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Calvin Rutstrum, Letters to a Reader

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- Skills and guides - Library -



Publication: Monday 15 August 2005

Description :

In the late 1960's and mid 1970's, Shel Abelson wrote four letters to Calvin Rutstrum with questions concerning gear sources. Calvin answered Shel's questions and also provided several interesting side notes about his whereabouts. The original letters and Calvin's answers are combined with various quotes from his books in this article.

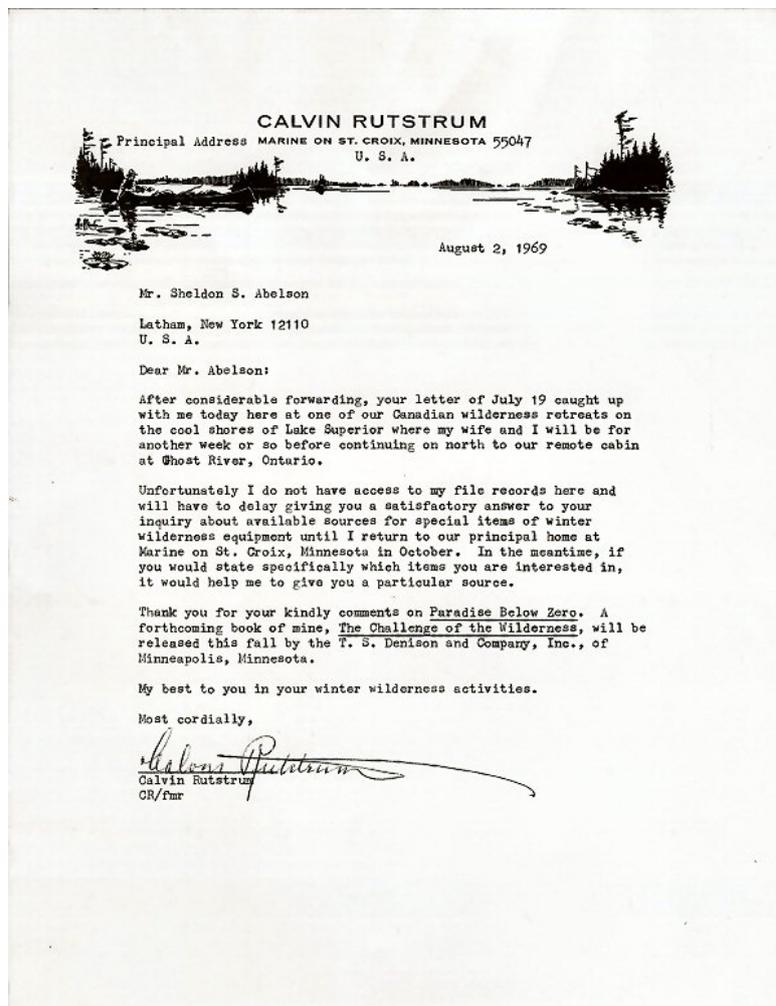
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Throughout Calvin's various publications he entreated readers to contact him for specific questions. Later he discussed the role of his reader's letters in *Burning Bridges* a chapter in *Once Upon a Wilderness*. In this article I will present the letters and some quotes from Calvin's writings that correspond to the various details in his letters.

