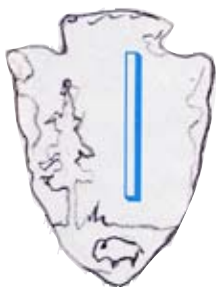

EVERYTHING MUST GO

BY JEFF OSGOOD



THOUGHT I HAD THE EDGE. How many people could be shopping for camping gear at 10AM on a Thursday? But as I pulled into the parking lot of Backcountry Escape, an outdoor equipment and apparel store, my advantage whittled down to nothing: I was not alone. Every parking space was taken and a herd of anxious consumers hoofed toward the store.

Backcountry Escape was going out of business. They had sent forth mailers declaring “the largest sale in the history of the store... and the *last!*” Everything was priced to move, from the kayaks down to the tent stakes. The desperate storeowner was even hawking the bookshelves and clothing racks. This business was another victim of the difficult economic times.

After finding a distant parking spot, I slid sideways through the store’s entrance

IN OUR SOLIDARITY WE KNEW OUR ESCAPE WAS CLOSER AND LESS EXPENSIVE THAN THE RESORTS AND AIRLINES WOULD HAVE US BELIEVE. IT’S REALLY IN THE FAMILY CAMPGROUNDS, AND THE STATE AND NATIONAL PARKS.

narrowly avoiding a collision with a woman brandishing a discounted ice axe. There was hardly room to move inside. Shoppers and merchandise commingled to create a congested labyrinth. I had come looking for a good lantern, but my eye roved for any bargains that were too good to pass up. As I slipped past a mirror sandwiched between hooked fleece and parkas, I caught a glimpse of myself frowning. It was a sad day. Another locally owned outdoor store

was going under. Sure, there was a Dick’s Sporting Goods across town, but stores like that aren’t typically run by people who have used the gear they’re selling. Small places like Backcountry Escape are more like base camps than retail stores, a waypoint to re-supply, catch a weather update, and hear about the best trail to get you where you’re going.

I looked around and saw I wasn’t the only one in a foul mood. A man scowled as he pawed through a basket of socks. A

woman couldn’t find her size amongst a stack of shoeboxes and grimaced like she’d found a hole in her rain fly. There was something more than mourning for the loss of a local business. Desperation was in the air. This milling band of gatherers was on a dire mission to secure their escape.

The summer and fall of 2010 promises to be a season of canceled vacations and pared back plans. Money’s tight. Each successive month brings news of hundreds of thousands of jobs

lost and double-digit unemployment rates in some states. There is prodigious uncertainty out there and people are clutching the money they have. A vacation is a luxury item and one of the first things to be slashed from a tightening family budget. My wife and I recently pulled the plug on plans to fly to the Adirondacks with our four kids. The price tag was just too high. Terms like *staycation* and *naycation* are surfacing in media like spring crocuses breaking through the snow.

Yet staying put is not an option; like the sign on the storefront says, “Everything must go.” For a lot of us, the need to get out and move around is coded in our bones, like a bird’s instinctual call to migrate. Westerners in particular are a restless subspecies. Never finding too much relaxation in the reputed comfort of an easy chair and a remote control, we’re always giving in to the urge to light out for country. Blame it on the landscape. Leagues of prairie, mountain, desert, valley, and coast run uninterrupted to the horizon. It all gives off a sultry whisper, saying, “Move. Go. Just because you can.”

As I looked around the store at the harried bargain hunters, I could see we’d all come to the same solution. In our solidarity we knew our escape was closer and less expensive than the resorts and airlines would have us believe. It’s really in the family campgrounds, and the state and national parks. For the price of two nights in a hotel, I can purchase an economical 6-person tent. A multi-day camping permit costs less than room service. And a good campfire at the close of a day spent outdoors has more value than an overblown IMAX movie ever had.

I found my lantern and moved into the line for the cash register. I was smiling. It’s all too easy to think of 2010 as the year of our discontent. In reality it will be the season of the tent.

Jeff Osgood writes and shops on Colorado’s Front Range. Read more from him at jeffosgood.com