

Ultralight: State of the Revolution - Part 1

Written by Ron Moak

Friday, 13 January 2012 07:40



At the tail end of 2011 Ryan Jordan, Backacklight.com senior editor, penned the article [Cottage Stagnation and Recent Gems](#). Coming at the end of the second decade of the ultralight revolution, one might have thought it'd be good have an article highlighting where we stand at the end of this two decade old odyssey. Instead we get a diatribe about the total lack of innovation in the Cottage Gear market. In summation, not only our glass empty but the **Sword of Damocles** hangs above our heads, held by a sliver of thread, poised to deliver us in to oblivion. The sword welded by the established backpacking gear manufactures.

Well as a charter member of the "**Into Oblivion Club**", I can't say I was too pleased. My first reaction was the desire to grab Ryan by the collar and shake him violently while yelling "You fool, you stupid fool." Upon reading the article, I knew immediately I couldn't let this one go by without a response.

After several days of turning the problem over and over through my head, I was finally able to devise a scenario in which I was actually in agreement with Ryan. I can honestly say that if look upon the Ultralight landscape from the perspective of my own personal needs, I too am hard pressed to find any gear that I have a burning desire to possess. I guess that if one believes that the sole purpose of innovation is to generate an overwhelming desire to possess something new, then we have indeed failed.

It's no secret that each summer Glen Van Peski, Henry Shires and I get together for our **Annual UL Brain Trust** hike. After a couple year absences even Brian Frankle was able to join us this summer for a short period. Brian was able to tell us about life after the cottage gear madness. Given the recent prognosis of our imminent demise, perhaps we should be looking for someone gullible enough to purchase our companies while they still retain some value.

As is our usual practice, the first night we show off all of our latest toys. Like proud dads, we'd display our marvellous new children, eager to discuss their endless virtues. Of course we fain interest when listening to others drone on about their great works, we're confidently convinced our designs have reached a state of near nirvana.

Henry shows off his new Stratosphere, I parried his thrust with my Skyscape X. Quite pleased when a couple nights later, I find myself safely ensconced in my domain long before he finished twiddling with his. Glen brought forth his latest incarnation of The Wedge. Henry and I stand silently look at each other, each of us wondering into whose tent Glen would come crawling if it actually rained during the night. Fortunately we never had to find out.

The point is that when you attain a certain level, the whole concept of innovation takes on a different meaning. There isn't much out there that's going to significantly change my hiking style. Aside that is from getting older, greyer, fatter and slower than I already am. A condition I really don't relish.

It isn't that Glen, Henry, Ron Bell, Joe Valesko and all the other UL designers are not making great innovative gear; it's that the essence of innovation is solving problems. In the early days when there was very little gear to be had, innovation seemed to be never ending. Today the market is awash with plethora of packs, shelters, stoves, sleeping gear, etc. Innovation seems diminished because our choices have exploded. As with any maturing industry, innovation becomes more evolutionary then revolutionary, its effects are more subtle and difficult to discern.

Innovation is also a sneaky commodity. Sometimes years pass before we have the right perspective and can look back and asses how innovative a product or idea turned out to be. Innovation is not always is not always kind to the designer. Throughout history, many of the most innovative products have been commercial disasters. Often it takes multiple designers years to tease innovation to its full value.

Innovation is most frequently discussed in terms of how it directly affects my life or activities. We purchase a piece of gear and take it off into the back-country. If it makes a very positive contribution to our experience, we're apt to deem it innovative. What we don't see and can't judge is all the effort, problem solving and innovation that may have occurred simply to get us a piece of gear we can hold in our hands.

It's difficult to write about innovation. Sure there are products we see that make us all giggly like children on Christmas morning. Products that excite make it easy to write. It's also easy to fall into the trap of believing that what's good for you is good for everyone else. What's not so easy is taking you out of the equation. How do you write from the perspective of someone new to the world of UL when your conversion occurred a decade earlier? Their fears and turmoil's are fresh, raw and vivid. Meanwhile, yours have faded with the passage of time.

Before truly understanding any potential trends in the Cottage Gear market, one must understand the origins of ultralight and the forces that shaped the revolution. Over the next six parts of this series, we're going to explore the last two decades of the Ultralight Revolution, examine the factors that shaped both its direction and spread and the Cottage Gear manufactures that grew out of it. We'll look at where we are today along with the challenges and the opportunities that lay before us. With a little luck we may even deduce a little of what's beyond the horizon.

