

## A Camping Trip by Hamlin Garland

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It was the fifteenth of June, and the sun glazed down upon the dry cornfield as if it had a spite against Lincoln Stewart, who was riding a gayly painted new sulky corn-plow, guiding the shovels with his feet. The corn was about knee-high and rustled softly, almost as if whispering, not yet large enough to speak aloud.

Working all day in a level field like this, with the sun burning one's neck brown as a leather glove, is apt to make one dream of cool river pools, where the water snakes wiggle to and fro, and the kingfishers fly above the bright ripples in which the rock bass love to play.

It was about four o'clock, and Lincoln was tired. His neck ached, his toes were swollen, and his tongue called for a drink of water. He got off the plow, after turning the horses' heads to the faint western breeze, and took a seat on the fence in the shade of a small popple tree on which a king-bird had a nest.

Somebody was galloping up the road with a regular rise and fall in the saddle which showed the perfect horseman and easy rider. It was Milton Jennings.

"Hello, Lincoln!" shouted Milton.

"Hello, Milt," Lincoln returned. "Why ain't you at home workin' like an honest man?"

"Better business on hand. I've come clear over here to-day to see you——"

"Well, here I am."

"Let's go to Clear Lake."

Lincoln stared hard at him.

"D'ye mean it?"

"You bet I do! I can put in a horse. Bert Jenks will lend us his boat—put it right on in place of the wagon box—and we can borrow Captain Knapp's tent. We'll get Rance to go, too."

"I'm with you," said Lincoln, leaping down, his face aglow with the idea. "But won't you go up and break it gently to the boss? He's got his mind kind o' set on my goin' through this corn again. When'll we start?"

"Let's see—to-day is Wednesday—we ought to get off on Monday."

"Well, now, if you don't mind, Milt, I'd like to have you go up and see what Father says."

"I'll fix him," said Milton. "Where is he?"

"Right up the road, mending fence."

Lincoln was so tickled he not only leaped the fence, but sprang into the plow seat from behind and started on another round, singing, showing how instantly hope of play can lighten a boy's task. But when he came back to the fence, Milton was not in sight, and his heart fell—the outlook was not so assuring.

It was nearly an hour later when Milton came riding back. Lincoln looked up and saw him wave his hand and heard his shout. The victory was won. Mr. Stewart had consented.

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Lincoln whooped with such wild delight that the horses, swerving to the right, plowed up two rows of corn for several rods before they could be brought back into place.

"It's all O.K.," Milton called. "But I've got to come over with my team and help you go through the corn the other way."

From that on, nothing else was thought of or talked of. Each night the four boys got together at Mr. Jennings's house, each one bringing things that he thought he needed. They had never looked upon a sheet of water larger than the mill-pond on the Cedar River, and the cool face of that beautiful lake, of which they had heard so much, allured them.

The boat was carefully mended, and Rance, who was a good deal of a sailor, naturally talked about making a sail for it.

Lists of articles were carefully drawn up thus:

4 tin cups 4 knives and forks  
1 spider 1 kettle, etc.

At Sunday School the campers became the center of attraction for the other small boys, and quite a number of them went home with Lincoln to look over the vehicle—a common lumber wagon with a boat for the box, projecting dangerously near the horses' tails and trailing far astern. From the edges of the boat arose a few hoops, making a kind of cover, like a prairie schooner. In the box were "traps" innumerable in charge of Bert, who was "chief cook and bottlewasher."

Each man's duty had been assigned. Lincoln was to take care of the horses, Milton was to look after the tent and places to sleep, Rance was treasurer, and Bert was the cook, with the treasurer to assist. All these preparations amused an old soldier like Captain Knapp.

"Are you going to get back this fall?" he asked slyly, as he stood about, enjoying the talk.

"We'll try to," replied Milton.

Yes, there the craft stood, all ready to sail at day-break, with no wind or tide to prevent, and every boy who saw it said, "I wish I could go." And the campers, not selfish in their fun, felt a pang of pity, as they answered, "We wish you could, boys."