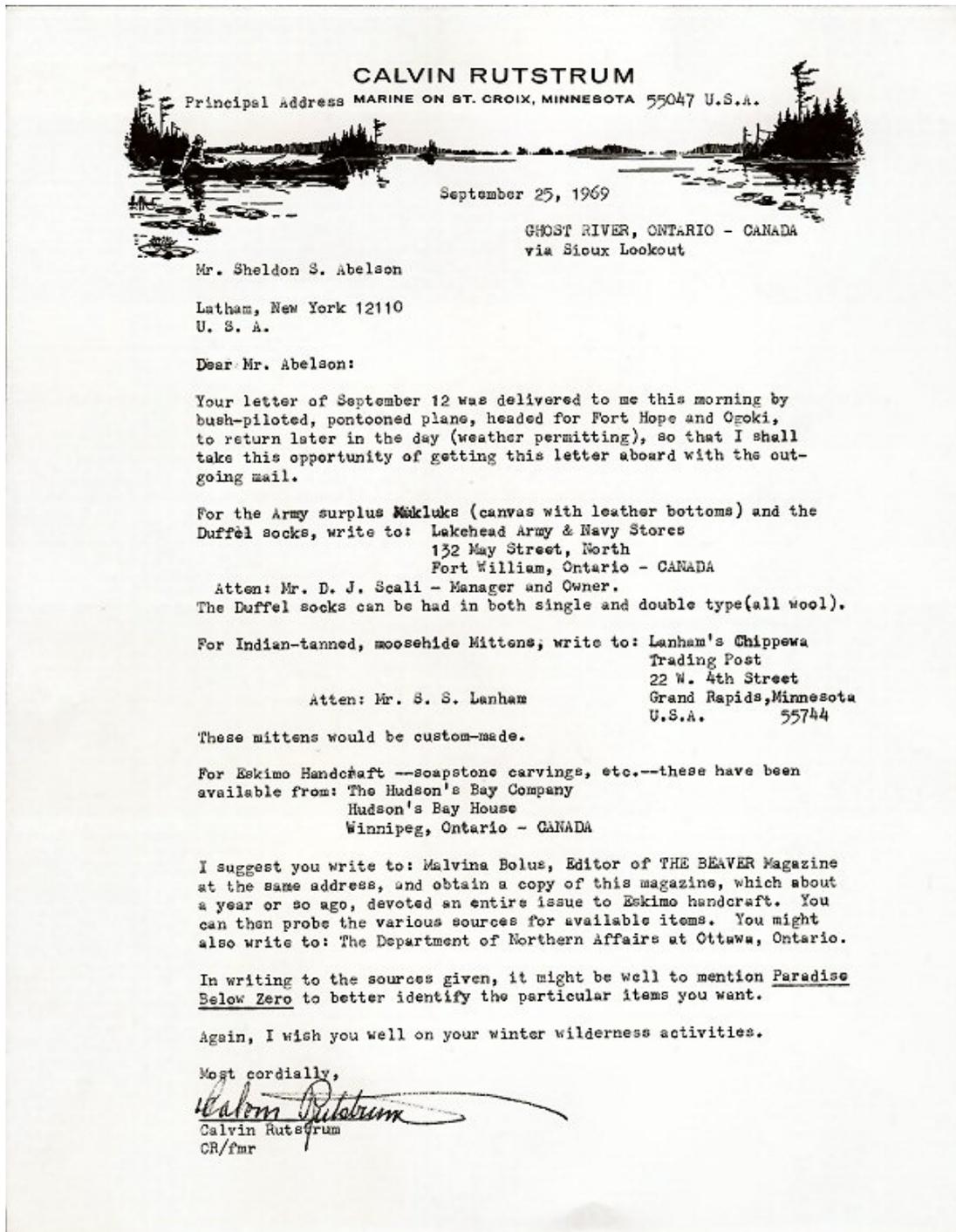
*If the reader will write to me in care of the publisher, I will give an available source for special items at the time of the reader's communication to me. Ski and mountain climbing footwear should be selected from firms specializing in this equipment. **Paradise Below Zero**, The Function of Winter Clothes, 1968, p142*

This entreat by Calvin seems to have been the initiator for Shel's first letter in August of 1969. Calvin specifically references Shel's comment on *Paradise Below Zero* and like any good author plugs his next book. What particularly interested me in this letter was Calvin's reference to Shel's letter being forwarded around and finally catching him at his Canadian cabin just prior to their departure to Ghost River. Shel sent his letter two weeks earlier probably to Macmillan in New York.



Shel apparently had asked some general questions concerning sources for equipment that Calvin had specified in *Paradise*. Calvin defers addressing these questions until he can return to his primary residence and requests a detailed list of items. Also of interest is his stationery and Florence's initials as scribe for the correspondence (which can also be found on all the letters presented).

The next letter in the series was sent via bushpilot from Calvin's cabin. It was in response to a followup letter from Shel who provided the specific items he was seeking.



Here again we have a marvelous tidbit about the arrival of Shel's letter via bushpilot on his way to Fort Hope who then plans on stopping once again at Calvin's site on the return trip.

*Mail from readers of my books and articles began to come by various and devious routes. An Indian reaching our granite shore, landing in a canoe or on a pair of snowshoes, was likely to be carrying the mail packet. We would usually read the mail before he departed, exchanging woodlore and news over a meal. A pontoon plane or ski-equipped plane roaring directly over our rooftop was a sort of "sonic boom" signal that warned us of two things: to get the coffee pot going for a visitor or to look for a mail packet that would be dropped in the water or on the ice in a few moments, providing we showed up on the lakefront in full view of the pilot to retrieve the packet. Mail in the open water season came in a plastic bag or with a plastic detergent bottle as a buoy that bobbed on the lake surface until we used the canoe to recover it. **Challenge of the Wilderness**, Wilderness Inviolable, 1970, p146*

We can imagine the pilot buzzing Calvin's cabin and dropping the packet containing Shel's letter, Calvin paddling out to retrieve the mail and then answering Shel's questions prior to the pilots return for a cup of coffee.