Part 2 - Orgins of a Revolution

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Ultralight: State of the Revolution - Part 2

Written by Ron Moak

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Origins of a Revolution

In 1992, [Ray Jardine](#) published the, “[The Pacific Crest Trail Hiker’s Handbook](#)”. Today more people are more familiar with Ray’s subsequent book “[Beyond Backpacking](#)” published in 2000. In it he expands on the basic concepts and drops the PCT related information. Whatever else you say about Ray, even those of us less enamored of him, have to admit that his writing touched off the current Ultralight Revolution.

Reading “The PCT Hiker’s Handbook”, it’s clear that Ray derives significant inspiration for his gear from [Grandma Gatewood](#). Long a legend in the world of long distance backpacking, this Midwestern farmer’s wife, mother of eleven children, and grandmother first hiked the Appalachian Trail in 1955 at the age of 67 (1). With her red Keds TM shoes, shower curtain tarp and a gunny sack over her shoulder, she eventually completed three complete hikes of the Appalachian Trail. By the time of her death in 1973, she had hiked many other long trails including the Oregon Trail, Long Trail, etc.

In his book, Ray writes “What set Grandma apart was her disdain of contemporary equipment.” In this case it’s pretty clear that Ray’s projecting his own distaste of traditional gear on Grandma. The reality is that when Grandma Gatewood first stepped foot on the Appalachian Trail, those manufactures that we call traditional today, didn’t even exist.

[Colin Fletcher’s](#) “[The Complete Walker](#)”, didn’t appear in print until 1968 not long after many of these modern backpacking companies came into existence. While it is clear that Ray hiked for years using boots, big pack, tent and sleeping bag; there’s no evidence that Grandma Gatewood ever carried anything resembling traditional gear.

Some might be tempted to believe that the Ultralight Revolution was born by an engineer’s detailed analysis of the best and most efficient means of accomplishing a thru-hike. The reality is that it was an elderly grandmother, ignorant of available gear, who with a farmer’s wife’s resourcefulness, fashioned her gear from what was available and with dogged persistence became the first woman to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. Her sheer tenacity and unorthodox style inspired a revolution.

Further reading of “The PCT Hiker’s Handbook” reveals some interesting facts. In this 372 page tome on hiking the PCT, only the last chapter “Advanced Techniques” is set aside to discuss his new hiking philosophy. In a mere 35 pages, Ray lays out his own minimalist hiking philosophy.

Ray unveils his philosophy in a rambling narrative that mixes trail stories with specific bits of gear and how it’s made and used in the field. He blends it all together into a sort of minimalist stew that’s easy for the reader can savor and digest.

It should be noted that Ray never used the term ultralight to refer to his new system. In fact the term is only once in “Beyond Backpacking” when specifically referring to his 13 ounce backpack. Nor does Ray ever use weight as a means of defining a backpacking system. For him there is simply the traditional and his new minimalistic approach to backpacking.

Just where and when the term Ultralight backpacking and its ensuing weight classification, entered into the backpacking lexicon is unknown. While Ray never mentions it in his books, it certainly was in common use the middle of the nineties.

Later authors have divided Ray’s “Advanced Techniques” into three areas; Ultralight Principles, the Big Three and Techniques. Ray used two terms to describe his selection of gear, Systems and Minimalist. Of the two, the System approach is by far his most important contribution. Before Ray I doubt many people thought about their gear in terms of a system. The concept of looking at the relationship of different items of gear and how they worked together was pretty foreign.

As I said, Grandma Gatewood personified the value of the minimalist approach. Unfortunately her hobo looking attire did little to inspire later thru-hikers to alter their choice of gear. The strapping young men with chiseled physiques, who followed in her footsteps, much preferred the macho look of mountaineers. It took Ray and a small twist to her gear list to make Grandma Gatewood cool.

Combining a systems approach with minimalistic gear created a synergetic effect. Soon people were talking about buying scales to weight everything. The concept of multiuse gear was formed. Carrying not only just what you needed, but what you actually used. Ultimately these ideas coalesced to form the Principles of Ultralight. When the principles are applied to your selection of gear, it became much easier to create a light and effective pack.

Ray also introduced the Big Three; pack, sleeping system and shelter. Today, discussions of the reducing the weight of your Big Three are often prelude to the conversion from traditional to ultralight. However, Ray’s introduction of these items was more of a metaphor to describe in physical terms the concept of systems and minimalist. He could have used a number of different gear combinations to illuminate the concept. However, in his gear list; the tarp, ultralight pack and quilt were the most unique and best illustrated his point.

Unfortunately the importance of the metaphor escaped most people and the value of the Big Three got morphed all out of proportion. It wasn’t long before people skipped the Ultralight Principles and dove straight into the Big Three. They’d buy the lightest pack, sleeping bag and shelter possible. Then tossing in the rest of their normal backpacking kit, they’re off to the trail head. Showing up to start the hike with forty pounds of gear stuffed into a pack barely comfortable at twenty. Misery was soon to follow.

