

## Student Conservation Association volunteer discovers history of wilderness cabin

by Lindsay O'Reilly

Preserving the past just gained a new level of importance for me as a summer volunteer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. I have been working on the backcountry trail crew, and I have been able to see and experience some of the best wilderness that the refuge has to offer. My wilderness appreciation just got a further boost after a weekend of remodeling the public-use cabin on Emma Lake.

The Emma Lake cabin, like many on the refuge, is a historic place. Joseph Secora built the cabin after he served with the Army Air Corps Rescue Squad in Alaska during World War II. Retreating to the wilderness, Secora took up gold mining downstream from the outlet of Emma Lake to Indian Creek. He led a life of solitude and self-reliance, and his cabin displays the hard work of a skilled craftsman with its split-log chinking and hand-sawn planks, three windows, roof, and front porch.

Secora lived there until 1972 when he died in an airplane accident at the Forks of the creek. After visiting the cabin, I have come to realize the importance of preserving this and other historic cabins on the refuge, and I feel fortunate to have had a hand in this preservation.

Trail crew member Kathy Pearson, backcountry ranger and historian Gary Titus and I devoted two days to maintaining the cabin and its access trail from Tustumena Lake. We cleared the cabin of all unnecessary articles and cleaned it top to bottom. With the floor repainted and a fresh coat of varnish on the ceiling and walls, the room took on the warmth of care and upkeep. And, with a load of firewood stocked outside, it will take on the warmth of home to the next visitors who pass through.

We also cleared the trail up from the cabin to the high country, which chases the ridge through meadows bright with fireweed, patches of sweet blueberries and vast views into the heart of the refuge. Looking down on the headwaters of the creek and a herd of caribou on a distant slope, our day reached its peak and concluded with a hike back down to the cabin.

Recorded in the cabin journal are messages from

others who shared appreciation and respect for the place during their stay. The refuge asks that visitors write the date and events of their visit, the condition of the cabin, and that they leave the cabin cleaner than it was found.

Respecting the cabin not only ensures that others will enjoy it, but honors the memory of its past inhabitant and preserves an aspect of Alaska's cultural history for the future.

The remains of approximately one hundred historic cabins are known to exist within the refuge boundaries. Without a crew to maintain these cabins, the work of homesteaders like Secora, and others dating back to the late nineteenth century, would be left to rot into the ground. With that, an enriching history would be lost.

The cabin is not just the work of a man, but a monument to a way of life. The wildness and freedom that epitomize the Last Frontier are perpetuated by the experience of wilderness. For Alaskans and visitors alike, immersing in the wilds as men like Secora have done can continue the essence of that lifestyle.

Coming across a cabin while trekking in the woods, a wilderness experience may be enhanced by sharing a connection with the land's history. A tent can be pitched by anyone at nearly any place, but those who breach the trails less traveled may find shelter in a cabin that is a unique historical asset to the refuge.

Each cabin is different, a monument to an individual builder. And each deserves care and respect, to be treated as a home to Alaskan history, to be treated as you would your own home.

In the time I spent at the Emma Lake cabin, I gained respect and knowledge for the building, for the man who built it, and a sense of what his daily life was like. I have traveled a great distance to spend my summer in Alaska and it was the lure of wilderness that led me here. However, it has made the wilderness come alive to know its history, to know the legends of the mountains. More than merely shelter, the cabin is a part of the complete wilderness experience the refuge has to offer.

Spend a night under its roof—your boots by the stove, sunset on the lake, the call of a loon echoing your own solitude—and you will experience truly what life in Alaska, or simply Life, is all about.

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*nai National Wildlife Refuge. She is from Massachusetts and is a student at Bard College in New York. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.*