

# CAMPFIRE PROGRAMS



Jim Byford

University of Tennessee at Martin  
April 2, 2007

# Campfire Programs

## -CONTENTS-

### What is a camp?

#### Purpose of Campfires

- Warmth
- Cooking food
- Relaxing and winding down
- Bonding and fellowship
- Leadership development (youth especially)
- Teaching
- Recreation and fun

#### Moods Of A Campfire

- Roaring
- Mid-burn
- Simmering Coals

#### Campfire Programs For Teaching

- Cultural heritage
- Natural history
- Life skills
- Leadership
- Inspiration

#### Multipurpose Campfire Program

##### How To Do It

- Setting
- Fire Lay
  - Fuel, oxygen, spark
  - Newspaper strips
  - Tee-pee, log cabin, lean-to

##### Key Individuals

- Firekeeper
- Master of Campfire
  - Talent
  - Self-Confidence
  - Caring
  - Sincerity
  - Patience
  - Encourages
  - Good listener

- Sense of humor
- Prepared

### **The Program**

- Match the fire mood
- Involve audience
- Activities
  - Songs
  - Stories
  - Skits
  - Stunts
  - Poems
  - Challenges
  - Ceremonies

### **Sound**

- PA Systems
- Fire Rings

### **Disruptions**

**Campfire Programs**  
**Jim Byford**  
**University of Tennessee at Martin**  
**April 2, 2007**

## **What Is A Camp?**

A camp is a place where people spend time outdoors - - a place with food, water, and protection from weather. It's a place where people can relax, and retreat from normal routine activities. It usually involves overnight stays. In frontier days, toward the end of the day of hunting or traveling, people would make camp in a sheltered place, near a stream and out of the wind. They'd pitch a tent, build a fire, eat supper, wash dishes and finish other camp chores, then relax in front of the fire before going to bed.

Modern camps, whether hunting camps, group camps, or youth camps, take many forms. In group camps, modern buildings have often replaced tents, and catered food has replaced cooking wild game. But successful modern camps still have some of the same ingredients as early camps - - namely:

- opportunities to enjoy the natural world
- shared chores
- time for fellowship
- shared relaxation and reflection
- time to "wind down" before bed
- campfire each evening

## **Purposes of Campfires**

People are naturally drawn to campfires. In cold weather, they keep us warm. In wet and cold conditions, they can be critical to survival. Some camps use them for cooking food - - from entire meals to snacks, such as wieners for hot dogs, marshmallows, or s'mores (roasted marshmallows and Hershey's bar on graham crackers). But, beyond food, campfires attract people in mysterious ways. Children get excited just to see one. They want to add sticks and watch them burn. All ages are entranced by the depth of glowing embers. And the warmth appeals, no matter the air temperature. I've believed for years, that this primitive appeal is connected deep in our subconsciousness to the

warmth and sense of security we experienced in our mother's womb. Campfires bring back memories for adults, and people who become quiet near the end of a fire are often reflecting on fond memories - - and sometimes sadness and longing for a time when life was less complicated. For most, campfires bring respite from hectic work schedules and problems back at home or the office. Problems become distant, if only for a short while.

Of all the values of campfires, though, perhaps the greatest is their value in helping people bond together. Campfires have a way of leveling the field. Here, there is no rank or social hierarchy. No matter the level of wealth, race, gender, or social background, everyone's the same. The thing they have in common at that moment is the campfire - -and it bonds them together. Over the years, I've noticed that bonds built around a campfire often continue throughout the lives of those individuals. Friendships that endure - - even in spite of the craziness and hardships life often throws at us.

I've found that campfires are great leadership development tools, too, especially among youth. Children in the "real world" are shackled with inhibitions, shyness, and self consciousness. In the dark, they often feel their imperfections don't stand out - - they feel camouflaged. With a little encouragement from a skillful campfire leader, children can often be coaxed into "stepping up" to sing a song, recite a poem, tell a story, mimic a wild animal, or any number of other things. Things they would never dream of doing in the light of day. The group bonding will often motivate the "audience" to be kinder, if the "performance" is less than perfect. And if the group responds positively, it may be one of the first times the "performer" has ever received approval from his / her peers. That is powerful! And I've found it often marks the budding of leadership for a great many youngsters.

### **Moods Of A Campfire**

While it may sound strange, a campfire goes through a series of changes, which affect the moods of people. These changes are distinct, transitional, and predictable.

**Roaring** - Soon after it ignites, the fire roars, flames leaping high in the air. You not only see it, you hear it roar, crackle, and pop. It is hot, and powerful - - energetic and

consuming. The mood of people at this stage is also energetic, full of laughter, frolicking, and fun.

**Mid-Burn** - The fire is still energetic, but toned down a bit. It can be kept at this stage indefinitely if you have enough wood. Mid-burn brings an energetic, but toned-down mood as well. People are still engaged in laughter and activity, but generally less mobile - - most sitting down to participate.