The final ingredient in Ray’s bare bones backpacking stew was the Skill Set. For years gear designers have struggled to remove the Wilderness from wilderness camping. Tents were designed to protect us from the harsh realities, real or imagined, that lurked deep in the woods in the dark of night. For Ray, the tradeoff between physical protection and mental dexterity paid untold dividends. With a tarp and the right skills, you could travel lighter, camp more comfortably and enjoy the environment around you.

Tarps have been used in one fashion or another for a million years, so Ray only needed to lay down a few basic skills to guide tent dwellers into the land of the tarp. As the movement grew with increasing hunger to

save weight, tarps got smaller and smaller. Poncho tarps with their dual duty of raingear and shelter became all the more attractive.

With each reduction in gear, more skill is required to master both the gear and environment. Ultralight enthusiasts were continually pushing the envelope, constantly searching for the limits of man, gear and the environment.

A review of the Ultralight literature written over the last twenty years reviles some startling facts. There has been a lot of writing about the Principles and an enormous volume written about gear. Meanwhile comparatively little has been authored about the Ultralight Skill Set. Attempting to write about how the wide range of gear combinations available will play in an equally wide range of environments is an impossible task. At best, all an author can do is to lay out a few ground rules and leave it to the reader to discover the rest for themselves.

As it is, the Skill Set has become the **Black Arts** of the Ultralight domain. Its mastery acquired over years of study and many nights of misery.

Looking back at Ray's original gear list, one thing is pretty clear. Nothing he carried was all that innovative. The pack is little more than a grocery bag with shoulder straps and a few pockets. The tarp is a flat 8' X 8' piece of cloth. The quilt was well a quilt. The items were constructed with the same fabrics I used for my gear a decade earlier.

That begs the question, if there was no innovation in either the gear or the materials, how and why did the ultralight revolution take hold?

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(1) In today's world of healthy active retirees, 67 does not seem that old. At the time Grandma Gatewood first stepped foot on the Appalachian Trail, she had already surpassed the average life expectancy of someone born in the late 1880's by 10 years.

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Ultralight: State of the Revolution - Part 3

Written by Ron Moak

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The Stars Align

At any given point in time, the seeds of thousands of dormant revolutions lay spread across the land. Within each is the potential to alter our realities in profound ways. Sometimes the results are positive while others leave disastrous consequences. Of all the potential revolutions, only a tiny fraction will ever mature enough to make a difference. Deprived of right mixture of ingredients needed for growth, most will wither and die.

The Ultralight Revolution needed far more than the unorthodox hiking style of an elderly grandmother and the analytical musing of a hiking engineer to take root. There were many factors that contributed to success. The absence of any factor would have left it floundering to an unknown fate.

For the revolution to have a ghost of a chance, the benefits of adopting it at an individual level not only have to be good, they have to be profound. If we stumble upon something that makes a modest improvement in our lives, at best we may tell a few close friends then move on. Give us something that makes a profound change and we'll climb a mountain and shout it out to the world. If the mountain doesn't exist, we'll build it.

First time adopters of ultralight hiking are frequently amazed by the new sense of freedom. No longer burdened by weight, they are able to shift their view from those few yards that lay front of their feet. They could stand erect can gaze upon mountain panoramas as they glide over high passes.

In spite of the mysterious Ultralight Black Arts, the general ultralight narrative is easy to understand and pass on. The easier and idea is to understand and implement the faster it'll propagate.

Not only was the message simple but so was the key items of gear described by Ray. Their simplicity was tailor made for the Make Your Own Gear, MYOG, crowd. In the early days any decent size tarp would do. The drawings and assembly descriptions in the book were good enough for anyone with a modicum of sewing skill to put together both the quilt and pack.

If Ray had released the UL principles along with the gear designs of the cottage industry today, Ultralight hiking would have died before it got started. The UL movement needed that first decade of MYOG sewers working into the night dreaming about their new gear and the wonderful liberating hikes they could take.

The first few years the growth of the movement was slow. Ultralight backpackers were the minuscule fringe of the backpacking scene. Its devotees' scattered across great distances. They would get together annually at long distance hiker gatherings and talk about their latest hikes and gear. In an attempt to gather like minded hikers, Ray founded the "American Long Distance Hiker Association – West" and hosted it for several years in the early 90's.

By the mid nineties, the Internet had started to expand beyond the world of techno geeks into the population at large. It proved to be the perfect medium to nourish the rise of the revolution. By the end of the decade,

ultralight specific websites, mailing list and forums were spreading like wildfire.