It was arranged that they were all to sleep in the ship that night, and so as night fell and the visitors drew off, the four navigators went into the kitchen, where Mrs. Jennings set out some bread and milk for them.

"Now, boys, d'ye suppose you got bread enough?"

"We've got twelve loaves."

"Well, of course you can buy bread and milk, so I guess you won't starve."

"I guess not—not with fish plenty," they assured her.

"Well, now, don't set up too late, *talkin'* about gettin' off."

"We're goin' to turn right in, ain't we, boys?"

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"You bet. We're goin' to get out of here before sun-up to-morrow mornin'," replied Bert.

"Well, see't you do," said Mr. Jennings, who liked boys to have a good time. "I'll be up long before you are."

"Don't be too sure o' that."

It was delicious going to bed in that curious place, with the stars shining in and the katydids singing. It gave them all a new view of life.

"Now, the first feller that wakes up, yell," said Bert, as he crept under the blanket.

"First feller asleep, whistle," said Lincoln.

"That won't be you, that's sure," grumbled Rance, already dozing.

As a matter of fact, no one slept much. About two o'clock they began, first one, and then the other:

"Say, boys, don't you think it's about time?"

"Boys, it's gettin' daylight in the east!"

"No, it ain't. That's the moon."

At last the first faint light of the sun appeared, and Lincoln rose, fed the horses, and harnessed them while the other boys got everything else in readiness.

Mr. Jennings came out soon, and Mrs. Jennings got some hot coffee for them, and before the sun was anywhere near the horizon, they said good-by and were off. Mr. Jennings shouted many directions about the road, while Mrs. Jennings told them again to be careful on the water.

To tell the truth, the boys were a little fagged at first, but at last as the sun rose, the robins began to chatter, and the bobolinks began to ring their fairy bells, and the boys broke into song. For the first hour or two the road was familiar and excited no interest, but then they came upon new roads, new fields, and new villages. Streams curved down the slopes and ran musically across the road, as if on purpose to water their horses. Wells beside the fences under silver-leaf maples invited them to stop and drink and lunch. Boys they didn't know, on their way to work, stopped and looked at them enviously. How glorious it all was!

The sun grew hot, and at eleven o'clock they drew up in a beautiful grove of oaks, beside a swift and sparkling little river, for dinner and to rest their sweaty team. They concluded to eat doughnuts and drink milk for that meal, and this gave them time to fish a little and swim a good deal, while the horses munched hay under the trees.

After a good long rest, they hitched the team in again and started on toward the west. They had still half-way (twenty-five miles) to go. The way grew stranger. The land, more broken and treeless, seemed very wonderful to them. They came into a region full of dry lake-beds, and Bert, who had a taste for geology, explained the cause of the valleys so level at the bottom, and pointed out the old-time limits of the water. As night began to fall, it seemed they had been a week on the way.

At last, just as the sun was setting, they saw a dark belt of woods ahead of them and came to a narrow river, which the farmers said was the outlet of the lake. They pushed on faster, for the roads were better, and just at dusk they drove into the little village street which led down to the lake, to

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which their hungry eyes went out first of all.

How glorious it looked, with its waves lapping the gravelly beach, and the dark groves of trees standing purple-black against the orange sky. They sat and gazed at it for several minutes without saying a word. Finally Rance said, with a sigh, "Oh, wouldn't I like to jump into that water!"

"Well, this won't do. We must get a camp," said Milton; and they pulled the team into a road leading along the east shore of the lake.

"Where can a fellow camp?" Bert called to a young man who met them, with a pair of oars on his back.

"Anywhere down in the woods." He pointed to the south.

They soon reached a densely wooded shore where no one stood guard, and drove along an old wood road to a superb camping-place near the lake shore under a fine oak grove.

"Whoa!" yelled Milton.

All hands leaped out. Milton and Lincoln took care of the horses. Bert seized an axe and chopped on one side of two saplings, bent them together, tied them, cleared away the brush around them, and with Rance's help drew the tent cloth over them—this was the camp! While they dug up the bedding and put it in place, Rance built a fire and set some coffee boiling.

