My earliest memory of camp is from when I was about eight years old. The excitement of going to camp just bubbled out of my father. For days leading up to that trip, I remember him gathering this and that and making lists of what to bring. That excitement was etched into me. I remember the trip being a very long highway drive, followed by an hour rattling down paper company roads.

The camp we call the “Circle B” is in the woods; I mean in the woods. It’s 26 miles off the blacktop, with the last mile being a goat path that we maintain. The last mile is 4-wheel-drive only, uphill all the way. To understand why our camp is on top of the mountain, you’ll need to listen to my grandfather tell his stories. The stories told at camp about life through the years are told over and over again. This is how it is. This is how the tradition stays alive: Reliving those bygone times through often told – and often embellished – stories.

My grandfather is at the root of a family tradition that has endured for over 50 years. His vision and love for the land the camp sits on is still felt today. It began way back when my grandfather’s father was a cook for the logging company. Now, these loggers are legendary in their own right, working the timber harvest through the New England winters, from summer to spring. The cook’s job was to feed these men twice a day for months on end. As a boy, my grandfather recalled a flat piece of ground near the logging camp that overlooked a large beaver pond. It was also the camp where the horses were kept, back in the day. A “good” spring for drinking was close by. The years before camp was to be, my grandfather hunted the woods and introduced his sons to the woods that they, too, would grow to love.
Jul 21, 94, Wednesday. Ridge had a beautiful morning. Hosy is going to put it in the room during the day. I think that it should be put in the road. I think that it should be put in the road. It is going to be a beautiful day. Home is going to be a beautiful day. Home is going to be a beautiful day. Home is going to be a beautiful day. Home is going to be a beautiful day.
Over the years, camp evolved. Now the old metal camper is just a memory, a far cry from the comfortable two-room cabin we have today. Woodstove heat can still drive you out, but for me, these good fires served as the backdrop to the nightly storytelling. Still do.

**Summer Socializing**

The major use of camp is for fall hunting. But when you have a remote camp, you need to maintain the road, shore up the building and work on the woodpile. Camp takes on many names throughout the seasons. In the summer, it’s fishing camp; early fall, grouse camp; late fall, deer camp; and in the winter months, snowmobile camp. The only season camp does not see much activity is the spring. With mud waist high until the end of May, all the roads leading into camp are closed.

Time spent at camp in the summer is split between the necessary work, fishing and hiking. My grandfather took me to every beaver dam within ten miles of camp. Some of these beaver ponds were no bigger than a backyard swimming pool. But, boy, were they ever filled with magnificent brook trout! My grandfather loved to fish, especially for beaver pond trout. I guess you could say I got my passion for fishing from him. We would spend hours walking together in sweaty hip boots. By the time we got to the pond, the boots were already wet on the inside. Why we bothered to wear them is a mystery. I guess it was part of the uniform.

My grandfather was a fishing fool, for sure. He was not a big fan of eating trout, so I learned to like it. I ate so many trout when I was young! Did I mention that most of these beaver ponds were next to impossible to get into with fishing gear in hand? They were always in a tangle of alders and Joe-Pye weed. Every one of them was downhill from camp – no big deal until it was time to walk back. In fact, everything is downhill from camp. If a day of hiking didn’t wear you out, the last pitch
before getting back to camp sure did.

Summertime at camp is also family gathering time. One weekend or two are set aside to get the crew together, along with folks from other camps in the area. Socializing and eating are the order of the day; this is when other family members get their chance to pass on their own special memories of camp to the next generation.

PA’TRIDGE AND POODLES

When the leaves turn color and start to fall, summer camp turns into grouse camp. In the early 1980s, you could shoot your limit on pa’tridge. My grandparents had a poodle that would find birds. No kidding, a poodle as a bird dog!

Grouse camp has always been special for me. For many years, I ventured to camp alone for a week. Time was spent hunting birds, scouting for deer and letting go of the world “below.” I say I went solo; usually, my grandparents would come by and look in on me, usually with some sort of baked goods in hand.

I had to give a detailed report to my uncle about where I had encountered deer sign. My uncle is a woodsman. Not many, including myself, can cover as much ground as he does. I’m not quite sure if he has wings on or not. When I was a young hunter, I followed him for a day; actually, I followed him for ten minutes and then followed his tracks the rest of the time. His tracks took me through some of the nastiest terrain around. I was not amused with this at all. Not to say he was putting me through my paces or anything! Later on, I learned that these are the places deer are found. Still, that was the last day I followed him through the woods.