MYOG'ers could come up with new designs and pass them along instantly to others interested in making the latest gear. People flocked from far and wide in this virtual world and talked gear, their last trip or fantasize about their next. People even coordinated trips to hike with other ultralighters, often traveling hundreds of miles to hike with strangers of kindred spirit.

Grandma Gatewood chose her gear based on practicality and availability. Ray Jardine was a bit more analytical in his selection; however, both pretty much quit fiddling with their kit once they were happy. It was up to the next generation of enthusiast to take ultralight to a whole new level.

When people reminisce about their days **Before Conversion**, they'll frequently comment about how their gear closet was pretty minimal. Maybe they'd have one pack a sleeping bag or two and various other sundry items needed to complete their kit. Frequently items would stick around and be used for years before finally being replaced.

After Conversion they'd find themselves swimming in piles of gear. Multiple packs, tarps, tents, dozens of homemade stoves, pads, clothes, cooking sets littered every nook and cranny of their homes. Frequently gear was used just a few nights before being abandoned as its owner bounced around looking for the next big thing.

The thing is, that once we started thinking about gear as systems with items interconnected in all sorts of ways, it triggered something almost primeval in our brains, thought. We didn't just buy and use gear, we really thought about it. Soon we were hooked attempting to construct a complex backpack jigsaw that would lead to the perfect kit. The fact that perfection doesn't exist didn't dampen our quest.

[Part 2 - Orgins of a Revolution](#) - [Part 4 - The Commercialization of Ultralight](#)

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Ultralight: State of the Revolution - Part 4

Written by Ron Moak

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The Commericalization of Ultralight

2002 was not just the 10 year anniversary of the UL revolution. It also marks the turning point that leads us to UL as we see it today. Despite Ray's brilliance at coming up with the UL principles and simple designs, there were two glaring flaws that were poised to bring the whole revolution to a screeching halt.

Like all good engineers, Ray is good at coming up with solutions. In the mid 70's, as a big wall climber in Yosemite, Ray designed the **Friends** clam climbing device that helped to revolutionize the climbing world. By 1981 he retired from big wall climbing and devoted his attention to backpacking. But like lots of engineers, he seemed to believe that what's good for me is good for everyone. In short he took the slogan "Ray Way" seriously. Ray didn't dismiss the traditional hiker. In fact in his early books he describes the more traditional approach to long distance hiking long before explaining his alternative method.

What is clear is that after his first book publication, Ray never had much interest in really expanding his gear to broaden its appeal to a wider audience. Though there are a few changes that came about over the years. The tarp grew beaks at either end for better rain protection. Also "The Cave" a net tent that hangs within the tarp didn't show up until much later.

By the end of the 90's a new company, Golite, was formed based upon Ray's gear. Finally each item of gear was available to purchase from Ray's special umbrella all the way to his quilt. Golite's early success did send a clear signal that there was money to be made in Ultralight gear.

The rise of Golite didn't signal the end of the MYOG era. By now others were beginning to tweak the Ray Way for greater appeal. Glen Van Peski (of GVP Gear later Gossamer Gear), added a separate pad pocket on the back of the pack. With your sleeping pad inserted in the pocket and a waist belt, you could achieve some load transfer to lift the weight off your shoulders. This was unthinkable for Ray who viewed any kind of hip belt with disdain.

While there were a host of hikers sporting Ray's gear at early hiker gatherings, It was equally clear that there was a hunger for a wider range of gear. It would be up to others, fiddling in the garages on nights and weekends to broaden the appeal of Ultralight hiking.

2002 saw the startup of a number of new ultralight companies, TarpTent, ULA, Mountain Laurel Designs, Dancing Light Gear and Six Moon Designs. Confident in their belief (well actually tepid would be a more accurate term) that there are more than one way to the top of the mountain, these companies started churning out a few items.

Their mission was to incorporate some of the core principles of ultralight while softening some of its raw edges; thus making ultralight hiking palatable for more people.

Throughout the second decade of the Ultralight Revolution we saw more and more gear rolled out into the market. New companies came into the market, some left and others evolved to conform to new user demands. With its relationship with Ray Jardine on the rocks, Golite dropped the entire “Ray Way” line of products and was forced to come out with its own designs.

At the beginning of the decade, Golite was held up as a model by which other cottage gear companies could follow. With capital and ambitious plans, Golite vaulted past the Cottage Gear phase and directly into the mainstream backpacking gear companies.

With Golite's transition away from Ray's gear came a new line of heavier packs, more complex shelters, a wide range of clothing and even a line of shoes. Even though Golite maintained a stable of a few UL products in their offerings, by the end of the decade they were often referred to as GoHeavy by the UL crowd.

