

## **Forts**

You learn practical things in the summer. Like what an electric fence sounds like when it's on, or just how fast an angry bull can run.

You know, important stuff.

In suburban Leander, our summer classrooms were half-built houses, dry run-off reservoirs, and the ever-dwindling patches of trees. In the neighborhood, these bits of wilderness were nearly gone, replaced with yet another house. If you were willing to walk out of the neighborhood a little way, and maybe hop an old barbed wire fence or two, you could find much larger groves.

In these, we built our forts.

Forts became our base camps, laboratories, and gyms. They were the wild, sacred spaces where civilization had no hold. Out amongst the trees, we were free to do exactly what kids do. Most of it was recklessly dangerous or profoundly stupid. Often both.

We went through several forts over time. One fell when the lot it was on was sold. It became a bland single story house that was a study in beige-tone bricks. Another was paved over by a road that then remained closed and unused for nearly a decade. A third fort had barely even seen use before a herd of cows claimed it. One was lost to a bee infestation. They can just burrow all through a tree and become unhappy when some kids snap off branches of their home.

We learned how fast and far we could run when panicked.

Our last fort was a sprawling space in one of the last proper woods near the neighborhood. Like all central Texas woods, this was a cedar forest with the occasional oak fighting for space among the evergreens. We found several clearings clustered together and built ourselves a proper little camp. We had walls, multiple levels, even hammocks. What we didn't have was the one thing we all agreed a good camp needed: a fire pit.

We imagined something ringed with stones, something we could sit around and roast marshmallows. Instead, we learned a lesson.

We went to the clearing that was, roughly, the center of the fort. An old, gnarled cedar held sway in this clearing, framing the space for our fire pit with long thick branches that we thought would make perfect benches. We scraped out the dimensions with our sneakers, clearing the matting of cedar needles from the floor. Using our improvised tools, we dug.

Here's the thing about Leander: you get about six inches of topsoil, and then it's all limestone. Big chunks, small chunks, all sorts of chunks that do not want to be dug up, and certainly not by kids with sticks.

So, we abandoned the pit idea and settled on a fire ring. We were so pleased with this that we decided to have a fire that day. It was early August. The hottest, driest month, and we had been in a drought for far too long.

We gathered the wood and, with the aid of a plastic gas can we had found that was full of something flammable, we built and prepared our fire. Being kids, we didn't have the foresight to bring matches with us, and it was decided quickly that a good fire needs snacks and drinks. The gas can was hung up on a branch out of sight, to prevent its red color from attracting any

strangers to our fort. A quick expedition to the corner store netted us a lighter, some chips, and some sodas. We were ready to see the fruits of our labor. The oldest of us bent down and ignited some kindling we built around the bottom.

The whole pile went up in flash and the billowing, white smoke, full of the pungent scent of burning cedar and adolescent idiocy, washed over us, carrying with it the creeping dread of an incoming lesson.

The lesson came a second later and went something like this:

“Plastic gas cans tend to melt when left hanging, forgotten, over a pile of firewood.”

This was followed by another lesson:

“Cedar trees in a central Texas summer drought are exceedingly flammable.”

We got to practice our running again.