In November, grouse camp becomes deer camp. Just writing about it gives me that electric feeling of excitement and anticipation. I’ve tried to put a better description on this, but the best I can come up with is somewhere between Christmas morning and your wedding day. On that first weekend of the season, all the camps are full, including ours. This is my favorite event of the year – not opening day, but the night before. This is when the stories fly, and we eat great food caringly prepared by mothers, wives and grandmothers. Boy, do we have it good. It’s our first night at deer camp, and we all celebrate. We celebrate the hunt before it happens; we celebrate the family coming together.

This was my time with my dad. You see, my parents moved out of state after I graduated. We would stay in touch by phone, but when folks are halfway across the country, talking on the phone is not enough. For ten days every November, for 12-plus years, camp was the time I had with Dad. This was also time best spent with my grandfather and uncle. I’m fortunate to have had this opportunity, and not just for a place to stay. Camp really matters for me for the time it brings with family and friends.

November hasn’t always been good to us. I recall several deer seasons we had to leave camp because of too much snow. In the big woods, some “tracking” snow is a good thing, but not when snow is measured in feet! The second day of the season, we got inches during the day. Once darkness came, so did more snow – big, dinner-plate-size flakes. The air was still and the snow fell big. My uncle had to leave camp after dinner. By the time he left at 9:00 p.m., another 8 inches

Successful hunts: the author is pictured second from right with his hunting buddies.
Top, a 1960s shot of Theresa Beauchesne, Mark’s grandmother, shoveling the camp roof. Above, The good life: clear skies, bright snow, a freshly shoveled roof and a fire in the stove. Below, the author (center), with his father (right) and uncle proudly display Mark’s opening day snowstorm buck.

had fallen. Later on, I found out just how bad he had it trying to get off the mountain. The next morning, the three of us awoke to over two feet of snow! Needless to say, the season was over for us. We packed the trucks and made for the low country. Two hours passed with camp still in sight. The wet, heavy snow bent the trees over, at times completely blocking the road. The two trucks took turns getting stuck, while I trudged ahead with ax in hand. The trees would splinter with one hit from the ax.

At times, the snowdrifts were chest high. After eight hours, we finally made it off the mountain just before dark. It almost happened again two seasons ago. That was the year we burnt the outhouse down to the ground. We had built a brand new one that summer, so on the last night of deer camp, my uncle and I set the old one ablaze. And what a blaze it was!

**The Year without Mice**

By the time deer camp becomes snowmobile camp in late January, the snow has settled a bit. For years, my grandparents would ride the 30 miles to camp by snow machine. Their mission was to shovel off the roof. By late January, several feet of snow stressed the roof. Over the years, my grandmother took to leaving ribbons in the trees around camp the mark the snow depth. One of these ribbons was more than twelve feet high – no doubt from the drifts; still, a load of snow.

My last trip to snowmobile camp with Dad we now call “the year without mice.” After a bone-chilling ride to the camp road, Dad decided that I should break trail to camp. Sure, one mile uphill, with turns in unbroken snow, sounds like fun. He assured me that I was the man for the job; and coming down, I should slide over to make the trail wider. Off I went, with the throttle pinned to the bars; I made it in record time and without breathing. On the way down, I set over a half-sled width. All was well, until I sank the sled in four feet of snow. Nearly an hour later, my help arrived.

We got the sled out of the hole, and both of us got to camp without any further incident. We dug our way down into camp – a very strange feeling, I might add. Camp warms fast wrapped in a blanket of snow. Under the table, I noticed a straggly shaped scat. Then, just as I realized what it was, an ermine appeared from the bunkroom. The little snow-white weasel streaked across the floor, not to be seen again. Well, the ermine had it good at camp. The short time it was there, the weasel managed to rid the camp of mice. The mice stayed away for the better part of a year and a half.

Over the years, camp has seen many changes and additions. The road is still rough and the stories are still told. Some have passed on, leaving their mark on camp and all who enjoy it. For me, our family camp in the big woods is where the old-time quote still proves true: “Camp turns boys into men, and men into boys.”

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Mark Beauchesne is the advertising and promotions coordinator for the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.
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