

ICONIC NOLS GEAR: THE BANKS FRY-BAKE THE PAN THAT STARTED A REVOLUTION

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IT STARTS WITH A FLAT, 15-INCH circle of aluminum. With a tool called a circle sheer, this aluminum sheeting is cut into shape before being spun over a mold and formed into the shape of a pan.

After the edge is cut and smoothed out, in a process called “de-burring,” the pan is sent to the factory, where it will receive its Uniform Anodic Coating. This process begins when small electrodes are attached to each pan. The rack of 200 electrode-equipped pans is then dipped in a pool of sulphuric acid and the pans are given a jolt of 45 volts. Upon receiving this charge, the surface of the aluminum is attacked by the acid, which effectively eats away at and impregnates the aluminum with the hard-coat treatment. An hour later, the pans are ready to for cooking.

This process has seen very few changes since the pan’s early days. The Banks Fry-Bake frying pan has accompanied NOLS students on over 6,500 courses around the world since its creation in 1979.

The Banks Fry-Bake is the brainchild of NOLS instructor Pam Banks, who drew up a blueprint in a coffee shop after a family trip in 1977. Pam’s father, Pete owned a metal shop and suggested they create the






“perfect pan” together after he watched her lug around a giant cast iron skillet in her backpack for the duration of the trip. Pam refused to carry Teflon pans because early models were not durable and the coating often flaked after hard use. Pam needed something better. She needed a lightweight pan that would hold up to years of wear and tear in the backcountry.

In 1978, after perfecting the design and experimenting with the manufacturing process, Pam ordered 12 pans be sent to NOLS Rocky Mountain. Before she could even lay eyes on them, though, the box had been opened and pans had been taken. The first battery of tests were performed in some of the harshest conditions in all of the lower 48 states. The feedback she received from the first models was great—so great, in fact, she had 200 additional pans made the following year (150 of which were for NOLS.)

Since those early years of product testing, NOLS students have carried Pam’s frying pan in and out of the backcountry, creating meals that most, even in their wildest of dreams, could not imagine possible. From piping-hot pepperoni pizza to delectable delicacies like cinnamon rolls and cherry pies, students have been pushing the limits of what’s possible in some of the most wild and remote areas on the planet. ◻



The fry-bake made possible backcountry meals some students couldn't create in the front-country. Courtesy of Tracy Baynes/STEP

1965	1968-1970	1976	1977	1978	1979	1985	1988	2011
 The National Outdoor Leadership School is started by legendary mountaineer Paul Petzoldt			 Pam takes family trip carrying a 14" cast-iron skillet	 The idea for the fry-bake is born and the Banks order 12		 The fry-bake lid is redesigned to prevent coals from slipping off the top		 The smaller, lighter "alpine model" is created
	Billy cans are used to store and cook food. "Spooza" (cooked glop stuck in cans) is widespread and is the leading cause of sickness	At 19, Pam Banks enrolls in a NOLS Instructors Course			Pam orders first big shipment of 200 pans (50 for herself and 150 for NOLS)		23 years after the Fry-Bake's last innovation, Pam is at it again "cooking" up a new design for her line of dependable backcountry cooking pans	