Calvin lists specific suppliers for mukluks, duffel socks, moosehide mitts. Years later he regrets that suppliers for these unique items have become even scarcer.

*Some items are beyond purchase. In my book **Paradise Below Zero** I have offered to give sources for those winter wilderness items which the reader fails to find in the open market. Commercial mukluks, moccasins, and mittens for the winter wilderness traveler are tragically inadequate. Skins smoke-tanned by Indians and Eskimos, crafted into native-patterned footwear and mittens, are required to make sub-zero wilderness living and travel highly functional. It pains me that I cannot suggest ample sources for such items to my readers. Fine smoke-tanned skins today are quite scarce, except in remote wilderness areas. To hope for acquisition of such items through correspondence has proved virtually impossible. The amicable, personal contact is needed. Factory-tanned skins are worthless for this purpose because the smooth grain is not removed, and when left on mukluks, moccasins, or mittens only risks perspiration condensation, with consequent danger of frozen hands and feet. **Once Upon a Wilderness**, Hands and Feet Upon the Wilderness, 1973, p 89*

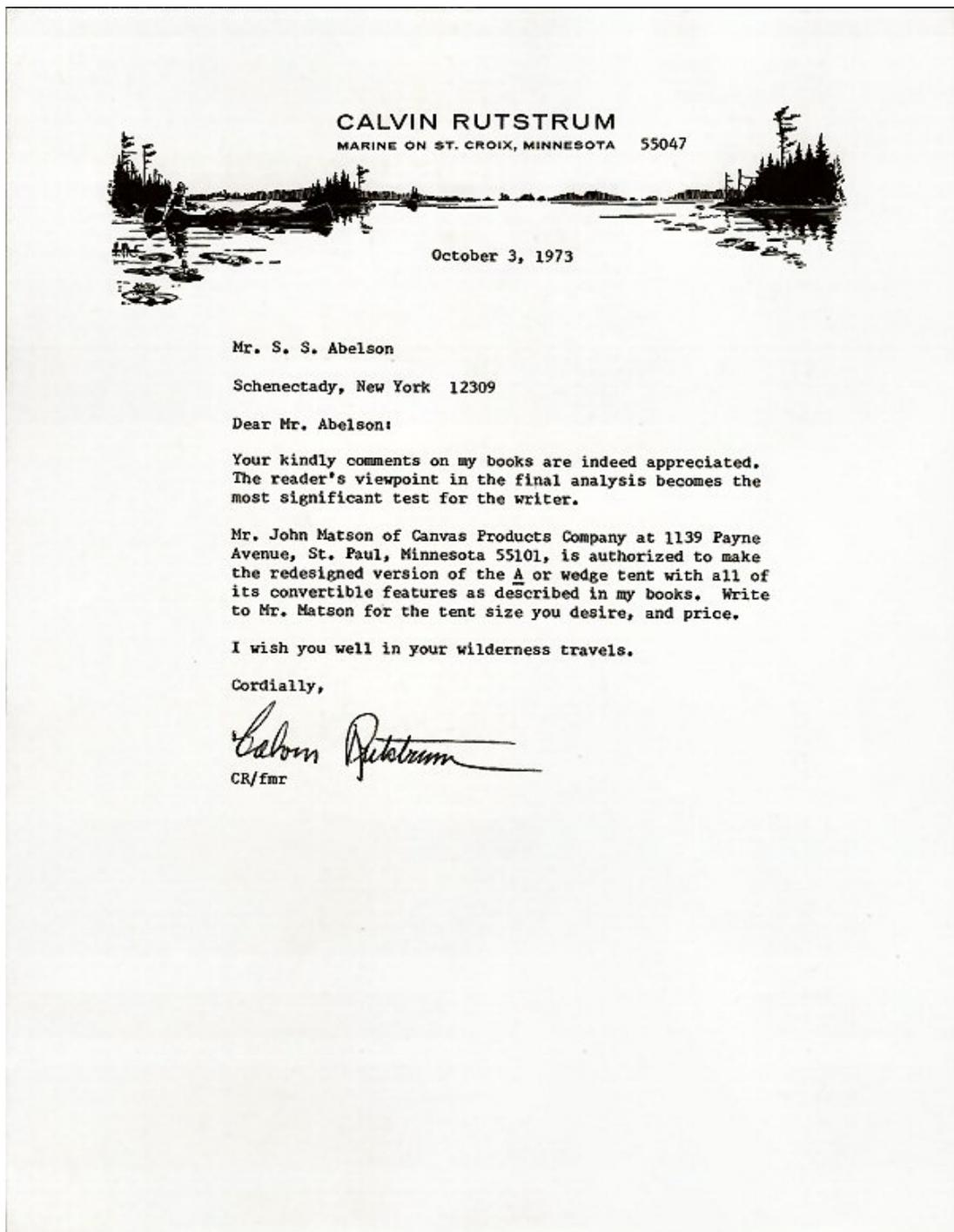
Calvin in *Paradise Below Zero*, Chapter 7---Incredible Naturalistic Man, discussed the Northern First Peoples and their adaptation to their environment. He references the Hudson's Bay Company and *The Beaver* magazine in response to Shel's apparent questions about sources for Eskimo art.