By the time they sat down to eat their bread and coffee and cold chicken, the grove was dark. The smoke rose in a billowy mass, vanishing in the dark, cool shadows of the oaks above. A breeze was rising. Below them they could hear the lap of the waves on the bowlders. It was all so fine, so enjoyable, that it seemed a dream from which they were in danger of waking.

After eating, they all took hold of the boat and eased it down the bank into the water.

"Now, who's goin' to catch the fish for breakfast?" asked Bert.

"I will," replied Rance, who was a "lucky" fisherman. "I'll have some fish by sun-up—see if I don't."

Their beds were hay, with abundant quilts and blankets spread above, and as Lincoln lay looking out of the tent door at the smoke curling up, hearing the horses chewing and an owl hooting, it seemed gloriously like the stories he had read, and the dreams he had had of sometime being free from care and free from toil, far in the wilderness.

"I wish I could do this all the time," he said to Milton, who was looking at the fire, his chin resting in his palms.

"I can tell better after a week of it," retorted Milton.

To a boy like Lincoln or Rance, that evening was worth the whole journey, that strange, delicious hour in the deepening darkness, when everything seemed of some sweet, remembered far-off world—they were in truth living as their savage ancestry lived, close to nature's mystery.

The pensiveness did not prevent Milton from hitting Bert a tremendous slap with a boot-leg, saying, "Hello! that mosquito pretty near had you that time."

And Bert, familiar with Milton's pranks, turned upon him, and a rough and tumble tussle went on till Rance cried out: "Look out there! You'll be tippin' over my butter!"

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At last the rustle of the leaves over their heads died out in dreams and the boys fell asleep, deliciously tired, full of plans for the next day.

Morning dawned, cool and bright, and Bert was stirring before sunrise. Rance was out in the boat before the pink had come upon the lake, while Milton was “skirmishing” for some milk.

How delicious that breakfast! Newly fried perch, new milk with bread and potatoes from home—but the freedom, the strange familiarity of it all! There in the dim, sweet woods, with the smoke curling up into the leafy masses above, the sunlight just dropping upon the lake, the killdeer, the robin, and the blue jay crying in the still, cool morning air. This was indeed life. The hot cornfields were far away.

Breakfast having been eaten to the last scrap of fish, they made a rush for the lake and the boat. There it lay, moving a little on the light waves, a frail little yellow craft without keel or rudder, but something to float in, anyhow. There rippled the lake six miles long, cool and sparkling, and boats were getting out into the mid-water like huge “skimmer-bugs,” carrying fisherman to their tasks.

While the other boys fished for perch and bass for dinner, Lincoln studied the shore. The beach which was their boat-landing was made up of fine, varicolored bowlders, many of them round as cannon balls, and Lincoln thought of the thousands of years they been rolling and grinding there, rounding each other and polishing each other till they glistened like garnets and rubies. And then the sand!

He waded out into the clear yellow waters and examined the bottom, which was set in tiny waves beautifully regular, the miniature reflexes of the water in motion. It made him think of the little wind waves in the snow, which he had often wondered at in winter.

Growing tired of this, he returned to the bank, and lying down on the grass gave himself up to the rest and freedom and beauty of the day. He no longer felt like “making the most of it.” It seemed as if he were always to live like this.

The others came in after awhile with a few bass and many perch which were beautifully marked in pearl and gray, to correspond with the sand bottom, though the boys didn't know that. There were no large fish so near shore, and they lacked the courage to go far out, for the whitecaps glittered now and then in mid-water.

They ate every “smidgin'” of the fish at dinner, and their larder looked desperately bare. They went out into the deeper water, all feeling a little timorous, as the little boat began to rock on the waves.

Lincoln was fascinated with the water, which was so clear that he could see fish swimming far below. The boat seemed floating in the air. At times they passed above strange and beautiful forests of weeds and grasses, jungles which scared him, for he remembered the story of a man who had been caught and drowned by just such clinging weeds, and besides, what monsters these mysterious places might conceal!