**Simmering Coals**—Fed infrequently now, the fire becomes deep, hot coals - - changing hue from bright to dull orange. The heat is intense, but deep and subdued. Just as the heat becomes deep and concentrated, and the fire becomes mellow - - so do the minds of people. Thoughts become deep and meaningful. And even normally flighty personalities begin to philosophy, either openly or silently. Not so much through sadness, or melancholy - - but through deep introspection.

### **Campfires For Teaching**

A campfire program is a series of events, planned well ahead of time, and orchestrated to accomplish a set of goals. To be most effective, these events must be appropriately timed to match the moods of the fire. Used wisely, a campfire can be used in a group camp to accomplish any one or more of several different things. We've already mentioned bonding and fellowship. We've talked about "winding down" before going to bed. They can be used for recreation and just plain having fun, too.

But perhaps the most overlooked way to use campfire in a group camp setting is as a medium to teach. To teach all kinds of things - like:

- cultural heritage, through ceremonies
- natural history of native plants and animals, through stories
- life skills - - such as survival, how to build fire, etc - - through demonstration
- leadership, which we've already discussed
- inspiration, through stories, poems, and songs.

## **Multipurpose Campfire Program**

There are many ways to design a campfire program, and I've seen dozens of ways that work. What I'm about to describe, though, is a type of campfire program I've found to work best over the last 35 years. I've found this type of program successful with youth, from six years old to early twenties; with adults, from early twenties to the eighties; from singles, to couples; from parents to grandparents; men to women - - all races and cultures. The concept is simple - - a program that features:

- bonding
- fellowship
- recreation / fun
- nostalgia (with adults)
- education (what we teach varies with the type of group)
- inspiration

### **How To Do It**

**Setting** - Picking the right setting is important -- but a bad setting is not a deal breaker. The best setting I can ever remember is a high mountain lake in Idaho - - no sound, except for the wind, the fire - - and the people. The worst is a fairground in Union City, Tennessee, where I desperately tried to create a proper atmosphere, with a racetrack in the background, and mosquitoes that had a special fondness for blue-clad cub scouts. Nearly as bad was a rained out campfire in Maryland, that went on anyway inside a warehouse, with candles and aluminum foil making a poor-imitation of a prairie campfire in Nebraska.

**Fire Lay** - Before you can have a campfire program, you must first have a campfire. That can be tough if the only wood you have is wet - - or huge. At one camp in Montana where I was supposed to do a campfire, all I had to work with was 10 inch bolts of firewood - - and since I'd flown in, I had no axe or knife. No matter how much "firewater" you have, it's hard to ignite 10 inch logs.

I don't have room here to teach you all you need to know about starting fires. But, here are a few basics. A fire has to have three things - - fuel, oxygen, and a spark. The spark ignites the fuel in the presence of oxygen. For that to happen, the spark has to be hot enough to be at the "kindling temperature" of the fuel - - and the lay has to be loose enough that oxygen from the air can reach the fuel. So - - to make that happen, the fuel has to be fine, and loose, before the spark is ignited. The finer the fuel is, the lower the kindling temperature, and the looser it is, the more oxygen is available.

So, in practical terms, what does that mean? Basically it's simple. Use a fine fuel (dryer lint works well - - so does tiny peelings of birch bark) under an increasingly coarser fuel (tiny sticks, small sticks, larger sticks, even larger, etc.). Make sure it's dry, then strike a match. If you have to use diesel or kerosene, you didn't lay the fire well. And stay away from gasoline, unless you're ready to become prematurely bald! I learned a trick from a 4-H leader in South Dakota, that I've used many times. If the fire is slow in starting, tear several pages of a newspaper in one inch vertical strips - - top to bottom - - to add to a stubborn new fire. Basically the curling strips raise the kindling temperature.

There are several basic fire lays:

- tee-pee (stack one inch sticks in a tee-pee with finer fuel underneath)
- log cabin (put one inch sticks in a square, overlapping each side, with finer fuel in the middle)
- lean-to (use a four to six inch log, and lean one inch sticks against it, with finer fuel underneath)

### **Key Individuals**

Basically, you need two individuals to make a campfire program work - - a **firekeeper**, and a **master of campfire**. The firekeeper keeps the fire in such a way that the mood of the fire matches the mood of the program. The master of the campfire (MOC) should be focused on the program only. This is a critical role, and the MOC should be an individual with certain traits:

**Talent** – That the MOC must be talented as a singer, musician, or storyteller is a common myth. It certainly doesn't hurt, but talent is the least important trait of a master of campfire.

**Self Confidence** - This trait is important, but only to the degree that the MOC doesn't feel the need to show-off his/her skills or talent. The program is not a stage for the MOC, but a stage that spotlights participants. The last thing a good campfire program needs is a self-centered MOC. At the same time a skillful MOC, especially one with some talent, can model good music or storytelling skills - - and done well, that can inspire members in the audience to participate.

