limited way that mostly kept long-time park friends, newly defined as outsiders, out of the conversation.

This development was both astonishing and frustrating to park friends. There was an urge to say “I don’t need this, and leave. But when citizens are met with a series of bureaucratic “no’s” in their public spaces – not only for campfires, but for so many other initiatives too – and they turn away, their parks often become orphans. Following the bureaucrats and challenging them to open up to citizens is a difficult alternative, but it has a chance of working out better in the long run. And so park friends got busy writing letters.

Excerpts from campfire support letters

Kathryn Scharf: “I got a campfire permit to celebrate my son’s birthday in the park, and on a warm sunny day my four-year-old and several cronies toasted

marshmallows around the fire. Some kids we didn't know stopped by and they toasted some too. All of the adults there said what a wonderful thing it was to be able to do something so simple yet special in a public park."

Erella Ganon: "Fires warm more than just beverages, I think. Sometimes they warm spirits too."

Angela O'Hara: "Having a cooking fire is one of the simplest and most pleasurable ways for people to come together and the ability to do this in a park in the city is cherished by the community."

Ann Bjorseth: "How wonderful it is for all of us in this community to go to the park and have a campfire: young and old, a variety of cultures, middle class or whatever class, with special emphasis on inclusion and friendliness. I have had a campfire for children in my daughter's school, and for family events – a wonderful opportunity for fun and celebration."

Nadya Burton: "My family has used the fire pits for numerous family birthday parties, and I have attended gatherings of others at these fire pits in both winter and summer. Additionally, my family skates often at the Dufferin Rink. One of the delights of the rink is the small fire burning nearby, sometimes heating cider or hot chocolate, or just burning a few logs (it is never a large fire). I have, over the past decade, observed families (including my own) with toddlers and young children, and older kids and teenagers, as well as adults, all congregate around these fires. It provides meaningful, healthy, creative opportunities for teenagers, young families and many individuals marginalized in other communities to share outdoor space in a wonderful way. The park fires are an integral and wonderful part of this community."

Kyla Dixon-Muir, and George A. Moore: "My husband and I are the coordinators of a community garden. As wood from this garden becomes weathered, we donate it to Dufferin Grove, so it goes from use in growing foods to use in cooking foods -- a fine furtherance, we think.

Fire is something connected deep within our psyches and ancestral memories, and should not be reserved for the lucky few who can afford houses with fireplaces or who must drive hundreds of miles to campgrounds and cottages..... Nothing tastes better than grilled, charred, caramelized foods eaten outdoors.

Feeling the Canadian elements of warm toes and a cool back late in the evening, even in July, seeing loved ones draw close to the glows of each other and the embers, I reflect on its importance as a means to draw us into ourselves, to slow down, and to literally get grounded."

Suzanne Wilson & Ralph Kircher: “There is something about a wood fire, in particular in the cold winter months, that draws people together and fosters a sense of community and friendliness. Particularly for those of us with small children, it’s a welcome addition to the long winter that helps draw us out to the park to play.”

Alan Carlisle: “Ontario’s public parks have thousands of campers enjoying and using fire as a fundamental activity for cooking and warmth and to generate that wonderful feeling of involvement with one’s companions. Indeed, fires create a connection that consciously and unconsciously links us to our forebearers, to whom fire was a fundamental essential of life. Many communities in the rural areas tolerate fires as a direct symbol and activity of winter fun. Skating ponds from New Brunswick to Grenadier Pond typically have a casual small fire nearby for cozy evocations and practical warmth. Participants over the day and night, feed the fire and it is an engaging invitation that is real in its essence. It is not shopping, buying services, watching TV, computer time or driving. It is a modest, real activity that nourishes our soul and spirit. That’s just as true for campfires here in the park.”

Mary-Margaret Jones: “I hosted a Thanksgiving Dinner at Dufferin Grove in 2006 and it was fabulous. People of all ages gathered around the fire to share food in a very meaningful way.”

Jane Price: “Dufferin Grove is not all about ‘programs’ that people sign up for. Quite to the contrary, it is a place where people have a chance to make things happen from cooking fires to pizza parties to outdoor theatre. It is a place where urban dwellers can make their own fun in a way that we can never do if we are joining into someone else’s program or set of instructional sessions. And, because people have the feeling they can “make the park their own,” it is a fabulous place for people to gather, meet, and maybe go from being strangers to acquaintances and sometimes even, to friends. All of that happens around the cooking fires.”