Growing large and fast means much of your energies are devoted to “Feeding the Beast” as I like to call it. There are many intrinsic values to having a large infrastructure. But it demands to be feed. It's hard to build a company on backpacking gear alone, which is why so many gear companies find themselves unable to resist the lure of repeated fashion sales. We buy cloths regularly and tents not so much.

If you attend any new business seminar, you'll frequently hear that there are three words that that define the success of a new business, location, location, location. In this century the commercialization of ultralight is also based on three words, Internet, Internet, Internet.

In the first decade the Internet was used to communicate, in the second decade it was used to sale. The irony here, in case you've not already surmised it, is that it's taken a highly evolved and technical platform to grow and sustain a revolution based upon simplicity. Go figure.

But for the Internet, none of the major player in the UL cottage gear would exist. Without the cottage industry, UL would be doomed to languish indefinitely in the realm of the MYOG crowd.

Of the five UL gear companies that sprang up in 2002, four are still in business and they still represent the cornerstone of the industry. They also share a number of common traits. All of these companies were founded by MYOG people who basically didn't know when to stop.

Typically, companies are formed when people leave existing companies taking with them years of experience in design, production, sales and marketing. They take these acquired skills and apply them to their own endeavors.

These UL companies were formed where passion overwhelms common sense. Ignorance is a great blinder to the obstacles that lay before us. Passion and determination can often carry us beyond our natural limits.

Blind to the obstacles, ignorant of the tools needed to surmount them and then leaping off a high dive into a lake that was probably no deeper than a mud puddle, they went. Looking back, it's not a very sound reason to start a company. At the time most of us felt we'd be out of business in a couple of years.

No one had any capital. If they did they were smart enough not to invest it such a dubious adventure. If this was going to succeed it'd have to be done on a low risk, low overhead basis. Much of the real investment

was in time spent going round and round on multiple designs and prototypes, only to come up with something that was almost but not quite what you wanted. Still at some point you need to get it out the door.

Fortunately the internet simplified the sales obstacle, the number of website discussing UL made marketing easy. With a small market eager to get the latest designs, no matter how ill conceived, design by trial and error was the rule of the day.

Still the biggest obstacle that people starting UL companies faced then is the same as new entrepreneurs face a decade later. The difficulty of establishing a reliable means of production has closed many UL shops and prevented others from opening.

Once bitten by the UL bug many ultralighters were infected with a new strand of OCD, OGD or Obsessive Gear Disorder. While it put a strain on many a UL'ers wallet, it was a boon for gear manufactures.

More importantly it allowed small shops rapidly improve their gear. The high level of involvement of the UL community on various forums, blogs and websites provided a constant feedback loop. Problems that showed up within days of a products release could be quickly addressed.

Products produced by established manufactures are designed to be "Shelf Ready". As soon as products are unboxed from the container, they're ready to be shipped to the consumer. Many cottage gear producers make and sell gear one item at a time with long delays between order and shipping.

Even those cottage companies not doing in house production, seldom get Shelf Ready product. This is especially true if the gear is made in the US. In most cases incoming gear still needs some level of additional processing before it's ready to ship. Typically this involves inspecting, correcting issues, packaging and labeling. This additional layer of post production activity does make it easier to correct problems before shipment.

The downside to this layer of complexity is that expanding production to meet demand becomes more complicated. You can't just call up the supplier and double your order. You need to compensate for the additional workload.

"As he giveth, so shall he taketh away." This quote probably best defines the relationship between the Internet and the Cottage manufacture. The Internet short circuits the traditional market place of manufactures, retail and consumers. It places the consumers in direct communication with the producers.

For small budding markets like UL this is great. It allows the producers to quickly learn of problems without being filtered by the retail chain. Retailer and consumers have different needs and expectations. Addressing the needs of the retailer may have little or no benefit to the end user. Also, consumer issues may get garbled when traveling through the longer pipeline.

For the producers, an even greater benefit to direct sales is the significantly enhanced margins available. This extra infusion of cash can go a long way to keeping marginal business afloat.

Because of the high cost of local production, many small manufactures find it difficult to build in the layers of cost into their products and still keep themselves competitive. Essentially these producers are splitting the normal retail margin between themselves and the consumer. For the buyer this is a great deal as they can get

more value for their dollar.

The big question of the next decade will be whether the lack of a retail presence for many UL products will stymie the spread of UL into a wider audience. Will dependency on the Internet ultimately impose a limit on how far we can grow?