**Caring** – someone who wants others to succeed and have a good time

**Sincerity** - If the MOC isn't sincere, the campfire program has little chance to succeed.

**Patience** – Sometimes, a struggling participant needs a little more time

**Encourages** – That struggling participant often just needs a little encouragement. The skillful MOC can often entice the audience to help encourage the participant. Gloss over mistakes, and ask for applause for the effort and courage of the struggling participant.

**Good Listener** – During an event, the MOC needs to be planning ahead for the next event so the program will flow well, but he/she also needs to listen to what's currently going on and react accordingly.

**Sense of Humor** – The MOC must, above all, be human! How he/she responds to a joke on the MOC, or to an error on his/her part, will set the mood of the program. Indignation, or cutting remarks will kill the mood.

**Prepared** – The MOC should be prepared - - know beforehand what to do at each stage of the fire - - what to fill in with if someone backs out, or if something goes wrong. A successful program moves right along - - flowing with the evolution of the fire - - starting and ending on time. The program should move like clockwork - - but, if the MOC is skillful, the audience will never realize the program has an agenda. After all, the key purposes of a campfire are to relax, bond, wind-down - - not be another highly structured activity.

## The Program

We've already talked about the need of the campfire program to match the mood of the fire. I like to start with a lively song that everyone knows. Follow with lively activities that most of the audience can participate in. Use the mid-burn for stories, skits, songs, etc - - and save inspiration and spiritual activities until later, when the fire is dying down. I usually ask a few people before the program to be prepared to sing a song, tell a story, etc. I'll "weave them in" in appropriate places during the program. This will help me make sure I've got enough material/activities.

Involve as many of the audience as you can - - and be flexible. If someone you didn't plan on musters the courage to participate involve them then, don't ask them to wait. However, if a youngster wants to recite an inspirational poem, during the early part of the fire, ask them to wait - - but above all, don't forget them!

Set the stage early, before you invite participation. It may be necessary to announce that there will be no vulgar stories, or bad language. This often not necessary - - good modeling behavior by the MOC will usually be enough. Tell participants ahead of time to keep it short. And if young children are in the audience, I announce ahead of time that there will be no scary stories, or skits. Sometimes, it's appropriate to "pick on" some individual, with a skit, song, or story - - but make sure it's someone who is very popular, with a good dose of self-esteem - - such as the camp director.

There are several activities that can be used in a campfire program:

- songs
- stories
- skits
- stunts
- poems
- challenges
- ceremonies

When telling stories, it's helpful to use plenty of descriptions. Be specific - - use fictional names. For example: "Uncle Bill Ledbetter was unusual. He wore the same old coveralls every day - - faded, with a hole just below the left knee. There was a grease stain above the right pocket, where he would reach for his Case pocket knife with his

greasy hand while he worked on his old Allis Chalmers tractor - - he was always working on that tractor.” It’s OK for participants to read, but the MOC should never read a story or script. Learn it well enough beforehand.

Finally, most campfires involve music somehow. Audiences love to sing, but they must know the song. Teaching songs at a campfire doesn’t usually work - - but if simple and repetitive it’s sometimes OK. If participants have musical instruments, let them play. If they want to come up and sing, let them. It’s not really important how good they are. If they’re not, the audience will usually tolerate them, especially if the MOC is supportive. In the rare case no one wants to sing, and the MOC doesn’t have that talent, he/she can still use music, if nothing more than a CD song or two positioned at strategic points in the program.

### **Sound**

Sound can be a problem if the group size is too large. This is one of the biggest problems I’ve had with campfire programs when the group is large. PA systems can sometimes help. At other times they can be miserable failures. If a PA is used, it should be set up and tried well ahead of time. A PA system that works well inside, may not function well outside in open space.

My preference is to build a campfire ring with a “stage” no further than 15 yards (45 feet) from the nearest participant. By placing concentric rings of seats around the fire, with each ring slightly higher than the ring in front of it, everyone can see and hear what’s going on. When participants can’t see or hear, they begin talking to themselves, and the program deteriorates. The best campfire circle I’ve ever seen was at Jackson’s Mill 4-H Camp in West Virginia..

### **Disruptions**

My experience is that if participants talk, jeer, or otherwise become disruptive, the site or the programs are not adequate to keep their attention. Or - - the MOC is not facilitating the program well. If that ever happens when you’re the MOC, my suggestion is just to pause, or stop completely, until the disruption fades. Take stock of what caused the disruption, and try to fix it. Pick up the tempo, get everyone involved in something - - change pace. Shouting at the disrupters, scolding them, or putting them down - - are not only ineffective, it destroys the mood, kills the bonding, and sometimes creates scars.

The MOC role is not only an important role, it is a powerful role. One that should be accepted with good wishes for all involved - - and with humility.