Kathy Patterson: “As a family with a small child we have come to love the chance to enjoy a warm outdoor fire in the middle of winter. I think the many varied dynamics at the park help grow a safer community- with better bonds between people of all ages and with lots of things for young people to engage in instead of getting lost to boredom.”

Bob Edwards, Registrar, 62nd Toronto Scout Group:

“We have held many campfires in the park. For some of our inner-city youth it’s the first ‘real’ fire they’ve seen. It’s a neighbourhood opportunity to teach fire safety and cooking skills etc. Last summer we had a campfire for a group of Scouts visiting from Liverpool UK. They had never seen a city park with such

community involvement and spirit. Several commented that they would like to borrow the 'Friends of...' concept to use at home where parks are lifeless, dangerous places after dark."

Gillian Green: "We have reserved the firepit to celebrate many occasions over the years. We have had the fortunate pleasure of sharing our unique park with friends and relatives from across the country. Many of them have been delighted and inspired by the community spirit and unanticipated adventure the park has to offer. The firepit is one of the strong elements that allows for the interaction and celebration to occur. We have booked the firepits to allow a warm focus to our gathering events; skating parties; outdoor wiener roasts and summer night fireside story telling. Each time we marvel at how lucky we are to have such a wonderful opportunity right in the middle of an urban setting!"

Mac Scott: "My two year old son and I attended a campfire at the south end of Dufferin Grove Park that was very pleasant last night. I wanted to thank you for making such opportunities possible in Toronto. We are hard working professionals who rarely get the chance to leave the city and as a result, our son has little opportunity to experience this kind of outdoor fun! There were a number of friends with us, including a gentleman visiting from Newfoundland, and I know everyone really had a great time. In addition, I remember a woman passing by who dropped in to join us, remarking on how the presence of our party made the park a much safer place."

Charlotte Elder: "When my daughter and I were living in a tiny attic garret on busy Dovercourt Road six years ago, we spent a lot of time at Dufferin Grove Park. At that time, my daughter and I had as much chance as going camping or to a cottage as flying to the moon. Imagine my delight to be able to hold campfire dinners in downtown Toronto with my daughter and her other inner-city friends, some who had never ever experienced a campfire! We sang songs, we baked potatoes and corn, we had great times with our friends. We even held a daycare fundraiser there. We were carefully prepped about safety and how to handle the fire and our responsibility to clean up the area afterward. No issue ever arose. I cherish those memories with my young daughter.

I cannot describe the feeling of adventure and confidence that this possibility meant for us: suddenly my relationship to my city changed. I realised that I had always assumed that some hidden administration held the power over our common space--suddenly I realised that as a citizen, I could bring forward ideas about public space and what we could do with it. I realised that my idea of this 'hidden administration' dictating what could and couldn't be done in our public space was an idea I had made up. It was an exciting change, and I am sure, had an empowering effect on my daughter about her relationship with her city."

1. The Law

Parks friends began researching laws and regulations about cooking over open fires. An e-mail from the City's Parks manager said that "legislative and other similar requirements of city employees are information for the public and not topics that may be revised...to reflect the varied interests or perspectives found within neighbourhoods." "Similar requirements" was a category big enough to drive a truck through, but what were the *legislative requirements*? We looked in Google.

ONTARIO FIRE CODE 2.6.3.4. "Open Air Burning shall not be permitted unless approved, OR unless such burning consists of a small, confined fire, supervised at all times, and used to cook food on a grill or a barbeque."

Forest Fires Prevention Act - O. Reg. 207/96

8.5 No person shall start a fire outdoors outside of a restricted fire zone during the fire season for cooking or warmth unless all of the following conditions are met:

1. The site of the fire is bare rock or other non-combustible material.
2. The fire is at least one metre from any flammable material.
3. The space above the one metre area around the fire is at least three metres from vegetation.
4. The fire does not exceed one metre in height and one metre in diameter.

Toronto Fire Services web site

Open air burning shall not be permitted unless approved, **OR** unless such burning consists of a small, confined fire, supervised at all times, and used to cook food on a grill or a barbecue.

Kitchener Fire Services web site

Can I have a fire to cook food?