[Part 3 - The Stars Align](#) - [Part 5 - Death of a Revolution](#)

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Ultralight: State of the Revolution - Part 5

Written by Ron Moak

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Death of a Revolution

In life, we often find ourselves so deeply involved with the issues at hand that we fail to backup a step or two and see the obvious. For the Ultralight Revolution, it's obvious the revolution is over. In case you didn't get it the first time. **The Ultralight Revolution is over!**

I realize that this will come as somewhat of a shock to many people. It all died quietly one night. No news broadcast, no parades and no one even noticed. Now before someone takes it into their mind to drag me out and burn me at the stake as some heretic, bear with me as I explain.

The original goal of the movement was to establish a number of basic principles, hiking techniques and selection of gear that would allow one to hike in relative comfort and safety unburdened by weight of traditional gear.

One took the basic principles (multiple use gear, weigh your gear, carry what you need, etc.) mixed in a few basic items (tarp, quilt, pack) to form your kit. Once outside the limits of civilization, you add the advanced hiking techniques, **The Black Arts**, to insure you'd make it safely home in one piece.

Understanding and mastery of **The Black Arts**, is the key to making ultralight work. Without them you could easily find yourself in a world of hurt. The dependence on these **Black Arts** was the main reason why many people avoided ultralight hiking. Instead they'd declare it dangerous or life threatening.

In the early days of the revolution around the time when the term Ultralight became established as the moniker upon which the movement would be hung, a range of base weights (weight of gear without food and water) was established to differentiate between the newly contrived hiking classes. Traditional Hiker (20 pounds plus), Lightweight Hiker (12 to 20 pounds) and Ultralight Hiker (6 to 11 pounds). As equipment got lighter a new and more extreme class of Superultralighters was created for people carrying 5 pounds or less.

What is it that really the difference between the various classifications, aside from weight? The transition from traditional to lightweight backpacker can be easily accomplished simply by adopting some of the basic Ultralight Principles when selecting gear. In 1977 on my Appalachian Trail thru-hike my base weight averaged between 16 and 18 pounds using standard state of the art backpacking gear. The simple elimination of unneeded gear can go a long ways to reducing pack weight.

Most of the early long distance backpackers carried lightweight packs. It wasn't until the late 70's and 80's with the growth of backpacking stores and the explosion of available gadgets that we begin to see a rapid rise in pack weight. By the time Ray penned his book, weights had exploded to the point where some empty packs weighed eight pounds alone.

Ray's "**Back to the Womb**" approach to backpacking attempted to cast off all vestiges of the previous 30

years of backpacking advancement. Adopting the mantle of Ultralight Hiker required a new mindset, a change in gear and mastery of **The Black Arts**. Even though these arts have been practiced for thousands of years by adventures around the globe, they are of little interest to the modern day recreational backpacker.

The truth is that most backpackers simply want to have fun. To the recreational backpacker all the mind games and mental gymnastics involved in achieving an ultralight pack creates a massive obstacle between them and fun. Ultralight hiking achieved a greater foothold in the long distance hiker community, simply because lugging a forty pound pack twelve hours a day for four, five or six months at a time, across deserts, high mountain passes and snow fields, isn't always a lot of fun.

The fact that recreational backpackers are happy with their gear, shouldn't come as any surprise. It's functional, provides a degree of comfort both physical and mental. Simply because it can easily reduce a full grown man into a beast of burden on the journey between camps, isn't necessarily a problem. As long as one limits their daily forays to a reasonable mileage. For the most part, it has been the older hiker that are first to adopt lighter gear. A lighter pack helps maintain their ability to continue backpacking. Plus they generally have more disposable income to apply to expensive gear.

Fortunately, advancements in gear in the last few years has reached the point, where one can now purchase ultralight gear that will provide all of the advantages of traditional gear. You can easily put together a sub ten pound pack that'll let you hike without needing to utilize the **Black Arts**.

Who killed UL Revolution? This golden goose of the Cottage Gear manufacturers. Those same happy warrior Cottage Gear folks that worked days and nights spewing out an endless supply of new gear killed it. If you don't find this the least bit ironic, I don't know what you would.

With the death of the UL Revolution, one might rightly ask, "What now?" In accordance to the "**Circle of Life**", death begets new life. It's not hard to see where the death of the Ultralight Revolution is the best thing that's happened to it.

[Part 4 - The Commericalization of Ultralight](#) - [Part 6 - Cottage Gear Post Apocalyptic](#)

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Ultralight: State of the Revolution - Part 6

Written by Ron Moak

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Cottage Gear Post Apocalyptic

So what impact will the death of a revolution have on the Cottage Gear manufactures? Probably not much will happen for the foreseeable future. While one can highlight many changes and advancements of the last decade, most of basic constraints that inhibit the adoption of ultralight are still in place. For the vast majority of hikers, ultralight is still unknown or worse misunderstood.