*This chapter, to be conventionally acceptable, should, perhaps, make a distinction between "civilized" man as contrasted to "savage" or "primitive" man. Derogatory terminology commonly applied to wilderness-living people has irked many of us, largely because it closes too many doors of knowledge to the aspiring student of ethnic science and defers fact to false conception. In this chapter, therefore, I prefer to make the distinction between "industrialized" man and "naturalistic" man. **Paradise Below Zero**, Incredible Naturalistic Man, 1968, p 85*

Calvin included an image of *The Walrus Hunter*, a carved soapstone sculpture and he notes:

*...the Eskimo, no longer has his works of art and craft filched from him by white traders and individual tourists for a paltry sum. He now at last has begun to demand a fair value for his work. **Paradise Below Zero**, Incredible Naturalistic Man, 1968, p 94*

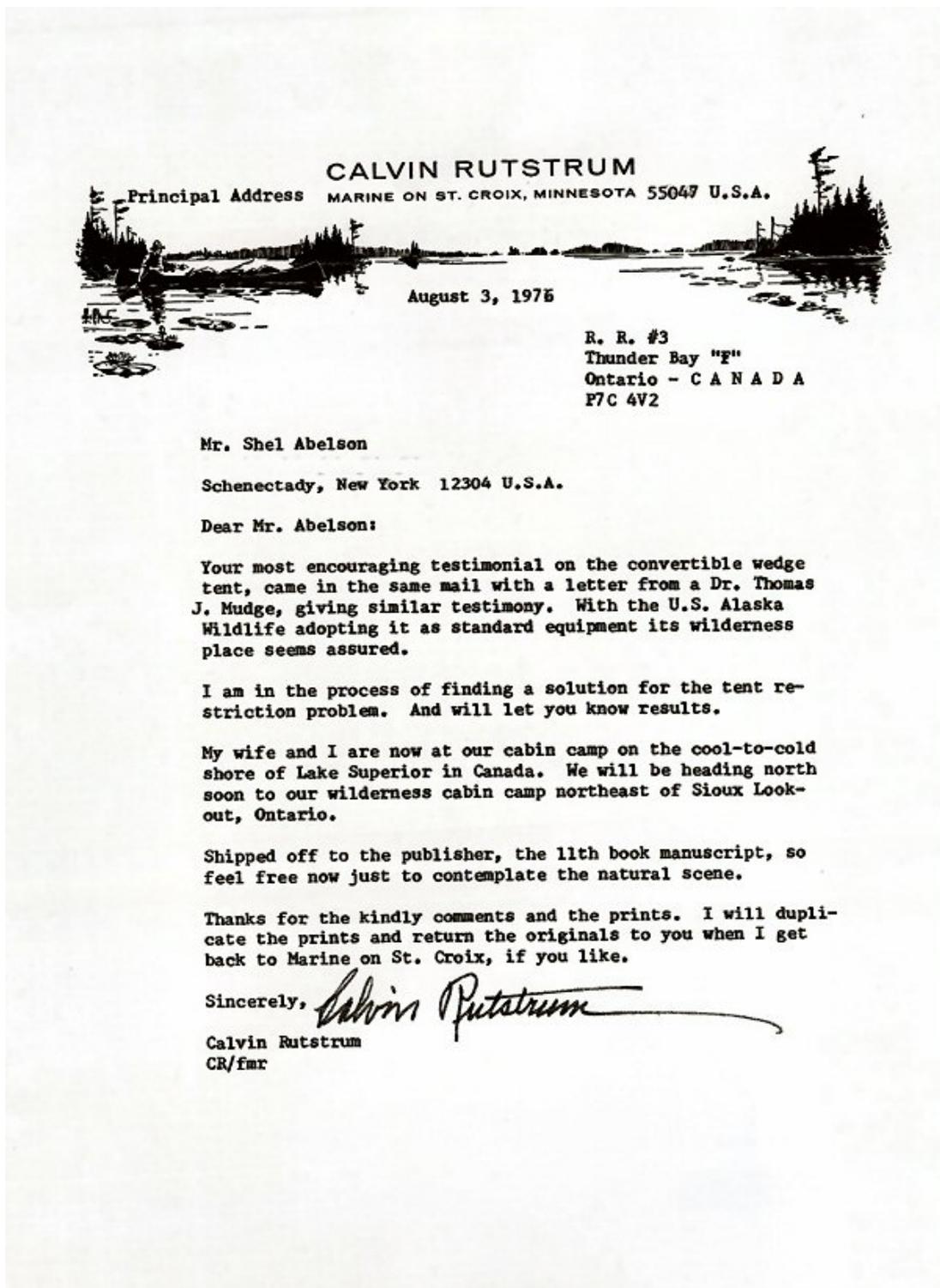
The next 2 letters from Calvin are all in reference to Shel's desire to purchase a Rutstrum Wedge Tent. Calvin discusses this tent design starting in 1946 in *Way of the Wilderness* and it appears throughout his various books from there after. The first letter in the series dated October 3, 1973 comments on Shel's praise for his works and then refers him to John Matson of Canvas Products Company as the supplier of the Wedge tent.