Cooking fires are allowed without permit provided they meet the following:

- * must be located a minimum of 10' away from the property line, house, outside buildings, wooden fence
- * maximum grill area and maximum interior fuel surface area of 24" x 24"
- * may only be used to cook or grill food
- * may not be used for open burning, refer to open burning permit if required
- * must extinguish flame and briquets or wood chips upon completion of cooking
- * may not continue with fire after cooking has been completed, may not use for entertainment purposes
- * must be suitably enclosed so that briquets or wood chips are maintained within structure of barbeque or barbeque pit.

Cooking fires, in other words, are exempted by the Ontario Fire Code from needing a permit. When we asked the Fire Captain, he confirmed it. Nobody seems to know why the exemption – maybe an old leftover from the depression, so that out-of-work, homeless men would not be arrested for cooking whatever food they could scrounge or glean? But the fact was, the law specifically permitted people to cook over a campfire without a permit.

2. Insurance

Then there was the ever-looming question of liability, which the Parks supervisor raised to park friends. He said that without new protocols and restrictions, ensuring that all approvals are in place, there would be “no indemnification for the City in the event of any incident or injury.” So we asked for a meeting with Jim Kidd, who is a “senior risk management analyst” at City Hall. The City Councillor’s assistant set it up, and came along.

Mr.Kidd told a rather more complicated story. First of all, he said, independent of whether Fire Service approves park campfire locations, *the City has no outside insurance coverage for any claims under \$5 million*. Insurers are leery about municipal insurance, so they require a \$5 million deductible for third-party liability claims. The City has its own insurance kitty, for claims under that amount. Each division is internally charged a premium by the city, partly based on how many claims are made against that division. Parks and Recreation don’t produce many claims, so the proportion they have to pay into the City’s insurance kitty is not high.

So the Parks Supervisor’s idea – that there would be no insurance coverage for the city in case someone sued for “incident or injury” caused by a park campfire – misses the mark. Under \$5 million, there’s no external insurance coverage whether the fire department approved the fire sites or not. And Mr.Kidd said the cost of injury claims is not high. 90% of all third-party liability claims against the city are resolved for less than \$15,000. However, the city’s documentation of those claims is not very detailed. The Risk Management Analyst said that they intend to change this, so that it will in future be easier for staff to get details of claims or lawsuits, to learn from them.

And easier, also, for citizens. The Province’s Information and Privacy Commissioner made a judgment against the City in 2005, saying that they must reveal their insurance and claims details. City risk management staff had argued that if more people knew that they could get money from the city, more people would sue. But in fact that didn’t happen after the newspaper coverage. So more information continues to be released. The Councillor’s office can ask for a detailed report of third-party claims relating to parks, and Risk management staff can try to get that for them.

3. Volunteers

In his meetings with Recreation staff, the Parks Supervisor made the argument that only City staff could look after a campfire program, no volunteers. Or if there was a volunteer, she or he would only be “covered” by the City’s Commercial General Liability insurance policy if she or he was “a person that performs activities under the direct supervision and control of City staff and does not receive pay for those services.” This information came from a different Risk Management Analyst for the city. So the Parks Supervisor decided that staff must stay right beside the campfire at all times – which would mean, no campfires, since the city didn’t have that kind of staffing money for recreation staff.

But as Mr.Kidd explained, in the event of a mishap with a volunteer, claims under \$5 million would not be paid out by the insurance company anyway, since the City’s third-party liability insurance policy has a \$5 million deductible. And Mr.Kidd said that the definition of what “direct supervision” means is a common-sense one. Direct supervision of volunteers, he said, does not necessarily mean staff being physically on site with their eyes trained on the volunteer. Rather, it refers to the same kind of common sense implied when law talks of the “reasonable person.” The Senior Risk Management Analyst pointed to the “**Occupiers Liability Act**” as a good source of information for a definition of reasonable care and reasonable behaviour. In the case of volunteer adults looking after a small campfire, staff would not likely have to remain “on site.”



What happened next:

In March of 2007, the Ontario Trillium Foundation approved our grant request to work with small community groups and leaders who contacted us for help in enlivening their neighbourhood parks.

By then the campfires had been mostly restored, only with a heavy layer of paperwork and an uneasy sense that any small mistake in following the paperwork rules could scuttle neighbourhood events. Still, the determination of park users had gradually worn down the bureaucratic blocks. And so there followed many campfires (and makeshift brick pizza ovens) in other city parks.



Lakeshore Park



MacGregor Park





Campbell Park



Stonegate Park



Withrow Park



Crombie Park



Susan Tibaldi Parkette