Other boats came around them. Sailboats passed, and the little steamer, the pride of the lake, passed over to “the island.” Yachts that seemed to the boys immense went by, loaded with merrymakers. Everything was as strange, as exciting, as if they were in a new world.

Rance was much taken by the sailboats. “I'm going to rig a sail on our boat, or die tryin',” he declared.

He spent the whole afternoon at this work while the other boys played ball and shot at a target, and

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by night was ready for a sail, though the others were skeptical of results.

That second night was less restful. The mosquitoes bit and a loud thunderstorm passed over. As they heard the roar of the falling rain on the tent and the wet spatter in their faces, and heard the water drip-drop on their bread-box, Milton and Lincoln wished themselves at home.

It grew cooler toward morning and the mosquitoes left, so that they all slept like bear cubs, rising fresh and rested.

It was a little discouraging at first. Everything was wet and the bread was inclined to be mouldy and tasted of the box; but the birds were singing, the sky was bright and cool, and a fresh western wind was blowing.

Rance was eager to sail, and as soon as he had put away the breakfast, he shouldered his mast.

“Come on, boys, now for the boat.”

“I guess not,” said Milton.

The boat was soon rigged with a little triangular sail, with an oar to steer by, lashed in with wires. Lincoln finally had courage to get in, and with beating heart Rance pushed off.

The sail caught the breeze, and the boat began to move.

“Hurrah!” Rance threw water on the sail; where he learned *that* was a mystery. The effect was felt at once. The cloth swelled, became impervious to the wind, and the boat swept steadily forward.

Lincoln was cautious. “That is all right—the question is, can we get back?”

“You wait an’ see me tack.”

“All right. Tack or nail, only let’s see you get back where we started from.” Lincoln was skeptical of sailboats. He had heard about sailing “just where you wanted to go,” but he had his doubts about it.

The boat obeyed the rudder nicely, came around slowly, and started in on a new tack smoothly and steadily. After this successful trip, the boys did little else but sail.

“I’m going up to town with it after dinner,” Rance announced. But when they came out after dinner, they found the sky overcast and a strong breeze blowing from the southwest.

Milton refused to experiment. “I’d sooner walk than ride in your boat,” he explained.

“All right; you pays your money—you takes your choice,” replied Rance.

The boat drove out into the lake steadily and swiftly, making the water ripple at the stern delightfully; but when they got past a low-lying island where the waves ran free, the ship began to heave and slide wildly, and Lincoln grew a little pale and set in the face, which made Rance smile.

“This is something like it. I’m going to go out about half a mile, then strike straight for the town.”

It was not long before he found the boat quite unmanageable. The long oar crowded him nearly off the seat, as he tried to hold her straight out into mid-water. She was flat-bottomed, and as she got into the region of whitecaps, she began to be blown bodily with the wind.

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Lincoln was excited, but not scared; he realized now that they were in great danger. Rance continued to smile, but it was evident that he too was thinking new thoughts. He held the sail with his right hand, easing it off and holding it tight by looping the rope on a peg set in the gunwhale. But it was impossible for Lincoln to help him. All depended on him alone.

"Turn!—turn it!" shouted Lincoln. "Don't you see we can't get back?"

"I'm afraid of breakin' my rudder."

There lay the danger. The oar was merely lashed into a notch in the stern, with wire. The leverage was very great, but Rance brought the boat about and headed her for the town nearly three miles away.

They both thrilled with a sort of pleasure to feel the boat leap under them as she caught the full force of the wind in her sail. If they could hold her in that line, they were all right. She careened once till she dipped water.

"Get on the edge!" commanded Rance, easing the sail off. Lincoln climbed upon the edge of the little pine shell, scarcely eighteen inches high, and the boat steadied. Both looked relieved.

The water was getting a lead color, streaked with foam, and the hissing of the whitecaps had a curiously snaky sound, as they spit water into the boat. The rocking had opened a seam in the bottom, and Lincoln was forced to bail furiously.

Rance, though a boy of unusual strength, clear-headed and resolute in time of danger, began to feel that he was master only for a time.