Despite an explosion in the number small Cottage Gear companies there still isn't a wide selection of gear available. The amount of gear produced by these manufactures is infinitesimal compared to the industry at large. Just one modern factory can produce more backpacking goods in a single month than the entire Cottage Gear manufactures combined made or sold in the last five years. Consider that there are a number of factories pumping out millions of packs, tents, sleeping bags and all manner of outdoor goods annually.

In the first segment of this series, I mentioned Ryan Jordan's complaint that stagnation with Cottage Gear manufactures could lead to our demise. That may be true, if one assumes that the entire world of ultralight is a handful of gear manufactures selling to a few thousand die hard ultralighters. In that scenario, innovation and change becomes the only way to survive. You need this small stable of buyers returning over and over to keep the doors open.

The problem with the cottage industry isn't lack of innovation; it's that most of us still cling to the comfortable MYOG mentality. We're far happier tweaking an existing design or coming up with some new one, than trying to figure out how to build a thousand units let alone sell them.

Most retailers are skittish about taking on ultralight products from cottage industries. Will they be available when needed? Is there enough margins? Will the gear fall apart? Do the companies have any name recognition? Do I have to retrain my sales force to deal with the unique aspects of this gear? These are just a sampling of the kinds of issues that need to be resolved.

Small specialty backpacking shops represent the most fertile opportunities for cottage gear manufacture to enter a retail setting. These shops really need a variety of gear to distinguish them from the many outdoor super stores being built. Yet most cottage manufactures lack the volume or margins to hire reps nor do they have the in house staff necessary to keep in contact with more than a few retail establishments at a time.

With established lines of production and distribution, one would surmise that the established backpacking companies would be poised to swoop in and quickly dominate the market. Despite their apparent advantages, this isn't likely to be the case anytime soon.

The big boys love to hang the Ultralight tag line on every item of gear they produce. How many four pound ultralight tents have been trotted out on the market? Looking back over the history of any actual ultralight

products that are produced, most are pretty much gone by the following year. Plus they've had their share of poor ultralight designs. Anyone still remember the silnylon pack Gregory sold a few years ago that self-destructed after about fifty miles?

It should come as no surprise that the owners of the cottage manufactures are not captains of industry. While one the current cottage companies is owned by the billionaire founder of a national grocery chain, his ultralight company is pretty much left to it's own devices to survive or fail on its own merits. Those entrepreneurs seeking to enter the market to reap vast rewards need not apply. What success that may come is not easily gained.

Without power and wealth, one might wonder what's left to motivate the cottage gear mini-magnate. Buzz is a powerful narcotic and does much to drive the state of development in ultralight gear. There's nothing like the adulation of people praising your gear. When the focus shifts to others, one is apt to find themselves scrambling to do anything to grab that focus back.

Buzz drives competition much to the benefit of those seeking to procure the latest ultralight wonder to hit the market. The problem is that Buzz is a dual edge sword; it's capable of cutting both the competition and the person receiving it.

As in politics, Buzz in the ultralight world is generated and driven by the most ardent adopters of the practice. The problem is that buzz tends to shift the designers focus to a smaller and smaller share of the market.

In recent years, with the advent of newer materials like Cuben Fiber, there's been a noticeable shift of gear into the Super-Ultralight realm. While good for one limited group of hikers, it diverts the already limited resources from developing goods that would better serve a larger hiking community looking to lighten their loads.

As beautiful as Cuben is, its ability to have a significant impact on the wider hiking community is minimal at best for the foreseeable future. Even if the cost of Cuben Fiber was cut to a third the existing price, it would still have significant limitations. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the product, it's just not possible to manufacture complex products with Cuben Fiber in large quantities.

Looking through a typical ultralighter's pack, the majority of items it contains come from companies that could care less about the ultralight specific market. Everything from clothes to flashlights is available from large market providers. These products are adopted because they are light, reasonably priced and function well.

Cottage manufactures are at a nexus of choosing between two alternative business paths. Each path has its own benefits and potential pitfalls. Some will seek broaden their markets by developing ultralight products that appeal to a wider market. This will require the ability to expand production to meet larger demands. It may require opening up new channels of distribution to reach these new customers. On the downside, if successful, they may blaze a path for larger companies to enter the market.

Those manufactures choosing to widen their products appeal will no doubt receive increased pressure to ruggedize their gear. It is the old battle between the ultralight approach of "Take care of your gear and it'll

take care of you.” vs the REI model of “Trash it if you like and we’ll gladly replace it.” The pressure for robust gear has been around for quite some time. It grows as a higher percentage of the customers of the cottage manufactures are not ultralight hikers. Their demand on the design of gear can already be seen in subtle ways. With a widening market this pressure is bound to increase. This may force the adoption of heavier materials or spur the design of new construction techniques.