The last letter from Calvin in the series is a response to Shel's praise of the tent that he purchased in 1976. He thanks Shel for some photographs he sent, one being of a 1976 canoe trip with the new tent.

This letter has one interesting point about the tent...apparently it was adopted for use by the Alaska Wildlife service. The reference to the tent's restriction problem is unknown.

Calvin again cites his newest book...book eleven which may have been *Chips from a Wilderness Log* published in 1978.



The last letter in this collection is from Matson which includes a price list for his products from 1971. The prices of the tents now seem incredible considering the workmanship, material quality & attention to detail (Shel's tent is still in service after 30 years and is as good as new.) Also having a price list that did not change for 5 years is also amazing....would it not be nice to find prices on the wedge tent like this now?

While Calvin discussed the wedge tent in many of his books, the 1952/53 edition of *Way of the Wilderness* and the 1958 *New Way of the Wilderness* probably have the best written descriptions of this designs utility and practicality and *New Way* has excellent drawing by Les Kouba. *Paradise Below Zero* has Calvin's winter tent description using both liner and stove. *Once Upon a Wilderness*, best of all has included three photographs of the tent with its insect netting and he discusses some of his modifications over the years.

Thus we ran the gamut of wide-ranging purchase and partial custom-remodeling of just about everything you carried with you into the wilds; and I repeat, this is, unfortunately, as true today as it was over fifty years ago. Redesigning and remodeling the wedge tent, as shown in the accompanying illustrations, provides an example. Running the tent flaps at both ends all the way to the ridge allowed raising either side of the tent to form a canopy to cook under in rain. Also, a mosquito netting the full size of the tent and suspended with loops inside the ridge gave protection from insects no matter what tent conversion was used. The mosquito netting quickly suspended away from the tent for a noonday stop avoided much insect trouble, or was needed for photographing wildlife from a blind. Before that revision, the wedge tent was much like all other nonconvertible tents---a fabric cell you crawled into to get out of the rain. **Once Upon a Wilderness**, The Earlier Approach, 1973, p 19

CANVAS PRODUCTS & REPAIR
1139 PAYNE AVENUE
ST. PAUL, MINN. 55101
PHONE: 771-2876

S. S. Abelson

Schenectady, New York 12309

Dear Mr. Abelson,

Thank you for your inquiry for a Rutstrum Wilderness Tent. While searching for a fabric which would be suited for the rugged type of wilderness camping, I wanted something that would be reasonably light weight, strong, and would have an excellent water and mildew repellency treatment. I feel I have found just that material. It is approximately 5.5 oz. sq. yd. and is 50% rayon and 50% cotton. This material is available in O.D. and tan.