"I don't suppose this is much of a blow," he grunted, "but I don't see any of the other boats out."

Lincoln glanced around him; all the boats, even the two-masters, were in or putting in. Lightning began to run down the clouds in the west in zigzag streams. The boat, from time to time, was swept sidewise out of its course, but Rance dared not ease the sail for fear he could not steer her, and besides he was afraid of the rapidly approaching squall. If she turned sideways toward the wind, she would instantly fill.

He sat there, with the handle of the oar at his right hip, the rope in his hand with one loop round the peg, and every time the gust struck the sail he was lifted from his seat by the crowding of the oar and the haul of the rope. His muscles swelled tense and rigid—the sweat poured from his face; but he laughed when Lincoln, with reckless drollery, began to shout a few nautical words.

"Luff, you lubber—why don't you luff? Hard-a-port, there, you'll have us playin' on the sand yet. That's right. All we got to do is to hard-a-port when the wind blows."

The farther they went, the higher the waves rolled, till the boat creaked and gaped under its strain, and the water began to come in fast.

"Bail 'er out!" shouted the pilot. The thunder broke over their heads, and far away to the left they could see rain and the water white with foam, but they were nearing the beach at the foot of the street. A crowd was watching them with motionless intensity.

They were now in the midst of a fleet of anchored boats. The blast struck the sail, tearing it loose and filling the boat with water, but Rance held to his rudder, and threading her way among the boats, the little craft ran half her length upon the sand.

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As Rance leaped ashore, he staggered with weakness. Both took shelter in a near-by boathouse. The boat-keeper jeered at them: "Don't you know any more'n to go out in such a *tub* as that on a day like this? I expected every minute to see you go over."

"We didn't," said Rance. "I guess we made pretty good time."

"Time! you'd better say time! If you'd been five minutes later, you'd had *time* enough."

It was a foolhardy thing—Rance could see it now as he looked out on the mad water, and at the little flat, awkward boat on the sand.

An hour later, as they walked up the wood, they met the other boys half-way on the road, badly scared.

"By golly! We thought you were goners," said Milton. "Why, we couldn't see the boat after you got out a little ways. Looked like you were both sittin' in the water."

They found the camp badly demoralized. Their blankets were wet and the tent blown out of plumb, but they set to work clearing things up. The rain passed and the sun came out again, and when they sat down to their supper, the storm was far away.

It was glorious business to these prairie boys. Released from work in the hot cornfields, in camp on a lovely lake, with nothing to do but swim or doze when they pleased, they had the delicious feeling of being travelers in a strange country—explorers of desert wilds, hunters and fishers in the wildernesses of the mysterious West.

To Lincoln it was all so beautiful that it almost made him sad. When he should have enjoyed every moment, he was saying to himself, "Day after to-morrow we must start for home"—the happy days passed all too swiftly.

Occasionally Milton said: "I wish I had one o' Mother's biscuits this morning," or some such remark, but some one usually shied a potato at him. Such remarks were heretical.

They explored the woods to the south, a wild jungle, which it was easy to imagine quite unexplored. Some years before a gang of horse thieves had lived there, and their grass-grown paths were of thrilling interest, although the boys never quite cared to follow them to the house where the shooting of the leader had taken place.

Altogether it was a wonderful week, and when they loaded up their boat and piled their plunder in behind, it was with sad hearts. It was late Saturday night when they drew up in Mr. Jennings's yard, but to show that they were thoroughly hardened campers, they slept in the wagon another night—at least three of them did. Milton shamelessly sneaked away to his bed, and they did not miss him until morning.

Mrs. Jennings invited them all to breakfast and nobody refused. "Land o' Goshen," said she, "you eat as if you were starved."

"We are," replied Bert.

"Oh, but it was fun, wasn't it, boys?" cried Lincoln.

"You bet it was. Let's go again next year."



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“All right,” said Milton; “raise your weapons and swear.”

They all lifted their knives in solemn covenant to go again the following year. But they never did. Of such changeful stuff are the plans of youth!