Many of the cottage manufactures will remain safely ensconced in their current Super-Ultralight niche. This is one niche where it is highly unlikely that the big boys will want to play. However, it is venerable to the next guy to come along with a bright idea, sewing machine and some time. Small niche markets are the easiest for the budding entrepreneur to penetrate.

The long term success of the expanding ultralight is dependent upon the ability of cottage manufactures to look beyond the buzz. The fact is, there isn’t a lot of buzz attached to most of the products we buy. Sure there may have been a happy dance or two when the product was first introduced. But mostly the allure has long since faded away.

There’s no doubt that pushing the envelope can be both fun and rewarding. However, even more important at this stage is building a foundation of stable ultralight gear that will provide a path for traditional backpackers to transition to lighter packs. This gear needs to be both stable and reliable.

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Ultralight: State of the Revolution - Part 7

Written by Ron Moak

Saturday, 28 January 2012 10:01



Searching for a New Parahigm

If one can be ultralight without being ultralight then what the hell does ultralight mean? Such is the conundrum when multiple meanings are applied to the same word. For the last twenty years, to be an Ultralight Hiker was to be someone of distinction. Upon announcing oneself as an ultralighter in the presence of a gathering of traditionalist, a reverent silence would befall the room. Ok, that maybe stretching the point, but there is still a lot of cachet associated with being an ultralighter. It will come as a shock to many to discover that their vaulted status of ultralighter has been reduced to that of a traditionalist with a very light pack.

When it was introduced twenty years ago, the advantages of an ultralight pack were a great enough inducement for many to overcome the obstacles that stood in their path. With the advancements in ultralight gear, many of these obstacles have been cleared away. This makes becoming an ultralight backpacker a simpler task.

Still confusion will reign for some sometime to come as people start coming to terms with the new reality. Standard backpacking is now divided into three basic divisions depending upon their base weights, Traditional (twenty pounds plus), Lightweight (twelve to twenty pounds) and Ultralight (eight to twelve pounds). For the backpacker the primary difference between each of these groups is the selection and utilization of the gear.

There is a second class of backpackers that I'm going to call Advanced Minimalists. This category of backpacker is really a combination of Ray's original Advance Techniques and Minimalist gear. Over the last few years this has been the Super-Ultralight class of hikers. In general their pack weights are in the sub eight pound range.

For the backpacker, there are significant advantages in terms of hiking comfort for each time they are able to transition to a lighter weight class. In practical terms a person carrying a thirty pound fully loaded pack (Lightweight) is going to be a lot more comfortable hiking than one carrying a forty five pound pack (Traditional). The same is true for a person carrying a fifteen pound pack (Ultralight) vs. a thirty pound pack (Lightweight). For each transition you're able to travel farther per day, enjoy the hike more and get into camp feeling better.

There is a point where lightening one's pack bumps up against the laws of diminishing benefits. Practically speaking an Advanced Minimalist backpacker isn't going to achieve greater mobility over an Ultralight backpacker. So if there's no direct benefit to be gained, why would someone choose to be an Advanced Minimalist?

Over the years Ultralight backpackers have discovered it is fun to continually push the limits of themselves,

their packs and the terrain they travel. A degree of competition has crept into this leisure activity. Often one is simply in competition with oneself, however; when multiple hikers assemble it's not long before people scramble to see who has the lightest pack.

Looking forward, it'll be up to the writers of gear guides, magazines, websites and bloggers to bring clarity to this new world we find ourselves. The transition will no doubt be a bumpy one. It's not easy to giving up long cherished beliefs or assumptions.

There is one place we can start. Not long after the start of the Ultralight Revolution, a set of core principles was penned, often referred to as the Ultralight Principles. They were adopted by the ultralight community and promoted as a way to start transitioning from traditional to ultralight packs. The reality is that these are principles that should be learned and understood by anyone undertaking any human powered outdoor activity.

These principles are equally as important in a beginning book on Boy Scout backpacking as in books on advanced backpacking techniques. Understanding how to select gear isn't just about having a lighter pack. You save money by not purchasing items you don't need. If you're enjoying your hike instead of being a slave to your gear, you'll be doing more backpacking. Finally selecting the right gear can extend your backpacking life for years.

The future is unknown to all of us. But if Past is Prologue, then no doubt we'll see many new and interesting things in the next decade and beyond.

Part 6 - Cottage Gear Post Apocalyptic

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