Some of the features that I have in this tent are: strong webbing foot loops, roof loops and peak loops. The peak loops are designed so when the tent is suspended on a rope the tent is held straight instead of sagging with the rope. For the door closures I am using VELCRO instead of zippers or ties. This feature is unique that it gives a tight and sound door closing and is very light weight. The dacron netting that I am using is strong and the knit is fine so even most of the smaller knots and flies cannot get through it. The floor is made of a synthetic coated nylon which gives an excellent waterproof floor cloth. The winter liner is made from a woven polyester fiber fabric. These materials are not flame resistant as we have not found suitable materials with flame resistant compounds in them.

In going over the details of construction of this tent with Mr. Rutstrum, I have been able to construct a tent that I am proud to offer. As a wilderness camper myself, I am very confident that this tent has come up to my expectations.

I have three different sizes to offer. Each size tent is so engineered that either netting or winter liner may be used.

The attached price list is still current. Shipment is generally made approximately two to three weeks after order and payment are received.

Thank you,

John M. Matson
John M. Matson

JMM/gm
Enclosures

Rutstrum Wilderness Tent -- Price List 1971

CANVAS PRODUCTS & REPAIR
 1139 PAYNE AVENUE
 ST. PAUL, MINN. 55101
 PHONE: 771-2876

6'-0" x 7'-0" x 5'-0" High

Tent	\$ 75.19 each
Coated Nylon Floor	25.59 each
Mosquito Netting Liner	38.53 each
Winter Liner	61.20 each
Package unit less winter liner	\$124.31
Complete package unit	185.51

6'-6" x 9'-0" x 6'-0" High

Tent	\$ 90.78 each
Coated Nylon Floor	30.26 each
Mosquito Netting Liner	44.42 each
Winter Liner	71.80 each
Package unit less winter liner	\$150.46
Complete package unit	222.26

8'-0" x 11'-0" x 6'-0" High

Tent	\$108.53 each
Coated Nylon Floor	35.85 each
Mosquito Netting Liner	57.05 each
Winter Liner	81.97 each
Package unit less winter liner	\$186.43
Complete package unit	268.40

The tent is made from 50% Rayon/50% Cotton Shelter Duck which is available in O.D. and Tan. Mosquito netting is dacron. The winter liner is made from Polyester Fibers. (Woven)

All orders F.O.B. St. Paul, Minn. Send remittance with order.

These letters to an interested reader demonstrate to me an amazing depth of character in Cal. He not only published to make a living but followed through to inform and assist his readers well beyond the typical author. Calvin acknowledges the value of his reader's letters in these two quotes.

*My publisher and people who read my books purport to have some sort of claim on me. They want their letters answered. This implies a need for mail delivery at reasonable intervals. Anyone accustomed to mail delivery every day would consider our weekly wilderness delivery a serious inconvenience. **The Wilderness Life**, As a Way of Life, 1975, p 35*

Writers on outdoor life usually have a substantial reader correspondence. These letters, containing all sorts of inquires, might at times seem to be excessive extracurricular activity; but by virtue of this correspondence, writers pretty much get to know where they stand with the reading public. Letters can and often do become a kind of private

book review. *Like a doctor or lawyer, the writer gets an insight into the life of his clientele.* **Once Upon a Wilderness**, Burning Bridges Behind, 1973, p 149

I leave this article with another of my favorite quotes.

In a world of insecurity, of planned obsolescence, of ephemeral plastics and other impermanency, the individual who can reach back into a more stable world, or ahead if you prefer, and come up with genuine, durable items, methods, and principles---life, to that individual, will have far greater values and pleasure. **Once Upon a Wilderness**, Hands and Feet Upon the Wilderness, 1973, p 90



Calvin Rutstrum From Challenge of the Wilderness 1970

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Mr. Shel Abelson for generously providing copies of these letters. I am certain letters much like these were addressed to readers all over the world. I have found it a special treat to have been able to read these and generously thank Shel for sharing these pieces of his history with Calvin. I know he still enjoys the wilderness and has stories to tell about trips he has done in the Calvin style.

I also want to thank Mr. Brad Field who "discovered" Shel and pointed him my way due to correspondence initiated from my [Rutstrum book review article](#).

Resources

The Rutstrum Wedge Tent in Egyptian cotton is now available from [Tentsmiths](#) Conway NH...for a bit more than they were in 1976 however.

Post-scriptum :

Calvin Rutstrum, Letters to a Reader

Version 1.0 4/28/2005 draft

Version 1.5 8/9/2005 Letters added

Version 1.6 8/10/2005 Edited plus quotes

Version 1.7 8/17/2005 quote typo corrected (Thanks Don)