

OUTDOORS

For outdoors gifts it's still the thought that counts

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PHOTO COURTESY STAN NELSON

Family snapshots such as this one of columnist Betsy Clayton and daughter Junco aboard their Sea Craft often make the best holiday gifts for Clayton's father and other outdoors-loving family members.

This past week, I read no fewer than five gift-buying guide stories for outdoors lovers and boaters. Each offered gadgets and trendy trinkets as well as pricey products.

So why, then, did I find myself at Cape Tool & Tackle considering buying a belt for my fishin'-, boatin'-, hiking-, bird-watching-loving father?

It was neither trendy nor expensive, neither gadgety nor innovative. It was a \$12.99 belt with a few Guy Harvey snook stitched into it.

It was practical – something most outdoors types greatly appreciate, especially 70-year-old George Clayton, who lives in Oregon far from the warm waters legendary linesiders need and love.

It was basic.

It will be the perfect gift for dad.

Looking back over the years, I think of the unelaborate gifts that pleased dad. I bet some of them will work for you as you shop for the loved-one who prefers an environment without a ceiling.

Often, the best outdoors gifts are the most basic ones.

I remember one year when I was in high school, I secretly called a man I'd only met once named Wayne Gwen. He was my dad's colleague in the pharmaceutical field and

also was a frequent fishing buddy. My sister and I didn't know much more about him. But that year, he was going to be Santa's helper as well.

After thumbing through dad's address book and finding Gwen's number, I called up one evening when dad was out. Mr. Gwen, I said, I need to know which lures to buy dad so we can surprise him with tackle-box treasures on Christmas Day.

I had the angler relate not just brand names but specific types and colors and quantities. I made him repeat himself so I could write it down exactly and come home with the right stuff.

The gift did not bust my sister's and my piggybanks. It totally caught our father by surprise. Basic gift; beautiful Dec. 25th smile.

There was also the year we wanted to book dad with a fishing guide. Mind you, ours was a one-income household with a small used boat and adequate gear, so we didn't splurge on things such as going in a guide's boat. My dad always looked out for us, spending extra cash on music lessons or a nice dinner for mom. He'd never give himself for a day of fishing with a pro.

My sister and I didn't have the \$350 to pay for the guide. But we had the smarts to make calls and figure out which ones were frequently used by doctors in the building where dad worked.

Then we booked a guy and made a gift certificate to which we affixed the guide's card. Fortunately the guide took us on our word and didn't demand any money down, though few professional guides do that.

On Christmas Day, he opened the box that held the certificate and smiled. He knew we were broke and hadn't paid the guy. But he also knew we – my mother included – were telling him to go spend the family fun money on himself for once.

Other basic gifts that satisfied dad over the years included a hiking stick that someone had carved a cardinal atop, a water-resistant storage bag filled with an I Love You note (only \$15), and a fleece pullover in a blue-gray color to match his eyes (on sale for a mere twenty bucks). There was also the small, inexpensive radio that told of the river levels, rainfall and tides in an informative, monotone voice he adored.

So, yes, despite the great offerings these days in the outdoors gear retail world, I think my daughter, husband and I will be

BETSY'S BUYING TIPS

Before you shop for the outdoors lover in your life

- >>Think about his or her favorite pastime and focus on that one thing.
- >>Call his buddies or her friends she's often on the water or in the woods with and ask them what they've heard mentioned lately.
- >>Resist the urge to go with the trendy item you see in five catalogs.
- >>Buy local from a locally owned store so returns will be easier. Or if you shop at a national retail store, get the business card of the sales representative who waits on you so you have a connection later if needed.
- >>Don't go broke buying outdoors gifts. That cliché "it's the thought that counts" is tried and true for practical outdoors folks.

mailing George Clayton that belt. We're pairing it with a photo from down here of us paddling a calm bay. The enlargement was only a couple bucks.

Even though I won't be with him on Christmas morning, I'm betting his basic belt and simple picture will make him grin all the same. For my outdoorsy dad, it's not the price of the gift but the thought that goes into the purchase that counts. ■

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